**What is the theological mandate for restitution?**

For too long, Christians of all stripes have embraced a gospel of cheap grace. Some want Christianity to be easy; for it to be beneficial personally only. As a result, false gospels are embraced, ranging from the prosperity gospel to a pietism that focuses on the individual’s personal holiness at the exclusion of the gospel’s demand for social wellness and justice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great 20th century German martyr, memorably said of this false gospel, “Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before.” True discipleship, on the other hand, he summed up this way: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

While that may not be a literal death, although for Bonhoeffer it was, it *does* mean death to one’s own comfort, one’s own determination to protect himself, and one’s own sense of himself as more important than others. None of this comes to us naturally or intuitively. We should expect, then, that the work of restitution and reconciliation on earth will be a difficult and ongoing process, one that demands much of us and is costly if we are to follow in the path of Christ. This sense of realism—that the task ahead is difficult and costly—is one that stands us in good stead when we encounter opposition, resistance and our own frailty.

Restitution involves recognising that, as Christian scripture warns us, the effects of sin accumulate over generations. A man deprived of his land in turn cannot make a living, educate his children, or contribute to the health of his community. His children therefore are unable to recognise their own potential, and the cycle continues.

Christian scripture gives ample examples of restitution as part of the creation of a just society. In the deuteronomical guidelines for observing Jubilee, land was restored to its original owners, debts were forgiven and slaves set free, a periodic levelling of the economic playing field so that wealth could not become too entrenched and the poor could not be exploited without recourse.

The story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19) is a compelling one when we speak of restitution. A tax collector, Zacchaeus had repeatedly defrauded his countrymen. After his encounter with Jesus, he commits to giving away half of his wealth, including compensating those he has robbed up to four times what he owed them. This is not mere generosity; rather, this can be understood as recognition on Zacchaeus’ part that the effects of sin are exacerbated over generations, and wealth taken from one person years ago may have resulted in a string of catastrophes for them over the years. So he does not settle for a simple one-to-one ratio, restoring what he took; he recognises that to truly set things right, he must compensate them for the losses in opportunity, investment and self-betterment that may have come their way had they had the means to take advantage of them. It is only when Zacchaeus makes this statement that Jesus then says, “Surely salvation has come to this house.”

What we must recognise, however, is that people are understandably sceptical of relying on the same people who defrauded them to voluntarily make recompense. Once again, it can leave people at the mercy of the whims of the privileged. Thus the story of Zacchaeus is perhaps best paired with the story of the unjust judge and the persistent widow—a story that comes just one chapter earlier in Luke’s gospel. In this parable, a callous judge finally grants a widow’s cry for justice not because he agrees with her, but because he wants her to stop harassing him. Those wounded by apartheid should hear in Christ’s words, “*I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming*” (Luke 18:5) as encouragement to be clear and persistent in their claims to justice towards those with power.

Christ gives permission in this story for the disenfranchised to continue raising their voices in the pursuit of justice without concern for what others may think. As part of the restitution process, disenfranchised communities who have been traditionally silenced must be empowered to speak up for themselves, to articulate their own needs and to insist that they be heeded. The task of the privileged churches who hear this cry is to align themselves not with the judge, who gives in just to stop her cry, but with the Lord: “will He keep putting them off? I tell you, He will see that they get justice, and quickly.”