**24th September 2023**

**Matthew 18.21-35**

Last week I started a look at this profound parable about forgiveness.

I said that Forgiveness is problematic. There is a modern-day conflict over forgiveness because people don’t do God anymore. This parable is about knowing you are forgiven by God and how that should change your life and your relationships to others. Vertical forgiveness, internal forgiveness leading to horizontal forgiveness.

I talked about modern-day problems with forgiveness that asking people to forgive and move on… helps abusers and institutions and organisations escape accountability and responsibility. The #MeToo movement struggles with the call to forgive. Many women ask: doesn’t forgiving perpetrators only encourage abuse?

I talked about the contemporary models of forgiveness.

cheap grace/non conditional forgiveness, little grace – the transactional merited forgiveness, or the no grace, no forgiveness model,

but how all those models lack any vertical dimension.

They all contrast with the costly grace model of forgiveness assumed in the Bible, which has both a horizontal and vertical dimension to it and the internal dimension that changes the heart of the forgiven.

Grace

Cara Heafy,   a hospital and hospice chaplain in Oxford and an associate minister serving Marston and Wheatley United Reformed Churches wrote in her online sermon for the URC last week:

There’s a quote I heard once and have appreciated since,  It goes something along the lines of this: “God is Master of the Arts and of all the Sciences. But God is terrible at Maths.”

In God’s economy the spreadsheet doesn’t balance, the numbers don’t add up. One sheep takes priority over ninety-nine. The widow’s penny is prized above the large contributions of the wealthy. Five loaves and two fish are enough to feed five thousand hungry people, with twelve basketfuls left over.

Forgiveness is bad Maths, too. “An eye for an eye” seems proportionate, logical. “Turn the other cheek” does not.

Jesus talked about forgiveness a lot. And it really aggravated many of the religious people who heard him. Going around saying, “your sins are forgiven” was controversial, provocative, annoying. He seemed to offer these pronouncements so freely, no petition or penance required.

The trouble with grace is, it’s not fair! It makes a mockery of all our comparing and measuring, our attempts to earn our way to holiness, our scorekeeping and gatekeeping, our preoccupation with who’s ‘in’ and who’s ‘out.’ The trouble with grace is, it interferes with our sense of justice. We like to see the ‘bad guys’ get their comeuppance, their just desserts.

I feel some sympathy for Peter, in our gospel reading for today, when he asks Jesus, “how many times should I forgive the person in the church who’s wronged me? Seven times?” To me, seven times sounds pretty generous. Surely there comes a point where enough is enough, where someone has used up all their chances and needs to be written off as a lost cause.

Jesus says no. The sky’s the limit. You can’t use up grace, it’s not a finite resource. To illustrate his point he tells a story, a story about a king who decides to call in his debts…

This is a strange parable, isn’t it? Some of it seems to make sense. The servant who has been forgiven is exposed as a hypocrite, asking for mercy and showing none himself. But what are we to make of the character of this king, his master, who retracts his forgiveness as swiftly and thoroughly as he had given it? The last two verses of the passage are particularly chilling with their reference to torture, their threatening tone, their implication that this king who swings from one extreme to another represents God. What, exactly, is Jesus saying here? Are we to forgive because we are forgiven, transformed by grace? Or are we to forgive on pain of punishment?

It might help us to recognise the tone Jesus is using. His hearers would have recognised the absurdity of this story. Ten thousand talents or bags of gold was a ridiculous, inconceivable amount for a servant to owe his master. A single talent would have been many years’ wages for a labourer. It was laughable for the servant to ask for time to pay off such an unpayable debt.

In comparison, a hundred denarii or silver coins was a miniscule sum. The servant’s treatment of his fellow-servant, “seizing him by the throat” for such a tiny debt, was unreasonable to the point of comedy.

I don’t think Jesus is really describing God as a fickle, furious debt-collector. Jesus is being a storyteller, using hyperbole, language of excess, to lampoon Peter’s suggestion that there ought to be a limit to our forgivingness. In this light, maybe the details of the story aren’t meant to be taken too literally. Maybe Jesus is using an extreme illustration to poke gentle fun at Peter and drive home the central point: we have all been forgiven.

We are to live in the light of this truth, breathing in and exhaling grace. When we comprehend the magnitude of God’s love and forgiveness towards us, many of our own grievances are exposed as petty and foolish.

What does limitless forgiveness, forgiveness that does not keep score, look like? Does it mean letting evil and injustice go unchallenged?

Absolutely not. This passage needs to be read in the context of the verses that go before. In verses 15-20, Jesus gives some specific, practical instructions about conflict resolution. He says that the community has a responsibility to bring issues into the light, confront abusers, support and empower victims, speak the truth in love. Forgiveness within the Church does not mean turning a blind eye, covering things up, protecting abusers and failing to protect the vulnerable.  There’s always consequences to our actions

In the cheap grace model of forgiveness the one who has been offended offers forgiveness, maybe out of a desire to have inner peace and not be consumed by bitterness. That’s not to be criticised. But if there was a just resolution of the hurt, the offender would see the hurt they have done, say sorry and repent, change their ways. Ideally there would then be some reconciliation. But as we well know, life is not like that and people don’t acknowledge their sin, don’t repent, there is no reconciliation, there is no justice, in this life at least. Cheap grace to the one forgiven – costly to the forgiver.

Practically speaking unless you do some of the work toward forgiving the perpetrator you won’t be seeking justice but revenger – which means you will cause defensiveness and combat mode in the perpetrator. Forgiveness is not the opposite of seeking justice but is the pre-condition.

Dan Hamilton[[1]](#endnote-1) describes how he and his finance forgave each other over time after a painful break up. It insightfully describes how, while forgiveness can be granted to someone in a moment, it is still an inward process for the forgiver that can take time. ‘Forgiveness can be like buying an expensive gift for someone on credit. The gift is received in one moment (when you say to the person, ‘I forgive you’) and enjoyed from there on, but the giver will continue to pay unseen until the full debt is satisfied.

He provides himself as a case study:

‘Once upon a time, I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her… but only in small sums over a year. they were made whenever I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past. Done whenever I saw her with another man. Done when I had to renounce jealousy and self-pity, when I prayed for her as she moved into other relationships. Done when I praised her and spoke of her value, though I wanted to slice away at her reputation. Those were the payments – but she never saw them. But I do know she forgave me. Forgiveness is more than a matter of refusing to hate someone. It is also a matter of choosing to demonstrate love and acceptance to the offender.

Forgiveness is to deal with our emotions.. by denying ourselves the dark pleasures of venting them or fondling them in our minds. Pain is the consequence of sin; there is no easy way to deal with it. Wood, nails and pain are the currency of forgiveness, the love that heals.

Wood nails and pain – the cross.

Forgiveness has a different power. It can be the power that finally breaks cycles of violence and abuse. History, experience, and psychosocial research all teach us that unprocessed trauma is passed on through generations. When Jesus, from the cross, abused, tortured, betrayed and bleeding, says “forgive them, Father”… he is saying, “this goes no further. It ends here, with me. I refuse to meet violence with violence. The cycle is broken.” Jesus absorbs the debt of sin. In Christian doctrine this is called the doctrine of substitutionary atonement – much misunderstood – but basically Jesus and God refuses to pay back what we deserve. Love comes from the cross not revenge or wrath.

Lutheran preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber said this: “Maybe the Good Friday story is about how God would rather die than be in our sin-accounting business anymore.”

I find those words so powerful. I’m going to say them again, to give us chance to hear and absorb them: “Maybe the Good Friday story is about how God would rather die than be in our sin-accounting business anymore.”

For me, the central message of our faith and the Good News we are called to share is all about grace. If there is one truth, one shining little nugget of wisdom I want you to take away with you today, it can be distilled into just four words, words that change everything, words that Jesus was really fond of saying, words that got him into a whole heap of trouble:

Your. Sins. Are. Forgiven.

It seems to me that the journey of faith is all about learning and leaning into the truth of those words. Believing their truth not just in our heads but in our hearts, in our bodies, in our bones. We are forgiven already, before we even ask. We are loved already, just as we are.

Knowing that we are forgiven means holding two, seemingly incongruous things together. We are flawed, vulnerable, broken, prone to making mistakes. And: we are beloved, blessed, redeemed, cherished, made whole. Knowing that we are sinners helps us to see our common humanity. Knowing that we are loved helps us to love.

Knowing our need for forgiveness demands some humility – we need to know we are in God’s debt. Knowing we are forgiven should be freeing – if God has judged us and given the verdict we are forgiven: who are we to judge others and put ourselves in the place of God?

Grace is not a finite resource, it is abundant. When we let it in and allow it to fill us up, it overflows, spilling out to heal our relationships and to bless and transform the world. Grace sets us free from all our measuring and comparing, our striving to achieve holiness. Grace sets us free from self-loathing and shame. Grace gives us eyes of compassion with which to look at our neighbour, even our enemy. Grace can heal. Grace can flood and fill the fractures within and between us.

I love the musical Les Miserables. I’m not going to sing it to you.

The story begins with the parole of Jean Valjean[[2]](#endnote-2), a laborer who once stole a loaf of bread to feed his sister's starving children. Our society is full of people who are desperate to feed their families at the moment – from those hit by the cost of living, to those desperate to flee their homes and seek asylum.

In Les Mis, Even after serving 19 years, Valjean is informed by police inspector Javert that he is not really free. He is branded a thief and an ex-convict, preventing him from finding honest work. He eventually steals silver from a church and is caught with it, but the bishop lies, saying that he gave the silver to Valjean, effectively saving him from another long prison term.

This moment of grace and mercy by the bishop galvanizes Valjean: it reminds him that he is not just a thief, but a man with a soul, and so he takes the silver to become an honest businessman. He also tears up the identity papers labeling him as a convict and breaks parole. Javert sees this deception as a criminal act and commits himself to putting Valjean in prison again.

Javert does not hate Valjean or even particularly dislike him, but he cannot forgive him. He is the law, and that makes mercy impossible.

According to Javert, we are all capable of following the law, and when we don't, punishment follows. There is nothing unfair in this. When Valjean complains that he only stole a loaf of bread, Javert shares a surprising part of his own history: that he was born inside a jail but lived a good life according to the law and became an honored policeman. If he can do it, Javert reasons, anyone can – and they deserve punishment when they can't meet that standard.

Jesus, however, paints a very different picture. In the [parable](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+18&version=NKJV) of the unforgiving servant, He tells of a man who had a large debt forgiven, but then refused to forget a small debt another man owed him. Jesus uses this story to show why we must forgive those who sin against us: because God has forgiven us our own sins, we should be gracious when people sin against us, and forgive them. The fact that we once needed mercy compels us to act mercifully to others.

This grace, of course, does not give Valjean the freedom to ["go on sinning so that grace may increase."](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+6&version=NIV) Even while Javert's law held authority over him, Valjean found other duties that he could fulfill: his promise to the bishop to become an honest man and his promise to the dying Fantine to raise her child well. Valjean needs liberation from Javert's exacting justice, but he also must do what he can to live a good life judged by a better law.

Your sins are forgiven. May you hear this today, may you live and breathe it, may you walk from here with a lighter step, ready to love and forgive and share the Good News and be known as people of grace. May there be a harvest of grace – sow grace, reap grace, love because God first loved you.

**Amen**.

Lord God, we come before you, marvelling at your sense of justice. Amazed by our wonderful world where Barry, the dinosaur, walked 150 million years ago. Yet a world so full of troubles. Sometimes it is so hard to believe in you as a God of justice when bad things happen. Lord God, we only have to watch the news to realise how far the world has strayed from your standards. We pray today as our ideas are challenged, that our prayers will be heartfelt. We think about those for whom justice seems very far away.

God of infinite justice,
**hear our prayer.**

We pray for the church worldwide. We pray for people who struggle against injustice in trying to live out their faith. For places where faith has to be hidden.

God of infinite justice,
**hear our prayer.**

We remember that every single individual in this world belongs to you. As countries all over Europe are working together to deal with the migrant crisis, we pray for wisdom for them. May they not see people just as excess numbers but take to heart their needs and what they are escaping from. We pray that the people on Lampedusa will find it in their hearts to offer support to those in need. That the overcrowding situation will be resolved.

God of infinite justice,
**hear our prayer.**

This week there have been scandals in the media about sexual abuse by people in the public eye; widespread corruption in the Metropolitan police force; overstretched probation services where bad decisions have led to loss of lives. In a world where closed doors hide so much injustice, we pray for your justice to return. May we as your people do all we can to understand your ways and stick up for the downtrodden and downhearted.

God of infinite justice,
**hear our prayer.**

We continue to pray for the people of Libya and Morocco. They must be finding it hard to believe in a just God. We cannot even begin to understand their depths of grief and anger. May aid reach them as quickly as possible and help to alleviate the suffering of the survivors.

God of infinite justice,
**hear our prayer.**

We pray for people who tirelessly work for God’s justice. For all who follow your calling to spread your word, and your work in whatever situation, that they will open the way to a harvest of generosity. For Tear Fund, Oxfam, Christian Aid, Fair Trade – for all who, like you Lord, go the extra mile.

God of infinite justice,
**hear our prayer.**

We pray for our communities, the places where we live and work. That we would respect those around us. Be ready to stand up when we see things that are against God’s law. We pray for the times when people say to us that God isn’t fair. Give us the right words to say in reply.

God of infinite justice,
**hear our prayer.**

Lord God, we are all workers in your vineyard. We thank you that we all have talents which we can use for you. We pray for people who have no hopes or expectations of getting more than the bare minimum. For people who take it as their right to have more than others. For those who just see work as a way to maximum money. For people who waste their talents, don’t use them as you intended. O Lord God how we long for a world like the kingdom of heaven, where no one gets more or less than anyone else. Where everyone belongs and receives in equal measure.

God of infinite justice,
**hear our prayer. Amen.**

1. Dan Hamilton, Forgiveness IVP 1980 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://thinkchristian.net/the-new-testament-parable-that-is-les-miserables#:~:text=Jesus%20uses%20this%20story%20to,to%20act%20mercifully%20to%20others>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)