

Grace in an Unforgiving World

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 June 2019

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Hands up if you do think that the world is now a more unforgiving place. Whoa. Okay. And probably, yeah, so hands.

Okay. What about those who think that it's not a more unforgiving place? Okay. Slightly fewer.

Okay. I think the evidence is quite mixed, isn't it?

I don't know what you talked about. But on the one hand, I think the world, or at least Western society, has now become a more forgiving place when it comes to certain indiscretions.

So it used to be that back in the middle of last century, if you were alive then, if you were born, let's say, out of wedlock, that would have been a really shameful thing.

Likewise, if you were divorced, that was actually a social thing that was not, yeah, it was a bit of a taboo. The same was true, too, if some families were, if you were in a mixed marriage.

[1 : 09] Protestants marrying Roman Catholics were disapproved of. In fact, I visited a lady who taught me about, you know, from another church, but I went to visit her. She's in her 90s now.

She did say, yeah, her family was not happy. And so was marrying someone of a different race in certain families. So I think back then there were things that the world was not forgiving of.

But the world has seen a lot of change since then. Just take a few examples. The sexual revolution in the 1960s. Globalization in the 80s and 90s.

And so these things now are just not that big a deal anymore, particularly in the Western society.

But on the other hand, you have to say the world has become more unforgiving in other areas.

Nowadays, the worst thing you can be accused of is to be sexist or racist or homophobic or the like. Now, again, these may not be crimes in that you go to jail for it.

[2 : 14] But like the sins of the mid 20th century, if you are convicted in the eyes of society, then it's very limiting. Career limiting for a lot of people.

If you don't believe me, just witness what happened with a few political candidates at the recent federal elections. Some candidates, and they came from all political stripes, were caught making offensive remarks on social media.

They were deemed sexist, transphobic, racist, amongst other things. And there was actually great pressure for them to step down or to be disendorsed by the party.

And some of them were. And now you have to realize that actually, for some of them, these were not recent comments. Some of them, these comments were being dug up from five to ten years ago.

And for some of the candidates, they actually said, look, you know, I've actually changed my view since then. But that wasn't enough, was it? There was no forgiveness. Sorry wasn't enough.

[3 : 15] They had to go. And so, you have to ask, has the world become a more forgiving place? Well, with some things, yes. But with other things, I would say no.

I think what's happened is simply a reordering of sins. Some sins, like domestic violence or child abuse, have now jumped up to the top of the hierarchy.

These sins are now no longer forgivable. There's no way back from them for people who commit these things. They are ostracized from society.

While others, those that used to be unforgivable, have now dropped down the list. People may still think they're unacceptable, but they're willing to turn a blind eye to it.

Now, don't mishear me, please. I'm not arguing about whether these things are right or wrong. In many cases, I think we should be rightly horrified by things like abuse. But the problem is, we've so elevated certain sins that they've now become unforgivable.

[4 : 22] For those who commit them, there is actually no path back to redemption. Whereas, if you're enlightened enough not to commit any of these things, then you become so-called the

righteous elite.

You're able to sit in judgment of others. And so, I think it seems that in any given age, we always have things which we find unforgivable.

It's just which ones. And that all depends on what era you live in. Now, the other aspect of an unforgivable world, which I've got as my next point in the outline in the newsletter, is the presence of unattainable standards.

Now, again, there are many layers to this. So, for example, at the level of society, I think we've painted an unrealistic picture of what the ideal person should be.

They're young and glamorous. Savvy on social media. An influencer. I only recently learned that that's such a thing, you know. You can make a career out of being an influencer.

[5 : 31] They're up to date with the various social causes in the world. And then for women, there's even more pressure, isn't there, to look a certain way. And if you're a mom, to be a super mom.

You know, you can look after the kids, attend every school function, and then still be the CEO of some large corporate. Just flick through the in-flight magazine, if you don't believe me, next time you fly Qantas, and you'll see the type of people that they interview.

These are the people. The ideal person. Or troll through the articles of mamamia.com. Not that I've ever done that, but, you know, for those of you who know what kind of articles they are on there.

They're all meant to be inspirational, isn't it? To help you to be the better person that you're supposed to be. But I think a lot of times, the only thing that ends up is, is telling you how far short you fall, don't they?

You're just a stay-at-home mom. What a failure. You're a shop assistant at Kohl's, and that's your career. Don't you have an ambition to do better?

[6 : 38] And this sort of mentality happens in families too, right? Siblings being compared with each other, or children between families.

Why is so-and-so getting straight A's, and passing grade 8 in violin? And you aren't. And sometimes this gets so bad that parents would withhold affection and approval from their children so as to motivate them.

But all it does really, and some of you probably know exactly how it goes, all it does is demoralize you, don't they? They can't help but think that they are failures.

Have you ever felt like that? Whether as a husband or a wife, as a child, or among your family, friends, or colleagues? Have you ever felt like you're just not good enough for others?

You have been unable to attain to those standards, whatever they are? It's debilitating, isn't it? It makes you feel unloved, that you don't belong.

[7 : 39] You keep trying harder, but you know it's futile. Well, if that's what you've experienced, then the thing you need in this unforgiving world in life is grace.

The experience of grace is what will enable you to thrive, to live well, to more than survive in an unforgiving world. And so that's where we're going to spend our time today, reflecting on grace. And as Christians, we believe that this grace, first of all, comes from God. Because to be gracious, look next at the second part of the outline, to be gracious is part of God's nature.

That was God's own declaration in our first reading tonight, in Exodus chapter 34 and verse 5. Let me put it again on the screen for you. As God passed by Moses on the mountain, this is how he described himself.

He has, Now, if you aren't familiar with the context, God had just rescued his people, Israel, out of slavery from Egypt.

[8 : 56] And as they gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai in the Arabian Peninsula, God called Moses up to the mountain to give them the law. But the people soon grew bored waiting.

And so what they did was build an idol, a golden calf. And so God's anger burned against Israel. But after Moses pleaded, God forgives them.

And so now in this very passage, Moses is about to receive the law a second time. The thing is, unlike us, God actually knows what we're like.

God actually knows that the propensity of all humans is actually to fail. That by our nature, we fall short of his standards. That by default, we actually do wrong more than we do right.

Ever since the time of Adam and Eve, every single human being has stuffed up. And so God doesn't expect us to live up to his standards. In one sense, he knows that we will fall short of it.

[10:04] And yet, it grieves him that these standards aren't met. But God is still compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, and willing to forgive weakness and sin.

He does all this because that's who he is. That's his nature. He knows our default position is to fail, but even though he himself is perfect, he's gracious toward us.

Now, I have to say, that's very different from us, isn't it? Because, you know, just think of ourselves. We know that we're prone to mistakes, aren't we? Whether it's intentional or unintentional.

We know how imperfect we are. And yet, what do we often do? We're often impatient, aren't we, with other people's mistakes. Now, how often have we judged our failures and been unforgiving?

Now, I have to confess that as a parent, the number of times I say to my girls, how many times do I have to repeat myself, blah, blah, blah, before you get this right?

[11:11] Can't you get it right the first time? I'm ashamed to say how many times I've actually said that. And that's my propensity. Someone who's imperfect, doing that to my children.

Who am I supposed to say that I do love very much? And yet, God doesn't do that with us, does He? He knows that I'm going to stuff up like Israel, that I can't help myself.

And what He does is He shows compassion. He forgives when He has every right not to. Psalm 103 verses 13 and 14 puts it so well.

He says, As the Father has compassion on His children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He knows how we are formed.

He remembers that we are dust. So being gracious is part of God's nature. But you may well say, Well, of course it's easy for God to do that.

[12:11] I mean, He's rich and powerful. You know, He has the means to do so. It's rather like saying Bill and Melinda Gates, you know, one of the richest couples in the world. Of course they can afford to be generous.

What's it to them to give a few million dollars here and there away? They wouldn't even miss it. Now, I think Bill and Melinda have actually said that they're going to give most of their wealth away before they die.

They've got 100 billion at the moment. But you know, even if they gave 99% of 100 billion dollars away, do you know how much that would still leave them? A hundred million.

So you might think, Isn't that the same with God? He can afford to be gracious, can't He? Because it costs Him nothing. Well, actually you're wrong.

Because when you look at what He's done, that's not true at all. God's grace actually cost Him dearly. God's grace cost Him His Son.

[13:13] And what is true of the Father is equally true of the Son as well. Because Jesus, God's Son, didn't come into this world with pomp and ceremony. He didn't live in power or luxury, but He was the Son of a humble carpenter.

As He walked the earth, the religious elite despised and rejected Him. He was numbered with the sinners, with prostitutes, with tax collectors, scum of the earth.

And then, He was betrayed even by His friends. Judas, one of His disciples, disowned by Peter, one of His favorites.

And then, as we see in our Luke reading tonight, He was led away to be crucified, even though He was totally innocent. He was so badly beaten and flogged that He couldn't even carry His own cross to the hill.

And then, as He hung there, you know, His entire body weight, pressing on maybe three or four nails. He was probably naked. At most, He had a loincloth around His waist.

[14:26] You know, I don't know how shameful that would have felt. What does He say then? Verse 33 of chapter 23, verse 34 of chapter 23, which I've got on the slide.

He says this, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing. Friends, I can only think that someone is capable of doing this only because they are gracious by nature.

Jesus, you see, is just like His Father. After all, someone has gone through like this. No one does this to look good. No one does this to make a point.

You can only do something like this because that's just who you are. That's your nature. That's why the Apostle John could say of Jesus that he saw His glory and it was full of grace and truth.

Now, when you've been wronged or betrayed, when you've been made use of, put down unfairly, I wonder, do you think you'd be up to that same grace as Jesus did to ask His Father to forgive them because they didn't know what they were doing?

[15 : 52] In fact, I think that's rather a generous interpretation, don't you think? You know, I would have thought that Pilate and the Jewish leaders and everyone else knew exactly what they were doing. They had been plotting and scheming for months.

They were jealous of Jesus. They didn't like that He exposed their flaws. They knew what they were doing, all right? And they knew that what they needed to do was shut Him up so that they could keep on living their own way.

But no, Jesus was just like His Father. He knew that the default position of humans is to stuff up. He knew that they were blinded by their own pride so that they didn't even know that they were stuffing up.

But of course, all this grace from the Father and the Son is well and good, but it actually creates a problem for God. And the problem is this.

When you forgive someone or show grace, what you do is you leave a wrong unpunished. No restitution is paid. No wrong is put right.

[17 : 04] It's the difference, isn't it, between requiring a debt to be repaid and forgiving it. Likewise, when God forgives sin, wrong goes unpunished.

There is no payment, no justice. So for example, if someone lies and the one that is lied to suffered, then forgiving the liar means that the one who has suffered wrong has been unfairly treated.

And the greater the offense, then the greater the forgiving, the greater injustice occurs when there is forgiving.

And it actually creates a greater problem for God because justice, just like grace, is also part of God's nature. Remember that declaration he made of himself back in Exodus?

So let's put it back up again. The last part of verse 7 actually says this. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

[18 : 05] If God is worth his salt, he needs to be just, doesn't he? Otherwise, why bother, why do we bother seeking to do good? If God just turns a blind eye to injustice, if he doesn't care to be fair, then why do we even call him God in the first place?

But again, that's where what the Son did on the cross enables both God to be gracious and just because there was just punishment, only it fell on Jesus instead of any of us.

So the prophet Isaiah can say, we all like sheep have gone astray and stop singing the Colin Buchanan song, please. Each of us has turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity or sin of us all.

And so grace is shown by God in such a way that it's still consistent with his justice. That's why it's costly grace because God paid for our sins himself through the sacrifice of his son Jesus on the cross.

Or as Paul so neatly puts it in Romans, which I've again got on the slide. It's a rather long passage but let me read some of it. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

[19 : 31] God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness or his justice because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.

He did this to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

This then is essentially the amazing offer of God's grace to us that through faith in Jesus we are no longer measured by what we've done or who we are.

Instead our entire lives every moment of our days every step we take in this life is now marked by his grace over our lives. I've been a Christian now for many years but even today I cannot tell you how much freedom this grace of God gives me in my life.

Because I know God's grace and the love that flows from it I don't ever have to live life worrying about whether I'm good enough or not. Do I still get upset when people criticize me unfairly?

[20 : 46] Of course. But then I remember God's grace and I realize I don't have to measure up to other people's expectations of me. I don't need the approval of the world.

No, I have God. If I stuff up despite saying sorry people don't forgive me well it hurts but I can take comfort that God forgives me.

And the grace of God works the other way for me too because I'm so humbled by God's grace for me then when others let me down and they don't even want to apologize for it well I'm prompted to be gracious to them as well.

I don't carry the whole guilt or resentment or grudge against them forever and a day. Why?

Because I'm overwhelmed by God's grace for me.

God allows me to forgive because He has first forgiven me. I don't know about you but that is such a wonderful way to live don't you think?

[21 : 47] Not to have to carry the weight of past sins or guilt not carrying the resentment that I hold against others not even carrying the hate and angers others may have of me when they are baseless and unfair.

And so my invitation to all of you tonight is this are you living? Do you want to live under this amazing grace? It's not difficult at all to receive this grace.

There's only one thing that's required and the thing is this you have to swallow your pride and put your faith in Jesus. Put your faith in Jesus and His goodness rather than in your own goodness.

That's why you need to swallow your pride. The other word for this is repentance. You know much has been made about this Israel Falau thing and his Instagram post.

But at the heart of his message is simply the call for everyone to repent. And people jump up and down as if this word repent is such an offensive thing to ask of anyone.

[22 : 57] But really repent simply means to swallow your pride, admit that you're wrong to have gone your own way and instead place your dependence on Jesus' death instead.

There's really nothing more than that. And yet swallowing our pride can be so hard, isn't it?

Receiving grace isn't always easy, is it?

Because when we say please forgive me, what we're saying is that we've stuffed up. We were hopeless, we were useless, and God, we need all the help that you can give us instead.

In other words, to receive grace requires humility. But that's really the only single criteria God places on his forgiveness. That verse in Psalm 103 did say, God has compassion on those who fear him.

It's another way of saying God has compassion on those who repent and believe in his son. And so when you boil it down, the choice is really that simple. Whose goodness are you going to bank on?

[24 : 06] Are you going to bank on your own and therefore have to be anxious all the rest of your life that you've made the cut? Because at the end of the day, I suspect you'll fall short.

Or are you going to swallow your pride, admit that it's not your goodness, but Jesus' goodness, that is what you need? And when you do that, what you receive is God's grace.

Thank you.