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The Lord's Prayer, forgiveness, and criminal (in)justice

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tjx**Andrew Millie**

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Abstract

Criminal justice is usually retributive – that is, justice is only apparent when an offender receives their just deserts. While Western ideas of criminal justice have historically been influenced by Christian tradition, doctrine and theology, in this article the Lord's Prayer is used as a starting point to challenge conventional thinking. The article considers the prayer's emphasis on God's kingdom, and on forgiveness. Through the lens of retributivism there is little room for forgiveness, and kingdom justice would be an injustice. It is argued that the Lord's Prayer turns notions of justice upside down. Implications are discussed.

Keywords

criminal justice, forgiveness, justice, Lord's Prayer, punishment, retribution, righteousness

Introduction

The Lord's Prayer is familiar to virtually all Christians – and quite a few non-believers – who have learned to recite it, maybe sometimes without thinking. Yet, it is a huge prayer with wide implications, the perfect model given by Jesus when asked by one of his disciples, 'Lord, teach us to pray' (Luke 11.1).¹ For this article, the Lord's Prayer is a starting point to challenge conventional thinking on criminal justice. The focus is the prayer's call for God to 'forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors' (Matt. 6.12). It is the only part of the prayer

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that Jesus clarifies in the following verses: ‘For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins’ (Matt. 6.14–15). It is a tough ask for anyone; as J. I. Packer notes, ‘the question is: can I say the Lord’s Prayer?’² Are these words that we can say and mean them? According to R. T. Kendall:

If then, we are going to be followers of Jesus, we do get a wonderful fringe benefit – we get to pray the Lord’s Prayer – but we are trapped! We have to promise to forgive. We cannot pick and choose which of these petitions suits us. We are brought face to face with the heart of Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of heaven, and we are forced to apply his words, or not pray this prayer at all.³

Other translations of the Lord’s Prayer ask for forgiveness of sins, or trespasses, rather than debts. Whichever translation, we are called to forgive those who have wronged us, which, according to William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, is an outrageous idea:

Can we agree that forgiveness is an outrageous human act? In our society where might makes right, a society of a myriad of victims, each licking his or her cherished wounds, forgiveness seems crazy . . . So right here is where the Lord’s Prayer is most difficult to pray.⁴

Added to this, in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6.27), Jesus’ instruction is to ‘[l]ove your enemies [and] do good to those who hate you’. As John Calvin once noted, such love is ‘not merely difficult but utterly against human nature’.⁵ For Paul Ricoeur, the instruction is ‘not ethical but supra-ethical’.⁶

An emphasis on loving enemies and forgiving debtors is immediately problematic for a secular criminal justice system predicated, as the criminologist Nils Christie puts it, on ‘the inflicting of pain, intended as pain’.⁷ Punishment is retributive, returning pain for pain with the aim that the offender receives their just deserts.⁸ This article considers conventional meanings of criminal justice, including Christian influence. It is argued that criminal justice informed by the Lord’s Prayer would look very different. The article also draws on the Lord’s Prayer’s emphasis on kingdom, in praying ‘your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6.10). It is contended that the Lord’s Prayer provides an alternative understanding of justice, a kingdom justice to be applied here on earth today as a foretaste of the kingdom come. Implications for criminal justice are discussed.

Criminal (in)justice

For good or ill, interpretations of Christian tradition, doctrine and theology have had historical influence on Western ideas of criminal justice. It is also possible that criminal justice theory and practice have had a reciprocal influence on

Christian thinking. Literal translations of *lex talionis*, or an ‘eye for an eye’ (Deut. 19.21), and a view of God as a vengeful moral authority,⁹ have contributed to retributive understandings of justice. For instance, according to Tim Gorringer, satisfaction theories of atonement drawing on Anselm have ‘legitimated the idea that people have to suffer for their offences’. Yet, Gorringer continues: ‘this interpretation has never been hegemonic. There have always been other ways of understanding the cross.’¹⁰

It is a question of whether God is vengeful or graceful, a theme to which this article returns. But first, to provide some context, during the 1970s a belief that nothing works in penal practice led to a collapse in what had been labelled a ‘rehabilitative ideal’.¹¹ Thus, if there were thought to be little or no utilitarian benefits of punishment – in terms of preventing future criminality and encouraging offenders to desist from crime – then that left retribution as a primary justification for punishing individuals, marking the seriousness of the offence, and ensuring that the offender received their just deserts. Since then, populist penal politics have dictated that increasingly punitive and retributive sentences have been handed down: for instance, three-strike policies in the USA and mandatory minimum terms for serious offences in the UK.¹² The result has been – in the USA in particular – the warehousing of prisoners with little on offer by way of rehabilitation. Locking offenders away in an already overcrowded prison compounds the pains of imprisonment.¹³ It may incapacitate offenders, keeping them out of circulation and giving potential respite to victims of crime, but at what cost? In the USA in particular, there have been racial and class undertones to patterns of sentencing,¹⁴ thereby criminalizing large sections of the population.

While many would be appalled by this, the notion that justice is, by definition, retributive has been broadly accepted; as Hauerwas observes, ‘Good people, morally substantive people, rightly want revenge.’¹⁵ Criminal justice in the West can be seen as the seeking of revenge by harming those found guilty through exile or separation. At its extreme, in some jurisdictions this is permanently through the death penalty, but more commonly through incarceration or by simply limiting freedoms in some other way. Hauerwas asserts that, ‘contrary to the liberal assumption that justice and vengeance are opposites, justice is a “purification” of the moral impetus behind vengeance’.¹⁶ Vengeance can be limitless, yet retribution – for instance, an eye for an eye¹⁷ – limits our level of punishment. But, retribution – causing another pain because they have caused us pain – does not elevate the punisher to a higher moral position. To return the discussion to the Lord’s Prayer and its emphasis on forgiveness, a very different view of justice is possible that suggests a higher response, offering hope rather than pain.

Jesus offers a higher moral response in Matthew 5.38–39 by stating: ‘You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.’¹⁸ According to conventional retributivism, what Jesus proposes is the opposite of justice, it is an *injustice* that retribution has not been served. Contemporary individualism dictates that I may wish to lead my life how

I choose so long as my life choices do not unduly harm or offend another.¹⁹ Thus, anyone who causes me harm or offence is in the wrong and should be punished for it. Retribution is therefore a natural reaction and, according to Nicholas Wolterstorff, it is also a right:

To forgive the person who has wronged one is to forgo exercising some or all of one's retributive rights. But one can genuinely *forgo* exercising one's retributive rights only if one recognizes that one has them.²⁰

Wolterstorff assumes we have a right to retribution when we have been wronged – that, if someone causes me pain, I have a reciprocal right to cause them pain. We can choose retribution, and in many cases this may be an understandable choice – but it is a choice, not a right. For instance, in Romans 12.19, we are instructed: 'Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath.' Accordingly, the only one qualified to take revenge is God himself, who is far more interested in reconciliation. Rather, we are told, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink' (Rom. 12.20). This is picked up by proponents of restorative justice Ted Grimsrud and Howard Zehr, who note how:

Biblical understandings of justice point more in the direction of restorative than retributive justice. Biblically, 'justice' has to do not so much with punishment as with healing, restoring relationships, and fostering the well-being of the entire community.²¹

Rather than seeking retribution, a different choice – and perhaps the more difficult one in line with the Lord's Prayer – is to recognize that we all require forgiveness, both from God and from each other. In writings on restorative justice,²² it is often said that forgiveness is not something that can be demanded, that it is in the gift of the one forgiving. Given how difficult and painful it can be to forgive others, this makes perfect sense. But then, in the Lord's Prayer we are all called to forgive others, just as we ask the Father to forgive us. For Tim Newell, a Quaker, 'The way we consider people who are subject to our system of justice defines our view about the nature of being human.'²³ It is easy to see those who are convicted of crimes as something different – that we are part of a law-abiding majority, and it is 'others' who break society's rules and cause us harm.²⁴ On this basis, retribution seems justified. Yet, as stated in 1 John 1.8, 'if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us'. According to Chris Wood, 'There are no innocent human beings, according to the teaching of the New Testament. There is a basic human solidarity in sin, offence, and guilt. We are all offenders.'²⁵ Sinning and breaking the law are of course not the same, and the sinful thing may sometimes be to keep society's laws. But just as everyone has sinned, it is also likely that everyone has broken the law in some way – be it, for example, an exaggerated insurance claim,²⁶ motorway speeding,²⁷ illegal parking,²⁸ or minor fraud to get a child into a preferred school.²⁹ There is no divide between

a law-abiding us and an offending other; there is just us. Appreciating that we all require forgiveness is to refuse to see a divide between ‘us’ and a criminalized ‘them’. We recognize that we are all part of a common humanity made in God’s image, and that we have all fallen short. Realizing this changes our moral relationship with ‘our debtors’, as Gorringe observes:

Pronouncing judgement may be socially necessary but it is certainly morally perilous, constituting as it does an invitation to forget that we are made of the same clay as the offender.³⁰

A purer form of justice

If God is more graceful than vengeful, then what the world sees as an injustice – that retribution is not served – becomes a purer form of justice. According to N. T. Wright, justice is ‘the intention of God, expressed from Genesis to Revelation, to set the whole world right’.³¹ This setting ‘the whole world right’ concerns the building of God’s kingdom – a key petition in the Lord’s Prayer – rather than the infliction of retributive pain and seeking just deserts. For instance, Isaiah 30 details a people who have turned away from God; but rather than retribution, at verse 18 it states: ‘Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice.’ Justice here is equated with grace and compassion and not retribution and just desert. God’s agape love for humanity, his desire to see his kingdom come, ‘on earth as it is in heaven’, trumps any reciprocity. As Leroy Pelton observes, ‘Clinging to the premise that justice is desert, and believing in it, yet also admiring agape, scholars of religion³²... can do no more than wrestle with the incompatibility of the two, as if trying to make a round peg fit a square hole.’³³

Wolterstorff looks at the place for agape love in relation to justice and considers a hypothetical situation where someone is attacked by another.³⁴ Wolterstorff asks, ‘So what do you, as an agapist, do in such a case? So far as I can see, you tolerate injustice. You do nothing.’ He is right that to tolerate injustice is ‘an untenable position’; but showing love for enemies, and forgiving others, does not mean standing aside when someone is suffering. It is possible to intervene, demonstrating love and recognizing the wrong being done, but also not to seek revenge. Here, justice is the same as righteousness – and, in English versions of the New Testament, the Greek *dikaiosune* is frequently translated as ‘justice’ or ‘righteousness’. Again, according to Wolterstorff, ‘So when the New Testament writers speak of *dikaiosune*, are they speaking of righteousness or of justice? Is Jesus blessing those who hunger and thirst for righteousness or those who hunger and thirst for justice?’³⁵ For Wolterstorff, it is an important distinction as he sees a search for justice as interpersonal, while he sees a search for righteousness as seeking personal moral improvement. But the distinction disappears in the context of the Church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12.12–31). Yes, followers of Christ may

each individually search for righteousness, but personal moral improvement is only possible through interconnection with others – and a search for justice for others reflects one’s own personal morality. The problem, if there is one, is in the use of language for modern readers who can view the word ‘righteous’ as old-fashioned and even as a negative, as in being self-righteous.³⁶ But to be righteous is to be just, and to be just is to be righteous. And justice in this context is not the same as retribution – even if the world sees the avoidance of retribution as an injustice.

Other than Christ, there is no purely righteous person; similarly, none of us are purely just (in the same way I have argued that no one is purely law-abiding, and all are sinners). But a follower of Christ more resolutely pursues both righteousness *and* justice, with God’s grace for when we do not quite make it. As Willimon and Hauerwas observe, ‘We have run up a debt with God so large that all we can do is ask for forgiveness.’³⁷ To bring the discussion back to the Lord’s Prayer, Willimon and Hauerwas state:

We pray as the forgiven and the unforgiving, as those who have been spectacularly forgiven and loved by Christ on the cross yet who are ridiculously unforgiving and unloving when it comes to the wrongs we suffer from others.³⁸

As noted, in Matthew 6.15 the emphasis on forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer is clarified – that ‘if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins’. The suggestion is that God’s forgiveness is conditional; yet Jesus’ cry from the cross is ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23.34). Jesus does not wait for us as humanity to be repentant but, demonstrating his grace, mercy and agape love for humanity, asks his Father to forgive. Likewise, we do not wait for others to be penitent before we forgive, as R. T. Kendall observes:

There are no conditions accompanying the Lord’s Prayer that give even a loophole not to forgive until they are sorry. We do not have that luxury. It takes minimal grace to forgive when they are sorry; it takes maximum grace to forgive when they are not sorry, or do not know what they have done.³⁹

In forgiving our debtors – even when they are not repentant – we demonstrate our love for enemies. We show ‘maximum grace’, demonstrating God’s righteousness and justice, and provide a glimpse of his kingdom ‘on earth as it is in heaven’. Yet, as David Cunningham observes, forgiveness of those who have done great harm, ‘seems to be the vocation of a saint, not an ordinary person’.⁴⁰ We find this kind of forgiveness extremely difficult; but because of his grace we are forgiven when we fall short. As R. T. Kendall notes, ‘We are saved by grace. In a word: We are not saved by forgiving others; we are not kept saved by forgiving others.’⁴¹

Discussion and conclusions

Those involved with secular criminal justice would question the relevance of a discussion of Christian theology for notions of justice. Yet, in the West at least, and as noted at the start of this article, interpretations of Christian theology have long had influence over what is regarded as just, leading to prolonged emphasis on retribution and just deserts. This article has argued that a truer interpretation of God's (kingdom) justice – as informed by the Lord's Prayer – is more to do with forgiveness and reconciliation, and the building of his kingdom, and less about punishment and just deserts. It is a radical departure from what has been the status quo for a very long time, and would for many be seen as injustice rather than justice; as Willimon and Hauerwas put it:

in commanding us to forgive, Jesus is inviting us to take charge, to turn the world around, to throw a monkey wrench in the eternal wheel of retribution and vengeance . . . We can take charge, turn things around, be victors rather than victims. We can forgive.⁴²

According to E. B. Redlich, 'Forgiveness is full restoration to fellowship.'⁴³ The person being forgiven is not regarded as some other, to be banished from society. Rather, because we recognize that all are offenders, we offer a gift of mercy and hope for reconciliation. As Cunningham highlights, 'God is always about the business of finding the stray sheep and healing the wounded victim.'⁴⁴ We should be likewise. What is needed is a relational justice⁴⁵ rather than retributive justice.

The logical consequence of this discussion is that, if we are to take the Lord's Prayer seriously, then we ought to embrace kingdom justice, offer forgiveness and turn away from retributive punishments – abandon capital punishment where it persists and decarcerate, using prisons far less than we do. For some it would be an argument for penal abolition.⁴⁶ Instead, alternative resolution that invites offenders back into the community should be promoted, perhaps in line with restorative justice – although this should be a substitute for punishment rather than an add-on, as is so often the case.

That said, and while morally problematic, there may still be a few offenders who require separation for public protection. Although we are instructed to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5.38), the morally right thing to do is not always straightforward, especially when dealing with some very dangerous people who may offend again – although there are far fewer fitting this category than are currently incarcerated.⁴⁷ Separation for public protection could focus on rehabilitation and would not have to be in a prison as conventionally recognized. But, of course, while we might say we are forgiving and want to show love for enemies, this approach would instead repay pain with pain. Answers are not easy, or necessarily comfortable.

The Lord's Prayer has always been radical. It is still revolutionary when applied to issues of criminal justice, turning everything upside down. Justice is no longer the seeking of retribution, but, in the words of N. T. Wright, it is setting 'the whole world right'.⁴⁸ It is centred on forgiveness, a kingdom justice to be applied here today as a foretaste of the kingdom come. As noted, the Greek *dikaiosune* can be translated as both 'justice' and 'righteousness'. If we seek to be right before God and before others, then this is justice. The challenge in a criminal justice context is that the world will see this as an injustice, that retribution is not served.

Notes

1. All Bible verses are taken from the New International Version.
2. J. I. Packer, *Praying the Lord's Prayer* (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p. 81.
3. R. T. Kendall, *The Lord's Prayer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2010), p. 130.
4. William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: the Lord's Prayer and the Christian life* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 78.
5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by J. T. McNeill, translated by F. L. Battles (Louisville KY: Westminster Press, 1960 [1559]), vol. 1, p. 697.
6. Paul Ricoeur, 'The Golden Rule: exegetical and theological perplexities', *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 36, no. 3 (1990), pp. 392–7, here p. 397.
7. Nils Christie, *Limits to Pain* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981), p. i.
8. See, for example, Andrew von Hirsch, *Censure and Sanctions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
9. Andrew Millie (ed.), *Criminology and Public Theology: on hope, mercy and restoration* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).
10. Tim Gorringer, 'Interpreting the cross: religion, structures of feeling, and penal theory and practice' in Millie (ed.), *Criminology and Public Theology*, p. 107.
11. See, for example, A. E. Bottoms and R. H. Preston, *The Coming Penal Crisis: a criminological and theological exploration* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1980).
12. See, for example, John Pratt, *Penal Populism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); also, Andrew Millie, Jessica Jacobson and Mike Hough, 'Understanding the growth in the prison population in England and Wales', *Criminal Justice*, Vol. 3, no. 4 (2003), pp. 369–87.
13. Christie, *Limits to Pain*.
14. See, for example, Loïc Wacquant, 'From slavery to mass incarceration: rethinking the "race question" in the US', *New Left Review*, Vol. 13, January/February (2002), pp. 41–60.
15. Stanley Hauerwas, 'Why time cannot and should not heal the wounds of history but time has been and can be redeemed', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 53, no. 1 (2000), pp. 33–49, here p. 34.
16. Hauerwas, 'Why time cannot and should not heal the wounds', p. 36, note 6.
17. According to Herman Bianchi, Martin Buber's German translation indicates that an eye for an eye is not to be taken literally, but rather 'an eye for the value of an eye; a tooth for the value of a tooth'. See Herman Bianchi, 'A biblical vision of justice', *New Perspectives on Crime and Justice*, Vol. 2 (1984), pp. 1–9, here p. 3.

18. See Andrew Millie, 'Criminology, public theology and hope' in Millie (ed.), *Criminology and Public Theology*, pp. 145–64.
19. See, for example, Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others: the moral limits of the criminal law* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1984); Joel Feinberg, *Offense to Others: the moral limits of the criminal law* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1985); Andrew Millie, *Philosophical Criminology* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016).
20. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: rights and wrongs* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 106.
21. Ted Grimsrud and Howard Zehr, 'Rethinking God, justice, and treatment of offenders', *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, Vol. 35, nos. 3–4 (2002), pp. 253–79, here p. 253.
22. See, for example, John Braithwaite, 'Redeeming the 'F' word in restorative justice', *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (2016), pp. 79–93.
23. Tim Newell, *Forgiving Justice: a Quaker vision for criminal justice* (London: Quaker Books, 2007), p. 75.
24. Millie, *Philosophical Criminology*, p. 85.
25. Chris Wood, *The End of Punishment: Christian perspectives on the crisis in criminal justice* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1991), p. 81.
26. Susanne Karstedt and Stephen Farrall, 'The moral economy of everyday crime: markets, consumers and citizens', *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 46, no. 6 (2006), pp. 1011–36.
27. Helen Wells, *The Fast and the Furious: drivers, speed cameras and control in a risk society* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).
28. Sylvia Chenery, Chris Henshaw and Ken Pease, 'Illegal parking in disabled bays: a means of offender targeting', Police and Reducing Crime Briefing Note 1/99 (London: Home Office, 1999).
29. Millie, *Philosophical Criminology*.
30. T. J. Gorringer, *Crime, Changing Society and the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 77.
31. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 224.
32. Here Pelton cites Timothy Jackson, *The Priority of Love: Christian charity and social justice* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
33. Leroy H. Pelton, 'Love and justice. Presented at the 9th World Congress of the International Society for Universal Dialogue', *Skepsis: A Journal for Philosophy and Inter-disciplinary Research*, Vol. 22, no. 1 (2012), pp. 152–62 (online version pp. 1–19, here p. 10).
34. Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 108.
35. Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 112.
36. Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 111.
37. Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 79.
38. Willimon and Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us*, p. 85.
39. Kendall, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 139.
40. David S. Cunningham, *Christian Ethics: the end of the law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 133.
41. Kendall, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 131.
42. Willimon and Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us*, p. 84.
43. E. B. Redlich, *The Forgiveness of Sins* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), p. 104.
44. Cunningham, *Christian Ethics*, p. 133.

45. Jonathan Burnside and Nicola Baker (eds), *Relational Justice: repairing the breach* (Winchester: Waterside Press, 1994).
46. See, for example, Joshua Dubler and Vincent W. Lloyd, *Break Every Yoke: religion, justice, and the abolition of prisons* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).
47. Dubler and Lloyd, *Break Every Yoke*.
48. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 224.

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