



## **Judgments and Bitterness as Clutter that Hinders Emotional Healing**

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**Combining the essays and sample prayers for judgments and bitterness:** Our perception is that judgments and bitterness usually (always?) go together. We perceive that bitterness requires judgment – you cannot be bitter towards a person unless you first judge him. We have also observed that judgment will usually (always?) be infected with bitterness – if somebody has hurt you, you can't do anything about it, and you judge and condemn her in response to this wound and powerlessness, bitterness will usually (surely?) follow. At this point we are wondering whether it is always best to address judgments and bitterness together.<sup>1</sup> We have therefore combined the previous sample prayer to address bitterness and the previous sample prayer to address judgments into the single sample prayer at the end of this document, which addresses them both together.

**2025 note re changes:** Much of this essay was written in 2001. So you may notice that some of the material feels subtly different from our more recent teaching. For example, our overall approach to ministry has become much more relational in the twenty-plus years since 2001. I have also developed the Immanuel Approach since 2001, and as the reader probably realizes, the Immanuel Approach places much more emphasis on helping the recipient to engage directly with the living, tangible, interactive presence of Jesus at every point in the process and regarding every issue, problem, question, and traumatic memory that comes up. Even so, the 2001 insights presented here and the prayer at the end of the essay can still be helpful for recipients who have judgments and bitterness that are hindering their healing work and their spiritual growth.

### **I. Judgments:**

**A. Intense resistance:** This section regarding judgments has been very difficult to write, and the battle to get it written has been quite instructive. Charlotte had read Dallas Willard's discussion of judgment<sup>2</sup> a year or two earlier, and had been deeply convicted about the importance of confessing and releasing our judgments towards others. She made comments on a regular basis for months but her comments just didn't seem to make sense somehow. I read the book, but it didn't make sense either. I read the material on judging again, and I still didn't get it. I felt vaguely confused, like there was some kind of subtle interference in my brain, whenever I would read about, think about, or talk about releasing judgments. I also noticed that I was irritated by every little detail in other written material about judgment, and I would

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<sup>1</sup> I think in the past, when I have been able to successfully release bitterness without also explicitly addressing judgements at the same time, it has been because judgments were resolved spontaneously/ "accidentally" as a part of healing the traumatic memory and forgiving the offender, even though I didn't understand or specifically name the judgments.

<sup>2</sup> See Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 148-158 and 215-227, for a number of helpful insights regarding judgment, condemnation, contempt, and self righteousness.

become irritated with Charlotte when we would discuss the subject. I continued to experience persistent interference and resistance even after significant release with prayer – when I tried to work on this essay, or to work on releasing my own judgments, I would become restless, think of other things I wanted/needed to do, feel the need for a snack, or be overcome with sleepiness. At other times I would sit for hours and simply couldn't think of what to write.

1. Spiritual stronghold: Our perception is that much of this resistance and interference has been spiritual opposition. I can now see that judgment has been a spiritual stronghold in my life, and this has given the enemy an unusual amount of space and authority to harass and confuse me regarding this subject. I have a child place in my heart that responds to being hurt and powerless by judging the offenders. This angry, judgmental part of myself has judged just about everybody. I have judged Charlotte for being fearful, obsessive, slow, and about ten other things. I have judged my father for being judgmental. I have judged computer programmers for writing software that is not user friendly, civil engineers for unclear road signs, other drivers for cheating when merging in construction zones, developers for pillaging the environment, businessmen for being greedy and dishonest, and politicians for being corrupt. I have judged minorities for being bitter and white people for being racist; I have judged weak people for being burdens on society and strong people for being insensitive to weak people; I have judged conservatives for being fearfully close-minded and liberals for being irresponsibly open-minded; I have judged some Christians for being “lukewarm” hypocrites and other Christians for being unrealistic fanatics; and I have judged the general public for being stupid, selfish, and short sighted. As described in “Judgment and Bitterness Towards the Lord”<sup>3</sup>, I have even judged God.

I had a vague-but-persistent sense that I needed to address this issue for myself, and I had a clear and persistent sense that I needed to write this ministry aid, so I kept pressing in (by the grace of God). The basic principles eventually made enough sense that I was able to go through a first round of prayers to confess and repent of judging others, and the confusion interference immediately decreased – the whole subject began to make more sense, and it became easier to see both the larger pattern of judgmentalism and the specific judgments pervading my life. Amazingly, I never realized that judgment was a spiritual stronghold in my life until after this first round of prayer – even though it was such a large animal sitting in my living room, somehow I just couldn't see it. As each new piece made sense at an experiential level, I went through the prayers again with a deeper level of connection and internal unity. It seemed like there was less interference after each round of prayer, but there were still times when I had to worship and pray for an hour or two before I could write the next paragraph. If you experience distractions, interference, and resistance when you try to work on releasing judgments, press in with choices to go through a “first round” of prayer to confess and renounce the general pattern of judging others. Hopefully this will open the way for the next step forward.

2. Guardian lies being triggered: We eventually discovered that some of my resistance was coming from guardian lies that were being triggered as I read material about judgment and as Charlotte and I discussed this material. The teaching in the 1960's social-action pacifist church where I grew up seemed to be especially fertile ground for a child to misinterpret “Thou shalt not judge”:

- Not judging meant that there would be no rules and that there would be no justice – no punishment or consequences for being hurtful, selfish, and evil, and no rewards for being

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<sup>3</sup> See “Judgment and Bitterness Towards the Lord” on our web site.

good, unselfish, and sacrificial.

- Not judging went along with “Love your enemies,” and meant that it was okay for the angry kids on the playground to beat me up – I should just love them and forgive them in response to their violence against me.
- Not judging meant I should not set boundaries.
- Not judging meant that I should not say “no.”

Just naming these as guardian lies and identifying their roots resolved some of the resistance I was experiencing, even before I had the opportunity to fully resolve the underlying traumatic memories. Check for guardian lies getting triggered if you have a negative reaction to reading and/or discussing this material.

3. “Good” judgment vs. sinful judgment: A small part of my resistance and confusion came from lack of clarity regarding “good” judgment vs. sinful judgment.

- “Good” judgment: We perceive that there is “good” judgment that is necessary and appropriate – judgment that is discernment, setting appropriate boundaries, determining what is helpful and what is hurtful/wrong.
- Sinful judgment: We perceive sinful judgment to be the combination of condemnation and self righteousness. Condemnation is deciding that the person is not just wrong/broken/in need of correction, but that they are bad/worthless/in need of punishment. Self- righteousness is feeling and acting morally superior – deciding I am better than them – believing that if I had been given their life I would have done it differently (better) – believing that if they were just like me we wouldn’t be in this mess.

As Dallas Willard comments, “We do not have to – we *cannot* – surrender the valid practice of distinguishing and discerning how things are in order to avoid condemning others. We *can*, however, train ourselves to hold people responsible and discuss their failures with them – and even assign them penalties, if we are, for example, in some position over them – without attacking their worth as human beings or marking them as rejects.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***B. Finding Judgments:***

1. “Sleeping in the same bed” with a vow: It is possible for vows to stand alone, but most vows require that you first judge somebody. For example, a person would not make the vow “I will never be lazy like my father” without first judging his father for being lazy. When we find a vow, we will often find a judgment sleeping in the same bed.

2. Standing next to bitterness: As mentioned above, we perceive that you cannot be bitter towards a person unless you first judge them, and we perceive that judgment will usually (always?) be infected with bitterness. Whenever we find bitterness, we usually (always?) find one or more judgments standing right next to it.

3. Ask your family, friends, and spouse to help: Our families, close friends, and spouses usually know what it feels like when we are judging them. They also usually know what it feels like to be with us when we are judging others. I am sure that my family and my close friends are familiar with the characteristic, unpleasant angry intensity I get when I am

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<sup>4</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 225.

judging. Charlotte recognizes it instantly, and she has helped me to identify when I am judging her or anyone else. If you are especially brave, ask your teenage children to help you identify when you are judging them.

**C. “Judge not, that you be not judged”:** As Charlotte and I have been observing our judging behavior much more closely, we have come to the conclusion that one of our first responses to being judged is to judge the person who is judging us (start observing yourself, and see if this isn’t true in your experience as well). I think some of this is just the dynamic described below of using judgment as a defense to protect ourselves from feeling hurt, vulnerable, and powerless – it feels terrible to be judged, and we can’t make others stop judging us, so we judge them to protect ourselves from the hurt, vulnerability, and powerlessness<sup>5</sup>. However, I think there also may be a separate spiritual/psychological phenomena that is activated. It’s like a psychological and spiritual “knee-jerk” reflex – you tap my patellar tendon and I kick you, you judge me and I judge you. I have always thought “Judge not that you be not judged” (Matt 7:1-2, Luke 6:37) was a warning that if we judge others, the Lord will judge us. Now I wonder if this passage is simply *describing* the spiritual/psychological pattern in creation that if you judge others they will judge you in return.<sup>6</sup>

**II. Bitterness:** Many have discovered that harbored anger/bitterness/unforgiveness is one of the most common blockages hindering the effectiveness of prayer for healing (physical or emotional). A lot of thought and writing has been focused on this subject<sup>7</sup>. In this section we present several insights that are directly practical to removing bitterness as clutter.

**A. Anger versus harbored anger:** It is not wrong or sinful to be angry in the moment of being acted upon unjustly. It is the carrying of anger over time that becomes injurious to oneself, and sinful in that it usually then takes the form of judgments, bitterness, desire for revenge, or even hatred. Once anger has served it’s appropriate function of drawing attention to injustice that needs to be opposed, a wrong that needs to be addressed, or a wound that needs to be healed, it can and should be released. See “On the Art of Being Relationally Angry, Or, ‘I Have A Pet Tiger’ for more information.<sup>8</sup>

**B. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration of trust:** A common misunderstanding is that forgiveness is the same thing as reconciliation and the restoration of trust, and therefore if I forgive the person who has hurt me I must automatically trust and return to relationship with this person. This misunderstanding predictably generates a host of objections with the general theme “It’s not safe to forgive because...” Our understanding is that forgiveness does not inherently or automatically include reconciliation or the restoration of trust. Forgiveness does inherently include giving up judgments against the ones who hurt us. The one who offended me

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<sup>5</sup> I have noticed that I feel especially powerless when I am judged for things I can’t change, like being a white male, and I feel especially judgmental towards those who judge me for being a white male.

<sup>6</sup> Dallas Willard also discusses this interpretation of the “judge not that you be not judged” verses. See Willard, Dallas, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), p.222-224 for insightful comments regarding the “law of reciprocity” with respect to judging each other.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Smith has an excellent section in his training manual summarizing key insights regarding bitterness as clutter, see *Beyond Tolerable Recovery*, p. 239-250. Charlotte’s essay “Wrestling with the Nature and Demand of Christian Interpersonal Forgiveness” on our website provides additional discussion and also an extensive bibliography on the subject of bitterness and forgiveness.

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte E.T. Lehman, “On the Art of Being Relationally Angry, Or, ‘I Have A Pet Tiger,’ available as free download from “Special Subjects/Advanced Topics” section of the Resources page on [www.immanuelapproach.com](http://www.immanuelapproach.com).

may be totally unrepentant – he may be just as prone to the same hurtful behavior as he used to be – so it would not be wise for me to re-enter a business partnership with him, for instance. But I must still give up my self-righteous condemnation of his character, admitting that God alone can judge him justly, in order for forgiveness to be complete. Forgiveness is something the victim can do, with God’s help, to free him or herself from bitterness, and requires no participation or cooperation from the offender. Forgiveness on the part of the victim plus confession/apology and repentance on the part of the offender are the foundation upon which reconciliation is built. Reconciliation plus changed behavior are the foundation upon which trust is built, and trust grows over time as changed behavior continues.<sup>9</sup>

Forgiveness ≠ Reconciliation or Restoration of Trust

Forgiveness + Confession, Repentance, and possibly Restitution = the Foundation of Reconciliation

Reconciliation + Changed Behavior over time = Restoration of Trust

Note: This confusion about the meaning and implications of forgiveness, and the associated objections, are usually more than simple cognitive misunderstandings. Our experience is that these are usually guardian lies carried at a non-rational, experiential level. If this is the case, there will be some value in explaining the cognitive concepts, but the “misunderstandings” and objections will not move until they are identified as guardian lies and taken to Jesus. It is important for the therapist/facilitator to understand these concepts so that you can look for and identify “It’s not safe to forgive because...” guardian lies more effectively.

### III. How do judgments and bitterness harm us/?why do we need to release them?:

**A. Judgments harm our relationships:** Charlotte and I have noticed tremendous benefit in our relationship as I have been releasing my judgments towards her. Within the first two weeks after the initial breakthrough, we noticed that certain issues of conflict that had been stuck for years were much easier to deal with and were moving forward to resolution. I realized that I had been judging her in these conflicts – my comments in discussing the disagreements would be tinged (or laced) with condemnation and self righteousness – “You’re stupid/selfish/lazy, etc., you deserve to be punished, and I’m better than you.” Of course I would not speak these judgments out loud. I knew I shouldn’t have these thoughts and feelings towards her, so I would use cognitive “self talk” to improve my internal attitude and then try to convince myself that I didn’t really have these judgments against Charlotte. Ironically, Charlotte was much more aware of my judgments towards her than I was, since she easily perceived them in my facial expressions, body language, voice tones, and overall attitude. The bad news was that stuffing my judgments towards Charlotte back in the closet with cognitive techniques and denial only put them away until the next time we were discussing the triggering conflict issue. The good news is that Jesus permanently removes them when I bring them into the light and ask for His help.

These issues of conflict with Charlotte were also some of the places where I had been unable to fully resolve bitterness. It was amazing (sarcasm intended) how my bitterness, condemnation, and self righteousness triggered angry and defensive reactions in Charlotte. It truly *is* amazing how much easier it is to work together to come to productive resolution of disagreements when resentment, condemnation, and self righteousness are removed.

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<sup>9</sup> See “Wrestling with the Nature and Demand of Christian Interpersonal Forgiveness” on our website for additional discussion of these concepts.

**B. Judgments hinder our efficacy as emotional healing facilitators:** Judging those we minister to will trigger angry and defensive reactions from them, will impair our discernment, and will also give the enemy place and authority to interfere with the process. One of the best examples of this has been in my facilitating emotional healing for Charlotte. My ability to facilitate, her ability to receive, and our ability to work together as a team have all improved. She has experienced several significant breakthroughs in her healing work (with myself as facilitator) as I have been confessing and releasing my judgments towards her. I have also noticed that it is easy for me to judge the people who have hurt our clients. When I have judgments towards those who have hurt the person receiving ministry, it will be very difficult for me to see, or help her address, any judgments she has against these same people.

**C. Only God has the information and the wisdom to “do the math:”** As discussed above, judging/discerning that another person’s *choices/behaviors* are hurtful and wrong is necessary and appropriate. However, judging the *basic moral character* of the person is a job we need to leave to the Lord. Our perception is that only the Lord can see the whole picture – only the Lord knows the person’s intentions, wounds, what they have been given to work with, etc. Only the Lord has the wisdom to put this all together and “do the math” regarding the moral judgment of the person.

An experience which we and other emotional healing facilitators have observed – the Lord revealing “the rest of the story” – reinforces this point. A recent session provides an excellent example. The principal of David’s grade school was a very toxic man, who had traumatized many children. In one memory, David was standing on the playground watching the principal beat his older brother, John, in front of all the other kids. John was hurt and humiliated, and David was powerless to do anything about it. David felt intense bitterness, judgment, and desire for revenge towards the principal, and could remember making a vow to get revenge: “I’ll remember, and I’ll get you back – I’m smarter than you. You won’t even know. I’ll make you feel just like I do right now.” David confessed and renounced this vow, and then prayed to release his bitterness towards the principal. David began crying as he finished the bitterness prayer, and reported: “I’m on the playground, and I can see Jesus there...The Lord is showing me his [the principal’s] childhood – he was abused – he was being ground up by things he couldn’t control...Jesus is telling me that it doesn’t make what the principal did right, but only He can deal with justice in this man’s life...Jesus is telling me that I don’t need to take care of this.”

The Lord seemed to clearly indicate: 1) He knew “the rest of the story,” which was a source of compassion towards the perpetrator. 2) It was His job to weigh all the pieces and make judgment – only He is able to do this and we need to relinquish this role. NOTE: In our experience, when people receiving ministry have this kind of encounter with Jesus, they always feel that these two pieces are totally true and they have complete peace in releasing their offenders to the Lord’s judgment and justice.

**D. Judging is inherently legalistic:** The “authority” we invoke when we judge someone is the “law” which we determine that person has violated. Often we are not aware of our own subjective, emotional investment in condemning the person we’ve judged; rather, we’re thinking that it’s simply a matter of objective interpretation of the law. And, in fact, we may be right about someone having done something wrong – perhaps that person really did commit adultery, for instance. The problem is that when we judge (sinful judgment), adding our self-righteous character condemnation to that assessment of wrong-doing, we put ourselves and our

relationship to that person back in the realm of legalism rather than the realm of God's grace. And in the realm of legalism – where your acceptance is always dependent upon your performance – you can never rest, you can never measure up, and you can never stop measuring how well you and others are doing. The enemy of our souls loves to seduce Christians into a mind-set of legalism because then we are vulnerable to his accusations and condemnation. When we start throwing the rocks of sinful judgment at others, the enemy has permission to throw his rocks of judgment and condemnation at us<sup>10</sup>. Even if you haven't committed adultery like that person you judged, you have sinned in other ways and the enemy knows about it. He will be more than happy to remind you of your sins, and he knows that you will believe his condemnation lies because you are choosing to play by the rules that your acceptance depends on your performance. It is possible to exercise discernment (good judgment), and even to bring correction to someone, without entering the realm of legalism. The key is to make sure that our relational circuits are online, and to be in a state of love, humility, and honesty about our own pain and investment in the situation.

**E. Judgments serve as a defense mechanism that “protects” us from feeling powerlessness, helplessness, and other painful emotions:** Our perception is that the defense-mechanism dynamics behind judgment are similar to the defense mechanism dynamics behind bitterness and vows. My own experience is that I only judge, experience bitterness, and make vows when others are harming me, I can't do anything about it, and it doesn't seem like there will be justice. My perception is that I do not judge, experience bitterness, or make vows towards those who are in a system where *they* receive the consequences for *their* choices and their choices do not affect *me*. I do not judge, experience bitterness, or make vows when somebody acts against me if I can protect myself from harm. I do not judge, experience bitterness, or make vows when somebody hurts me if I am truly convinced that justice will be done (regarding both victim and offender).

As with bitterness and vows, judgments “protect” us from feeling helplessness, powerlessness, and other painful emotions in the face of harm and injustice. When somebody else's selfishness, hatred, laziness, greed, deceit, etc. is coming against me, and I do not have the power to protect myself or to rectify the situation, I have two choices: 1) I can stand straight in the clean pain of being harmed as a powerless victim – the pain of powerlessness, helplessness, and injustice – and turn to the Lord to help me deal with the situation and for healing. 2) I can judge the person. “You deserve punishment, and some day you will get it. I may not be able to \_\_\_\_\_, but at least I am better than you.” In my own subjective experience, judging the offender in this way functions much like bitterness and vows – it makes me feel less powerless, helpless, and vulnerable. I feel like I can do something about the situation, like I can fight. I feel like I am punishing them in some way by judging them, and that this will make them change. I feel like I have power in some way by deciding that I am better than they are. I feel like I can contribute to justice by judging them – I am “keeping score” and waiting until an opportunity arises for me to contribute my judgment as part of the justice process. Note that it is *always* good to release judgments because, like bitterness and vows, judgments are an inherently sinful defense mechanism.

**F. Judgments protect and anchor bitterness:** Our perception is that judgments make it harder to release bitterness. This has certainly been true in my own healing work – it has been much easier to release bitterness now that I am also dealing with these patterns and strongholds of judgment. Certain areas of bitterness that have always been especially resistant in the past

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<sup>10</sup> See Matthew 6:12-15, Matthew 18:21-35, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:36-37, Romans 12:17-19.

are now starting to resolve. It makes intuitive sense that it would be difficult to release bitterness when judgments are still in place. For example, does this sound like a tenable prayer? “Lord, I am bitter because Bob has hurt me and there is nothing I can do about it. He is selfish, dishonest, and lazy. He is morally deficient, he deserves to be punished, and I am better than him... but please take this bitterness away.”

**G. Judgments block the Lord’s authority, and provide a place and authority for demonic spirits:** Condemnation, self righteousness, idolatry to self protection, avoiding the appropriate clean pain, and taking the Lord’s job as judge are all sinful choices that block the Lord’s access/ authority to work in the jurisdiction of the judgment. Anything that blocks the Lord’s access/ authority to work makes a place where the enemy has space and authority to work. The enemy can hinder healing, impair discernment, and cause confusion in the jurisdiction of the judgment.

**H. Polarization of internal parts:** Much like vows, judgments can cause and/or exacerbate polarization between internal parts. Polarized, adversarial internal systems are always problematic, and it is always beneficial to help these polarized internal systems reconcile so that all of the internal parts can work together towards healing instead of fearing and fighting each other. In our experience, judgments between internal parts are always present wherever we find polarized, adversarial internal parts relationships; and helping internal parts to release judgments against each other always helps to depolarize adversarial internal parts systems.

One of the most common scenarios in which internal polarization hinders healing is when angry, “hardworking” parts judge weak and wounded parts, making it even harder for the weak and wounded parts to come forward and be vulnerable. For example, I have a child place in my mind that believes everything is my fault because I am a white middle class American, and that “they” will stop hating me if I can just fix it all. This part is a very hard worker, but he has a very big job (“fixing” Native American genocide, racism, poverty, and environmental destruction), and constantly struggles with feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. This hard working, overwhelmed place in my heart has NO tolerance for weakness or woundedness. Anybody (including my own internal parts<sup>11</sup>) who is a “burden” instead of a worker triggers these miserable emotions of being overwhelmed and hopeless, and is therefore judged fiercely. Furthermore, I have noticed that I am especially prone to make “unnecessary” mistakes when I am triggered so that “wounded child” thoughts and emotions have come forward and are interfering with my usual adult faculties. “What’s the matter with you!” I will rage at myself when this happens, “We can’t afford this kind of stupidity and incompetence!” Needless to say, the wounded child internal parts that contributed to the mistake are not able to come forward for healing in this angry, judgmental atmosphere.

An especially illustrative example of internal judgments hindering the healing process occurs when I am doing my own emotional healing work. If I can’t find some important piece of the target we are working on, and I stay stuck at this place long enough, my hardworking, angry, judgmental part eventually gets triggered. I will have the intense subjective perception that the child parts carrying the missing pieces are choosing not to cooperate because they are too weak and scared. The internal family systems dynamics immediately polarize, and I will often get the image of frightened children locked in the bathroom, with my adult self raging outside the

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<sup>11</sup> We have noticed that we often have internal parts with the same sins and/or problems as other people that we judge, and that these internal parts are judged and hated just as harshly as the people that we judge for having these sins and/or problems.



door. “Come out here and cooperate with this healing, you pathetic, weak, cowardly, little \$%#&’s. I don’t care what you’re afraid of – I’ll make your feared outcomes look like a birthday party compared to what I’ll do to you if you don’t come out here and cooperate NOW!”

You don’t need a degree in psychiatry to know that judging and threatening won’t help wounded child parts participate in a healing process that requires them to come forward and be vulnerable.

**2025 update:** The good news is that these toxic self-judgement phenomena have slowly-but-steadily decreased as I have persisted with an Immanuel lifestyle. Even though they were anchored in a vast network of interconnected memories scattered throughout the first 20+ years of my life, they have dwindled to almost nothing as I have learned to talk directly to Jesus whenever I am triggered to lies such as “I have to fix the world,” as I have persisted with regular healing work to find and resolve the underlying trauma, and as I have deliberately released bitterness and judgments whenever/wherever I encountered them.

**I. Unforgiveness is often linked to denial/refusal to accept what happened:** While working on certain memories that had been “stuck” through several years of emotional healing work, I discovered that the reason these memories were stuck was that the internal child parts carrying the memories were “stuck” in the memories with the demand that the people who had hurt me fix it *back then*. The internal child parts in the memories carried the guardian lies that I could fix the problem by using my unforgiveness “IOUs”<sup>12</sup> to force the people who had hurt me to “make it have never happened.” The child parts in these memories would not forgive the people who had hurt me because I was still trying to fight the reality that events had turned out the way they had and that there was nothing I could do about it. I was stuck, back in the memory, trying to hold onto a form of denial. From inside these memories, it felt true that by holding onto my unforgiveness “IOUs” I could make the people who had hurt me “pay” in some way that would make the old traumas “never have happened.” It is very clear to me that this was another way in which unforgiveness was functioning as a defense mechanism. I wouldn’t feel powerless and helpless and vulnerable if I could hold onto the “IOUs” that gave me the power to make the offenders “fix it.” I was trying to use unforgiveness, and the demand that those who had wounded me “fix it so that it never happened,” to protect myself from the truth of what had happened and the truth that I was powerless and helpless to do anything about it.

Note that this *inherently* blocks healing because completing the unfinished processing tasks carried in the traumatic memories *inherently requires* fully connecting with the painful reality of the events *including the truth that they happened and that I can’t do anything about it*. I can’t make them “never have happened,” I can’t make anybody else make them “never have happened,” and accepting this reality is a necessary part of standing straight in the pain so that Jesus can help me work through the unresolved content.

The memories in question were quickly healed as soon as I realized where the healing process had been stuck, focused the guardian lies, received the Lord’s truth to dispel the guardian lies, released my demand that the perpetrators “make it never have happened,” and completed the

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<sup>12</sup> Actually, the people who hurt me had never given me any kind of “IOU,” promising to compensate me in some way in exchange for what they had done to me. Maybe I should say that I was hanging onto unforgiveness “YOMs,” since I had certainly created and held onto a pile of “You Owe Mes.”

forgiveness process.

**IV. Judgments and bitterness/unforgiveness block the healing process:** In my own experience, healing work with a number of different traumatic memories, previously stuck for many months, started moving forward after I dealt with judgments that were infecting the wounds. We have several thoughts about the mechanisms by which judgments and bitterness block the healing process:

**A. Judgments energize and anchor guardian lies:** Our perception is that judgments can block the healing process by energizing and anchoring guardian lies. This has certainly been the case with some of the “stuck” traumatic memories involving my father. When I was judging him he felt like an enemy, which gave more power to the guardian lies “It’s not safe to let go of this,” “It’s not fair,” “I won’t be able to make him change,” “I won’t be able to defend myself,” and “It’s not safe for me to take responsibility for *my* stuff because then he won’t take responsibility for *his* stuff and I’ll get blamed for everything.” I had identified these guardian lies months earlier but I had not been able to get them to move. After releasing judgments, Dad was a wounded person doing his best to be a good father instead of an enemy I had to defend myself against. Releasing judgments towards Dad cut off a lot of the adversarial and fearful energy that anchored these guardian lies, making it possible to finally move them out of the way.

**B. Judgments “protect” us from painful emotions:** As discussed above, judgments function as a defense mechanism that helps us avoid pain by covering over helplessness, powerlessness, and other painful emotions. The defense mechanism function of judgments therefore prevents healing by preventing connection with the true painful emotions. This has certainly been the case with my judgments. We have found powerlessness, helplessness, and other painful emotions hiding behind every judgment I have brought to the Lord, and the Lord has been able to move forward with healing the source of these painful emotions when I released the judgments that were blocking emotional connection.

**C. Judgments anchor and protect bitterness:** As discussed above, judgments can block the resolution of bitterness, and bitterness always hinders the healing process.

**D. Judgments provide a place and authority for demonic spirits:** As discussed above, judgments can provide a place and authority for demonic spirits, and demonic spirits will always hinder the healing process.

**E. Judgments polarize internal parts:** As discussed above, judgments can cause and/or exacerbate polarization between internal parts, and polarized, adversarial relationships between internal parts will always hinder the healing process.

**F. Unforgiveness is often linked to denial/refusal to accept what happened:** As discussed above, part of unforgiveness can be holding onto an “IOU” in an attempt to force the perpetrator to “make it never have happened,” and this will inherently block healing by reinforcing denial and hindering acceptance and emotional connection.

**V. With Jesus and Healing, Resolution Is Often Spontaneous (2025 addition):**

As mentioned above, I have developed the Immanuel Approach since first writing this essay in 2001. Compared to the Theophostic-based approach I was using in 2001, the Immanuel Approach is much more relational, and it places much more emphasis on engaging with the living, tangible, interactive presence of Jesus at every point in the healing work, regarding every

issue, problem, question, and traumatic memory that is encountered. And I have noticed an interesting shift as I have transitioned from the earlier Theophostic-based approach to the Immanuel Approach: with the living presence of Jesus in the middle of every aspect of the process, recipients seldom become stuck due to judgements and bitterness, and they seldom require this prayer for resolving judgments and bitterness in order to be able to move forward with healing work.

Furthermore, once the underlying trauma has been resolved, any judgements and bitterness associated with the trauma usually resolve spontaneously, without any additional intervention required. Recipients often make comments along the lines of, “Wow. This is so interesting. I have always felt such bitterness toward my father, but now I’m just feeling this wave of compassion. I feel like I’m seeing him through Jesus’ eyes – I’m feeling compassion toward him, and I feel like I can forgive him – like I *have* forgiven him.”<sup>13</sup> And with the underlying, anchoring trauma resolved, judgements and bitterness appear to *remain* resolved as we follow-up regarding observable positive changes.<sup>14</sup>

This being said, the principles presented in this essay and the sample prayer at the end are very helpful for the occasional session in which we encounter judgements and bitterness that are particularly intense and persistent, and that seem to be hindering the healing work.

## **VI. New Applications (2025 addition):**

As just described, I now seldom use the judgements-and-bitterness prayer during Immanuel Approach healing sessions. Instead, I have been experimenting with using this prayer in other ways. For example, I have been using this prayer to push back against judgements and bitterness that keep popping up toward political figures that I perceive to be particularly destructive. I find that this helps me to love and pray for these “enemies,” and that it helps prevent judgment and bitterness toward these particularly toxic figures from bleeding into the rest of my life. These two benefits help me to be a positive force for healing in our community, instead of being a negative force that just exacerbates division and polarization.

I have also been using this prayer for judgements and bitterness toward groups of people who have been the source of many traumatic experiences. Just as with toxic political figures, I find that this helps me to love and pray for these “enemies,” and that it helps prevent judgment and bitterness toward these “enemies” from bleeding into the rest of my life. And just as with toxic political figures, these two benefits help me to be a positive force for healing in our community, instead of being a negative force that just exacerbates division and polarization.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, I have been using this judgements-and-bitterness prayer as a between-sessions “homework” intervention regarding several thematic issues that have been particularly difficult to resolve. These thematic issues are anchored in large clusters of early traumatic memories, and

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<sup>13</sup> In the occasional sessions in which forgiveness and compassion do *not* flow spontaneously, judgements and bitterness usually resolve with a simple prayer asking Jesus to help the recipient to see the people who have hurt her through His eyes, and to help her have His heart and mind toward them.

<sup>14</sup> Bits of judgement and bitterness sometimes come forward with the triggered content when recipients bump into trauma splinters, but then these bits of judgement and bitterness are *permanently* resolved as the associated splinters are resolved.

<sup>15</sup> I keep working away at the pile of specific memories, and I continue to find that judgements and bitterness in each specific memory resolve with Immanuel Approach healing work. At the same time, this judgements-and-bitterness prayer has been good for pushing back against judgment and bitterness still anchored in the memories that are not yet resolved.

toxic content from these memories is definitely infected with intense judgements. My between-sessions-homework-intervention experiment is to use this prayer when I get triggered regarding these issues, in order to dismantle the psychological-defense aspects of these judgements when the underlying trauma is most accessible. Hopefully, this will help me to be more able to stand straight in the pain and cooperate with Jesus when I am in IA healing sessions to work on these issues.

#### VI. “Just choose to forgive” usually doesn’t work:

I have heard people teach that we need to “just choose to forgive.” And I appreciate that the motivation for this teaching usually comes from an accurate understanding of the terrible toxicity of judgement and bitterness, and from an accurate understanding of the tremendous value of forgiveness. The bad news is that “just choosing to forgive” does not usually work very well.<sup>16</sup>

It certainly did not work for me. I tried to “chose” to forgive those who had hurt me, and after “choosing” forgiveness I tried to somehow manufacture forgiveness. And then I tried to “hold by faith” that I had forgiven the person even though I didn’t feel any different. I would try to “just believe” that I had forgiven them, even though the same old judgment and bitterness would come forward the next time I encountered a trigger that re-activated the underlying, anchoring trauma. I was chronically discouraged and confused by the experience that I had to keep forgiving the same person for the same thing over and over again.

And almost every person I have discussed this with has describe an experience essentially the same as my own.

The good news is that there is a way to resolve judgements and bitterness that does work. As just describe above, If we clear out guardian lies so that we are truly *willing* to release judgements and bitterness, if we clear out other blockages that can get in the way of releasing judgements and bitterness, and if we work with Jesus to resolve the underlying, anchoring trauma, judgements and bitterness usually resolve spontaneously. Even the difficult cases of intense, persistent judgements and bitterness will resolve when these first pieces are combined with asking Jesus for His mind and heart toward the perpetrators and with the prayer at the end of this essay. And again, the really good news is that judgements and bitterness never come back when they are resolved in this way.<sup>17</sup>

#### VII. Comments Regarding Sample Prayers for Releasing Judgments and Bitterness:

**A. More than one location:** Like vows, other reactive sins, and demonic infection, judgments and bitterness can be carried in a number of different locations. The person receiving ministry can carry judgments and bitterness towards another person regarding several different memories and/or issues, and sometimes the person will deal with these different memories and/or issues separately. The person receiving ministry will usually carry judgments and bitterness towards a number of different people, and the judgments and bitterness towards these different people will usually be addressed separately. Different pieces of the judgment and bitterness

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<sup>16</sup> I am aware of rare exceptions, such as the story Corrie Ten Boom shares about choosing to forgive, and then miraculously *feeling* forgiveness for the Nazi guard who tormented her and her sister during their time in. However, my observation is that most people experience what is described in this section. Corrie ten Boom with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1974), page 238.

<sup>17</sup> Again, bits of judgement and bitterness sometimes come forward with the triggered content when recipients bump into trauma splinters, but then these bits of judgement and bitterness are *permanently* resolved as the associated splinters are resolved.

towards a given target can also be carried separately by different internal parts.

When evaluating whether prayers and commands have been effective, it is important to realize that resolving all the judgments and bitterness *regarding a specific memory and/or issue, towards a given person, or carried by a given internal part* is different than resolving judgments and bitterness in *all locations*. When checking to see whether the judgments and bitterness are gone it is important to check the *specific target* that has been addressed. See “General Introductory Comments Regarding Ministry Aids” for additional comments and discussion.

**B. Local strongholds, demonic infection, and curses:** My sense is that there are sometimes spiritual strongholds, demonic spirits, and curses that are connected to/associated with the specific judgments and bitterness that are being addressed, and therefore lose their protection/anchor when the judgments and bitterness in question are resolved. In these situations it is easy and important to finish with commands to deal with the spiritual strongholds, demonic spirits, and curses that have just been exposed. I target the specific, local strongholds, demonic spirits, and curses in question by including the local “address” in the commands. For example, “In the name of Jesus, we command that all spiritual strongholds connected to or associated with *these judgments and bitterness towards Mary’s father regarding his emotional absences* be torn down now.” See “General Introductory Comments...” for additional comments.

**C. Systemic patterns of judgmentalism and bitterness:** We have also observed that, in addition to being carried in multiple, specific, local infections, judgmentalism and bitterness can also be carried as wide-spread and deep-seated *systemic* infections. It is important to watch for systemic judgmentalism and bitterness because every “local infection” will be easier to deal with once systemic judgmentalism and bitterness have been addressed. The first time someone deals with judgments and bitterness is a good time to check for widespread and deep seated patterns behind the immediate situation, but sometimes the systemic judgmentalism and bitterness do not become apparent immediately. Look especially for systemic patterns if judgments and bitterness pop up over and over again. When you find systemic judgmentalism and bitterness, make sure to treat them with a full course of systemic “antibiotics.”

Systemic means:

1. Working with the adult core-self as opposed to working with internal parts.
2. Addressing the wide spread patterns of judgmentalism and bitterness as opposed to addressing specific, local judgments and bitterness. For example, “I confess these *wide-spread and deep-seated patterns of judgmentalism and bitterness* in my life,” and “In the name of Jesus, we command that all spiritual strongholds connected to or associated with these *wide-spread and deep-seated patterns of judgmentalism and bitterness* be torn down now.”

“Full course of antibiotics” means:

1. Confessing judgmentalism and bitterness, renouncing judgmentalism and bitterness, asking the Lord for true repentance regarding judgmentalism and bitterness, and asking the Lord to free you from judgmentalism and bitterness.
2. Going through the prayers to address corresponding spiritual strongholds, demonic spirits, and curses.

See “General Introductory Comments...” for additional discussion.

**D. Common problems:** The six problems briefly discussed below are commonly encountered when working to releasing judgments and bitterness. See “General Introductory Comments Regarding Ministry Aids” for additional discussion regarding each of these common blockages.<sup>18</sup>

1. ***Specific trauma getting triggered by the discussion of judgments and bitterness:*** For example, some people have memories of a perpetrator hurting them, and then telling them that it is their fault that they have been hurt. This kind of memory can sometimes get triggered when the recipient is working on a trauma, and the facilitator brings up the possibility that the healing process might be stuck because the recipient is holding onto judgment and bitterness.
2. ***Guardian lies:*** We often find guardian lies hindering the release of judgments and bitterness. As described above, guardian lies getting triggered contributed to my resistance to releasing judgments. One of the most common guardian lies hindering the release of judgments is: “These judgments give me power to make them change – if I let go of my judgments they will never change.” Some of the most common guardian lies hindering the release of bitterness are: “It is not safe to let go of my anger,” “My anger makes me strong,” “I need my anger to protect myself,” and “My anger protects me.”
3. ***Vows:*** Judgments can be protected by vows, such as: “I may not be able to stop him from beating me, but I will be better than him.” Bitterness can be protected by vows such as “I will never forgive them for humiliating me” and “I will get them back some day.”
4. ***Demonic interference:*** Any demonic spirits associated with the judgment and bitterness in question will try to block the person and/or internal parts from participating in the prayer. As discussed in “Dealing with Demonic Interference/Opposition during the session...,” it is helpful to “focus the target” when dealing with demonic interference. When I am dealing with possible demonic interference hindering release of judgments and bitterness, I will address my commands to “all demonic spirits connected to or associated with these judgments, this condemnation, self-righteousness, and bitterness.”
5. ***Avoidance of the whole truth:*** The person receiving ministry needs to truly “see” how badly her wounders have hurt her before she can release judgments and bitterness towards them -- she has to fully recognize, own, and feel what she’s judgmental and bitter about before she can release the judgments and bitterness. It will hinder release of judgments and bitterness if she is still avoiding the whole truth about how badly she has been hurt.
6. ***Internal parts that do not participate:*** For complete resolution of the judgments and bitterness towards a given person regarding a specific issue/cluster of traumatic memories, any internal parts carrying the judgments and bitterness in question must be present, stay connected, and participate in the prayer.

It is ideal to identify and resolve these problems before going through the prayers and commands to address judgments and bitterness. When I perceive that judgements and bitterness are hindering the healing process and I want to lead the recipient through these prayers, I first

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<sup>18</sup> These same problems also frequently get in the way of dismantling other defenses and reactive sins, such as vows and self pity. Again, see the “General Introductory Comments Regarding Ministry Aids” essay for additional discussion.

describe what I have observed that makes me wonder if judgments and bitterness might be present, and I explain how judgments and bitterness can hinder the healing process.<sup>19</sup> I then ask the person receiving ministry if she is sure she is ready to release the judgments and bitterness in question, and then I check for any anger, uncertainty, or lack of internal unity. This usually picks up guardian lies and any trauma that is being triggered by the discussion about judgments and bitterness, and often picks up internal parts that are not yet ready to participate. See “General Introductory Comments Regarding Ministry Aids” for additional comments.

**E. If judgements and bitterness do not resolve:** My experience is that I and the recipient sometimes still miss something, such as quiet vows and deeper traumatic memories that are carefully protected. The good news is that it is easy to tell when you miss something – the judgments and bitterness will still be there when the person is done with the prayer. When this happens, you can assume with a fairly high degree of confidence that one or more of the common problems just discussed is blocking the way. Ask the Lord “What do you want \_\_\_\_\_ (name of the person receiving ministry) to know about these judgments and this bitterness?” and then watch especially for the common problems discussed above. Return to the sample prayers and commands when the blocking problems have been addressed. The Lord will always free a person from judgments and bitterness when the relevant traumatic memories are fully connected and all interference has been resolved.

**F. Initial paragraphs of the sample prayer:** When I first started using this prayer for releasing my own judgments and bitterness, I always included the initial paragraphs. I found it especially important to talk about the specifics of the trauma, including the powerlessness and helplessness, until the judgments and bitterness in question felt emotionally connected. Now I usually use a much shorter version unless I am having difficulty with emotional connection.

**G. Reduce or expand the reactive sin target words to facilitate connection:** One of the most important goals for all of our sample prayers is to help the person receiving ministry to connect experientially/emotionally with the core concepts, and to stay connected throughout the prayer - to stay emotionally connected to the meaning of the prayer as they go through it. Use fewer target words if a longer list is hindering emotional connection by becoming distracting or confusing (for example, just “judgments and bitterness”). Include additional target words if doing so seems to help establish and maintain experiential/emotional connection (for example, “judgments, condemnation, self righteousness, harbored anger, bitterness, resentment, unforgiveness, hatred, and desire for revenge”). The same principle applies to whether or not to include the reactive sin target words at each point in the prayer. See “General Introductory Comments...” for additional discussion regarding this point.

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<sup>19</sup> With recipients who already trust me and the process, and who prefer very brief explanations, my explanation may be as simple as, “In my experience, judgments and bitterness can hinder the healing process in a number of different ways, and I think that might be happening here. I think it would be good to go through a prayer to release judgments and bitterness, to see if that might help the process move forward.” In contrast, with recipients who feel more comfortable with more detailed understanding regarding what we are doing, and who prefer detailed explanations, I describe exactly what I am observing to make me think judgements and bitterness are present, I give a brief intro regarding, “in my experience, this can hinder the healing process,” I give them this essay to read as homework, and then we discuss any questions they have after going through the essay.

### Sample Prayer for Releasing Judgments and Bitterness

Never assume the person is ready to release his judgments and bitterness towards the person(s) in question. Always ask “Are you sure you’re ready to release your judgments and bitterness towards \_\_\_\_\_?” If there is any anger, sense of uncertainty, or lack of internal unity, then look for guardian lies and the other common blockages discussed in the essay about judgements and bitterness.

It is important for the person receiving ministry to understand how we use judgments and bitterness to protect ourselves from painful emotions, and to understand why it is important to release them. If she does not already understand these principles it can be helpful for her to review the essay about judgments and bitterness.

**Sample prayer to confess, renounce, and release judgments and bitterness** *(The first paragraph can be omitted to conserve time if the person thoroughly understands the dynamics of judgments, is already emotionally connected, and is fully ready to release the judgments in question):*

“Lord Jesus, I was deeply hurt when \_\_\_\_\_ *(describe the details of the situation, including the helplessness and powerlessness – talk about it until it feels emotionally connected)*. I have judgments and bitterness towards \_\_\_\_\_ as a reaction to being wounded, as a reaction to being judged *(include this if it fits)*, and as a way to protect myself from the painful emotions – especially from feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. I \_\_\_\_\_ *(describe your judgments and bitterness. For example “I hate him. I believe he is stupid, selfish, and cruel. There is no excuse for what he did, and he deserves to be punished. I believe that I would be better than him if I had his life, etc.” Talk about it until it feels emotionally connected)*.

“I do want protection from situations where I am hurt, powerless, and helpless, but I don’t want this judgment, condemnation, self-righteousness and bitterness towards \_\_\_\_\_ to hinder my relationship with You or my healing, and I am ready to release and renounce this attempt to use judgment and bitterness to protect myself. I ask for Your protection, and also for the discernment and grace to participate in Your plans for my care. I accept that You don’t guarantee that I will never be hurt, powerless, and helpless, and I ask You for the grace and strength to be faithful to You in whatever You choose to allow. Help me to stand straight in my honest pain when I am hurt, powerless, and helpless.

“I confess this judgment, condemnation, self righteous, and bitterness towards \_\_\_\_\_ as sin. I confess that I don’t have the right or ability to judge \_\_\_\_\_. I ask Your forgiveness for this judgment, condemnation, self righteous, and bitterness. I renounce this judgment, condemnation, self righteous, and bitterness. I am willing to forgive and release \_\_\_\_\_’s sins against me. I acknowledge that I cannot change my own heart and mind. I ask You to give me true repentance – I ask you to give me Your heart, Your mind, Your truth, and your compassion, humility, and forgiveness towards \_\_\_\_\_ regarding \_\_\_\_\_. Lord, I cannot free myself, but I am willing to be freed. I cooperate with Your desire to free me by consenting to Your work in my heart.

“I specifically release and renounce using this judgment, condemnation, self-righteousness, and bitterness to protect myself from painful emotions, especially powerlessness, and helplessness.



“Lord Jesus, I ask now that you would wash me with your blood, cleansing me and freeing me from all judgments, condemnation, self righteousness, and bitterness towards \_\_\_\_\_ regarding \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Go back to the memories being addressed and try to stir up the judgments, condemnation, self-righteousness, and bitterness towards the person(s) in question. Often they will already be gone. If they are still present, stir them up and then look for Jesus’ presence, listen for His voice, try to sense His presence. Watch, follow, listen to whatever he does/says.*

*After a few moments, try to find the judgments, condemnation, self-righteousness, and bitterness.*

If the judgments, bitterness, etc. are not gone, ask the Lord “What do you want \_\_\_\_\_ (*name of the person receiving ministry*) to know about these judgments and about this condemnation, self righteousness, and bitterness?” and then watch especially for the common problems discussed above. Return to the sample prayer when the blocking problems have been addressed. The Lord will always remove judgments, condemnation, self righteousness, and bitterness when the relevant traumatic memories are fully connected and all hindrances have been resolved.

*If you feel lead to do so, you can tear down spiritual strongholds (2 Cor. 10), deal with demonic spirits, and break curses:*

“In the name of Jesus, we command that all spiritual strongholds connected to or associated with my judgments, condemnation, self righteousness, and bitterness towards \_\_\_\_\_ regarding \_\_\_\_\_ be torn down now.”

“In the name of Jesus we now command all demonic spirits connected to, or associated with, my judgments, condemnation, self righteousness, and bitterness towards \_\_\_\_\_ regarding \_\_\_\_\_ to go immediately and directly to the feet of the true Lord Jesus. You will go bound. You will not touch or harm anything or anyone on the way. You will never return and you will never send anything in your place. He will deal with you as He sees fit.”

“In the name of Jesus, we command that all curses in any way connected to or associated with my judgments, condemnation, self righteousness, and bitterness towards \_\_\_\_\_ regarding \_\_\_\_\_ be broken, nullified, and rendered powerless.”