

Is It Fair?

Part 4C – August 20, 2023

Genesis 45:1-15

¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there — since there are five more years of famine to come — so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’ ¹² And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matthew 15:10-28

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³ He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶ Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.

¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.



Today we wrap up our 12-week series on the path of discipleship. Intwoven throughout the series that drew from Genesis and Matthew have been insights from our Wesleyan Methodist heritage and traditions. Who and what John Wesley was and believed is an integral part of being Methodist, just as understanding who and what God and Jesus are is an integral part of being a Christian. Today, as we delve into Genesis 45 and Matthew 15, we will look to the heart of both our Wesleyan roots and our Christian core as we grow in our understanding of God's mercy and grace.

Please turn with me to Matthew 15 as we begin today. Our gospel text has two sections. We will use the first one, where Jesus interacts with the Pharisees, to lead into our Genesis text, where Joseph shows mercy to his brothers. Later, we will return to the second half of our Matthew 15 passage, where Jesus encounters and ministers to the Canaanite woman, as we dive deeper into God's abundant and generous love, into God's mercy and grace. Running throughout these texts we will wrestle with the question: Is it fair? We focus on this question today because we all want things to be fair. Well, maybe more accurately, we want fairness in ways that benefit us. We ask this question today to get at the deeper realities of God's mercy and grace. We do so because deep down, in our heart of hearts, what we really want is not fairness but mercy and grace. As we prepare to do so today, let us pray...



As we turn to verse 10, we need a little context. It helps us to understand why Jesus calls the crowd to himself. In verses 1-9 Jesus has just had a confrontation with the Pharisees, the keepers of the Law. The crowd was likely present for this interaction.

The argument begins with the Pharisees asking Jesus, *“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat”* (Matthew 15:2). The Pharisees want Jesus’ disciples to be good and devout Jews.

“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not Wash their hands before they eat.”

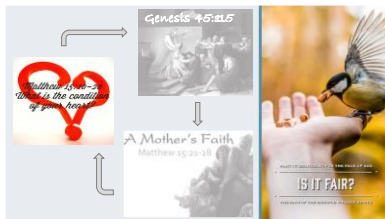
- Matthew 15:2



After some back and forth about tradition and the actual commands of God, Jesus calls them hypocrites and quotes from the prophet Isaiah as he shares of God’s lament, saying, *“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine”* (Isaiah 29:13). Stepping away from this religious argument, Jesus draws the people to himself, eager to show the better way of faith.

“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine.”

- Isaiah 29:13



Jesus begins teaching the crowd by telling them, *“It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”* Jesus wants the people

to understand a key truth here: what comes from their hearts matters far more than what they put into their mouths. Looking to the physical level, Jesus explains that what we eat or drink goes into the stomach and eventually on out of our digestive system. In this sense, then, food eaten with unwashed hands is trivial. For Jesus, the far more important matter lies with what we put into our hearts. It is important because the matter or content of our hearts leads to what comes out of our mouths and defiles us.

Moving to verse 19 we see some of the things that can come from our heart and, ultimately, we see some of the things that can defile us. Here Jesus lists *“evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.”* This is but a partial list.

We could add to this like, adding things like greed, envy, and lust. Jesus wants the crowd and all who would read this teaching to understand that the condition of our heart is what really matters.



As we turn to Genesis 45, we see how the condition of one's heart really does matter. This is revealed both in Joseph's heart and in his brothers' hearts. As has been our pattern the

past several weeks, let's get caught up to where we are at in chapter 45. Since being thrown into a pit and then sold into slavery back in chapter 37, Joseph has experienced a lot in Egypt.

Arriving in Egypt, Joseph is bought by Potiphar, a captain in Pharaoh's court. He excels there – until falsely accused by the wife of trying to sleep with her. Joseph is thrown into prison. But it is not just any prison. It is the prison for the king's prisoners. In prison, Joseph again excels and is soon in charge of all the prisoner's care. It is in prison that he hears and then, through God, interprets the dreams of the cup bearer and the baker. The cup bearer is restored to his place serving Pharaoh but forgets his promise to remember Joseph. Two years later the Pharaoh has two dreams that none of the wise men or magicians can interpret. It is then that the cup bearer remembers Joseph's gift.

Joseph is brought in and he, again through God's provision, interprets Pharaoh's dreams. Then, through God's direction, Joseph lays out a detailed plan to survive the coming 7-year famine. Pharaoh is so impressed with Joseph that he installs Joseph "over my house, and all my people" (Genesis 41:40). Suddenly Joseph is #2 in all of Egypt. His plan – well, God's plan – works to perfection. After saving up food during the seven good years, Egypt is in a great position to survive the famine.

The famine strikes far and wide. Soon Israel and his family are on the brink of starvation. Israel sends the 10 oldest sons to buy grain in Egypt. Through this trip and the ensuing trip for more food, Joseph tests his brothers, seeking to discern the condition of their hearts.

It is during the last test that Judah steps up and offers himself in place of Benjamin. Judah knows that losing the second son of Rachel would kill his father, Israel. This act of selfless sacrifice convinces Joseph that his brothers' hearts have changed. As today's passage begins, we see that Joseph cannot control himself emotionally any longer. He sends out all of the Egyptians, being left alone with his brothers. Joseph then weeps so loudly that it can be heard outside of the room. Soon even Pharaoh and his house know of Joseph's loud weeping. After Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, they are speechless. Scripture tells us, "*They were dismayed.*" I don't know about you, but I'd be more than dismayed if I were them. The Bible that I use at home says "*terrified*" – I think that's more like what I'd be feeling if I were one of the brothers.

From a more worldly perspective, most people would probably think that the brothers deserve to be punished by Joseph for how they treated him, for selling him into slavery. From a worldly perspective, most people would think that they should pay for their crimes. But this is not Joseph's perspective. Yes, some really bad things have happened to him. Unfair things. Since being sold into slavery, none were his fault. Joseph even pays for several mistakes that were not his mistake. Has that ever happened to you?

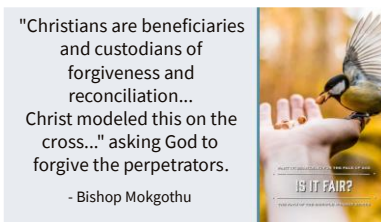
Yes, in life this happens to us once in a while. At first, when we have not yet found a relationship with God, these unfair circumstances are really hard to deal with. We want to shout, "It is NOT fair!"

At first, heading to Egypt as a slave, Joseph probably shouted this. But after landing in Potiphar's house and rising up, after landing in prison and rising up, after being used by God to interpret dreams and then to rise up in Pharaoh's court, Joseph starts to understand that God can and will work through any circumstance. The key to this new understanding is the condition of his heart. Instead of asking, "Why me? It's not fair!" or "Why is this happening to me?" Joseph asks, "What does God require of me now?"

With that question in mind, Joseph trusted in a destination that he could not always see or understand. He trusted the driver, the captain of the boat. Joseph endured lots of bad stuff, over time learning to keep his faith in a God that he saw had the master plan. And instead of questioning how God was laying out that plan, instead of thinking that maybe God could've worked things out differently – like we often do – he trusted in God's plan for his life. Because trust and faith became the condition of his heart, Joseph experienced God's blessings again and again.

This same trust in God is present in Jesus as he endures his final days. None of what happened to him was his fault. The betrayal, the trial, the suffering, the crucifixion – all "life" happening to Jesus. He endured the pain, the insults, the heartbreak of it all. Those who put him on the cross "deserved" at least the same as Joseph's brothers deserved. They deserved a legion of angels raining down death and destruction, right? Instead they received mercy and grace. All because it was part of God's plan.

On Monday morning, in my Disciplines devotional, on page 272, Bishop Mokgothu, a UMC Bishop in the Southern Africa Conference, wrote this about what we receive from God and about our response to this gift:



"Christians are beneficiaries and custodians of forgiveness and reconciliation... Christ modeled this on the cross..."

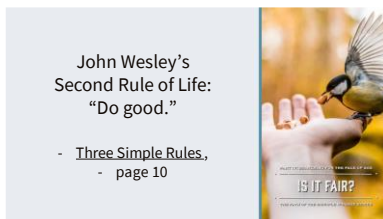
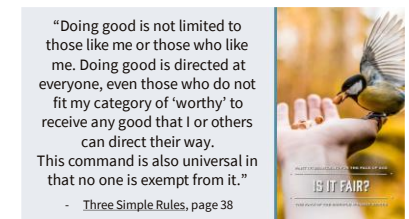
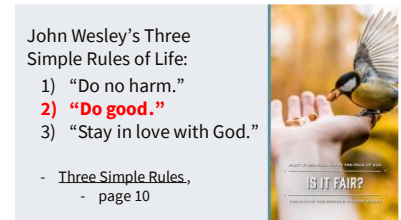
asking God to forgive the perpetrators. I love the idea that we are not only beneficiaries but are also custodians. Yes, we are

grateful to receive God's mercy and grace through Christ. We are glad to receive forgiveness for our sins and to experience the ensuing reconciliation that we receive in our relationship with God. We are happy to be beneficiaries. But we are also custodians. A custodian is defined as "a person who has responsibility for or looks after something" ([Oxford Languages online dictionary](#)).

Our response to what we graciously and generously receive from God is to live as people who graciously and generously offer forgiveness and reconciliation to others. Bishop Mokgothu referred to this response as practicing the African cultural practice of "*Ubuntu*." This word translates to 'humanness.' This cultural norm or practice is all about human beings seeing and appreciating the image of God in one another. When we see Christ's face in the face of the other, it is so much easier and much more natural to offer acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. This is one lesson from Genesis 45. When Joseph saw both his brothers' humanity and the changed condition of their hearts, he was able, through grace, to offer forgiveness and reconciliation. Through these gifts their relationship was restored and made new again.

This practice also falls in line with John Wesley's second rule of life. In [Reuben Job's Three Simple Rules](#) he asserts that these rules "have the power to change the world" (page 7). Before delving into this, just imagine what our world would be and look like if all Christians were good "custodians of forgiveness and reconciliation."

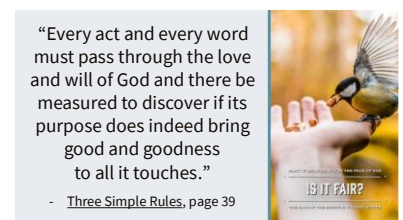
Here are the 3 rules. Wesley's second rule for life is "Do Good." This was to be practiced "as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort." Job writes of the universal application of this rule: "Doing good is not limited to those like me or those who like me. Doing good is directed at everyone, even those who do not fit my category of 'worthy' to receive any good that I or others can direct their way. This command is also universal in that no one is exempt from it." This is also about seeing and appreciating the image of God in one another – in all others, not just those like us. And it is about taking the goodness of God within us and extending that good out into the world – in any way that we can.



Job describes "doing good" this way: "It is a proactive way of living. I do not need to wait to be asked to do some good... I do not need to wait until circumstances cry out for aid to

relieve suffering or to correct some horrible injustice... This way of living will require a careful and continual assessment of my life and the world in which I live" (Three Simple Rules, pages 38-39). The ongoing process of assessment keeps our eyes and our hearts open. This proactive way of living will guide us to be good custodians of God's forgiveness and reconciliation. Job then offers this nugget: "Every act and every word must pass through the love and will of God and there be measured to discover if its purpose does indeed bring good and goodness to all it touches"

(Three Simple Rules, page 39). My friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, imagine if that was always our filter.



Imagine what our world would be like if every Christians' acts and words first passed through the filter of God's love and will. Imagine how that would change our world.



Turn with me now again to Matthew 15, this time starting in verse 21. As Jesus leaves the lands of the Jews, he travels to Tyre and Sidon. These are two Gentile towns north of Galilee.

Although primarily sent to the Jews, to God's chosen people, Jesus does minister to the Gentiles as well. This encounter with the Canaanite woman is the beginning of that ministry. In the verses that follow today's passage, Jesus spends time there performing many miracles and then once again feeds a large crowd that gathers to hear his teachings. The central character in this passage is the Canaanite woman. She is living in a world that is not fair. Women had little power and even less ability to control outcomes. "Life" often happened to them.

She, like most women in her day, was consistently overlooked and regularly marginalized. So this woman had learned to be persistent, to be loud in order to be seen and heard. She has learned to push through these slights and challenges to get the attention of those who would prefer to ignore her. This woman has mastered the ability to shrug off the name-calling that was used to keep her at bay. With all of this within her, she approaches Jesus and says, "*Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.*" And Jesus ignores her. Was this a test of her faith? Just as it had been in the bottom of the pit for Joseph, God was silent.

But she does not give up. She remains persistent. Finally the disciples urge Jesus to send her away, *“for she keeps shouting at us.”* She is too much to ignore! Even though he has chosen to come to the land of the Gentiles, within her hearing Jesus says to the disciples, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”* Another test of faith. She persists. Now kneeling before him, the Canaanite woman pleads, *“Lord, help me.”* Referring to her as a *“dog”* and speaking of how unfair it is to take food from the children of God, Jesus again tests her faith. Taking in the insult and using it to her advantage, the woman



says to Jesus, *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”* She is willing to endure much, to exist on crumbs, so to speak, on the chance that Jesus might be her Lord and Master too. Jesus is moved. He

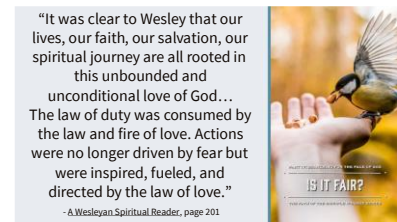
commends her faith and her persistence. At that moment, her daughter was healed.

In the Canaanite woman Jesus saw a faith that would not give up. She would not let go of hope even when pressed down upon by those in power – Jesus himself this time. She is much like Joseph. In spite of life’s challenges, Joseph held onto God and onto hope in God’s plan for his life. This woman had a desperate need and a willingness to go to whatever lengths necessary with Jesus to get that need met. In the end, both the woman’s faith and Joseph’s faith carried them through. Was anything fair? No. But neither asked for fairness. They sought and received grace and mercy. They searched for and found God. They came to know God’s love for them.



To close this time together and our time over these 12 weeks learning about John Wesley and the Methodist faith, we turn to the final chapter in [A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader](#). Chapter 25 is about God’s love. It is called “God’s Love and Ours.”

Job writes, “The essential nature of the Christian faith and life is love... It provided the energy for the early Methodist movement, and it still guides the faith and witness of the worldwide Wesleyan movement... Our love is always in response to what God has done and is doing in our lives... It was clear to Wesley that our lives, our faith, our salvation, our spiritual journey are all rooted in this unbounded and unconditional love of God... The law of duty was consumed by the law and fire of love. Actions were no longer driven by fear but were inspired, fueled, and directed by the law of love.” This is what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees: faith over fear, love over the law.



May God’s love be what guides us, what fills our hearts. May God’s love be what we are rooted in and what we are inspired, fueled, and directed by. May God’s love overcome our fears and demolish our barriers and prejudices. May God’s love lead us to be persistent, to be heard, and to seek to do good in our world. May God’s love move us to both receive the abundant and generous forgiveness and reconciliation from God **and** to be good custodians of God’s forgiveness and reconciliation for the world. May it be so for us all. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When and where have you recently felt God’s love leading you to love another? How would responding to this help you to grow in your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Who do you know who might be saying “It’s not fair” right now in life? Pray for them each day this week!
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 16:5-12. How does this teaching of Jesus reinforce and add to the teaching that we covered in Matthew 15:10-20?