

Perverse Justice: How can God forgive paedophiles?

I did not choose this topic.

1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men will suffer some form of sexual abuse, broadly defined, in their lifetime. Therefore the first thing to say is...

God sides with victims - became a Victim in solidarity with all victims.

- John 1:1 God is explained by Jesus. John 1:14 Jesus reveals God not only by siding with the little guy. He became the little guy. He became an oppressed minority, born as, apparently, a bastard-child to two dirt poor teenagers in a northern backwater of a downtrodden, occupied people under the jack boot of the Roman Empire. He grows up as a carpenter - bit like a car mechanic from Basra. That's Jesus - and if John 1 is correct: that's GOD. God is like a car mechanic from Basra, in an occupied land who will soon - keep reading John - become wrongfully arrested, suffer an appalling miscarriage of justice and then die as a Sacrificial Lamb on the cross, He becomes the ultimate Victim - a Victim in solidarity with all victims. And that is what God is like according to the Bible. Revelation: the Lamb at the centre of the throne.

God sides with victims. And...

God opposes the proud. He opposes the oppressor.

But Abraham Lincoln once said the surest way to destroy your enemy is to make them your friend.

I wonder how you feel about that. It can sound nice posted on a Facebook wall. And of course we all want to feel that we are forgiving kinds of people. It's a nice idea, until someone actually genuinely hurts us. And then forgiveness feels outrageously hard and ridiculous and perverse.

What about in Charleston? 17th June, Dylann Roof a racist terrorist guns down 9 people after an hour of bible study. And a few days later in court his family members addressed him via a video link:

Daughter of one of the victims: "You took something very precious from me, but I forgive you. It hurts me. You hurt a lot of people, but may God forgive you."

Mother of one of the victims:

"We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms. You have killed some of the most beautiful people that I know. Every fibre in my body hurts. I will never be the same..."

She continued: “Tywanza was my hero. But as they say in the Bible study, we enjoyed you, but may God have mercy on your soul.”

Another grandson: “We would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the one who matters the most, Christ, so he can change your ways no matter what happens to you and you’ll be OK.”

NOTICE SOMETHING: They are all happy to take part in the legal process that will see him put away for life. They are very happy for the state to do justice. That’s what the state does. Christians have always been happy for the state to be the state and to enforce a rule of law. Ever since Jesus said “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s but give to God what is God’s” Christians have been commanded to be law-abiding citizens in a state ruled by law. Romans chapter 13 speaks of the state wielding the sword of justice and that is a good thing. Ever since the New Testament commanded it, Christians have been praying for secular rulers that they would *rule* and rule justly. Christians are not anarchists. The state is good. The rule of law is good. Justice is good. But Christians think that there is something on top of that which is better. I’ll unpack that in a second, but let me read one more quote from the Charleston families...

A granddaughter: “Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof that they lived and loved,” she said. “Hate won’t win.”

At that point she’s almost quoting Martin Luther King Jr. “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

This is the better thing – what is better than justice? Love. Because tit-for-tat cannot redeem anything. Reciprocity might be the essence of justice but over-abundance is the essence of love. Getting what you deserve is a marker of the rule of law – but getting far better than you deserve is a marker of the rule of love.

So only love can drive out hate. That’s a lovely sentiment. A brilliant quote. Gets the retweets. And we might even assent to its wisdom all the way to Charleston. I don’t know whether you think their posture towards the killer of their loved ones was perverse or noble but as crazy and counter-conditional as it is, a lot of people think it’s noble.

Largely that’s because of the influence of Jesus on our culture. Certainly the Roman Empire thought forgiveness was just weak. Folks like Nietzsche have seen it as utterly perverse. But I think if you happen to think that forgiveness is

good – even in that situation, I suggest you might be more Christian than you think because that is a quite distinctively Christian viewpoint.

But let's imagine that you can cope with the Christian forgiveness ethic all the way up to Charleston. Can you cope with it all the way to paedophilia?

On Channel 4 News last night there was a report about Tom Watson's claim that a government minister was involved in the abuse of children and the reporter said this line: "There is no more damaging accusation than calling someone a paedophile."

This is why the Christian Union picked this title because today in the West paedophilia is pretty much the most wicked label to apply to anyone – it's the unforgiveable sin.

In Jesus' day, the tax collectors – the thieving collaborators with the Romans – were the lowest of the low. And so Jesus goes and recruits Matthew the tax collector – makes him one of the 2 disciples right alongside Simon the Zealot – a political revolutionary trying to oust the Romans. Jesus puts Matthew and Simon together and says "I have forgiven, now you forgive." Radical! Jesus picked the most unforgiveable people and forgave them. And this talk title is trying to contemporize that same shocking truth. I can say "Jesus forgave a tax collector" and you yawn. But if I say "Jesus forgives paedophiles" that gets your attention.

And at that point you start to ask: Is that perverse? Is that the end of justice as we know it? I want to say no. It **requires** justice, it **raises above** justice to something even greater and it re-establishes justice.

First of all, **Forgiveness requires justice.**

Forgiveness assumes justice. Forgiveness depends on the law. It depends on transgressions being transgressions. It depends on them being inexcusable.

Please note: **forgiving a sin in the Christian understanding is virtually the opposite of excusing a sin.** Excusing a sin is to justify it and brush it under the carpet. It's to say that, ultimately, it's not a sin. **Forgiving** a sin means naming the sin AS sin – calling it inexcusable.

Simon Mayo's Confessions: people vote on whether a person *deserves* forgiveness but that is to confuse things. Forgiveness is by definition undeserved. If you deserve the slate wiped clean then what you are receiving is not forgiveness it is vindication. 'Deserve' is the language of justice. 'Forgive' is the language of mercy.

We don't mix those categories – a judge *acting purely as judge* does not and should not say "You are guilty but nonetheless I forgive you, go free." Justice is good. God loves justice. But is there something not less than justice but greater than justice – something that rises above justice. We'll get there in a second.

But forgiveness requires law and justice. There can only be forgiveness if there are things to be forgiven. There can only be things to forgive if there has been transgression. There can only be transgression if there is law.

As we speak about forgiveness for flagrant sinners we are not in any way dismissing guilt but actually affirming it. There can be forgiveness for paedophiles precisely because abusing children IS EVIL. It's not just an evolutionary blind alley, not just sociologically maladjusted, not just grotesque or ugly or painful. It is EVIL – a profound transgression against the ultimate Goodness, Truth and Beauty of the triune God.

Law and justice are good – they are required if you're going to have a thing called forgiveness and the law judges paedophilia as EVIL.

But before we move on. The law also judges me too.

MLK's sermon called "Love Your Enemies" begins with this point. "In order to love your enemies, you must begin by analyzing self." He goes on to analyze the human condition – he quotes Plato and Ovid and Goethe and the Apostle Paul to say we are divided against ourselves. I'm divided and you're divided. I can't look at anyone and think there's no good in them. And I can't look in myself and deny that there's evil in me. But that's what we're always inclined to do isn't it.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote about how we're always dividing the world up into goodies over here and baddies over there. Solzhenitsyn wrote:

"If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

Is that what we do with paedophilia? It's THEM, over there.

It's fascinating that in an age where paedophilia is THE unforgiveable sin – in the very same culture and time – the number one search term for online porn is... TEEN. As a culture we point the finger at those evil people. As a culture we're mad for sexualising young girls. As a *culture* there's this duality going on. Do you recognise that duality within yourself?

Miroslav Volf, Croatian theologian. How do you end the cycle of violence in the Balkans? You HAVE to find a way to forgive. You HAVE to. But how? Here's the problem:

“Forgiveness flounders when we exclude our enemies from the community of humans and when we exclude ourselves from the community of sinners.”

I am in BOTH communities and so are you. The paedophile is in the community of humans. And I am in the community of sinners. If I can't say that, forgiveness flounders – and that is really the root of cycles of violence.

So Christianity insists – the law is GOOD. Forgiveness REQUIRES justice. Justice is good. But I am not. I am judged BY justice and found to be a sinner myself. So what's my hope?

Well, thank God, there is something that RISES ABOVE justice. That's the second thing...

Forgiveness RISES ABOVE justice.

Prodigal son - comes home. What is just? What is leniency? What is grace?

Here is something over and above justice. And it's what you need if you realise that justice judges you. COME HOME!

(Do you see a beauty in this? Jesus said “Mercy triumphs over judgement” – do you agree?)

Well here's my final point: Forgiveness doesn't just RISE ABOVE justice and leave it behind. The forgiving love of God RE-ESTABLISHES justice on a lasting footing.

Prodigal Son: What happens the next day after the feast?

Les Miserables. The bishop doesn't merely bankroll Valjean's sin, it purchases him from it. This is what forgiveness looks like biblically speaking - it is about redemption.

Not the king on the throne throwing silver to servants. Forgiveness is not bankrolling the sin. Forgiveness is a loving Lord who climbs down to marry the girl.

Redemption does not ignore sin but finally addresses it. And finally it deals with and restores the sinner – destroying the enemy because you make the enemy a friend.

Example: Circle of Friends – Mennonites in Canada. Circles of Support and Accountability – begun by a Mennonite pastor and overwhelmingly supported by Christian volunteers, has reduced recidivism by 70%. The message of

grace - properly understood - does not encourage sin but gets at the roots of the human heart.

So forgiveness REQUIRES justice, it RISES ABOVE justice and it RE-ESTABLISHES justice truly and lastingly.

But a final word... if you still think forgiveness perverts justice and you want to reject that. I can understand that reaction. But let me say...

Banishing pariahs does not work. Maybe you just want to crush and obliterate the sinner. That's understandable, especially if the sinner has sinned against you. That is the justice impulse. But if you go for *mere* justice, three things follow:

- 1) you have settled for less than what redemption offers - restoration, new starts. Forgiveness re-establishes a kind of justice that is not possible without forgiveness and you are giving up on that. By getting rid of forgiveness you'll end up with less justice not more.
- 2) beware your own soul if your only response to wrong is justice. For your own sake, justice and retribution takes its toll on you. Older Brother. I asked if you agreed with Jesus that "Mercy triumphs over judgement" – if you don't agree, then the Older Brother is your hero... "Unforgiveness is like drinking poison hoping the other person dies."
- 3) what about your own sins? How can God forgive paedophiles? The same way He can forgive you. The Jesus who died for paedophiles died for you. You need this forgiveness. Come Home!

Bono: You see, at the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics; in physical laws every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the universe. I'm absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that "as you reap, so you will sow" stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff.

I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. I'd be in deep s---. It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity.

Assayas: The Son of God who takes away the sins of the world. I wish I could believe in that.

Bono: But I love the idea of the Sacrificial Lamb. I love the idea that God says: *Look, you cretins, there are certain results to the way we are, to selfishness, and there's a mortality as part of your very sinful nature, and, let's face it, you're not living a very good life, are you? There are consequences to actions.* The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled. It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of heaven.

Assayas: That's a great idea, no denying it. Such great hope is wonderful, even though it's close to lunacy, in my view. Christ has his rank among the world's great thinkers. But Son of God, isn't that farfetched?

Bono: No, it's not farfetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: he was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius. But actually Christ doesn't allow you that. He doesn't let you off that hook. Christ says: No. I'm not saying I'm a teacher, don't call me teacher. I'm not saying I'm a prophet. I'm saying: "I'm the Messiah." I'm saying: "I am God incarnate." And people say: No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet, we can take. You're a bit eccentric. We've had John the Baptist eating locusts and wild honey, we can handle that. But don't mention the "M" word! Because, you know, we're gonna have to crucify you. And he goes: No, no. I know you're expecting me to come back with an army, and set you free from these creeps, but actually I am the Messiah. At this point, everyone starts staring at their shoes, and says: Oh, my God, he's gonna keep saying this. So what you're left with is: either Christ was who He said He was the Messiah or a complete nutcase. I mean, we're talking nutcase on the level of Charles Manson. This man was like some of the people we've been talking about earlier. This man was strapping himself to a bomb, and had "King of the Jews" on his head, and, as they were putting him up on the Cross, was going: OK, martyrdom, here we go. Bring on the pain! I can take it. I'm not joking here. The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me, that's farfetched. Bono later says it all comes down to how we regard Jesus:

Bono: If only we could be a bit more like Him, the world would be transformed. When I look at the Cross of Christ, what I see up there is all my s--- and everybody else's. So I ask myself a question a lot of people have asked: Who is this man? And was He who He said He

was, or was He just a religious nut? And there it is, and that's the question. And no one can talk you into it or out of it.

I dreamed a dream

...There was a time when love was blind
And the world was a song
And the song was exciting
There was a time
Then it all went wrong

I dreamed a dream in time gone by
When hope was high
And life worth living
I dreamed that love would never die
I dreamed that God would be forgiving...
...I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I'm living
So different now from what it seemed
Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.

GRACE MELTS VALJEAN

Yet why did I allow this man
To touch my soul and teach me love?
He treated me like any other
He gave me his trust
He called me brother.
My life he claims for God above...
Can such things be?
For I had come to hate the world -
This world that always hated me!

Take an eye for an eye!
Turn your heart into stone!
This is all I have lived for!
This is all I have known!
One word from him and I'd be back
Beneath the lash, upon the rack.
Instead he offers me my freedom!

I feel my shame inside me like a knife.
He told me that I have a soul...
How does he know?
What spirit comes to move my life?
Is there another way to go?

Javert – I AM THE LAW

Who is this man?
What sort of devil is he?
To have caught me in a trap
And choose to let me go free?
It was his hour at last
To put a seal on my fate
Wipe out the past
And wash me clean off the slate!
All it would take
Was a flick of his knife
Vengeance was his
And he gave me back my life!

Damned if I live in the debt of a thief!
Damned if I yield at the end of the chase!

I am the law and the law is not mocked!
I'll spit his pity right back in his face!

550,000 children are reported to the social services in this country every year.

The Catholic figures show that between about 4% of priests and deacons serving in the US between 1950 and 2002 had been accused of sexual abuse of someone under 18. In this country, the figure was a 10th of that: 0.4% But whereas the victims in the general population are overwhelmingly female, the pattern among American

Catholic priests was quite different. Four out of five of their victims were male. Most were adolescents: two out of five were 14 or over; 15% were under 10.

Number one porn search term: TEEN

A gay rights conference backs a motion in favour of paedophilia. The story is written up by a national newspaper as "Child-lovers win fight for role in Gay Lib".

It sounds like a nightmarish plotline from dystopian fiction. But this happened in the UK. The conference took place in Sheffield and the newspaper was the Guardian. The year was 1975.

Charleston Church Shooting – 9 shot dead at a prayer meeting on Wed 17th June this year

Dylann Roof

Daughter of one of the victims: "You took something very precious from me, but I forgive you. It hurts me. You hurt a lot of people, but may God forgive you."

Mother of one of the victims:

"We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms. You have killed some of the most beautiful people that I know. Every fibre in my body hurts. I will never be the same..."

She continued: "Tywanza was my hero. But as they say in the Bible study, we enjoyed you, but may God have mercy on your soul."

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"Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

In order to love your enemies, you must begin by analyzing self.

[MLK]

I've said to you on many occasions that each of us is something of a schizophrenic personality. We're split up and divided against ourselves. And there is something of a civil war going on within all of our lives. There is a recalcitrant South of our soul revolting against the North of our soul. And there is this continual struggle within the very structure of every individual life. There is something within all of us that causes us to cry out with Ovid, the Latin poet, "I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do." There is something within all of us that causes us to cry out with Plato that the human personality is like a charioteer with two headstrong horses, each wanting to go in different directions. There is something within each of us that causes us to cry out with Goethe, "There is enough stuff in me to make both a gentleman and a rogue." There is something within each of us that causes us to cry out with Apostle Paul, "I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do."

So somehow the "isness" of our present nature is out of harmony with the eternal "oughtness" that forever confronts us. And this simply means this: That within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good.

hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and go on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. [*tapping on pulpit*] It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil. And that is the tragedy of hate, that it doesn't cut it off. It only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. Somebody must have religion enough and morality enough to cut it off and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love.

Hate at any point is a cancer that gnaws away at the very vital center of your life and your existence. It is like eroding acid that eats away the best and the objective center of your life. So Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated.

Love breaks the cycle of violence.

Love heals the hater

Love has redeeming power

love is the only creative, redemptive, transforming power in the universe.

Napoleon Quote: "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended upon force. But long ago Jesus started an empire that depended on love, and even to this day millions will die for him."

"Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" Abraham Lincoln

I would rather die than hate you