

Bible study on Restitution

"...FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE."- MATT.3:8

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[DISCLAIMER - THIS IS A DISCUSSION STARTER AND IS BY NO MEANS EXHAUSTIVE ON THIS TOPIC.]

Introduction - Forgiveness vs Justice?

Recently my daughters reported to me a comment that both the Rabbi and the Imam who spoke at their school had made. Each in his turn emphasised that "Christianity has to do with forgiveness" but that their faith (Islam or Judaism) was about justice.

That Christianity can be portrayed as only about forgiveness and as unconcerned about justice, reflects how little understanding the cross of Christ has in the popular mind. Sadly, this is often so because it is not always clear in popular Christian thinking either.

Justice and the Gospel

Because God's "*eyes are too pure to look upon evil*" and because He "*cannot tolerate wrong*" (**Habakkuk 1:13**) and only "*... he who has clean hands and a pure heart will stand in His Holy place*" (**Psalms 24:3 and 4**), God was unable simply to forgive sin lightly.

Thus God's solution to this problem was the cross of Christ – which on the one hand satisfied his love which insisted he forgive His children. On the other hand it satisfied his justice which, though we were unable to pay it, yet equally insisted that a price be paid for our sin. The only solution to this predicament, the Bible teaches us, was the ultimate and



In January 2003, Charles & Rita Robertson handed over their farm on the outskirts of George to the Foundation of Church Led Restitution on SA



devastating one, where God, the only Righteous Judge, had to take on human flesh in Christ and die in our place. That alone would satisfy both the justice and righteousness of God.

The whole point of this truth, so fundamental to the Christian message is that God's grace and mercy do not abolish his holy justice at all but rather accept and fulfill it on our behalf (**Matt 5:17**).

So it is that both righteousness and peace are to be found in the cross ("*...righteousness and peace kiss one another.*" (**Ps.85: 10**)).

Therefore this justice which, together with righteousness, forms the foundation of God's throne (**Ps. 97:2**) is also foundational to the Gospel and is established in the doctrine of the cross.

Repentance and it's fruit

Likewise, God's passion for righteousness is revealed in making righteousness essential to our response to this gospel also. (**Matt.6: 33-** " ...But seek first his Kingdom **and his righteousness...**) He has stressed repentance alongside of faith. It is impossible to please God without faith, but faith without the evidence of faith, is dead (**James2: 26**).

This evidence of good deeds (fruit) says John the Baptist had to be demonstrated in order to authenticate repentance. "*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance*" (**Matt3: 8**).

That Jesus began his public teaching ministry picking up where John the Baptist left off (**Matt.4: 17**) also indicates the stress he laid on the importance of John's message of repentance.

What are the fruits of repentance ?

Jesus summarised the content of John's message in **Matt 21:32** as: "*.. the way of righteousness*" This therefore indicates that the fruit John was looking for was righteousness.

The essential truth about righteousness, which we rightly teach, is that righteousness cannot be earned through our deeds of righteousness but through the gift of God's grace working through faith (**Ephes.2: 8-10**) . It is not accomplished because our deeds were found to be good enough but it is credited to us (**Romans 4: 23-24**) because Christ's deeds were accepted by God on our behalf as good enough.

But this faith, then, if it is real and not just theoretical, is a faith that works (**James 2:18-26**) and brings a righteousness that is both positional and functional not just positional only. This is why Jesus said that our righteousness must exceed (surpass in extent) that of the scribes and Pharisees. (**Matt.5: 20**). The test of the genuineness of our faith therefore, is tangible deeds of righteousness.

Grace and righteous living

But it is important to note here - lest we stray into legalism and pharisaicism - what Dewi Hughes says in *The God of the Poor* . He says that the struggle is not about who is and who isn't in the in the Kingdom but about "behaving in a way that is consistent with its citizenship" (p.39). The New Testament challenge to those who are "in Christ" and in grace is that what the law was unable to do in promoting righteousness in us, grace now accomplishes. Therefore "how much more" righteous living

shouldn't we expect from one another under the New Covenant of grace than under the old one of law. (see **Rom.5; Heb.9 and Titus 2: 11-14**)

We have all quoted **Hebrews 12:5-11** with regard to the disciplining of individuals in our churches. I have even heard this passage referred to when high profile Christians have fallen in the public arena. We say (rightly) we would rather they weren't reinstated in ministry until sufficient time has passed. Why? So that we can see whether their repentance is genuine or not - whether the discipline has been received sufficiently by that individual for them to have been "*...trained by it.*" (v.11). The way we check this is by whether or not the "*peaceful fruit of righteousness*" (RSV) has been produced or not. Surely the same thinking is justified in Black South African Christians when they hear White South Africans say they are sorry about their part in Apartheid but never see any significant move towards righting those wrongs (i.e.restitution).

Attitudes, Apartheid Affirmative action and Zimbabwe.

Clearly this is always a heart issue and a matter of attitude rather than just deeds. But our approach to attitude vs action in this matter of repentance has to be a "both-and" one rather than an "either-or" approach. It is surely no good to practice affirmative action accompanied by our complaints and grinding teeth.

Those of us privileged South Africans who have children coming out of school into the meager job market, have to see that for whites now to be at the end of the jobs queue (rather than at the beginning) is but a

light let-off for the sins of the past. Likewise for increased taxes and land redistribution. The trouble is that sorting these matters out ought to have been a charge led by the Church rather than an initiative from the government that we reluctantly drag our feet to follow. What would Zimbabwe look like now had this been the attitude in the Christian churches there?

Repentance, Righteousness and Restitution

What then are the fruits of righteousness? **Ezekiel 33: 14+15** (see below) clearly states that restitution is a mark of a repentant man who is forgiven and a failure to make restitution is a mark of a wicked man who is not.

Should we not be applying the same principle to our Christian churches implicated by our approach to Apartheid too. If we say we have repented of Apartheid then there must be some evidence or fruit demonstrating that the change is genuine. If someone steals my car and thereafter says they have repented but makes no attempt to return the stolen car (restitution), surely I have grounds to doubt the genuineness of that repentance?

Now it is up to us in each of our churches rather than this study to bring the application on just how well our churches have been applying these principles. Issues that need addressing include : How much of the poverty in this country is attributable to Apartheid ? How much to colonialism ? How much to irresponsible family planning? Is there such a thing as a poverty spirit or mentality ? If so, how did it come about and how do we address it ? How do we redress the emotional and psychological damage done by racial discrimination?