

“The economics of grace”
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Once upon a time, long ago, a brother killed a brother, insisting that he was not his brother’s keeper. He had a child, and he taught him this way of life. The lesson was passed down generation by generation, until Cain’s descendant Lamech bragged that he had killed a man for wounding him, shouting, “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” It was the beginning of an endless cycle of vengeance and violence... until one day, a carpenter promising the kingdom of God spoke a word capable of undoing the curse of Cain and Lamech. The word was grace. A gift of love and amnesty from God, inspiring us to give and forgive also.

In our passage today, Jesus instructs Peter to forgive, not seven times, but seventy-sevenfold—the exact number pledged by Lamech in vengeance but now pledged in mercy.

To explain, Jesus tells a story. In this story, the world—shaped by Cain and Lamech—has a set order, a clear way of doing things. At the top of the pyramid is the king. Below him is a servant who commands the other slaves. He is the king’s debt enforcer. His job is to pass money from the poorest to the richest.

He is said to owe the king a staggering 10,000 talents. One talent was worth more than 15 years’ wages as a laborer. These can’t be just his debts. This is the collective debt of all the king’s servants, the debt he was charged to collect.

The system demands that the debt be paid, and unable to pay, the servant is to be sold, along with his family, into slavery.

But then something happens that will change the world. Jesus calls it pity. In the Greek, Jesus says that the king is moved in his innermost parts—his heart, his lungs. He breathes in the man lying before him, prostrate on the floor—a man trapped by a cycle of debt that enslaves his children and grandchildren—and the king’s heart is moved to compassion. He sees before him not a slave but a man. A father. A human being. A creature of God. This obscure Greek word for the king’s emotion is the same word used to describe Jesus’ compassion when he sees his people hurting and proceeds to feed the hungry, cure the sick, give sight to the blind, and raise the dead.

Because of this pity, the king forgives the servant’s debt, which you may remember includes everyone else’s debt too. According to scholar Stanley Saunders, “The king effectively inaugurates a regime of financial amnesty, a jubilee, not only for one slave, but for everyone in his debt.”

The Hebrew people had long waited for their Jubilee, the 50th year in which the trumpet sounds and liberty is proclaimed throughout the land.

But like so many revolutions, this one ends almost as quickly as it begins. The servant doesn't really believe in the new way of doing things. He still believes that wealth and power are the only guarantee for survival. He may doubt whether he is truly forgiven, expecting the king to call in his debt at any time. So he grabs a fellow-slave, wraps his fingers around his throat, and demands that his debt be paid. And when he cannot pay, the servant throws him into prison.

He just cannot bring himself to share what he has received.

We are not unlike this man. We are the recipients of an astounding grace, the citizens of a world of Jubilee, of debts cancelled and hurts healed. We have been given another chance at life.

But like the servant, we have trouble believing that we are truly forgiven. We are not so confident in this new world. We're not sure we can trust God's grace; we think we may still need to rely on our own wits to survive. We're not ready to give up the debts that are owed us; we like the power they afford.

Most of us here, of course, show a lot more mercy than this servant. We really do try to live up to God's love. It's just that we try, at the same time, to keep one foot planted in the old acquisitive world of Cain.

We get upset when someone else appears to get a free ride. We accept hierarchies that privilege some over others. We accept an economy that leaves many vulnerable to debt, exorbitant interest rates, payday loans, and poverty. We accept a world of violence and mass incarceration.

In the end, a part of us still believes that grace has a limit. And honestly, who can blame us? One of the main points of this parable is how hard forgiveness is—how hard it is to live by a model of grace in a system established for a very different purpose.

Grace is a risk. But Jesus' story teaches that there is also a risk in refusing grace.

By retreating to that old world of Cain, the servant pulls the king back into that system, forcing it upon himself also. He insists on justice, and so *he* will have justice. He insists others pay their debts, and so *he* will be made to pay his.

He insists on a violent, transactional world, and so that's exactly what he gets. Jesus' point: we choose the world to which we belong.

In C.S. Lewis' book *The Last Battle*, the lion Aslan saves Tirian, the last king of Narnia. Tirian and the other Narnians rally to save the kingdom from those trying to exploit and oppress it. A band of dwarfs is also rescued, but because they no longer have faith in Aslan, they refuse to help, declaring, "the dwarfs are for the dwarfs."

At the end of the book, Tirian and the children walk through a stable door that represents death, and on the other side, they find they are still in Narnia! The sun is shining. A feast is waiting for them. The world they fought so hard for, the world they always believed in, is the world they discover on the other side. But when those same dwarfs walk through the same stable door, they

find the same Narnia, the same feast, the same sunshine—only they can't see it. All they see is a dark stable, full of rotten food. The world they find is the world they believed in, the world they helped create. They can't see God's grace because they never believed in it enough to share it.

Do you believe?

There are people in Jesus' story who believe. They are the other servants, the fellow slaves, who upon seeing the ill treatment of their friend, go to the king and report all they saw. It would have been so easy for them to witness this cruelty and to say, "See, I told you so. This talk of grace was empty. All rumor. Just a ploy. Maybe people with power like him get grace, but not us. The world hasn't changed at all. The king's vision of Jubilee is a lie." But they don't say that. In sinking mud, they cling to their faith. They go to the king, bypassing all the proper channels, risking punishment and death. They go, believing that the vision is still alive, that the king is who he says he is, that their debt—and the debt of their fellow-slave—can still be forgiven.

Do you believe? Do you believe that you are forgiven? Do you believe that death no longer has dominion over your life? Do you believe that the pyramid of power has been flattened and that all lives have equal value? Do you believe that you are loved so much, by a king so powerful, that nothing in this life or the next can separate you from the love of God?

To see it, we have to believe it. And believing it, we share it. We love because we have been loved. We show mercy, as God has had mercy on us.

This is not theory. We don't get to say the Lord's Prayer, "forgive me my debts as I forgive my debtors," unless we mean it, right now, today, in how we live. Are we ready to end usury in this country? Are we ready to seek restorative justice as an addition or alternative to incarceration? Are we ready to forgive debts, be they trespasses or money? Are we ready to be, for the first time in our lives, free?

The old world of Cain will always seek our hearts. It will always seek to make a mockery of our compassion by hanging it on a cross. But even there, on the cross, we shall turn to our crucified neighbors and declare proudly, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Even there, we shall pray, "Father, forgive them." Even there, we shall rejoice, for Jubilee is ours. Sunshine and feast. Not tomorrow, but today. A grace that has always been here—we just had to believe, and share, in order to see it.

Amen.