



5 Keys to Break Free from the Cage of Bitterness

Last in a 3-part mini-series titled: *Struggle Bus*
Part of the larger 10-week *Family Bundle* series

Pastor Matt Friend – November 4 & 7, 2021
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– OUTLINE –

What's today's big idea?

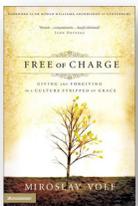
Forgiveness is unlocking the door to set someone free and realizing you were the prisoner!

What I won't be encouraging you to do in today's sermon:

- “Get over your hurt.”
- “Forgive and forget.”
- “Ignore the law.”
- “Become best friends with the person who hurt you.”

What I am encouraging you to do in today's sermon (the 5 keys):

- #1 – See the person who hurt you as a human being created in God's image.
- #2 – Let God be their judge. You take care of you.
- #3 – Try to sympathize with the suffering they've experienced in life.
- #4 – Recognize the role that the forces of evil have played in their life.
- #5 – Remind yourself, “If God can forgive my sin, I can forgive their sin.”



Resource Recommendation

[*Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*](#)

By Miroslav Volf



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– NOTES –

Introduction:

Today I want to tell you the true story about one of the most heroic POW escapes in WWII...

Few of us know what it's like to be a prisoner of war; however, many of us know what it's like to be a prisoner of unforgiveness. Few of us know what it's like to be held in a cage of bars; however, many of us know what it's like to be held in a cage of bitterness.

What's today's big idea?

Forgiveness is unlocking the door to set someone free and realizing you were the prisoner!

(This oft-used phrase has been attributed to Max Lucado, though it likely predates him.)

Big idea expanded:

Why is this big idea so important for us? I'm convinced that the greatest blight in American Christianity right now is the blight of bitterness, especially what we've seen in the last five years on social media. Few things have been a more powerful temptation in my own life, and from what I see in pastoral ministry, few things are more destructive in our congregation's life than unforgiveness.

This past summer, we took a family survey of our congregation. From the responses we received, it was obvious: bitterness and



unforgiveness are killing us.

- Husbands are refusing to forgive their wives.
- Wives are refusing to forgive their husbands.
- Children are bitter at their parents.
- Parents are bitter at their children.
- Parents are bitter over what someone else did or didn't do for their children.

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What about you? Have you ever struggled with bitterness and unforgiveness?

- Has anyone ever abused you: physically, emotionally, or worse?
- Has anyone ever done any of these things to someone you love?
- Did your father step out on your mother, or did your mother step out on your father?
- Has anyone ever treated you like yesterday's trash?
- Has someone, even a friend, ever lied, gossiped, or spread rumors about you?
- Did a family member steal from you?
- Did a former business partner do you dirty?

What I won't be encouraging you to do in today's sermon:

- "Get over your hurt." – No, Ecclesiastes says there's a time to cry (3:4). Grieving is not a sin. Hurting is not a sin. Both are part of being human. Some of our pain will not be fully resolved until the resurrection. It is not wrong to hurt; however, it is wrong to hate.
- "Forgive and forget." – No, forgiveness is free, yet trust must be earned. I can forgive a thief yet it doesn't mean I'll give him



- the keys to my car or my house.
- “Ignore the law.” – No, our God is the God of forgiveness, yet He’s also the God of justice. If someone has abused you or committed a crime against you, God expects you to use the gift of government not only for your good, but for society’s good. Romans 13 says that one of the government’s primary jobs is to execute justice. I often advise, “Get a good lawyer.”
 - “Become best friends with the person who hurt you.” – Jesus never commands or expects this; however, He does call you to forgive. Again, it's not wrong to hurt; it is wrong to hate.

This is not a sermon on reconciliation, though that’s important. This is not a sermon on having a hard conversation with someone, though that’s important (and something we all need from time to time). This is, however, a sermon on forgiveness.

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Let’s be honest: forgiveness is hard. Forgiving jerks is the hardest trick in the bag. As Christians, we’ll feed the poor, confront the king, and even buy 200 boxes of Stove Top Stuffing. We’ll even memorize the book of Leviticus if God says so. However, forgive someone who has hurt us? That’s unthinkable!

Think with me about how hard the following principles are to obey...

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. –Matthew 5:9 (NIV)

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. –Romans 12:18 (NIV)

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander. – Ephesians 4:31 (NLT)

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. –



Colossians 3:13 (NIV)

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone... See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. –Hebrews 12:14-15 (NIV)

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What I am encouraging you to do in today's sermon (the 5 keys):

#1 – See the person who hurt you as a human being created in God's image.

Here's how we say it in our Member Statement of Faith...“God intentionally created man and woman in His image, sharing in aspects of His spiritual, relational, rational, moral, emotional, and royal image, making us—of all creation—most like Him and most capable of glorifying Him, even in our physical bodies. As image-bearers of God, each person is loved, designed with beauty, created with a purpose, and is inherently and eternally valuable. All people reflect aspects of God's nature and are to be treated with dignity.”

See the person who hurt you as a human being created in God's image.

Because they are created in God's image, they are at least to be treated as human, no matter how animalistic you may think they are. ([Genesis 1:26-28](#); [5:1-3](#); [9:6](#); [Psalms 8](#); [139:13-18](#); [Isaiah 43:7](#); [44:24](#); [James 3:9](#); [1 Peter 2:17](#); [1 John 4:20](#))

Additionally, Jesus loved and died for the whole world, even while we were his enemies. This includes the person who hurt you. ([John 3:16](#); [Romans 5:8](#); [1 Timothy 2:4](#); [2 Peter 3:9](#); [1 John 2:2](#))



#2 – Let God be their judge. You take care of you.

Do you ever fear that the person who did you wrong has gotten away with it? We fear the evildoer will slip into the night, unknown and unpunished, escaping to Fiji to sip mai tais on the beach.

Think with me... After what that person did to you, isn't some vengeance in order? Of course it is. In fact, God cares about justice more than we do.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. –Romans 12:17-19 (NIV)

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God... For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. –Hebrews 10:26-31 (NIV)

In both of those passages, we say that God will repay, not He might repay.

#3 – Try to sympathize with the suffering they've experienced in life.

God sympathizes. God doesn't excuse sin but He has empathy.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. –Psalm 103:13-14 (NIV)

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them,



because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. –Matthew 9:36 (NIV)

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. –Hebrews 4:14-15 (NIV)

Our Executive Pastor, John King, has reminded us all throughout the pandemic that we must have empathy for one another. We're all suffering in some way. Very few people I know are okay. Teachers are not okay. Health care professionals are not okay. Parents are not okay. School children are not okay. You may not be okay.

What about hurt from years ago, pre-pandemic? One thing that can bring compassion is trying to understand the story of the person who hurt you. What led them to where they are today? In what ways were they hurt? What did they lose? Who took something from them or deprived them of the basic essentials of healthy humanity? None of these excuses their sin, especially what they did to hurt you, but it can carve forgiveness.

#4 – Recognize the role that the forces of evil have played in their life.

Truly understanding evil is the only way to forgive the unforgiveable.

A little less than two years after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot, John Perkins was working on his own nonviolent resistance movement in Mississippi. He was not simply following King, but was observing him while trailblazing his own path for freedom and equality. Perkins's movement overlapped with



King's, but instead of becoming famous through his speeches, he became known for his community Bible studies. Unlike King, he was not in the national spotlight, but like King he stood firm against the systematic evil all around him.

On February 7, 1970, John led a nonviolent march in protest of the racial inequity in Mendenhall, Mississippi. A group of students who participated in the march left to return home and were followed by police. Once they crossed over the line separating Simpson County from Rankin County, a police car pulled one of the vans over. All the students were ordered out of their van and were arrested, then taken to the county jail. Doug Huemmer, who had been driving the van of students, was taken in a police car by himself, and was beaten the entire way to the jail by Frank Thames, the officer who had pulled them over. The students were kicked, stomped, and beaten with blackjacks and billy clubs at the police station. Their nonviolence was met with violence. After the students had been arrested, the driver of the other van contacted John to tell him what happened. He quickly connected with two other protesters and set out for the jail, even though they were worried about another ambush. When they arrived at the station, a highway patrolman met them in the parking lot. He told them to wait outside for the sheriff. Instead, a dozen officers poured out of the station to arrest them. From this point on, five of the deputy sheriffs and seven to twelve highway patrolmen beat them within an inch of their lives. In and out of consciousness, Perkins recalls seeing a lot of blood and remembers being forced to clean it up while they beat him some more.

When I first read this story in Goggin and Strobel's book, "[*The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb*](#)," I felt rage inside me. Yet, John Perkins's own reaction was different from mine. He recalls, "They were like savages—like some horror out of the night. And I can't forget their faces, so twisted with hate. It was like looking at white-faced demons. Hate did that



to them.” Like King before him, Perkins saw how evil defiled human beings. Evil power had destroyed them. While there is no question that John was being abused and dehumanized, he saw men who had been abused and dehumanized by evil. The very thing they turned to for power to control was warping them and making them less than human.

John recalls, “I couldn’t hate back. When I saw what hate had done to them, I couldn’t hate back. I could only pity them. I didn’t ever want hate to do to me what it had already done to those men.” That night, in and out of consciousness as the students cared for him, John prayed, “God, if You will let me get out of this jail alive, I really want to preach a gospel that will heal these people too.”

I’m reminded of Tony Dungy’s words, “Today we are a divided country, and Satan is laughing at us because that is exactly what he wants. Dysfunction, mistrust, and hatred help his kingdom flourish. We have to realize we are not fighting against other people. We are fighting against Satan and his kingdom of spiritual darkness.”

In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. –Ephesians 4:26-27 (NIV)

#5 – Remind yourself, “If God can forgive my sin, I can forgive their sin.”

Not only has suffering played a role in their life; it has played a role in your life as well. Not only have the forces of evil played a role in their life; it has played a role in your life as well. And not only has sin played a role in their life; it has played a role in your life as well.

In Matthew 25:21-35 Jesus tells a parable. Instead of reading it, I’ll put it in a modern context for you. Imagine that I borrow



a \$10 Million from you, with the promise to pay it back in one year. Well, a year later I come to you and say, “Due to the economy and Covid and gas prices, I’m not going to be able to pay it back.” I ask for your forgiveness, and you give it—forgiving the entire debt. But then, Paula comes to me and asks to borrow \$10. I give it to her, and one week later she comes back and says, “Due to the economy and Covid and gas prices, I’m not going to be able to pay it back.” However, I refuse to forgive her. “No way, Paula! I’m calling the cops and sending you to jail! How dare you not pay me back \$10!” What would you say to me?

Christian: you will never forgive anyone more than God has already forgiven you.

Why do these 5 things? Because...

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