

Life's Not Fair by Jeff Strite

Ecclesiastes 4:1-4:6

OPEN: Awhile back there was an article that appeared in a Kentucky newspaper which read:

"I used to think I was poor. Then they told me I wasn't poor, I was needy.
Then they told me it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy, that I was culturally deprived.
Then they told me 'deprived' was a bad image, that I was underprivileged.
Then they told me that 'underprivileged' was overused, that I was disadvantaged.
I still don't have a dime, but I have a great vocabulary."

In Ecclesiastes 4, Solomon deals with an issue that frustrates many people in our world. It's the issue of "unfairness". That things just aren't always right and fair in this life.

Solomon was reflecting on this truth when he wrote:

"Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed— and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors— and they have no comforter." Ecclesiastes 4:1

Inside each one of us is an inner voice that tells us that all things should be fair. That's why we have referees in sports games and judges in courtrooms: we have an innate sense of right and wrong. And we serve the God of the universe who tells us that there is a right and there is a wrong.

But then we see oppression, tragedy and sorrow.
And inside of us there's this inner voice that says:
"That just not right"
"This shouldn't be happening!"
"How could we possibly fix this great injustice of life?"

The problem is that there are two conflicting truths about life's unfairness that drive us nuts.

The first truth is that – no matter how hard we try – we're never going to fix the problem. Life is always going to be unfair.

For example Jesus said: "You will always have the poor among you..." John 12:8
Have you ever heard that?
Of course you have... and He DID say that.

Now, there are those who look at what Jesus said there and they feel like throwing up their hands and just walking away. After all, if the poor are always going to be with us... why should we bother to try to help them to begin with? It's not going to do any good.

That may have been one of the motivating factors in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus that Jesus told. He said:

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.

In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.'"

Luke 16:19-25

Now, why was the rich man not sharing anything with Lazarus? Well, the Bible doesn't say, but I personally think he was thinking:

- Why doesn't that guy go out and get a job or something?
- He's always out there every day asking for food. It's really annoying!
- If I gave HIM food, it was just encourage all the other beggars to come annoy me.
- And besides, we're always going to have the poor with us, so my little bit of food won't make a dent.

The point of Jesus' story was - DON'T GO THERE.

Don't you go making excuses for why you don't help the poor.

The rich man ignored Lazarus' hunger... and we all know where HE went.

And that brings us to our 2nd truth:

Yes, life is always going to be unfair.

But God says it doesn't matter. He calls His people to work at "fixing it."

ILLUS: The story's told of a man who'd seen an injustice in his city, and in frustration he prayed to God "Why aren't you doing something about this?"

And God's voice came to him and said:

"I did do something. I sent you."

You know I learned something new when preparing this sermon.

Did you realize that when Jesus said "you'll always have the poor among you", he was quoting the Old Testament?

Yeah - it's true.

In Deuteronomy 15:11 God declared:

"There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land."

That's the verse Jesus was quoting.
You're always going to have the poor among you, THEREFORE help them.
That's the command of God to His people.
In fact, this is a constant theme throughout Scripture.

In Proverbs God says:

"... blessed is he who is kind to the needy." Proverbs 14:21
And "a generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor."
Proverbs 22:9

In fact, this is such an important matter for God that He promises: "He who is kind to the poor LENDS to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done." Proverbs 19:17

ILLUS: I just took my van over to Mike's to have the power steering fixed. He looked it over and said it was going to cost \$400... but it wasn't worth it. My van has nearly 240,000 miles on it and it's time (he said) for me to get another vehicle. So I've gone down to the Credit Union where I have an account, and they said they'd loan me the money for another vehicle.

They're willing to loan me money!

Isn't that nice of them?

So, this week I'm going to go buy another car with the money they're willing to give me.

But once I borrow that money, what are they going to expect me to do?

PAY IT BACK.

And more than that, they expect their money back with interest.

So, what God promised us in Proverbs 19:17 was that when you help the poor, you are LENDING to Him. Do you know what God's saying there? He's saying that you can expect Him to pay you back... with interest.

That's how important helping the poor is to God.

BUT on the other hand though... God is very clear:

"If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered."

Proverbs 21:13

If you turn your back on the poor... God will turn His back on you.

Now, in my mind's eye... I can visualize Solomon sitting there thinking about this.

He sees people in poverty and being oppressed and misused.

And he's seeming to be very frustrated about this.

But now... wait a minute!

What is Solomon's job description? What does he do for a living?

Well, he's the king, isn't he?

If he's the king he should be able pass some laws to fix all this. He should be able to punish wrongdoers and oppressors of the poor. Why isn't he doing that?

And, on top of that, Solomon is wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice. Why doesn't he just give away money to the poor?

Well, I think maybe Solomon did do all that.

I think Solomon had worked hard at removing all the oppression he could. And I'm thinking he did give money to help the poor.

But it's like he's barely making a dent.

Even if he gave EVERYTHING away, people would still be poor.

And it bothers him.

So part of his discussion here in Ecclesiastes 4 is telling us WHY he can't fix it all.

In verse 4 he says "I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Ecclesiastes 4:4

You know what enviousness is all about?

Envious people look at what their neighbor has and it makes them DISSATISFIED with what they have. So their labor and achievement is always about getting more of what the other guy has.

And because that is their driving passion, envious folks end up hurting themselves or others in their blind pursuit of "more."

ILLUS: You remember, of course the tragedy that took place on September 11th 2001.

When the Islamic terrorists took over airplanes and murdered thousands of innocent people, every airplane in America was grounded.

This was an obvious safety measure to deal with a threat we didn't even begin to understand. But, as you can imagine, that action hurt the airline industry. In fact, there was only one big carrier that was still making money the following year – SouthWest Airlines (although they were still making about ½ what they had the year before).

All the other airlines were swimming in red ink and either had declared bankruptcy or were seriously considering it because their creditors still demanded that they pay their debts.

So, in an atmosphere where most airlines were struggling to survive, SW's employees had relative job security. And yet, some of the workers in one of its unions was threatening to strike for higher wages.

Why? Because comparable employees in one of those other airlines (that were failing) made more per hour than they do.

(PAUSE)

Do you sense the insanity of that?

These union workers were not content, because somebody else (in a failing & potentially bankrupt airline) was getting more than they did.

They were driven by envy, and envy can make you poor because you end up doing stupid stuff like that. And Solomon realized that was part of the reason for poverty and oppression.

But Solomon realized there was a 2nd reason that led to poverty:

Some people were just plain lazy:

Solomon wrote: "The fool folds his hands and ruins himself." Ecclesiastes 4:5

In Proverbs, Solomon put it this way:

A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.” Proverbs 6:10-11

ILLUS: According to a medical study cited by the BBC 5 years ago... “Whether slim or fat, a person leading a sedentary lifestyle has similar chances of dying young to a smoker. Statistically, every week spent inactive is roughly equivalent to smoking a packet of cigarettes. Inactivity in children leads to obesity and reduced academic performance across all socio-economic classes.

(<http://www.bbc.com/news/health-11442101>)

But BBC noted it’s not just our health, but also our wealth, that laziness effects. “...Inactivity among working adults leads to increased time off from work & decreased productivity.”

So Solomon is looking around and he notices that many poor people are poor because they’re too lazy to get off the couch. They’d much prefer a hand-out to a workout.

Now, that that should NOT be seen as an excuse not to help folks who are struggling. That’s not Solomon’s point! Solomon is simply pointing out that you can’t fix everything in life. You can’t remove all the poverty in the world. There’s way too much greed and envy out there - and there’s just way too much laziness - to fix it all

Unfairness, poverty and oppression are just part of life.
And we’re never going to change that completely.
Some of the hardships of life will be our own fault.

But some of those hardships will be the fault of others.

As Solomon said in the first verse of this chapter:

“I saw the tears of the oppressed— and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors— and they have no comforter.”

Solomon was disturbed by this reality.

And he’s not the only one

Over the years, there have been a number of church goers who have dedicated themselves to dealing with injustice and oppressors by engaging in something called “Social Justice”.

Social Justice is the idea that churches should focus primarily on poverty, slums, poor nutrition and education, alcoholism, crime, and war.

Now, those are not bad things in and of themselves.

Christians SHOULD BE concerned with poverty/ slums/ and the all the rest.

We should seek to find ways to confront those who hurt others in this world.

But the problem with the Social Justice crowd is that they generally get everything out of whack. They are off-balance in their approach. The problem with social justice is that its adherents tend to believe that they need to change the culture of a people before you can talk to them about Jesus.

ILLUS: During the 70's and 80's many of the Social Justice folks went down into S. America and they tried to help people locked in poverty and hunger and oppression. They rightly saw that much of the problem was created by selfish dictators and military despots. The answer: overthrow the bad guys and remove them from power.

How do you overthrow a government? Well, you shoot people. And if you shoot at the bad guys, what do you think they're going to do in response? That's right. They're going to shoot back.

A lot of people died because of those armed struggles.

And even when they did succeed in removing one wicked dictator... guess what? Another selfish leader replaced him and sometimes things got even worse.

THAT'S WHY Jesus never endorsed violence in His preaching.

ILLUS: I recently attended a seminar where the speaker was introducing a different approach to "social justice". He didn't talk about violently opposing dictatorships, but he felt that churches needed to deal with poverty and hunger BEFORE preaching the Gospel.

Now... he was partly right.

Churches should always attempt to deal with poverty and hunger

I mean: it's hard to preach to someone dying of hunger.

But if churches get in the habit of feeding people without talking to them about Jesus they can eventually get into the habit of talking about Jesus altogether.

ILLUS: For the better part of the 1900's there was a powerful church in Manhattan. It was called Broadway Presbyterian Church and they were committed to reaching out to people for Christ. One of the tools they used was to have food kitchens.

They'd bring the poor in off the streets, have a prayer for the food, talk about sin and the need to change lifestyles. And it worked. Folks changed their lives and even began coming to church and digging their way out of poverty.

But from the 60's to the 1990's a subtle change began to take place.

In the soup kitchens, prayers were not offered over meals because they were afraid that they'd offend the poor. AND they no longer tried to convince the homeless to turn to God and to repent of their past sins. That might drive away the very people they were trying to feed.

But over time they found that the same people were coming through the lines year after year, and there was no change taking place in their lives. The church gradually slipped from a membership from 1000 people down to 120 and a once mighty congregation sat with a nearly empty building.

You see, that's one of the major drawbacks of the Social Justice Folks.

They don't want to offend people that they want to help.

They don't want to talk about SIN.

They don't want to go on record as being against abortion or homosexuality or living together because that might offend the people they're trying to help.

(PAUSE)

You know I just noticed something when I worked on this sermon I'd never seen before.

You remember I quoted Jesus saying "you'll always have the poor with you"?

I had never really looked up that verse.

I just knew it was there, and took it for granted that was all Jesus said in that verse. But I was wrong. That's not ALL He said.

THIS IS WHAT HE SAID:

"The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." Matthew 26:11

You know, when people quote Jesus about the poor from that verse, they never seem to mention the 2nd part of His comment. And as I read that verse I wondered: why did Jesus say that?

Well, the scene was in a man's house just a few days before Jesus will be arrested, beaten, crucified and buried in the tomb. A woman hears that Jesus is there, and she comes and pours expensive perfume on His head.

When they saw this, Jesus' disciples (especially Judas) were upset. They complained that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. And so Jesus said:

"The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." Matthew 26:11

You know what was Jesus saying?

He was saying there are PRIORITIES in our mission.

Helping the poor was admirable, but service to Jesus was even more important.

When Jesus appeared to His disciples on a mountain, just before going into heaven He gave them their marching orders. He told them what their priorities were to be. He said:

"go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:19-20

Do you see anything there about helping the poor?

Do you see anything there about working for social justice?

It's not there is it?

Not that those things aren't important.

I mean, in the first part of this sermon we pointed out that one of God's highest priorities IS to help the poor and the oppressed.

But that priority is secondary to the command Jesus gave His disciples that day.

Jesus said that our primary mission as Christians is to

1. Make disciples
2. Baptize them into the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
3. Teach them to obey everything Jesus had commanded.

That's it. That's the prime directive.

And, you know, when the disciples went out to do that – when they preached about Jesus and made disciples and so on... they often offended people

Peter stood before Sanhedrin one time. These were the rulers of the nation, and they were furious. They said: "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name... Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."
Acts 5:28

Do you think maybe Peter had offended them?

Yeah, pretty sure he had.

Peter had preached about sin... and the need to repent of that sin.

He spoke truth to power.

And it made folks angry.

Then there's Paul. In one of his letters to the Corinthians he talks about having been thrown in prison, flogged, whipped, beaten, stoned, and run out of town.

Do you think maybe he'd upset some folks?

Sure he had. That was part of his job description.

(PAUSE)

You know, the world of that time was NOT a fair and just place to be.

There was poverty and injustice and oppression that was as bad or worse than anything we might see in our day.

And, you know, Jesus lived in a time like that.

And the disciples preached in a day like that.

And Jesus' command to those disciples was this::

1. Make disciples
2. Baptize them into the Father/ Son/ Holy Spirit
3. Teaching them to obey everything Jesus had commanded.

And you know why the early Christians followed those orders?

They did it because that was the only way they could change the hearts of men.

When you change the hearts of men... you give them true freedom.

A freedom from sin and guilt and shame.

And if when people are freed from those chains... they are free indeed. And no force on earth can ever take away that freedom and that power in their lives.

CLOSE: A few years back a team from our church took a short-term mission's trip to Haiti. When they arrived, they were shocked at the abject poverty in which people lived. Most of the people there have little in the way of "personal property" (in fact, it was a privilege when one of them had a suitcase, because that way they can store what few items they own in it).

Homes were generally ramshackle affairs that are smaller than a really small bedroom.

There was little food to be had and little work that a person could do for money.

Most folks in the US would look on these in Haiti and pity them because they have nothing
But when Dave (one of our Elders) returned from Haiti, made mention of something a
Haitian evangelist had told him while he was there:

“There are people in this world that say we are poor people here.

But no one is poor who has Jesus.”

Dave noted that although the people in Haiti were poor by this world’s standards, the people
at the mission were cheerful and smiling. Because they loved Jesus and knew He loved
them.