

BIGGER THAN ANY OF OUR MISTAKES

Sunday 11th September 2022

1 Timothy 1:12-17



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In a small mid-American country town, the police station received a call from some concerned citizens. They had observed a car passing by their home multiple times. This, in itself, wasn't all the startling. However, in this particular case, the car was being driven in reverse. Police later reported pulling over a young woman who explained what was going on.

Her parents had let her use the car on the condition that she not drive very far. After discovering she had put far too many kilometres on the speedometer, this young woman decided to try and unwind her misdemeanour by driving in reverse!

And, of course, there is a message here. This young lady's attempt was in vain. We can't unwind the past.

This is no more so than in this digital age when the internet and its offspring, social media, leave a trail of records that cannot be erased. Internet searches, downloads, emails, posts and tweets are on the record forever. Activities on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat create digital footprints that are permanently there - and this means the internet never forgets!

For so many, the past continues to haunt us, and this digital age makes it no easier. Our mistakes, indiscretions, flaws and personal matters that are revealed on-line, become an abiding, enduring presence, often for all to see.

An example here involves a schoolteacher who posted a picture of herself on-line during a drunken party. While the party took place ten years beforehand (as a school student herself) the teacher was fired from her position. And there are many more examples.

Meanwhile, the public shaming of people through the disclosure of their digital footprints can have dire circumstances akin to putting people in public stocks or forcing them to take a walk of shame as depicted in that drama series, *Game of Thrones*.

Here the condemned Queen Cersei is shorn, stripped and forced to march through the streets of King's Landing while a hostile crowd mocks and taunts her. This was based on past practices when, during the 15th century, women who were found guilty of sexual immorality and other offences, were publicly disgraced and humiliated.

So, like those days of old where the town square stocks or the public walk of shame served to ruin reputations, the disclosure of our internet trail can damage good standing. It can undermine hopes and aspirations. It can even destroy lives.

Now, this doesn't mean we should never be unaccountable. The very public disclosure of people like Harvey Weinstein, Roger Ailes, Jimmy Saville and Rolf Harris was, surely, necessary as these people committed serious crimes. Indeed, for anyone who has committed a crime, full accountability must - and always must - be the first port of call.

But so many disclosures are based on piecemeal information and lack of real context. Such disclosures can surface when people with a maligned intent are bent on smearing, defaming or denigrating others, often for their own personal gain.

So, what is a Christ-like response to all this? As followers of Jesus, how do we deal with issues that haunt people from the past and how do we approach the matter of pointing the finger and public shaming? Moreover, how do we deal with our own misdemeanours or those accusations that come back to trouble, torment or even consume us?

The great William Shakespeare has a bit to say here. In his play, "*The Merchant of Venice*", a trader by the name of Antonio borrows a substantial amount of cash from a moneylender named Shylock. Antonio's ships are lost at sea and the businessman defaults on his loan. But Shylock takes him to court demanding his "pound of flesh". I won't go into all the details of this fascinating play but to comment that Shakespeare uses this scenario to launch a magnificent monologue on the "quality of mercy". It's in Act 4, Scene 1.

Antonio is in a real spot. Shylock is demanding due justice as Shakespeare focusses our attention on another option. This option is mercy – and, Shakespeare declares, mercy is not about getting one's "pound of flesh". Rather mercy is an honourable, generous, kind-hearted thing. Mercy does not come forcefully but it is more powerful than the monarch. Mercy is attribute of God and the one who offers mercy demonstrates a God-like character. Mercy is the foundation of justice meaning justice must always be humane.

For the Shylock, moneylender, Antonio failed in his obligation to repay the loan. Shylock has, therefore, a rightful cause to demand his "pound of flesh". But the proper and most decent thing to do is to offer poor Antonio mercy. It is to give Antonio another chance.

The key thing here is to not condemn. It is to not judge. And it is to never extract retribution. Such demands are, in Shakespeare's terms, an inhumane form of justice.

Rather, the thing to do here is this - it is to offer mercy.

Mercy is to be kind. Mercy is to offer-goodwill. Mercy is to be compassionate towards the other even if that other has brought the issue on themselves.

And you know, this can be offered in so many ways. We offer mercy when we refrain from cursing the person in front of us who is slow to move off at the traffic lights or fumbles their credit card at the supermarket check-out. We live out mercy when, at a restaurant, we choose not to send back food that isn't just right, especially if the waiter looks overwhelmed and stressed.

Mercy means we are patient with the quirks of others, we are open to those with whom we may strongly disagree, and we are prepared to give others the benefit of the doubt. To be merciful is to be ready to forgive others for their innocent mistakes, it is to create an atmosphere where people feel safe enough to admit their slip-ups. Mercy is to correct someone without lording it over them. It is to reprimand them without "drawing blood".

Friends, mercy embraces a deeply felt concern and a good heartedness. Mercy is to offer someone who has inconvenienced you or offended you a second chance.

And you know, this is just what God is like.

This is just what God is like - for God doesn't curse us if we muck things up. God doesn't condemn us if we fumble or make a gaffe. God doesn't banish us if we put our foot in it. God doesn't malign, defame or trash us because we make mistakes or get it wrong.

For you see, God is a God of mercy.

In John's Gospel we hear these words:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16).

Friends, here is a most splendid manifesto on mercy. "For God so loved the world" – in other words, God loved the world in such a way – "that he gave his only Son".

And this "such a way" is mercy, pure mercy – it's good heartedness, it's loving kindness. It's a deep concern for those who have mucked things up. It's a willingness to offer a second chance to those who have made mistakes and are by no means "angels" in the sight of God!

It's out of a commitment of sheer mercy towards every one of us that God acts in the way God does. It's out of a commitment of sheer mercy towards you and me that God gives his only Son that we may not perish but have life – and have life in all its fullness.

And this action leads to the gift of grace, to the offering to each and everyone of unconditional love. This is a love which serves to restore us and make us whole.

It's gift that says a big "yes" to us and to the truth that we are acceptable to God, we are reconciled to God, we are eternally valued and cherished by God, no matter who we are.

Paul the great apostle experienced mercy. Paul was once a pious, one-eyed, zealous tyrant when it came to his attitude and approach towards early Christians. Paul created havoc as he entered the houses of those who followed Jesus, dragging men and women off to prison (Acts 8:3). Paul sought to hunt Christians down where-ever they were (Acts 9:1-2) and he sanctioned the death of Stephen by witnessing his brutal stoning to death (Acts 7:57-8:1).

But God never gave up on this obsessive, fiery Pharisee. Many of you will be aware of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus and today, in our reading from the First Letter to Timothy, we learn about a former "*blasphemer, persecutor, and a man of violence*" who receives the mercy of God (1 Timothy 1:13:16).

This man is Paul. And, despite his multitude of faults, despite his hostility and his loathing of Christians, God acts mercifully to Paul. And because of God's mercy, Paul is healed of his compulsion to malign and denigrate. Paul is freed from his obsession to revile and curse those who follow Jesus. Paul is healed and made free to become one of greatest among all Christians as he goes on to proclaim the good news of the Gospel!

Friends, mercy is important. Mercy stands at the core of Christian faith. Mercy is to resist condemning others. It is to be generous and kind. It is to refrain from judging others by being compassionate.

Mercy is to refuse the act of revenge and retribution by being open, patient and forgiving. It is to give others the benefit of the doubt by offering second chances.

Friends, this is mercy - and this is what we are called to do!

There are many references to grace in the vocabulary of the church. But we can't experience grace if there is no mercy. To be merciful is to be Christ-like – and out of this Christ-like way of being - comes the gift of grace.

God's mercy is bigger than all our mistakes. While driving in reverse is pointless, while we can't wind back history and we can't fully erase the past, God's mercy gives us hope. God's mercy gives us a way forward. God's mercy lays the foundation stone of grace and a life as God intends it.

As followers of Jesus, mercy, and the offering of mercy to others, is to be at the heart of who we are and of what we do.

Indeed, let mercy fill your life. For as Jesus says, "*be merciful just as God is merciful to you*" (Luke 6:36).

Amen.