

January 9, 2021 WholeLife Seventh-day Adventist Church
2800 N Orange Ave Orlando, FL Ephesians 2:1-10
Stewarding the Gospel of Unfairness by Andy McDonald

There are some words so common to the human experience that they have come from the lips of just about all of us. And there is no doubt that if there are some who have never spoken them they likely have thought these words, and for sure if they haven't thought them for themselves they've heard them expressed by others. Every parent has heard them.

Here are the words I'm talking about, "That's not fair."

It seems we have been wired with this ethic of wanting things to be fair. Really a very nice human wish. The call to fair play, to fairness, to being fair.

To hear this about our human race is sort of encouraging at first. We might imagine that with this hard wired wish for fairness that there is hope for a more fair and just world.

If the billions of people on our globe share this draw toward fairness it would seem that things should be getting better. Poverty should be reducing, starving people should be a thing of the past, good high quality education should be available to children in all communities, the legal system should be rocketing to reform becoming more fair to all who encounter it.

Over the Christmas holiday were privileged to have our two children, their spouses, and our three grandchildren with us. It was simply wonderful. Our youngest grandchild, Holden is only 18 months so his vocabulary is amazing for his age, of course, but it is one and two words at a time identifying people and objects. The other two Paxton age 6 and his sister Andie Jo age four are best pals who love playing together.

But even over the holiday there were some times I heard the words from them, reflective of our human race, “That isn’t fair.”

What I noticed is that the pursuit of fairness was juvenile, but unfortunately it was a juvenile pursuit a juvenile stage from which too many never move. I never heard either of these precious grandchildren say that some situation wasn’t fair for their sibling.

Each voiced complaint regarding unfairness was that the situation wasn’t fair for him or wasn’t fair for her. Never did big brother complain that something wasn’t fair with regards to his sister, nor little sister argue that something wasn’t fair for her brother.

Our greatest concerns for things being “fair” is with regards to our not wanting to be treated unfairly. On this planet we have as our home, it seems in every arena the contours are rather uneven. We wish, at least in our imaginations, for a “level playing field” but instead it seems that the football field of real life is filled with potholes, speed bumps, hills and valleys, natural and unnatural obstacles that, depending on the direction one is going create unfair advantages or disadvantages.

When our son finished college he had an advantage over many of his classmates. By our diligence, his hard work, the refinancing of our home, he had no school debts. Fair or unfair this gave him the freedom to follow his own pursuits. He needed income but no debt hung over his head so his reduced income need allowed him to experiment, start his own company, start his own store, etc. Was it fair that he had this freedom while others were compelled by need to service a debt to maybe take a job they weren’t really wild about?

In our American culture for most of the history of our nation, there has been the reality or illusion that in our capitalistic free market economy whoever works hard can make it. That the system is in place that rewards diligence. That penniless immigrants can arrive at our shore not speaking the language, and through diligent hard work

can make a better life for themselves. Sure some will have lucky breaks, the benefit of family and friends, the success of previous generations, and will amass wealth at a quicker pace while others will suffer the disadvantages of poor choices, hard situations, bad luck, and playing fields that start out already tipped against their success.

But whether advantaged or disadvantaged we have had a collective mind that the one who works hard will benefit from their hard work.

This week I've pondered how that might create in us a prejudice against the gospel. In our beliefs about fairness there may be some unusual, and maybe hard to diagnose, resistance to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our series this January as we step in to 2021 is not our typical stewardship series. Most years over my ministry I've used the first month of the new year to talk about more traditional stewardship responsibility. I've consistently reminded us that all we have, all we are is not really ours to do with as we please but that we are stewards of our lives, our money, our time. That it is all a gift from God that we are privileged to manage for the benefit of his kingdom. These series of sermons on stewardship always kick a bit against the free market economy I love. Probably like many of you I like to imagine that I am what I am and have what I have, and can do what I can do because I studied hard in school, and have worked hard through my career in ministry. But true stewardship says that just isn't the way it is. Paul writes the Philippians and asks, "What do you have that you haven't been given?" David reminds us in his prayer of praise to the Lord at the generosity of the people giving gifts for the building of the temple. He said, "Your's, O Lord is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for EVERYTHING in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you." So we are merely, just, only, stewards of all we call "ours."

We call the Gospel of Jesus Christ “ours” too. And with that gospel, hearing it, knowing it, believing it, there comes a stewarding responsibility. That’s why this year we are talking about Stewardship of the Gospel and today in particular Stewardship of the Gospel of Unfairness.

In Matthew’s version of the events of Jesus earthly life, he has Jesus telling a most fascinating parable right after and tied to the visit of the “Rich Young Ruler”.

This young man comes to Jesus with an American, or maybe just a human question: “What good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

Jesus’s answer, apart from the gospel, is really a bit unnerving. “If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”

With boldness that lacks understanding the young man claims to have kept all the commandments and asks, “What do I still lack?” Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

When the young man heard this he went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

In the eyes of everyone in that culture wealth was a sign of being in heaven’s favor. And Jesus turns the barrel over when he said, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The astonished disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?” What they are asking is that if the one who has been so blessed by God with wealth, the obvious sign in their minds of God’s favor, if they can’t get in who can?

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Peter looks to his own performance. He says to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

Jesus promises them thrones to judge the 12 tribes. And then he says, “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” Doesn’t seem fair.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the normal day’s wage and sent them to work in his vineyard. About three hours later he went out and saw some other standing in the market place doing nothing. He told them, “Go work in my vineyard, and I’ll pay you what is right.” And they went. He hired on more workers at the 6th hour and the 9th hour and just an hour before quitting time at the 11th hour he hired more.

At quitting time it was also time to get paid. Day laborers were paid at the end of each day.

The first to be paid were the one’s hired an hour before quitting time. And each one received a full day’s pay. So when those who had been hired first came they had high expectations of receiving more than a day’s wage. But when they each only got a day’s wage they began to grumble that it wasn’t fair. The complaint was that the men who were hired last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

The master said, “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a day’s wage? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you

envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Are you ready to steward the gospel of unfairness? Or Would you rather be treated fairly? Would you like to get what you earn, what would be fair?

Let me warn you away from seeking fairness. Paul says it clearly in Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All is a pretty inclusive word. Every human except Jesus Christ, has sinned and we all fall short of the glory of God. And if we want our fair wage Paul writes in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death.

For us to be treated fairly, to get what we deserve, to demand our rights as sinners, would mean death. Let me be really candid-when it comes to being treated fairly, I don’t want to be treated fairly. I want something beyond what I am due. Something more than I have or could ever earn.

God is amazing in what he gives. In his letter to the people in Ephesus Paul wrote clearly. “As for you , you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us (there’s that inclusive word) All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. (If we get what is fair for us to receive it is wrath) BUT because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. (not will be, might be, can be or could be saved—IT IS BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order

that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (For our message today maybe we would say, “So that no one can boast that it is fair they get eternity. That they are getting what they deserve!) For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

If I run a good race, if I keep the faith, if I obey the law, it seems to be fair that there’s a crown of righteousness and glorious future awaiting me.

But before we run a good race, and keep the faith and obey the law, before all that, comes the gift of God.

It is God’s grace the favor he shows us that is not deserved at all. It is because of God’s great love that he made us alive in Christ WHILE we were dead in our transgressions. It was God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s grace, and God’s action. We are God’s workmanship not our workmanship. Any resemblance to a masterpiece is the master’s work not the piece’s work. We have been created in Christ Jesus to do good works, works that God wants done, works that will take effort but NEVER works that will earn us or merit us God’s favor.

Our performance doesn’t make him the gracious God full of mercy who makes us dead folks alive in Jesus. But it is God’s mercy and love and grace that move us to exert effort to do the good works God wants done.

It is just not fair, true gifts aren’t fair, but rather perfectly matched to the recipient, not fair because they were due but fair only because of the generosity of the giver.

And when we realize the enormity of the gift of God's grace and mercy and salvation that are unfairly ours then we want the same for every friend and every enemy. That they might come to know the great unmerited favor of God. Fair only because of Jesus sacrifice. And maybe if all of humanity is treated as special while dead in their transgression maybe that is fair its just not our doing.

Why should I gain from his reward

I cannot give an answer\

It is the gospel of unfairness, it is gift I don't deserve, I cannot earn, I gain all of heaven from his reward.

And what I don't deserve, that isn't my fair wages, because I have received them, and there is no shortage I wish for all what has been granted me by God's favor.



When was a time you screamed the loudest, “That’s not fair”?

Why do you think it is that we are concerned about fairness?

When you think about fairness is it about everybody getting the same, or each getting what they deserve, or is it each one getting according to their need?

How is your concept of fairness related to a level playing field?

What do you think about Jesus parable of paying all the workers what they agreed to or more? How is that fair?

As a spiritual person how do you stay in touch with the reality of not deserving God’s grace?

If God’s grace saves while we are dead in sin how much of our being “saved” is our doing?

How do you feel about being God’s workmanship so that any resemblance of a masterpiece is the master’s work not ours?

Who is it “fair” for God to offer his grace to and to whom is it “not fair” to have grace offered to them?



When was a time you screamed the loudest, “That’s not fair”?

Why do you think it is that we are concerned about fairness?

When you think about fairness is it about everybody getting the same, or each getting what they deserve, or is it each one getting according to their need?

How is your concept of fairness related to a level playing field?

What do you think about Jesus parable of paying all the workers what they agreed to or more? How is that fair?

As a spiritual person how do you stay in touch with the reality of not deserving God’s grace?

If God’s grace saves while we are dead in sin how much of our being “saved” is our doing?

How do you feel about being God’s workmanship so that any resemblance of a masterpiece is the master’s work not ours?

Who is it “fair” for God to offer his grace to and to whom is it “not fair” to have grace offered to them?



Join the conversation on Twitter @wholelifeorl #wlcTAKEAWAYS

Sermon archives are available at wholelife.church/sermons

Weekly podcast is available at wholelife.church/podcast



Join the conversation on Twitter @wholelifeorl #wlcTAKEAWAYS

Sermon archives are available at wholelife.church/sermons

Weekly podcast is available at wholelife.church/podcast