



It Was So Unfair!

“You sent out emails to everyone on the Board and had a secret meeting without telling me!” exclaimed Michael. It was late at night and the Board meeting had been going on for three hours. Michael was having a heated exchange with Harold, a 45 year old Board member whose grandfather helped found the church. Michael was angry at Harold’s latest betrayal. He had written a scathing critique of Michael’s leadership and sent it to all the Board. The conflict had begun a few months earlier when Michael started a new service with contemporary music. Michael was hired as head pastor to grow the church beyond its plateau of 500 members by attracting young people. The new 11:00 am service was an immediate hit. But the Woman’s Ministry had to shift their Sunday morning Bible study to a later time to accommodate the new service schedule. Harold’s wife had been unhappy with the change. She had met with the ladies’ Bible study she facilitated, and openly accused Michael of being a “woman hater.”

By the time Michael called me for counsel, he was having difficulty sleeping and his painful days had turned into painful weeks and increasingly painful months. The conflict was also affecting his family. His wife, Sheila, had not spoken to Harold’s wife, Mary, for weeks. Sheila was devastated and heartbroken over the damaged friendship. Mary was the first real friend she’d had in years. To make matters worse Michael didn’t respond well to the pressures. He became irritable, given to outbursts and shouting at the kids. Sheila had told Michael not to change the service schedule without talking to everyone, but Michael had not listened. Sheila felt totally frustrated and helpless at Michael’s refusal to listen. His response had been “They hired me to change the church. I’m just doing what they want.” Now, Michael was considering taking the conflict to the congregation for a “show down” and a vote of confidence. “Either I lead the church or they do (the Board)!” he angrily declared.

Emotional justice

I, like many of us, was raised with the motto of “what’s fair is fair...and what isn’t, isn’t.” When people treat me unfairly I feel wronged. I think most of us are sensitive to how fairly we are treated. If we are mistreated we want justice. We want the person to admit they did wrong and make it right. I call this the need for “emotional justice.” Michael felt unfairly treated by Harold and his wife. And certainly he had been. His response was anger and the need to quench his desire for justice by taking the conflict to the congregation for a “show down.” He was going to show them who was right and assure the Board and Harold got what they deserved.

Marital (and other conflicts) are often like this. Each party justifying their reactions to their partner’s perceived wrongdoing because they feel unfairly treated. The need for balancing the scale provokes them to focus more on their partner’s wrongdoing than their own. This results in demonization of the other party, escalation of the conflict and further polarization of each person’s stance. In short, it makes everything worse. Yet, each feels justified in his/her position and believes the other to be the cause of the problem.

God’s answer to seeking emotional justice

It is always so challenging to see what the Bible says. In Matthew 5:38-41 Jesus offers advice to those seeking fairness. “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two.”

Wow! That’s radical. Furthermore, in Matthew 18:21-35 He offers a parable on forgiveness that puts the burden on the unfairly treated person to totally forgive the offender. In other words, don’t become pre-occupied with how others unfairly treat you but rather focus on your response and make sure you don’t try to balance the scales of justice.

After prayer and counsel, Michael came to this realization. “I felt I had a right to be angry since they betrayed me. What I didn’t realize until later was how I first betrayed them. I didn’t communicate and work with them through the change. I was the first one to break trust. I also understand I have a problem with anger. I am working through the pain of my past and feel more at peace than ever. I needed this crisis in my life to get at the roots of what God wanted me to

change in order to be more effective. I see God working in my life and also in the church. It hurt a lot but was worth every ounce of pain.”

Michael learned that focusing on his own responses instead of their unfairness, brought self-awareness and the ability to resolve the conflict. This is a key to thriving as a leader. God wants to work on us so that he can work through us. This means that He does not want us seeking our own path to justice. The increased self-awareness that enduring unfairness can bring, offers us a glimpse into deeper inner characteristics that we normally would not recognize. It can help us see our blind-spots. Being unfairly treated can be a blessing in disguise. “...you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result...” (Genesis 50:20).