Just Grace: Forgiveness and Accountability at Work (Part 3)

*In this article, Peter Heslam provides the third part of his series on the theme **Just Grace: Forgiveness and Accountability at Work.** In Part One and Part Two of this series, he addressed the rise of a toxic culture of blame from a biblical and practical perspective. Here, in Part Three, he uses a case study to consider the moral and theological significance of apology.*

Miriam and Luke are product managers for a large pharmaceutical company, where they lead rival teams. One day, Miriam witnesses Luke speaking overly harsh and demeaning words to Anabelle, one of the interns, after she made a mistake. Miriam is worried that although Luke's words cannot be considered abuse, they will have negative impacts on Annabelle and her fellow interns. Miriam tells a colleague and friend called Hetty about the altercation as they chat over lunch in the canteen. Miriam assumes Hetty will keep this confidential, but Hetty lets slip in a conversation with Luke that she knows about it. Luke denies that the incident ever occurred and tells Hetty how hurt and offended he is by Miriam's allegation. He will not forgive her, he says, unless Miriam issues an apology.

The resulting tension between Luke and Miriam affects the functioning of their teams and reduces their productivity. Observing this, Hetty suggests to Miriam that she apologise to Luke for having made up the altercation story. Although Miriam is sure her story is true, as she witnessed the incident with her own eyes, the offer of forgiveness and the prospect of workplace peace and unity are so compelling that she offers Luke a full and heartfelt apology for her words and actions.

Luke refuses, however, to accept this apology. He insists Miriam explicitly admits she was lying about the incident, as it never happened. Miriam knows she cannot make this admission – she would be lying to say that she had been lying. But she reiterates her remorse and her unconditional apology.

The deadlock continues. The Group Product Manager is aware of the situation but thinks it is petty, that the two product managers will eventually settle down, and decides not to intervene. Luke increasingly gives vent to his feelings of victimhood and of his resentment against Miriam. He takes every opportunity, in his words to Miriam (and to other people about Miriam) to express negativity and disapproval towards her. Miriam thinks that why Luke will only accept her apology if she admits to lying is because he is so embarrassed about his ill-tempered words to Anabelle, and so fearful for his reputation. By holding her accountable, rather than himself, he shifts both blame and shame away from himself. Miriam responds by trying to be gracious towards Luke, hoping he will eventually forgive her without her having to admit that she had lied.

As noted at the start of this series on Forgiveness and Accountability, the demand and provision of apology have become commonplace in the world of work and in public life more generally. In this context, the case study raises two pertinent issues about apology that bear consideration from a moral and theological perspective.

The first is the nature of apology. Luke rejects Miriam's full, heartfelt and unconditional apology as disingenuous. As a frequent user of public transport, I often hear workplace apologies like this:

> *The train to Peterborough is delayed by approximately 45 minutes, due to its late departure from London King's Cross. Thameslink apologises for any inconvenience caused.*

Especially when I am dependent on one train arriving on time so as not to miss a connection later in my journey, I sometimes find myself wishing for a more robust apology. For all I know, the train was late setting off from London because the driver overslept. Could a more specific and convincing reason for the delay not have been provided (other than the proverbial 'inclement weather', or 'leaves on the line')? And would not transport apologies be more genuine if they apologised for 'the (rather than 'any') inconvenience caused'?

Apologies from institutions for historical wrongs committed by a generation of people long dead may also sound hollow in the ears of their intended recipients.

Nevertheless, for a purported perpetrator to have to admit, in making an apology, to something of which they are innocent makes a mockery of accountability and constitutes an abuse of power. Miriam is genuinely sorry for the hurt and upset she has caused and longs for Luke's forgiveness and for the easing of tension between them and their teams. But Luke is adamant that his condition first needs to be met. He is thereby prioritising his right to victimhood over Miriam's right to maintain her integrity.

The second issue is whether an apology – whether acceptable or not – is a prerequisite for forgiveness. Some Christians quote these verses in defence of their unwillingness to forgive unless a perpetrator provides an (acceptable) apology to the victim:

> *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1.8-9, NRSVA).*

Unconditional forgiveness
Photo: betterhelp.com/

These words, it should be noted, are about relations between humans and God, rather than relations between humans. More importantly, Jesus' words and actions never make forgiveness between human beings conditional on any apologies. The Lord's Prayer, for instance, does not say 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who apologise for their sins against us' (Mt 6.9-13). Indeed, Jesus prayed for forgiveness for his (unrepentant) persecutors and executioners (Lk 23.34). Also, the oft-repeated teaching of Jesus that unless we forgive others, our heavenly father will not forgive us includes no exceptions or conditions (see, for example, Mt 6.14-15, which immediately follows the Lord's Prayer).

In fact, it is only after witnessing God's acceptance and grace in Jesus that some transgressors show what appear to be signs of remorse, such as in the case of Zaccheus (Lk 19.1-10), Simon Peter (Lk 5.1-11), the Pharisees with the woman caught in adultery (John 8.2-11), Thomas (John 20.24-29), Paul (Acts 9.1-18), and one of the criminals and centurions at the crucifixion (Lk 23.39; Mk 15.39). In Jesus' command that we should forgive each other 'not seven times but seventy times seven' (Mt 18.22) there is no requirement that an apology precedes each of those 490 (ie countless) pardons.

Insofar as apologies demonstrate true remorse and humility, they can of course help a victim to forgive. As saying 'sorry' is generally difficult, it is disarming to hear and makes forgiveness and reconciliation more likely. It is a healthy sign that the perpetrator understands the importance of holding oneself accountable to the victim. But as far as the plain teaching of scripture is concerned, genuine forgiveness is unconditional, rather than dependent on an apology.

Returning to the case study by way of conclusion, Miriam is in a real predicament. She is genuinely sorry for having discussed Luke's abuse with Hetty, rather than confronting him with it directly. She also laments upsetting Luke and, consequently, workplace relations. She can, in addition, be commended for finding the courage to make an apology, even though Luke's demand for an apology - let alone his demand that it contained an admission of lying - was misplaced and misguided. She is prepared to assume the role of the perpetrator, even though the person claiming to be the victim (Luke) is actually the original perpetrator. Miriam's predicament continues, with no sign of a resolution. But as the saying goes, 'it is better to fail in a cause that will ultimately succeed [grace and generosity] than to succeed in a cause that will ultimately fail [victimhood and vengeance]'[1]. My hope is that Faith in Business' engagement with the theme of just grace will encourage many of those who think they are failing to see how in following Jesus they will ultimately succeed.

1. Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Speech in Syracuse, New York State, USA, 12th September 1912.

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