

# **MAKE GRACE YOUR WAY OF LIFE**

**Third Sunday in Lent  
4<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

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Terry is an angry housewife. She is incensed because her husband has run off with his secretary to live in Sweden. Terry is left with four teenage daughters whose relationships become complicated and rather dysfunctional largely because of the rage their mother holds against her unfaithful husband.

Indeed, Terry receives some satisfaction as her daughters too, agree with her as they comment: “we hate him too”. The reality of a husband and a father abandoning his wife and daughters for another woman is unbearable.

The movie, released in 2005, called The Upside of Anger and starring Joan Allen together with Kevin Kostner, is, perhaps more relevant now than ever.

Terry takes solace in her whacky neighbour, Denny, who is a retired big league baseball player-come-radio host. Their liaisons are characterised by heavy drinking and eventually sexual relationships as Denny moves in to live with Terry. Here the hapless Terry tries to drown her sorrows over being jilted by her husband.

But there’s a twist in the story. And here there is a spoiler alert because I am going to reveal the ending of the movie. Before Terry’s husband disappeared, he and Denny were planning to work on a development at the rear of their properties. Now, after some time, Denny decides to explore the land on which a new subdivision was to be built. And here he uncovers an old well.

When Denny peers inside this concealed space what does he see? He identifies the body of a middle-aged man. And, you guessed it, its Terry’s husband, Grey. While having been accused of running-off to Sweden in the middle of the night with his secretary, Grey had, in fact, tripped and fallen into this well while walking the dog!

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Grey hadn't run-off with his secretary as Terry believed. Rather, Grey's life came to a sudden, tragic end one summer's evening right at the back of their home. Terry, in her haste to take it out on others, had jumped to conclusions about her husband.

Friends, here Terry made a choice. The choice was to accuse Grey of treachery. The choice was to claim Grey walked out on her, that he and destroyed their family as the father left his girls for another woman.

Moreover, Terry used this as an opportunity to reveal her own feelings of resentment, enmity and distrust. And in doing so, this sad lady submerges herself into a life of heavy drinking, jealous rage and deep-set anger.

In doing so, Terry almost ruins her life and the lives of those closest to her. The movie ends as Terry weeps over her folly, as Terry cries over what amounts to her real losses and her absolute stupidity.



Friends, Terry made choices. She passed judgment and demonstrated what she believed to be a justified, righteous anger. And not only was Terry wrong, she creates a hell on earth for herself and others.

Jesus spoke in parables and today we encounter the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. It's a rather confronting story as a king cancels the debt of one of his servants only to see that servant refuses to show the same kind of mercy to others who are in his debt. The outcome is tragic as the servant in question ends up in a kind of hell being tortured mercy-less until he is able to repay all that he owes.

Parables are important tools to get across a message. And what's paramount here is not all the fine and often sordid details. Rather, what matters is the bottom line. What's significant is the overall point Jesus wants to make.

Take the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, commonly known as the Parable of Lazarus and the Dives, for instance. I am not convinced Jesus is suggesting rich people, after they die, end up in the fires of hell.

Rather, the point of the story is that God's ways are different to the ways of this world. The bottom line is, that in God's scheme of things, Lazarus is the rich man's equal.

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Moreover, in God's righteous order, the rich man is subject to God's justice as the poor beggar shares joyously in all the riches God has to offer.

So it is with today's parable. The slave who is relieved of his immense debt by the king and who then fails to do likewise towards another who is in his debt, is not a story about God torturing the bad in hell for eternity. Rather, it's a story about the choices people make in life – and, most importantly, the consequences of those choices.

In our example today, Terry makes a choice. She decides to pursue life with a self-seeking, justifiable anger. Here Terry puts the blame on her husband for his sudden disappearance. Here Terry makes judgements and throws what amounts to be righteous hand grenades in a sad scenario that leaves Terry without a partner and her daughters without a father.

Like the slave who fails to forgive in Jesus' parable, Terry cannot let go of the obligations she believes she is owed. Terry cannot envision a debt-free world where those who trespass against her are forgiven. Terry cannot embrace a world where hurts committed against her are released and where those who do the hurting are not written off.

In Terry's case she continues to harbour a grudge, Terry expresses constant, righteous anger over what her husband, Grey, was supposed to have done.

In the parable of the Unforgiving Servant there are real similarities here. The slave whose debt has been cancelled by the king, seeks pure revenge as he tries to extract every last cent out of the fellow who owes him.



In both stories there are two approaches to life at stake here. There is the approach that says we have every right to extract what others owe us. There is a principle which says if you hurt me then I am justified, indeed compelled to hurt you. There is an entitlement that says I am to pluck your eye out if you pluck out mine.

Such an approach focuses on the debts others owe us and on our right to exercise revenge.

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Then, there is another approach to life. This approach says the debts of the past, the things that we believe others owe us - and the need extract some kind of vengeance - no longer should preoccupy us. What's important here is that we learn how to cancel debts, what's urgent here that we release ourselves from the need for retaliation. What's critical here is that we distance ourselves from a "quid pro quo", "eye-for-eye" attitude to life.

Here we encounter the matter of forgiveness and priority of simply moving on.

For you see, to forgive is to not simply let the other person off the hook. Rather, forgiveness and the act of cancelling debts involves letting go the thing that person has done to us. The act of forgiving releases and sends away those things that continue hurt and haunt us. And this means we are no longer under the control of that past act.

Such an approach leads to a life of freedom, opportunity and new growth.

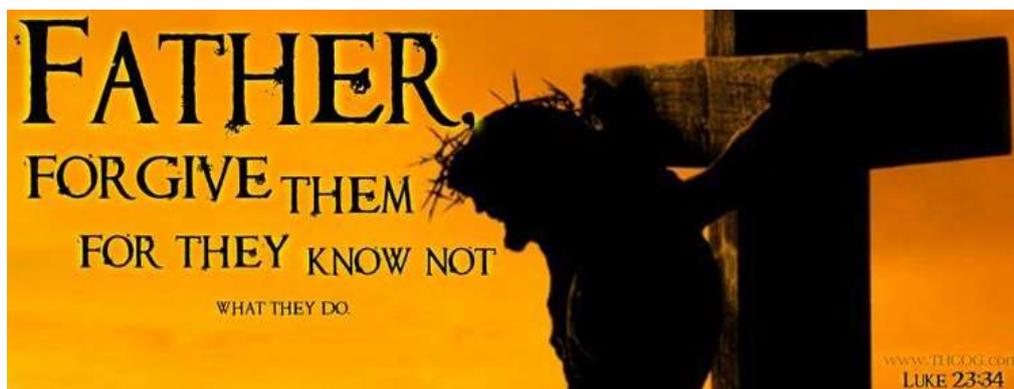
This is in such contrast to the first approach which involves a constant, downward spiral where revenge, bitterness and the urge to settle scores ultimately leads to a dead-end. Here there is simply more anger and there is more hurt. This is what Jesus meant, I believe, when he refers to the unforgiving slave being left in a state of torture.

Now, this may seem a fairly reasonable argument in most cases. But what about the person who has been badly abused or has suffered terrible pain, hurt and distress? Are they to forgive their abusers? Are they to cancel the debts of those bodies and institutions under whose watch and responsibility such things took place? Should these bodies and these institutions be let off the hook?

I am certain such abusers and I am sure such institutions, whether they be government, community or church, are never meant to simply get away with it. And here I am thinking of the recent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. This is a massive question and I believe we can learn more about such an issue from Jesus.

When Jesus was arrested, tortured and sentenced to death there was a lot at stake. Many people were responsible for his subsequent pain and suffering. There were the Romans, the Pharisees and the bystanders who inflamed the situation by demanding blood.

But, what do we see happen as Jesus goes to the cross? We see a man who cries out from that cross with the words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."



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Now, we have to be careful here. In these words Jesus is not denying the reality of what is happening to him. Jesus' pain and suffering were real, very real. And the wrongdoing that is taking place here is never denied. It is never swept under the carpet. Indeed, every Easter we acknowledge this.

And so it is with those who suffer from the hurts and the abuses of others. God is not saying we should deny such evil acts. Christian faith never says such terrible things should be concealed or hidden under the carpet. The way of Jesus never advocates that the abusers and their crimes should not be held accountable!

But what Jesus is saying in those words of forgiveness from the cross is that we should never get caught up in that chain of indebtedness that seeks revenge, lays constant blame and longs to settle scores at any cost.

Here Jesus chooses the approach that sets him free from such bondage. Jesus embraces the option that releases him from what would otherwise consume our Lord in a rage of anger, violence and hatred. Jesus frees himself from that journey that would take him down to the level of his accusers and his executioners. And this would lead to a simple dead-end in life!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what is really being highlighted here is the centrality of God's grace. For God's grace, that gift of unconditional, unmerited love says we don't have to seek revenge, we don't have to devour our lives in settling old scores, extracting an "eye for an eye" or simply firing angry darts with the intention of avenging those who have wronged us.

It's no doubt true that the wrongdoings of others and the hurts perpetuated have impacted on our lives. Indeed they may have brought about major changes creating significant disadvantages and set-backs.

But the gift of God's grace says this grace is sufficient for all our needs. We don't have to seek revenge. We don't need to hate. There is no point seeking reprisals, demanding payback or "giving as good as one gets". God's grace puts an end to all this.



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But remember, abandoning God's grace is fraught with danger. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant warns us here.

For you see, to live outside a state of grace, to pursue those things in life where debts are pursued and where the need for vengeance and reprisals determine our outlook, leads us nowhere. We end up like that poor, pathetic slave stuck in a state torture and torment.

Indeed, we end up identifying ourselves with poor Terry whose distrust and bitterness blinds her, whose anger consumes her.

Friends, living in a state of grace raises new priorities. And these priorities call for the cancelling of debts and the need for forgiveness. These concerns call for the opening of our lives to others in the same way God has opened himself to us in a love that is immensely generous and truly unconditional.

Living in a state of grace means offering that unconditional love to others just as God, in God's unconditional love, has cancelled our debts and given us a new start in life.

So, friends, be open and generous to others. Be loving and gracious to those with whom you share your lives. Learn how to forgive and to let go. Don't seek retribution. Don't count up the trespasses of those who sin against you.

Just love – and make grace your way of life!

For this is what God requires of you today and always.

Amen.

