

Life is Not Fair! (Matthew 20: 1-16)

Fairness: A simple word that causes great disturbance in our souls when we sense an imbalance in the equation!

“Life is not fair” is a statement that we all know is true but hate it when it is applied to our moments when all we seek is equitable treatment. Is it not fair that I seek to be treated as well as others, not better, but certainly not worse!

It is the emotional turbulence in our souls when the person driving down the turn lane suddenly cuts in front of us in the midst of stalled traffic so they can get ten cars ahead. “That is illegal and not fair” our sense of judgement calls out! We have been wronged, as well as the drivers of the other nine cars behind us, because we followed the rules and this fool violates our obedience to the proper rules of gap distance between vehicles! We wish to have the last 10 seconds over again so that we could have closed the gap between cars leaving them trapped in their devious plot to advance themselves over my right to be ahead of them. I find myself wishing them every manner of evil, limited by my sense of grace and a gnawing sense of God’s Spirit rebuking me; so I limit myself to hoping they will reap what they plant as that sounds like Biblically sound judgement.

When arriving at my destination my sense of life being unfair is further tested by the person who stands in the express lane with far more than eight items! This is not a question of their being mathematically challenged, nor the fact that 9 bananas count as a single food item, this is a matter of their cart overflowing and the 19 different things they have in there cannot be divided into any sort of rationalised eight item category!! My blood boils at the injustice of being unfairly forced to line up six carts deep because I have eleven items in my cart. And there is no special recognition by the harried cashier for my fair play, and even worse, no chastisement for the other person’s unfair advancement through the lines. Surely that name tag and shirt identifying them as an official cashier gives them the right to demand fair play and enact satisfying judgement on the transgressor of the clearly marked “eight items” sign.

I am then reminded that life is indeed unfair and that there are millions of people in the world who have nothing to eat who would trade places in the line with me in a heartbeat to be able to share in the wealth of food they would discover in my cart. But that thought is quickly dismissed when another of greater importance crosses my mind; that person who “unfairly” used the express line is also the same jerk who took up two parking spaces in the crowded lot by parking carelessly over the lines, forcing me to have to walk for almost two extra minutes to my vehicle parked neatly in its spot! Life is not fair and that person personifies it!!!

Jesus uses the parable of the owner of a vineyard who negotiates with some workers at the start of the day to labour for him. They agree on a set wage for the day and put in their hours. As the day progresses the owner of the vineyard goes again at noon, 3PM and 5PM and hires more workers, simply telling them he will pay them whatever is fair. At the end of the day the owner begins handing out pay slips with those who started at 5PM and pays them each a full day’s salary. When the workers who put in a full day finally come forward they have seen the

salary paid to the other workers and are expectant of a better return for their full days labour under a hot sun. They are shockingly given the same amount! And the only reason for this apparent “unfairness” is that the owner is generous! In their understanding, that generosity has some serious misunderstandings!

They are not told they slacked off, or had bad attitudes (at least not until they were paid) or that they were incompetent and did not measure up to expectations. They are told that the pay was negotiated with them and they received what they were due. With the others no negotiations were made, only the promise of “fairness”.

The truth is that it does not seem fair!! In our day and age of negotiated work hours, legal protection for the rights of workers and minimum wage requirements, this is definitely not fair. But relax just a little, it did not come across as fair to them 2000 years ago either!! Unfair is still unfair! No real comfort in that however!

No matter how you look at it, it does not seem fair. And the only response from the Master, who is God in the parable, is that He has the right to be generous.

The truth is that I have always struggled with this passage. I have always related to the guys who worked hard all day, sweating and toiling under the hot sun, being diligent to make sure I was a good worker, and at the end of the day having my hopes built up by seeing “generosity” given to the those who came to work after me and thinking I too was about to be really blessed! Only to be dashed against the rocks of unfairness making me wonder why I felt excited at all to be hired at the crack of dawn.

Then I suddenly saw the passage in a whole new light.

None of us qualify to be in the first category of workers, and very few of us even in the group of half day workers, although some of you without humility could claim to be so.

Truth is, negotiations were made, wages were set, we called it the law, and expectations were established and we could not measure up and put in a full day’s work that could qualify for a full day’s pay.

You see, in this parable the problem is that although many of us see ourselves relating to the first group, none of us could have been those workers. We can relate to the unfairness but the truth is we cannot claim to be those workers who were there all day.

The law did something for me that is amazing; it showed me clearly how I cannot do it. I can’t put in a full day’s work and earn my full pay at the end of the day. The law clearly shows me I cannot do it. I am not able to be a perfect worker, who can follow the negotiated agreement to make sure I am guaranteed my full pay at the end of the day. Even if I was able to pull off the day and meet all the labour requirements, I would break the law about “coveting” at the end of it, upon witnessing my Master’s generosity. And any failure in keeping the law is a failure to meet the negotiated requirements; that forfeits any of my pay.

When I am truly honest with myself I realise that on my good days I am a 5PM hire. That does not belittle my worth to the Master, or my labour that I did put in. It only sheds a true light on the grace behind the “unfair” return I received for my wages.

It is unfair that I should have been hired at all. It is unfair that the owner should even have recognised me or my need. It is unfair that the owner is generous with me at all.

Yes, life is unfair; and I am thankful, very thankful that it is. For I truly am a beneficiary from the Owners generosity by His very late hire of me. If I am not mistaken, I think it was even after 5PM that He took me on.

And just maybe I will remember that next time in the checkout line, or possibly even in traffic. Not likely, but possible.