

No Fair!

Every kid has said it, and even as adults we often think it. Despite the fact that nobody promised life would be fair, our innate sense of justice says it ought to be. But the truth is we tend to have a double standard. We don't mind unfairness when it benefits ourselves or those we love – nobody minds getting better than they deserve – just not when it instead benefits people we consider unworthy.

I was thinking about this in relation to the parable of the “Prodigal Son” in Luke 15. You know the plot: the rebellious younger son demands and then squanders his inheritance in loose living. Yet when he comes to his senses and goes home, wretched and repentant, his father immediately forgives him, embraces him, and celebrates his return. The prodigal gets far better than he deserves, so no complaint from him. But there's a third character: the dutiful older son, who, according to his own estimation at least, has been obediently serving his father all his life. He resents his father's welcoming the prodigal back into the family, giving him gifts and even throwing a feast in his honor. Basically he says, “No fair! I'm the one who deserves to be celebrated, not that worthless brother of mine!”

But why include the older son at all? Wasn't the point of the parable to vividly illustrate God's extravagant grace to his wayward children, His joy over each soul saved? Yes, but there's more. From the younger son, we learn the high cost of sin and the way of true repentance. The father's example challenges us to emulate God's generous love and forgiveness. And through the older son we're warned against a self-righteous attitude, the idea that we deserve God's grace more than others do.

God's grace isn't “fair,” and how fortunate we are that it's not! The fair wages for our sin is death (Rom. 6:23), but Jesus chose to pay the price for us – by far the most sublimely inequitable transaction in history. Consequently, we all receive better than we deserve, if we're only willing to accept the salvation Jesus purchased for us with his blood.

If you are a prodigal, don't despair. Your heavenly father is waiting with open arms for you. If you are more like his older sibling, then join in celebrating every brother and sister who returns to God. As the father says to you in verse 31-32, *“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found.”*

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