

# The Case for Saying I'm Sorry



President Donald Trump and White House Senior Advisor, Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk shake hands while attending the NCAA Division I Wrestling Championship in Philadelphia, Pa., on March 22, 2025. Kayla Bartkowski/Getty Images



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## *Commentary*

Elon Musk and Donald Trump had a blowup last week that grew unusually sharp, thus hitting headlines the world over.

After some days of thought and consideration, Elon apologized: “I regret some of my posts about President @realDonaldTrump last week. They went too far.”

The message is short and to the point, with no fluff. He apologized, no excuses, no sarcasm, no elaboration. No, he did not take back his views that Trump should do more to back DOGE cuts.

He has doubts about the tariff agenda. He thinks the government needs to be cut to the bone and that is not happening. He has doubts about other cabinet officials.

He let his frustrations get out of control and posted about it. He has apologized, not for his views but for the way he got carried away. Mostly he rejects the personal attacks on Trump and the other matters that he said “went too far.”

And that was enough.

You could feel all the tension in the room fall to normal almost immediately. Even though Trump has said nothing back, it was enough for one man to simply say: I’m sorry.

It made international news, every venue going on about it. It’s not only because there are some political implications that come from reconciliation. It’s because it is astonishing to see someone actually apologize!

Isn’t it amazing? Just a few words that cost absolutely nothing. Still, they are rarely said. People cling to those words like personal treasure, as if saying them is surrendering an important part of self. In a sense, that is true. Which is precisely why we should hear them more.

“I’m sorry” should be added to “please” and “thank you” as magic words. Kids should be taught this, and not just by instruction but by example too. They need to see their parents say a genuine “I’m sorry” to each other. They need to observe adults simply owning their mistakes without excuses.

For some reason, the practice of genuine apology seems to have vanished from the culture.

Maybe it is due to that pop slogan from a 1970 movie: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” My mother despised that line, which she said was completely wrong. She says love means being always ready to say you’re sorry.

Still, it stuck, as if never say sorry is an act of love. There are exceptions when under legal duress and only as PR theatrics. We often hear “CNN would like to offer an apology about x, y, and z” but we know for sure that this announcement is part of a legal settlement and therefore not sincere.

In one tactic I’ve heard recently: “I owe you an apology.” That’s admitting a debt, not actually apologizing. Just say: I’m so sorry.

Nor is an apology that is immediately followed by a long string of circumstantial excuses and subtle blaming of everyone else a legitimate apology.

Nor is saying “I’m sorry you are upset” or “You don’t like this and I’m sorry about that.”

Those are all just lame ways to use the word without the meaning.

See how many clever ways we invent to keep from saying that thing? Why? It has something to do with the strange pain that comes with the surrender of ego.

Verbalizing contrition without excuse is extremely difficult. You have to do it often to develop the habit. Hardly anyone has it anymore.

The costs are extremely high as a result. Resentment persists and festers, growing worse over time. It’s true in politics and in interpersonal relationships too.

Saying sorry requires humility. Here again, we live in times when that is nearly absent. Today’s influencers believe they thrive on always being right, never wrong. People gain dopamine hits from fighting rather than getting along. It’s a dog-eat-dog world and everyone seems to be trying to either eat or avoid being eaten.

Humility, contrition, and forgiveness as cultural institutions seem nearly extinct. As a result, lost trust is never regained and results in permanent fissures and lifetime wars among people.

Life is too short for all of us for this kind of nonsense, each tick of the clock getting us all closer to our expiration date, at which point none of it matters anyway.

How many times have you heard someone say a version of the following: “I would be glad to make up and go on like nothing happened but not until I get an apology.”

I figured out years ago what this means. It means nothing will ever be fixed. Waiting for someone else to apologize to you means you will be waiting until death. Essentially, there is no experiential basis for waiting for anyone else ever to apologize to you.

There is only one answer: make the first move. “If I did anything wrong, and I’m certain you believe I did, and no question I could have handled the conflict better, I want to sincerely apologize to you and ask for your forgiveness.”

Say that or some version of that—even if you are barely wrong and the other person is hugely wrong—and nothing more. Watch what happens. There is a good chance that in a few days, the same will come back at you. Then you can talk and find some middle ground to go on.

Otherwise, these resentments, conflicts, loathings, and internal hates pile up in our lives like bags of stones in burlap sacks we drag around with us everywhere. They slow us down and dull the human spirit.

The next part of contrition is forgiveness. Hannah Arendt wrote a famous [essay](#) about it. She says that “the Discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense.”

Forgiveness, unlike vengeance, “is the only reaction which does not merely react but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. The freedom contained in Jesus’ teachings of forgiveness is the freedom from vengeance, which encloses both doer and sufferer who in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end.”

That’s beautiful but is there any reason to speak of forgiveness without apology? Probably not. This is why the Christian tradition long emphasized confession, whether in a formal sacrament or just personal honesty with one’s maker. Admit it all. Feel contrite. Pledge to do better. That makes all things right.

At that point, we let it go. We move on. As Arendt says, the field of the future is open, refreshed, a blank canvas on which to paint a new image. So long as we hold on to dreams of revenge and the anger of resentment, the canvas cannot accept a new image at all.

Let’s do what we can to bring back the apology, the genuine expression of regret, the *Mea Maxima Culpa* with the strike of the breast thrice, without excuse, without footnotes, without mitigating words of subtly blaming others. We are all flawed. We all do wrong. A culture in which we are honest about that with each other is one that can build a brighter future.

Elon has shown the way and deserves nothing but praise. Twitter cost him \$44 billion but the apology cost him nothing. The latter could ultimately prove more valuable.

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