

The Surprise of Grace

Matthew 21:23-45

Matthew 21:23-45 (NASB)

When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?”
 24 Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?”
 And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ 26 But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.” 27 And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

28 “But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’ 29 And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, ‘I will, sir’; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?” They *said, “The first.” Jesus *said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

33 “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35 The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37 But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ 39 They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?” 41 They *said to Him, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.”

42 Jesus *said to them, “Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, This became the chief corner stone; This came about from the Lord, And it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

43 Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. 44 And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. 46 When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.

Jesus is back in the temple teaching —his FIRST TIME BACK after flipping over the tables.

- Just the DAY BEFORE, Jesus had gone OFF on the money changers in the temple!

REMEMBER—it’s passover season

In our text today we see the leaders are **SURPRISED AGAIN** by the grace of God for **ALL PEOPLE**.

“I asked God for a bike, but I know that God doesn’t work that way, so I stole a bike and asked for forgiveness.”-Al Pacino

We feel a tension and even confusion over the meaning and scope of God’s grace.

“If God is holy, how can the Kingdom of God be full of prostitutes and tax collectors?”

So Jesus returns to the temple and is immediately confronted by the religious leaders... WHAT THE HECK?

- BY WHAT AUTHORITY DO YOU DO THESE THINGS? — Asking if he’s of God or man.
- WHO GAVE YOU THIS AUTHORITY?

Jesus responds with this question about the authenticity of John’s baptism—Is it from God?

The religious leaders are forced to reply “We don’t know...”

- CHECK MATE MOVE!

And so they give a dishonest answer when they say “We don’t know” (v. 27)

—SIDE NOTE— Isn’t this what happens to us when we try to live outside of Jesus’ authority??

Maybe some of us are choosing to believe lies because we are rejecting Jesus’ authority.

This is EXACTLY what the religious leaders were doing—and so they LIE to cover themselves...

Jesus seizes the opportunity to challenge their assumptions about God & God’s kingdom by telling 3 stories.

Parable #1—About a father who asks his 2 Sons to Work in his Vineyard...

1st son says “no” at first, but then changed his mind & works in the vineyard.

2nd son says “yes” at first, but then does NOT go into the vineyard and work.

- So Jesus explains that tax collectors and prostitutes are the 1st son who ended up receiving the grace of God and entering the vineyard...
- And the religious leaders are the disobedient 2nd son who never enter the kingdom because they are unwilling to obey the Father.

And we then hear this sobering assessment of the religious leader’s TRUE standing with God:

v31—“Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you.”

- This would have been appalling to the religious leaders
 - The religious leaders knew that God was holy.
 - They knew that God has called us to be holy.
 - So, HOW IN THE WORLD could tax collectors & prostitutes enter into God’s kingdom??
 - And how is it possible for horrible sinners to enter the kingdom BEFORE THEM??
- **This is the great SURPRISE of God’s Kingdom—This is SCANDAL of God’s grace.**
It is SCANDALOUS how far the grace of God reaches.

The religious leaders didn’t get it.

To them holiness is a prerequisite for receiving God’s grace RATHER THAN a product of God’s grace.

- They thought that God loves good people rather than that God’s love makes people good.
- Some of us think this way too....

We tend to look at people in the Bible as GREAT people that God was able to use to do amazing things!

- And we try to be good so God can use us.
- And we teach our kids to imitate the courage of David so they can defeat the Goliaths in their life...

This is SO WRONG in light of the storyline of scripture.

- Noah was an incestuous drunkard.
- Abraham was a pagan who worshipped the moon.
- Jacob was a crooked thief.
- Moses murdered a guy and then hid the body in the desert!
- David was an adulterer, murderer, liar and a religious fraud.
- Solomon was a player...

BUT, God worked through these people BY HIS GRACE ...and this is just the OT.

- In the NT we see Matthew who was a tax collector.
 - Simon who was a political fanatic.
 - Peter who denied Jesus 3 times.
 - Paul hunted and murdered Christians!
- YET, we know these people's names & they are in the Bible.

NOT because they are models of morality, but because they are all pictures of God's grace.

The Bible is not a story of God looking for good people, but one of God redeeming sinful people.

- This is GOOD NEWS!

Jesus chose people FURTHEST from the Kingdom to show them & us that it is by GRACE we are saved.

- NOBODY works their way into the kingdom.
- NOBODY enters based on their own merit.

This is a SURPRISING detail for the religious leaders—probably more like a SHOCKING detail.

- We need to try hard to fully understand what they would have heard.

We tend to sympathize with prostitutes.

- Responsible, but we know they are also often victims.
- In the US, the average age of entry to prostitution is 13 years old.
- Most have been abused and are often the product of broken social services/foster care systems.
- We tend to have SYMPATHY for that.

These religious leaders wouldn't have had sympathy for prostitutes.

It'd be more like Jesus confronting a group of self-righteous pastors today and saying:

- "Greedy Wall Street bankers and porn stars will enter the Kingdom of God before you."

We have a hard time with this! HOW COULD THEY RECEIVE GRACE FROM GOD?!?

One of my favorite biographies is an incredible story of a slave-trader in the 1700s...

- Slavery was and is a HORRIBLE EVIL!
- Slave trading is completely defiant of God's grace.
- It is hard to think of a more despicable profession!

This slave trader was a captain of a ship & his ship starts to go down in a storm...

• **What does he do?? He cries out for mercy...**

- I don't know about you, but my instinct is to pray AGAINST this guy getting grace!
- "Don't do it Lord! Don't save THIS guy!"
- He's as evil as a guy can be—this is a moment of desperation...
- He's ONLY crying out because there is literally no other hope for him.

EVERYTHING IN ME knows that this guy doesn't deserve grace!!

- **Believe it or not, this slave trader's name is JOHN NEWTON.**
- **John Newton was saved by God's grace and went on to write the hymn "Amazing Grace"!**

• I think we tend to feel that we deserve grace but these "horrible and rebellious" people do not.

- **I can SO EASILY fall into a false understanding of grace!**
- This is what had happened to these religious leaders—they saw themselves as BETTER than prostitutes and tax collectors.

When we are HONEST before God, we see that we're on the same plane as the prostitutes & tax collectors.

- **Our spiritual need is the same as theirs.**
- **WE DESPERATELY NEED GOD'S GRACE!**

Jesus tells these religious men that "The prostitutes & tax collectors GOT IT—they believed"

- **But you guys TOTALLY MISSED IT!**

• Jesus' message from the VERY BEGINNING of His ministry was simple:

- **"The Kingdom of God is at hand. REPENT and believe the Gospel!"**

The right response to God's grace is repentance and faith.

These religious leaders do the exact opposite—they resist God's grace and do not believe in Him.

- WHY would anyone resist grace?
- Grace is an undeserved gift!

We need to be clear about what we're talking about—WHAT IS GRACE?

**Grace is not a "thing" that God gives us outside of Himself.
God gives us HIMSELF when we don't deserve Him—THAT is grace.**

So, why would anyone resist a free gift?

- **Elaina's birthday**—spends the day visiting businesses that give FREE GIFTS on your birthday!
 - Pizza Man Dan's, Jersey Mikes, Red Robin, Bunt Cakes

If someone is giving you a free gift, why would we resist that?—Who hates?

3 reasons we resist grace—I think of them as 3 ENEMIES of grace.

Enemies of Grace:

- 1. Pride—The idea that we don't need grace.**
- 2. Entitlement—The idea that we deserve grace.**
- 3. Pity—The idea that I am not worthy of grace.**

1. Pride—The greatest enemy of grace is the idea that we don't need it.

- **Grace is not a crutch for the weak—its a foundation for the honest.**
 - When I'm honest with myself I realize that I don't need a crutch—I need MUCH MORE than that!!
 - I need a heart transplant!
 - I'm not a mostly-strong person who needs a little help here and there...
 - I need to be completely renewed from the inside out!

2. Entitlement—If pride says "I don't need grace", entitlement says "I DESERVE GRACE!"

- There is a 3-step process to entitlement:
 - receive something as a gift.
 - then we get used to receiving it as a gift
 - then we start to think that we deserve it—it is no longer viewed as a "gift" at this point.
- **Grace makes people grateful. A lack of grace makes people entitled complainers.**
Entitlement actually strangles out grace.

3. Pity—"I'm not worthy of God's grace." God could never be gracious to me."

So the SURPRISING GRACE of God cuts two ways:

1. Some of us might identify more with the tax collectors & prostitutes.

2. Others might relate more with the religious leaders.

- **Following Jesus is NOT about what you do for God to earn His approval!**
- **Following Jesus is receiving what Jesus has done for ME when I was incapable of doing good!**

My wife and I had a teenage foster daughter who came to us at 14 having already worked as a prostitute.

- She left our home at age 17 and dove into a life of addiction, prostitution and pain.
- We'd pray for her—not knowing where or how she was.
- We'd talk about her & cry—not knowing if she was even alive.

- Constantly checking county website to see if she had been arrested
- **I'd attend all of her hearings.**
 - She'd be lead in in shackles—no makeup—covered in scabs—hard expression on her face.
 - She wasn't looking for grace. She wasn't expecting grace. She knew she didn't deserve grace.
 - She'd see me and WEEP—totally lose it—she became that broken little girl I used to sing to sleep.
- She'd get out of jail and was SO THANKFUL that we hadn't given up on her.

Last time I saw her she was strung out on drugs and she asked me to never give up on her.

- My wife and I STRUGGLE to BARELY remain SORT OF faithful to her over the years...

**Some of us need to hear that God is ALWAYS and PERFECTLY faithful!!
God has NOT given up on you!**

You might have rejected God's grace in the past...

...but you need to hear that God has not accepted NO as your final answer!

This is the SURPRISE of GRACE!!

2. Others of us associate more with the religious leaders in this story.

- **So often there is this pull for me to define myself & my worth in WHAT I DO for others or for God rather than what God has done for me.**

We tend to misunderstand the nature of grace.

Because we misunderstand grace we have this "YES-then-NO" response—like the 2nd son.

- We say YES up front, but then live a life that basically says NO.

I think there are 4 common misconceptions of grace that lead to this "YES-then-NO" response to the Gospel:

Common misconceptions of grace :

- 1. Grace is permission to sin**
- 2. Grace fills the gaps.**
- 3. Grace is God relaxing his standards.**
- 4. Grace opposes effort**

Misconceptions of grace:

1. Grace is permission to sin.

- God forgives sin, so I can sin and God will just forgive me.

Grace is not permission to sin, but the power to overcome sin.

God's grace forgives us, but it also TRANSFORMS us into the image of Christ.

2. Grace fills the gaps.

- We try hard & do our best and God makes up for our shortcomings.
- The problem is that we are sinful to the core and from the beginning!
- So, we need God's grace in EVERY PART of EVERY ACTION on EVERY DAY
- Every good thing in life is from God and by God's grace!

If we really believe that, apart from Jesus, sin separates us from God and that God is the source of all goodness, then EVERYTHING we have is grace!!

3. (misconception of grace) Grace is God relaxing his standards.

- It's easy to see the OT God as a hard-nosed God with tons of rules and impossible standards...
- And then we see the NT God as an older God who has eased up on his standards in old age...
 - **As if God realized, "Well, maybe the bar was too high & nobody was getting it. Let's have grace and lower the bar to help them out..."**

NO! Grace is not God letting up on His law and His standards for holiness!

Grace is God sending His son to FULFILL the law in our place.

- God doesn't change his mind.
- God doesn't change his standards.

- Rather, God sends his son to redeem us so that we would be forgiven and made holy.
- **He sent Jesus to die on a cross to prove that He is the JUST and the JUSTIFIER.**

4. Grace opposes effort—the idea that “I’m saved by grace so it doesn’t really matter what I do.”

This is silly—just because we are saved by grace and not by works does NOT mean that works don’t matter!

Grace does not oppose effort—Grace opposes MERRIT!

- Grace opposes the idea that our works earn our approval from God.
- So as Christians who understand grace, we strive & work hard FROM grace—not FOR grace!

This grace we receive from God is free—it is an UNDESERVED gift.

But as we see in this next parable, it cost a GREAT PRICE.

Vs 33-46 tells another parable—Landlord who owns a vineyard.

- Landlord goes away and hires workers to care for the vineyard.
- In time he sends servants to get the fruit from the vineyard, but the hired workers kill the servants.
- In response, the landlord doesn’t send warriors to kill the workers—he sends MORE SERVANTS.
- They kill the servants again...
- So then the landlord sends his own son saying, “Surly they will respect my son.”
- What do they do? They kill his son too...

First—this is a picture of the persistent grace of God.

We see this throughout the OT—God persistently sends prophets to His people.

- The prophets speak truth about the sins of the people.
 - They plead for the people to TURN FROM YOUR WAYS!
 - “Return to God! His way is the way of life!”
- What do the people do? They MOCK the prophets, BEAT the prophets, KILL the prophets.
- But God’s grace persists and He sends more prophets and the people do the same...
- And God’s grace persists and, WHAT DOES HE DO?
 - Jn 3:16—God so loved the world that He sent His only son!”
 - Do they receive God’s own son with joy and thanksgiving? NO
 - They KILL His son.

THIS is where we see the cost of grace...

Jesus shows us who he is by showing himself as the rejected stone who has become the cornerstone.

What does it mean that he is a “rejected stone?”

- This refers to the death of Christ:
 - that he came out of love to fulfill God’s mission...
 - that he is rejected and killed on the cross...

This raises the question, “Why did Jesus have to die?”

- If God is gracious and God is forgiving, then why did Jesus have to die?

The answer is because God is not just gracious and loving, he is also HOLY and JUST and PURE.

God is QUICK to love and PERSISTENT and PATIENT in love—sending SERVANTS and His SON...

- But this doesn’t mean that God is not holy.

We see the cost of grace in the death of Christ.

- While grace is free for us, it cost God greatly.

God did what we could not do—this is the GOOD NEWS!

- **That Jesus died in our place so that we could be reconciled to God and LIVE BY GRACE!**

The cross is a BEAUTIFUL THING!!

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NIV)

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

When we see that the cross is an act of grace—that it was for our sins...

- When we see that it is God's grace, then we can MARVEL over the message of the cross!
- **The message of the cross is that we are SAVED BY GRACE!**

Not only was Jesus the REJECTED stone, He has become the CORNERSTONE.

- He has raised from the dead, and He is the foundation of the Church.

The cornerstone is the most important stone in a building.

Imagine 1st century builders looking through a pile of stones to find one that could be the cornerstone.

Jesus says, "I am that stone that you rejected! I am the cornerstone."

- We need to hear this! — Jesus is our cornerstone!
- We don't need to find a cornerstone!

1 Corinthians 3:11 (NIV)

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Jesus is to be our foundation—if you mess with the foundation, it messes up EVERYTHING This is true in the church and in our families and in our own personal life—Jesus is our cornerstone.

Because Jesus was rejected, we are able to receive full acceptance by God.

The surprise of grace is that Jesus was rejected for us!

So, if Jesus is the cornerstone & foundation of the Kingdom, it begs the question:

"How can prostitutes be part of the kingdom of God?"

- Does God simply overlook sin & allow prostitution.

God doesn't have a kingdom of sinners because he overlooks sin—that's NOT what God does.

God's love does not lead Him to ignore or overlook our sin, but to DEAL WITH our sin.

God love meets us where we're at, but His love refuses to let us stay there.

We all know that in order to love someone, you don't have to affirm their lifestyle.

- This is true for us
- This is also true for God—He can love you without affirming your lifestyle.

So we need to be careful to not confuse God's patience for God's approval.

- Love wants what's BEST for the beloved—God knows what is best for us.

• **So grace is not about God changing His standards.**

• **Grace is about God changing His people.**

This is the surprise of grace!

- Grace CHANGES us!
- Grace produces fruit!

This is why Jesus says in

v43—"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing it's fruit."

- **When the grace of God takes root in our heart, it produces FRUIT in our life!**

- Responding to God's grace is not a one-time event.
- Responding to God's grace is to be the steady rhythm of the Christian life!

This is why John the Baptist said in Matthew 3 to "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

- So we see God's kingdom is not just a kingdom of forgiven people.
- It is also a kingdom of fruit-bearing people.
- It is a kingdom of repenting people

Are you surprised by God's grace today?

- Maybe you have not yet received and experienced the grace of God in salvation today...
- Maybe you are having trouble receiving this grace in light of some things you have done or experienced.

God doesn't leave us in our brokenness and sin

We need to hear that we are not supposed to stay in a place of brokenness and hopelessness and sin.

- God's grace lifts us out and moves us FORWARD!

****RESPOND to this grace****

Come respond in worship

Come get prayer