

Just Grace: Forgiveness and Accountability at Work (Part 2)

In this article, Peter Heslam continues to address the theme Just Grace: Forgiveness and Accountability at Work. In Part One of this series, he highlighted the rise of a toxic culture of blame. Robust and creative strategies need to be found in grappling with this culture, he argued, that are based on the notion of just grace, which seeks to balance forgiveness with accountability. Here, in Part Two, he explores that notion using stories and scriptures.

Case studies that provide perspective on just grace are not difficult to find in ordinary, everyday life. Yesterday, for instance, I was about to enter a supermarket when the security alarm went off. Suddenly, a young man dashed past me in the opposite direction, clutching a large box of beer cans. By the time I realised this was not a false alarm but a theft, he was charging down the footpath. I felt an impulse to run after him, tackle him to the ground and retrieve the beer cans. But his relative youth and speed – plus some hesitation as to the legitimacy of such ‘citizen action’ – counselled me otherwise. I continued into the supermarket, where the security guards were in anxious conversation about the alarm, and told them what I had witnessed.

Reflecting on my instinctive response to this incident, I was struck by how much of it was based on justice and accountability, rather than on grace and forgiveness. Perhaps that is understandable, as the latter would be more a matter for the supermarket than for me. But it got me thinking about how an innate sense of justice seems to be hard-wired into human beings and how this must reflect their creation in the image of God within a moral universe.

The existence of this human trait, and the need to nurture it, is reflected in the fact that justice is included in the four cardinal virtues of classical philosophy: prudence, justice, fortitude, and moderation. Several

years ago, Faith in Business hosted a conference that explored the relevance of the cardinal virtues to business. Although the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love received some attention, the absence of forgiveness in the cardinal virtues (and hence in the conference) is one of the reasons why this year we have put it centre stage.

After all, there is no reason not to believe that forgiveness and grace are hard-wired into human beings, for the same reasons as justice and accountability. Indeed, the Book of Genesis shows the God in whose image humans are created exercises these virtues when these humans are disobedient, start killing each other, and end up behaving so badly that we read: ‘The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually’ (Gen 6.5; cf vs.11–12). However, it is into this appalling and tragic situation that we find the wonderfully redemptive story of Noah and the ark. Having been held accountable to God’s standards of justice, humans are now shown God’s grace. God even re-entrusts them with the commission to Adam and Eve to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Gen 9.7; cf 1.28), and enters into an ‘everlasting covenant’ with them, a perpetual sign of which would be the appearance of a glorious rainbow (Gen 9.12–17).

Another story that holds God’s justice and grace in tension also implies humans can and should do likewise.

Natalie, the CFO in a manufacturing firm, made a serious accounting error. It meant her company lost a crucial international contract. Because designing this contract had required a major investment of resources, the firm now faced the threat of liquidation. Instead of being fired, however, the owner/CEO gave her a second chance.

A week later, Natalie’s junior colleague called Matt made the mistake of double-booking one of the company’s meeting rooms. Although his error was much less consequential, Natalie humiliated him in front of the team and refused to let him correct his mistake. When some team members reported Matt’s treatment to the CEO, her empathy for Natalie turned to indignation; she called her into her office and fired her.

As some of you may recognise, I am here retelling (in contemporary and simplified form) Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18.21–35), noted in Part One. Probably the most important parable for our ‘just grace’ theme, it tells of a servant who, having been forgiven a huge debt, refuses to show mercy to a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller amount. It ends with a warning about how God will treat those who refuse to show towards others the forgiveness they have received from God.

Space allows only two brief points about this parable. First is the amazing grace of the master in forgiving the servant’s debt. This would have struck



The Unmerciful Servant (1556)
Jan van Hemessen
Photo: Wikimedia

the parable's original audience, given the scale of the sums involved. The servant's debt of 10,000 talents amounted to about 20 years of a labourer's wages. It was way bigger than the debt the servant was owed, which was only 100 denarii – around 100 days of labour. The implication is clear: the greatness of God's forgiveness towards human beings, due to the magnitude of their sin, should make them ready and willing to forgive those whose wrongs against them may feel substantial but are comparatively tiny.

Second is the eventual fate of the servant – he is thrown in jail. It is a tragic and arresting picture of what happens to people who refuse to unequivocally forgive someone who has wronged them – they become spiritually, emotionally and relationally imprisoned.

We may well have witnessed such imprisonment. As a result of a wrong committed by a fellow team member, a colleague becomes hypercritical of that person, and negatively disposed towards them. Having once done wrong, that team member can now do no right. Regardless of the harm such negativity inflicts on the perpetrator, the harm the victim brings

on themselves through their lack of forgiveness is generally much greater than the harm done to them by the perpetrator. It is as if their bitterness and resentment eat away at their soul and extinguish their spark. They are in a dungeon of their own making.


Leaders who find themselves in this situation generally end up using the dungeon of their dungeon to imprison others. We can find plenty of evidence of this in world affairs today. It is made all the more alarming because the rise of totalitarian regimes (whether fascist or communist) has generally been based on widespread resentment whipped up by leaders set on 'taking revenge' against real or imagined enemies.

All this stands in contrast to the generous and unconditional forgiveness the Bible demands. That demand stems from the notion of a God who loves humans as a parent loves a child. The Hebrew word translated as mercy (*rachamim*) is the plural form of the word for womb (*racham*). It implies a rebirth – a new beginning. A wonderful example of its use occurs towards the end of the epic tale of Joseph. He says to his brothers who had sold him into slavery: 'You intended to harm me but God intended it for good' (Gen

50.20). That statement has the ring of just grace about it. It recognises the wrong committed but it simultaneously nullifies generations of sibling rivalry.

Forgiveness is, then, the only way to live with past wrong without being imprisoned by it. It is so difficult precisely because it conflicts with our innate sense of what is just. As wrong has been committed against us as individuals or against a group we belong to, we feel it should be avenged. Forgiveness can feel like a personal and collective betrayal. It is necessary, however, because we also have a God-breathed ability to exercise grace. That gives us a duty to both the future and the past.

According to another ancient rabbinic parable, God contemplated creating the world based solely on grace but decided this would lead to too much sin. Then he considered basing the world only on justice but then recognised the need also for grace to enable the world to endure, so he created it with justice and grace (Genesis Rabbah 12:15).

The concept of just grace gives us an ancient but still effective tool to consider forgiveness and accountability at work. Join us in this life-changing and culture-forming enterprise! 



Dr Peter S Heslam is Director of Faith in Business and a Fellow of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology, Cambridge (peter.heslam@cantab.net)