

The Full Apology

On why we only go halfway — and what it means to repair something completely

James 5:16 (ESV)

Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it works.

There is a version of an apology that is not really an apology. You have given it. You have received it.

These sentences have the shape of an apology. They use the right words. But something in them is still closed.

“I’m sorry you felt that way.”

“I’m sorry, but you have to understand what I was going through.”

“I said sorry already — what more do you want?”

“Okay, I was wrong, but you were also wrong.”

These sentences have the shape of an apology. They use the right words. But something in them is still closed. Still protected. And the person on the other end can feel it — that small reservation, that held-back part — even if they can’t name it.

“That held-back part is pride. Still calculating. Still keeping score. Still deciding how much of itself to surrender.”

This study is about what it looks like to actually finish the apology. To go all the way. And why, for most of us, that is one of the hardest spiritual acts there is.

PART ONE

Why We Stop Short

Think about the last time you needed to apologise for something. What happened in the moment just before you said the words? There was probably a negotiation. An internal audit. *How wrong was I really? Do they deserve a full apology, or just a partial one? If I go all the way, does that mean they were completely right?*

Does that make me weak?

That negotiation is pride at work. And it is doing two things simultaneously: protecting your image, and protecting your position. Because a full apology — one with no conditions attached — feels like losing. Like exposure. Like handing over leverage you might need later.

James 5:16 (ESV)

James uses a very specific word: healed. Not just forgiven. Not just resolved. Healed. Which means something was broken. And incomplete confession — the kind that stops short, that qualifies, that deflects — does not complete the healing. The wound closes on the surface and the infection stays underneath.

“A half-apology protects the apologiser more than it repairs the relationship. When we stop short, we are prioritising our own comfort over the other person’s healing. That is, at its core, a failure of love.”

PART TWO

David’s Model: Going All the Way Down

In Study 01 we looked at David’s failure — the pride and entitlement that led him to take what wasn’t his. But now look at what he does next. When the prophet Nathan confronts him, David doesn’t negotiate. He doesn’t explain his circumstances.

I have sinned against the Lord.

2 Samuel 12:13 · David to Nathan · Six words. No conditions. No deflection.

David doesn’t ask God to weigh his wrongdoing against his previous faithfulness. He goes all the way down. *Create in me a clean heart, O God.* Not: adjust my heart slightly, because most of it is fine.

And notice: David doesn’t lose himself in this moment. He is, in fact, finally free. Because the thing he was protecting — his image, his position, his pride — was the very thing keeping him in chains.

Psalms 51:10–11 (ESV)

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.”

This is what a full apology looks like spiritually. David doesn’t ask God to weigh his wrongdoing against his previous faithfulness. He goes all the way down. *Create in me a clean heart* — not: adjust my heart slightly,

because most of it is fine.

PART THREE

What a Real Apology Actually Contains

There's a difference between saying sorry and actually repairing something. The Bible doesn't give us a formula, but it does give us a pattern across multiple stories and letters of what genuine repentance and reconciliation involve:

<p>01 Acknowledge Specifically</p> <p>Not “I’m sorry if I upset you” — but “I did this specific thing, and it was wrong.” Specificity shows you understand what happened.</p>	<p>02 Own the Impact</p> <p>Even if your intention was not to hurt, the impact was real. A full apology takes responsibility for both intention and impact.</p>
<p>03 No Conditions</p> <p>“I’m sorry, but—” negates everything before it. The “but” is pride reasserting itself. A full apology stands alone.</p>	<p>04 Name What Changes</p> <p>Matthew 3:8 — “fruit in keeping with repentance.” Words are the beginning. What behaviour follows? This is the proof.</p>

Notice that nowhere in this list does it say: wait until the other person also apologises. The instinct to withhold your full apology until you get one back is almost always pride talking.

PART FOUR

The Prodigal’s Return — and the Brother Who Stayed

The parable of the Prodigal Son is usually preached as a story about God’s welcoming grace. And it is. But look at what the son actually says when he comes home:

Luke 15:18–19 (ESV)

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”

He rehearses this speech in the far country. He prepares it. He goes all the way. He doesn't say: *I made some mistakes, but you also could have called.* He goes to the floor. And the father — who sees him while he is still a great way off — runs.

But then there is the older brother. He has done everything right. He has stayed, worked, been faithful. And now there is a party for the one who wasted everything.

Luke 15:29 (ESV)

“Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.”

“The older brother is keeping score. His faithfulness was transactional — an investment expecting a dividend. Sometimes there is an older brother posture underneath — a long-running resentment about investment not being matched — that needs to be named before real repair can happen.”

PART FIVE

The Difference Between Sorry and Repentance

2 Corinthians 7:10 (ESV)

“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”

WORLDLY GRIEF

“I feel terrible that I got caught.”

“I feel bad because things are awkward now.”

“I’m sorry because I need you to stop being upset with me.”

Motivated by consequence. Centred on self.

GODLY GRIEF

“I am genuinely sorry for what I did to you.”

“I see how this hurt you, and it grieves me.”

“I want to change — not to fix this moment, but because I don’t want to be this person.”

Motivated by love. Centred on the other.

The Test

You can usually tell which grief you’re operating in by asking: **if there were no consequences at all — if the other person never knew — would I still be sorry?**

If the answer is no, you’re dealing with worldly grief. And that admission is actually the beginning of the real thing.

PART SIX

What Repair Makes Possible

Here is the thing about a full apology that we rarely talk about: it doesn’t just repair the relationship. It repairs *you*.

When we hold back, the unresolved thing sits in the chest. It affects how we speak to the person we wronged. It makes us defensive. It creates distance. The pride that felt like protection is actually a weight — and we don't realise how heavy it is until we put it down.

The Unrepaired Thing Is Interrupting Your Worship

Matthew 5:23–24 (NIV)

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

Jesus is saying: the unrepaired thing is interrupting your worship. The relationship and the vertical connection are not separate tracks. You cannot fully open yourself to God while remaining closed to the person you hurt.

This is why the full apology is not just a relationship skill. It is a spiritual act. It is choosing to value the other person — and your own integrity before God — over the false safety of pride. It is, in a very real sense, an act of worship.

Study & Reflection

Is there an apology you have been giving in partial form — one that had a “but” attached? What would the full version look like?

When you say sorry, are you more focused on resolving your own discomfort or on what the other person actually needs to hear?

Is there an “older brother” resentment somewhere in your closest relationships — a long-running score you haven't named out loud?

What are you most afraid would happen if you apologised fully, without conditions? What does that fear tell you?

Is your grief over a recent wrong “worldly” (focused on consequences) or “godly” (focused on the harm done to the other)?

According to Matthew 5:23–24, is there something unrepaired that may be sitting between you and your worship right now?

Key Scriptures

James 5:16 · 2 Samuel 12:13 · Psalm 51:1–17 · Luke 15:11–32 · 2 Corinthians 7:10 · Matthew 5:23–24 · Matthew 3:8

“First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

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