

Just Grace: Forgiveness and Accountability at Work (Part 1)

Each year, Faith in Business focuses on a theme that reflects the contemporary world of work. It does so through a lively mix of activity, events and output. The aim is to stimulate theological and practical insight, discussion and initiative in the sphere of work and in the church contexts to which working Christians belong. The theme for the current academic year is Just Grace: Forgiveness and Accountability at Work. Here Peter Heslam provides the first part in a series of short articles introducing this theme.

A seemingly endless series of scandals is shaking the contemporary world of work. Individuals and organisations have behaved in a way that has damaged lives, lost trust, and generated negative outcomes. Highly esteemed institutions are amongst those affected; in the UK including the Post Office, the BBC, Harrods, the Church of England, and the bodies responsible for the provision of clean rivers, clean blood, and fireproof cladding.

But whatever the size and public profile of an organisation, it will always be subject to human failings. Creative ways need to be found to deal with those failings that are sufficiently robust to address the valid concerns of stakeholders while withstanding today's toxic culture of blame. If such strategies are to be sustainable and life-giving, they need to model both grace and justice by making space for forgiveness and for accountability.

Over the next few months, Faith in Business aims to address this challenge by grappling with some important questions about how *just grace* works in practice, such as:

- what practical protocols, conduct codes, grievance procedures, disciplinary measures, corporate governance policies, counselling programmes and leadership styles best reflect justice, grace, accountability and forgiveness?
- how can a corporate ethos of just grace stimulate innovation, which inevitably involves trying and failing?
- what practical learning can we derive from workplace case studies about the inherent tensions between justice and grace; trust and trustworthiness; mercy and grace; law and liberty; wrong and redemption?
- in promoting a harmonious and inspiring culture of just grace, what are the inhibitors and how can we overcome them?

True to its rootedness in theology, Faith in Business looks to the Bible to help guide these deliberations. The Apostle James writes:

Anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (James 5.15b-16).

Clearly for James, forgiveness is one of the most precious gifts from God. It is so powerful that it can heal us. It brings life to our bodies and joy, freedom, and peace to our spirits. It offers a new start – like entering a workplace on the first day of a dream job.

But just as the Apostle James is clear about forgiveness' healing power, he is also clear that this gift cannot be kept to ourselves. We are, he tells us, to 'confess our sins to *one another*, and pray for *one another*'. This echoes his teaching

earlier in his letter, where he writes that 'judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy' (James 2.13). James seems to be working on the assumption that, when God sends forgiveness, the recipient must hand it on for that forgiveness by God to take effect.

The reciprocity, accountability and humility this demands reflect Jesus' teaching. Examples include:

- his parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18.21-35);
- his command to 'Forgive, and you will be forgiven...for with the measure you use, it will be measured to you' (Lk 6.37-38); and
- his warning 'If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins' (Mt 6.14-15).

Nothing in this teaching suggests it is only applicable within churches, or between Christians. It also applies within the sphere of ordinary everyday work. In fact, the forgiveness and accountability dialectic has become a major theme in today's media. It has surfaced in debates surrounding poor performance, unprofessional conduct, reputational damage, safeguarding violations, the exploitation of former colonial peoples, and the kind of dysfunctional and damaging situations referred to at the start of this article.

In these debates, the demand and offer of apology has become



commonplace. But they are often driven by opprobrium, vindictiveness, fear and defensiveness, all magnified through social media. In this context, James' echo of Jesus' words sounds a very different note. It is a call to all who follow Jesus to manifest such a generosity of spirit that they are ready and willing to apologise and to forgive.

But when people or organisations 'confess their sins' to another person or organisation they are holding themselves accountable to that person or organisation. That can be very hard to do, especially when the person or organisation to whom they confess their wrongdoing committed the very misdeed that provoked their wrongdoing in the first place.

People and organisations may need to take time to count the cost of making an individual or corporate confession of any wrongdoing of which they are aware. They may well need to take personal and professional advice. Over recent years, corporate advisors, ethics


consultants, and compliance teams have multiplied to meet that demand. It reflects the fact that, within a culture of blame, great caution is required. When handling issues of forgiveness and accountability, personal and corporate reputations – which can take years to build but can be destroyed in a moment – are at stake.

Perhaps the sheer difficulty in practising forgiveness and accountability is partly why Jesus is so persistent in addressing this issue in his teaching, and why it is included in his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6.14-15, cited above); and in his most famous prayer, the Lord's prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us' (Mt 6.12); and in his most famous saying, the so-called Golden Rule: 'do to others what you would have them do to you' (Mt 7.12).

We will look at these and other revolutionary and culture-forming teachings of Jesus as this series unfolds.

In the meantime, the challenge for Christians is to follow the God of just grace in their work. In doing so, they can and should exercise in that sphere the call to forgive and the call to be accountable. Finding the right balance between those two callings in their complex work environments is inevitably difficult, especially within today's blame culture.

But all leaders can get better by sharing their experience and insight with other leaders. It must not be for lack of worked examples that leaders are so paralysed by the complexities of offering forgiveness or enforcing accountability that they cannot imagine how to move forward when they find themselves caught up in blame games.

Against this background, Faith in Business is issuing an open invitation to join us as we explore together the practical and theological ramifications of our theme. Let the conversation commence, and may the fruit of it grow! 



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