

# *I*

## GENEROSITY OR BACK-SCRATCHING?



### That's Not Fair

"That's not fair!" It seems like it was the first full sentence my kids learned. How is it that a two year old who has barely learned to talk is so aware of the injustice in the world? Yet, we have all experienced the same indignation that children feel when they have been treated in a way they consider unjust.

It is true for all of us. We were born with the ability to fight against what we understand to be unjust. Nobody teaches toddlers to become angry when a sibling picks up their toy. They just know they want it and it isn't fair that they don't have it. Nobody has to teach the child that most trades aren't fair unless they have out-bartered their friend.

I watched my own children fight for what is fair. Andrew had the Hot Wheels® toy Daniel wanted.

"That's mine!"

"Offer him a trade, Daniel" was his mother's wise advice. He opened his hand and offered his brother a broken car he was ready to discard.

"No!" His brother was quite offended. "I want your best car."

Daniel's eyes scrunched with two-year-old temper. The fight was on.

I had hoped my children would outgrow this childishness. I've come to realize it has nothing to do with being a child and everything to do with being part of Adam's race. While they don't fight over toy cars anymore, my teenagers still race each other to the car.

"I call shotgun!"

"No, I got here first. You get in the back!"

"Too bad! I called it!"

*I pray, God why aren't they generous with each other? Why don't they put each other's feelings ahead of their own? Why do they refuse to give, but always take?*

I wish I were different, but I see the same tendency in my own heart. When I get home and am tired from the day the last thing I want to do is cook dinner or clean dishes. Someone else should do that. I'm exhausted. It's just not fair. At the end of a long week, I have the right to a restful Saturday! Right? After all, I worked hard, and I have needs too. It's my turn to be served. That's what is fair.

## **We're Born Back-scratchers**

From birth, there is something in us that measures the world through this sense of fairness. My brother, Randy, and I were in elementary school. Our house had an old television antenna tower that was a perfect trellis for climbing up to the roof. Dad had told us many times to not do it, but he wasn't here and the snow was deep enough to make the jump thrilling! Randy had a snowsuit, but I only had a pair of jeans. The

third and fourth jumps from the roof to the snowdrifts were just as much fun as the first and second. My jeans were soaked and my legs were beginning to sting, though not enough to quit the repeated climbs and jumps.

“Randy and Kevin! Get off that roof this instant!” Mom’s voice shrilled with the threat of punishment. We considered it one more call to jump, and down we went. We thought it was far more comical than Mom did. She dragged us into the house and proceeded to inflict justice. I was first.

If you’ve ever experienced a spanking when your jeans are soaked with snow and ice, you understand that each swat stung more viciously than the last. I’m not sure how many I got, but I had one thrilling thought that made the pain bearable. My brother was going to get his, and I was going to get to watch!

Mom was still angry and Randy’s eyes were wide with fear. She laid him on the bed face down, still garbed in his new snowsuit. The first whack sounded like a pillow strike in a pillow fight. *Woof*. It didn’t sound very painful. I wondered what Randy was feeling. She tried again. His five-inch layer of stuffing was protecting him.

“I can’t feel that!” Randy was now laughing.

*Woof*. She tried again, holding back a chuckle. Randy was almost singing with joy. “I can’t feel that! I can’t feel that!”

My mother has never lacked for a sense of humor, and this was more than she could take. The next few swats got progressively weaker as her cackles grew progressively louder. Within a few seconds she and Randy were both lying on the bed laughing. Her fury was gone, and Randy knew he had escaped his punishment.

My face burned with anger. This wasn't fair. I got mine and he needed to get his! We both were jumping and he needed to feel the same level of pain I had. "Spank him, Mom! Spank him!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. It only fueled my mother's laughter. Randy squealed, "I can't feel it!"

Mom roared.

It's a sore subject to this day. It wasn't fair. It didn't matter that I got what I deserved. That wasn't the point at all. I didn't get equal treatment. That was the point. I was treated unfairly because someone else received more mercy than I had. It wasn't fair because I had received more punishment than someone who deserved it just as much as I had. I didn't have to be schooled in injustice. I was living it.

While these injustices seem trivial, we all have experienced moments when the injustice is difficult. An exhausted husband who gets up grumpy disregards his wife's needs. A coworker manipulates a superior to get a promotion we are convinced is ours. Children disregard our sacrifices and accuse us of not caring enough to let them do what they want to do. Someone at church criticizes the ministry we have worked tirelessly to improve. A husband is unfaithful to his wife. A child steals from a parent. A mother abandons her family.

The abuses can be severe—so severe that Jesus' words strike us as completely unfair. "Turn the other cheek," "Go the extra mile," "Give your tunic as well," "Pray for those who persecute you," "Love your enemy."

Jesus is obviously approaching life from a different point of view. It is His perspective that will challenge us to keep giving when others would demand repayment.

## **A Different Perspective: Generosity vs. Reciprocity**

Jesus challenges our sense of injustice with a call to generosity—to give back more than we have received. Give more than we are expected to give. Offer forgiveness and reconciliation in a measure that reflects the love the Father has lavished on us. Use a generous portion when we deliver grace, mercy, patience, and so on.

Jesus calls us to quit evaluating every relationship based on fair treatment and reminds us that He lavished His love on us when we didn't deserve it. His ultimate generosity calls us to walk away from our demand for equal treatment. He calls us to give when others want to take. He calls us to share when others want to hoard resources. He calls us to lavish love when others want to give only what is deserved. It goes against the very fabric of our natural selfish condition.

From the time we are born, we limit our generosity toward others. It doesn't take too much life experience before we begin honing our skills at keeping life as fair as possible. We know a good trade and a bad trade. We know when others are treating us unfairly. We are keenly aware of how we should be treated and horribly unaware of the injustice we inflict on others. We know when it is okay to give up on someone and walk away from the relationship. It all starts with childish competition, but in the end leaves us unable to experience the power of relationships in which everyone's needs are met. We are intended for blessing, but we live convinced we are supposed to get more than we have. We are back-scratchers, always limiting our love by what we expect to get in return. We live in a world based on reciprocity, not generosity.

Reciprocity is a big word that refers to equal treatment. You took my toy, so I took yours. That is reciprocity. You rubbed my back for two minutes, so I'm counting down the seconds while I rub yours. You got to watch your television show; now it's my turn to control the remote. I had to watch the kids all day yesterday, now you must let me have some alone time! You scratch my back, *then* I'll scratch yours. That is fair. That is reciprocity.

This "back-scratchers mentality" is how the world evaluates right and wrong. "An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth." It's the rule that keeps our courts full and our grudges deep. We live in a "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" world. We've embraced this philosophy in every relationship. Whether at work, school, church, home, or in the neighborhood, we look for fair and equal treatment; we want to get back as much as we give. Moreover, we don't want to give one ounce more than others give.

## **Coming to Grips: I Am a Back-scratcher too**

I pastored for many years, and this reality always frustrated me. I watched good men and women go through stressful days and turn into self-absorbed, resource-hoarding, finger-pointing whiners. "Why doesn't someone else show up to help? Am I the only one who cares? If nobody else is going to step up, I'm going to quit too!"

I couldn't believe it. Many times I wanted to scream. "I'm tired too! Nobody cares about whether or not I've worked eighty hours. Quit whining!" I couldn't see my own back-scratching mentality. I was frustrated because I was convinced I was giv-

ing more than the rest, and they didn't care. This wasn't fair. If I was going to scratch their backs, they needed to scratch mine.

This frustration over the lack of generosity in the majority of churchgoers was a daily part of ministry. You may have heard that twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work and give eighty percent of the money. In fact, in my consulting with churches, I am thrilled when churches reach such a level of generosity that thirty or thirty-five percent of the people carry the load. That means the number of people doing nothing in the church has reduced from eighty percent to sixty-five or seventy percent. Even that sounds frustrating, doesn't it? It was driving me crazy. I was working hard; why shouldn't the rest of them? It wasn't fair!

Years later, after leaving pastoral ministry, I found myself as one of the twenty percent in my local church. I was driving home late one night from a consulting job a hundred miles from home. I was exhausted from working a full time job, consulting on the side, and filling many roles at church. After all, there were plenty of other people who could do half the things I was killing myself to complete. I had been exhausted the last Sunday and had found out some church folks had been grumbling over the fact I stayed home from church. I was honestly so tired that I just needed a day to rest, and that doesn't happen for me at church.

Their lack of gratitude and accusations were more than I could take. In my heart I was yelling at God for making me be the one who had to be responsible. *Why don't they quit complaining and start helping? Don't they know I am doing ministry all week? I am only one person! I can't keep going like this. I've had*

*it. They can find someone else to do this stuff. If they don't care, why should I?*

There are moments when God quietly waits for us to say something He can use to confront our sin. We assume the reason He is patiently listening is that He agrees with us. And then, once we have laid open our selfish attitude, He forces us to acknowledge that what we just said really is the way we think. We know it isn't okay, but we can't deny having said it. It is painful and exhilarating all at the same time. It is painful, because we have to confess our sin. It is exhilarating, because we know God is about to take us into one of those moments of transformation.

God's voice wasn't small or still. He was loud and clear. "You sound just like one of those whining churchgoers. What's that all about?" Immediately, my own words convicted me. I had already confessed my guilt. It was time to do some soul searching. *God why am I not willing to give? Why am I not generous with my time and my money? Why am I so limited in my willingness to sacrifice?*

You should never ask a question if you don't want the answer. God's voice became clear and I was arrested by His clarity. "You have never been generous. You have always operated out of a sense of reciprocity. You give just as much as you receive and you quit giving when you don't get back what you think you deserve. You're a back-scratcher!"

I don't know if the Holy Spirit speaks to you so sternly. But it left me undone. *You're right! I need you to help me change. I don't understand what a generous heart really is. If you'll teach me, I will listen.*



The next months proved to be a spiritual journey into the heart of a man who died on a cross and at the same time lavished mercy on those nearby (Luke 23:34). I came face to face with a friend who knew He was going to be deserted, yet encouraged Peter while confronting him (Matthew 26:31-32). I was undone by this man's willingness to reconcile long before his brother was willing to open the door and sit down at the family table (Revelation 3:20).

*I am sorry God. All these years, I have limited my gifts to you by what others have been willing to give. I am not generous. I am a back-scratcher, and I need to wash my hands of this attitude. Help me to give like you gave. Help me serve out of respect for how you serve me.*

In that prayer, I realized there is to be only one reciprocal relationship in my life. I am to love because He first loved me. I am to be holy because He is holy. I am to give of my life because He gave of His. No other person is to become the gauge by which I measure the fairness of my life.

His mercy was delivered to me when I didn't deserve it, so I am to lavish on others a generous portion of love, mercy, hope, forgiveness. I am to offer my first fruits. My gifts are to be pressed down, shaken together, running over. It doesn't matter if the people I serve deserve it. I don't give because they give. I give because He gave. The measuring stick—the only source of reciprocity—is Jesus. I give my life out of respect of His sacrificial love for me. That is generosity!

## Jesus on Generosity

Jesus is calling us to walk away from a world that determines its willingness to give to others based on fairness. However, we are so engrained in the back-scratching mentality of this world that we have a hard time understanding when He calls us to respond to injustice with generosity rather than our right to repayment—reciprocity.

You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. —Matthew 5:38-42

Now, here we are, face to face with Jesus, and like my children, we want to cry, “That’s not fair!” We resist the apparent injustice being inflicted on us. We know that when someone strikes us on the cheek we have the right to fight back or be paid for our injury. When someone forces us to help him or her, like the Roman soldiers could force a person to carry their pack one mile, we understand that we should only have to do what the law requires. It is unfair to begin with, so why would we go beyond the letter of the law? When someone steals from us, why would we ignore the offense and find a way to meet that person’s need?

When we evaluate Jesus’ statement from our back-scratchers worldview, none of it makes sense. However, Jesus turned

the whole equation on its end. His sacrifice on the cross shows us the heart of the Heavenly Father. He is not one who treats us as we deserve. He offered grace and forgiveness, not because we had given Him something equal to His sacrifice, but because He loved us so much He was willing to take our punishment. He didn't just give us just enough love to help us feel better. He didn't limit His love by what we deserve. He lavished His love on us (1 John 3:1) and then called us to take the cloth, follow His example, and start washing feet (John 13:4-5). In fact, Jesus' reason for calling us to this level of generosity is that we are to reflect the character of God.

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. — Matthew 5:43-48

I turn the other cheek, offer my coat, walk the extra mile, and love my enemy because I want to reflect the perfect nature of God.

If we are going to have hearts that reflect the character of Christ, we have to come to grips with the reality that our level of investment in those around us cannot be determined by what is fair. In fact, it has nothing to do with fairness. It has every-

thing to do with an appropriate response to grace—generous expressions of gratitude. It has everything to do with living out the kind of love Christ displayed for us. It was a *lavished* love—a generous portion.

It isn't fair grace, but unfair grace. This inequity is the power of grace. It isn't restricted by the actions of the offender. It is empowered by Christ's mercy. It isn't limited by our sense of injustice. It is unbridled as we reflect the Father's grace.

If I am to be like Jesus, I am to generously pour my life into others as an act of unbridled grace. I am not to take on the mentality of a back-scratcher, which is "I'll give when I'm given to, and in equal measure."

I will look at the cross, see the overwhelming love and self-sacrifice of someone else paying for my sin, and embrace its call to a life that imitates that kind of generosity.

We limit what God can do through us when we refuse to give as Jesus gave. History is full of men and women of faith who sacrificed what others wouldn't in order for God to accomplish what man could not: Martin Luther King Jr., Billy Graham, and Mother Teresa—the big names are recognizable. But, there are hundreds of thousands of faithful believers who have been transformed by the lavish love of God who sacrificially invest themselves in ways that make a significant impact on the lives of those around them. You and I are called to open ourselves up to the possibility that God might just change someone's life because we choose generosity over back-scratching.

We can never fully understand the love of the cross until we give up the right to receive as much as we give. We are

called to “live a life of love just as Christ loved us.” He gave himself up for us. There was no limit. His love was *lavished*.

## **Generosity in Reconciliation**

We are called to be imitators of God as dearly loved children (Ephesians 5). Paul described this as a ministry of *reconciliation* (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). Jesus calls the church to repent by referring to a reconciliation pattern illustrated by sitting down at the same table (Revelation 3:20).

In a world where relationships are falling apart in staggering numbers, we need to embrace generosity in reconciliation. We are to be the first to the table, consistently declaring our willingness to work through the issues that will bring healing. Reconciliation goes beyond forgiveness. Forgiveness is something we give, but doesn’t necessarily dictate that we stay close to the one we forgave. Reconciliation is something we work at. Reconciliation calls for a renewed relationship and implies a process where we find healing from the sins that separate us. While we explore this in more depth in another chapter, it is important to understand that we cannot reflect the generous love of the Father while maintaining an unwillingness to find healing in our relationships.

## **Generosity Changes Our Relationships**

When we choose this kind of generosity, it changes how we deal with our relationships. It changes our relationship with our spouse and children. It changes our approach to reconciliation. It changes how we handle church, and it changes how we interact with the world around us. In the chapters to come we

will explore what each of these relationships can become when we embrace God's call to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, and care more about the needs of our brother and sister than the offense that could separate us. We will choose to walk away from a back-scratcher world, refuse to evaluate our lives through a filter of fairness, and live the generous love of Christ.

## **Hand Soap for Back-scratchers**

“Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8). We live in a world that doesn't understand the generous grace of the Father. However, we are to embrace it. We must take an honest assessment of our willingness to give as He gave. We live in a back-scratcher world, and it is time to wash our hands of a value system that will only give to the level it has received. We are to treat our neighbors as we want to be treated, not as they have treated us.

As you explore the pages of this book, it is my prayer that God will empower you to love as He loves and give as He gives—generously.