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Leniency

This month we had news of yet another scheme from the Crime and Law agencies in the UK about postponing punishment, and if the perpetrator behaves then the punishment can be cancelled altogether. Although this has come to the fore recently, this isn't actually new. You only have to look at newspaper articles such as that in the *Guardian* newspaper on 14th February 2020 and carrying the headline: '*Durham's pioneering police scheme slashes reoffending rates*'. Unfortunately research has shown that it didn't actually slash reoffending rates.



It is said that you cannot completely understand the true enormity of grace, forgiveness and leniency until you really understand justice and judgment.

When we act wrongly we hurt others and so avoiding punishment can actually be inappropriately hurtful to others. Therefore, leniency in our world has to be a balance between undoing and putting right the hurt to others and reducing the punishment that should rightly be ours.

Corrie ten Boom was born in the Netherlands. In World War II, she and her family hid and helped hundreds of Jews protecting them from arrest by Nazi authorities. Betrayed by a fellow Dutch citizen, the entire family was imprisoned and sent to concentration camp where they died but Corrie survived.

Unexpectedly, after the war, she encountered one of the guards from the Nazi concentration camp. She said afterwards:

*Even as the angry vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.... Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.... And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, **but on His**. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives along with the command, the love itself.*

The truth is that only God himself is perfect and we, as human beings are constantly doing the wrong things. If God is perfect and we are the ones constantly making mistakes then the scales of justice are always showing that, overall, we are the ones in the wrong and we can never be perfect through our own hands and minds.

That means that we are the ones that should be punished, but if we believe in Jesus Christ we can receive forgiveness and mercy. Receiving forgiveness doesn't mean we get away with anything and everything. However, Jesus Christ has taken our punishment in our

place and so if we believe in him then, whilst God can still ask of us to do things to help, to cure and to put things right, nonetheless we can receive forgiveness before God. Forgiveness is never saying that what happened was ever right at all as Corrie ten Boom realised. It is, however forgiving those involved and not even always getting to the truth of what actually happened.

St Paul wrote, in the letter to the Romans at chapter 7 at verse 21, that he wanted to do good but kept on getting things wrong:

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So if even St Paul, who is a really good person and a Saint, keeps getting it wrong then who are we to suggest that we are better than St Paul? If even St Paul constantly needs the forgiveness given by Jesus Christ then so does every one of us. This means that all of us need to constantly repent of the wrong we do and receive the forgiveness that Jesus Christ freely gives to every one of us. What matters is the recognition that we are imperfect and realising the value of forgiveness in Jesus Christ.



In *Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo, we see an image of leniency and forgiveness. After being released from prison after nineteen years, Jean Valjean is trying to lead a new life but is still tempted by theft and concealment. When the Bishop shows kindness towards him by giving him dinner and a room for the night, Valjean is overwhelmed by such kindness, but is still unable to prevent himself from stealing the Bishop's silver candlesticks and running away during the night. When he is then caught and brought back by the police, the Bishop exclaims that the candlesticks were a gift to Valjean, and that the police should let him go. The candlesticks tell us of the incredible mercy shown to Valjean by the Bishop. There was no raw justice and Valjean could have simply been taken away and punished again in prison, but the Bishop showed leniency and forgiveness.

St Paul wrote in Romans chapter 6 that we cannot keep on doing wrong just because we receive forgiveness, real leniency.

¹What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so

that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹²Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Greg Olsen wrote in 2004:

The prophet Isaiah gave hope and comfort to all who have stumbled and made mistakes when he revealed these words from the Lord: "...Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isaiah 1:18)

With a broken heart and a contrite spirit, we can receive forgiveness and learn from our mistakes. Part of what we may learn in the process is that happiness comes not only from receiving forgiveness, but also from giving it to others who equally might not deserve it!



It was Greg Olsen who made the picture above.

Forgiveness, real leniency and mercy, is available to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ, indeed Christianity is about forgiveness of what we do wrong.

In the Christian view we are not perfect people, none of us, and do not always get everything right. That is what makes Christianity so accessible to everyone because it offers forgiveness for getting things wrong. In fact it offers anyone forgiveness no matter who we are and all it takes is belief in Jesus Christ.

Right at the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis chapter 1 at verse 27 we are told:

*So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God He created them;
male and female He created them.*

That fundamental concept, that we are all created in God's image, is then used throughout the Bible. If we are all created in God's image then we are all equal and all equally valuable. It is not that only important people get forgiveness and leniency – but everyone.

God's caring love for us isn't just in the New Testament but even right at the beginning in creation have you ever noticed that when God has to expel Adam and Eve from out of the

Garden of Eden it is then that God gives them each a coat to keep them warm? That is how much God cares for each of us – God cares for us, all of us, always.

In John gospel at Chapter 3 Jesus relates the coming crucifixion to his own raising up. As it says in John's gospel:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

God's righteousness cannot allow evil and yet at the same time God also provides healing for anyone if they simply looked upon the image of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (representing their wrong-doing). So it is that the resurrection happened on the third day to prove the forgiveness available to each one of us. There is no small print or complications: All that any of us has to do is to believe completely in Jesus Christ.

The forgiveness also asks for our repentance, yet that forgiveness is available to each of us. As St Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans at Chapter 7:

²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Any of us can receive forgiveness from God through our Saviour Jesus Christ – all we have to do is believe in him completely. “.... ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world....”

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