



Matthew 25 Gathering 2017: Anglican Justice and Mercy Contending for Shalom

David Hanke – September 29, 2017

“How many times do I have to forgive?”

That’s the kind of question we ask when we treat faith as a box of obligations that we can dispose of once we accomplish all the things in the box. That kind of religious question signals that we’re most interested in fulfilling the letter of the law and then proceeding on to the things we really want to do.

It’s the kind of question I receive at the dinner table with my kids when they’re served something they no longer want to eat, and they ask, “How many bites do I have to have until I can have dessert? Is it two? Twelve? How many are we going to do here so I can do what I really want to do?”

Or it’s like those questions youth pastors get: “When I’m making out with my girlfriend, how far can I go with her? How much can I touch, and where do the feet belong? What can I get away with there?”

Or the question pastors get: “When I give, do I need to give off the net or the gross of my income?” which often means, “What sort of number is going to get God off my back so that I can get to the stuff I really want to do with my money?”

“How many times do I have to forgive?” we ask. “How many times do I have to go through this cycle of her sinning and me forgiving her? When can I transition to her sinning and me getting bitter, or her sinning and me reminding her every Thanksgiving for the next twenty years of what she did back in ‘78 because I haven’t forgotten it yet? How many times do I have to forgive?”

The question might sound sterile—“Just give me a number. How many times?”

It might sound like a question of religious obligation—“How many times do I *have* to?”

And it might sound cold, as if it’s only concerned with the letter of the law—“How many times do I have to forgive?”

But if you’ve been hurt, if you’re someone who has been wronged again and again, if you’ve been the punch line of someone’s joke and you got embarrassed again (“I have to forgive them?”), if someone took your idea and called it their own again, if someone told you they would not drink that or go there or watch that and they did it again and again, if you’ve been lied to or betrayed or deceived or embarrassed again. Well, then that question sounds a whole lot more like

the way Peter actually asks it: “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him?” (Matt. 18:21).

It’s not sterile if you’ve been hurt or wronged again and again. Peter offers the number seven as a possible response, perhaps hoping Jesus might round down to five, because seven is a lot.

“I forgive you for being harsh in your anger. I forgive you for being harsh in your anger. I forgive you for being harsh in your anger. I forgive you for being harsh in your anger. I forgive you for being harsh in your anger. I forgive you for being harsh in your anger. I forgive you for being harsh in your anger. I forgive you for being harsh in your anger.” It gets hard after one.

“Seven times, Jesus?”

“No. Seventy-seven.”

I hope you’re not expecting me to go through seventy-seven of those. You probably can recognize what Jesus intended with that number: he intended us to be people who forgive.

Period. Followers of Jesus forgive. We forgive, and we forgive, and we forgive.

The problem with religion is that it seeks out this box of obligation for the sake of being released to self-sufficiency, self-actualization, selfishness. “Just tell me what I have to do so I can get on to what I really want to do”—that’s the problem with religion.

Judah had a big problem with religion around 600 BCE. If you remember your church history, you'll recall that it was in 587 BCE that Babylon rolled in, destroyed Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple. In 600 BCE, the kingdom still has about thirteen years left, but they have a significant problem with religion. Their problem is that they have this temple, and they have this scriptural history that says God has made irrevocable promises to them that as long as they can see that temple, God will be with them. God has guaranteed that if they can walk around the city and have the temple in their sights, nothing can touch them. They thus believe that as long as they can work things out so they can see the temple, it won't matter what they do or how they treat people. "Yep," they think, "The temple is still there. God is still on his throne. We're going to be okay."

They would sing about this in Psalm 132, that God has made his presence there. They remembered this great promise God made to King David, and they held on to it with a death grip. "As long as we can see this building," they convinced themselves, "We're going to be all right."

At that time, they were very preoccupied with the activities of what we would call the *cult*—they were concerned with what you say, how you say it, what you do with your body, but they had very little concern with the rest of their actions. They were much more concerned with the right words than they were with the ethical demands of the covenant or what God expected of God's people. They just figured God would always be there. That's the way religious people act.

In response to this, Jeremiah notes that having the right words said at the right time in the right place is what in the vernacular of 2017 we would call *empty superstition*. He says, "Do not trust

in deceptive words and say, ‘The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’” (Jer. 7:4). Don’t make religion about incantations.

Eugene Peterson writes that standing in a church and saying or singing the right words doesn’t make you holy any more than standing in a barn and neighing makes you a horse.¹ That’s actually really helpful to me. That I can understand.

And so it was a religious problem for Judah. They were treating people badly and then coming to church and expecting God not to care.

Jeremiah is a good prophet, one who felt deeply the words he would say. Jeremiah was also a courageous prophet, like many of you, and he stationed himself in the place where everybody would have to hear, where things could go badly if they disagreed. You can read this story in Jeremiah chapter 26. At the end of that chapter, Jeremiah almost gets lynched.

Indeed, he knows that people won’t like what he’s going to say. He gives them a command. He gives them a warning. He tells them, “Amend your ways and your deeds...Don’t trust in deceptive words” (Jer. 7:4). He’s not talking here about showing greater sincerity in worship or piety or having sounder doctrine. This is what he says in Jeremiah 7:5–7:

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed

¹ Peterson, *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 66.

innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this [land that I gave to you].

He encourages them to do the work each of *you* are doing, to look out for those who are forgotten (as we've heard several times, the least, the lost, the last), to speak out when violence is done against the innocent, to call attention to self-destructive hankering after false gods—money, power, wealth, prestige. In other words, Jeremiah calls on them to look out for those who are not being looked out for; he calls on them to do the work that you, today, are already doing:

Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are delivered!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD. (Jer. 7:8–11)

Quite simply, they would do a daily round of breaking the big Ten (Jeremiah lists out commandments six, seven, eight, and nine), and then every weekend they would flock to the temple to claim protection of God over themselves and over their city, all while having ignored the things they've done all week, the ways they've turned it into a den of robbers.

If you've read any Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys in your life, you know what the den of robbers is for. It's where the bandits hide out when they're done pillaging, when they're done harming all

of the people around them. It's where they feel safe and have total disregard for all that they have done during the week. And Jeremiah essentially says, "That doesn't work. You've come to a place where God is one who loves you and wants to change and transform you, but God's not safe. God sees you, and God longs to change you."

These are sincere religious problems, presuming upon God's kindness, assuming God does not care how we act, forgetting about those whom God most watches out for, and not using our resources and platform and leverage to serve those people. It was a problem in 600 BCE, and we know it's a problem for the church today. It's one of the reasons we gather to be strengthened in grace for the work we've been given to do. The problem of religion is that it seeks this box of obligation so we can get on to what we really want.

As we leave, I want to give you the challenge of grace. The challenge of grace is that it actually wants to metastasize into every square inch of our soul. What grace demands is coherence. Grace demands transformation. Grace demands we be the kinds of people who realize we have been forgiven much so we will forgive much. Grace demands that we be the kinds of people who love because we have been loved.

Grace demands that we look for those who are lost and forgotten and at the margins because one who saw us lost and forgotten on the margins found us. That is the work to which we have been released. It's the work you do. We are grace because grace metastasized its way into every square inch of our souls. So you will go back to the work God has given you to do as metastasized grace and as people who forgive.

One of the things I love in the stories you've told is that you have done so much work to understand what you've been forgiven. It's the way you can do the work you do. You've worked to understand how God has set you free, and you've worked to be able to articulate that story. "This is what God is doing to transform and change me," you say.

But with great compassion, as a pastor and a fellow pastor to many of you, I know you go back to work where you will have to forgive people a lot. You will have to forgive the people you serve for not doing what they said they would do, for taking you for granted, for saying things that hurt your feelings, for saying things that are just wrong. You will have to forgive over and over again.

You will have to forgive families, *your* family, *their* families, families that have let them down, dads and moms who have been awful, brothers and sisters who have not been careful.

You will have to forgive.

You will have to forgive government leaders who don't cooperate, who don't give you the permits you need, who don't release funding for good, good work.

You will have to forgive church leaders who are maxed out and sometimes don't seem to see the work you're doing. You will have to forgive church leaders who can't be every place you need them to be and can't support you in all the ways you want.

You will forgive your coworkers. You will forgive the people you don't know. You will forgive strangers.

You will forgive over and over again, and some days you will ask at the end, "How long will my brother or sister sin against me and I forgive?" So go into the world as metastasized grace, people who forgive in the work you do, and in that way you will bring the light of Christ to dark places, and you will be grace to people who long for it. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.