

Sunday January 24th, 2021

Ecclesiastes 4
Series: "What If?"
"Measuring Life by Fairness"

I found a story about a man who was an avid cigar smoker. This particular man went out and bought several hundred very expensive cigars, and then had them insured against fire damage. After he had smoked them all, he filed a claim, pointing out that the cigars had in fact, been destroyed by fire. As you can imagine the insurance company refused to pay, which left the man with no choice, but to sue the insurance company.

At the end of the trial, the judge ruled that because the insurance company had agreed to insure the cigars against fire, it was legally responsible. The company had no choice but to pay the claim. However, the moment that the man accepted the money, he was promptly arrested. Why? Well, isn't it obvious? He was arrested for arson. (1001 More Humorous Illustrations, pg. 173) Perhaps you see this outcome as justice, but what is justice actually?

More often than not, we tend to view justice as fairness. From the moment we can speak, we are apt to use our voices to demand fairness. Children are very skilled at observing things and crying out in protest that, "it isn't fair!" But children are not the only ones to look at the world and conclude that things are unfair. It may be in our opinion unfair that a corporate CEO makes millions of dollars, while the company employees make a small fraction of that.

We might think it unfair that people in other parts of the world are: oppressed, starving, or suffering from disease, while we Canadians live in relative security and comfort. But our sense of unfairness can also get very personal. "It isn't fair that my coworker got the promotion." "It isn't fair that my friend found love but I haven't." "It isn't fair that I am sitting in traffic late for work." "It isn't fair that I got sick, unemployed, divorced etc."

Our sense of fairness is even reflected in how we structure many things in our society. We have referees to keep sporting contests fair. We appoint judges to try and keep things just and fair. We expect people to not butt in line, to obey traffic lights, turn off their cell phones at the movies, not bring 9 items to the 8 items or less express checkout line, wear a mask, and a whole host of responsible things. And when they break the rules, we get upset and angry.

In our passage today, the Preacher is primarily concerned with the bigger issues of justice and fairness. Primarily about the exploitation of the poor and powerless. He writes, "Again I observed all the oppression that takes place in our world. I saw the tears of the oppressed, with no one to comfort them. The oppressors have great power, and the victims are helpless." Elsewhere in the famous book "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu, we read that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Day in, and day out, we see the fact that rich, influential people; exploit loop holes, and exploit people, to further feather their own nests. Just read some of the articles these last few years about offshore tax shelters that even our banks are using to hide wealth and avoid taxes. And time and time again, in our outrage, we throw up our hands and declare, but what can we do? What can I do?

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The reality is that there are two conflicting truths about the nature of fairness that drive us nuts. The first is very hard to swallow, but nonetheless, true. That truth being that no matter how hard we try; we are never going to fix the problem of unfairness. Life is always going to be unfair. Jesus alluded to this truth in John 12:8 when he said, “You will always have the poor among you.” Have you ever heard that quoted, especially in the midst of discussions on what if anything we can do to alleviate poverty?

Most often we tell ourselves that if Jesus said we will always have the poor with us, why bother trying to change that. It isn't doing any good. We use it as a kind of excuse not to get involved. There just never seems to be an end to needs and the requests for donations, and so we might be inclined to avoid giving altogether. I wonder sometimes if that was the thinking, the rich man had in the parable Jesus told in Luke 16, about the rich man and Lazarus.

Have you ever wondered why the rich man never shared with Lazarus, who he literally had to step over to get into his house? The bible doesn't tell us, but I bet it is was along the same lines as the things we think. “Why doesn't he go out and get a job? Man, I am tired of this guy always asking for a handout. If I give him food, he will tell other poor people and I will be overrun by the needy.

Besides there are always poor people around, what does my little bit accomplish? Jesus' point is simply this, “Don't go there!” Don't go making excuses for why you do not help the poor. The rich man, made excuses for not helping Lazarus and well, we know where he ended up. This brings us to the second truth about fairness that is just as unsettling, and I know none of us wants to hear it and it is this.

Life is always going to be unfair. There I said it. There is no promise by God that life is going to be fair. The reality is that with sin and with nature being fractured as The Apostle Paul states in Romans, none of us has any guarantee of fairness. And so, some of us are better off, because of where we are born in this world and who are parents are. Some of us are better off genetically, gifted with genius IQs, or an athlete's lungs and muscles.

You get the point, I think. Our crisis comes when we want God to do something about this unfairness. We want God to end poverty, illness etc. We are like the man sitting in a church shaking his fist at God. “Can't you see the problems we have God. Why don't you do something?” To which God responded, “I did do something. I sent you.” You might be surprised to learn that the verse, “You will always have the poor among you” was Jesus quoting the Old Testament.

In Deuteronomy 15:11 God declared to Israel, “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.” That's the verse Jesus was quoting. His audience would have grasped the entirety of it. You will always have the poor among you, therefore help them. Helping the poor and oppressed is a constant theme in scripture.

Proverbs 14:21, “Blessed is he who is kind to the needy.” And Prov. 22:9, “a generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.”

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This is such an important command of God that he says in Prov. 19:17, “He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done.” Think about what this verse says. Many of us have wanted to buy a car or a house and we needed a loan. So, we traipse over to the bank, and meet with the loan officer, asking for money to buy whatever it is we need or want.

It is so nice of them, isn't it, to agree to deposit a few, or maybe many thousands of dollars in our account for us to spend. However, there is a catch, isn't there? As generous as the bank may seem, they do expect something. They expect us to pay the money back, over time, and with interest. Imagine that. God is saying that when we help the poor, we are lending to him and he will pay us back with interest. That is how important helping the poor is to God.

However, the opposite response to the poor is also dealt with by God. Proverbs 21:13, “If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.” In other words, if we turn our back to the poor, God will turn his back to us. Scary thought isn't it. But wait a minute, Solomon wrote Proverbs, and maybe Ecclesiastes, so you might wonder, “Now wait a minute. He is the king. He is very wealthy. Surely, he could have done something for the poor.

Surely, he could have passed laws, and punished those who oppressed the poor. He could have set up soup kitchens and welfare payments. I am sure he did things like this, but as he thought about his generosity, he realized that it changed nothing. He barely made a dent in the unfairness and it bothered him. He could have given away everything, and still, there would be poor people around. The same for the rich young ruler. He could give it all to the poor, but change nothing.

So, part of the discussion in Ecclesiastes 4 has to do with answering the question of why things never change. In Eccles. 4:4 we read, “Then I observed that most people are motivated to success by their envy of neighbours. But this too, is meaningless, like chasing the wind.” The moment you compare yourself with your neighbour, you open yourself up to feelings of dissatisfaction and envy.

The goals of your life change, from serving God and your neighbours, to attaining more to keep up with your neighbours. This drive for more, wrecks lives. It ruins marriages, family ties, friendships, and our health. I have reminded us before the old adage that no one says on their death bed, “I wish I had put in more hours at work”. The drive for more is insane. Back in September, we passed the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attack that happened in New York.

The economic fallout of this event is well documented. In particular, the airlines were badly hurt financially. People were scared away from flying, and seats were not selling on flights. Only one airline was making money the following year- South West Airlines; although they were only making about 50% of what they did the year before. The rest of the industry was bleeding red ink, and some declared bankruptcy to protect themselves from creditors.

So, it is odd that some of South West's employees, through their union, were threatening to go on strike. Why? Because they were not making as much money as comparable employees at the airlines that were failing. These union workers were prepared to risk everything because someone else, whose job was precarious, was making more.

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This is what envy leads you to do. It leads to insane actions and decisions. Besides greed there is another reason people get stuck in poverty. Not all people, but some. In 4:5 we read, “Foolish people refuse to work and almost starve. They feel it is better to be lazy and barely survive than to work hard, especially in the long run everything is futile.” Another translation of the first phrase reads, “The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.”

In a word, the preacher is saying that laziness leads to poverty. We know that inactivity leads to health issues, but it also has economic consequences. This observation is not offered to excuse us from helping those who need help. Rather, the Preacher is saying that you cannot fix everything in life. You cannot fix all the poverty. There is just too much greed and laziness to fix it all. Unfairness, poverty, oppression: is all a part of life.

Some are caused by ourselves, but often it is caused by situations we have no control over. As we are told in verse one, the oppressed have no comforter. This is very disheartening. I suspect that this disheartening is the motivation for many churches and parachurch ministries to dedicate themselves to social justice. Churches commit therefore to poverty reduction, peace initiatives, education, crime reduction and addiction counselling.

These are laudable goals. We heartily endorse such efforts, but something is missing. No matter how hard churches and organizations work there is always more needs. Some folks become trapped in a vicious cycle of chronic dependence. I am firmly committed to doing what we can to alleviate suffering, but it is in the long run, just a stop gap measure. To really address the systemic needs of society, the fallenness of humanity needs to be tackled.

We cannot do this, but Jesus can. I relish how God reveals new things to me in familiar place. Remember the story of the four friends who carried their paralytic friend to Jesus and then cut a hole in the roof and let him down to Jesus. Any sensible person, who knew what Jesus was capable of, and what the man really needed, would expect Jesus to heal him and send him on his way. But something else happened first, do you remember what it was.

Looking down at the man Jesus said, “Your sins are forgiven”. Only after the religious leaders were outraged, did Jesus heal the man of his physical ailment. There are a lot of lessons in that story, but one truth is that if you really want to begin to alleviate injustice, you have to address the source, namely the fallenness of people. We get a bit squeamish when talking about sin or making Jesus Lord of our lives.

But frankly, we need to ask ourselves, and everyone else, “How is it going with you being the Lord of your life?” Go back to that famous verse of Jesus’. “You will always have the poor with you”. That’s not the whole verse. The whole verse reads, “The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.” (Matt. 26:11) The words are spoken right before Jesus’ death and resurrection, and right after an unnamed woman comes and anoints Jesus.

The disciples witness the woman’s act of devotion and they grumble, especially Judas. They grumble that the valuable perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus is talking about priorities in our mission. Helping the poor is admirable and in tune with God’s call to us, but service to and proclamation about Jesus are our first priority.

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The disciples demonstrated this priority all through the book of Acts. In Acts 5 Peter stands before the Sanhedrin because he refused to stop preaching Christ. He is not there because he gave a few shekels to a poor beggar. The disciples knew that to really change society, Christ needed to be shared and promoted. Only when Jesus is truly Lord of all hearts will the vicious cycle of poverty and injustice end and the change begins one heart at a time.

No wonder the Preacher states that if we are waiting for a political solution, we are wasting our time. The solution is Jesus who comes and blesses our efforts to share what we have, and represent him in loving those around us, particularly those whose life has dealt a difficult hand. We must remember that Jesus identifies with the poor and the oppressed as we read in Matthew 25.

“For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.” Because as Jesus states, “I assure, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!” We know misery loves company, but just remember that Jesus is that company.