

# Matthew 5:21-26, 6:9-15

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[ 0 : 00 ] I wonder if you can relate to the feeling that comes over you when you think of that person's face.!

There's an emotional aspect to it more significantly that means you're distracted and irritated and annoyed.

That person, that group of people, that thing that they did, it's still there.

Those years have passed and the thought of them, maybe even as I'm saying this now, there's a face that comes to mind, there's a person's name that comes to mind and that agitation begins.

Maybe you thought you'd move beyond it. It was so long ago, you've talked about it so much, and yet you realize now that it's still an issue in your heart.

[ 1 : 22 ] Resentment, quote, resentment, also called ranklement or bitterness, is a complex, multi-layered emotion that has been described as a mixture of disappointment, disgust and anger.

That's the definition of resentment from the sociologist Warren Tenhouten. Resentment focuses on A, and it could be perceived or actual.

It focuses on a sense of having been wronged in some way and ruminates and seethes and often looks to retaliate.

That's a cheery note on which to start this evening. Why start there? Because resentment is common currency in our day.

Resentment motivates so much of our politics. It drives so-called cancel culture. You know cancel culture, that phenomenon whereby if you offend me, or in some cases if you even disagree with me, I seek to get you fired or ruin your reputation in some way.

[ 2 : 30 ] And resentment frames a lot of our wider social discourse. It informs lots of our conversations. Our culture expects us to see resentment as just a normal part of things.

We're expected to hold things against people who treat us in a particular way. We're expected to settle scores in the name of justice and to exact retribution, whatever that might take.

Vilifying another person is totally reasonable then in such an adversarial environment. The environment in which we live, the air that we breathe in our culture.

And because this is the case, it's in our workplaces, it's in our friendship circles, it's certainly on our social media feeds. Christians need to watch out. We need to watch out.

Because this attitude, complex multi-layered emotion that has been described as a mixture of disappointment, disgust and anger, that attitude is completely at odds with what is supposed to characterize our disposition, our hard attitude to others, but particularly our relationships as the people of God.

[ 3 : 44 ] The Christian community, as we've been hearing Sunday evening by Sunday evening over the last while from the Sermon on the Mount, is supposed to be distinctive in the culture. We are supposed to be present in the culture, but marked by different values that stand out.

In John's Gospel, Jesus makes it very clear. He says, this is how they will know that you are my disciples. The they is the culture, the world. The disciples are the people of God.

This is how the world will know that you are the people of God. It is as you love one another. And this evening, as a bit of an appendix to the Sermon on the Mount series, I want to go back and pick up a theme that we mentioned in passing, but that deserves more attention because of this cultural atmosphere in which we live.

And that is how Christian love deals with grievances by choosing forgiveness over resentment. How Christian love deals with grievances by choosing forgiveness over resentment.

I want to talk about forgiveness. Jesus tells us in the Lord's Prayer, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

[ 4 : 55 ] When it comes to God, we know that confession is essential. Whilst we know Him as our Father and we know our acceptance before Him is not based on any merit in us, that doesn't mean that we aren't aware of the reality of ongoing sin in our lives.

Confession in the Kingdom of God isn't us becoming a Christian again. We don't fall in and out of salvation because of our ongoing sin. Confession is the unburdening that comes when a relationship that has got twisted up gets straightened out again.

That is why we confess our sins together each Lord's Day. And what a comfort those words of assurance are. When we hear that reminder of gospel that follows our confession each Lord's Day, that reminds us of our forgiveness in Christ.

Precious words. So we know that. We know confession is important. But I want to focus on the second part of the sentence. As we also have forgiven our debtors.

As we think about the kind of church that we are, we want to be one where disagreements and grievances are resolved quickly. Where forgiveness is given and received. Because Christians don't give up on one another.

[ 6 : 07 ] We don't harbor grudges. And we don't allow resentment to get any traction in our life together as a community. In Matthew 5, 23-26, Jesus says that we should go to someone if we know they have something against us.

And we get further on in Matthew's gospel to chapter 18, verses 15-20. We're told to go to someone if we have something against them. We go to someone if they have something against us.

We go to them if we have something against them. And what this means simply is that if any relationship gets out of shape in some way, it doesn't matter who started it. A Christian should seek to put things right.

Regardless of how the problem began, we seek to put things right. If we can get hold of this, it will make for good relationships in church life.

But it will also make us increasingly distinctive in this adversarial culture that we live in. So to help us with this, I want to highlight three important aspects of forgiveness.

[ 7 : 15 ] For us to consider. But not just to consider. To make sure we're implementing in our lives. Three important aspects of forgiveness. It is costly. It is required.

And it is possible. Costly, required, and possible. Number one, it is costly. Jesus describes sins in Matthew 5. Did you notice in this translation here, in Matthew 5, he uses the image of a debt.

He does the same in Matthew 18, as it happens. When you are seriously wronged by someone, you very clearly feel that the person who does whatever they do to you owes you in some way.

And if you're honest, that's how it feels. You feel like you need to make them pay to put it right. They have to pay down the debt that they have accrued.

And we do that in a number of ways. We can do it physically. We hit them. We can do it verbally. We vent our anger on them. Christians know that those aren't the right approach.

[ 8 : 14 ] Just to be clear, those aren't the right approach. So, we then also, often it's common that we'll avoid them. So, we know we can't hit them.

We know we can't scream at them. So, we avoid them. But then there's also withdrawing emotionally. Making the other person feel bad in some way. This is common in marriage.

Or even just hoping that something bad happens to them. I've seen this in marriage as well. But that's how we operate. Even subconsciously.

We haven't actually thought that through in our minds. It just kind of happens. Only after that person suffers in some way, we think. And in a way that we deem equal with the wrong that they did to us.

Do we decide that the debt has been paid and their obligations have been met. And so, we can move back towards them. I want to suggest that this sense of debt and obligation is impossible to escape.

[ 9 : 11 ] And anyone who denies that it exists simply hasn't been wronged in any serious way. Now, for you to be able to extend forgiveness, you need to give up the right to go after that repayment from your wrongdoer.

And what that means is that you will have to cancel the debt by paying it yourself. Someone always pays every debt.

Forgiveness is simply you choosing to bear the cost. When you are sinned against, the debt could be anything. It might just be your happiness that they've taken from you.

It could be your reputation. It could be a relationship or any kind of opportunity. Someone has taken this thing from you and they owe you. Let's say they've done something to hurt your reputation. You could try and deal with the debt by making them pay. You criticize them publicly. You get online and say what needs to be said. You try and pay them back to the point of your satisfaction.

[10:16] Or you can forgive. You can refuse to go after payback. And you can absorb the damage to your reputation. You can trust it to the Lord. And let him take care of it.

Now, in both cases, there is a cost to be met. But in one, they pay. In the other, you pay. Either you make them suffer for it.

Or you forgive and suffer for it yourself. Forgiveness is always costly. It is perhaps most costly emotionally.

Because you constantly, constantly have to reframe the way that your emotional instincts want to lead you. You want revenge. Revenge. You want them to pay. And this reframing.

This coming to those thoughts and reframing them. That is hard and it is exhausting. But there are some ways that you may pay the debt yourself.

[11:17] So, you choose to refuse to hurt the person directly. You refuse vengeance. Instead, you are as civil as you can be to them. You refuse subtle ways to try an exact payment while telling yourself that you are not trying to do that.

You know when you are doing that. So, you avoid critical remarks. You avoid rehearsing past wrongs. Dragging up things from before.

Talking about the context of our relationships together. Be that in the home or in church life. You refuse critical remarks. You refuse rehearsing past wrongs.

Wanting to remind them how horrible they are and how badly they have treated you. Holding on to power is another thing we can refuse.

You know what that is like when you make demands of the person because you feel that they still owe you. They are in your debt and so they need to pay that debt down. And so you have power over them.

[12:23] You refuse to avoid them. You refuse to emotionally check out around them. Those are subtle ways that we can exact payment while telling ourselves that we are not trying to exact payment.

Another way we can pay the debt ourselves is we refuse to gossip about them. We refuse to slander them to others. Now, be careful here because in the life of the church you could present this as, Could you just pray with me about this?

I'd really appreciate it. I just need to share with you how really terrible that person is and how absolutely awful they are. No, that's actually looking for sympathy.

That's not actually just looking for prayer. You refuse to continually replay the wrong in your head in order to keep the hurt fresh. That's very difficult to do because the pain is so real.

And you feel the pain. You feel the difficulty. And you rehearse it in your head again and again. And you replay how awful that they were. And yet what that does, it just keeps picking the scab off.

[13:30] So the wound is fresh. You refuse to do that. And you refuse to demonize the offender in your mind. Instead, you acknowledge that you're a sinner just like them.

And rather than hoping for them to suffer, you pity their sin. Not suggesting you pity them necessarily, but you realize that their sin that they committed is a grievous thing between them and God.

And you pity them for it. And you pray for their growth. Now what this means is that forgiveness is actually something that you grant before it is something that you feel.

It is a promise not to do these things. And it is a commitment to pray for the perpetrator. Jesus says, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

It is something you grant before it is something you feel. And that is easier said than done.

Speaking before his death, Sir Roger Scruton put his finger on the challenge when he said this, quote, resentment is so much easier than love.

[14:45] Love requires you to forgive the faults of the other, to be giving and forgiving, whereas hatred has no cost at all. I'm not sure it does have no cost at all, but you can see the point that he's making.

And we feel that instinctively. It's far easier to follow our anger, to follow our bitterness, than it is to refuse to go that way. Tim Keller in his book on forgiveness puts it this way.

Though it is extremely difficult and painful, you are bearing the cost of the sin yourself. Forgiveness will deepen your character, free you to talk to and help the person, and lead to love and peace rather than bitterness.

Further, by bearing the cost of the sin, you are walking in the path of your master. Matthew 18, Colossians 3. Forgiveness is never easy.

It is costly. But secondly, 14 and 15 make clear, chapter 6. For the Christian, there's no way around it.

[15:52] It is required. Matthew 6, 14. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

I pointed out when we discussed this section in the series on the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus is not saying here, if you do this, then God will do that in some kind of trade.

That would be out of step with the rest of the New Testament. He is saying the way that you will know if you have experienced the Father's grace is if you extend grace to others. Or to put it more bluntly, if you don't extend forgiveness to others, it looks like you don't know the Father's forgiveness in your own life.

If you are not a forgiving person, there's every chance that you're not a forgiven person. As we have forgiven our debtors, necessarily flows from forgive us our debts.

In that sense, we are required to forgive. This is a recurring theme in the Apostle Paul's writing. In Colossians 3, he says, Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.

[17:05] Whatever grievances. What's not on the list of whatever grievances? Nothing. And Paul calls for this on the basis of Jesus' atonement for our sins.

He goes on, As the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. It's the same point. He's simply just repackaging what Jesus says here in Matthew 6.

If you profess to be a Christian, you are required to forgive those who wrong you. You must let go of bitterness.

Instead, to go on in Colossians 3, you must put on love, which binds everything together in harmony. You are required to forego resentment and anger. And this is to be true.

Even when the person who has wronged you doesn't say sorry and doesn't ask for forgiveness.

Now, some theologians differ on this point.

[18:02] Some say you can't forgive someone who hasn't asked for forgiveness. So, a sin that isn't repented of can't, by definition, be forgiven. Now, there's a certain logic to this, but there are also problems, not least the problem of what it does to us when we hold on to resentment, anger, and bitterness.

And I said at the beginning, you remember the face of that person, you remember the name of that person, and it still has those kind of physical effects on you. When we hold on to these things, they don't do us any good.

But the main concern I have with that way of thinking is the unqualified way that Jesus speaks about it, both in our passage here and elsewhere. Think about this, Mark 11, 25.

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him. He doesn't say forgive him if he repents, but rather forgive him in your heart in that moment as you are praying.

It is something you commit to before it is something that you feel. God requires us to forgive whether or not the offender has repented or has asked for forgiveness.

[19:13] Now, it's really important for me to say that this doesn't mean that we have no concern for justice. These words from the lips of Jesus are not the only thing that he has to say about what to do in the face of wrongdoing.

He tells his disciples in Luke 17, verse 3, to rebuke the wrongdoer. We are to confront wrongdoing. We are to call people out on their sin, and there will often be consequences for that sin.

There is such a thing as church discipline. And not to do this is unloving because sin is so destructive to us and so offensive to God that if we are just to...

Don't hear me as saying we just leave it unchecked and we just forgive everybody no matter what. While leaving justice just to kind of do its own thing.

We don't brush stuff under the carpet. To do that is actually terribly unloving. But Jesus still follows the call to rebuke with, if he repents, forgive him, Luke 17.

[ 20 : 12 ] So what he's saying is, yes, we do confront wrong. We do pursue justice. But the way that we do it, even the way that we do that must bear forgiveness in mind.

So Jesus calls us both to practice internal forgiveness in our hearts and to rebuke and correct. It's not either or.

You don't forgive people at the expense of justice. We deal with our hearts and we deal with the issue. But even in that context, we refuse the right to pay back.

At a personal level, we usually get this the wrong way around. We don't pursue justice on the outside. We don't confront. We don't challenge someone who wrongs us.

At a personal level, in our relationships, we withdraw. Because it's painful to have to go and speak to that person and to call them out. So we don't do that. And we do hold on to resentment on the inside.

[ 21 : 11 ] And Jesus tells us to turn this completely around. And actually, he's saying you can only do the external bit properly if you've done the internal bit. If your heart is right.

If your disposition is to forgive and to be gracious. Only then will your motives or your words be appropriate to confront. Forgiveness is costly.

But it is required for followers of Jesus. Now, in saying this, I don't want to sound flippant or glib. I'm not for a moment suggesting you're struggling with resentment.

Get over it. You're required to forgive. Not at all. The extent of many of our grievances, it's fair to say, are fairly minor in the wider scheme of things. But some of us have had deep griefs to bear. And I'm aware of how hard that this sort of thing can sound. How difficult this idea is. And yet, the teaching still applies. So, what do we do when this task does sound so difficult?

[ 22 : 18 ] When, up to this point, you've been just simply internally thinking, this is impossible. I know it says it, but actually, there must be some other way. Because I cannot imagine this ever being possible.

Well, then, we need to remember, thirdly, that forgiveness is possible. It's costly. It's required. Thirdly, it's possible. Remember how the Lord's Prayer starts. Remember how the whole Sermon on the Mount started.

Jesus gathers his disciples to teach them how to live as citizens of God's kingdom. This is a prayer for those who know God as Father. For those who have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

And it is this gospel. It is this gospel of free grace given to us by the Father through the Son. Applied to us by the Holy Spirit. Not on the basis of what we have done, but on the basis of what He has done.

In the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ on our account. It gives us the resources for a life of forgiveness. Resources that one author has called emotional humility on the one hand.

[ 23 : 20 ] And emotional wealth on the other. Why do you remain bitter and resentful towards someone? Why do I feel that way about someone?

I can only do that if I feel superior in some way. If I think to myself, when it all comes down to it, I would never do anything like that. But if you refuse to forgive someone, you are blind to your own sinfulness.

And your own need for forgiveness. And your own capacity to commit exactly the same sin. When Paul, the apostle Paul describes himself as the chief of sinners in 1 Timothy 1.

He is not exaggerating. He is saying that he is capable of sin. He is as capable of sin as the worst kind of people are. What has happened there?

The gospel has given him emotional humility. And he sees himself as he really is. He's the chief of sinners. He is capable.

[ 24 : 19 ] The seeds of every possible sin are in his heart. This is one of the sure signs that the gospel has taken root in our lives.

It brings us low in the right way with an emotional humility. We know we aren't better than others. At the same time, you can't forgive someone.

You can't pay the required debt if you're insecure. That is, if you need to uphold a particular reputation. If you need to have certain things in your life. If those things are such a need to you that you cannot let them go.

By definition, you're going to be insecure. You're not going to be able to forgive. You can't let those things go without someone paying. That actually is emotional poverty.

However, if you know God's love. If you have experienced his forgiveness. Then the truth is that there's actually a limit to how deeply another person can hurt you.  
[ 25 : 26 ] They can cause you real sadness. But they can't touch your true identity. They can cause you real pain. But they can't undo your security in Christ.

They can't therefore actually get to your real wealth. What is your real wealth? Your real wealth is your in Christness. So the more you appreciate your own forgiveness. And what that means for your identity. The fact that you're dearly loved by the Father of glory. The fact that he looks on you and he says, I am well pleased. You are my beloved. The more that we meditate on that, the easier we will find it to forgive others. Because we're grounded in emotional wealth. We know who we are. In the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have the resources we need to forgive every wrong.

[ 26 : 27 ] In marriages, between parents and children, between siblings, with friends, colleagues, anyone. And especially in church life.

Again, this doesn't mean it will be easy. Maintaining good relationships in a community as diverse as a church is really tough. Jesus' mission is to bring people who are as different as can be together.

Don Carson says this, The reason there are so many exhortations in the New Testament for Christians to love other Christians is because the church itself is not made up of natural friends. It is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance. Christian love will stand out and bear witness to Jesus because it is a display, for Jesus' sake, of mutual love among social incompatibles.

[ 27 : 31 ] Jesus' sake, of course, of course, of course, of course, of course, difference doesn't just evaporate as we go up there.

It does theologically, but it doesn't emotionally. And so that is why we've got to keep going back to the realities of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what that does in taking away our sin and in uniting us to one another.

The possibility for offense in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is significant because we all come from different backgrounds. But if we resolve to work together in the power of the Holy Spirit, to be slow to take offense, to be quick to cover grievances, to refuse the resentment that is crippling our culture because we're called to, yes, but also because we can.

We'll personally be much happier. We'll have greater unity as a body, as a church. But we'll also send a message to the wider world about the power of a gospel in an area of life which they simply do not have answers for.

So let's resolve to do that. Nobody said it would be easy, but it is possible. Let's pray together.

[ 29 : 19 ] Let's pray together. Thank you.