

# The Gospel — Good News or Bad?

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*There was once a landowner who went out early one morning to hire labourers for his vineyard; and after agreeing to pay them the usual day's wage he sent them off to work. Going out three hours later he saw some more men standing idle in the marketplace. "Go and join the others in the vineyard," he said, "and I will pay you a fair wage;" so off they went. At midday he went out again, and at three in the afternoon, and made the same arrangement as before. An hour before sunset he went out and found another group standing there; so he said to them, "Why are you standing about like this all day with nothing to do?" "Because no one has hired us," they replied; so he told them, "Go and join the others in the vineyard." When evening fell, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with those who came last and ending with the first." Those who had started work an hour before sunset came forward, and were paid the full day's wage. When it was the turn of the men who had come first, they expected something extra, but were paid the same amount as the others. As they took it, they grumbled at their employer: "These late-comers have done only one hour's work, yet you have put them on a level with us, who have sweated the whole day long in the blazing sun!" The owner turned to one of them and said, "My friend, I am not being unfair to you. You agreed on the usual wage for the day, did you not? Take your pay and go home. I choose to pay the last man the same as you. Surely I am free to do what I like with my own money. Why be jealous because I am kind?" Matthew 20:1-16 NEB.*

What kind of person is this vineyard owner anyway?

Back and forth he goes between his vineyard and the marketplace all day, hiring workmen as late in the day as an hour before sundown. And then, when the day is over, he ends up paying them all the same amount — a full day's wage!

Is he kind and generous — or mentally unbalanced?

Is he fair and just — or simply capricious?

Is he trying to make people happy — or to make trouble?

Is this really a generous thing he does — or only a clever and certain way to start a riot?

It all depends on the group in which you find yourself.

If you've worked all day long in the burning sun, you probably hate his guts! But the maddening fact is that you're hard put to say exactly why. In your pocket is the wage you worked all day expecting to get. It's the full amount for a full day's work. So how can you honestly say the boss has been unfair?

Yet there's something horribly wrong about what he's done. He's turned the world upside down. In some way everything has been radically upset, and you don't like it. Somehow this isn't the way things are supposed to be. You feel deeply wronged, cheated. Yet you have exactly what you bargained for and expected.

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If you worked only that last fading hour in the cool of the day, you probably think this fellow is one of the greatest and best you've ever met. In your pocket is a day's pay, and you only worked an hour! Why did he do it? There's just no explanation — no possible reason you can think of, except perhaps that he's a kind, generous, big-hearted man.

As bystanders, we can't help feeling a tug of sympathy for those who worked all day long. The word of kindness and grace that overlooks the perseverance of these early laborers seems to have something wrong with it. But looking at it another way, we have to admit the owner has been fair. He has paid the wage agreed on. He has not been capricious. He has not given to one group at the expense of the other. He has been fair, but fairness has been transcended by goodness. Generosity has not excluded justice, but included it. The owner's justice forms a background that makes his goodness appear as goodness and keeps us from accusing him falsely. He is more than just — he is generous and kind.

And that's exactly what makes the situation so perplexing. On the one hand, we can't blame the men who worked all day for grumbling and feeling robbed. But on the other hand, why is it that kindness and generosity end up making people angry? How in the world can you grumble against goodness? Instead of arousing opposition, shouldn't such kindness be greeted with joy?

There's something ironic about the fact that had those who worked all day been paid first and gone home without knowing what happened afterward, they would have been perfectly content. The real rub comes not in that they have been treated badly — but in that someone else has been treated just as well without deserving it!

And maybe here is where we come close to the heart of the issue. What kind of world is it in which the word of grace encompasses and transcends the realm of law? Is such a word good news or bad? Is it to be welcomed with joy or rejected as a disaster? Is the world created by the gracious word of the gospel the heaven we seek or the hell we flee?

It all depends.

The men who worked through the heat of the day understand and are comfortable in a world of law. Here *they* are in control. By their efforts they can establish their own security and status; they can earn their wage. Life founded on unvarying law means they can take care of themselves. This is their understanding of existence, and with this they feel secure. The owner can say to them in all fairness, "Take your pay — what you have earned — and go home." They are excluded from the source and atmosphere of grace. Goodness has invited them to go beyond law and the barriers that law constantly erects between men to prevent their rejoicing in a fellow human being's good fortune. But they are incapable of going beyond — barred by their own understanding of existence. Kindness and generosity infuriate them, because such qualities threaten their basis of security and existence.

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In a world created by the word of grace, by kindness and generosity, where everyone receives the same pay, how can you distinguish between the industrious and the lazy, between the good and the bad, between the righteous and the sinner? Law, commandments, religion — all of these provide such a handy and necessary way to discriminate between the righteous and the wicked. What will happen if you turn these upside down? Isn't there something indiscriminating and even irresponsible about one who would pass out rewards on the basis of kindness rather than according to some level of performance or achievement on the part of the receiver? What a travesty that careless taxgatherers and fishermen should find themselves, without any prolonged rehabilitation, brought into the full assurance of God's merciful forgiveness, having done nothing to deserve it!

But there are those for whom the word of grace means the only hope they have ever known. They see clearly enough that there is no chance for them by their efforts ever to merit a reward at all. The world of law dooms them to despair. Then to their surprise they find in their hand a full day's pay, and the kindness of the owner captivates their lives. Life for them means dependence on and rejoicing in the generosity of another. Not out of their own resources but through his abundant kindness do they live in freedom and

peace, able to enjoy another person's good fortune because they are always conscious of their own.

The great delight of these recipients of grace generates coldness and hostility in the hearts of those who've worked all day long. For the day-long workers the gospel is bad news, the worst there could ever be! And there is only one thing to do to a person who comes along turning the world upside down — eating with publicans and sinners, speaking the word of grace to any and all who will hear and receive.

Crucify him!