

The Bonfire of the Vanities
“Life Isn’t Fair”
Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

Introduction

- [Slide #1] Our youngest boy Micah has recently developed a sense of what he thinks is fairness. Everything is unfair to him. If Ethan has more breakfast cereal than Micah, Micah is right there with a vociferous “not fair.” Everything has to be fair. Or, everything we say to Micah, if it’s not a “yes”, if it’s not what he wants, Micah calls it unfair. In fact, Miriam and I were kind of surprised the other day. We were at the table eating and Miriam told Micah something and he responded with the now routine, “not fair.” And then he added something that has had me chuckling for weeks. Micah added, “Not fair is the new yes.” Meaning when he says “not fair” what he’s really saying is “yes, I can have what you say I can’t have.”
- Sometimes a child’s sense of fairness is nothing more than pure selfishness. You want something and you can’t have it so it’s unfair. However, I think there’s probably something more to it than that. God is just and we are created in his image. We are wired to sense when something is unjust or unfair. The human radar picks up the signal pretty easily. And when we experience unjust treatment or unfairness it irks us. A lazy coworker gets a raise while you don’t. You get sick while the rest of the family stays healthy. The weekend comes and it rains. You study hard but the teacher asks the other question, the one you didn’t prepare for.
- None of us need to be reminded of this, but isn’t all that fair. Some of you probably had parents who drilled that into your heads. The saying “when life throws you a bag of lemons, make lemonade” is ridiculous. Most of the time the lemons are rotten anyway. Life is unjust. Or as the late [Jack Benny](#) once remarked upon accepting an award, "I really don't deserve this. But I have arthritis, and I don't deserve that either."¹ We swim in a perpetual sea of unfairness. What we learned when we’re three years old, that all of life is basically unfair, makes us bitter and cynical the older we grow.

Transition

It did Qoheleth. There is no fairness under the sun, in life on this earth. There is no meaning to be found in hoping that life will turn out fairly. It won’t. We come to Ecclesiastes 3:16-22 and you can almost feel Qoheleth’s words dripping with cynicism. He’s been beat down by the unfairness of life. But here’s the difference between Qoheleth and us. Whereas we let life’s unfairness overcome us with a whole lot of whoa is me and pity parties here Qoheleth says something very important about the unfairness of life...[Slide #2]

Proposition

- **The unfairness of life is meant to drive you to God**
- He gives here...

Organizational Sentence

- **Two instances of unfairness which are meant to drive us to God**

¹ Submitted to www.preachingtoday.com by J. Richard Love, Rushton, Louisiana

- The **first instance** in verses 16-17 is unfairness in the courtroom. The **second instance**, from verses 18-22, is the unfairness of our own mortality.

Transition

Look at **verses 16-17**. *And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment--wickedness was there, in the place of justice--wickedness was there. 17 I thought in my heart, "God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed."*

Main Points

- As Qoheleth searches for meaning in life under the sun he is forced to a painful conclusion. There is no justice on the earth. **Verse 16**. *And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment--wickedness was there, in the place of justice--wickedness was there.* All he sees are OJ cases everywhere. Courtroom injustice abounds. [Slide #3] Even the **courts are unfair**.
- That phrase, *the place of judgment*, is synonymous with the courtroom. In the one place where there should be justice and equity and fairness Qoheleth finds the opposite— *wickedness*. The guilty are proclaimed innocent. The innocent are condemned. In Micah's words, "that's not fair." Or as **Chuck Swindoll** says, "Whether we think it is fair or not, we must confront the fact that in our world, evil frequently triumphs over good, injustice routinely replaces justice, and inequality habitually sweeps aside equality."² Qoheleth knows this. We know this. My three year old knows this. Injustice and unfairness are everywhere, not just in the courtroom. The courtroom is symptomatic for the rest of life. If unfairness and injustice happens in the courtroom rest assured there's unfairness and injustice at every corner throughout life.
- In this life under the sun the Halls of Justice have crumbled to be replaced by The Ghetto of Unfairness. And that brings something to Qoheleth's mind. Will things always be this way? Will things always be unjust? Will life always be unfair? And the answer he comes to is no. **Verse 17**. *I thought in my heart, "God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed."* The unfairness of life, the unjust nature of the courts, reminds Qoheleth of a time in the future when God will once and for all set all things right. One day God will justly judge everything and everyone, *the righteous and the wicked*.
- Qoheleth's point, I think, is that because we have this innate sense of right and wrong, we know injustice and unfairness when we see it, a longing for justice is really a longing for God, a longing for the only one who can balance the scales and set things right. **Life's unfairness is meant to drive us to God**.
- The theme of God as judge is one of the dominant themes of the Bible. Psalm 7:11. *God is a righteous judge.* It is impossible, in any serious reading of the Bible, to ignore this theme. God sees all. He knows all. There's never unfairness with him. He is always just. And one day *God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ*.³ Sometimes the only comfort in this life is knowing that one day *God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked*.

² Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, p. 34.

³ Romans 2:16

And until then we cry out Psalm 82:8 *Rise up, O God, judge the earth.* Life is unfair. Do something about it. And we know that one day he will.

Transition

Which is problematic for Qoheleth. Because life is unfair now and God's just judgment, the balancing of the scales, is far off. And in the meantime we die. And that is an unfairness of its own kind. [Slide #4] The **second instance** of unfairness Qoheleth points to. Look at **verses 18-22**. *I also thought, "As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. 19 Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. 20 All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. 21 Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" 22 So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?*

- See. Here's the deal. We were made for eternity. Remember that from the last section? Ecclesiastes 3:11. *He has also set eternity in the hearts of men.* We are made to endure beyond this life. But, as Qoheleth observes in **verse 19**, *man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other.* As individuals made to last for eternity and long for eternity, what could be more unfair than dying like animals? Unlike animals, we were made for eternity.
- And as much as PETA tries to convince us that people and animals are the same, they're not. Animals and people are fundamentally different. I have nothing in common with a chicken. I don't care how close our genetic structure is with a chimpanzee. We're not chimpanzees. Animals don't have souls. They're animals for crying out loud. People have souls made in the image and likeness of God. Animals and people are both alive, both may have the breath of life in them, **verse 19**, *all have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal.* We die like them, **verse 20**, *all go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.* But the similarities end there.
- The fact that we all share the same fate as soulless beasts is the great unfairness of life. Not fair. Do you realize that? You were not made to die. The question I think Qoheleth would have us all ask is why in the world do we die like animals? The answer comes in **verse 18**. *I also thought, "As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals.* God tests us.
- That word *test* is used fourteen times in Old Testament. The same word is used in Daniel 12:10. *Many will be purified, made spotless and refined [there's the word test], but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.* God tests us with death; we die like beasts, so that this great sense of unfairness is provoked within us. We die like animals. But we shouldn't. We're made for eternity. God does this so that we might understand that something in this life under the sun is wrong and find our way to him. **Life's unfairness**, and especially our own mortality, **is meant to drive us to God.**
- Let me make something very clear. It's unfair that we die like beasts. That is terribly unfair. But there is no injustice whatsoever in God sentencing us to death. Given what we've done, the death sentence is completely fair. God has called all humanity into relationship with him and as proof of this covenantal agreement He gave the Mosaic covenant, the Ten

Commandments. God expects everyone, everywhere to act justly—to keep the commandments—as the means of expressing good faith in keeping the covenant.⁴

- Problem is we have broken the terms of the agreement God has established by breaking every single one of those commandments. We have broken the covenant. Romans 3:10. *As it is written: "There is no one righteous [or just], not even one; 11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.* So, on the one hand God gives us what we really do deserve. Death. And that stings. As [H.L. Mencken](#) puts it, "Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what stings is justice."⁵
- But our mortality is meant to drive us to God. And when we come to him we find that he has also given us Christ. Knowing we would never be able act justly and perfectly keep the details of this first covenant, he sent Jesus to keep all the commands and regulations of that first covenant for us. God made a New Covenant with us through Jesus.

Conclusion and Intro to Communion

- This morning, as we prepare to receive the communion elements, what we are really doing is celebrating God's justice through this New Covenant. Romans 3:25 *God presented [Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice.* Life is not fair. But God is. He is the just judge who declares us innocent through the death of Christ. What God does is fair and just because Christ died for us. As [John Stott](#) says, "When God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all; [that would be unfair, unjust...Instead] he is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has borne the penalty of their law-breaking."⁶
- God calls the death of Christ for each of us Good News. It is news that must be received by faith. Jesus says of himself in John 12:48, *There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.* The moment you turn from your sin and commit yourself in absolute trust to Jesus Christ, who died for you and rose again, God pronounces you righteous.⁷ This morning, if you've done this, if you've turned from your sin and placed your trust in Christ, you're invited to celebrate communion with me.

⁴ *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, p. 415.

⁵ H. L. Mencken, "Talking Points," *The Week* (4-27-07), p. 19

⁶ John Stott, *Authentic Christianity*, p. 172.

⁷ John Stott, *Authentic Christianity*, p. 171