

### THE UNFAIR LOVE OF GOD

Friends, I have to tell you: YOU are such LUCKY people today! That's right! TODAY, you have the distinct HONOR of sitting in the presence of the WISEST, FAIREST, most CARING and compassionate **JUDGE** who has EVER had occasion to TRY a case! Of course, this JUDGE is now SEMI-RETIRED. But AT his PEAK, he was SUCH a pillar of WISDOM and FAIRNESS that HE got an average of **240,000** requests per day to LISTEN to the heart-wrenching TRIALS and TRIBULATIONS of people who believed themselves to be UNFAIRLY taken ADVANTAGE of, and OFTEN even ABUSED, at the hands of others. And, these cases were SO difficult, and so PASSIONATELY argued, that ANY judge, ANYWHERE, would have had a HARD time rendering a JUST and FAIR verdict.

Now having SAID that, this judge's DECISIONS did not ALWAYS make everyone HAPPY. But, everyone MUST have thought that he was FAIR, because time after time, when JUSTICE needed to be SERVED, they shouted out HIS name! They'd shout: *DAD! DAD! Ryan just pulled my HAIR! Or, DAD! I said I was going to practice the piano, and Lyndsey ran IN there before I could GET there! Or, DAD! Tell RYAN to stop changing the CHANNEL! I was here first! Or, DAD! I told Lyndsey to stay OUT of my ROOM, and she keeps coming in and bothering me! Tell her stay OUT! Or, DAD! Ryan keeps HITTING me!* And, ON and ON it WENT for this judge ALL day long, day after day!

You know, it's not EASY being the world's WISEST judge, ESPECIALLY having 2 CHILDREN, whom I was convinced would grow up to become the world's greatest LAWYERS, KIDS who could make ANY argument sound reasonable and fair, and KIDS who could make me feel like the biggest HEEL in the world if I happened to choose the OTHER one's SIDE. Yes, it was a TOUGH job!

And what I used to hate MOST about it was the way the kids would wait until I got really INTO something, really BUSY, before they'd start FIGHTING! They ALWAYS had a WAY of choosing the WORST possible moments, like when I was trying to concentrate on writing a SERMON. Invariably, LYNDSEY would come in: *DAD! RYAN won't let me PLAY with him and GREG! TELL him to let ME play TOO!* Now, I WANTED to be a FAIR judge, but I ALSO wanted to get my SERMON finished. SO, even though I remember WELL how it FELT to be the OLDER brother, FORCED to let my younger brother TAG along all the time, I would HEAR myself shouting: *RYAN, YOU let your sister PLAY with you, or your FRIEND can GO HOME right now!* And, that WISE and JUST decision was based on just ONE, simple FACT: *I knew WHO would have to STOP and play with LYNDSEY if Ryan did NOT!*

Yes, it was TOUGH being a great and wise JUDGE, and NEVER being able to make BOTH kids happy, even though I loved them BOTH and wanted BOTH to BE happy. THAT'S why I'm GLAD it's pretty much OVER. They're grown UP now, and it's GREAT! And if you're a PARENT going through it: I am living TESTIMONY that there IS an END in sight. It DOES get better in TIME! There IS a LIGHT at the end of the TUNNEL!

But you know: it makes me very GLAD that I'M not GOD. Did you ever wonder how GOD must feel? I mean, HERE we ARE -- BILLIONS of us around the world -- who are just like RYAN and LYNDSEY used to be. We have this incredible sense of JUSTICE and FAIRNESS, and this GREAT ability to ARGUE our cases with PASSION, POWER and LOGIC.

And WE just ASSUME that because something seems right and fair to US, it must CERTAINLY seem right and fair to GOD. We picture GOD, I think, sitting in the *CONTROL Center* of the universe, making all these WISE and FAIR decisions, sort of a COSMIC Bill Gates -- or the CEO of Coca Cola, or M.I.T. or some TOP corporation or institution -- with ONE eye on efficiency and the BOTTOM LINE, but the OTHER eye on the PEOPLE -- and REWARDING those who EARN it and getting RID of the DEAD WOOD.

But EVERY once-in-a-while, something PERPLEXING comes up that makes us WONDER about that picture of God. Does God REALLY have the SAME sense of justice and fairness that WE have -- or NOT? Well, our SCRIPTURE Lesson today from MATTHEW is ONE of those PERPLEXING *some things* that comes up. EVERY time I READ this parable of the VINEYARD owner and his WORKERS, my FIRST response is to say: *NO! It's NOT FAIR to pay those who worked only ONE hour the SAME wage as those who worked ALL day long! And what's WORSE: THOSE who worked only an HOUR got paid BEFORE those who worked ALL day! WHAT is FAIR about THAT?*

And let's FACE it: it's **NOT** fair, at least according to OUR standards. And, THAT'S why, whenever I READ this parable, I have to REMIND myself of what GOD says to the people of ISRAEL in our Scripture Lesson from **Isaiah**: *MY thoughts are NOT YOUR thoughts, and MY ways are NOT YOUR ways!* You see: we TRY, but we CANNOT lock GOD into OUR value system or OUR ways of thinking! And, if we TRY to DO that, we'll NEVER understand this parable, NOR, will we understand the Kingdom of God.

And THAT'S because, no matter HOW it appears, this parable has NOTHING to do with *LABOR RELATIONS*. Instead, it's about GOD'S love! It's about GOD'S grace! It's about GOD'S generosity! THIS parable is describing the KINGDOM of God, not THIS world. And it DESCRIBES it as a SPIRIT of generosity and love, which SPILLS over to ALL kinds of people at ALL different POINTS in their lives. BUT, as LONG as we are CAUGHT UP in a RIGID mentality, which INSISTS upon *a day's PAY for a day's WORK*, where we ONLY get what we EARN, we CANNOT fully experience the Kingdom of God, **OR** the love and generosity that THAT kingdom EMBODIES.

I mean, THINK about it: how OFTEN do we hear people SAY things like: *I don't know WHAT I did to deserve THIS problem or THAT struggle. I lead a good, clean life! I go to church every Sunday! I treat people nice. I just DON'T understand it! And, WHAT'S WORSE: LOOK at that JOKER across the street. The guy NEVER goes to church! And HE'S been RIPPING off people for YEARS! But LOOK: HE'S got EVERYTHING! And he NEVER has any PROBLEMS! WHY me, Lord? Why ME? It's just NOT FAIR!*

Well, the PROBLEM with that kind of THINKING is that it's BASED on 2 false assumptions. FIRST, it's BASED on the assumption that GOD thinks the SAME way WE think. And we're TOLD in Isaiah that THAT'S just NOT true. And SECOND, it's BASED on the assumption that we GET what we EARN -- and that you can TELL how GOOD and FAITHFUL and RIGHTEOUS someone IS by how WEALTHY they are, or how HEALTHY they are, or how few PROBLEMS they have. Well, BOTH of these assumptions are DEAD wrong! We can ALWAYS find someone WEALTHIER, someone HEALTHIER, and someone more PROBLEM-FREE than OURSELVES, -- and someone LESS deserving! CONVERSELY, we can ALWAYS find someone POORER, SICKER, and more PROBLEM-PRONE than ourselves -- and someone we think is a BETTER person! SO, our ASSUMPTIONS just DON'T WORK.

Therefore, INSTEAD of trying to squeeze GOD into OUR little SCHEMATIC of what is FAIR and what is NOT, LET'S look at how GOD works. And of course, we know God BEST by looking at JESUS. And Jesus is always reaching out in LOVE and compassion to ALL people everywhere, ESPECIALLY people in NEED. And it doesn't matter to JESUS whether society LABELS these people righteous and deserving, or NOT. HE loves them ALL! And you can call it UNFAIR if you WISH, but when it comes to GOD, the motto, *A day's PAY for a day's WORK*, just does NOT compute.

Now, I REALIZE that it seems very STRANGE to think of God's universal LOVE as UNFAIR. BUT, by the standards of OUR tit-for-tat world, it IS unfair! And it's UNFAIR because it loves EVERYBODY equally, whether they DESERVE it or NOT. And you know: THAT'S the model that I always try to FOLLOW as well. In my MINISTRY, my GOAL is to offer the SAME high-quality ministry (the BEST I can, given my limitations) to EVERYONE in the church, REGARDLESS of whether they give \$170 dollars-a-week or \$7.00 dollars-a-week; OR, whether they have been part of THIS church for 5 GENERATIONS or 5 MINUTES. You see: I believe that God calls ME to minister to everyone EQUALLY, just as JESUS did.

FURTHERMORE, I would go so far as to say that THAT'S how God calls EACH and every ONE of us to MINISTER to others. After all, if we REALLY want to follow Jesus, DON'T we have to LOVE as HE loved? And HIS was an UNCONDITIONAL, UNMERITED kind of LOVE for ALL people, whether they DESERVED it or NOT. Call it UNFAIR, but THAT was JESUS! And OUR job is to be as MUCH like HIM as we CAN be.

Now let me tell you: THIS is NO easy CALLING. It's VERY difficult to be AGENTS or AMBASSADORS of God's UNFAIR kind of love. It would be SO much SIMPLER just to GIVE people WHAT they DESERVE. BUT, as the Bible says: *GOD'S thoughts are not OUR thoughts, and GOD'S ways are not OUR ways*. And even though I don't have a CLUE as to WHY God would choose US to be ambassadors of God's LOVE, I DO know that it's a SPECIAL calling and an AWESOME task. And I ALSO know that IF we going to SUCCEED, then WE need to start THINKING of ourselves in a NEW and different LIGHT. We NEED to start THINKING of ourselves as AMBASSADORS instead of CITIZENS, as people who live IN this world, but are NOT OF this WORLD. WE are those who live by a DIFFERENT set of VALUES because, FIRST and foremost, we are CITIZENS of a DIFFERENT kingdom, the Kingdom of GOD! And we are only AMBASSADORS to THIS world! And so, OUR words and deeds of kindness and love, peace and goodness and justice, OUGHT to remind people of the Kingdom that WE are representing, which is the Kingdom of GOD. And AS we FAITHFULLY say and DO words and deeds of kindness and love, peace and goodness and justice; and AS people SEE and experience the POWER and JOY and MEANING of our words and deeds, WE will slowly but surely ADVANCE God's Kingdom on earth! WE will, slowly but surely, TRANSFORM this world -- ONE person at a time -- from a world whose values are greed, self-centeredness and nationalism, leading ONLY to things like increased poverty, nearly-continual WAR and ever-present suffering, to a world whose VALUES are the VALUES of GOD, the values of GOODNESS and PEACE, JUSTICE and EQUALITY! And THAT'S the KIND of world for which we ALL yearn! Yes, LET'S take God's call SERIOUSLY, and let's CHANGE this world, ONE person at a time, by BEING the BEST that we can BE as God's AMBASSADORS, as AGENTS of God's UNFAIR love and GOODNESS. And let's BEGIN right here in this church, because WE, as a church, need be a LIGHT in this community, the LIGHT of God's KINGDOM, SHINING forth for ALL to see. Amen.