

OVERCOMING RESENTMENT

Americans have been shocked in recent years by incidents of random shooting in which innocent people have been killed or wounded. People are almost afraid to turn on the television or radio for fear of encountering another breaking news story of this kind. In almost all of these cases, those who know the perpetrator are in complete shock that the person would commit such a horrible act of violence. Often the person has no former criminal record, has raised no one's suspicions as far as being "on the edge" of violence, and appears to be a responsible citizen.

However, once an investigation begins into the background of a person who commits explosive acts of violence against others, it is not unusual for a pattern of seething resentments to emerge. Resentment bubbles and boils beneath the surface of a calm demeanor, ticking like a time bomb. The trouble is that no one, often not even the person himself, knows when the bomb will go off. Like the straw that breaks the camel's back, one final act which brings forth yet more resentment can set off violent acts.

Unlike anger, which is more impulsive and sudden, resentment builds slowly and gradually over time. No one feeling of resentment is enough to trigger dangerous behavior, but add feelings of resentment up over time, and you have a volatile situation. And because resentment can be masked by an outwardly calm exterior, often it goes undetected by others. Accumulated resentment can lead in time to anger and bitterness—and yes, even to violence.

Resentment needs to be banished immediately from our lives when it is first detected. Step one is to make sure we know what resentment is and how to detect its presence.

THE EXAMINATION OF RESENTMENT

We have to discover the meaning of resentment through the back door of the Greek language. The English word is not actually used in the New Testament, but the Greek word *logizomai* underlies what we refer to as resentment. An example of this is found in a negative context in the great love chapter of the Bible, *I Corinthians 13*. There Paul says that love "*thinks no evil*" (*verse 5b*).

Logizomai has its roots in the concept of bookkeeping. It means to calculate or to reckon. Entering a number into a ledger for the purpose of keeping track of it is what is meant by *logizomai*. The word is used to our benefit when it describes how God does not enter into His ledger a record of the sin of the person who is in Christ. Paul also expressed hope that the failures of some in their actions toward him would not be recorded against them (*II Timothy 4:16*).

While there are many situations in which record keeping is essential, in personal relationships it is not only unnecessary but harmful. Love, Paul says, does not take into account wrongs that are suffered. Love doesn't write down and keep records of wrongs that are done. Love looks for a chance to erase the record of wrongs at every opportunity, to forgive and keep a clean slate.

THE EXAMPLE OF RESENTMENT

We find a sad example of resentment in the Old Testament Scriptures. When King David was dying, he brought Solomon, his son, before him and gave him some instructions. David still bore in his memory resentment over the actions of Joab, one of his military commanders. Joab had unlawfully killed two commanders in the army on the basis of his own resentments, and David had not forgotten it. David had remembered Joab's actions for years but had never avenged the deaths of his two commanders by killing

Joab. So David called Solomon in and corrupted his mind by commanding that Joab not be allowed to die a natural death. In other words, David wanted Solomon to kill Joab (*1 Kings 2:5–6*). David had nurtured his resentment for years and finally decided to act on it.

The trouble with resentment is that it is not static—it does not remain the same. Resentment is like a cancer that grows ever so slowly, eating away at the insides of the person who nurtures it. And, like cancer, ultimately other people become involved. Some people say, “If I want to be bitter and resentful that’s my business.” But, as *Hebrews 12:15* points out, bitterness is a root that springs up and defiles many people in the process. Regardless of how benign you think your resentment is, it is not. Resentment is an evil root that is growing daily, waiting only for the opportunity to bring forth its fruit.

THE EXPENSE OF RESENTMENT

Experts agree that the one who nurtures resentment pays a high price to do so, both psychologically and physically. As I have mentioned earlier in this series, doctors are documenting more and more instances in which anger, bitterness, and unforgiveness are the causative factors in physical diseases.

S.I. McMillan, in his book *None of These Diseases* says the estimates vary from 60 to 100 percent. Hypertension and heart disease are a major illness influenced by the stress brought about by unforgiveness.

Psychologically we are imprisoned by our past. We think we have put another person under our control by our unwillingness to forgive, but it is really we who become the slaves of resentment. We become the embodiment of our resentment. Our life revolves around that which we refuse to let go of.

Lewis Smedes, in his book *Forgive and Forget*, tells a story which illustrates how a person’s whole life can be bound up in his resentment. It is a story from a play based on World War II war crimes. A German officer was sentenced to prison for his part in wartime atrocities. Upon his release he and his wife planned to live out their life quietly in a cabin in the countryside.

A French journalist, whose entire family had been killed by orders of the German officer, had waited all the years the officer was in prison to extract vengeance. The court had not sentenced the officer to death, but the journalist had in his own heart. He stirred up resentment and hatred in a group of people who agreed to join him in putting the officer and his wife to death. On the afternoon of the planned killing, the journalist went to interview the officer and ended up revealing who he was, telling the German the story of his family. The journalist, upon meeting the aged officer, was suddenly softened by the man’s difficult station in life and warned him that a mob was coming that night to kill him. He offered to lead the officer through the woods to safety.

The officer agreed to go on one condition: That the journalist forgive him—which he could not do. The journalist left and returned that night with the mob and killed the officer and his wife. He was willing to lead a person to safety whom he was not able to forgive. To forgive the officer would have meant giving up his whole reason for living. He had spent so many years focused on what the German officer had done to his family that to give that up would have meant giving up the purpose of his life.

Resentment exacts a high price from any who would choose to possess it. For those who want to live free from resentment, five steps are critical.

FIVE STEPS TO DEFEATING RESENTMENT

Think It Through

First, it is important to step back from the trees and try to get a picture of the whole forest. Just as we get so absorbed in reading a book or watching a movie or working on a hobby that we lose track of time, so we can lose track of the destructive nature of resentment. Do we really want to stay committed to something as destructive and harmful as resentment?

In all the research about resentment I have done, there seems to be one dominating reason for why people engage in it: Resentment gives people a feeling of superiority over the person toward whom their hate is directed. It makes them feel as if they are the righteous person who has been ill-treated by a lesser person. They enjoy fantasizing their plots of revenge. They mentally rehearse the story to themselves over and over, etching the details further into their memory with each retelling. Someone has said that resentment gives us two things: neurotic pleasure and religious pride.

Think it through! Is this what you are doing? Is it worth it to enjoy this sordid pleasure and risk your own health?

Write It Down

Write down why you are filled with resentment. I have discovered through counseling that often, when you ask a person consumed with resentment and unforgiveness to tell you why he is, he can't give a clear reason. Over time, the resentment has taken on a life of its own independent of what initially caused it.

If you will write down on a piece of paper in simple terms why you are resentful and read it out loud to yourself, it will sound totally different to you than it does when you rehearse it in your mind. Not only will it sound different; it won't have the emotion attached to it that you feel when you think about it. If you are honest it will sound far less justifiable, that is, there is something that happens to facts after being swirled around in the poison of resentment over time. They grow in size and seriousness. They get blown out of proportion. Reducing those facts back to their original size and shape by putting them on a plain piece of paper will help you regain perspective.

When you complete the following single sentence, "I am filled with resentment because ...," do it when you're alone. Why? I predict that you will be a bit embarrassed when you discover that what is written on the paper is what you are so upset about.

Work It Out

A man who had been married for fifty years to the same woman was asked the secret of their marital bliss. "Well," he said, "it's kind of like this. When my wife and I got married, we made an agreement that whenever she was bothered about something she would just tell me off and get it out of her system. And if I ever got mad at her about something, I would take a walk. I guess you can attribute our marital success to the fact that I have largely led an outdoor life."

I'm not suggesting you can overpower anger with exercise. But there is a significant amount of research that suggests people who get regular physical exercise handle conflicts better than those who don't. Because most of us don't have jobs that are physically demanding, we have to create that situation artificially through exercise. Exhausting oneself with work or exercise seems to take an edge off of our emotions and helps to

keep us “drained” of pent up feelings. It’s not a cure-all (nor should it be interpreted as a recommendation to vent your rage on a punching bag), but exercise is as good for your soul as it is for your body.

Talk It Over

If you are a Christian, I know one of your friends—the Lord Jesus Christ. So I want to suggest to you that you talk over your resentments with Him in prayer. Perhaps you should read to Him what you wrote down on the piece of paper. Just tell Him, “Lord, here is why I feel resentful toward so-and-so.” Then tell Him. You’re not going to shock Him—He knows how you feel already. And it will begin a conversation that will hopefully lead to you resolving your resentment before it goes further and deeper.

I have read how missionaries learn to get leeches off their skin—by soaking in a warm bath of balsam. If they try to simply pull the leeches off, part of them will remain hooked in the skin and cause an infection. But in the warm bath they unhook themselves and can be pulled off cleanly.

Bathing in the grace of God in the presence of Jesus has the same effect on resentment. It is hard to remain bitter and resentful while sitting in the presence of the Lord in prayer. Resentment will unhook itself from your heart and you’ll find yourself able to lay it down. When you begin to ponder what the Lord has done for you, how He has forgiven your every sin and how he holds know resentments toward you when you sin against Him, you will begin to see the hypocrisy of holding resentments against others.

If you haven’t accepted the forgiveness God offers for your own sins, it’s much easier to hold on to your resentments toward others. But if you are a child of God who has been cleansed of sin against whom God holds no grudges, you should find yourself unable to maintain your resentment and unforgiveness toward others. We are to forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven us (***Ephesians 4:32***). And there is no better time to be reminded of that fact than when you are talking over your resentments with Him.

Give It Up

Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, was once reminded of an especially cruel thing that someone had done to her years before—but she didn’t seem to recall it. And her friend said, “Don’t you remember?” Clara Barton said, “No, I distinctly remember forgetting it.”

Did you know the only part of the Lord’s prayer that is repeated is the part about forgiveness? ***“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,”*** and clear at the end as an addendum to the prayer is this statement from Matthew that says, ***“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:12, 14–15).***

God’s method for getting rid of resentments is through forgiveness. The Bible tells us that we are to love our enemies, bless those that curse us, do good to those that hate us, and pray for those that spitefully use us and persecute us. If we do this, it says, we will demonstrate that we are truly children of God. We are to act like our Heavenly Father. That’s the only way I can explain some of the forgiveness I have heard about.

If you are nurturing some level of resentment toward a person or situation in your life, I urge you to work through the five steps above—and give it up. Your life free from resentment will be far sweeter and healthier in every respect.