

How to Let Go of What's Weighing You Down

Mark 11:22-25; Colossians 3:12-17

In the series “Real Talk: Honest Conversations with God”

[Stand beside a table with the empty backpack and the pile of stones in full view.]

Most of us know what it feels like to carry something heavy. At first we adjust — we shift the weight, tell ourselves it's manageable, figure we'll set it down soon. But the longer we carry it, the more it starts affecting everything else. Our shoulders tighten. Our posture changes without us noticing. We get tired faster than we used to, doing things that never used to wear us out. And after a while, we honestly forget what it felt like to move freely.

Some emotional and spiritual burdens work exactly the same way — guilt, shame, regret, anger, resentment, old injuries we keep replaying long after everyone else has moved on. Here's the thing about burdens like these: they're usually not heavy because of their size. They're heavy because of how long we've carried them.

And Jesus gives us a prayer for both kinds of weight. It's one line, but it moves in two directions: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

[Pick up the empty backpack and hold it open.]

Jesus begins with two words: “Forgive us.” Right away, the prayer assumes something most of us would rather not admit out loud in front of other people — we all have things that need forgiving. Not “other people” have things that need forgiving. We do.

[Place several small stones into the backpack, one at a time, as you name each item.]

Some of what we carry seems small on its own. A sharp word we didn't need to say. A little lie that felt harmless at the time. The impatience we showed someone who didn't deserve it. The gossip we repeated because it made for a good story. The person we ignored because we were in a hurry. One small stone doesn't feel like much. But they add up faster than we expect.

[Add several medium-sized stones.]

Then there are things that feel more serious. Trust we damaged and never quite repaired. A relationship we let go neglected until it went cold. Anger that crossed a line into cruelty. A habit that ended up harming someone else. An apology we've been avoiding for so long it's become its own kind of lie.

[Add one or two large stones.]

And some things are hard even to name out loud. Things we deeply regret. Things we genuinely cannot undo. Things that still bring a wave of shame when they cross our mind at two in the morning — things we're fairly sure would change how people see us if they ever found out.

[Zip the backpack closed and put it on.]

This is what guilt and shame can turn into. We carry what we did. We replay it on a loop. We punish ourselves for it, sometimes for years, telling ourselves that if we just feel bad enough for long enough, we'll somehow make up for it. But shame rarely makes anyone better. Mostly it just drains our joy, saps our energy, and convinces us to hide from the one God who could actually help us set it down.

And right here — right in the middle of the prayer Jesus taught his followers — he has us pray: “Forgive us.” That single line tells us two things at once. First, that we all need forgiving, no exceptions. Second, that God is genuinely willing to give it. Grace doesn't say, “It didn't matter.” Grace says, “It mattered, and God's mercy is still greater than what you did.”

This is where a word like repentance actually matters, even though it can sound like old church vocabulary. It just means we stop hiding. We name the wrong instead of dancing around it. We drop the excuses. We say we're sorry and mean it. We make it right where we still can. We turn and walk a different direction than the one that got us here. And then — this part matters just as much — we trust God with what we genuinely cannot undo ourselves.

[Drop the backpack to the floor with a clear thud. Pause.]

“Forgive us our trespasses.” Trespasses is just an old word for the wrongs we've done — the lines we crossed that we shouldn't have. That thud is the sound of grace. Not denial. Not dodging responsibility. Release.

[Stand upright. Breathe visibly, freely, without the backpack.]

That would honestly be a wonderful place for the prayer to end — “God, forgive me,” full stop. But Jesus keeps going: “as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The prayer now turns to face the weight of what other people have done to us.

[Begin loading the backpack again, from empty.]

Some offenses genuinely are small. A rude comment tossed off without much thought. The slight you probably weren't even meant to notice. The dismissive look across the room. The friend who forgot. The moment you were left out or overlooked and nobody seemed to realize it.

[Add several medium-sized stones.]

Then there are deeper hurts. A friendship that quietly fell apart and was never repaired. A family conflict that never actually healed, just went underground. An accusation that wasn't fair and was never retracted. A broken trust. A wound from church, of all places. Someone who failed you exactly when you needed them most.

[Add one or two large stones, more slowly.]

And some wounds are genuinely profound — abuse, abandonment, infidelity, cruelty, a betrayal so devastating it changed the direction of somebody's whole life.

[Hold the loaded backpack against your chest, arms wrapped around it.]

When someone hurts us, the offense starts with them. But resentment has a way of becoming something we hold onto ourselves. We replay the conversation. We rehearse our case against them, building the argument a little more airtight every time. We imagine what we wish we'd said in the moment. We keep the debt

alive, like a ledger we can't stop checking. And sometimes we quietly believe that holding on is the only proof we have that the hurt actually mattered.

There's real research behind what that does to a person. Doctors and researchers at places like Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and Mayo Clinic have studied what long-term resentment does to the human body, and it isn't subtle — higher blood pressure, a faster heart rate, more muscle tension, a nervous system stuck in low-grade alert for years at a time, a greater risk of anxiety and depression. One national survey found that 62 percent of American adults say they need more forgiveness in their own lives. This isn't a “spiritual people” issue. It's a human one.

Consider a man named Chris Carrier. In 1974, when he was ten years old, he was abducted near his home in Florida, taken into the swamps, stabbed repeatedly, and shot in the head. He survived — barely — and flagged down help on a nearby highway. Decades later, a police officer told Chris that the man suspected of attacking him was dying, alone, in a nursing home, and suggested he go confront him. Chris did something braver. He visited the man. He held his hand. He told him he forgave him, and he kept visiting until the man died. Chris didn't do that because the crime didn't matter — it mattered enormously, and he still carried the scars. He did it because he'd decided he wasn't going to spend another decade of his one life gripping a hatred that could never undo what had already happened. [Brandon Showalter, “SBC highlights power of the Gospel in one man’s testimony after being left for dead,” *The Christian Post*, 06/16/2021. Accessed 07/11/2026.]

Most of us aren't carrying anything close to what Chris Carrier carried. But it affects us the same way it affected him. Resentment starts shaping our posture, our relationships, our prayers, our capacity to trust, our capacity for joy — the whole shape of a life, bent slowly around a grievance.

In Mark 11, Jesus says, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.” That teaching comes right after Jesus rides into Jerusalem, confronts corruption in the temple, and walks past a withered fig tree — this isn't abstract, stained-glass spirituality. He's describing what real life looks like

under God's reign. “Have faith in God,” he says. Then he speaks about prayer. And then, without changing subjects, he speaks about forgiveness. Jesus connects the two because prayer is relational trust with God, and resentment keeps the heart clenched shut. It's hard to receive mercy with your hands wrapped tightly around a grievance.

[Adjust your grip on the backpack, visibly straining.]

Unforgiveness is like gripping something heavy for far too long. The original weight got placed on us by somebody else — but eventually, it's our own grip that starts doing most of the damage. Jesus isn't asking us to deny the wound. He's asking us to stop letting the wound control our prayer life, our heart, and our future.

[Continue holding the backpack.]

This next part needs to be said clearly, because I never want forgiveness preached from up here in a way that hurts people who've been genuinely wronged.

Forgiveness does not mean what happened was acceptable, or that the hurt didn't matter. It doesn't mean there should be no consequences, or that trust gets automatically restored. It doesn't mean you're required to return to an unsafe relationship, ignore abuse, stop pursuing justice, or force yourself to feel warmly toward someone who hurt you.

Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation, and mixing those two up has caused real damage. Forgiveness can begin in one person's heart, on their own. Reconciliation — actually rebuilding a relationship — requires truth, genuine repentance, safety, accountability, changed behavior, and rebuilt trust, all from the other person, not just good intentions from you.

I want to pause and say something very clearly for survivors of abuse, violence, or trauma. I am not asking you to forgive and forget, to minimize what happened, or to reconcile with someone who is unsafe. Healing does not run on a schedule, and forgiveness — if and when it comes — may take far longer than a sermon or a season. You are not behind, and you are not failing God by still being in

the middle of this. Wherever you are today, you are welcome to bring a counselor, a trusted friend, or your pastor alongside you as you go.

So, what does forgiveness mean? Forgiveness is releasing the right to revenge. It means placing judgment into God's hands instead of carrying the gavel yourself. It means refusing to let bitterness make the rest of your decisions for you. It means being able to say, honestly: "God, I will not carry this alone anymore."

[Drop the backpack again. Pause.]

Forgiveness doesn't say the burden was light. Forgiveness says you're ready to stop letting it own you.

[Step away from the backpack on the floor, hands empty.]

But letting go isn't the whole of the Christian life. Colossians tells us what we put on after we set the burden down. Paul writes, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience... forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you."

Notice where Paul starts. Not with a command — with an identity. Chosen. Holy. Beloved. We don't forgive so that God will love us. We forgive because God already loves us, and that's what makes forgiveness possible in the first place instead of just one more obligation.

Forgiveness isn't a feeling we have to manufacture out of nowhere. It's part of the new life we put on because Christ has already covered us in mercy. Every single day, we decide what we're going to wear, and Paul says followers of Jesus make a similar decision about their character: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and above everything else, love. That means forgiveness may be a daily practice long before it ever becomes some emotional breakthrough moment. Some mornings, we'll need to release the replay in our head again. Put on patience again. Choose mercy again. Ask for freedom again. That's not failure — that's just what it looks like to keep getting dressed.

And Paul isn't writing to isolated individuals here. He's writing to a church, a whole community: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.” A church shaped by Christ isn't a place where nobody ever gets hurt, disagrees, disappoints, or fails each other. It's a place where hurt doesn't get the final word — where people tell the truth in love, confess, apologize, and stop keeping hidden scorecards on one another. It's a place where mercy is something we actually practice, not just something we sing about on Sunday morning.

[Gesture toward the backpack, still on the floor.]

So today, the question isn't really “who should forgive whom.” The deeper question is simpler and harder: What are you still carrying? Is it guilt over something you've done? Is it shame you're convinced God could never actually release? Is it resentment over what someone did to you? Is it the need for an apology that may never come?

You don't have to resolve all of it today. Forgiveness is often a journey, not a single decision made once and finished. Some wounds genuinely need time. Some situations require real boundaries, not just good feelings. Some burdens need the help of a counselor, a pastor, or a trusted friend who can walk with you through it. But you can begin, right now, with one honest prayer: “God, I am tired of carrying this alone.”

This week, try praying the Lord's Prayer slowly, on purpose. When you reach the words “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” stop. Don't rush past them like you have a hundred times before. Ask yourself: What mercy do I need to receive? What resentment am I still carrying? What would one honest step toward release look like today?

The prayer Jesus gives us moves in both directions at once. “Forgive us our trespasses” — God, release me from the weight of guilt and shame. “As we forgive those who trespass against us” — God, help me release the resentment that keeps

shaping me. **What we refuse to release keeps shaping us. What we surrender to God no longer has to rule us.**

So receive mercy. Practice mercy. Put down what Christ is already ready to help you release. And let the peace of Christ teach you, maybe for the first time in a while, what it actually feels like to stand up straight again.

Let us pray. Merciful God,
you know what each of us has carried into this room.

You know the guilt we cannot undo,
the shame we have hidden,
the hurts we keep replaying,
and the resentment we are tired of holding.

Meet us now with your grace.

Help us receive the forgiveness we cannot earn.
Give us courage to confess what is ours to confess,
to repair what we can repair,
and to entrust to you what we cannot change.

Where we have been wounded,
help us release the burden without denying the hurt.
Give us wisdom to seek justice,
courage to maintain needed boundaries,
and patience with the long work of healing.

We cannot force forgiveness.
We cannot manufacture peace.
But we can open our hands to you.

So we surrender our guilt,
our shame,
our anger,
our need to keep score,
and our longing to control what happens next.

Clothe us again with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love.

Let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

We surrender all we are and all we carry
to your mercy and care.

Amen.