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Title: When Life Is Unfair

Text: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Last year Naval Admiral William McRaven spoke to the 8000 members of the 2014 graduating class at the University of Texas. He talked to them about the 10 most important life lessons he had learned during the course of Navy SEAL training that he had completed back in the seventies. These lessons, he said, really had nothing to do with being in the military, and everything to do with preparing you for life. One of the lessons parallels with the theme of today's message.

Admiral McRaven described Basic SEAL training as six months of long torturous runs in the soft sand, midnight ocean swims in freezing water, obstacle courses, unending calisthenics, days without sleep and always being cold, wet and miserable. He said, "It is six months of being constantly harassed by professionally trained warriors who seek to find the weak of mind and body and eliminate them from ever becoming a Navy SEAL." And then he told about becoming a sugar cookie.

Several times a week, the instructors would line up the class and do a uniform inspection. Your hat had to be perfectly starched, your uniform immaculately pressed and your belt buckle shiny and smudge-free. But no matter how much effort a recruit put into presenting a perfect uniform, the instructors would seemingly ALWAYS find something wrong with something.

The student who failed uniform inspection had to run fully clothed into the ocean and then, wet from head to toe, he had to roll around on the beach until every part of his body was covered with sand. The effect was known as a "sugar cookie." Then the student was required to stay in that uniform the rest of the day – cold, wet and covered with sand.

Many students just couldn't accept the fact that all their effort was in vain, that no matter how hard they tried to get the uniform right, they failed the test and were forced to spend the day as a sugar cookie. Those students, McRaven said, didn't make it through training.

He says that the problem was that they didn't understand the purpose of the drill. You were never going to have a perfect uniform, and everyone was bound to be singled out at one time or another. The Admiral said that the life lesson here is that sometimes no matter how well you prepare or how well you perform you still end up as a sugar cookie. It's just the way life is sometimes. And then he said, "If you want to change the world, get over being a sugar cookie and keep MOVING FORWARD."

Such stories make me glad I didn't go into the military. On the other hand, sometimes I think that maybe I should have. Maybe I would have learned some of life's most difficult lessons a little sooner.

There is a cold hard fact about the world we live in: LIFE IS TOUGH, and IT OFTEN SEEMS UNFAIR.

In the movie *The Princess Bride*, the guy who used to play Columbo on TV is reading a fairy tale to his grandson, the kid who used to be on *The Wonder Years*. Toward the end, the story takes a wrong turn and the little boy objects, saying, "It can't end like that! It wouldn't be fair." The grandfather says, "Well who says life is fair? Where is that written? Life isn't always fair."

Life isn't always fair. This isn't my favorite part about living in this world, but it's an unavoidable truth. Life isn't always fair. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, young or old, male or female. It doesn't even matter if you're religious or not. Life isn't fair all the time. Life might not even be fair much of the time. Sometimes you're the sugar cookie. Sometimes you suffer when you don't deserve to suffer. How you respond when this happens will determine when – or if – things ever get back to the way they should be.

Jaded and cynical. Many times when people are on the receiving end of unfair treatment, they respond by becoming jaded and cynical. Sadly I've seen this happen in the lives of many unbelievers. They somehow pick up the idea – I don't know where they get it; certainly not from the Bible – but they somehow pick up the idea that life is supposed to be a fairy tale, a day at the beach, or a picnic in the park. They have the idea that God exists only to make everything easy for them, and because God exists nothing unpleasant should ever happen.

Over the years I've heard people use an unpleasant experience as an excuse to abandon the faith and stop believing in God. Or, at the very least, to become jaded in their attitude toward living the Christian life. I've heard people say, "If God is real, then why did this person close to me die?" I understand how difficult it is when someone close to you passes away. I've been there. I've questioned things. But the truth is that people have been dying every day since the beginning of time. It's part of life. But people who aren't prepared to face this reality will say, "Since it happened to

someone I know and since I have to experience this pain, then it must mean that God isn't real or that He doesn't care."

I've also heard people use this argument when something less tragic happens. I've heard them say, "If God is real, then why did I get sick?" Or, "If God is real, then why did I lose my job?" Or, "If God is real, then why didn't I get that promotion I deserved?" Etc. If you want to become cynical and jaded, you can find an "injustice" to become cynical and jaded about, because life is full of them on all points of the spectrum. It's tempting for us to develop an entitlement mentality – especially Christians – where we say, "I'm a good person so my life should always be fair and easy." Except it's not. Life is sometimes unfair. Not because God is unfair but because the world is unfair – we live in a fallen world, and as long as your address is this side of heaven, sometimes you're going to be the sugar cookie.

Bitter and selfish. I've also seen it happen, when people are forced to face the reality that life isn't always easy, that they become bitter, selfish and aloof. They say, "Why should I love others if I'm just going to get hurt in return? Why should I help others if no one appreciates what I do? Why should I be unselfish when selfish people end up getting all the breaks? And then they let their heart get a little colder and they say, "From now on, I'm keeping my guard up. I'm looking out for number one. From now on, I will do unto others before they do unto me."

Give up and quit. I've also seen people decide just to give up. They give up on Christianity, their marriage, their family, success, helping people, on trying to make the world a better place. And they say, "From now on, I'll just settle for mediocre." I've seen this happen. I also must admit that I've even entertained this very idea more than once in my life when things didn't go the way I thought they should go. Am I alone, or can anyone else relate?

In the Bible we see an example of a group of people who go through the life-is-unfair and you're-the-sugar-cookie experience, and their response is the opposite of the response I've been talking about. Instead of becoming cynical and selfish and ready to quit, the Apostle Paul heaped praise on them because their faith actually grew in the face of unfair treatment. Their love for others actually increased, even when the world was out to get them. And instead of abandoning the faith, their steadfastness became an example for believers all over the world to follow.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul said to them...*"We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring."*

Who were these people? The friendly folks at the First Church of Thessalonica. This was the same church that Paul wrote an earlier letter to known as 1 Thessalonians. Many scholars say that 1 Thessalonians is the oldest book of the New Testament, written around 49 AD. A few months after Paul wrote First Thessalonians, he wrote a second letter – which is believed to be the second oldest book of the New Testament. It was probably written around 50 AD. It's one of those short, often overlooked letters, but it has a powerful message. 2 Thessalonians speaks to us of a faith that cannot be conquered, no matter what life brings your way.

In today's message we'll talk about how to respond when you're the sugar cookie – when you feel like life has arbitrarily and unfairly singled you out and given you worse than you deserve. Maybe it has to do with your health, or your finances, or your work, or your home life, or maybe it has to do with all of these. But if you have recently found yourself asking, "Why do I have to go through what I'm going through right now?", then today's message is for you. I can't give you an answer to why it happens, other than: "It just happens. That's how life is." But I can tell you through the Word how you should respond. These aren't my ideas; these are from Paul, in chapter one of Second Thessalonians. If you're facing trials and tribulations and you feel like you're getting the sugar-cookie treatment, I believe that Paul would challenge you with one simple phrase: **Look Past Today At What's Coming Your Way.**

Perhaps I've been beating and repeating the point that life is sometimes unfair, but this statement comes with a footnote. The footnote is that yes, life is sometimes unfair – but only for a while, if your life is in Jesus Christ. We live in a fallen world and we are subject to its fallenness, but we also serve a God who stands for justice, a God who is at work in history to redeem the world and to bring glory to His name. So I'm encouraging you to look past today at what's coming your way.

What does that mean? What does the Bible say is coming your way? There are three things that Paul brings to our attention in 2 Thessalonians 1. First of all, when life is unfair I want you to keep in mind that ...

1. **You will come through this better than you were before.** Paul said to the Thessalonians, *"All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering"* (vs.5). "All this" refers to the fact that the Thessalonians are persevering through hard times with growing faith and increasing love. The word "judgment" here doesn't mean punishment. You could say that the word means God's "authoritative opinion" about you, or His conclusion about your character. Paul goes on to say, *"With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling..."* (vs. 11). And then take note of this... *"We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in*

him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (vs. 12) Did you get that? Take a look at that verse again. Not only will you be made worthy, not only will you glorify Jesus Christ, but you will also be glorified in Him. That’s exactly what Paul said. This situation you’re facing today isn’t forever. It’s just for now. You will get through this, and you will come out on the other side better than you ever were before – IF you respond the way God WANTS you to. There is an old cliché – a trial or tribulation can make you a bitter person or a better person. It depends on how you look at life. If you consider every event as random and luck-of-the-draw, then it’s easy to give way to cynicism and bitterness – “Why am I so unlucky? Why don’t I get any breaks?” But, on the other hand, if you believe that God can somehow make sense of what happens, that He can use everything that happens in such a way that it serves His purpose and brings glory into your life, then life’s most unfair moments can help you become a better person. I confess, that when I’m going through hard times, I don’t always know how this situation will help my life become better later on. I don’t always know why it happens or what good will come of it. But, I believe that it will happen because I know that *“for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose”* (Romans 8:28). That’s why the Thessalonian Christians didn’t become jaded and cynical when they faced trouble. Their faith continue to grow. “The world is against us? Let’s believe God for a miracle!” This can be your attitude, too. You can look past today to what is coming your way, because you know that you will come through this better than you were before. And you can also know that...

- 2. If the score needs to be settled, God will settle it.** Sometimes when you look back to an unfair situation, and you think of how someone went out of their way to take advantage of you, it’s easy to give way to bitterness. It’s not very hard to become consumed with the idea of getting even. “If he talks bad about me, I’ll talk bad about him. If he dishes the dirt, I’ll dish it right back. Since he did this to me, I’ll do that to him.” And on and on. Let me get prophetic here for a moment. 2016, the election year, will be reduced to nothing more than one political group attacking another, followed by a counter-attack, followed by a counter-counter attack, and then another, and on and on. If that doesn’t happen, I guess I’ll be one happy camper and one false prophet. In fact, we not only see it in campaigns, we see it in the day-in-day-out nuts-and-bolts of how some political leaders work. I am rather convinced that there are groups on both sides of any good idea that intentionally hold back progress simply because the idea came from the wrong side of the table. Then the other side gets mad that their idea didn’t pass, and they retaliate, and there we go again. This goes on until, in some circles, political life is no longer about serving people, it’s about fighting enemies. What’s worse is that there are ministries who operate with the mentality that we must fight our enemies – and if someone lashes out at us, we will lash right back. It’s a fact of life that growing churches and ministries face a great deal of criticism, and in most cases it is likely undeserved. Let me get bold and risk putting my foot in my mouth. I’d go so far as to say that if you’re not connected to a particular church and you’re not tithing at that church and you’re not plugged in to serving at that church, you have NO BUSINESS criticizing that church. However, what I find disappointing is that in recent years there have been a few megachurch pastors who have taken to social media to get back at their critics, even making videos to mock their critics, and name-calling those who disagree with them. Here’s the problem: the MORE you focus on your CRITICS, the LESS you focus on your CALLING. Let me go a little further. The other danger is that the more you focus on your critics, the more they’re proven right. Paul’s approach is the complete opposite. Listen to what he said...*“God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you...”* (vs. 6). Paul is talking about *real* persecution here, life and death persecution, not the petty little tiffs we often take part in – tiffs that we try to pass off as persecution. Paul is talking about serious stuff – and he reminds the Thessalonian believers that God will settle the score. This is the attitude we must have, whether the opposition is major or minor. GOD WILL SETTLE THE SCORE. Whenever I feel like I’ve been treated unfairly, this verse often comes to mind, *“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord”* (Romans 12:19). You see, when God said “Vengeance is mine,” He is saying specifically, “Vengeance is NOT yours. It’s not your job to get back at your so-called enemies.” So whenever I feel like I’ve been treated unfairly, I remind myself of two things: **I could be over-reacting.** I could be making a big deal out of nothing. Therefore, I’m much better off to respond to critics and “enemies” with mercy and grace. If, in fact, this situation is really that serious, and their behavior is really that egregious, **God will settle the score Himself.** He will do what needs to be done, and I don’t need to do anything. Do you know what this means? It means that EVERY TIME you’re tempted to feel angry, resentful, bitter or vindictive, you can just let it go and release it into God’s hands, knowing that He will deal with it accordingly. Now, you may say, “But I *want* to deal with it. I *want* to set that person straight. I *want* to settle this *my way*.” Maybe you want to, but that isn’t your job. Maybe you’re over-reacting. Just maybe. Either way,

you can be sure of this: as long as you're focused on settling the score for yourself, God CANNOT settle it for you. I want you to see what Paul says next. He says that God will pay back trouble to those who trouble you... *"and give relief to you who are troubled"* (vs. 7). That's where your focus needs to be. Many times I have cried out, "God, this situation is eating me up. Please, help me get over it. Help me get past it." And I can say from experience that when you ask Him, He will do it. By the way, that word "relief" in the Greek is "anacin." How appropriate is that? When you trust God to settle a score that needs to be settled, in His way according to His wisdom, it's a huge relief, like the world's worst HEADACHE has suddenly gone away. You can look past today at what's coming your way because you know that God will balance the scales and will settle any score that needs to be settled. Even more than that, you can also be sure that...

3. **God will give you the chance to put your best ideas to work.** Paul uses a phrase here that I absolutely love. He's telling the believers in Thessalonica how he's praying for them, and in his prayers he asks... *"that by his [God's] power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith"* (vs. 11). He's saying every good idea and every good effort – God will bless. Every God-given goal and every Spirit-inspired plan of action, He will empower you to accomplish. Do you think persecution can stop God from blessing you? NO! Do you think being in an unfair situation means that your goals, your plans, your dreams and God's calling on your life are now for naught? NO WAY! If someone or something has tied your shoe-strings together and has caused you to trip and fall, it has NEITHER changed God's PLANS or His PROMISE. He will empower you to fulfill every good purpose and every act of faith. No matter what you're facing at this moment, you can look past today at what is coming your way.
4. **Conclusion.** That's what the believers in the church at Thessalonica were able to do. That's why they were Paul's pride and joy, as he said in his first letter. That's why their faith continued to grow, even in the midst of persecution, because their eyes weren't only on what is happening in this moment in time. It's why their love for others continued to increase. There's no way they were about to let a little mistreatment fill their hearts with bitterness. They knew that God is in control and so they could look past today. It's also why they refused to turn tail and run, because they knew that God's calendar extends far beyond this present moment. They had courage to stay faithful to Jesus Christ to the very end, because they knew He would be with them to the very end. What about you? As you face life's sugar-cookie moments, how will you respond? Will you become cynical and short-sighted? Or, will you say, "Lord, this is my chance to practice a faith big enough to move mountains." When you're treated maliciously, will you become bitter and vindictive? Or, will you say, "God, I trust You to settle the score. I will continue to love the people You bring my way, and I will show others the same mercy You have shown me." When life takes an unfair turn, will you throw in the towel? Or, will you say, "I will not let go of God's plan for my life. No matter what the cost, I WILL cross the finish line." These are the characteristics of God-defined faith. You look past today at what's coming your way. But life isn't just about looking past today, you've still got to live today. You can't spend your life thinking about the sweet by and by; you've also got to face up to the nasty now and now! How do you do it? **Live today as if it has already come your way.** Live today as if all we've talked about has already happened. Live today as if God has already made everything work together for good. **Let your faith grow.** Live today as if God has already settled the score that needs to be settled, and you're free to reach out to others in love and mercy and compassion. **Let your love increase.** Live today as if God has already empowered you to do all that He has called you to do. **Never give up.** Live today as if your victory is assured ... because it is!