

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S GOODNESS

I'm going to tell you two stories and I wonder if you can tell me what they have in common. Here is the first... Once upon a time, there was a wealthy man who, early one morning, dropped by the marketplace, which was the ancient equivalent to the unemployment office. There he hired a bunch of men to work in his vineyard for an agreed daily rate of pay. A few hours later, he went back again and again throughout the day, each time employing more and more men. In fact, as Jesus told it, the owner of the vineyard hired extra workers right up until quitting time. The last men were hired just one hour before sunset.

As the last light of day faded, the workers gathered to receive their pay. They were lined up in order - working backward from the last men hired. And this is when Jesus threw a blinder into the story. Every man, no matter how long they had worked that day, received exactly the same pay - one day's wages. I don't have to tell you that things got a little heated by the time the line reached its end. Much murmuring passed among those who were hired early that morning. Finally someone just spoke it out aloud: "This is not right. We got a raw deal. You have short-changed us! We did most of the work today. We carried the burden under the hot sun. But you treated these other workers as equals in the labour!"

Jesus placed these words in the mouth of the owner of the vineyard: "Didn't we agree together on what I would pay you? One day's wages! And haven't I kept my word? Now don't begrudge my desire to be generous! For reasons that are mine alone I wanted to do something unexpected, something out of the ordinary, something that would make these men run home to their wives and say, 'You're not going to believe what happened to me today!'" (Based on Matthew 20)

Now, for the second story... This one took place in a classroom at a College in Missouri back in 2002. It was the day for final exams. Everybody in the room was doing last-minute studying. Then the professor enters, and looking at the students intently he says: "This is in your textbook, and you are responsible for the outcome of this exam." When the time came for the test, the professor gave the word to start and every student took up their pen and turned over their test. To their astonishment every answer on the test was filled in. Each student's name was even written on the exam in red ink."

A wordless astonishment traveled over the class as each student looked at their completed exam. On the bottom of the last page of every test was this note from the professor: "All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an A on the final exam. The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get the A." (Cited in PreachingToday.com, "Professor Takes Students' Test for Them")

Now, consider what you have heard. First, there was the story about labourers who were paid a full day's wages for just one hour's work. Then there was the story of an already-completed exam paper that gave every student an undeserved "A." What do these stories have in common? Both were undeserving of the outcome! Can I tell you something? Those aren't just stories about other people's lives. There isn't a single person in this room who hasn't experienced outrageous, lavish, unexpected, undeserved kindness. What's more, we probably experience these serendipities every single day. They are being poured out over us constantly. I know this, and I declare it with absolute confidence because of one unchanging truth which permeates every aspect of my reality.... **God is good!**

If you want to see God for Who He really is, then listen to what the Bible has to say: **"Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good"** (1 Chronicles 16:34). **"Taste and see that the Lord is good!"** (Psalm 34:8) **"Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise! Give thanks to Him and praise His name! For the Lord is good and His love is eternal, and His faithfulness endures to all generations."** (Psalm 100:4-5)

When Moses boldly pleaded with God, *"Please, show me Your glory,"* he was asking to see God for who He really is. *"Show me as much as I can stand, Lord."* So what did God show him? Exodus 33:19-20 gives us God's response: **"I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim the name Yahweh before you."** Moses wanted to see God's glory, but God showed Him something so wonderful and accessible that it caused the skin of Moses' face to glow with the radiance of God's presence. God showed him His goodness.

We sing about it and we say it often. But do we fully understand this great attribute of God? The Bible defines God's goodness in two ways. One has to do with His character; the other focuses on His actions. Psalm 119:68 captures both when it says of God: **"You are good and You do what is good..."** The first half of that verse focuses on that fact that God is by nature good. But since this is God we're talking about, this goodness ascribed to Him is elevated to the highest possible level. Think about it... God is the original definition of good. He is good in and of Himself. For us, goodness is an added quality. But it comes naturally for God. He doesn't possess goodness, He is goodness! That's exactly what Jesus meant when He said, **"No one is good but One - God."** (Mark 10:18) We call all kinds of things good - "This meal is good. He's a good friend. That was a good movie." But all that we call "good" on this earth is tainted and imperfect. God alone is goodness itself.

Yet, how do you see the true character of a person? By his actions. So the other part of the definition for God's goodness concentrates on what He does. And the Bible is saturated with descriptions that point to His kindness, His mercy, His steadfast love, and His generosity. Out God is pleased to give to us beyond what we deserve - all the time! Have you ever thought how generous God is toward you? Can you believe that when He looks at you, He says, *"I want to be generous to you. I can't wait to pour out on you that which will make you happy - not because you deserve it, but because there's something about Who I am that loves to give in extravagant ways."* God's word tells us that those are actually God's thoughts about you. God is for you. He has your back. He is there, plotting to do you good. You are the object of His affection, and because of His divine nature, all that He expresses comes from an expansive, over-whelming, God-sized generosity toward you. God is Good!

God uses three specific channels through which to broadcast His goodness to us.

- a. Natural blessings - This is the lowest level at which He expresses His goodness and the one we tend to overlook or take for granted. But David saw it clearly. He was moved by God to write Psalm 145 - a hymn of praise that celebrates God's goodness expressed in the created order. In verses 7-9 he describes what the older generation will say to the younger: ***"They will give a testimony of Your great goodness and will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and great in faithful love."*** Note, verse 9: ***"The Lord is good to everyone."*** Who is included in the word "everyone"? We are! In case we missed that, he repeats the idea in the next phrase: ***"His compassion rests on all He has made."*** That means there's nowhere in the universe you can go where God won't be good to you.

- b. Kind interventions - Psalm 107 is totally devoted to this theme, and opens with joy: **"Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His faithful love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord proclaim that He has redeemed them from the hand of the foe."** God intervenes on behalf of His goodness in the lives of those crushed by calamity. When the storms threaten to sink us and we're at our wit's end, we can call to Him and see Him command the storms to be still - because He is good! He's been there for you, more than you'll ever know. No matter what situation you're facing this morning, God is the best Person to take it too. There is no surer source of deliverance or blessing than Him. Why? Because He is good all the time.
- c. Through His Son Jesus - Colossians 1 reminds us that Jesus **"is the image of the invisible God"** (verse 15) and that **"God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him"** (verse 19). Jesus is God's goodness manifest in the flesh. He demonstrated God's desire to pour out blessings, and help and deliver those in need. God's extravagance flowed to us in the amazing substitution of His Son on the cross. His death for us is the perfect demonstration of unmerited goodness. You don't deserve it. I don't deserve it. In fact, we continue to do things that prove we didn't earn this. But God is good. His intrinsic nature drives a desire to do for us what we can't do for ourselves. All the good and perfect gifts of God come to us through our relationship with Jesus. If you want to understand and appreciate God's goodness to mankind, it must begin and end with Jesus.

So how should we respond to God's goodness? For the goodness of God demands a response. (1) With a thankful heart - with gratitude! (2) With a joyful heart - with praise! Let's start to do that right now....