

We've all heard it—from kids on the playground to adults in heated discussions. A child's first word might be "Mamma" or "Dadda." Their first full sentence could be "Hold me!" or it could be "Give me!" But their first argument will almost certainly be, "That's not fair." Our own daughter, Kristen, said it when she was younger. There's a four-year difference between our boys and her, and because the boys were older, we allowed them to do things like walk to their grandma's house. But Kristen wasn't permitted to do the same. The moment she noticed the difference, she immediately declared, "That's not fair!"

It's a common reaction, isn't it? Whether we're talking about kids or adults, the cry for fairness resonates throughout life. But have you ever stopped to think about what we really mean when we say, "That's not fair"? It seems as though our built-in sense of justice goes deeper than cultural training. Dr. Laith Al-Shawaf, an expert in the field of biology and morality, studied this issue and found that morality across all cultures has a .7 correlation. This suggests that the sense of right and wrong, of fairness, is not just taught—it's built into our nature. This is an incredible proof of God's existence. If we have a rule written on our hearts that tells us there is right, wrong, and fairness, then it's reasonable to assume that Someone wrote that rule.

Fairness and the Human Condition

We can clearly see when something is not fair. That instinct is deeply embedded in us. It's universal. However, while we recognize unfairness when it's against us, we often fail to apply the same principle when we're on the giving end. Think about how we view justice. I love watching instant karma videos—those clips where someone gets what they deserve. It feels satisfying to see justice served. . . unless the person is me. Then, I don't want fairness—I want grace. I want leniency.

We want fairness for others but grace for ourselves. Is that fair?

That's the paradox of fairness. The moment we get it, we realize that we never really wanted it. It's tough, because while we think we want to live in a world that's perfectly fair, in reality, we don't. When fairness comes knocking on our door, we quickly realize that what we actually need is grace.

This brings us to the apostle Paul. In his letter to Philemon, Paul knew exactly what unfairness felt like. He writes from prison—unjustly imprisoned for the sake of the gospel.

Paul begins his letter by addressing Philemon with affection: "Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker" (Philemon 1). From the very first verse, Paul sets the stage, highlighting his own unfair circumstances. Five times in this short letter he references his unfair situation. Here he is, writing to Philemon while sitting in a prison cell—not for wrongdoing, but for preaching Christ. That alone shows that life isn't always fair.

Why is he mentioning this? Because he is about to ask Philemon to do something that will seem unfair.

In verses 8–9, Paul points out that though he has the authority to command Philemon to do what is right, he instead chooses to appeal to him out of love: "Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you." What is Paul asking for? He is pleading for grace on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave who had wronged Philemon. By law, Philemon had every right to punish Onesimus. This would be fair. Onesimus had stolen from Philemon and run away. Justice would demand punishment.

But Paul doesn't ask for justice; he asks for grace. "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment" (Philemon 10). Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus and recuperate his losses. Yet, for love's sake, Paul asks him to do something that isn't fair. He asks him to let go of his rights for the sake of grace. This is the essence of what grace is.

An old Reliant K song says, "The beauty of grace is that it makes life unfair." And that's the truth, isn't it? Grace, by its very nature, disrupts fairness. It gives us what we don't deserve and lets go of what we are entitled to. Grace flips fairness on its head. Grace says, "You deserve punishment, but instead, you receive mercy." Grace happens when someone gives up their rights for another's wrongs.

This is tough for us, because we like the idea of fairness. At least, we think we do. But when we really dig into the concept, we might begin to wonder whether we truly want to live in a world that is fair. Fairness means people get what they deserve. But do we want that?

Jesus addresses this paradox in Matthew 18:21–35, where Peter asks him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus replies, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Then Jesus tells a story to explain his point. A king wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One servant owed him an enormous debt—so large that it could never be repaid. The king ordered that the servant and his family be sold to pay the debt. But the servant begged for mercy, and the king, moved with compassion, forgave the entire debt.

But the story doesn't end there. That same servant, having just been forgiven, went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a small sum of money. Instead of extending the same mercy he had received, the first servant demanded payment and had his fellow servant thrown into prison.

When the king heard about this, he was furious. He called the first servant back and said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't

you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” Then, in anger, the king had the servant thrown into prison until he could pay back everything he owed.

Jesus concludes the parable with these chilling words: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:35).

If God dealt with us strictly according to fairness, we would all be in serious trouble. We are like the first servant, owing a debt we could never repay. But God, in His grace, forgives us.

Yet, when we demand fairness from others, we are often like that unforgiving servant, forgetting the grace we’ve been shown. We want justice for them and mercy for ourselves.

Fairness would mean judgment for our sins. Grace means forgiveness. The beauty of grace is that it makes life unfair in our favor. We receive mercy instead of punishment, and we are called to extend that same mercy to others.

Paul’s appeal to Philemon was a call to extend grace, not fairness. Philemon had every right to punish Onesimus, but for love’s sake, Paul urged him to forgive. In the same way, we have been forgiven an unpayable debt through Christ. And now, we are called to extend that grace to others, even when it isn’t fair.

That’s the paradox of fairness. The moment we demand it, we realize we don’t really want it. What we need—what we’ve been given—is grace. And grace, in its most beautiful form, makes life gloriously unfair.

Part 3: “Forgiveness” over “Fair”

a study of Philemon

RUNAWAY grace

God’s Plan for Broken Relationships



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