

# FAITH ASKING QUESTIONS



A ST FRANCIS COLLEGE SHORT COURSE

THE TRANSCRIPT

## Episode 4 Evil and What to do about it

### 4.3 Why do some people get away with doing really bad stuff?

**Jeremy Greaves:** I think that's a question that people have struggled with for millennia and it's at the heart of all great religious traditions and it has resonances with that other great question – why do bad things happen to good people? There's no easy answer to that. I think inherently we want things to be fair, but the reality is that the world isn't fair, and as Christians we are called to work for justice. Justice is different to fairness and at the heart of who we are called to be.

People who wrestle with that question and try to make a difference can make the world a more just place. There's always people who are going to get away with stuff that we think is not ok or is wrong, or is evil. And ultimately for some of those things there's nothing we can do about it, but what we can do is in our own sphere, in our own place in the world we can do what we can to make justice a reality.

**Penny Jones:** Martin Luther king says, that in the end we'll remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends. And I think that really answers the question of how people can get away with bad stuff. It's not so much the bad stuff that people do, it's the fact that ordinary people, people like you and me don't stop them. We can be extraordinarily lazy; we can be extraordinarily fearful. Human beings are really hard-wired to protect themselves and to keep security around themselves and therefore to blot out and ignore things that might disrupt them. So that's how, I think, dictatorship arises. It's how exploitation of the poor can arise...not that we are actually setting out to do bad things, but that we are ignoring the bad things that are going on often under our very noses. And so, it takes courage to be clear eyed, and to look and to listen and to see what is actually going on. We are all only one human being. We can't always take responsibility for everything.

So, you go to the supermarket and you try to choose the best foods you can. You try and look at how this has been packaged, you try to look at how this has been produced, who has been exploited, which farmer isn't getting a fair price for their crop, but it's not always obvious. And it's not always easy, and it takes a huge amount of effort and energy to try to make those good choices. So sometimes we make bad choices



not out of malice but out of sheer weariness because we are all only able to do so much. So it's easy for bad things to happen, but the remarkable thing is that so many good things also happen and that human beings have that capacity to stand up for justice and to seek what is true and right and to focus their attention in that way.

**Marian Free:** I think people get away with really bad stuff because the rest of us are too chicken to hold them accountable. There's a second part to that answer of course, that the church has misunderstood forgiveness and grace. So the first thing is that one of the things we are confronting at the moment is this idea that men get away with wolf whistling, with domestic violence, saying hideous things about women because their male friends will not hold them to account and will not pull them up short. And that's the same for all of us. I'm using men because that's the current issue that's in the press. But we're all the same, we don't necessarily say to our best friends "that's not good enough".

**Peter Kline:** One way to get into an answer to that question is that all human systems of human law and justice are broken, finite and incomplete. There's no way that human beings among ourselves can establish perfect justice. So, some people get away with doing horrendous terrible things and that they never get called to account or made responsible for them. That itself is simply a function of the limitations and finitude of humanity. And also, that we never have any perfect notion of justice. We have things called laws; we have things that enforce those laws but we never have the perfection of justice among ourselves. Perhaps this is the reason that many religious traditions say that God is the one that ultimately has justice, even if justice can't happen on earth even if people get away with very bad things, awful things here on earth, ultimately everyone will be held to account by God at the end of history (however religious traditions speak about that) there will be some ultimate reckoning. Whether in terms of the final judgement – that somehow all of us will be held to account for a perfect bar of justice...that somehow people will be held accountable for all deeds done. Even that notion that justice ultimately resides with God...that in itself can be used in problematic even terrifying ways, to say that even if you're not going to be held accountable by a human court that "God's gonna get ya!" at the end of the day.

So various traditions can wield that idea that God ultimately holds justice actually as a way of trying to ground or fortify their own sense of justice, I think there needs to be a whole lot of caution that needs to be put around that idea. That ultimately it is god who will ensure that there's justice. That idea in itself can be used in some harmful and problematic kinds of ways. One of the radical things about Christianity is that it says that because of what happened with Jesus, what we mean by divine justice or God's justice is actually mercy and forgiveness. This is one of the ways that Christianity upends the whole idea of justice: the way that God will



ultimately exercise justice on the earth is through mercy and forgiveness. It is actually mercy and forgiveness that are justice.

Rather than simply punishment or holding people to account or getting people to pay a penalty, what Christianity wants to say is that God will bring justice to the earth by being merciful. So even though people get away with terrible things in this life, ultimately what they face is not some sort of severe punishment (so that what we hold out for is some sort of divine vengeance) which is perhaps simply a way of protecting our own desire for vengeance onto God) "if we can't do it dammit God's gotta do it"

Christianity actually says something different: that even the most horrendous acts of injustice here will be met with an unfathomable, transformative love. And that's what ultimately awaits everybody. And if that's what we think ultimately awaits everybody, how then does that influence how we should do matters of justice and injustice here on earth? That's a very big question.



You can find the video of this session, along with reflection questions for individuals or groups at [www.stfran.qld.edu.au](http://www.stfran.qld.edu.au) under “SFC Short Courses—Faith Asking Questions”.

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