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THEO 730
Ethical Exhortation
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The kingdom of heaven is like a judge who wished to make an impartial decision to pursue justice in the face of the guilty. “Bailiff,” the judge said, “Bring in the first of the unworthy scoundrels.” The first miscreant walked in, cuffed and dressed in orange, with his tatted head faced down, and his eyes fixed on the floor. Let’s call him Rob. “Well Rob,” the judge spoke with pretension, “it looks like you are guilty of first-degree robbery, and you managed to kill an innocent person in the process. Seems like you wanted to spend the rest of your life—.” But before the judge could finish his sentencing, Rob interrupted with a desperate plea. “Please, I have four kids. I didn’t mean to hurt that woman. I just wanted food for my family! Forgive me. I’ll make it right. Be patient with me!”

Well, that’s absurd. Make it right? What does that even mean? How could you kill someone by accident? Nice try, Rob. If you really have four kids, you should have thought of them before you forced that innocent woman to give you her purse! Please, someone, slap some sense into this man. Think of the victim’s family. Surely, the judge can see the ingenuity of this plea. He deserves punishment; justice needs to be served and the balance of social order restored! Society isn’t ordered on forgiveness, or unicorns and butterflies, man. Before the judge could speak the victim's husband stands and clears his throat. The words that flow from his mouth are unbelievable.

To everyone’s surprise, the judge and the victim's husband decide to take pity on Rob. They don't laugh in his face. They don't slap any sense into him. They just nod. “Fine. Go. Release him! We have forgiven you,” The judge orders.

Wait, what? What about the safety of innocent civilians? What about the law?
With people like that, the world will spin out of control.

The judge's response should stump us—it doesn't make any sense. It is like something happened that seems remarkably good, and yet it uproots everything we think we know about the way the world works.

Three days later Rob is at home, peacefully asleep with his four kids. Abruptly, Rob is woken up by the sound of a crash and a bang. He quickly realizes some hooligans threw a cement brick through his window! Furious, Rob runs outside and manages to catch one of the unruly teens. Pinned to the ground, the teen begs, "I'm sorry, sir. Please, forgive me. Let me go. I will make things right with you—I will fix your window." Rob shows no sympathy, and within minutes the police arrive and the hooligan is taken into custody.

Rob, how could you do that? Have you already forgotten what was done for you?
What is wrong with this man!

On second thought, maybe Rob is right. Maybe forgiveness can only go so far. There must be exceptions. What about the murderers or the sex-offenders? What about the person who always asks to borrow my notes even though they never want to come to class? What about the person who threw a brick through my window? How many times must I forgive these people?

God invites us into his kingdom with costly mercy and grace. He challenges our temptation to quantify forgiveness. Upon first sight, the kingdom captivates us, but as soon as we are invited to participate, we resume our logical way of thinking. God's kingdom can't exist on earth; that would interrupt all the good things we have going on.

From the context of this story reworked from the parable of the unmerciful servant, and other passages from the Bible, I invite us to consider how God's justice is different from our understanding of justice. Like the judge whose decision threatens our entire societal order, God is a judge of compassion, and he keeps his arms open wide waiting to throw us a party upon our arrival home. God's mercy invites us to live according to a new order. In his humble pursuit of man, God accepts self-humiliation and torture to mend his relationship with all of humanity, including the very people who nailed him to the cross. God has reached into the deep darkness of the world to bring us light and now we can see that we were created to live in right relationship. If you have a conflict with your brother, leave your bird at the altar and reconcile with him, Jesus teaches. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges how the religious leaders have used and followed the law to exhibit that the law was only ever supposed to guide people to *shalom*.

God has reconciled with humanity; because of Christ, reconciliation with each other is possible. Our restored relationship with God and the power of the Spirit allows us to do the impossible in the face of our enemies. He is making all things new! God has established his reign on earth through Jesus, and his kingdom is breaking in. We show our allegiance to him, and participate in his kingdom work when we choose reconciliation first.

For 22 years of my life, I lived like Rob—I loved being on the receiving end of God's mercy. It wasn't until I completed my first restorative justice mediation that I believed in my heart that the gospel was good news, and realized I had never actually experienced God's mercy. The mediation, an expression of the gospel, guided me to new

depths of insight. I became overwhelmed by God's radical commitment to his creation and his boundless relationship to humanity. No longer was the gospel only an invitation to wait for heaven; no longer did I consider forgiveness a secondary submissive response illustrating devotion to God. God's authentic love and mercy grabbed hold of me, it awakened something in me—possibly my own humanity—and the same love flowed from me. It was the water and the sunshine that the garden of my innermost being needed to grow and blossom. It was anything but logical; hardly a mathematic equation, and nothing like the balancing of just deserts. Following the narrow path, which had always seemed impossible and demanding, became my deepest desire. My compassion for victims and offenders grew tremendously, and I quickly realized that my only enemy is the one behind the powers trying to put me at odds with my brothers and sisters.

I invite you to consider how you are like Rob. Are you living outside of God's mercy, as if the cross didn't happen? Do we, as a church believe that God is reconciling all of humanity? Have we accepted God's call to be ambassadors of reconciliation? Do we believe in our hearts and live like the gospel is good news? Are we willing to face our enemies in an attempt to be constructive and forgive? To what depths of vulnerability will we descend in our pursuit of reconciliation?

Today, I am offering you an opportunity respond to God's merciful invitation by becoming trained in restorative justice practices. To receive God's mercy, we have to let it grab ahold of us and allow it to nourish us. We can't be afraid to let it reorient everything we think we know about the way the world works. Let us embrace our occupation as peacemakers and learn how we can better bear witness to God's reconciling work through Christ.

May we never get used to the wonder of a God who could restore the world on his own, but who has graciously allowed us to be a part of his redemptive plan.