

“How to Fight Like a Christian” (No Fair: 1 of 3)

a sermon based on
Matthew 18:15-20

and delivered on-
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Today begins a new sermon series: *No Fair*. The good news that we as Christians preach is that God isn't fair. At first blush, that doesn't sound like good news. Does it? But it is good news. Although God isn't fair, God is just and God is merciful. We might even say that God is humble, when we remember that in Jesus he humbled himself as ordinary human being so that we might receive mercy through the cross. In fact, God is exactly what he expects of us when we hear those words from Micah 6:8: "Hear, O mortal, and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness (i.e. be merciful) and to walk humbly before the LORD your God."

Do you see what I mean about God not being fair? If God was fair there would be no room for mercy. Without mercy, would there be room for justice? Justice not in the sense of punishment but in the sense of honoring the dignity of others so that they have access to all that they need to thrive in life.

God is just. God is merciful. God is good. But, God isn't fair. Praise the Lord! Because if he was fair, I would have no hope. In my sins, I've squandered too many opportunities to reflect back the honor God bestowed when he made me in his image.

Let's have a little logic lesson. Shall we? Next week it will be a math lesson, but this week it's logic.

If God isn't fair and I am made in God's image, must I be fair? I still have to be just. I still have to be merciful. I still have to be humble. But must I be fair?

Usually when any of us worry about fairness it's when we feel like something isn't fair to me. Right? We don't usually worry about it when we come out ahead in the matter. Do we? Be honest.

So as Christians, how do we live unfairly but in holiness at the same time? One way is by how we fight with each other.

It may surprise you to hear, but Christians sometimes fight with one another: often over the silliest things like the color of table cloths for the women's dinner, because we know that when we stand at the pearly gates there's that chance that St. Peter's gonna say, "It looks like we were all lined up with a place for you, but then you used that ugly orange table cloth for women's summer lunch. Right? Honestly, some of the biggest church fights I've heard have been about silly stuff like that. I've even seen people leave a church over those sorts of things.

So what happens when something more serious gets in the way? What happens when someone does something that hurts us deeply? Isn't it interesting that the people we love the most can or whom we expect to be the most caring can hurt us the most? The same action or inaction from a stranger, we can brush off; but when it's someone who's supposed to love us as a member of the church or any other relationship, it just hurts more.

It's not fair. In our broken and fallen nature, that bugs us; and the only way to make it fair is to even the score. Right? That's how the world fights. That's how the world seeks balance: you hurt me, so now I have to hurt you until we're equally hurt.

I've seen that in divorces, when couples will fight so much to come out on top that the "victor" ends up with less than if he or she had just accepted "unfairness" and let the other "win" early on. I suspect many of us have seen that happen. So what's the prize? Fairness?

During my first meeting with couples preparing for marriage, I give them two specific assignments. The first is that they intentionally pray for each other each day. That prayer isn't, "Lord, help him to discover that there is a hamper for dirty socks," or "Lord, help her to use something other than the smoke detector as the kitchen timer." The prayer isn't "Help him/help her be ... fill in the blank..." Instead, the prayer is, "Lord, how can I be the man she needs as a husband?" "How can I be the woman that he needs as a wife?" "Help me to honor the best in this person, so that he/she can realize all that you intended." That's the first assignment. It's actually related to the second assignment.

The second assignment (I learned this from a supervising pastor when I was a student) is to form "Rules of Engagement." By "rules of engagement," I don't mean rules for things to be done as you prepare for the wedding. These rules of engagement are rules for fighting.

What's funny is how often a couple will say, "But we never fight." I look at them and chuckle, "Well, you're not married yet. You will."

I go on to explain that these are rules that they will agree upon so that they honor one another. Think about it: when couples marry they're not usually thinking about how long they can stretch it out before divorce, but about the hope of staying together in love for the remainder of their lives. Right? Realistically, they will have disagreements; but their hope remains to stay together. If that is their hope, then it means that they should approach their hurts and disagreements in such a way that they will stay together in love. Right?

St. Paul said in the passage that Sydney read earlier, that we should, "Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." (Ro 13:8) Jesus just assumes that love when speaks in the Gospel passage about how to address another member of the church who sins against us – who hurts us.

What does he say to do? First, tell the person. Do it alone. One of the first things I was taught during management training in my previous career was to praise in public and to correct in private. The goal was to help employees get better, rather than to demean them. Shouldn't that be our goal in our relationships with one another?

Even the silliest sort of things hurt more when someone we love or respect does it (or maybe forgets to do it). How does complaining to others fix it? I've seen this in the church, too. Something doesn't go someone's way or someone did or said something that hurt or annoyed her. Instead of telling the person – who may be oblivious – they share it in the parking lot, "Don't you think it's awful?" "Can you believe?" In effect they stir up hurt and anger in others who weren't even a part of it to begin with.

This is just part of our worldliness. It happens in the world. How often does a snarky or snide comment get posted on Facebook or Twitter? Where they remain forever – no matter what you think happens when you delete a post. What's the purpose? Really? Is it to alleviate your pain? or to come out on top?

Jesus' instruction is this: whenever someone hurts you or offends you, go directly to that person and tell him. This is the good part, if they listen, "you have regained that one." If they listen (I'll add, and if you listen, too) your relationship will be restored and love can flourish. In the context of marriage, don't complain about your husband or wife to everyone who will listen (especially keep your family out of it) so that you make him or her look bad to others. Think about what that says about you if you're married to such an oaf. Instead, tell them what hurt.

When you got married wasn't that the hope, that this person cared about you and doesn't want to hurt you? That they want the best for you? Do you see how that changes things?

If I believe that this person whether my spouse or my parent or my friend or my fellow church member really doesn't want to hurt me, then they will want to know how I've been hurt so that they can stop and maybe even offer healing? We could even project that on to strangers – hoping that the image of God in their lives has that same sense.

Then if – IF. Let me repeat that IF – only IF – the person refuses to listen should we bring anyone else into it. Then we only say what the hurt is in the presence of the other. We don't work them up to our side in advance. Several years ago, I'd been in a relationship with a parishioner, so I went to a counsellor – keeping the person's name secret – asking, “Is this something I should be upset about? Or am I the one with an issue?”

I think that's why Jesus says to bring one or two with you (only one or maybe two not a crowd) so that they can listen to both of you. Maybe I'm the one in the wrong. Humility – not fairness, right? But even if not, maybe the other will acknowledge the wrong and seek to be better, leading to mercy, right?

Sometimes that doesn't happen. Sometimes the other won't listen, and has no intent to stop the hurt. In that case, Jesus says, let it go. Have nothing else to do with them. That's a sad thing, but just a reality that we don't have control over others.

In all things, however, our goal as Christians should be towards reconciliation whenever possible. In all things our goal should be focused on humility and mercy for the sake of one another rather than making sure we come out on top; because too often the victory is hollow.

He tells us that what we bind on earth is bound in heaven and what we let loose on earth is loosened in heaven. When we strive to forgive – to unbind ourselves from our hurt – we free ourselves to enter glory without dragging the suffering our hurts with us. It makes for a happier life.

Several years ago, I'd used that example of the “rules of engagement” in another sermon. One man approached me later. He and his wife had been married for over forty years. He told me that they'd never had a fight or disagreement. I still find that hard to believe: that in forty years they had agreed on everything. However, the more I pondered that statement, I wondered: maybe they just never noticed because they didn't let things fester for even a moment and trusted that they wanted the best for each other.

Especially in a world where it has become too easy to denigrate those who hurt us and to find others for our side of any argument, we as Christians can set an example of how to build up one another even in the midst of our own hurts.

It's never fair when someone hurts us, but making them hurt more won't take away our pain and will probably just make it linger as we wonder whether we've really evened the score. Meanwhile, the joy of reconciliation is a wonderful anesthetic.

How glad I am, that Jesus allows me to ease his pain on the cross by claiming the mercy he offers with an awareness of just how unfair he is for my sake. AMEN.