

Giving Up Grudges

Ephesians 4:31-32

As we continue our Lent journey together, examining the behaviours we need to *give up*—not just *temporarily* for the season of *Lent*, but *permanently* for the sake of *love*—today, we want to look at giving up *grudges*. *Hands up if you have a grudge against the person next to you.*

We may not see ourselves as grudge-holders, but we live in a world where deep-seated bitterness and resentment are increasingly the norm, a growing trend referred to by some psychologists as the *Bitterness-Anger Loop*—a self-reinforcing cycle that turns temporary anger into a permanent state of hostility. While the initial anger—*caused by hurt or perceived injustice*—isn't necessarily a negative emotion, and may even be warranted, when not processed in a timely and healthy manner, can lead to a permanent sense of victimhood, constantly replaying painful memories over and over, fueling more outrage and leaving us trapped in a downward-spiral of bitterness. This can lead to symptoms like sleeplessness, diminished self-confidence, negative personality shifts, and an inability to maintain relationships. We justify our bitterness, seeing it as just valuing *fairness* and *justice*, but there's usually a deeper psychological reality behind it. Bitterness gives us a sense of *purpose*—*a back-handed way to bolster self-esteem and a shaky sense of identity*. The problem is... *it doesn't work*. Harboursing bitterness (or, *holding grudges*) is, as has been said, like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. So, how can we cure our bitterness? And what does the Bible say about letting go of *grudges*?

The word *grudge* appears only a handful of times in the Bible, but is central to one of its most important verses, *according to Jesus* who, when asked which of the 613 Old Testament laws was the *greatest*, famously responded by naming *two*: **Deuteronomy 6:5**, **“Love the Lord your God with all our heart, mind, and strength”** and **Leviticus 19:18**, **“Love your neighbour as**

yourself.” Loving God by loving others is the New Testament’s vision for what it means to follow Jesus. In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul explains that the whole message of scripture is summarized by this one command: **“Love other people as well as you do yourself.”** adding, **“You can’t go wrong when you love others.”** (Romans 13:9-10) Given the critical emphasis Jesus places on this one verse, let’s take a moment to read it in its original context:

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:18)

In its context and at its core, the instruction to *love our neighbour as ourselves* is given in direct contrast to holding grudges—*love* and *grudges* are fundamentally incompatible; meaning that if we harbour bitterness and resentment toward someone in our hearts, we can’t fulfill the law of love, causing things to go *very* wrong for us. Biblically, grudges are *that* serious!

Interestingly, the Hebrew word, *Natar* (*naw-TAR*), translated here as *grudge*, has two meanings: the *first* is literally **to cherish our anger**. Have you ever noticed the emotional energy we spend on what upsets us? How we can become almost obsessed with our outrage, unable to let it go? On her latest album, Taylor Swift describes the near-romantic devotion of her so-called *haters*, saying (after listing the nasty things they say about her): *“It’s actually sweet; all the time you’ve spent on me / It’s honestly wild; all the effort you’ve put in / It’s actually romantic”* That’s the *first* definition of *Natar*—a negative fixation bordering on obsession; *cherishing our anger*.

The *second* use of *Natar* means **to a keep of a garden**—to plant a seed, water it, fertilize it, cultivate it so it thrives. In the *Song of Songs*, the young maiden laments, **“My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me keeper [Natar] of the vineyards.”** (SoS 1:6) The idea is that, just like how we keep a *flourishing garden*, we can cultivate the seeds of anger into a *festering grudge*, nursing negativity until it takes over, like a creeping vine or an invasive weed.

Grudges can also be like gardens in that they grow deeper and more extensive even when we're not actively tending to them. We think we don't have grudges, until we bump into *that* person. Even if we aren't actively cherishing our anger or consciously cultivating grudges, low-grade bitterness—*a comment here; an eye-roll there*—can allow anger to fester and grow until one day we're riddled with resentment, locked in a grudge-match with the whole world.

So, how can we prevent this from happening to *us*? *And what can we do if we suspect it already has?* Well, in [Ephesians 4](#)—*our anchor text for this Lent series*—The Apostle Paul writes

“Get rid of bitterness, rage and anger... be *kind* and *compassionate* to one another, *forgiving* each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” ([Ephesians 4:31-32](#))

Paul says the key to giving up grudges (*what he describes as the trio of anger, outrage, and bitterness—the Greek word for the acrid taste of poison*) is embracing 3 grudge-busting practices: *kindness, compassion, and forgiveness*. If grudges are poisoning our relationships and undermining our Jesus-following, then *kindness, compassion, and forgiveness* are the cure.

Kindness, in our Day, is a word associated with “*niceness*.” If someone is polite, friendly, and considerate, we call that, *kindness*. But biblically, *kindness* is more than just being nice and friendly. It's not a *personality* or even *character* trait; it's a *relationship* word, rooted in the most common Hebrew description of God in the Bible, *Khessed*—often translated *lovingkindness*. Rooted in how God treats us, *Khessed* is intentional action, motivated by loyal and generous love, in order to bring goodness and blessing into someone else's life in practical ways. The Greek word Paul uses in Ephesians 4 literally means to make yourself *useful* and *beneficial* to someone, doing to another what we'd want done to us, if we were in their skin. That's *kindness*.

Consider the person who hurt you: what would it look like to show them true *kindness*? Not just wishing them well *hypothetically*, but intentionally benefitting them, actively working

to bring God's goodness and blessing into their life. Imagine the heart-level miracle required—*that, by God's Spirit, could actually be realized*—in taking that kind of posture with our enemies.

The next grudge-busting practice is *compassion*. In [Exodus 34](#), God's very nature and name is *compassion*. It's the Hebrew word, *Rakhum*, closely related to the Hebrew word for *womb*, evoking the image of a mother's tender feelings for her vulnerable infant. Compassion is being tender-hearted to another person, deeply moved to consider and care about their reality. The Greek word Paul uses in our Ephesians text refers to our bowels—a deep, gut-level feeling of empathy, climbing inside someone else's reality in order to identify with them. We tend to mostly think of compassion as something we show to the *hurting*, but here Paul invites us to show this same compassionate empathy, not just to the *hurting*, but to those *who've hurt us*.

Consider again the person who's hurt or offended you: how could *empathy* provide you with an emotional re-set, dig you out of the mental ruts formed by replaying your pain over and over? Even if what they did is wrong, what if you could try to understand them, sit in their skin for a moment, see past your hurt to see their humanity? Back in 2016, when Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were campaigning against each other, a church invited people—*those with strong feelings on both sides*—to pray for them, displaying [photos](#) of both politicians *as children*. It was a way of practicing compassion, of re-humanizing the caricatures of personified evil these two had become in people's minds. Imagine how practicing this kind of empathy for *our* enemies—*picturing them as God's child*—might help us release our negative mental-images of them?

Finally, Paul says busting grudges means, "***forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.***" Forgiveness saturated Jesus' life and teaching, yet remains widely misunderstood and rarely-practiced by even devoted Christians. So, what does (and *doesn't*) forgiveness mean?

According to South African theologian and Nobel Peace prize-winner, Desmond Tutu:

“Forgiveness doesn’t mean condoning what has been done; It’s taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting... that threatens to poison our entire existence.”

We tell our kids to never say, *it’s okay* when someone apologizes, but *I forgive you*. And it’s not just semantics; it’s *not okay* when we’re mistreated. It’s wrong—it’s *sin*. And sin needs *forgiveness*, not *permission*, sweeping it under the rug where grudges thrive. In Jesus-centred relationships, we *acknowledge* sin, *confess* it, and then *forgive* it. We also make our kids talk to each other about what happened, before coming to us—*a.k.a., tattling*. And this practice comes directly from Jesus’ teaching on the mechanics of forgiveness in [Matthew 18](#), where he explains:

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” ([Matthew 18:15-17](#))

According to Jesus, the first thing to do when someone hurts you is *start a group chat to diss them to all our friends and allies*. No, he says, talk to them *directly*—keep the conversation **“just between the two of you.”** Now, there are times when being alone with the person who hurt you would be *unsafe* (which is different than *uncomfortable*. Conflict is *uncomfortable*, but that’s not the same as being *unsafe*). In truly *unsafe* situations, a public space—a *coffee shop or the church during office hours*—can reduce risk of further harm. Also notice, Jesus doesn’t say, if someone wrongs you, it’s on *them* to take the first step. He puts the onus on us to initiate, since in many cases, the other person may not be aware of the issue, which can add to the sting. It’s vulnerable to admit you’re hurt, which is why we often mask our *hurt* with *anger*. But Jesus says this one step can often resolve the issue and rescue the relationship, which is the goal—not to *confront* them, but to *come together again*; not to *win a fight*, but to *win back the relationship*.

Now, Jesus understands life isn't always this simple. So, if step one doesn't work, he says to now bring someone else into the conversation as a *witness*. To be clear, this isn't rallying your support-system of allies to gang up on them; it's involving an impartial third-party to *witness* the conversation from a neutral perspective, to call conversational-fouls, if necessary, and ultimately to help *both* parties hear each other, to see how maybe we too have contributed to the conflict.

If this still doesn't work, Jesus urges us to call in more reinforcements from the church, inviting the whole family to help keep this relationship from falling into permanent disrepair. This is about all of us taking responsibility to support the work of forgiveness and fight for love. But if even *this* doesn't work, Jesus says, ***"treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."***

Tax Collectors, in that Day, were despised as traitors—Jewish citizens who collected taxes for their Roman overlords, often collecting more than what was owed to line their own pockets. Nobody associated with them! It's almost like Jesus is saying, if the person is *this* unrepentant, then, in these rare instances, maybe unforgiveness, even a grudge, is *justified*. In some churches this has supported the practice of *excommunication*—cutting someone off from relationship. But this is where Biblical authors are so brilliant, letting those who only want to be validated see what they want to see, while offering counter-intuitive wisdom to those daring to dig deeper. See, Jesus gave these steps to his disciples; one of them, *Matthew*—the guy who recorded it for us. A few chapters earlier, we're given a glimpse into how Matthew became a Jesus-follower:

"As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" (Matthew 9:9-13)

That's right, Matthew was a *former tax-collector*. Yet Jesus loved him, included him, hung out with him and his friends. So, when Matthew records Jesus saying to treat people like a tax-collector, it isn't a loophole for excommunicating, canceling, or grudge-holding; on the contrary, it's a call to never, ever give up on anyone, to always show mercy, and seek reconciliation with even with those who don't seem to want or deserve it. Upon hearing this, Peter asks,

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’” (Matt 18:21-22)

This unique phrasing exists in only two places in scripture: *here* and in *Genesis 4*, spoken by Cain's 7th descendent, *Lamech*, who brags of killing a youth in a disproportionate retaliation.

“I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.”

Genesis 4:23-24

That's how unresolved anger works, always upping the ante on retaliation. But Jesus, in a reversal of Lamech's strategy for dealing with conflict, raises the ceiling, not on payback, but on forgiveness. And Jesus isn't being legalistic here; as if sin number 78 cancels our obligation. Jesus is poetically envisioning unlimited forgiveness for others, *just as God in Christ forgave us*.

As a time out, the Bible—and *Jesus' teaching on forgiveness*—has been misused to guilt people—often *women*—into staying in abusive relationships. But hear me say, Jesus' teachings aren't meant to keep us helplessly trapped in physically or psychologically dangerous situations. Forgiveness doesn't replace healthy boundaries—*removing ourselves from an abusive situation, or even seeking legal protection*. In my family, we have a situation requiring that forgiveness be accompanied by strictly enforced boundaries. But even when the ideal of relational repair isn't possible, we're still called to *forgive*. Practically, that means forgiveness doesn't always require an apology. Consider Jesus on the cross, forgiving those in the very act of killing him, saying,

“they know not what they do.” (Lk 23:34) Forgiveness doesn’t require the other person be fully aware of or able to perfectly articulate their wrongdoing. Frankly, it can be inappropriate (*as with an ex-spouse*) or even impossible (*as with a deceased parent*). True forgiveness may not require the other person’s involvement at all, because forgiveness isn’t primarily a transaction between two people; it’s a posture of the heart, as Jesus reveals in the final story of Matthew 18.

Jesus describes a servant who, after being forgiven an unrepayable debt—*like, zillions of dollars*—tracks down a guy who owes him a few hundred bucks, *chokes* him, and throws him in prison until every cent is repaid. It’s a portrait of someone so unaffected by God’s forgiveness, they can’t share it with others, so filled with unresolved anger, bitterness, and outrage, he’d rather get *revenge* than get *repaid*. (*I mean, how do you get money to repay a debt when you’re rotting in a first-century prison?*) In the story, after seeing the servant’s actions, the character representing God actually *un-forgives* the original debt. Jesus says, **“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”** (18:35) echoing the prayer, **“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”** (Matt 6:12)

A number of years ago, I found myself nursing a grudge against one of my oldest friends. We worked together at the time, and even lived next door to each other, with a shared wall. But in time, a *relational* wall grew between us and we stopped behaving like friends at all. Instead of *talking* about it, we just *didn’t*, even avoiding being around each other. I planned routes to my office that would avoid passing his. I wouldn’t have called it a grudge at the time, but I had let temporary feelings of hurt, anger, and a perceived sense of injustice turn into chronic bitterness and resentment. When I *would* pass by his office, I’d sense God nudging me to go in and talk to him, but my feet kept walking. I told myself it’d be a waste of time, that I’d only get hurt again,

that *I* was the one who'd been wronged and it was *his* job to initiate an apology. This went on *for years*. Until one day, responding to the Spirit's prompting, I found the courage to walk into his office. I said, "*I don't want to be in my 70's, see you in the grocery store and have to go down another aisle.*" That broke the ice. From there, we both shared honestly and tearfully about the hurt we felt, both learning of our impact on the other. We listened, empathized with each other, asked for and offered forgiveness, and committed to taking intentional steps to rebuild trust and be proactive about relating to each other differently. As we let go of our grudges, God's love returned to our relationship and, years later, we're still friends. Not that long ago, we had dinner together with our spouses. The walls built by years of anger, bitterness, and rage have crumbled and our grudges are gone, healed by kindness, compassion, and (most of all) forgiveness.

Let me ask you, what grudges have taken root in your heart, becoming part of your identity, maybe even altering your personality, and ultimately keeping you from loving others as yourself? Where have you been cherishing your anger, letting temporary hurt become chronic resentment? What relationships are in need of repair, and what would it take to find empathy and compassion for *that* person, to proactively show them kindness, to bury the hatchet and tear down the walls between you. Paul says that to let go of our bitterness, anger, and outrage we need to practice kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. So, what about the person who wronged you? What step do you need to take toward healing? What group thread do you need to delete, and instead go talk *to* the person, instead of always only about them?

This Lent, could we give up our *grudges* and together gain a greater experience of *love*?

Let's pray.