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**Sunday 13 September to Sunday 20 September**

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Sunday 13 September 2020

# Pay it forward!

by Sal Huckel

**‘When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that happened’ (Matthew 18:31).**

Get set for a wild ride of forgiveness, grace and mercy this week as we tackle some challenging lectionary scriptures on these themes. Pray for discernment and new insights as we read together.

Read Matthew 18:21–35

This passage is about God’s grace and forgiveness freely given to us, even though we have our own account with him that rightly should be settled, and is, by Jesus on the cross. Whatever way you do the maths, this kind of forgiveness feels too hard. Many modern-day messages say it’s okay to cut people off when they wrong us, and it’s perhaps easier to do that than ever before.

Today let’s consider the different ‘players’ or roles in the story. We have Peter asking the question. Is he wondering how long it is before he can be let off the hook, forgiving the same person time and time again? Are we?

We also have the king, settling accounts between his servants and offering grace and forgiveness for a sizeable debt. We can easily see God in this story, doing so with our own accounts with him. The unmerciful servant himself is forgiven a large debt, but rather than ‘paying it forward’ or passing that forgiveness on, he seizes his debtor for a much lesser amount.

But why are the ‘other servants’ here? They don’t seem essential to the plot. But Jesus’ words are never wasted! The servants witness the generosity and forgiveness of the master and the subsequent injustice. The servants petition for justice and the master acts. How can we put ourselves in their place once we have considered our own accounts? What are we witnessing? Just as in the reconciliation procedures in the previous passage (verses 15–20), the body is called in. Are you witnessing injustice and unforgiveness that may need to involve your action – naming it, praying to God for justice, and doing more than simply looking on?

**Lord, help me to keep a short account with you and with others. Remind me to pass on the forgiveness I receive from you as we pray so familiarly. Help me to discern the right approach where I witness a lack of mercy and forgiveness in others, and to bring it before you in prayer. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Monday 14 September 2020

# Our constant and just Ruler

by Sal Huckel

**‘Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?’ (Genesis 18:25).**

Read Genesis 18:20–32

We are shocked by the sinful actions of those in Sodom and Gomorrah and the drastic judgement upon them. Abraham is also astounded by the Lord’s plans and understandably concerned about the risk that righteous people will perish for the sins of the multitude.

One way of reading this passage might be to see Abraham trying to change the mind of God, bargaining with him for numbers. He receives an answer, for how many will be spared, and then asks boldly for a little more assurance. And again.

Is this really about Abraham keeping God accountable for the numbers? Or is this Abraham finding out something of the character of God? The Lord knows, of course, how many righteous people there actually are in that place. Spoiler alert: there are none. The Lord knows this; Abraham does not. The Lord answers the questions reliably and faithfully. He is patient with Abraham as Abraham comes to terms with this situation.

We know that the Lord does not change. We do not change his judgement with questions like this. He is showing his constancy, but although we cannot comprehend it, we must take those answers on face value. We learn in the next chapter that Sodom and Gomorrah were indeed destroyed. We can only deduct that there were not even ten righteous people there.

Notice that just as in our reading yesterday, where the petitions of others caused the king to act, so here the Lord tells Abraham that an outcry has reached him. We have a responsibility to speak up, however difficult or futile it may seem, against injustice and evil in this world. We petition the Lord to act. We entrust justice to him.

**Lord, you are the ruler over all the earth, the God who does not change. Help us to trust your constancy, to revere and worship you and appreciate your sovereignty. Where there is injustice, unrighteousness and evil, may we speak out against those things and cry out to you. Amen.**

Tuesday 15 September 2020

# Unfinished business

by Sal Huckel

**‘Then Esau said, “Let us be on our way; I’ll accompany you”’ (Genesis 33:12).**

Read Genesis 33:1–16

Have you ever said sorry with your fingers crossed behind your back?! Jacob (‘deceiver’) spent his entire existence doing this kind of thing. From the beginning of his life, through deception, he got what he wanted. Or did he? Did cheating make Jacob happy?

This encounter follows Jacob’s 20-year self-imposed exile to escape from Esau whom he deceived with his mother’s help. There’s no evidence in Jacob’s story that he has learned much from his past other than accruing guilt for his string of deceptions and betrayals.

We think this is a reconciliation – it seems to have the elements. Following an emotional reunion, Esau wants to go forward together. Wouldn’t this be a brilliant new beginning, a journey together? No. Jacob gives false reasons for delaying and then goes in the other direction. Disappointing! Looking back at the so-called reconciliation? There was no repentance, no apology, no promise of a future together. Jacob got what he wanted – a false reconciliation (rather like his false inheritance). It’s a missed opportunity, and a family remains broken.

Are you Esau, trying to lay the past aside, make a future and restore the relationship with your family member? Or are you Jacob, trying to keep your advantage, still serving the Lord, but there’s unfinished business with a sibling or other family member? God still blessed Jacob, but surely he was not a happy or peaceful man. Are we really right with God when we have unfinished reconciliation work to do? These are difficult times. We are stronger when we are together. ‘If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone’(Romans 12:18). Uncross those fingers, and stretch your arms out in front of you. Embrace, weep, apologise and forgive.

***Lord, show me what unfinished business I need to come back to. Help me to be brave and trust you to go with me as I return to reconcile relationships and live at peace with those waiting to reconcile. May new journeys begin with your blessing. Amen.***

Wednesday 16 September 2020

# Divine opportunity … or sinful temptation?

by Sal Huckel

**‘The Lord delivered you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed’ (1 Samuel 26:23).**

Read 1 Samuel 26:5–25

Have you ever stopped yourself from acting on an opportunity to right a wrong or seek justice – and committed it to the Lord for his timing instead? Sometimes we can even see that it was a trap, or we are prompted by the Holy Spirit to let the Lord do his work.

In this passage, we see David being pursued by Saul, who in his jealousy is trying to assassinate David. David has already had one opportunity to kill Saul while he slept, and here he is presented with another. Indeed, his companion Abishai thinks that this is a divine opportunity presented for David to take his victory.

Perhaps it does look as though this is a divine opportunity. David knows that Saul has been disobedient to God and has lost the Lord’s blessing. He knows that he will be king after Saul. Can he progress this succession to the throne now? No. He trusts Saul to God’s justice, which will come in the Lord’s perfect timing.

We can learn from David and follow his example by not taking matters into our own hands when we are waiting on the Lord’s timing for deliverance and justice – perhaps as we wait for him to act right now in these uncertain times. What looked to Abishai as a divine opportunity was actually a moment of temptation to force the hand of God instead of trusting in his timing.

Is this a time for us to trust the Lord’s anointed? Our political leaders and pastors? Are we trusting them, or are we seizing opportunities to try to force their hands in reversing restrictions, or rushing our fellowship back to the ‘normal’ we think it needs to be?

***Lord, waiting on your timing can be so hard, especially in times of trial. Help us to follow David’s example and to discern every opportunity we have to take matters into our own hands. Give us faith and patience to wait on you. Amen.***

Thursday 17 September 2020

# Check your plank

by Sal Huckel

**‘Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?’ (Matthew 7:3).**

Read Matthew 7:1–5

This Scripture is familiar to us, and it is not surprising that Jesus made it so clear because judgement is part of our sinful nature. As Christians, we try to live to God’s standards but we know that only he is righteous. He took our judgement. We try to follow Jesus in his example of loving others, and one big part of that is loving each other despite our faults.

‘You do you’ is one of those overused phrases that can mean ‘just be yourself and ignore everyone else’ or ‘don’t tell me what I’m doing wrong; you just concentrate on your own issues’.

Perhaps that’s one message to take away from this passage – ‘You do you’. There is more here, though. We learn in the first verse that in the same way we judge others, we too will be judged. As we measure, it will be measured to us. It doesn’t say ‘Do not judge’. It means, be willing to be judged to the same standard, or in the same way, as we are doing. So, let’s consider what standard we are expecting others to live up to. How do we match up against those ourselves? Are we holding our children, friends, families, and those in authority to a higher standard than we can reach ourselves? Alternately, we may actually need to make a judgement against injustice, to speak against a wrong in matters that as Christians we are called to take a stand. We must do it with prayer and discernment and check our own plank.

***Lord, help us to understand more deeply the implications of this Scripture. Challenge us as the body of Christ to love each other and those outside the church. Help us to be prepared to have those standards to which we hold others also apply to ourselves. You are the just and righteous judge. Amen.***

Friday 18 September 2020

# Love actually … actually love

by Sal Huckel

**‘Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth’ (1 John 3:18).**

Read 1 John 3:16–24

What an amazing call to love one another, and to put hands and feet on the love we profess with our mouths! Well-intentioned words of encouragement can come easily sometimes, can’t they? Have you expressed a need to a brother or sister in Christ but received words that hurt or miss the mark because words don’t help the problem at that moment? Or perhaps words come easily to you, but you feel that making a meal or giving a gift is someone else’s ministry?

The instructions to us in this letter are clear. If we have material possessions (or practical capacity) and see or hear another person in need but fail to act, we are not showing the love of God. The letter says to love actually, not with words but with action and truth. Why truth? Well, perhaps if we search our hearts, sometimes we know deep down that we are withholding the Christ-like sacrificial love that lays down ‘self’ for friends.

First, we hear how practical actual love is – doing and giving. Then we are further reminded that love is a commandment. Meditate on verse 21. In this week of forgiveness, grace and mercy challenges, where our spiritual muscles are getting a full work out, our hearts will condemn us if we are not matching up. We know when we are holding back. It is not the time for that. Go out and show your love to those you know you are holding back from. Mentor those younger than you in the faith, and remember yesterday’s scripture – about living up to the standards we are trying to teach and show others.

***Lord, help me to love with actions and in truth. May we be people who do what we say we are. Search our hearts and inspire us to truthful love, through the power of your Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.***

Saturday 19 September 2020

# Time for a breather!

by Sal Huckel

**‘I will exalt you, my God, the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever’ (Psalm 145:1).**

Read Psalm 145:1–8

My friend was training for the London Marathon, which has sadly been cancelled this year. I had no idea about the energy gels, protein foods and the special fuel required to keep runners going. I think this is a week worthy of the spiritual equivalent of those high energy foods! We may be reminded of Paul, who talks about running the race for the prize, as well as the differences between spiritual milk and solid food.

This week’s readings have certainly fed us with solid food to fuel us for the continuing journey. Perhaps in our spiritual marathon, this is the part of the race where we feel we are hitting the wall. Don’t be afraid to get into these difficult and challenging scriptures. All scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching!

Reflecting on the readings for this week, we found a simple lesson about the character of God in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. We’ve read details of the story of Saul and David that we may seldom read by choice. We have been challenged by Esau and Isaac, in addition to our New Testament readings.

Choose one of these excerpts and delve deeper. Go slowly, chapter by chapter, and pray for a simple message or ‘take-home’ from each day. Get into the word. Fuel your soul for this workout. But take time out to simply ‘be’, and praise God. If you’re exhausted from all this thinking, use the psalms! The hard work has been done for you. The words are there, waiting to go. It’s a ready meal of praise you can use after an exhausting week of daily workouts and spiritual protein shakes.

***Lord, I praise you for the wonderful gift of scripture, for training us in this race, pressing on to win the prize of eternal life, and for helping us to coach others and join them on to our team. May we tell of your mighty acts, meditate on your wonderful works, and praise your name forever and ever. Amen.***

Sunday 20 September 2020

# Amazing mercy

by Pastor Peter Bean

**‘Shouldn’t I show concern for the great city Nineveh, which has more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know right from wrong?’ (Jonah 4:11).**

Read Jonah 3:10–4:11

God’s mercy never ceases to amaze. And upset! And anger!

I like to hear about God’s mercy for me. I’m sure you like to hear about God’s mercy for you. But when it comes to other people; well, we mouth the words that mercy is for all, but in reality?

Whether, like in Jonah’s time, it is the people of Nineveh, or in Jesus’s time, the prostitutes and tax collectors. Or in our time, the corrupt politician; the cheating spouse; the dishonest business person; the premier who closes borders; the premier who leaves them open; the lazy no-hoper (who decides that?); the overpaid selfish sportsperson; those who avoid tax; the one who has offended us greatly … mercy for them? C’mon, God, you’ve got to be kidding.

That’s what Jonah said, what the Pharisees say, and, if we are honest, what we think and perhaps even say. As a generality, mercy is wonderful, but when it comes to specific people, mmm … not so easy.

That’s why we have this ending to the story of Jonah. Jonah, God’s servant, remembered for his journey in the whale, had a much more difficult journey to go on. It was a journey of understanding and accepting God’s mercy for himself and his enemies. God does not have favourites, and his generosity has no bounds. Whether we are obedient or not, God offers mercy to us. And he offers mercy to those we think don’t deserve it.

Yes, God’s mercy never ceases to amaze. May we live in that mercy, that grace, and in turn live merciful and gracious lives, looking for God’s presence in the lives of others, particularly those, who in our judgement don’t fit the parameters. Seeking God’s mercy, experiencing God’s mercy, and practising God’s mercy will allow people, animals, and all of creation to join us on this merciful journey.

**Thank you, merciful God, for your mercy and grace. Help us to live, ever aware of it in our lives and in the world around us. Amen.**