

BAD GOALS FOR YOUR LIFE HOLD ON TO BITTERNESS

I want to introduce you to a character in the Bible. He's kind of an obscure character. You may never have heard of him, but I think he might be called the patron saint of the grudge.

His name is Lamech. Lamech is mentioned in the fourth chapter of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, just a couple of generations after Adam and Eve. He was a descendent of Cain, and to get his story you need to understand one aspect of Cain's story.

Cain killed his brother Abel. The Bible says that Cain was afraid that somebody would try to take revenge on him. God said he put a mark on Cain. It's called the "mark of Cain." God said that mark would be a reminder that if anybody tried to take revenge on Cain, if anybody killed him, that person would be avenged seven times over. This mark of Cain is kind of a warning, because God realizes that once the human race gives in to the desire for revenge it will destroy itself.

A couple generations later, Lamech is born as a descendent of Cain. We are told two things about him: one is that he was married to women named Adah and Zillah. Nobody had ever done that before. It had been quite clear in the first chapters of Genesis that God's intention was that a man should cling to his wife and the two become one flesh--one husband, one wife. Lamech is the character who introduces polygamy to the human race in the Bible.

One day somebody hurt Lamech. We don't know any of the details. It might have been an accident, but it festered in him. The more he thought about it, the madder he got. That's the way bitterness works. The more you think about it, the more toxic it becomes. He decided to get even, so one day he killed that person who hurt him. Afterwards, he bragged about this.

In Hebrew, it was kind of a poem. Take a look at the screens for a moment. These are the words of Lamech. *"Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain"* -- remember the mark of Cain-- *"is*

avenged seven times, then Lamech will be avenged seventy-seven times.” Genesis 4: 23-24 “You thought it was bad to mess with Cain, that’s nothing compared to messing with me.”

You notice he expresses no sense of guilt, no remorse. In his mind, he is absolutely justified. His enemies had it coming. That’s the way bitterness works. You can justify anything if you get bitter enough. This is what might be called the “Law of Lamech.” What we’re talking about today is the Law of Lamech. “You hurt me, I’ll hurt you back; I’ll hurt you worse; I’ll make you pay.”

Notice the math in his statement: seventy-seven times over. That’s the way bitterness works. A bitter spirit is never satisfied. A bitter spirit never says, “OK, I’ve inflicted enough pain on you. Now I feel content.” It’s never enough.

Peter, one of Jesus’ closest the disciples, came up to Jesus one day. Like Lamech, Peter has been hurt by somebody. We don’t know how. We don’t know any of the details, but it happened several times. Peter says to Jesus, “How many times do I have to forgive this guy? Like seven times?”

LAW OF JESUS Peter thinks he’s being quit generous with this. He expects that Jesus will say, “Wow, you’re willing to forgive seven times? Good move, Peter. I’m really impressed.” But Jesus doesn’t say that. Look at Jesus’ response. Jesus answered to Peter, ***“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”*** Matthew 18:22

Where do you think Jesus got that number seventy-seven? Do you think he just pulled it out of thin air? Jesus knew the Old Testament backwards and forward. He chooses that number very deliberately. Jesus is doing a fabulous thing. He is doing a beautiful thing. He is now reversing the Law of Lamech.

It has been in operation ever since the downward spiral of the human race. He is saying, “Peter, if you want to, you can follow the Law of Lamech. You can pick up a grudge or a hurt, like heavy luggage that you carry around. You can harbor bitterness and resentment. You can carry a grudge the rest of your life. You can do that if you want to, or you can follow me. You can show mercy. You

can forgive from your heart. You can seek to be reconciled with another person. Peter, put down the luggage.

In case anybody's wondering whether Jesus could possibly be serious about this kind of thing, he makes a very similar statement, an identical idea in another place. Matthew records this in another chapter. Jesus says, *"For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."* Matthew 6: 14-15

Jesus says, to us all that if we're walking around with unresolved bitterness and resentment, and we refuse to do the work of forgiveness and to seek reconciliation with other people, we're at severe spiritual risk. I'll tell you what I think. I think the only thing that moves one human being to withhold forgiveness from somebody else, to walk around carrying a grudge, is when I forget, when I live in a kind of denial of the infinitely greater amount of forgiveness that I need from God.

FORGIVENESS COMES AT THE COST OF THE CROSS.

1 John 4: 19-21

It comes at the price of the death of God's Son. That's how much it cost for my forgiveness. I think the only way that I can harden my spirit up and tell somebody else I'm not going to forgive them, is when I forget how deeply stained I am by sin.

Testimony from the writers of Scripture is very consistent on this mark: that spiritually I am deeply stained by sin, more deeply than you can imagine, just to the core. I'm a walking stain. Pride, self-centeredness, arrogance, cowardice, prejudice, deception, cruelty, apathy--that's the truth about me. Because The Bible says that's true for each one of us.

The cost of our forgiveness to God was monumental. It cost him the life of his Son to forgive me and to forgive you. Therefore, there is only one safe place to put a grudge, and that place is at the foot of the cross. Here's the funny thing about us: Somebody hurts me, and as long as my mind is focused on that hurt, as long as it's focused on what that person did, I can convince myself I have every right to carry this grudge.

I can rationalize all kinds of bitterness. My thoughts can keep circling and circling around that for years, but when I take my eyes

off of it and look at the cross, it's a different story. Because Jesus says, "No, you don't have a right to that. I already paid the price for the forgiveness of every sin."

I'm wondering today, whatever bitterness you're carrying around, would you be willing today to lay it at the foot of the cross? Whatever your hurt and your bitterness is, would you be willing to lay it at the foot of the cross and remember again the price that was paid for your forgiveness and for mine?

I'm telling you, when people live at the foot of the cross, they don't carry a weight of bitterness. When people live in the daily awareness of what it is that I've been forgiven from God, when people live in the realization, in the experience of the lavishness of God's grace, why would you carry your weight of bitterness? Why would you dare?

Now, I know what a hard thing it can be to forgive. I know some of you are thinking, "There's no way." There's somebody you've had financial dealings with--an employer, a client, a business partner or a boss--and you trusted them and they used you. They used you for their gain. They didn't care a thing about your loss. They did it deliberately, and you just feel violated.

You have an ex-spouse that raked you over the coals. You have a family member who damaged your heart, who did mean, cold things to you. You have somebody that you thought was a friend, who said things to you or said things about you to somebody else that wounded you to the core. Inside you there's something that says, "There's no way. Let them out of that prison? Set that luggage down? Give them a free pass? There's no way."

I want to tell you something. I want to tell you about a day that's coming in the life of that person. This is a true story. A man wrote: "Some time ago, I was visited in my office by a IRS agent. He told my partner and I that we're behind on our taxes to a serious extent. It was quite frightening and very surprising. Our third partner, a woman, took care of our finances. We hadn't thought about it much.

"We took the books home, found out she had been systematically embezzling about \$150,000. She used the money to do things like send her husband to pilot school, carpet her home. To

make it worse, based on our lawyer's advice we ended up settling out court. We had to pay her more money to go away. She laughed about it. She bragged. I spent so many years in major bitterness. Why did God let this happen to me? I did nothing wrong. She did everything wrong. She got away with it. I paid.

"This bitterness began to affect my whole life, all my relationships. I was mad about everything. I was bitter with the world. One day my wife, who never gave up on me, gave me something to read. These words changed my life. They enabled me to put all of my pain and bitterness behind me. God spoke to me that day after ten years of carrying a stone around."

This quote is from a book written by a man named Charles Stanley. He wrote, **"The truth is, God is keeping very good records of injustice in this world. From snatched purses to lawsuits to abused children, God sees them all. God sees it all. One day, life as we know it is going to end. On that day, the Judge of this world is going to set up court.**

"Every crime that's ever been committed from the beginning of time to right now will be tried. When all is said and done, every man and every woman will receive just retribution for his or her deeds on earth. Judgment is coming." God says, *"Vengeance is mine. I will repay."* **Romans 12:19** Part of what that means is it's His. It's not ours. It's not mine. I am not healthy or holy or loving or fair enough by far to be trusted with vengeance.

Now, this doesn't mean that we don't work for justice. We do work for justice. It means I don't have the right, in light of the cross, to carry around bitterness anymore. And beyond that, I don't want to. Life is too short. Many of you have been carrying around that luggage for a long time. Set it down.

THE GREATEST MIRACLE: FORGIVENESS

I want to tell you something. There is no miracle in the world like the miracle of forgiveness. There is none. I tell you this without apology. There is no miracle in the world like it. You can, if you want to, live by the Law of Lamech. You can, if you want to, convince yourself that your judgmental spirit, that your hardness, that your

bitterness, that your anger, that your resentment that goes on day after day is fully rationalized because of what the other person did.

But I hope you don't because life is too short, and it will kill you. I don't know how badly you've been hurt. I know some of you have been hurt real bad, in some cases over a long period of time. I hope you'll forgive. It may take a long time.

If you need help, get help. If you need to talk to a good Christian counselor, talk to a good Christian counselor. If you need to make a phone call, Jesus says make it right now. If you need to write a note, write it today.

Maybe you just need to go to a door that's been closed for a long time and knock on the door. Go there and knock. Do it today. Maybe it will take a lot of time and a lot of effort and a lot of persistence, a lot of wisdom, a lot of counsel and lot of prayer.

Pastor John Ortberg tells the true story of a family friend named Sue. Sue's whose relationship with her mom was very difficult. Sometimes it was all out war. About the best it ever was, was cease-fire. She never got a compliment from her mom. She was quite attractive, but her mom never told her she looked pretty. About the only way they could relate was to inflict pain on each other. In a family, you know how to inflict pain.

Sue moved across the country, got married there, and avoided going home. When she did, she tried to stay with her brother to stay away from her mom. One day she got a call. Her mom had developed a degenerative muscular disease and probably wouldn't last a real long time. She started to pray, "God, do something. Do something to my mom's body or my mom's heart or my heart. Do something."

She and her mom both believed in God. Her mom went downhill quite rapidly. Sue got another call that the end was not far off. She flew home. They kept a family vigil by the bedside for several days, but her mom survived the crisis. Everybody was exhausted. They all went home except Sue who decided to stay for another day. She couldn't sleep that night.

She got up in the middle of the night and went into her mother's room and sat down on the side of her mom's bed. In the act of

moving towards her mom, something happened in her. Something real hard in her heart started to melt. She found herself saying words she thought she'd never ever say. "I'm sorry," she said to her mom, just such a simple phrase, such powerful words: "I'm sorry."

She'd done a lot of things that she regretted. She'd been hurt, but she had inflicted her. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know I wasn't easy to raise." "Me too," her mom said. "I'm sorry too. I'm sorry too." Sue said for the first time since she was a little girl, her heart was flooded with love for her mom. She had been afraid that she'd be cold towards her mom until the very end of her life. She hadn't touched her mom for years. Now she couldn't stop.

She held her mom's hand. She cradled her head and stroked her hair. She couldn't let go. She just couldn't stop touching her mom. She laid down on the bed next to her mom. She hadn't done that for 30 years. "I love you mom. I really do love you, I really do. I was so afraid you were going to die without knowing I love you. I was so afraid you were going to die and these words would never get said." Her mom said, "I'll bet you were afraid that you didn't know it either."

Her mom was having trouble speaking by now. Sue said she took a piece of paper and she started to write things. She wrote a single word for Sue to read and then pointed it towards her daughter, the word was pretty. Sue said, "The nurse told me I look a lot like you, Mom." She found herself with thoughts and feelings she wanted to express to her mom that she didn't even know she had. She was about 40 years old at this point and had not yet gotten married. She said to her mom, "I hoped to give you a grandchild."

Her mom wrote down, "You gave me daughter. You gave me a daughter." They just stayed up and talked and wrote and touched all night long. That was the last time that Sue would see her mom. It was her mom's last night on earth, her last, best night. A prison door was unlocked, and two frozen, bitter hearts melted, and two stones got laid down at the foot of a cross. Two human beings who had lived as enemies became mother and daughter.

There is no miracle like the miracle of forgiveness. If you're a follower of Jesus, if you love God, you've been forgiven an infinite

debt. You have been cleansed of the ultimate stain. What God has given you, you've got to give to the hurting, hurtful people around you. You've got to give it. Life's too short to live one day holding on to bitterness. Amen.