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Paying For Payback

No matter how long you nurse a grudge, it won't get better. Wade Bolton knew it, and wanted it that way.


Just before the Civil War, the astute businessman helped establish one of the most successful cotton and slave trading firms in the South. His partners were his brother, Ike, Tom Dickens and Washington Bolton who was no relation to Wade, despite the same last name.

In 1857, Wade got into a fierce business dispute with Tom. Soon after, Wade's brother, Ike, was involved in a shooting. Though acquitted after a very expensive trial, Ike — and Wade — wanted all four business partners to share the hefty bill. The others argued that only the brothers should pay for the trial.

Before long, a full-scale, two-family feud erupted. Wade Bolton and Tom Dickens locked horns in several bitter court battles. Then on July 23, 1869, Wade was shot and killed by Tom in downtown Memphis. In a high-profile trial, Tom was acquitted but was soon found dead of multiple gunshot wounds. His brother, Sam, also died in a shooting.

Another stir was caused by Wade Bolton's will. He left \$10,000 to his wife, Lavinia, land and money for the establishment of a college, and \$5,000 each to several family members — on the condition they continue the feud with the Dickens clan. To his niece, Josephine —





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who married the son of Wade's enemy — he left \$5, "one sixth of what Judas got for betraying our Lord".

On Wade Bolton's gravestone in Memphis, he's depicted with his curly beard and customary cane. At his request, his vest is misbuttoned and his left shoe untied. "I want to be remembered as I really was," he said. And he is. Though his marker lauds him as founder of Bolton College, the school's benefactor is best known for the 13-year feud that cost anywhere from eight to twelve lives. He's remembered for the pursuit of revenge, not knowledge, and that legacy is a lesson.

When not dealt with properly, anger, bitterness and resentment give way to full-blown hatred. Like slivers in the soul, negative emotions fester and turn poisonous until the emotional pain overwhelms everything else. Soon, all we can feel is rancor and the need for revenge. But whether we ignore or nurture the bitterness, it destroys us. The longer we leave it untreated, the more infected our hearts become until, when we can no longer stand it, the resentment explodes.

As Wade Bolton illustrates, the sin of seething, all-consuming hostility is contagious. That's why the Bible says when anyone offends us, the *onus* (look at the word) is on us. Rather than wait for the offender, we must take the first steps toward communication and reconciliation (Matt. 18:15). "And don't sin by letting anger control you," cautions the apostle Paul. "Don't let the sun go down while you're still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil." (Eph. 4:26,27)

Notice, the sin is not anger, but letting anger control us, making us think and do things we shouldn't. "Instead," he adds, "let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes... Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words and slander, as well as all types of evil behaviour. Be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God, through Christ, has forgiven you." (vv. 23, 31,32)

Forgiveness is an act of will; a choice born of gratitude for our own pardon from sin. So, when conflict arises, the solution is to deal with the situation quickly, honestly, and completely, asking God to release us from the bonds of bitterness. True forgiveness frees us to move forward and liberates us to love again.

Otherwise, our hearts turn poisonous or impervious. Contrary to what most people think, we always pay for payback, and getting even is not the first step toward getting ahead.