

‘I love the goal of Dane Ortlund’s *Surprised by Jesus*: to fill our heart tanks with “the high-octane grace that takes our conscience by the scruff of the neck and breathes new life into us with a pardon so scandalous that we cannot help but be changed”. This is the kind of grace that makes disciples so love the Savior that they will give their lives for his glory.’

Bryan Chapell, President, Covenant Theological Seminary

‘Dane Ortlund ... is a craftsman of prose, and more: he writes with theological discernment and an eye for heart application. To read this book is to have a surprising encounter with the Savior. Dane walks us through the four Gospels, highlighting Christ’s astonishing words and actions — actions never more astonishing than at Calvary. More than anything, as I read these pages I was reminded of the Savior’s stunning love for me and of his surprising grace — grace that is shockingly unmeasured, vast, and free.’

C. J. Mahaney, President, Sovereign Grace Ministries

‘Dane Ortlund’s *Surprised by Jesus* is a very helpful guide to a gospel-centered understanding of Christianity. Drawing from material gleaned from all four Gospels, Ortlund presents us with the compelling picture of ‘subversive grace’ — so different from the pale and timid imitation of pallid, anemic religion. Read this book and soak in the gospel of grace!’

**Josh Moody, Senior Pastor College Church, Wheaton,
author of *No Other Gospel***

‘The world wants justice and, truth to tell, the church often wants that too. In this book, Dane Ortlund makes the case from the Gospels that what the church and the world to whom she witnesses needs is grace. Grace is counterintuitive, beyond price, and yet totally free. Left to ourselves, we hate it. We see it as demeaning. We regard it as witnessing to our moral corruption and weakness. Yet grace is God’s way of salvation as revealed in the acts and sayings of Jesus in the four Gospels. This book is that strangest of things: the heartfelt rebuke which brings so much encouragement, freedom, and joy. Well worth reading.’

Carl R. Trueman, Grove City College, Pennsylvania

SURPRISED

by

JESUS

DANE ORTLUND

SURPRISED

by

JESUS

Subversive Grace in the Four Gospels

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*For Dad,
who has convinced me of the truths of these pages
by word and, far more powerfully, by example.*

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK WAS birthed in a class taught on the four Gospels in the autumn of 2008 at Naperville Presbyterian Church and again, in a slightly different format, in 2009 at The Orchard Evangelical Free Church, both near Chicago, Illinois. I am indebted to the members of both classes for their enthusiasm and insights. The material has also been honed over the years through various other teaching and preaching opportunities, not least spending two weeks teaching the four Gospels at the Theological College of Central Africa in Ndola, Zambia.

This book was originally released under the title *Defiant Grace* in 2011; the present iteration, ten years on, retains much of the same material but it has been reworked and honed. It is a particular pleasure to me that the first venue of teaching this material, Naperville Presbyterian Church, is where I now serve, having been called to serve there pastorally in 2020.

Noting the seedbed of these reflections helps to explain their intended audience, emerging as they have in the context of the local church. This book is not written for the academy, though I have benefited from numerous scholars whose names only rarely surface in these pages. Nor is it aimed at Christian leaders, though the debt I owe certain leaders in today's church is beyond repayment. It is written for fellow everyday believers, or those investigating what Jesus was really all about — anyone interested in listening afresh to the heart of Christianity by listening to Jesus. If you want nothing to do with Christians or the church but are intrigued by Jesus himself, this book is for you. If, on the other hand, you consider yourself a Christian yet obedience has somehow come to feel like a tax paid to God (with the hope that you will have enough left over to live on), this book is equally for you.

I happily and gratefully acknowledge those teachers of mine who have informed the theological and personal background from which this book has emerged — some dead, others living; some by their writing, others by their friendship. Readers familiar with the ministries of Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Adolf Schlatter, C. S. Lewis, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Paul Tournier, Helmut Thielicke, Richard Bauckham, Brian Martin, and Ray Ortlund Jr. will gladly note the influence these gifts to the church have had on my own understanding of spiritual reality. This little book is theirs as much as mine. It is dedicated to the last-mentioned, my dad, who, in a hundred ways I recognize and

a thousand I do not, has shown me the meaning and the beauty of the gospel.

I am grateful also to Brad Byrd and the team at 10Publishing for having the vision to give this material a fresh lease of life after 10ofThose assumed the book list of Evangelical Press, the original publisher.

Greater than my debt to any of these is that owed to my best friend and partner in life. Stacey not only read and improved every chapter, but continues to put up with and encourage me every day. For this and the countless other ways you brighten my life, thank you, sweetheart.

Dane Ortlund

Easter 2021

INTRODUCTION

JESUS IS SURPRISING. His coming fulfilled ancient prophecies, but not expectations. He shattered expectations.

Each of the four Gospel accounts in the Bible uniquely gives us a Jesus who turns upside down our intuitive anticipations of who he is and how following him works. Like a bad back that needs to return repeatedly to the chiropractor for straightening out, our understanding of Jesus needs to be straightened out over and over again as our poor spiritual posture throws our perception of him out of line — domesticating him and conforming him to our image, rather than transforming us into *his* image.

For the grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ is not measured. This grace refuses to allow itself to be tethered to our innate sense of fairness, reciprocity, and balancing of the scales. It is surprising.

Few have captured the surprise of grace better than the American Episcopalian priest and author Robert Farrar

Capon in his description of what the Protestant Reformers recovered five centuries ago. Reflecting on why Martin Luther refused to endorse forced celibacy on the priests, Capon wrote:

The Reformation was a time when people went blind-staggering drunk because they had discovered, in the dusty basement of late medievalism, a whole cellarful of fifteen-hundred-year-old, 200-proof grace — of bottle after bottle of pure distillate of Scripture that would convince anyone that God saves us single-handed.¹

The Reformation's rediscovery of grace is a discovery that must take place afresh, in kind if not in degree, in each generation. The church is always only a few generations away from losing the gospel. D. A. Carson recounts a memory both fascinating and frightening:

I have heard a Mennonite leader assess his own movement in this way. One generation of Mennonites cherished the gospel and believed that the entailment of the gospel lay in certain social and political commitments. The next generation assumed the gospel and emphasized the social and political commitments. The present generation identifies itself

1. Robert Farrar Capon, *Between Noon and Three: Romance, Law, and the Outrage of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp.10910.

with the social and political commitments, while the gospel is variously confessed or disowned; it no longer lies at the heart of the belief system of some who call themselves Mennonites.²

The gospel was first cherished, then assumed, then lost. Such a process of spiritual devolution is not, of course, limited to a particular branch of the church. Left in neutral, all of us tend to slide away from the wonder of the gospel. My aim in this book is to help us cherish the gospel.

Easier said than done. However much we may pay tribute to grace with our lips, our hearts are so thoroughly marinated in law that the Christian life must be, at core, one of continually bathing our hearts and minds in gospel grace. We are addicted to law. Conforming our lives to a moral framework, playing by the rules, meeting a minimum standard — this feels normal. And it is how we naturally seek to cure that deep sense of inadequacy within. The real question is not how to avoid becoming a Pharisee; the question is how to recover from being the Pharisees that we all — right from the womb — already are.

Law feels safe; grace feels risky. Rule-keeping breeds a sense of manageability; grace feels like moral vertigo. After all, if all that we are is by grace, then there is no limit to what God can ask of us. But if some corner of our virtue is due to personal contribution, there is a ceiling on what God can ask of us. He can bring us only so far. He can ask only so much.

2. D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons From 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), p.63.

Such is not the call of Christ. The Jesus of the Gospels defies our domesticated, play-by-the-rules morality. It was the most extravagant sinners of Jesus' day who received his most compassionate welcome; it was the most scrupulously law-abiding people who were the objects of his most searing denunciation. The point is not that we should therefore take up sin. It is that we should lay down the silly insistence on leveraging our sense of self-worth with an ongoing moral record. Better a life of sin with penitence than a life of obedience without it.

This book is a call to embrace the flooding liberations of the gospel *all the way down* — not the decaffeinated grace that pats us on the hand, ignores our deepest rebellions, and doesn't change us, but the high-octane grace that takes our conscience by the scruff of the neck and breathes new life into us with a pardon so scandalous that we cannot help but be changed. This book is a brotherly exhortation to blow aside the hazy cloud of condemnation that hangs over us throughout the day with the strong wind of gospel grace.

You 'are not under law but under grace' (Rom. 6:14). Jesus is real; grace is subversive; life is short; risk is good. For many of us the time has come to abandon once and for all our play-it-safe, toe-dabbling Christianity and dive in. It's time, as Capon put it, to get drunk on grace — 200-hundred-proof, subversive grace. Jesus doesn't crowbar us into change. He surprises us into change.

This book exists to stoke the fires of grace renewal already spreading throughout the twenty-first-century church.

Something of a resurgence of the gospel has been taking place today across various swathes of the Christian church. We must, of course, avoid facile generalizations. Yet it is evident from today's preaching and teaching, books and blogs, conferences and coalitions, that the gospel of grace is being wonderfully reasserted and cherished. Many have been walking with the Lord for years, yet are only now discovering the new mental and emotional universe of *grace*.

All this we happily receive from the hand of the Lord. The need of the hour, however, is neither self-congratulation nor smug diagnosis of who 'gets' the gospel of grace. The need of the hour is deeper reverence, new levels of wonder at the kindness shown to us, and a whispered prayer that the good news of God's free mercy in Christ would spread with a continued contagion with effects that will be felt for generations to come.

The spreading of that contagion is the reason for this book. *Surprised by Jesus* is divided into four parts, one on each Gospel's depiction of Jesus. Within each Gospel's treatment is a handful of short chapters. In Matthew, we see the surprise of disobedient obedience. Jesus' *definition of morality* is counterintuitive, contrary to all our expectations. Mark shows us the surprise of the king as a criminal. Jesus' *mission* is counterintuitive. In Luke, we are confronted with the surprise of outsiders becoming the insiders, and insiders, oddly, becoming the outsiders. Jesus' *community* is counterintuitive. And in John, we see the surprise of the Creator taking on flesh and blood as a creature. Jesus' *identity* is counterintuitive.

SURPRISED BY JESUS

In theological terms, our treatment of Matthew lies in the realm of morality, of Mark in atonement, of Luke in ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church), and of John in Christology. Time and again, our intuitive expectations of who Jesus is and what he has come to do are turned upside down — whom he excludes, what he came to do, whom he welcomes, and who he is. Such emphases are not mutually exclusive, of course. All four Gospel accounts teach us about all four of these theological areas. Still, for all their overlap, God has given us four accounts, not one. And in a way unique to each Gospel account, we see the perplexing compassion of Jesus confront our intuitive expectations about morality, atonement, ecclesiology, and Christology. The Jesus of the Gospels defies our safe, law-saturated, score-keeping existence.

Jesus is many things. But *predictable* is not on the list. He is not, in the words of Mr Beaver, 'safe'.³ Startling, arresting, surprising, infuriating, perplexing, yes; but not bland and predictable. No sooner have we convinced ourselves that God is real and the Bible meaningful than Jesus, the real Jesus, arrives on the scene and turns all our intuitive expectations on their heads.

But though Jesus' intuition-defying grace surprises us, our confusion does not surprise him. He knows all about it. And he is a patient teacher, more patient and tender than we have yet dared to believe.

So be surprised, with me, by the real Jesus.

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), p.86.

PART 1 – MATTHEW:
THE SURPRISE OF
DISOBEDIENT OBEDIENCE

1.

JESUS' DEFINITION OF MORALITY

OBEDIENCE CAN BE damning.

Paul Tournier, the French psychologist of the last century, helps us to see why. 'The strange paradox present on every page of the Gospels,' he writes of Jesus' ministry, 'and which we can verify any day, is that it is not guilt which is the obstacle to grace, as moralism supposes. On the contrary, it is the repression of guilt, self-justification, genuine self-righteousness and smugness which is the obstacle.' Consequently, 'Before Jesus there are not two opposed human categories, the guilty and the righteous; there are only the guilty.'⁴

The deepest distinction among human beings is not between the bad and the good, but between those who *know* they are bad and those who do not. Yet, strangely, it is not the blatantly

4. Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace: A Psychological Study*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp.136, 112.

wicked who have the greatest difficulty seeing this, but the carefully obedient. Jesus consistently exposes the guilt, writes Tournier, of ‘the moral and scrupulous people, by proclaiming that all men are equally sinful despite all their efforts, so that not by showing off their vaunted impeccability, but by confessing their guilt, by repentance, will they find the grace which erases it’.⁵ Scrupulous ‘obedience’ is, more often than we are aware, thinly veiled *disobedience*. Obedience, therefore, can be damning.

Nowhere is this put more sharply than in Matthew’s Gospel. To see it we will look at Jesus’ teaching on life in the kingdom of God in Matthew 19 – 20. Here we find most clearly the great surprise of Matthew: that the strange key to participation in the joys of God’s kingdom is not qualifying ourselves for it, but frankly acknowledging our disqualification — a disqualification that manifests itself not only in rule-breaking, but also in rule-keeping. Keeping the rules no more extinguishes the sin in our hearts than buckets of gasoline extinguish the flames in our fireplace. Matthew helps us to see this.

First we will focus on a portion of his Gospel, making some brief observations along the way. After plowing up the soil we will do some harvesting, tying it all together and seeing a common thread running throughout this section of Matthew’s account.

What’s the least I can do?

Matthew 18 – 20 portrays what life in the kingdom of God is meant to look like. And time after time a common question pops up, despite being asked by very different kinds of people.

5. *Ibid.*, p.122.

That question is: ‘What’s the least I can do?’

In Matthew 18:21-35 Peter asks Jesus how often he is required to forgive his brother. ‘As many as seven times?’ (18:21). ‘Where is the bar set, Jesus? At what point can I finally be free to stop having to forgive?’ Peter is asking what the least is that he can do with respect to forgiveness.

The very next account is a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees (19:1-12). Yet the same issue of the heart lies underneath the external distinctions between the blue-collar fishermen who had given up everything to follow Jesus and the morally meticulous Pharisees who felt threatened by Jesus. For, as the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce, essentially they enquire of him, ‘What’s the least I can do with respect to marriage?’ (see 19:3). ‘At what point have I fulfilled what the Jewish law requires of me in the marital realm?’

Finally, after Jesus rebukes his disciples for prohibiting the little children from coming to him (19:13-15 — a passage to which we will return), a rich young man approaches Jesus wondering what he must do to have eternal life (19:16-22). His query climaxes these three accounts by presenting us with the question that is behind the other questions. He asks, ‘What’s the least I can do with respect to obedience?’

In all three cases we are dealing with the same question in different clothing, yet this third instance takes us to the root of all three. Here we have come to the common concern raised by Peter, the Pharisees, and the rich young man. ‘What is the minimum obedience I can render’, each asks, ‘to get God off my back?’

Let's pick up the story at the young man's question and listen to Jesus, allowing this third and final conversation to launch us into the rest of Matthew 19 – 20.

Morality management

'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' (19:16). Here is a man who has been able to pay for everything in life with money — can't he also pay his way into eternal life with obedience?

Yet it's hard to get the right answer when you ask the wrong question. For right from the start we notice that this young man has not yet learned what Tournier has reminded us of: the question is not, 'Who will make the cut and be righteous?' but 'Who will admit that he can never make the cut?' A high-school freshman doesn't ask what blood type he is required to have in order to qualify for the football team; there is no right answer because the very question betrays a misunderstanding of what it takes in order to be on the team. Blood type is important, but irrelevant to gaining access to the football team. Obedience is important, but irrelevant to gaining access to eternal life. Heaven is not won with obedience. It is given.

Still, Jesus plays along:

And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder, You shall not

commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (19:17-19).

From the perspective of the Bible there are two ways to sum up the Old Testament law. One is the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:3-17; Deut. 5:7-22). The other is the double command to 'love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might' (Deut. 6:5) and to 'love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev. 19:18), which is how Jesus himself sums up the law in Matthew 22:37-40. In both lists, we have vertical elements followed by horizontal elements. Both lists start with our relationship with God and then move into our relationships with others. Here in Matthew 19, Jesus extracts the horizontal dimension to both summaries of the law and puts them before the young man. Of the Ten Commandments Jesus has ignored numbers one through four, and of the double commandment he has ignored the first part. In both cases, the vertical dimension is omitted.

Is this, however, completely accurate? Upon closer scrutiny, we see that this is not quite true. Jesus has quoted only five of the six horizontal commandments from the Decalogue. One is left out — the Tenth Commandment, which prohibits coveting. Why would Jesus leave this one off the list?

Jesus has bypassed this final horizontal commandment for the same reason that it is the sole commandment mentioned by Paul in Romans 7 as having aroused sin within him: it is

the one horizontal commandment that addresses the heart.⁶ Murder, adultery, theft, and the others, are all observable sins. Coveting is a sin of the heart. It is internal, invisible.

Jesus has put before the rich young man all the commandments that are, at first glance, externally manageable.

Exposing our idols

Consequently, the young man replies with confidence: 'All these I have kept.' He checks off each in turn. Yet the question remains: 'What do I still lack?' Even upon such brazen moral optimism, the young man knows something is not right. Those of us who believe ourselves to have kept the rules before God know the surprising emptiness resulting from such rigorous, though hollow, obedience. Swiss theologian Adolf Schlatter aptly called this young man's morality 'dry foliage'.⁷

Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions (19:21-22).

6. This is well articulated by Question 113 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. *Question*: What is God's will for you in the tenth commandment? *Answer*: That not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God's commandments should ever arise in my heart. Rather, with all my heart I should always hate sin and take pleasure in whatever is right.

7. Adolf Schlatter, 'Moral oder Evangelium?' ('Morality or Gospel?'), in *Gesunde Lehre: Reden und Aufsätze* (Velbert: Freizeiten Verlag, 1929), p.94.

With Jesus' climactic exhortation to renounce all in order to follow him, he was not dangling the carrot of law-keeping in front of this young man, egging him on in his self-justifying law-observance. Instead Jesus has lovingly set up the young man to show him his idolatry. Jesus has slipped in the First Commandment ('You shall have no other gods before me', Exod. 20:3) without the young man noticing. He exposes the man's sin not by showing him that he needed to give away his material possessions to follow God, but that his material possessions *were* his God. And as Martin Luther has pointed out, there is no breaking of commandments numbers two to ten without first breaking commandment number one.⁸ If we

8. Martin Luther, *A Treatise on Good Works*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 44: *The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp.30-31; *Luther's Works*, vol. 51: *Sermons I*, ed. John W. Doberstein; (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), pp.144, 161. See also Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), pp.68, 153.

G. C. Berkouwer makes the same observation about the nature of the First Commandment, though in a less developed way, in *Faith and Sanctification*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp.184-85.

Luther further helps us to see that the First Commandment is an implicit call to justification by faith. Because idolatry is justification by an idol (i.e. materialism is justification by financial security; sexual immorality is justification by pleasure; self-promotion is justification by the approval of others), the First Commandment is in fact a call to God's people not to have any lesser forms of justification before God. 'You shall have no other gods before me' means, if nothing else, 'You shall trust me; you shall seek your sense of self-worth — that is, your justification — in nothing less than me, the only one who can provide it and the only one in whom it is worthy to be sought' (see *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, pp.33-34; vol. 51, p.17).

dishonor our parents, we have broken commandments one and five; our god is independence. If we commit adultery, we have broken commandments one and seven; our god is sex. And if we love money, we have broken commandments one and ten; our god is material possessions. The First Commandment is the filter through which every sin passes.

In view of how seriously this young man took his morality, it is safe to assume that he made the appropriate Jewish tithes. But Jesus calls him to give away all that he owned because mere tithing allows a materialist to keep his idol basically intact. Jesus goes straight to the core of the young man's deepest affection: his financial security. His heart is exposed. And, sadly, like a child suffering from an irritating rash who prefers scratching to a healing steroid, the young man prefers the idol — and goes away sorrowful.

Elephants and sub-atomic particles

At this point Jesus seizes the opportunity to teach his disciples a lesson:

And Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.' When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?' (19:23-25).

Jesus' metaphor of a camel and a needle is not meant to say anything particularly cryptic. He simply calls to mind the largest known animal and the smallest known opening of the time. Had he been speaking today, he might have said it is easier for an elephant to pass through a sub-atomic particle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The point is the same either way. It's impossible.

Why are the disciples so troubled, though? It's puzzling at first to modern readers why they should be so flabbergasted. If it's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, then isn't the solution simply to avoid wealth? Why don't the disciples simply resolve to live in either the lower or middle class of society? The reason is that this was not how life worked for the first-century Jew. Financial gain was seen as a direct sign of God's approval. It was axiomatic that 'The blessing of the LORD makes rich' (Prov. 10:22). Material blessing was viewed as linked to spiritual blessing (Deut. 28:1-6,8,11-12). When the disciples ask, 'Who then can be saved?' they are saying, 'If those at the top of the social stratosphere, upon whom God has so clearly smiled, can't get in, what hope is there for the rest of us, who don't have that kind of obvious divine favor?'

9. The matter is a bit more complex than this — some proverbs speak of the blessing of wealth (Prov. 8:18; 10:4,15,22; 14:24; 22:4), others of the dangers of wealth (Prov. 11:4, 28; cf. Prov. 23:4; 28:22). For a balanced assessment of the multifaceted biblical teaching on wealth, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (NSBT 7; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999). The point should stand, however, that first-century Jews would view wealth as a divine blessing far more readily than twenty-first-century Western believers; see, for example, Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The*

Jesus responds enigmatically, affirming their dismay before rebuilding hope on the proper foundation: ‘But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”’ (19:26). ‘It’s worse than you think,’ says Jesus — ‘and so much better.’ According to your intuitive, natural, moralizing, domesticated, get-what-you-work-for understanding of the way you think God relates to people, yes, this is impossible. But with God — according to the wild, lavish, all out of proportion, get-far-more-than-you-asked-for-as-long-as-you-don’t-try-to-pay-for-it understanding of the way God relates to his people, all things are possible. ‘Above the impossibilities of our own making,’ wrote Schlatter, ‘stands the omnipotence of grace.’¹⁰

Heirs don’t earn

‘Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”’ (19:27). As with the rich young man’s misguided question in verse 16, so here with Peter’s—it’s the wrong question. Jesus nevertheless responds by assuring Peter and the disciples that all they have done will be abundantly rewarded in the new earth: ‘everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or

Pilgrimage of Wisdom (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), p.166; Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 4th edition, 2003), p.146. On the divine blessing of wealth see also 1 Kings 3:10-13; Job 42:12; Eccles. 5:19.

10. Adolf Schlatter, *Do We Know Jesus? Daily Insights for the Mind and Soul*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), p.193.

children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life’ (19:29).

Two observations help us make sense of what’s happening here. First, this is not the only reference to ‘eternal life’ we have seen in Matthew 19. Back in verse 16, the rich young man asked what he had to do to get it. But notice that the young man spoke about *earning* eternal life. Verse 16 literally reads, ‘What must I do in order that I might have eternal life?’ In verse 29, however, Jesus speaks of those who renounce all for his sake as *inheriting* eternal life. Heirs don’t earn. They receive, simply by being born into the family, by no virtue of their own. A billionaire’s only son doesn’t have to *do* anything to inherit a fortune when his father passes away.

Secondly, Peter clearly viewed himself as the polar opposite of the rich young man. As the young man slowly disappears around a bend in the road, Peter turns to Jesus and reminds him, ‘We have left everything...’ While the young man refused to leave house and home to follow Jesus, Peter had done precisely that (see also 4:18-20). Yet although the young man and Peter responded to Jesus in opposite ways, *they were treating discipleship in precisely the same way*. Both viewed loyalty to Jesus as a financial transaction. The young man wanted his money, so he didn’t follow Jesus. Peter wanted a reward, so he did. Neither wanted Jesus. Is there really much of a difference whether disobedience or obedience was the substitute savior? As Lewis once wrote, ‘Does it matter to a man dying in a

desert by which choice of route he missed the only well?’¹¹

Overturning not only the rich young man’s refusal to sacrifice all, but also Peter’s commitment to sacrifice all, Jesus immediately follows up his assurance of reward to his loyal followers with the strange comment: ‘But many who are first will be last, and the last first’ (19:30).

Now what in the world does that mean?

The last will be first

Evidently the disciples were wondering the same thing. For, as he so often did, Jesus told a story. He spoke of a landowner who hired workers for his vineyard at different points throughout the day and yet paid each a full day’s wage.

In order to show just how upside-down Jesus’ story would have sounded to a first-century Jew, listen to the words of a rabbi roughly around the time of Jesus in a commentary on part of the Old Testament law. This rabbi is reflecting on Leviticus 26, which speaks of a series of blessings for obedience. At one point God describes the way he will respond to his people’s obedience by assuring them, ‘I will turn to you’, which can also be translated, ‘I will have regard for you’ (Lev. 26:9). The mindset of this rabbi — my own default mindset, too — illuminates the dynamic of the heart Jesus is overturning.

11. C. S. Lewis, ‘A Slip of the Tongue,’ in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p.142.

‘And I will have regard for you.’ They told a parable. What is the matter like? It is like a king who hired many workers. There was one particular worker who had labored for him many days. The workers came to receive their payment and this worker entered with them. The king said to that worker, ‘My son, I shall have special regard for you. These many who labored with me a little I shall pay a little. But I am about to settle a large account with you.’ ... Therefore it is said, ‘And I will have regard for you.’¹²

This is not evidence that the Jews were more self-righteous than other ancient people groups. Yet that is not because

12. *Sifra Behuqqotai pereg 2:5*, quoted in E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), p.118. A similar account was told 300 years after Jesus by a rabbi in a funeral oration for a young man who had died at the age of twenty-eight. According to Joachim Jeremias’ modern rendering of the parable, the rabbi ‘began by saying that the situation was like that of a king who had hired a great number of labourers. Two hours after the work had begun, he inspected them, and saw that one of them was more skilful and industrious than the others... When the labourers came to receive their wages, this one received the same amount as the others. Then they grumbled and said, “We have worked the whole day, against this man’s two hours, and yet you have paid him the full day’s wages.” The king replied, “I have not wronged you; this laborer has done more in two hours than you have done in the whole day”’ (Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, New York: Scribner’s, 1966, p.110). Jeremias points out that, among many striking similarities between this parable and that of Jesus, the worker in the Jewish parable, despite working such a short amount of time, produced more than the others; in Jesus’ parable, the later hired workers can plead nothing but the kindness of the one who hired them.

the Jews did *not* have a problem with self-righteousness, but because everyone else *does*. Judaism is no more ‘legalistic’ than any other religion so long as that religion is made up of humans, for the propensity to earn rather than receive God’s favor is a human, not a Jewish, problem.¹³

Now let’s listen to how *Jesus* explains God’s response to our hard work on his behalf.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the

13. See Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p.117; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective*, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), pp.86-87; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006), p.121.

first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last’ (20:1-16).

Not what we earn but what we need

With the last sentence of the parable, Jesus returns to his words in the last verse of Matthew 19: the first will be last and the last first. This is his way of indicating that the parable is fleshing out what he meant at the end of chapter 19 when he first stated this principle.

What, then, is this parable communicating?

The point is twofold: first, with respect to those hired later in the day; and, secondly, with respect to those hired earlier. The second group, the workers who were hired early, will be our main focus.

We see the compassionate generosity of the landowner who treats the workers hired later in the day not according to what they deserve, but according to what they *need*. A denarius was a day’s wage. It would feed the employee’s

family for that day (see Deut. 24:14-15). Yet the workers did not even seek out the job. The landowner sought the workers. Indeed, the landowner did not even leave it to his foreman to seek out employees; the landowner sought them out himself. Drawing on sixty years' experience living and teaching the New Testament in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem and Cyprus, Professor Kenneth Bailey helps us understand the strangeness of the landowner's actions here:

Landowners in the Middle East are known traditionally to be gentlemen farmers. They hire others to work the land and appoint a foreman/steward to manage the estate. A traditional landowner may give his steward careful instructions in the morning and ask for a report at the end of the day. But to make the trek, in person, from the farm to the market and back five times in a single day is unheard of. That is the manager's job.¹⁴

And, besides, how much help, we might ask, could really have been provided in the vineyard by that final wave of recruitment? These tardiest of workers were hired at the eleventh hour, or 5 p.m. In a workday that went from sunrise (6 a.m.) to sunset (6 p.m.), this meant the landowner got one hour of work out of them. In fact we read, not that the workers started work at the eleventh hour, but that the landowner 'went out' looking for more workers at the eleventh hour (20:6). By the time they

14. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2008), p.363.

all returned to the vineyard and the foreman explained the job to them, perhaps it was only thirty minutes or less of actual work that the landowner got out of these latecomers.

The landowner did not need the workers; the workers needed the landowner. As Jerry Bridges points out, the parable shows us that God doesn't give us what we've earned. He gives us what we need.¹⁵

When our gratitude for grace received devolves into Jonah-like resentment that others less deserving have received grace, we show that we have not, in fact, understood the grace we ourselves received. For if grace is truly grace, freely granted, and not tethered to any personal merit or demerit, then it is impossible for anyone to deserve it any less or any more than the next person. Bailey rightly points out that the grouchy workers are not grouchy because they are underpaid but because others, in their perception, are overpaid:

The story focuses on an equation filled with amazing grace, which is resented by those who feel that they have earned their way to more... The complaint is from the justly paid who cannot tolerate grace... Grace is not only amazing, it is also — for certain types — *infuriating!*¹⁶

Jesus surprises us with his surprising grace.

15. Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God's Unfailing Love* (Colorado Spring, Col.: NavPress, 1991), pp.48-51, 613.

16. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, pp.360-61.