Defiant Grace

The surprising message

and mission of Jesus

Dane Ortlund

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I love the goal of Dane Ortlund's *Defiant Grace*.

Bryan Chapell, President, Covenant Theological Seminary

To read this book is to have a surprising encounter with the Saviour.

C. J. Mahaney, Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville

Dane Ortlund's *Defiant Grace* is a very helpful guide to a gospel-centred understanding of Christianity … Read this book and soak in the gospel of grace!'

Josh Moody, Senior Pastor College Church, Wheaton

This book is that strangest of things: the heartfelt rebuke which brings so much encouragement, freedom and joy. Well worth reading.

Carl R. Trueman, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

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. They have taught me.

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 David Woollin, Graham Hilton, Anne Williamson and the rest of the folk at Evangelical Press for their wise handling of this book.

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

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.

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 defiant.

Few have captured this defiant 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 of his that is 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 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 already are, right from the womb.

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 only ask so much.

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.

It's time to enjoy grace anew—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. It's time 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' (Romans 6:14). Jesus is real; grace is defiant; 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, defiant grace.

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 is 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 oneself, and a whispered prayer that the good news of God's free mercy in Christ would spread with a continued contagion the effects of which will be felt for generations to come.

The spreading of that contagion is the reason for this book. *Defiant Grace* is divided into four short studies, one on each Gospel's depiction of Jesus. In Matthew we see the surprise of disobedient obedience. Jesus' *rebuke* is counterintuitive, contrary to all our expectations. Mark will show 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.

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, reward-conscious existence.

Jesus is many things. But *predictable* is not on the list. He is not, in the words of that perceptive theologian Mr Beaver, 'safe'.[3] No sooner have we convinced ourselves that God is real and the Bible meaningful than Jesus arrives on the scene and turns all our intuitive expectations on their heads. The deeper into grace we go, the deeper will be our wonder.

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 than we have yet dared to believe.

So be surprised, with me, by the defiant grace of Jesus.

Matthew: the surprise of disobedient obedience

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.'[1]

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 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'.[2] 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 petrol 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 ploughing 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. 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, Honour your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbour 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 (Exodus 20:3–17; Deuteronomy 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' (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 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 Jesus 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.[3] 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 called this young man's morality 'dry foliage'.[4]

> 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 many possessions (19:21–22).

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', Exodus 20:3) without the young man noticing. He exposes the man's sin by showing him not 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.[5] If we dishonour 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 happily to keep his idol 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 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' (Proverbs 10:22). Material blessing was viewed as linked to spiritual blessing (Deuteronomy 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 favour?'[6]

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 counterintuitive, 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.'[7]

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

Two observations help us 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 saviour? As Lewis once wrote, 'Does it matter to a man dying in a desert by which choice of route he missed the only well?'[8]

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' (Leviticus 26:9). The mind-set of this rabbi—my own default mind-set, too—illuminates the dynamic of the heart Jesus is overturning.

> '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 laboured 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 laboured 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.'[9]

This is not evidence that the Jews were more self-righteous than other ancient people groups. Yet that was not because 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 favour is a human, not a Jewish, problem.[10]

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 labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers 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 labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the 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.

Firstly, though, 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 Deuteronomy 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.[11]

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 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.[12]

When our gratefulness 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*![13]

This is defiant grace.

Reluctant taxpayers

Secondly—and in the light of the flow of Matthew 18–20, this is the point that we need to emphasize—with respect to those hired earlier in the day we see that the greatest obstacle to glad, fruitful life in the kingdom of God is disobedient obedience. Here we move from ploughing up the soil of Matthew 19–20 to harvesting what we have seen and funnelling it into our own lives.

The reason we have looked at such a large portion of Matthew is that the mind-set of the early hired workers illustrates exactly the mind-set of both the rich young man and Peter. A common problem infected them all. They were operating out of the intuitive assumption that life in the kingdom was about receiving *in addition to* earning, rather than receiving *to the exclusion of* earning. They thought the only alternative to being bad was being good, failing to see that being good can be just as empty of the gospel as being bad. They thought there was one way to reject God, when in fact there are two: hard-hearted disobedience and hard-hearted obedience. The only difference is that the first kind *knows* it is rejecting God. If the gospel is God's provision of free acceptance in Christ utterly apart from our own detraction from, or contribution to, that acceptance, then not only moral failing but also moral success is excluded from God's love for us.

Yet the rich young man, Peter and the early hired workers were treating their relationship with God like a savings account—put in a

little obedience each day, keep track as you go ('all these I have kept'; 'we have left everything'), tally it up, and hope that we will have enough to live on at the end. Such a mind-set backfires because it denies both the inadequacy of our own moral resources (as a result of our sin) and the adequacy of God's divine provision (on account of Christ's work). Put differently, such obedience is actually disobedience because it treats obedience like paying a tax. The metaphor belongs to C. S. Lewis:

> Our temptation is to look eagerly for the minimum that will be accepted [i.e., what's the least I can do?]. We are in fact very like honest but reluctant taxpayers. We approve of an income tax in principle. We make our returns truthfully. But we dread a rise in the tax. We are very careful to pay no more than is necessary. And we hope—we very ardently hope—that after we have paid it there will still be enough left to live on.[14]

Obedience rendered to God with the same attitude with which we pay our taxes is not obedience at all. It is disobedience. It is what Schlatter rightly described as 'the monster of an impious piety'.[15]

To qualify or not to qualify?

The danger of obedience can be further illuminated by framing it in terms of *qualification*. For the string of passages which runs from the account of the little children being discouraged from coming to Jesus (19:13–15) through to the end of the parable (20:16) is all connected by a single thread, the main point Matthew wants us to see about how life in the kingdom works. That point is that, in the kingdom of God, the one thing that qualifies you is knowing that you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do.

Consider the string of accounts in Matthew's Gospel that we have touched upon. In every passage, a central character assumes that one has to 'qualify' to gain some corresponding approval.

- The disciples thought little children needed to qualify by being a certain age in order to gain Jesus' attention (19:13–15).

- The rich young man thought he needed to qualify by law-keeping in order to gain eternal life (19:16–22).

- Peter and company thought they had to qualify by making a sacrifice in order to gain a reward (19:23–30).

- The workers who were hired early thought all employees had to qualify by doing sufficient work in order to gain a day's wage (20:1–16).

In our moments of spiritual sanity, you and I know that we are no different. We tend to assume that in order for God to approve of us—*really* approve of us—we need to qualify. And at that moment, the gospel has shifted out of the burning fireplace of our heart and into the cold and dusty attic of self-contribution.

A Christian is not someone who has been enrolled in the moral hall of fame. A Christian is a happily recovering Pharisee.

Evil rule-keeping

I say 'Pharisee' because this disobedient obedience is present all through Matthew's Gospel and is clearest in the Pharisees' antagonistic confrontations with Jesus—confrontations that make about as much sense as a diabetes patient angrily confronting the medic who has arrived with a life-saving dose of insulin. If anyone ought to have rejoiced at Christ's coming it was the scribes and Pharisees. They were the erudite seminary professors of the day. They were the ones who knew the Scriptures that contained God's ancient promises and the whispered prophecies of a coming Saviour.

To be sure, some of them did recognize in Jesus the hope of Israel and the Saviour of the world (Mark 12:28–34; John 3:1–2; 7:50–52;

19:39). Yet time and again these religious leaders, on the whole, rejected Jesus and his teaching. How so? Not because they threw out all the rules. On the contrary, they were, in terms of the law, grade-A students. They kept all the rules. They were obedient. But it was a disobedient obedience. It was, as Augustine put it, vice clothed in virtue.[16] It was self-serving obedience, comparing themselves with others. The Pharisees were not less evil than the immoral. While the immoral were evil and were upfront about it, the Pharisees were evil on the inside but masked it, adding hypocrisy to their already culpable hearts.[17] In Matthew 12, Jesus called them a 'brood of vipers' and articulated the discrepancy between what they said on the outside and what was true of them on the inside: 'How can you speak good, when you are evil?' (12:34). Yes, we can be evil by throwing out all the rules. But we can be just as evil by keeping all the rules.

The scribes and Pharisees epitomized such disobedient obedience, earning them searing denunciations from Jesus in places such as Matthew 23, where he pronounces seven woes on them. Certainly we do not want to lump all the Pharisees together in this unflattering appraisal. Yet, according to Matthew, these men were the single greatest hindrance to Jesus' public ministry. Their hatred of him ran so deep that they repeatedly plotted how to kill him (12:14; 21:46; 22:15).

The point of bringing in the Pharisees is partly to show that disobedient obedience is a problem throughout Matthew, yet also to see that in Matthew 19–20 we discover that there is something of a Pharisee even in Jesus' most devoted followers. The greatest danger for followers of Christ is not the ways they fail him, but the ways they succeed. Failures, as we shall see further in our discussion of Luke, are precisely the kind of people God is looking for. For failures instinctively understand how to open the windows of their heart to let in help. Those who think they have made a success of their lives invariably turn in on themselves in satisfied self-reliance. Penitent hookers enter heaven ahead of smug virgins (21:31).

This is why Jonathan Edwards wrote his famous treatise on *Religious Affections*. In the wake of a local revival (1734–35) and then the trans-Atlantic revival known today as the Great Awakening (1740–42), Edwards increasingly saw the need to distinguish between those who had been authentically affected by God's Spirit and those who *seemed* to display authentic spiritual experience yet who had not been truly touched by God. *Religious Affections* is a sustained reflection on this challenging kind of discernment. What is remarkable is that in this treatise Edwards is not comparing disobedient and obedient people. He is looking at two different kinds of uprightness. Both zealously sing God's praises, tell others of their salvation and quote the Bible—yet for some it is rooted in self-love, not love for Christ. Edwards is not distinguishing between immoral and moral people, but between artificially moral and authentically moral people.[18]

A theme throughout Matthew

The startling contrast is found throughout Matthew, such as in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. Against what we expect, Jesus does not contrast those who clearly reject God's will with those who submit themselves to God's will. Rather, he contrasts those who obey God for the sake of being seen by others with those who obey God for the sake of love for him.[19] Jesus warns his disciples not of the danger of failing to practise righteousness, but the danger of practising righteousness before others. The paradoxical dimension of the Sermon on the Mount is sharply put by Adolf Schlatter in his overview of New Testament theology. In a section strikingly entitled 'The Repentance of the Pious', Schlatter reminds us of the surprising nature of the audience to whom Jesus was speaking:

> Jesus pitched the Sermon on the Mount against those who condemned murder and avoided adultery as sin, not against those who murdered and followed every lust ... against those who loved the friend, not against the selfish who loved merely themselves; against those who were ready benefactors and fasted and prayed, not against those who neglected to do so.[20]

Jesus was not preaching to the perilously immoral, but to the perilously moral. 'Jesus did not call the pious to repentance simply because he rejected their sin,' Schlatter later remarks, 'but also because he condemned their righteousness.'[21]

The upside-down problem of disobedient obedience is seen not only in the Sermon on the Mount, but also in Jesus' interactions with his professing followers (Matthew 18–20) and in his clashes with the religious leaders of the day (Matthew 12; 23).

The kind of disobedient obedience we have seen in Matthew is not, however, a first-century phenomenon. Not only the rich young man, Peter and the early workers, but you and I, too, have a Pharisee inside us. It isn't going away by more trenchantly dutiful living—this is just the thing that feeds the Pharisee within. Raw obedience can no more root out our moralistic tendencies than pouring fertilizer on the weeds in our front yard roots out these botanical pests.

How, then, do we get gospel traction in our lives? What are we to do if, as one theologian puts it, 'religion and irreligion are equally helpless'?[22] How do we live gospel-fuelled lives in the face of such overwhelming internal resistance? The same way that we get rid of the weeds: dig them out, roots and all—including what's underneath the surface.

Four reminders in particular will help us.

Obedience: a means or an end?

First, we must recognize obedience not as a means, but as an end. What I mean is this. The rich young man viewed his law-keeping as a means to the end of earning eternal life. Peter viewed his sacrifice as a means to the end of great reward. The all-day workers in Jesus' parable viewed their job as a means to the end of earning a wage. All assumed that obedience was the means to some other end, failing to see that

obedience—true obedience, from the heart—is its own reward. To love God with all one's heart is not an avenue to some other end.[23]

To obey God 'from the heart' (Romans 6:17)—that is, to love, adore and enjoy him, feeding on him as a fire feeds on oxygen—is an end in itself. It is its own reward, because deeper obedience fosters deeper communing with God. Because God himself is the fuel on which we are made to run, such communion with him is the deepest and most solid joy we can know.

Gospel growth

Secondly, progressive growth in holiness is energized not by graduating on from the gospel of God's free grace, but by deeper reflection on the very gospel that captured us in the first place.[24]

I wonder whether somewhere along the way you have been given an artificial picture of the Christian life. Maybe you have been taught (as I was) that the gospel is what bridges the gap between us and God, and that once this gap is bridged we 'move on' to discipleship—punctilious quiet times, regular witnessing, dutiful church involvement, faithful tithing. The gospel message that 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Corinthians 15:3) initiates us into Christianity and then fades into the background in relevance.

The trouble is that this is precisely the opposite of how the New Testament portrays the Christian life. The portrait of discipleship painted by the New Testament is that our first discovery of the gospel is the inauguration of an entire life of increasingly sensitized wonder at this grace. The gospel is not the runway to the Christian life, getting us off the ground at conversion and landing us in heaven at death, but irrelevant in between. The gospel is the engine—getting us off the ground, landing us and keeping us in the air all along. In confronting Peter's racist favouritism, Paul wrote not that Peter needed to cultivate more effective discipleship strategies, but that his 'conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel' (Galatians 2:14). Was Peter a believer?

Of course. But he needed to continue to grow in his reflection on the gospel itself, and live in accord with it. 'The truth of the gospel' was still sinking in.

Christian discipleship is not the process of getting in by grace and then becoming less and less dependent on that grace. It is, rather, becoming *more* dependent on grace. The engine of healthy sanctification (increase in holiness) is increasing awareness of justification (declaration of acquittal).[25] Our growth does not fuel our status; our status fuels our growth. When a caterpillar is given wings as it graduates on to become a butterfly, it does not then become less dependent on those wings. It grows ever more dependent upon them, learning to use them in increasing measure. Paul exhorted the Colossians to 'continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard' (Colossians 1:23; cf. Colossians 2:5–6).

Though Peter was at times slow to understand this 'gospel growth' during Jesus' ministry (Matthew 19), and even about twenty years later (Galatians 2:14), he would come to truly grasp and be transformed by the gospel. Towards the end of his life, the ex-fisherman reminded his fellow believers that God's 'divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness' (2 Peter 1:3). God supplies all we need—not just for getting in, but for life and godliness thereafter. A few verses later, after describing a list of the virtues of the healthy Christian, Peter gives an underlying principle for how such growth takes place: 'For whoever lacks these qualities is so short-sighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins' (2 Peter 1:9). Spiritual stagnancy results from *forgetting* the very gospel that brought us into the kingdom. Spiritual growth, cultivation of virtue, results from *remembering* the gospel. Forgiving grace is not an entrance ticket, to be torn up; it is the fresh air we now breathe, to be relished for ever. 'The gospel is the food of faith,' wrote Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, 'and must be known to be nourishment.'[26]

All this is not to deny the critical fruit that must be born in the life of a genuine believer, or the tremendous personal struggle that will be involved in sanctification (1 Corinthians 15:10; Philippians 2:12–13; Colossians 1:29). Christian growth is a process, and disciples of Jesus will either increasingly be conformed into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29) or prove that they are not, after all, true disciples (3:8; 7:19,22–23; John 15:1–2; James 3:11–12). The Christian life will often feel like two steps forward and three steps backward.

But the way sanctifying growth takes place is not, in essence, by redoubling moral efforts, writing out new resolutions and intensifying spiritual disciplines. The fundamental means of change is deeper and deeper reflection on the very gospel that rescued us in the first place. It sounds backward, but the path to holiness is through (not beyond) the grace of the gospel, because only undeserved grace can truly melt and transform the heart. Disobedience is not healed with obedience. Morality can reform, but never transform, immorality. Immorality is transformed only by the free grace of God—grace so free that it will be misheard by some as a licence to sin with impunity (see Romans 5:20–6:1). The route by which the New Testament exhorts radical obedience is not by tempering grace, but by driving it home all the more deeply.

Morality: 'the greatest enemy'

What, then, is this gospel by which we are not only placed within God's family, but on which we reflect more deeply our whole lives long? This brings us to the third reminder. Here we return to a truth briefly touched upon in our observations on Jesus' parable in Matthew 20, where we unearthed the counterintuitive dimension to the gospel by stating that in the kingdom of God the one thing that qualifies us is knowing that we don't, and the one thing that disqualifies us is thinking that we do. In other words, all we need is to know our need. To put it briefly, the only thing to offer is the single statement: 'I have nothing to offer.'

Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century Reformer, wrote:

> Grace is given freely to those without merits and the most undeserving, and is not obtained by any efforts, endeavours, or works, whether small or great, even of the best and most virtuous of men, though they seek and pursue righteousness with burning zeal.[27]

Not only does burning moral zeal *not* contribute to our standing before God, it can be positively blinding with regard to our true spiritual state. Edwards wrote that 'There is nothing that belongs to Christian experience that is more liable to a corrupt mixture than zeal.'[28] Perhaps this is why in more than one place in Matthew's Gospel Jesus called the most ethically assiduous leaders of his day 'blind guides' (15:14; 23:16,24). Paul saw this in his fellow Jews, for he prayed for their salvation (Romans 10:1) despite acknowledging their 'zeal for God' (Romans 10:2).

Christianity is the unreligion. It turns all our religious instincts on their head. Jesus' parable is not an attempt to show us which religion is the right one; it is meant to show us that religion itself is not the answer. The apostle Paul looked back on a life of earnest religion and called it not only unhelpful but 'loss' (Philippians 3:7).[29]

The ancient Greeks told us to be moderate by knowing our inclinations. The Romans told us to be strong by ordering our lives. Buddhism tells us to be disillusioned by annihilating our consciousness. Hinduism tells us to be absorbed by merging our souls. Islam tells us to be submissive by subjecting our wills. Agnosticism tells us to be at peace by ignoring our doubts. Moralism tells us to be good by discharging our obligations. Only the gospel tells us to be free by acknowledging our failure.[30] Christianity is the unreligion because it is the one faith whose founder tells us to bring not our doing, but our need.

Our natural intuitions whisper to us that the way to avoid disobedience is obedience, yet how easy it is to overlook the fact that it can be precisely our obedience that keeps us from living, as Paul put

it, 'in step with the truth of the gospel' (Galatians 2:14). We often hear in our churches of the danger of disobedience. Rarely do we hear of the danger of obedience.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the British preacher of the twentieth century, rightly preached in 1959 that it is not immorality but morality that is 'the greatest enemy of Christianity'.[31] Jesus did not come to start a new religion. He did not come to offer the best religion of all. He came to end all religion. The religious ethos currently inhaled by today's Westerners, to be nice and follow enough of the rules to appease God and others—what sociologist Christian Smith calls 'moralistic therapeutic deism'[32]—could not be further from the gospel. 'Be good' Christianity is not wrong in the way that an artist painting a tree across the street and leaving out one of the branches is wrong, but in the way that such an artist would be wrong if he had been hired to paint the tree but had chopped it down instead. Moralistic Christianity is not incomplete Christianity; it is anti-Christianity.

'The last will be first.' It is those who recognize their need—who candidly admit they are 'last' regardless of when they were hired—who, strangely, are first. And it is those who regard themselves as 'first' who grumble (20:11) their way through this life and end up last in the sight of God.

Obedience from the heart

Sin, then, is not the problem. Sin exposes our need for the cross. Obedience is the problem. Why? Because dutifully resolute obedience so naturally prevents our seeing the need for the cross. 'God is not hostile to sinners,' wrote Luther, 'only to unbelievers.'[33] To be sure, a follower of Christ who does not obey him is simply not a follower of Christ. Please hear me—*Christians obey*.

But we obey 'from the heart' (Romans 6:17), not to help God's love for us, but in the light of God's love for us (2 Corinthians 5:14; Ephesians 5:2; 1 John 3:16). God's approval of us is reflected in, not

strengthened by, our moral decisions. We must remember that Jesus was not essentially a sage but a herald. A sage proclaims the wisdom of healthy living, telling us what to do. A herald proclaims good news of victories won, telling what has been done.[34]

This past summer my wife and I experienced the great privilege of our first flooded basement! After pumping the water out into the back yard and bringing in the plumber, we learned that the root tentacles of the massive locust tree in our front yard had wound their way around the main pipe leading from our house to the city sewer. As those immensely strong tentacles began tasting moisture on the pipe, they slowly worked their way into the pipe itself, eventually filling the pipe with roots and sealing off all possibility for water to flow.

Every impulse of moral self-reflection in our heart—every smug thought of our own goodness; every self-contented consideration that we have left all to follow Jesus; every remembrance that we have 'borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat' (20:12)—is one more root tentacle clogging the pipe of our heart through which God's forgiveness and our joy flow. Even such a subtle thing as gratitude that I am not a Pharisee immediately turns me into one, since I am comparing my sin with the sin of another instead of with the holiness of God, before whom all claims of moral accomplishment die away.[35] Admission that we have a Pharisee in our heart, on the other hand, is to expose the moralism, bring it into the light and open the floodgates of healing.

This is the paradox of the gospel. As some have wisely said, then, there are not two kinds of people—the good and the bad, the obedient and the disobedient—but rather 'three kinds of men'.[36] In Christ, God offers a third kind of life that neither throws out the rules nor keeps the rules. It is no longer concerned with rules.

The foundation

The final and ultimate question, then, is how this can be so.

How could it be that you and I become heirs of the world, perfectly approved before a sin-hating God, caught up in this great plan of setting straight a crooked world, solely by admitting that we don't deserve it? Here we come to the fourth and final reminder. Does what we have said here in this first chapter, about qualifying by simply refusing to try to qualify by one's own efforts, destroy the moral fabric of God's universe? Isn't this simply calling good bad and bad good? What about retaining some sense of right and wrong? Amid all this talk about God accepting the wicked so long as they confess their failure, what about God's *wrath* on the wicked?

The answer to this objection is the foundation for our entire reflection on the disobedient obedience of Matthew's Gospel.

On a little hill outside Jerusalem, where common thieves were strung up naked on crosses to die an excruciating death, Jesus Christ, sent by his Father for this very purpose, gave himself up to be killed. On that hill, God poured out all his holy wrath on his beloved Son. This historical event is what maintains the moral fabric of the universe, so that you and I can be approved before God simply by admitting that we shouldn't be.

Just as the cross is the foundation for all that has been said here, so it is brought in at the very point in Matthew's Gospel where we left off. After telling his disciples the parable of the workers in the vineyard, Jesus gives them the fundamental reason *why* the generous landowner can be increasingly gracious in his dealings with every worker that is hired:

> And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day' (20:17–19).

Jesus died. That is the greatest surprise of all. On the cross, the one person who ever truly qualified allowed himself to be disqualified, so that you and I, who are naturally disqualified, can qualify—free of charge. The gospel is the happy invitation neither to trade in all our bad for being good, nor to trade in all our good for being better. The gospel invites us to trade in all our bad *and* our good for being free. Christianity's offer is not an invitation to become a Pharisee. It's an invitation to acknowledge the Pharisee who is already inside and to lay down our subtle efforts at appeasing God and others by our own resources.

Jesus died, and therefore all the bad we do can never lose God's love, yet all the good we do can never gain God's love. Jesus Christ is the only person to walk on this earth who truly deserved to be first, but he made himself last so that those who do nothing more than acknowledge that they are last can be first. To return one final time to the four passages in Matthew 19–20:

- We can have God's undivided attention without qualifying by our age or other social prerequisites, because on the cross Jesus was rejected, not ultimately by his disciples, or even by the religious authorities, but by his own Father.

- We can have eternal life without qualifying by law-keeping, because on the cross Jesus experienced hell despite living the only life that deserved heaven and being the only person who can truly say, 'All these have I kept.'

- We can have a reward without qualifying by sacrifice, because on the cross Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice that means we can freely receive the ultimate reward.

- We can have a full day's wage without qualifying by doing comparatively more work than others, because Jesus worked the

> whole day, 'bearing the burden of the day', and then on the cross was denied any wage at all.

With Jesus, morality is not what we think it is. Because he died, our disobedience can be compensated, not by our efforts, but by receiving his efforts in self-divesting faith. And our obedience, if carried out by way of compensation, becomes disobedience. This is surprising. The disciples were slow to grasp the point; so are you and I. But Jesus died even for that. All is taken care of. We are free to be fully and irreversibly forgiven. Recognize that you don't deserve it, and you are in.