



**Unit 3:** Return the Favor  
**Sermon Series Title:** The Necessity of Forgiveness  
**Sermon 3:** The Late Fees of Not Forgiving  
**Bible Passage:** Matthew 5: 21-26

### **Background/Context**

Two words that strike terror to the human heart are “late fee.” When you don’t act in time and late fees are added to your bill, the movie you rented costs as much as movie theatre popcorn. The tuxedo you returned late is as expensive as a wedding dress. The overdue credit card payment gives itself a raise and a bonus. The wise consumer does the right thing before the late fees break the budget.

Late fees cost you plenty, not only in your finances, but also in your relationships. When you experience conflict with another person, you have a brief, precious opportunity to forgive and be reconciled. If you wait too long, you will be severely penalized.

In a passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave us fair warning about the late fees we’ll pay for not forgiving. As you learn about the price you will pay for waiting too long to make things right, see how much is to be gained by offering forgiveness now.

### **A. Murder Begins (Matt. 5:21-22)**

Everyone knows that murder is wrong. Jesus challenged us to see that we must stop murder where it begins—in the human heart. Murder is an attitude long before it becomes an action.

First, Jesus warned us against a smoldering attitude of anger toward another person. Anger, if not extinguished by forgiveness, can flame up into violence. Feeling angry is not a sin but failing to deal with anger quickly is the first step toward murder.

Second, Jesus warned us against speaking dehumanizing words of contempt. Calling someone a “fool” is to say that the person lacks intelligence, competence, dignity, or value. So often in human history, enemies use demeaning labels to make killing one another seem less sinful.

Finally, Jesus warned against purposely destroying someone’s good name and reputation. The word translated “moron” describes a person who intentionally distorts right and wrong and disregards the will of God (see Ps. 14:1). Killing a person’s character in the eyes of others is dangerously close to killing the person.

The warning is clear: Before your anger flames up, before your words of contempt tear down communication, before your attack on another’s character poisons countless relationships, before you take another step toward murder, offer forgiveness—now.

**Application Point:** How far have you traveled down the killer’s road? Against whom does your anger burn, day after day? Who do you tear down with your words? Whose reputation do you trash in an effort to diminish that person in the eyes of others?

## **B. Worship Waits (Matt. 5: 23-24)**

Imagine that you have traveled many miles on foot to offer a sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple. You have bought the sacrificial animal and entered the temple courts. As you prepare to give your sacrifice to the priest, to lay your hands upon it and confess the sins for which the animal would die as your substitute, you remember something. Your brother has something against you.

A sacrifice was never considered acceptable if the worshipper had not first done everything in his power to mend his broken relationships. So, Jesus said, your experience of unhindered worship waits for you to make things right with your brother. Leave your sacrifice at the altar, return home, and be reconciled. Then, you will be ready to worship.

Christians do not worship through a sacrificial system, but Jesus' words apply equally to us. Your worship is hindered until you do everything in your power to restore right relationships with others. No matter how impressive the gift you were planning to offer God in worship, there is a gift He wants first, a gift He wants much more. He wants you to forgive and be forgiven. Then, you'll be ready to worship.

**Application Point:** Applying Jesus' words to your life, are you ready to worship? Do you have unfinished business with another person, an issue that you have the power to address and, hopefully, resolve? What specific action do you need to take to be reconciled so that you will be free to worship God?

## **C. The Unstoppable Starts (Matt. 5: 25-26)**

A good lawyer works to settle a case before it goes to court. Why? Because once an issue is in the hands of a judge and jury, the lawyer and his client have lost control over the outcome.

Jesus challenged us to settle our differences while the outcome is still within our control. If we wait too long, and the word spreads too far, and too many people choose sides, and one broken relationship becomes many, then we've lost control of who gets hurt and how the story will end. Conflict is like a fire that might be contained if fought quickly, but soon will spread too much to contain and will consume everything in its path.

Jesus really wants us to seize our fleeting moment to be reconciled, to contain the hurt of a broken relationship before it spreads out of control. How many families have feuded; churches split; communities divided; and nations gone to war because people missed the opportunity to be reconciled?

**Application Point:** Do you have a disagreement that might soon go beyond your power to control it? How much unnecessary pain do you and others suffer if you continue to delay? What do you need to do now to seize your opportunity to forgive and be reconciled before the unstoppable starts?