**PREACHING RESTITUTION**

**An example of a restitution sermon**

**Text: Luke 18:2-5; 19:1-9**

For too long, Christians of all stripes have embraced a gospel of cheap grace. We tend to want Christianity to be easy; we look for it to be beneficial to us. As a result, we embrace false gospels 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.”

Whilst for Bonhoeffer it was a literal death, it generally means death to one’s own comfort, one’s own determination to protect himself, and one’s own sense of self as being 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 Scripture warns us, the effects of sin accumulate over generations. A person deprived of their land in turn cannot make a living, educate their children, or contribute to the health of their community. Their children therefore are unable to recognise their own potential, and the cycle continues. The damage is felt for generations.

Scripture gives us ample examples of restitution as part of the creation of a just society. In the deuteronomic guidelines for observing Jubilee, land was restored to its original owners, debts were forgiven and slaves set free. It was 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 reflect on restitution. A tax collector, Zacchaeus had repeatedly defrauded his countrymen. Upon 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 time, 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 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 give back. 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 haranguing 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.

In this story, Christ gives permission 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 silenced traditionally must be empowered to speak up for themselves, to articulate their needs and to insist that they be heard. 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.”

**Biblical texts with a restitution focus**

There are many texts in the Bible affirming the need for restitution. Below are examples of such texts. The texts interpreted within their contexts have much potential to educate Christians on the biblical imperative of restitution

**Exodus 21:33-34**

*"If a man opens a pit, or digs a pit and does not cover it over, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution; he shall give money to its owner, and the dead animal shall become his.”*

**Exodus 22:1**

*"If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.”*

**Exodus 22:4**

*"If what he stole is actually found alive in his possession, whether an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double.”*

**Exodus 22:2-3**

*"If the thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no blood guiltiness on his account. But if the sun has risen on him, there will be blood guiltiness on his account. He shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.”*

**Exodus 22:5-6**

*"If a man lets a field or vineyard be grazed bare and lets his animal loose so that it grazes in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best of his own field and the best of his own vineyard. If a fire breaks out and spreads to thorn bushes, so that stacked grain or the standing grain or the field itself is consumed, he who started the fire shall surely make restitution.”*

**Exodus 22:7**

*"If a man gives his neighbour money or goods to keep for him and it is stolen from the man's house, if the thief is caught, he shall pay double.”*

**Exodus 22:8-9**

*“If the thief is not caught, then the owner of the house shall appear before the judges, to determine whether he laid his hands on his neighbour’s property. For every breach of trust, whether it is for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, or for any lost thing about which one says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before the judges; he whom the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbour.”*

**Exodus 22:10-15**

*"If a man gives his neighbour a donkey, an ox, a sheep, or any animal to keep for him, and it dies or is hurt or is driven away while no one is looking, an oath before the LORD shall be made by the two of them that he has not laid hands on his neighbour’s property; and its owner shall accept it, and he shall not make restitution. But if it is actually stolen from him, he shall make restitution to its owner. If it is all torn to pieces, let him bring it as evidence; he shall not make restitution for what has been torn to pieces. If a man borrows anything from his neighbour, and it is injured or dies while its owner is not with it, he shall make full restitution. If its owner is with it, he shall not make restitution; if it is hired, it came for its hire.*

[**Leviticus 5:14-16**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Leviticus/5/14)

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "If a person acts unfaithfully and sins unintentionally against the LORD'S holy things, then he shall bring his guilt offering to the LORD: a ram without defect from the flock, according to your valuation in silver by shekels, in terms of the shekel of the sanctuary, for a guilt offering. He shall make restitution for that which he has sinned against the holy thing, and shall add to it a fifth part of it and give it to the priest. The priest shall then make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering, and it will be forgiven him.”*

[**Leviticus 6:1-6**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Leviticus/6/1)

*The LORD spoke to Moses, saying if anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the LORD by deceiving his neighbour in a matter of deposit or security, or through robbery, or if he has oppressed his neighbour* *or has found something lost and lied about it, swearing falsely—in any of all the things that people do and sin thereby—if he has sinned and has realised his guilt and will restore what he took by robbery or what he got by oppression or the deposit that was committed to him or the lost thing that he found* *or anything about which he has sworn falsely, he shall restore it in full and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs on the day he realizes his guilt.**And he shall bring to the priest as his compensation to the LORD a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering.”*

[**Leviticus 24:17-21**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Leviticus/24/17)

*“If a man takes the life of any human being, he shall surely be put to death. The one who takes the life of an animal shall make it good, life for life…”*

[**Numbers 5:6-7**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Numbers/5/6)

*"Speak to the sons of Israel, 'When a man or woman commits any of the sins of mankind, acting unfaithfully against the LORD, and that person is guilty, then he shall confess his sins which he has committed, and he shall make restitution in full for his wrong and add to it one-fifth of it, and give it to him whom he has wronged.”*

[**2 Samuel 12:5-6**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/2-Samuel/12/5)

*“Then David's anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion."”*

[**2 Samuel 9:7**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/2-Samuel/9/7)

*“David said to him, "Do not fear, for I will surely show kindness to you for the sake of your father Jonathan, and will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul; and you shall eat at my table regularly."”*

[**1 Samuel 6:17**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/1-Samuel/6/17)

*“These are the golden tumors which the Philistines returned for a guilt offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron.”*

[**1 Kings 20:34**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/1-Kings/20/34)

*“Ben-hadad said to him, "The cities which my father took from your father I will restore, and you shall make streets for yourself in Damascus, as my father made in Samaria." Ahab said, "And I will let you go with this covenant." So he made a covenant with him and let him go.”*

[**2 Kings 8:1-6**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/2-Kings/8/1)

*“Now Elisha spoke to the woman whose son he had restored to life, saying, "Arise and go with your household, and sojourn wherever you can sojourn; for the LORD has called for a famine, and it will even come on the land for seven years." So the woman arose and did according to the word of the man of God, and she went with her household and sojourned in the land of the Philistines seven years. At the end of seven years, the woman returned from the land of the Philistines and she went out to appeal to the king for her house and for her field. Now the king was talking with Gehazi, the servant of the man of God, saying, "Please relate to me all the great things that Elisha has done."As he was relating to the king how he had restored to life the one who was dead, behold, the woman whose son he had restored to life appealed to the king for her house and for her field. And Gehazi said, "My lord, O king, this is the woman and this is her son, whom Elisha restored to life." When the king asked the woman, she related it to him. So the king appointed for her a certain officer, saying, "Restore all that was hers and all the produce of the field from the day that she left the land even until now.””*

[**Nehemiah 5:10-12**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Nehemiah/5/10)

*"And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them." Then they said, "We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say" So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.”*

[**Proverbs 6:31**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Proverbs/6/31)

*“But when he is found, he must repay sevenfold; He must give all the substance of his house.”*

**Isaiah 5: 8-9**

*“Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land. The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing: “Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants…”*

[**Isaiah 53:10-12**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Isaiah/53/10)

*“But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.”*

[**Jeremiah 30:17-18**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Jeremiah/30/17)

*“’I will restore you to health And I will heal you of your wounds,' declares the LORD, 'Because they have called you an outcast, saying: "It is Zion; no one cares for her."' Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob And have compassion on his dwelling places; And the city will be rebuilt on its ruin, And the palace will stand on its rightful place.”*

[**Ezekiel 33:14-15**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Ezekiel/33/14)

*"But when I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and he turns from his sin and practices justice and righteousness, if a wicked man restores a pledge, pays back what he has taken by robbery, walks by the statutes which ensure life without committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die.”*

[**Matthew 5:23-24**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Matthew/5/23)

*"Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”*

[**Matthew 16:25**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Matthew/16/25)

*"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”*

[**Matthew 19:21**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Matthew/19/21)*“Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."”*

[**Matthew 19:29**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Matthew/19/29)

*"And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.”*

[**Mark 10:21**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Mark/10/21)*“Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."”*

[**Mark 10:29-30**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Mark/10/29)

*“Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.”*

[**Luke 18:29-30**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Luke/18/29)

*“And He said to them, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life."”*

[**Luke 19:8-9**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Luke/19/8)

*“Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.”*

[**John 12:24-25**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/John/12/24)

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.”*

[**Colossians 3:13-14**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Colossians/3/13)

*“…bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”*

[**Philippians 3:8-10**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Philippians/3/8)

*“More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.”*