

“Just Mercy”
God at the Movies, 2020

[Bumper Video 2:31]

Well, today we come to the end of *God at the Movies* for another year. We’ve done 17 of these series now – not counting a special *God at the Movies Christmas* edition – and we will most likely do it again next year. I say “most likely”, because in order to have *God at the Movies*, you really need two main ingredients: God – and He’s always available – and *movies* – which I don’t know if you noticed, but...there have been very few movies so far in 2020. At this rate I’d have to do *Tenet* and *Sonic the Hedgehog* and call it a day!

I will tell you, if things stay the same by Spring, I have an idea to do something that we’ve kicked around for years and never pulled the trigger on – a *God at the Movies Classics Edition*. There are tons of movies that I have seen through spiritual lenses over the years before I pastored this church. The hard part would be narrowing the list down to six weeks! I can tell you one that is definitely on the short list because it’s one of my all-time favorite films...that almost no-one has even heard of, much less seen.

The story behind the making of *Brazil* in 1985 is almost as fantastic as the screenplay itself. It’s a black-comedy, sci-fi dystopian fantasy directed by a member of Monty Python, so it’s as close to an “Anthony Scoma Presents” feature as you’re going to find. I tell you all this because at the very beginning of the film, we see a fly buzzing around a giant room of bureaucratic typewriters clacking out documents, when suddenly our fly goes splat between the typewriter hammer and the paper, creating a “period” where there shouldn’t be one and the next thing we see, jack-booted law enforcement officers break down a door, apprehending – and quickly executing – the resident who has been misidentified because of the stray punctuation on what turned out to be a criminal warrant.

A low-level bureaucrat is then dispatched to sort out the error with the distraught family. But the whole film is really about the question of the two kinds of evil. There’s personal evil – I’m going to do you wrong. And then there is systemic evil – the system itself works against human flourishing and it’s very difficult to hold any one individual accountable for it. Which also makes it much more difficult to correct. But make no mistake, the Bible clearly identifies both kinds of evil in our world – personal and systemic.

And it seems like systemic evil has been a key theme in our series this year. We talked about mental illness and the nature of society's response to the least of these, we talked about economic disparity and the lack of hope that can bring, we've talked about the evils of empire that squash individuality and human dignity, we talked about patriarchal sexism that treats half of the human race as second class citizens. All of these things are evil – all of them are far from the heart of God - and in all of these things there's *personal* evil sure you could be a misogynist, you can take advantage of the poor through your own greedy practices, you can be the Emperor that issues these destructive orders. But one might argue that the more nefarious part of the problem is the *systemic* nature of evil - the *system* itself that keeps people down. And how do you fight a system?

That is the big question of our film selection this morning. In some regards, it could not be more different from fictional *Brazil* – but in the ways that matter most, the key questions are the same. *Just Mercy* is based on a true story of injustice based on the book of the same name by Bryan Stevenson, who as a gifted young Harvard Law graduate moved to Alabama in the late 80's and founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a collection of lawyers dedicated to defending the poor, the wrongly condemned and those trapped in the furthest reaches of our criminal justice system.

A system by the way that is very, very broken. And it's broken along both personal and systemic lines. Yes, there are racist sheriffs and incompetent judges and cruel guards and cowardly prosecutors and lazy defenders and indifferent bureaucrats all the way up and down the chain, but the system itself seems bent on cruelty and destruction. *Just Mercy* specifically tells the story of one innocent man, Walter McMillian, aka Johnny D, and his uphill battle to spare his life from a sentence of death.

I'm going to spend less time on the specifics of the movie today. You should watch it if you haven't already. But because of this movie I did a deep dive into the issue of justice and mass incarceration in America. And I have a lot to talk about. So we're going to jump right to the climatic courtroom drama at the end of the movie. And believe me, as George and Weezy sang, "It took a whole lot of trying, just to get up that hill."

By the way if you think racial injustice is just a matter of history, this all took place in the early 90's. I was a student at UT. That's not history, that's my life! We get caught in this pattern of "that was then, let the past be the past" without realizing that today's present is tomorrow's past. We have to deal with it at some point. So let's watch Bryan's opening argument at a trial to finally have the false charges against Johnny D dropped. [**A Test 2:00**]

It's a test. And right now, in America, we are failing the test. As a nation, we make up 5% of the world's population...and we have 25% of the world's prisoners. We imprison more people than Russia or China or Iran...and it's not even close. It didn't used to be this way. The truth is, our prison population has spiked by 790% since 1980.

“Well”, you say, “We must have a lot of crime then.” No, actually crime rates in America have decreased steadily for the last 25 years. Of course, we don't realize this. I just saw a poll conducted by the Barna group in 2017 that asked what people think the crime rate has done over that time period – remember the correct answer is *decreased* – 60% of US adults think that it has increased. And among the religious category that this church would most fit – evangelicals – the number is 81%!

We live in a culture of fear. And everybody is selling us fear – the media because it sells papers and the politicians because it wins votes – but it's nonsense. We have almost the exact same crime rate as Germany. In Germany, there are 93 prisoners for every 100,000 adults and children. In the United States – again, same crime rate – the rate is roughly eight times that or 750 per 100,000.

And the most striking feature of mass incarceration is it's racial dimension. No other nation in the world imprisons as many of it's racial or ethnic minorities as we do. There are more black men in prison in America today than there were black male slaves in 1850 – ten years before the Civil War. Let me break down that 750 per 100,000 incarceration rate for you. For white males 392 out of every 100,000 are in jail or prison. Black imprisonment is nearly 7 times higher – 2,272 prisoners for every 100,000 black males in this country. African Americans make up 13% of the national population and 40% of our prison population.

How do you explain that? It's easy. We were founded, have been and continue to be a racist nation. Or I guess you can just say that black people are more inclined to crime by their nature – which would make you a racist by the way. I could do the whole sermon about this, but I'm not going to. I will just tell you I've done the research – I read a ton to prepare for this sermon – and the systemic racial bias in our justice system is beyond debate.

I will give you a shortcut – everyone should watch the Netflix documentary *13th*, which traces a line from the Thirteenth Amendment which Constitutionally ended slavery after the Civil War, to the era of public lynching terrorism to Jim Crow to the Civil Rights era, to the war on drugs to mass incarceration. Most of the authors I read – including Bryan Stevenson – are featured in that documentary.

There are a lot of pipelines that have added to our mass incarceration crisis; mental health, immigration, privatization of prisons – corporations profit from locking up more and more our fellow citizens – the juvenile justice system’s school-to-prison pipeline, the eroding of rehabilitation options – this “tough on crime” mindset that prisoners are there to be punished, not reformed – and the economic and societal disenfranchisement that accompanies it, that all but ensures 60% of the prison population will wind up back in the system upon release. But for pure numbers, nothing has filled our prison population more than the War on Drugs that began during the Reagan era and was expanded to unprecedented levels under Bill Clinton – this really is a bipartisan mess we’re in.

In less than thirty years, our nation’s prison population went from 300,000 to more than 2 million with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase. Things like 3-strikes-your-out laws, mandatory sentencing guidelines, doing away with federal parole, have led to an enormous increase in drug-based incarceration.

And it’s not racially equal as is evidenced by the often related anecdote that during the crack epidemic of the 80’s and 90’s, sentences for crack cocaine – which was primarily in the black community – were ten times higher than sentences for powder cocaine – which was primarily in the white community – even though the two are chemically the same thing.

By the way, would you like to hazard a guess as to which ethnic group in this country does more drugs? Be careful! According to US Department of Health and Human Services research, the numbers of people using illegal drugs breaks down along racial lines like this; whites 6.4%, blacks 6.4%, Hispanics, 5.3%. And yet if you walked into a prison, you would swear that couldn’t be the case.

Black and brown bodies are sentenced for drug crimes at rate – depending on the state – of 20 to 50 times higher than white drug offenders. I think it’s telling that when the problem is poor urban black communities decimated by crack, it calls for a “war” but when it’s poor rural white communities decimated by opioids, it’s a “national health crisis”. Racism persists in America and it’s far more than just personal evil – “I’m prejudged against you” – it’s systemic – the system itself works against you - which is much harder to uncover and cure.

Now, I’m sure there are more than one person listening who would prefer I didn’t talk about this. Maybe think that church isn’t the place to talk about this. I disagree. Martin Luther King once said, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”

I think that's right. And I have plenty of prophetic zeal for you this morning. Because there is a deep theological component to all of this. And that's what I want to shift to for the rest of the message. These are tricky sermons, because I have to give you enough data to set the contemporary context. Last week, after the *Little Women* feminism talk, some of the UT Chi Alpha students were leaving after second service and I said, "Well, do you feel like you're leaving sociology class? Are you ready for the midterm?" It can be like that.

But this is a spiritual issue. There's a reason why we *must* talk about an issue like this in church. And it goes beyond race, it goes beyond justice even, it's an issue with the human heart. Michele Alexander puts her finger on it, I think. "Criminals, it turns out, are the one social group in America we have permission to hate. In 'colorblind' America, criminals are the new whipping boys. They are entitled to no respect and little moral concern." Isn't that it? "I mean, Anthony, who cares? They're criminals. They shouldn't have broken the law. You get what you deserve."

Well, first of all, let's not forget the main point of today's film, that there are a number of imprisoned folk who are innocent. Not only Johnny D, but his death row cellmate – in the film at least – Anthony Hinton were exonerated in real life.

Just before the credits roll, the movie reminds us that "For every nine people executed in the U.S., one person on death row has been proven innocent and released. A shocking rate of error." Even if you support the death penalty, you can't be ok with a death penalty that is so irrefutably flawed in its administration.

But leaving aside even the question of guilt or innocence. There's actually a greater issue for the Christian. And it goes to the very heart of our faith. You see Christianity is not a "law and order" religion. I worry sometimes that we think it is. But it was the "law and order" wing of religion that Jesus fought against the most, as it turns out. They once brought him a woman *caught* in adultery. She was guilty. And the law clearly said she should be executed. But you know the story, Jesus showed her grace and set her free. And the "law and order" faction hated him for it.

Don't forget our talk about empire; the gospel does not operate according to the weapons of the enemy – specifically the use of force, physical or financial. We should notice how remarkable it is that so many of the central characters in the story of the New Testament were arrested. John the Baptist, Jesus, all twelve of the disciples, Paul and his various companions, John of Patmos – they all ended up in jail at some point to uphold "law and order". We even have a genre of scripture known as Prison Epistles.

You should know that in this country, “law and order” language has always been tied to the issue of race – whether explicitly or subtly. Again, Alexander explains, “The rhetoric of ‘law and order’ was first mobilized in the late 1950s as Southern governors and law enforcement officials attempted to generate and mobilize white opposition to the Civil Rights Movement.” Let’s not forget, that in response to the 1963 March on Washington, that gave us the iconic “I Have a Dream” speech – a now classic bit of American pride – the FBI issued a memo calling Dr. King “the most dangerous negro in our nation”. Federal law enforcement spent more time and money on Martin Luther King than any individual besides Jimmy Hoffa. Fannie Lou Hamer, activist for blacks and women’s rights, dedicated Christian, and one of my heroes said, “Black people know what white people mean when they say ‘law and order’.”

But even aside from our contemporary history, there are massive *theological* problems with grounding the Christian faith in law and order. I don’t have time to get into what Paul means by “the law” – it’s very nuanced – but he is very clear that it is not the foundation of being “justified” or in right standing with God. Judaism was predicated upon the laws ability to set us right with God. But Paul doesn’t mince words in **Galatians 2:15-16**, “*We...know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith*

in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.”

We are made right by God, not by law and order, but by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. What *about* Jesus Christ specifically? His death and resurrection. It was through this – through the gospel – that Jesus enabled us to have a right relationship before God. We were God’s enemies and Jesus set us right.

There’s a very key theological concept that Paul lays out in **2 Corinthians 5:17-19**, “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who **reconciled** us to himself through Christ and **gave us the ministry of reconciliation**: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*”

I cannot overstate how central this is to the Christian life. This is *everything*! The gospel says we were estranged from God, but on the cross, Jesus brought us back together – he reconciled us. But it doesn’t stop there. Now, *we* have been given that same ministry of reconciliation that Jesus had. This is the central act of the Christian. If our main Christian *ethic* is love – love God and love one another – then the main *act* that demonstrates that love, is reconciliation.

Reconciliation is the center of Pauline theology. This was Paul's *whole life*, reconciling...Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, slaves and masters, parents and children, young and old, any category you can think of. And if you are a follower of Christ, then – like Paul – reconciliation is your main calling as well. This is why the Sermon on the Mount calls us to bless those who curse us, turn the other cheek...because that's what Jesus did on the cross – “father forgive them...”

So the chief goal of Christianity is not obeying the law, but reconciling others to God. Christianity is about reconciliation. And reconciliation requires grace. And grace is restorative. This is why Christians cannot support efforts of justice that are merely punitive. That's what our current incarceration system in this country is about, punishment. We can't support that. We have to demand that the goal of any justice system is restoration. Restoring the wayward individual to a functional place in society.

Will every single person be restored? Of course not. People have free will and many will use that will to choose evil. But another person's evil does not release us as Christians from our call to the ministry of reconciliation. Don't forget that crucified on either side of Jesus were two criminals – and not innocents like Jesus, they confessed that they deserved to be there. And one accepted the ministry of Jesus and was on the spot made right with God and promised a life in eternity – while the other criminal mocked and rejected Jesus. Your ministry is no different.

Let me show you just one picture of what Biblical restorative justice looks like. Most Christians know the story of Zacchaeus, the “wee little man” who climbed a tree to get a better look at Jesus. But a closer examination of Luke 19 reveals that he was a criminal who after encountering Jesus is restored to God, his victims, his community and himself.

We may not think of Zacchaeus as a criminal, but his community certainly did, and despised him for it. As a tax collector he became “very wealthy” by cheating, defrauding and stealing from others through the corrupt – if technically “legal” – oppression of the Roman Empire. We know that first century tax collectors routinely charged their fellow Jews more than they owed in order to keep more profits for themselves – Zacchaeus later admits he had cheated people. But as long as Rome was getting paid, they didn't care about the poor suckers being taken advantage of by an evil and unjust system.

So Zacchaeus' own flourishing was rooted in institutional injustice. And his community *hated* him for it. Not only was he a white collar criminal, but religiously, his contact with the Gentile overlords made him ceremonially unclean and thus cut off from Temple worship – and consequently right standing with God. He didn't just climb that tree because he was short; physically and socially he was isolated from both Jesus and the crowd.

And so we can better understand how radical it was when Jesus said, in **Luke 19:5**, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” First of all, he called him by name, which signifies that Jesus knew who he was dealing with. This guy was notorious in the community. But then he shocks everyone by going to eat in the unclean house of this unclean criminal and by doing so, bringing the one that society considered “the other” back into fellowship with God.

And Zacchaeus is transformed. Not just personal inward salvation of the heart, but transformed towards the community as well. Look at his response in **v.8**, “*But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*” Two things to note there, he recognizes his criminal guilt and agrees to make restitution to his victims – and that will require honestly naming and facing all the people that he has harmed.

But then he recognizes his crimes haven’t just hurt his direct victims, but he has damaged the broader community as well. Crime tears at the very fabric of society. And so that’s what the giving to the poor is about. He acknowledges that the system of which he had taken part had damaged society – falling most heavily, as crime always does, on the economically disadvantaged - and he wants a direct hand in repairing the damage.

It’s a beautiful scene, and then Jesus adds the cherry on top, **v.9**, “*Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”*” As a “son of Abraham”, Zacchaeus is no longer defined by the offenses and injustices he enacted – he’s not to be known as an “ex-con”. “Convicted felon” is not his identity. In Christ, he becomes a “son of Abraham”, no longer destined to exist in isolation, but invited to participate in covenant community. This is what restorative justice looks like. That’s a picture of reconciliation.

But I want you to notice something. None of that was predicated on what Zacchaeus *deserved*. At the moment in which Jesus called him out of that tree, Zacchaeus was a scoundrel whose criminal activities *deserved* justice, not forgiveness. Justice is getting what you deserve. Mercy is *not* getting what you deserve. But grace is something altogether different. Grace is not just being forgiven of your debt, but given the inheritance of the king in its place. And reconciliation is all about grace.

So who *deserves* grace? Nobody. By the very definition of what grace is. That’s why we sing about it being “amazing”. Grace should always amaze us. As the central ethic of the Kingdom of God, grace stands at odds with the ethic of the Kingdom of this World – which is meritocracy, you get what you deserve.

And Jesus was very clear about who the main recipients of his grace were to be. It's ironic, we began *God at the Movies* this year – in *Joker* – by quoting from Matthew 25, and we're going to end the same way. Near the end of Matthews gospel, Jesus explains what the end times is going to look like and then when he gets to the end, he talks about “judgment day.” He says on judgment day the Lord will have all of us standing in front of him, and he will set on one side the people who are saved and on the other side the people who are lost.

This is what he's going to say to the people who are lost. This is in **Matthew 25:41-43**, *“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’”*

Well, that's a lot to take in. And so the people naturally have some follow up questions. **V.44**, *“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’”* “Jesus, I saw you on the poster at the Christian bookstore. I saw you in the painting in my grandma's kitchen. But I never saw you on the street corner, or camping under the bridge or on death row.”

V.45, *“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’”* Summary: This is what God says: “If you don't love the poor, if you don't love the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the *prisoner*...If you don't love *them*, then no matter what you say, you don't love *me*. You do not have a relationship with me. The way you treat the ‘least of these’ tells me the reality of how you regard me.”

Here's what I said at the start of the series, let me stress it again as clearly as I can. A deep social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to others, especially the poor and overlooked in society is the inevitable sign of real faith and a real connection with God. This isn't some liberal or conservative agenda. This is the heart of the ministry of reconciliation. The heart of the gospel.

I came across a quote by reform activist Angela Davis that has haunted me this week, “The prison becomes a way of disappearing people in the false hope of disappearing the underlying social problems they represent.” Everybody on Jesus' “least of these” list; it's easier just to ignore them. By the way, the same thing is true with homelessness – which is one of the main pipelines to prison – our homeless crisis in Austin has become much more visible since the City Council decriminalized public camping a year ago. But make no mistake, that didn't *create* the homeless crisis. Believe me, we work with the county on this. They were always there. Hidden in the woods. Hidden behind the grocery stores. But a *hidden* crisis doesn't make it any less of a crisis.

Jesus will not allow us to hide from “the least of these.” So, you’re welcome to despise or ignore criminals. But you can’t despise and ignore them *and* be a Christian. The Bible paints Christians in the most unique light. The world tries to pigeon hole us into this or the other political or social category, but it simply can’t be done. A gospel transformed Christian is not a liberal or a conservative. Not traditional or progressive. Not Republican or Democrat. We’re much more interesting than that.

Let me show you something from the book of Hebrews. The author has spent the entire thing explaining how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Jewish law with all its customs and prohibitions. It’s an in-depth look at faith and discipleship and then it wraps up in the final chapter with some “closing exhortations”. It says, therefore, in light of all these twelve chapters of theology, **Hebrews 13:1**, “*Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.*”

Ok, but that’s an REO Speedwagon lyric, what does it *mean* to “keep on loving”? Fortunately the writer gets very practical in the next four verses, (v.2-5), “*Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*”

Now, look at that list – be friendly to strangers (immigrants is what it means), seek justice for prisoners, avoid sexual immorality – whether you’re married or single – and don’t be greedy for money. Is that list liberal or conservative? It refuses categorization. It steps on *everybody’s* toes. Liberals say, “My body, My choice”. Conservatives say, “My money, my choice.” Christians say, “Nope. Ultimately it’s not about me.”

Well who is it about then? It’s about “the least of these.” No, Anthony, it’s about God. Fair enough, but what did Jesus just say? How do you do it “for God?” You do it unto the least of these – a list that specifically includes the prisoner. But anybody that society says is “the other” – the outcast, the one that doesn’t matter.

But I have to close with a warning for you. And the warning involves our motivation. Because the Bible is clear that without the right motives, even the right actions will eventually be corrupted. Jesus said it’s not the outside of the cup that matters, but the inside. And so what is your motivation for caring for the least of these? Is it charity? Pity? “Oh, poor Johnny D, that’s awful.” Nothing wrong with charity and empathy, but it’s not enough. I want to show you a clip from the film where a young Bryan Stevenson explains to his mother why he - as a Harvard educated black man who could do anything he wanted - is moving to Alabama to work for death row inmates. He gets it...[**Could Have Been Me 1:02**]

It could have been me. The Bible actually forces you one step forward to say, “It *was* me.” Let me show you something, Jesus’ own brother writes in **James 1:27**, “*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*” Take care of widows and orphans, that’s a repeated theme in the Bible, in fact, there’s one more category that is often mentioned with it – the “stranger in your midst”, the immigrant, the alien, the refugee. It’s sometimes called the “triad of the oppressed”, but you see it all over the place – NT and OT – and it’s short hand for the least of these.

Now, let’s ask again about that motivation. Why are we, as Christians, to look after widows and orphans and immigrants? Because they have a hard life and we feel sorry for them? No. It’s because that is what *we were* - if not physically, certainly spiritually, and the Bible makes a big deal of tying the physical and spiritual existence closely together. So let’s think about what these three categories demonstrate for us.

What kind of status did a widow have in the ancient world? None. In the rigid patriarchy she couldn’t work outside of the family structure. She was completely reliant on others for her very survival – either through remarriage or the care of her children.

God says, that one of the primary metaphors of salvation is that you are the bride and Jesus Christ is the groom. That’s not just about romantic love the way we view marriage – it’s about having a standing in the community. It’s about your very survival.

How about orphans, how did they fare in the ancient world? About as well as they do now! Actually much worse. Children had no rights in the ancient world. In the Roman Empire, babies could legally be exposed to the elements to die. By the way, this is why I am anti-abortion, because abortion takes the two most “least of these” categories in human history - women and children – and pits them against one another. But back to orphans, one of the primary metaphors of salvation is being adopted into the family of God. We are children of God, not through nature or biology, but through adoption.

How about immigrants? And they may be the most ignored of the big three in the current American church. But that’s always been the case. The world says you take care of your own first and let the outsider fend for themselves. But again and again – I did a whole sermon on this a few years ago – the Bible makes it clear that spiritually speaking, you were – not just an outsider - an enemy combat of the Kingdom of God. And God granted you citizenship to His Kingdom.

So, three main metaphors of what it means to be a Christian, you are a bride, you are a child, you are a citizen. Why? Because you deserved to be? Because you earned it? Because you had it coming to you? No! Because of the unmerited grace and love of God, through His son Jesus Christ. Grace means that you are all of these things precisely because you *didn't* earn it, but because Jesus – who most certainly did earn it – swapped places with you.

And guess what, just because those are the big three, don't think they are the *only* categories of grace. You were spiritually poor...and Jesus made you rich. You were spiritually naked...and Jesus clothed you in his righteousness. You were spiritually starving...and Jesus fed you with his Word. And never forget, **Galatians 3:22 (NLT)** *“But the Scriptures declare that we are all prisoners of sin, so we receive God's promise of freedom only by believing in Jesus Christ.”*

You were a slave to sin. You were a prisoner of darkness. And Jesus Christ – through his death and Resurrection – set you free. So when I ask myself, who is “the least of these”, who is the widow, who is the orphan, who is the stranger, who is the poor, who is the prisoner...the answer is “I am.” And Christ rescued me and cared for me, when he didn't have to.

So it's not charity or pity that motivates me to care for the least of these. Oh no, that can actually make me proud and arrogant – and God can't stand that, just like you can't stand that. No. The motivation to love the least of these is **gratitude**. Because, “That could have been me.” A debt is owed. Even if you have to go to Alabama to pay it! If someone shows a great kindness to you, the worst thing you can do is to ignore them, or worse, be nasty to them.

There is something especially irksome to God about human ingratitude. I'm going to close with this parable, it's really perfect because it speaks to *both* prison and the attitudes of our heart. In Mathew 18 it says that the disciples asked Jesus how many times they had to forgive someone who sinned against them? “Is seven times enough?” And to show them that forgiveness isn't a matter of accounting, but of the heart, he told them the story of a man who owed the king a large amount of money. Let's call it \$10 million dollars.

Well, it's an amount that a typical person could not hope to earn in a lifetime. And then, as today, when you owe someone money and don't pay, the courts will step in to provide justice. So this man is found guilty and is ordered to be sold off into slavery – he and his whole family – in order to satisfy the debt.

So the man pleaded with the king for mercy. And the king was touched. It says, **Matthew 18:27**, “*The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*” He showed grace. Not because the man deserved it, what the man *deserved* was to pay his debt to society for essentially robbing the king. His property rights were violated! But the king showed grace. And what was required in return? Not the physical money, that’s impossible. But gratitude.

But here’s where the story gets good. Jesus said immediately upon his release, this guy goes to a man that owes him \$100 bucks. Not \$10 million, just \$100 bucks. And it says he gets violent with him – chokes him – and demands payment of the debt. And now this guy, his fellow-servant, begs for time so he can pay back the money. Jesus is such a brilliant storyteller that he uses the exact same words of appeal for both of the servants. I mean, it couldn’t be more obvious what his response was supposed to be.

V.30, “*But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.*” And we say – as Jesus’ audience would have no doubt said – “Why you no good son of a…” Well, word gets back to the king and he had the same reaction.

V. 32-34, “*Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*” Isn’t that a satisfying ending? We love to see cruel people get their’s, don’t we? Heck, that’s why the John Wick films even exist!

But the words Jesus’ chooses to follow up the parable are some of the most bone-chilling in all the Bible. (**V.35**) “*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*” The worst thing in the world – worse even than being a sinner – is to be a sinner saved by grace…who refuses to offer grace to others. It’s literally ungrateful. It’s rude. How can you be rude to God? When you realize how much God has done for you?

But maybe that’s the problem. I think many of us don’t realize just what God has done for us. Because many Christians don’t understand the gospel. Oh, they get religion – “If you will, God will.” That’s a thousand religions, but it’s *not* the gospel. Gospel Christianity is “You didn’t, but God still will anyway.” And what did God do? Look at Jesus.

You see, Jesus didn't just tell us what to do. He did it himself. He didn't ask us to do anything he wasn't willing to do first. When he said "forgive those who curse you" – he did. When he said, "care for the least of these" – he did. In fact, when he said, "You are to *identify* with the least of these" – he did that too.

Christ came into our context – into our story - taking on marginalized flesh, and upon his birth to impoverished parents the local authorities placed a bounty on his head. He faced ethnic profiling and social stigma because of the community he came from, and he was a refugee who was falsely convicted as a criminal and sentenced to the death penalty. That's who Jesus became. The least of these. And he did it for you. So what should a heart that understands that look like?

The Bible never calls upon Christians to be "tough on crime." It does call us to stand up for justice. But in a way that involves reconciliation and restoration and grace and mercy. Just mercy. It's not only what we have received, it's what we owe.

Let's pray...