

Sunday May 15th, 2022

Job 34:1-9
“Is God Fair?”

Steven Cole on the website Bible.org writes about a situation we can all understand. He says, *“Doesn’t it make you mad when something is unfair—especially if you are on the receiving end? Recently I applied for a new health insurance policy. The company accepted me but charged me a higher rate because of my allergy problems. The application never asked whether I smoked or how much (I’ve never smoked). They didn’t ask if I regularly down a six-pack and then get behind the wheel (I don’t drink at all). They never bothered to inquire whether I eat properly and exercise regularly (I do).*

So, some guy who smokes two packs a day, drives when drunk, eats junk food and never exercises could get the standard rate. But because I have hay fever, I have to pay more. I cried, “UNFAIR! We all want to be treated fairly. Most of us figure that if we do our best, God will deal with us fairly on judgment day. But Jesus taught that God does not operate according to our notion of what is fair.”

In [Matthew 20](#), Jesus told a story about a man who owned a vineyard. Early in the morning he hired some workers. He agreed to pay them the going rate for a day’s wage, so they started working. About nine o’clock, he found some more workers and told them he would pay them a fair wage, so they went to work. The same thing happened at noon and again at three in the afternoon. Finally, at five in the afternoon he found some more men standing idle, hired them and sent them into his vineyard.

At sundown, he called his foreman and ordered him to pay all the workers, beginning with those hired last. For their hour or so of work, they received the full day’s wage. So did everyone else, including the ones hired early in the morning. Everyone received a full day’s wage, no matter how long they had worked. Those who had worked all day grumbled. They didn’t think it was fair that they got paid the same as those who had only worked an hour. They thought they should get more.

But the owner of the vineyard said, “What’s your gripe? You got the day’s wage we agreed on. If I want to give the same wage to someone who didn’t work as long as you, that’s my business.” The main point is that God doesn’t operate on the merit system as we think he should. God deals with us according to His free grace. As Paul explains, “For it is by his grace you are saved through trusting him; it is not your own doing. It is God’s gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of” ([Ephesians 2:8, 9](#); New English Bible).

This concept of God’s fairness, supplies the basis for Elihu’s second speech. His speech is actually divided into two sections. In verses 2-15 Elihu speaks to a wider audience, meaning anyone within earshot. It is probably not a stretch, to think that this little gathering of men has garnered the attention of others. Maybe other elders from the community. The questions raised in this debate among these friends was something everyone wrestles with.

The second section includes words directed specifically to Job. In both sections Elihu will say basically the same thing, but the second section is a fuller and more a personal appeal.

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At the very heart of Elihu's words, is the concept of grace. Some people actually get surprised to learn that the concept of grace operates in the Old Testament, but it is everywhere in the bible; Old and New Testaments. God has, since he made us, been demonstrating his grace, and not delivering unto us what we deserve. Maybe a true story about grace will bring it home for us.

Just over a century ago, a man named Shamel was the leader of a guerilla group fighting against the Czarist regime in Russia. The unity of his group was threatened by a rash of stealing amongst the members, which included the soldiers' families. So Shamel imposed a penalty of 100 lashes for anyone caught stealing. Not long after that, Shamel's own mother was caught stealing. He didn't know what to do.

He loved his mother and didn't want her to suffer, but he also knew he had to uphold his law or anarchy and infighting would ruin his army. He shut himself up in his tent, for three days, agonizing over what to do. Finally, he made up his mind: For the sake of the law and the whole society, his mother must pay the penalty. But before three blows had fallen on her back, Shamel had his real and final solution. He removed his mother and he himself took her place. The full price had to be paid, but he bore the penalty she deserved. His law stood, but his love prevailed.

Even if you're a pretty good person, one who has been at work in the vineyard since early morning, you've violated God's holy law. You've got sin that must be paid for. Maybe the person coming in at five in the afternoon has more sin than you. But if God is just, both people's sin must be paid for. Either you pay (the merit system), or God pays (the grace system). God's grace doesn't seem fair to the self-righteous, but for those who recognize how undeserving they are, it is truly wonderful!

Perhaps we should heed Elihu's invitation to ponder God's governance of the world, and whether God governs fairly and justly. We know where Job stands on this. Many times, in this book of Job, Job has accused God of being unjust and unfair to him. Job believes he is being treated as a liar and no matter what Job says to God, his suffering endures. We know from the end of the book that Job will repent of his attitude and accusations directed to God.

Elihu cares not one whit about supposed secret sins Job is being punished for, and the three friends accused him of committing. Elihu is more concerned with the obvious sin Job has been committing all along in this discussion among the friends. Elihu says that Job has been "drinking up scoffing water", meaning Job has scoffed at the goodness and justice of God. By scoffing at God, Job has aligned himself with evildoers and the wicked.

Elihu is not saying Job is wicked, but rather that Job is speaking like a wicked person. Elihu points out that Job has said that God cares not for the behaviour of people. The wicked prosper and the righteous fall. Therefore, Job concludes, why be good at all. It doesn't seem to matter. This vision of God is Job's sin, and it is not hidden. Elihu and the other three friends have been privy to it all along. Only now does Elihu call him out on it.

Like anyone one of us, who has seen or heard a person who is down in the dumps get reprimanded. Some commentators believe Elihu is too harsh, and he is uncaring about Job's predicament, but this too is a human perspective not God's.

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Elihu, like the prophets that follow in the bible, is demonstrating an overwhelming passion for the honour of God. Thusly, Elihu moves on to present his own take on Job's circumstance, and Job's response to it. Once again, we see that asking "why" is asking the wrong question. When bad things happen to us, we should not be asking why, but instead; now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it? Elihu presents his main thesis in two ways. One negatively and one positively.

The negative approach is that Elihu cannot abide the idea that God would ever do wickedness. Positively, Elihu affirms the doctrine of just judgment, in that God does repay people fairly and justly according to their ways. This is the heart of Job's denial of the goodness of God directed toward him. Earlier the friends expressed a similar thought that God retains his punishment for the wicked, but Elihu broadens this idea. God is not only just in his punishments, but also good and fair in his governance of the world.

Why is it unthinkable that God would act wickedly? Elihu's main point in verses 13-15 are the heart of it all. It is unthinkable because God is God. God is above any and all other gods. God made the world and maintains the world, and if God is unjust, then there is no justice. If there is anything like justice in this world, it is because it originates from God. God made justice. Elihu drives this point home by reminding Job that we are utterly dependent on God for life and breath.

God however, needs nothing from us. To challenge God's justice is to attack his character. And this is a foolish, and dangerous endeavor. Job, in his words and attitude is challenging God's very character. Job, and anyone who thinks like him, is wrong, because God is supremely powerful and cannot be influenced by anyone to have God show favoritism to them. God's judgment is not uncertain. Elihu says, "in a moment they die" which doesn't mean immediate death on a wicked person, but God is at work 24/7.

God also judges with perfect judgement. He sees all. No one can hide from God. We humans can take a long time to investigate someone's guilt or innocence; but not God. He can execute judgment whenever he deems it necessary. Elihu also states that God judges publicly for all to see. People are given over to their wickedness to receive what they deserve. I am beginning to ponder this last point of late.

There is a great deal of wickedness perpetuated in this world, but have you noticed how even evil committed decades ago is now being revealed, and people and institutions are being held to account. For Canadians, at least for me, there was a blind spot when it came to the whole residential school system for aboriginal children. Honestly, I knew nothing about it until the last few years, and I am appalled by what I and everyone else is learning

The light is beginning to shine on the darkness. The same goes for the "MeToo" movement and "Black Lives Matter". I do not have any easy solutions for these miscarriages of justice, but I am now certainly more aware of them, and can become an ally of those so grievously wronged. I also want to mention that there is a real catharsis or release in people when they can share their pain, freely and without judgment.

But then Elihu comes to his climatic point of his argument.

Even when God seems quiet to us, it is still unacceptable, and wrong, to condemn God for his apparent injustice. For “when he hides his face” that is, he is invisible, we have no idea what is going on behind the scenes. This was the scene painted for us at the beginning of Job. But this also applies to our own personal situation and also globally. God’s apparent inaction, does not contradict his justice. God’s slowness to act, from our perspective, is no grounds to deny his sovereignty, nor his justice.

It is therefore logical that Elihu moves then to call Job to repentance. To admit before God, he has said things he shouldn’t have said. Even under such distress, as he experienced, Job needs to trust God. It’s God’s plan for him that matters. If God had admitted Job’s accusations were correct, then it would be Job’s wisdom, and Job’s sense of justice, that would be controlling reality and not God’s.

Some commentators think Elihu paused a moment at verse 33 to see what response Job and his friends had to what he said. We cannot say that for certain, but the point is clear that Elihu takes this matter with the utmost care and concern. For Elihu, Job has spoken without knowledge and without insight. What we say about God, and his justice and goodness, is of prime importance to us all. Job needs to give greater weight to Elihu’s words.

Elihu states that Job has added rebellion to his sin. Literally he has “clapped his hands among us and multiplies his words against God.” Elihu maybe suggesting that Job has undermined the piety of his three friends. Clapping his hands may indicate Job made an impious and rude gesture in response to Elihu’s words. Job has not just said one bad thing about God, but rather he has gone on and on with his dispersions towards God.

It has been a sustained attack on the good character of God. Elihu believes that despite his suffering, Job needs to repent of his words and attitude. We may be tempted to look at Elihu’s words, and consider them as cruel, or a self-serving arrogance, or insensitive to one so grievously suffering. I doubt any of us would have been so harsh with anyone in such devastation. But we miss the point if we dismiss Elihu’s words because of our perceived harshness in them. Elihu’s words are indeed harsh, and blunt, but there is a good reason for that.

You see, Elihu takes this all very seriously. He fears that Job, in his false view of God, is endangering himself to a final judgement and punishment. He wants Job to forgo his complaint to God, and simply submit to God, in all things; despite what has happened. To believe we know better than God in whatever circumstance we are in, is to align ourselves with the serpent in the garden of Eden, who tempted the first couple with promises of self awareness of wisdom.

To become like God. Job’s three friends missed this vital point, because they were so focused on the sins Job committed before this tragedy, that they missed the one he was committing right in front of them. The three friends had no way to validate their assertion of Job’s wickedness. It was all supposition, but Elihu sees the true sin in all of this, and calls Job to account. It therefore, all comes down to our willingness to submit in all things to God. No easy task given our egos and self pride. But to refuse to submit is the height of folly.

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The story goes that the captain of a battleship looked into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message "Alter your course 10 degrees south." Promptly a return message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north."

The captain was angered; his command had been ignored. So, he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south--I am the captain!" Soon another message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north--I am seaman third class Jones." Immediately the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke: "Alter your course 10 degrees south--I am a battleship." Then the reply came "Alter your course 10 degrees north--I am a lighthouse."

In the midst of our dark and foggy times, all sorts of voices are shouting orders into the night, telling us what to do, how to adjust our lives. Out of the darkness, one voice signals something quite opposite to the rest--something almost absurd. But the voice happens to be the Light of the World, and we ignore it at our peril.