

Excerpt from *The Reason for God* by Timothy Keller (pp. 185-188)

“Most of the wrongs done to us cannot be assessed in purely economic terms. Someone may have robbed you of some happiness, reputation, opportunity, or certain aspects of your freedom. No price tag can be put on such things, yet we still have a sense of violated justice that does not go away when the other person says, “I’m really sorry.” When we are seriously wronged we have an indelible sense that the perpetrators have incurred a debt that must be dealt with. Once you have been wronged and you realize there is a just debt that can’t simply be dismissed— there are only two things to do. The first option is to seek ways to make the perpetrators suffer for what they have done. You can withhold relationship and actively initiate or passively wish for some kind of pain in their lives commensurate to what you experienced. There are many ways to do this. You can viciously confront them, saying things that hurt. You can go around to others to tarnish their reputation. If the perpetrators suffer, you may begin to feel a certain satisfaction, feeling that they are now paying off their debt. There are some serious problems with this option, however. You may become harder and colder, more self-pitying, and therefore more self-absorbed. If the wrongdoer was a person of wealth or authority you may instinctively dislike and resist that sort of person for the rest of your life. If it was a person of the opposite sex or another race you might become permanently cynical and prejudiced against whole classes of people. In addition, the perpetrator and his friends and family often feel they have the right to respond to your payback in kind. Cycles of reaction and retaliation can go on for years. Evil has been done to you— yes. But when you try to get payment through revenge the evil does not disappear. Instead it spreads, and it spreads most tragically of all into you and your own character. There is another option, however. You can forgive. Forgiveness means refusing to make them pay for what they did. However, to refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is agony. It is a form of suffering. You not only suffer the original loss of happiness, reputation, and opportunity, but now you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out of the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death. Yes, but it is a death that leads to resurrection instead of the lifelong living death of bitterness and cynicism. As a pastor I have counseled many people about forgiveness, and I have found that if they do this— if they simply refuse to take vengeance on the wrongdoer in action and even in their inner fantasies— the anger slowly begins to subside. You are not giving it any fuel and so the resentment burns lower and lower. C. S. Lewis wrote in one of his Letters to Malcolm that “last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered— or felt as if I did— that I had really forgiven someone I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might.”¹ I remember once counseling a sixteen-year-old girl about the anger she felt toward her father. We weren’t getting anywhere until I said to her, “Your father has defeated you, as long as you hate him. You will stay trapped in your anger unless you forgive him thoroughly from the heart and begin to love him.” Something thawed in her when she realized that. She went through the suffering of costly forgiveness, which at first always feels far worse than bitterness, into eventual freedom. Forgiveness must be granted before it can be felt, but it does come eventually. It leads to a new peace, a resurrection. It is the only way to stop the spread of the evil. When I counsel forgiveness to people who have been harmed, they often ask about the wrongdoers, “Shouldn’t they be held accountable?” I usually respond, “Yes, but only if you forgive them.” There are many good reasons that we should want to confront wrongdoers. Wrongdoers have inflicted damage and, as in the example of the gate I presented earlier, it costs something to fix the damage. We should confront wrongdoers— to wake them up to their real character, to move them to repair their relationships, or to at least constrain them and protect others

from being harmed by them in the future. Notice, however, that all those reasons for confrontation are reasons of love. The best way to love them and the other potential victims around them is to confront them in the hope that they will repent, change, and make things right. The desire for vengeance, however, is motivated not by goodwill but by ill will. You may say, "I just want to hold them accountable," but your real motivation may be simply to see them hurt. If you are not confronting them for their sake or for society's sake but for your own sake, just for payback, the chance of the wrongdoer ever coming to repentance is virtually nil. In such a case you, the confronter, will overreach, seeking not justice but revenge, not their change but their pain. Your demands will be excessive and your attitude abusive. He or she will rightly see the confrontation as intended simply to cause hurt. A cycle of retaliation will begin. Only if you first seek inner forgiveness will your confrontation be temperate, wise, and gracious. Only when you have lost the need to see the other person hurt will you have any chance of actually bringing about change, reconciliation, and healing. You have to submit to the costly suffering and death of forgiveness if there is going to be any resurrection."