

Choosing Graciousness

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- [0 : 0 0] Lord, as we look into your word now, we pray that you would help us to feed upon it, to draw upon it, to learn from it, to be challenged by it, to be blessed through it.
- Through Jesus our Lord. Amen. I have to say that the political situation at the moment becomes increasingly fractious and polarised and unforgiving.
- And as I was preparing this sermon this week, I was very conscious that Gaza has a very fragile peace. That hasn't changed over the last five or six days.
- There have been concerns that President Trump is even suggesting what sounds very close to ethnic cleansing. And I noticed that some have linked that to try and base it on scripture and Joshua's call to destroy Canaan utterly.
- And at the same time, I read a brief article that made the point that biblical isn't always Christ-like. And that really rang true when I was looking at the readings for today.
- [1 : 2 0] And Jesus begins, but I say to you. And if we looked at Matthew's version of this, it's the Luke version, it's the reading for today.
- But in Matthew's version, Jesus is saying, you have heard it said, but I say to you. And Jesus pulls on some point from the Old Testament law.
- And then he says, but I say to you. He builds on it and takes it further. And that is so relevant to the political situation today.
- Which sometimes, in some quarters, not naming names, says, but you have heard it said. And that is what we should do. And overlooks what Jesus goes on to say where he says, but I say to you.
- And our calling as believers is primarily to be Christ-like. Thinking of Joshua, it's no surprise that very, very early on, the church began to wrestle with some of the content in Joshua.
- [2 : 2 7] And I think it was Jerome, one of the early church fathers, spiritualized it and said, this is more about our battle against sin and evil in our lives.
- That we have to be ruthless and wholehearted in rooting out what is sinful and what is wrong. And so he spiritualized the conquest narratives in Joshua to make it teach Christians something valuable.
- And certainly I can remember quite robust Bible stories as a child. My sort of book of Bible stories with Joshua and the Battle of Jericho and so on.
- And didn't have any problems at all. But when you see something similar being played out horrifically on the news, you're then left challenged and thinking, how do I equate the fall of Jericho with what's going on in Gaza?
- And I think a lot of Christians have been troubled by that connection. But the Old Testament is the word of God. It is the all scripture that Paul refers to in the New Testament.

[3 : 31] And it does have an awful lot to teach us. But it does need careful reading. And what we see in the words of Jesus, you have heard it said, dot, dot, dot, that I say to you, reminds us that the Lord is moving us on to make us more like himself.

The original Old Testament law, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, was introduced originally to mitigate and prevent escalating blood feuds.

You take out my eye, I'll take out both of yours, and I'll burn your house down for good measure. And blood feuds would tend to escalate and become, and as they escalated, they become established and long-lasting.

And the idea with the Old Testament law was, a wrong has been done, redress must be made, but it is to be limited and proportionate. And so an eye for an eye, only one eye for one eye, was a big improvement on what people were getting up to with their escalating blood feuds.

But then there is a drift towards grace, where Jesus says, but I say to you, love your enemy. Don't take the eye for an eye, but respond with love.

[4 : 48] And actually, even in the early Old Testament, we see examples of incredible graciousness already. And we have that in our first reading this morning, in the Genesis reading from Joseph, where Joseph was awfully treated by his brothers, and he sold him into slavery.

Ten out of eleven of them wanted to kill him. It was only one of them, Reuben, who said, no, let's sell him instead, and at least let's spare his life.

And of course, the story continues, and we see how Joseph eventually becomes, I think, something like the Grand Vizier of Egypt.

And he is not at all vengeful when his brothers fall into his power. So let's have a little bit of a look at Joseph and his graciousness. There are many highly dramatic key moments in the Bible where there is such a depth of feeling that is so clear.

What's going on here with Joseph? Well, Joseph had been shamefully sold into slavery by his own brothers, who then lied to their father about what had happened to him, and invented a story about them finding his clothes covered in blood.

[6 : 04] Some wild animal must have taken him. This is now 22 years later. The dates are there in the text. And so it's no surprise that Joseph's brothers don't recognize him.

Joseph had been a lad of 17. He is now a grown man and mature with a family and a role of his own in a different land. Certainly not what you expect from somebody who sold into slavery, and he is nearly 40 years old.

The brothers themselves were probably in their 20s and 30s when they did this. They are now 22 years on as well. Hence, Joseph is talking about their grandchildren. Everybody has grown 22 years older.

And it's no surprise, after that length of time, that when you bump into somebody that you haven't seen for over 20 years, you may or may not recognize them.

Carol and I, it's just 20 years since we moved up to the Highlands. I think occasionally when we go back down south, we bump into somebody we haven't seen since. It can be quite a shock. And certainly the last time we were down, we ran into an old friend who we really didn't recognize.

[7 : 11] And it was only when we were talking to her after the service, yes, it really is. And we sort of looked long and hard and still, no, it's not. But it was. So it's no surprise that Joseph's brothers, you know, in a completely different setting, don't recognize Joseph.

But how did they live with themselves all that time, knowing what had happened, with that terrible shared secret, and that being the key to their dad, Jacob's lasting grief, that he'd sat with that grief and that uncertainty and that story and the brothers knew it was a lie all that time.

What Genesis doesn't tell us is how they break the news to Jacob and actually own up to their part in how Joseph hadn't been eaten by wild animals.

In more recent literature, and I don't know whether anyone actually gets round to reading it and they haven't made a film of it for a while, but Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* is a similar story where the hero is stitched up, he's framed for a, and he is imprisoned for life, and he later emerges as the fabulously wealthy Count of Monte Cristo.

And that story is a tale of vengefulness and bitterness as the Count of Monte Cristo, as he has now become, seeks to take his revenge on the people who had framed him.

[8 : 38] But in the end, even he comes to realize that bitterness and vengefulness isn't the right answer, and ultimately he finds peace. But we've got this moment in the reading of Revelation where Joseph comes to his brothers and says, I am Joseph.

Yes, I'm the one you sold into slavery, and I am now the ruler over the whole of Egypt, first under Pharaoh. His brothers are completely in his power.

What did they feel that moment when Joseph says, guess who I am? I'm Joseph. The one you sold into slavery. Well, I think we can all very easily guess what they expected to come next, and that was a very, very short life.

But, instead of Joseph nursing and festering bitterness throughout those 22 years, Joseph sees God's hand leading him to the point where he can save lives by the thousand.

Joseph recognizes that God has taken his circumstances, evil and foul and unjust though they were, and brought him to a point where he could be a means of unique blessing to the most powerful nation in the world at that time, certainly in the known world, and beyond its borders as well, and including his own family.

[10 : 11] And so, Joseph is healed of his bitterness and his anger and he just sees blessing. And when he is in a position to be reunited with his brothers, all he wants is for them to find the same peace as well.

The sad thing is, if you read on through the rest of Genesis, it took another 17 years for his brothers themselves to truly find peace.

It was only after their father Jacob had died and they realized that Joseph wasn't just biding his time whilst his dad was alive, that he really meant good for them, that ultimately and finally they find peace.

They lived with that for the best part of 40 years, needlessly as it happens. But we've got this rich story in the Old Testament of Joseph's graciousness anticipating the grace of God for us.

Joseph's brothers had sinned greatly against Joseph in selling their own brother as a slave. But we have a saviour in Jesus who is equally and more so gracious to us.

[11 : 28] And in the New Testament reading in Luke chapter 5 Jesus is teaching and he says you have heard but I tell you this is what you're used to doing this is the way that you're used to being and you think before God that it's right.

And Jesus acknowledges that the law is just that now he calls us to move on and go further and be like the Lord in his graciousness as well as in his justice.

To be not just biblical because you can find a Bible verse that backs up and justifies your course of action as just. But be not just biblical but Christ-like.

You have heard but I tell you before we look at that though just to raise one question it's all very well but what about the abuser?

Because if we are going to make light of people's crimes and sins and offences isn't that the mess that the Church of England certainly at the top end the bishop has got itself in making light of such crimes.

[12 : 41] And I just want to say before we look at Luke 6 it is right to protect the victims. that abusers should be stopped that they should be rendered powerless and unable to continue to abuse and arguably they should no longer be put in positions of trust that they can exploit.

And actually most people who have been abusive in the past when they're found out and want to change don't want to be put in that position anyway. So yes protect the victims abusers should be stopped.

And yet Joseph and even that vengeful Edmund Dante and Count of Monte Cristo in the end realises that a true and lasting peace needs a different way than just something that is purely punitive.

it says vengeance is mine says the Lord and when the Lord Jesus the risen Lord Jesus now appears to Barnabas immediately immediately after he has met with Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus and Saul of Tarsus has been blinded and dazzled and changed by his experience and he is led by the hand into Damascus and the Lord appears to Barnabas one of the Christians that Saul had gone to persecute and imprison Jesus says something quite strange when Barnabas says are you sure Lord don't you know what he's here for this is the man who's been destroying the church right left and centre do you really want me to be good to him and Jesus says yes I'll show him how much he's got to suffer for the gospel Saul is not going to get it easy and later on as Paul

St. Paul he acknowledges that that his path is one of suffering but the result of Jesus saying that to Barnabas I'll show him how much he's got to suffer for the gospel don't you worry about that you just go and be good to him as Barnabas comes into the place where Saul is still sitting there praying and blind the first words Barnabas speaks are these brother Saul Jesus has sent me brother Saul and then he prays for him and he and is the instrument of Saul's healing and Barnabas baptises him and later on it's Barnabas who sticks up for Saul when they both go back to Jerusalem and he says no he really is converted he has become a Christian too and it's Barnabas who is the first companion to travel with Saul as he goes out on his first missionary journey Barnabas is going to be a big influence in Saul's life even he needed reassuring right at the beginning am I okay to do this because surely he needs punishing so back into Luke 6 we've got

[15 : 43] Jesus' point that we as believers have got better things to do than to be vengeful we are called for something better to be the father's children because the natural tit for tat response to evil is to match evil with evil to match destruction with another destructiveness and that is a distraction to us to the primary call that we have to be more like Jesus and if we look in Luke chapter 6 and if you've got your bibles open with you just please do follow this but in verses 27 to 31 we've got this long lengthy list of negative terms enemy hate curse abuse strike take and they're all there in verses 27 to 31 but alongside those Jesus gives an alternative approach that is reciprocal if you read on you've got these negative terms in 27 to 31 and there is a sort of transactionality about it in verses 32 to 34 do to them as they've done to you what they're doing pay them back for it as much as they harmed you you harm them it's still that tit for tat approach and that natural light for light response you be bad to me you hurt me

I'll hurt you in return only draws us deeper into that and the victim so often learns to become a bully in turn to others as Jesus says if you love those who love you what credit is that to you if you do good to those who are good to you what credit is that to you if you lend to those from whom you expect payment what credit is that to you well even sinners do that again that is setting limits on love I'm only going to be good to people who are good to me it's again that like for like response and Jesus knows what he's talking about here because he lived and he ministered in an occupied land at the backdrop to this is always the Romans who invited themselves in established themselves took over rule the roost and oppress and persecute and bully and basically although it was a peaceful and stable government it was a foreign government that the Jews did not want it was an outsider who was ruling at the time and that outsider was

Rome it was an occupied land and it was full of hatred and resentment and Jesus himself knows what lies ahead of him he has taken the path of the cross he knows at the end of his earthly ministry there is going to be injustice there is going to be hatred and there is going to be the death he draws waiting for him so Jesus himself is not naive and innocent and doesn't understand what this is all about and yet he stands firm and instead of words like enemy and hate and curse and abuse and strike and take Jesus used words like love do good bless pray give and instead of that reciprocity of I'll do good to the people who are doing good to me and I'll do harm to the people who are harming me Jesus introduces us to a different language of being unconditional love them anyway of no strings attached whether you are good or bad to me

I will do you good and ultimately of showing mercy whether you deserve it or not I will show you mercy and be gracious we can't say that Jesus isn't realistic and didn't understand but what Jesus does say is so challenging to us and if we want to honour him as Lord it's a challenge that we need to take seriously some people do say oh being a Christian is just about keeping the golden rule and that even that is actually the words of Jesus do to others as you would have them do to you it is actually a scriptural injunction it's there in the New Testament it's what Jesus says do to others as you would have them do to you that's often watered down to basically don't harm people but now

Jesus is taking a positive line of do good to people so often people say well I haven't harmed anybody in my life what Jesus is saying here is have you done any good to people in your life have you taken the initiative and shown love and graciousness and mercy Jesus here is actually talking about unconditional love so here in Luke 6 Jesus is directing us to be like what we know of the Lord Jesus simply Jesus is gracious we've seen the example in Joseph I've mentioned the story of James Thompson of Promete living that out this is Jesus his call to us he is gracious to us he wants us to be different and to be gracious and like him Jesus is merciful to us he doesn't judge us as our sins deserve he has died for us he has gone to that length to free us and liberate us from our sin and our guilt he has taken the blame for us in our place he wants us to be like him to be merciful to be his children

[21 : 53] Jesus is reflecting the father here who loves us and he wants us to be loving like him we're not called to be like the rest of the world being transactional and vengeful we're called to walk to the beat of a different drum and to be like the Lord our heavenly father and then Jesus says and you will be sons you will be sons of your father then your reward I'll just read it in full love your enemies do good to them lend to them without expecting to get anything back then your reward will be great and you will be sons of the most high because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked be merciful just as your father is merciful as we enter into this relationship that we have given to us through the

Lord Jesus and we are called to be sons we are called to show that family likeness we are freed! to give freely! we are freed to love without needing love in return because we're getting all the love we need from the father ultimately we are called to be like Jesus I'm going to close by a story that I was reminded of well over 40 years ago now getting on for 45 years one of Carol's teachers when she was at school and I told the story John and Julia we stayed in touch with them ever since they were a lovely Christian couple and we were getting married and we had friends coming up to stay and we were trying to work out where they could stay and John and Julia said oh we can put some of them up in our house and they offered to host our friends it was only after the wedding I think it was a month or two later we learned that they themselves had actually moved out to make room for even more of our friends their love and their kindness went beyond above and beyond even what we were aware of not just to be hospitable but to put themselves out literally out of the house to be even more hospitable that was a love that we couldn't repay but it's that sort of love that can't be repaid that is the part of true worship we've never been able to get them back for that but it points us to what the Lord our God is like so in these words of Jesus and in the example of Joseph we see a choice that transactional vengeful approach

I will give only what I get or the gracious approach that we see in Joseph and in James Thompson and John and Julia and supremely in the Lord Jesus and it's the Lord Jesus who calls us to be Christ man to be not like that but like him Amen and