

044 08/21/00 Fairness does not always mean sameness

“That’s not fair!” How often have you heard your child cry in protest that some situation at home or school is not fair? Chances are that you responded, “Life is not fair.” Years of experience have taught most of us that it is impossible to treat two children exactly same, just as it is impossible for a boss to treat two co-workers the same.

Jesus told a parable about the concept of fairness (Matthew 20:1-16). He told the story of a landowner that hired workers early in the morning for a standard day’s wages. Throughout the day, he hired more workers. He even hired some workers when there was only an hour left to work. When the workers who had been hired first realized that the latecomers were also being paid a full day’s wages, they cried, “That’s not fair!” The landowner reminded them that they had agreed with him early in the morning what their wages would be. He had kept his bargain. He told them that the fact that he chose to be generous with the other workers should not affect his agreement with them.

High school students often told me that a teacher had been unfair. Perhaps they had been disciplined for talking in class while another student did not get caught. I always had to ask them if they had ever talked without getting caught. Strict fairness, as they seemed to desire, probably would have resulted in more, not less discipline.

As you talk to your children about fairness, help them see that many factors enter into a parent’s or a teacher’s decision about how to treat children. In the case of the workers in the parable, the landowner probably saw that each worker needed a full day’s wages in order to feed his family. In the example of a student talking in class, the student who talks constantly or argues when corrected is usually disciplined more strictly.

Tell your children that parents must decide what discipline children need to become mature adults who love God and their neighbors. Sometimes that must be different for different children.

