Book 11

Sunday January 30, 1983

"HOW TO DEAL WITH RESENTMENT" I Corinthians 13:1-13

Text: I Corinthians 13:5 "Love is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful."

Everyone has bad days! And many of our bad days have to do with minor irritations rather than major ones--a pain in the elbow, a teen-ager who stays out too late, a misunderstanding with a relative or friend, a car that won't start, a set of lost keys, someone is rude to us and we are irritable in return. There are so many things in daily life which can frustrate us including unavoidable conflicts and silly mistakes. When we combine all the mistakes other people make with those we make, the potential for bad days is limitless.

A common illusion is that certain people because of who they are and what they do have fewer problems and are less prone to bad days than the rest of us--psychiatrists, clergy, psychologists, educators, or that they have built in exemptions. Let me assure you this is not true! No one is immune to everyday problems and frustrations.

One reason Andy Rooney's columns and books are so popular is that he puts into words what we've all felt and experienced. In one of his columns, he wrote: "There are a few things in life you can always depend on. It is common knowledge, for example, that any line you choose to stand in for anything will be the slowest one to move. At the bank you get behind someone with a whole payroll to work out in pennies; at the supermarket, you choose the line in which people don't seem to have too much in their carts, but it turns out that two of the six people ahead of you have to have checks validated. . . ."

Each one of us also has our own special reasons for bad days. One person said she's having a bad day when she feels fragmented and pulled in different directions by too many conflicting demands. Another connects bad days to having certain expectations and finding that he cannot meet them. Other people think it is a bad day because of resentments or threats. And there are individuals who put together lists of items which tell you when it's going to be a bad day.

For example, one list I saw had on it such things as-- You know it's going to be a bad day when your boss tells you not to bother to take off your coat. Your income tax check bounces. You put both contact lenses in the same eye. You call your answering service and they tell you it's none of your business.

On a more serious note, a friend of mine knows he's going to have a bad day when that all-too-familiar needle-like pain twinges in his lower back. Another kidney stone is sure to be on its way down the urinary tract, the culprit in many emergency trips to the hospital.

The first thing to remember is that bad days are inescapable. The human capacity for pain and suffering and mistakes goes back to our creation. To love is to be open to hurt. To care is to be open to disappointment. Yet to love and to care is to live--it is to experience the world by being affected, changed, transformed and turned around by people who love and care for us in return. A person's capacity for joy is only as great as his or her capacity for suffering.

Our Christian faith affirms that to truly live and love is to be open, accessible and vulnerable and that leaves us open to bad days as well as good ones. The Christian faith then goes on to emphasize the importance of living through the bad days, not giving in or giving up on them. And more than that, the Christian faith affirms that God lives right alongside us during the bad days as well as the good ones.

And there are some bad days we can make better or avoid. And this is particularly true of those bad days which are caused by resentment. Let's look at this in more detail.

1. First, what is resentment and what are its causes? Someone has described it in this way. "Resentment is yesterday's irritation scratched into the sensitive membranes of our memory. It is yesterday's hurt grown up into today's indignation. Planted and tended in our memory, the thorn that first pricked us now stabs away at our peace. Memories of minor hurts become major resentments."

And what a power resentment can hold over us, increasing in its intensity with each day it goes unresolved.

Nothing stimulates memory and uncovers an old and unresolved anger like a resentment whose time has come. We all have ghosts that haunt us from the past--old hurts, disappointments and conflicts hidden away in yellowed letters, school yearbooks, and other articfacts of years gone by.

Resentment creates bad days because we invest so much in trying to keep the lid on our anger and hurt and because it ruptures human relationships.

2. But why do we take the past into our minds and lock it there to keep it alive? Why do we prolong the hurts we receive and remember them so carefully instead of remembering the joys of the past. Can it be that we remember the hurts so that we can enjoy the pain of yesterday over and over again? What kind of pleasure can we get from our resentment against the one who hurt us?

We think we get rewards from hanging on, because resentment makes us feel superior to the person we resent. Also it gives us an excuse for indulging in exquisite plots for revenge. We savor the possibility for getting even.

And there is a strange distorted pleasure we get in remembering past wounds which hurt us. Sometimes we actually enjoy the feeling of hurt that the memory rekindles. How we fondle these memories. We savor them lying in bed when we cannot sleep; we mull over them while driving our car; we even brood over them while listening to sermons on love.

We play the tape again and again because we get a strange distorted pleasure in being hurt again--like someone who cannot keep his tongue off a sensitive tooth. We not only enjoy the painful pleasure of remembered hurt, we also enjoy feeling noble and worthy as the decent person who was wrongly hurt. Resentment therefore serves a double purpose; it gives us treasured pain and it gives us a chance to justify ourselves. So we get two rewards--neurotic pleasure and religious pride.

At the same time, we also hate resentment because we are miserable in it. It takes a lot of energy. It depresses us, robs us of gratitude and spills over into other relationships. Resentment is deadly because its target is persons. And resent-/ment blocks love. That's the worst part

of all. It blocks love because it views the person whose fault is being kept alive through a lens clouded with anger. Irritated by an individual, we slice her single offense from the whole picture of what she is and from all the good and decent things she has done. Pushing everything aside we frame that single wrong vividly, intensely, painfully in our memory. This is how resentment justifies our refusal to love by falsifying reality. We force our memory to distort reality so we can justify irrational resentment.

We often deal with family grudges in this way. A wife confronts her husband for having offended her at a party. In a few minutes, he is demanding that she recall, word for word, the time she belittled him in front of friends--two years ago. He has remembered and resented. Now he demands that she also remember. Why does he do this? Because he needs to let her know what the virtue score is. He will not let his petty offense put her in first place in the "who's the better person" contest.

Once he knows that she knows that his offense tonight was smaller than her two-year old put down, he may be able to cancel his case against her. She cannot win because his resentment is too strong. In fact, of course, neither will win--for next week's slipup by one or the other will call for the same sort of hateful scorekeeping. Resentment is more than a minor vice. It is one of the deadliest known to human beings. The irony is that it always kills the spirit of the person who wields it.

Before we look at some of the helpful and positive ways of dealing with resentment, let's look first at some of the negative or ineffective ways of handling it.

1. One way we all try to deal with resentment is to keep at a distance from the person we think has hurt us. We reply to questions from them with crisp, short, curt answers. We talk with them only when necessary and avoid them when at all possible.

It's a way of "stuffing" our anger. The idea of doing something about the resentment in a open way, expressing it in some way is so frightening in terms of the way others might respond, that despite our seething inside, we mask our feelings and keep our distance.

If our resentment centers on someone we live or work with on a day to day basis, there may be no way to get away from that person, so then we might use sabotage to show our hidden anger. Sabotage is a sneaky way to get our anger message across, not because we are sneaky people, but because the anger is expressed so deviously and in such small ways.

2. Another ineffective way of dealing with our resentment is through fault-finding. We work hard at finding as many faults as possible about the person we already resent. We try to convince ourselves that the person deserves much more resentment and is not worthy of being forgiven. We are not interested in solutions, only in punishment.

From a Christian point of view,
What then are some positive and effective ways of dealing with our resentment?

1. Ideally, of course the best way to handle resentment is to prevent it in the first place. But that's easier said than done. It's not always easy to deep ourselves from being angry and hurt.

2. Secondly, since resentment cannot always be prevented, try to deal with it openly and directly. Jesus said, "If you are bringing your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with that person first." The more and the longer one suppresses anger and hurt, the more it turns sour, and the more damage it does.

3. Thirdly, remember what the Apostle Paul had to say in this passage on love from First Corinthians--love can drive out the demon of remembered hurt and pain. The power of God's love working in us can bring us to a new beginning. Love lets the past die. It moves us to a new beginning without worrying about settling the past. It forgives the past. In other words, love does not have to clear up all misunderstandings. In the spirit of love, the details of the past become irrelevant; only its new beginning matters. Accounts may go unsettled; differences remain unsolved; ledgers stay unbalanced. Love does not have to get even. That's the big difference.

Conflict's between people's memories of how things happened are not cleared up--they are left in the past. We let go.

Only the present and the future matter. Love's power relieves us from being fussy historians. Rather love prefers to forget all about the loose ends of right and wrong in the past, forgiveness takes over and pushes us to a new start. Letting go of the past and beginning here and now to move again toward a reconciled life is one of the hardest things any human being is ever asked to do. But love has the power to do just that.

God's love is our model. It keeps coming to us though we have offended over and over again. God's love also makes it possible for us to love. We are enabled by a love that keeps no score. The score-keeping we like to do in human relationships can be our stumbling-block. God is not interested in our losses and wins with other people.

God's love is not resentful--ever. So we no longer have any need to savor those past hurts, to collect them and guard them--let them go. We have no need to nourish resentment. It only causes more trouble. We forgive and start fresh. We can leave that heavy load we are carrying behind.

Sure, we will still be hurt, for love does not shield us from hurt. Love is not a desensitizer. The loving person hurts and she knows who and what caused the hurt. But the loving person also forgives because love has the power to look cruel facts in the face, see them for what they are, and then move on. Love does not blind us to reality or gloss over pain. Rather it overcomes pain.

This love is available to all of us. It is the nature of God. It's source is God. All we have to do is accept it and use it. And then we will become loving persons. Amen.