

by Randal Rauser

"If you want to see folk damned..."

J.I. Packer has long distinguished himself as among the foremost evangelical critics of universalism. At the same time, he also made the following admission:

"No evangelical, I think, need hesitate to admit that in his heart of hearts he would like universalism to be true. Who can take pleasure in the thought of people being eternally lost? If you want to see folk damned, there is something wrong with you!"

...moral outrage at others' sin is often a confession of one's own deeply repressed cravings. Do we ourselves need hell to keep our envy of sinners at bay?

Packer's certainly right about that. And yet, the disturbing truth is that many conservative Christians *don't* want universalism to be true. I wrote about this problem four years ago in "The very worst reason to reject universalism." In that article I noted that acerbic Christian apologist Ray Comfort repudiated

universalism because it entailed that Nazis and pedophiles could end up in heaven. Yes, it does mean that. It also means that acerbic Christian apologists like Ray Comfort can end up in heaven. And even a few tentative apologists too!

I was reminded of this topic the other day while reading the following passage in Brad Jersak's *A More Christlike God*:

"According to Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, moral outrage at others' sin is often a confession of one's own deeply repressed cravings. Do we ourselves need hell to keep our envy of

sinners at bay? One pastor in my city even confessed that without the threat of hell, he would not be a Christian." (20)

The notion that people are most vociferous against the sins with which they most struggle is so familiar as to be called a cliché. The pastor who regularly rails against "demon alcohol" or "lust" invites

suspicions as to his own struggles.

What I find especially haunting is the suggestion that we might need hell to reassure us of our own life decisions to eschew certain temptations (and, dare we say it, our inherent worth and superior moral standing over the "sinners"). Two of Jesus' parables speak powerfully to this. The first is the Parable of the Workers in the Fields (Matthew 20:1-16): *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.*

3 "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. 6 About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

7 "Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

9 "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to

grumble against the landowner. 12 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

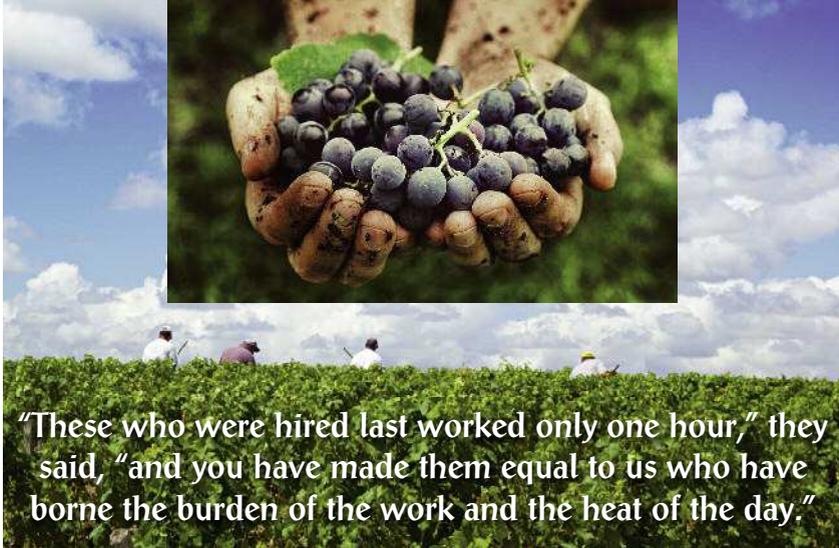
13 "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

I'll be honest. This is probably the parable of Jesus that I find most aggravating. That's why it's also my favorite. It can be as trivial as my resentment at allowing a car to merge in front of me or as cosmic as the thought of posthumous salvation for a damnable wretch. In each case, my own penchant for ungrace is placed on uncomfortable display when I begrudge the traffic merger...or the salvific invitation.

I recently heard a Christian express an objection to universalism that echoes the protestors in this parable. "You mean people could all be saved after they die?" this Christian exclaimed. And then came the key: "Then what's the point of being a Christian now?" Ouch. What a revealing question.

And that question leads me



"These who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

Two millennia on, these parables retain their power to lay bare the hypocritical heart. And it is disturbing to realize in their illuminating glow how reluctant we all are to see the same grace given to us now extended to others.

straight into the second parable. We all know the parable of the prodigal son, but as many commentators have noted, the older son's response to the younger son's redemption really constitutes a second parable. We'll pick up the story (in Luke 15) in progress:

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

31 "'My son,' the father said,

'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Do you think the older brother's moral indignation at forgiveness for his younger brother offers an insight into his

own "deeply repressed cravings"? Perhaps he is asking himself: "why did I spend all those years working for my father when I could have partied it up and then been forgiven like my younger brother?"

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