

**Bridging Our Divides:
Why Liberals and Conservatives Need Each Other
Part 1: Fairness
September 9, 2018**

Scriptures: Luke 6:31, 38; 14:14; James 2:1-5; 1 John 3:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12;
Micah 6:8; 1 Peter 3:8

This morning in Sunday school, our children are learning about an amazing piece of art that God has created. God's art is the earth – its flora and fauna, its rocks, minerals and mountains, its oceans, lakes, streams, and deserts. Truly, the work of a master – *The Master!* One of the most masterful features of God's masterpiece is not any individual creation, but the way in which each and every component of God's creation is interrelated in a mutually dependent and life-serving way. Even creatures that compete with one another – such as wolves and deer – are ultimately dependent on the health of the other species for their own survival. What seems messy or even ugly when the view is close in shows itself to be part of a wondrous whole whose beauty vastly exceeds the sum of its individual parts. If this masterwork is an expression of the mind and heart of its creator, then surely this is the masterwork that could not be conceived by a mere mortal. Earth is the work of a God.

Our children are also learning something else about God's masterwork: that the Master has handed each of us human beings a brush and a canvas and invites us to create a work of our own. The canvas is our lives. The paint palette we have to work with is the unique set of life circumstances given to us. And our brush strokes represent the choices we make within those circumstances – how we choose to work with our time, talent, and resources to create a unique expression of who we are and what we consider important. And beautiful. Whether you realize it or not, you've been painting all your life ... and you are painting still. One day you and God will behold your painting in its entirety. Will it be something you're proud of?

Of course, comparing the artwork we'll have created to that of God is a bit like placing a finger painting next to a Van Gough. Yet what truly loving master artist doesn't delight in seeing their child's work taped to the refrigerator, imperfections and all? And what loving master artist wouldn't be eager to help if their child asked for some pointers?

Happily, God is more loving and more masterful than any human artist. God constantly shows us how to paint well, but does so in ways that respect our freedom so that the works we create can truly be *ours*, not mere copies of the original. We are not forced to do so, but we are always invited to gain insight through God's Creation itself, observing the ways in which each component piece works for the good of the whole, even when in competition with one another, and reflecting this beauty in our own unique way in our relationships with others.

Another gift God gives us is the example of other human beings who have reflected God's beauty in their own lives, from which we can draw inspiration for our own work.

People like Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr.; like Mary Magdalene and Mary Daly; and, of course, Jesus himself, who shows us the "way, the truth, and the life" better than anyone. And then there is Scripture – a sacred body of work that is sacred specifically because it reflects a close conversation between God and humans. Scripture is not a perfect piece of art, as some suppose, but the broad lines of Scripture certainly do illustrate the kind of art that God finds pleasing.

If you were to read the whole Bible in one sitting, like stepping back to view the large mural all at once, one of the distinctive themes you would recognize as quite pronounced is the value Scripture places on helping the most vulnerable in society, particularly the poor. In fact, there are over 2,000 passages concerning our use of material possessions and wealth. A great number of these have to do specifically with how we are helping the poor and vulnerable.

Related to this dominant theme, you would notice a particular concern for Fairness – one of the themes Jonathan Haidt discusses in the book we've been invited to read as a congregation, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion*.

If you want the painting you make of your life to be beautiful in God's eyes, not merely your own, the Scriptures strongly suggest that you'll want to include distinctive colors and textures that show you to be a fair person and someone who is not only concerned about the welfare of those less fortunate, but someone who is actively doing something about it.

What does it mean to be fair, anyway?

Perhaps the preeminent Scripture that illustrates fairness comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Luke 6:31) This is a basic rule of thumb that we can take to pretty much every interaction we ever have with a human being – including our political discourse.

When God and I look over the painting I've made of my life, what I want to be able to see – and want God to see – is a person who treated others with whom I strongly disagree with the same respect and dignity I would want to receive if I were to discover that I was wrong and the other person was right. In other words, I'd want to see myself in political discourse that never devalues the humanity of the other, and presumes that the other person is sincerely acting out of positive motives (at least in their self-perception) until proven otherwise. And if proven otherwise, I'd want God to see me as a person that didn't demonize my "enemies" but treated them with love that is stronger than my hatred.

When the Bible speaks of Fairness, it provides more nuance than simply "treat others as you want to be treated." It speaks of Fairness in terms of proportionality and equality – two concepts that appear to be contradictory in nature but really are not. Curiously, according to Jonathan Haidt, these same concepts are reflected in our political discourse, with one group emphasizing fairness as proportionality and another emphasizing equality. You can differentiate the proportionalists from the egalitarians by simply asking which statement intuitively resonates with you more strongly:

(a) "People should be rewarded proportionately, according to what they contribute to society. A big problem is that the system doesn't work this way. Some people freeload."

or

(b) "All people are equal, and should be treated this way. A big problem is the disparity between rich and poor."

Both statements may be true, but people tend to resonate with one more than the other. Probably, you can see how different orientations lead to different political decisions.

In Scripture, Jesus speaks of God's fairness in terms of proportionality in the Sermon on the Mount where he says, "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap;

for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (Luke 6:38) In other words, the more you give, the more you will receive, and vice-versa. The apostle Paul also speaks of fairness in terms of proportionality when he reminds the Thessalonian congregation “we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it,” and commands, “anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10) In other words, if you don’t contribute anything to society, don’t expect anything from it.

We find this basic, scriptural understanding of Fairness as proportionality reflected in political discourse today in issues concerning wealth and poverty. Some people advocate for policies that reward those who contribute more to the communal good and either give nothing or even punish those who are freeloaders, like those Paul speaks of in Thessalonica.

As Jonathan Haidt argues in *The Righteous Mind*, many people consider those who emphasize proportionality over equality to be mean-spirited and uncompassionate, particularly when it comes to actively punishing those who may contribute less than others. Yet, as a social scientist who studies how human systems evolve over time, Haidt cites reams of research that suggest that the “proportionalists” – conservative or liberal – have a point that is often overlooked by those who place a higher value on equality (treating all people equally) over proportionality (treating people according to the contributions they make to society).

Let’s play a game. Suppose we have ten people, each of whom is given \$20. In each round, you are given the choice between keeping your money or contributing a portion of it to a community pot. After each round, whatever money has been contributed to the community pot is multiplied by a factor of 1.6. Then, the pot is divided evenly between the ten players. If the players are wise, they will throw all their money into the community pot. For, once it has multiplied and redistributed, each person now has \$32 instead of their original \$20.

However, if you want to really cash in on this game, and don’t care about what others think of you, when others throw in their \$20, you’ll just put your \$20 in your pocket. Thus, when the community pot is divided evenly among the ten players, everyone will receive \$29, but you will have \$29 plus your original \$20, for a total of \$49!

Studies show that, when games like this are played and people discover that there are freeloaders like you gaming the system, everyone tends to reduce the amount they contribute to the common good. In fact, over time, the system breaks down and no one benefits by contributing to the community pot. The only way to restore the system is to actively punish the freeloaders in some way. When people know that others will be punished for freeloading (“Those who do not work shall not eat”), not only do the freeloaders begin to contribute to the community pot, but everyone else does, too. The system thrives.

When it comes to how a society works to help the poor, this proportionality game suggests that a system of rewards for those who contribute and punishments for those who do not actually benefits everyone, rich and poor alike. Yet such systems are often perceived by egalitarians, who believe all people should be treated equally, as mean-spirited and only serving the interests of the rich. Of course, some people truly are mean-spirited and only in it for themselves, but not as many as egalitarians tend to think.

Yet the egalitarians make an important contribution to social systems as well – and to alleviating poverty. The Scriptures themselves teach this. I think again of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount where he says that God “makes God’s sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:45) This isn’t a saying about rich and poor, but it is certainly a strong assertion that God understands equality to be a critical component of Fairness.

Jesus’ brother, James, puts an even finer point on it in the Book of James:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? (James 2:1-5)

Clearly, James favors equality over proportionality when it comes to economics. Does this mean he would be opposed to Jesus’ insistence that the more you give

the more you receive, or Paul's assertion that those who do not work should not eat?

No, it simply means you can't have one without the other.

The wisdom that "egalitarians" like James tend to contribute to political systems is the strong reminder that many people do not contribute as much to the economic welfare of society not because they're lazy freeloaders but because they started the game of life with less than others.

If we were to adjust our proportionality game to more accurately reflect real life, you would have given some people just \$5 while giving others \$20, and still others \$100. When no one starts the game with equal resources, you cannot logically maintain that those who contribute more to the community pot are more deserving of reward than others. In fact, someone who starts with \$5 and puts all of it in, is contributing 100% of their income to the common good while someone who contributes the same amount but starts with \$100 is contributing just 5%. Would it be fair to favor the latter contributor over the former? An egalitarian would point out that, to be fair, you either need to start the first player with more money or expect the first to contribute less. 5% of \$5 would be 25 cents. Yet as James points out, many would look at the one who contributes just 25 cents as a freeloader, or at least of lower status than the \$5 contributor.

Are you seeing now why those who resonate more with the statement "People should be rewarded proportionately, according to what they contribute to society" should listen carefully to those who resonate more with the statement, "All people are equal, and should be treated this way" and vice-versa? Both statements are true. In fact, it is unlikely that you can count yourself as a person who values Fairness unless you take seriously both the values of proportionality and equality, and you support public policies that hold these values together as well.

I don't know if this reflection has solved all the issues that divide us politically, but I hope that it has provided at least a small reminder that we can't expect to produce beautiful artwork of our lives without the help of others. When it comes to reflecting God's vision of Fairness, proportionalists and egalitarians, conservatives and liberals, need one another's insights to produce a work of true and lasting value. We need one another to produce a beautiful society where the poor and vulnerable receive what the Bible wants them to receive: an

outstretched hand and a fair shake. Above all, we need to treat others – even those we consider enemies – as we ourselves wish to be treated.