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A Sermon Preached by  
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



# The Most Surprising Payday in History

Matthew 21:1-16

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious and loving God. Pour through me this morning the gift of preaching, that these words might not be my human words or human opinions, but by a miracle of Your Grace, these words might become Your living word to us. If there's anyone here today, O God, who needs a word of grace, if there's anyone here who needs a word of comfort, if there's anyone here who needs unmerited favor, then please, O God, meet us exactly at our point of need so that we might go forth as bearers and instruments of your grace to a world in need. To that end bless and anoint this message and we know you will, for we pray with anticipation in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen.

In the Peanuts comic strip, Linus is watching his favorite television program and his older sister Lucy comes into the room. With seeming disregard for him, she picks up the remote and immediately changes the channel. Linus is very upset and distraught about this and before he can even protest, Lucy picks up the family Bible and says, "Matthew 20:16 says the last shall be first and the first shall be last." Linus asks in disgust, "I wonder if Matthew had an older sister?"

What does that mean? **The last shall be first and the first shall be last.** It would be interesting this morning to survey all of you in the congregation and ask about the times in your lives when you've been first. Many of you are the first born in your family, and you know that there are some real advantages to that. You get everything first and get to do everything first. But there are disadvantages too. Parents really learn how to parent on the first child, so they're often harder on the first, than on those that follow.

But often it's hard to be first. Have you ever gotten to a party first? Sometimes, with just a few people there, you've got to keep things going until a critical mass of people arrives. Of course, there is the advantage to being first and getting to the available food and

**"The Grace of God is so preposterous that it turns an upside down world right side up."**

drink before anyone else does. But you've still got to work hard to be first. When you are first chair in the orchestra, or first in your high school, college, graduate school or law school class, it's an honor and its wonderful, but there is a lot of pressure on being first. I wonder if that's what Jesus meant by **the first shall be last.**

I wonder, too, if any of you have been last in your life. Certainly some of you were the last born – the fourth or fifth child born in your family. Although you might have gotten to do some things your older siblings didn't, because your parents were more lenient, you also got hand-me-down clothes to wear which wasn't much fun after a while. And when you're the last one at a party, it's already all revved up and things are going strong, but they may have run out of food by the time you get there. Maybe it's not so good to be last after all. Sometimes people feel last because everybody else gets to do it before they do – their turn comes long before yours. Does anybody here feel that way about the office, or a Board you are on, or your family? It's that feeling that you are last and everybody else is first.

**The last shall be first and the first shall be last.** What does Jesus mean by this curious, difficult phrase? Well this morning I believe that Almighty God, in order to make it clear, wants to lift up one shocking spiritual principle. Many of you who have heard me preach before are already stunned and shocked that there aren't three shocking spiritual principles. OK, I confess, I've got one shocking spiritual principle with three sub-points. Listen carefully. The shocking principle is this: **The Grace of God is so preposterous that it turns an upside down world right side up.**

The word **preposterous** has a fascinating etymology. **Pre** means in front, or to go before; and **post** means in

back, or to go after. So the word **preposterous** literally means what's in front is in back and what should be in back is in front, or what should be before goes after and what should be after goes before. In other words, everything is all twisted. It's exactly what Jesus meant: an upside down world has got to be turned right side up. The first shall be last, the last shall be first. Preposterous!

In order to get his message out, as he often did, Jesus told a story. But when Jesus told a story he chose it very carefully, it wasn't made up on the spot. This story was a slice of life from contemporary Palestine. In that day vineyard owners knew that the grapes would ripen late in September, and needed to be harvested immediately during the next 10-14 days, because October in Palestine was the rainy season. Those of you who have visited there know that there are torrential downpours in October. If the grapes aren't harvested by the end of September, the entire crop will be ruined.

Jesus tells the story of a vineyard owner going to market, as any of them would have done. In that day there were day laborers who arrived at the market at 6:00 in the morning with all their tools, hoping that someone would want to hire them that day. The vineyard owner says to some of the day laborers, "I'd like you to work with me for 12 hours and I'll pay you one day's wage. You will work from 6:00 in the morning till 6:00 in the evening, and at sundown I will give you a fair wage – one denari." (A denari is about \$50.) That pay would not make them rich but it is enough to buy food for the family that night. And most day laborers took the wages they received, went to the market and bought food for the family dinner. If there was no work, there was no money, and there was no food.

The laborers agreed to the terms, "Oh yes, we'll work for one denari as a day's wage." At noon the vineyard owner needed more help. Perhaps the sky was looking a little threatening so he wanted the work done more quickly. At 3:00 in the afternoon he brought in even more helpers. They were all eager for the wages, and the owner told them, "I will pay you what is right." Notice those words: "I will pay you what is right." He never said exactly what he would pay the additional group of hired workers. They were all so eager for the wages that they were glad to go to work in the vineyard at any time of the day.

In the parable the vineyard owner goes back to the market at 5:00 in the evening as the sun is just beginning to set, with only one more hour of daylight. It is literally the eleventh hour, since Jewish people measured the day from 6:00 in the morning until 6:00 in the evening. There he finds workers idle at the end of the day and he asks them, "Why are you standing here idle." We might think that they were lazy and didn't

want to work. But their answer reveals differently, "Oh no, we want to work but no one has hired us." The fact that they'd been waiting there for 11 hours meant that they wanted to work, in fact that they were desperate to work. They needed money to feed families who might go hungry.

"Oh yes," they said, "We will go to the field for one hour, we are so glad to have the work. Pay us whatever you will." So they go with the vineyard owner and work for one hour. At 6:00, the vineyard owners would line up all the day workers to pay them. According to Jewish law, (Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 24) "You shall not keep someone's pay for a day's work overnight. You shall give it to them at the end of the day, at sundown." This law was prescribed out of deference to the poor who were desperately counting on that money to feed their families. They were to be paid at 6:00.

But 6:00 that day was **the most surprising payday in history**. The vineyard owner said to his manager, "Pay them all, but start with those who came to work last." That was preposterous – the ones who came to work first should be paid first and the ones who came to work last should be paid last. That was justice. But this vineyard owner was a preposterous kind of a person, he insisted that those who came to work last be paid first. Everybody lined up, and the ones who had worked for 12 hours were grumbling a little because they were at the back of the line. Then the owner announced that those who had worked for only one hour were to get a full day's pay – a full denari, the whole \$50. They were certainly not expecting that – it was above and beyond what they deserved and they were ecstatic. They got an unmerited gift of Grace.

The workers at the back of the line, who had all worked a full 12 hours, were really whooping it up by this time. They were thinking, "Wow, if this vineyard owner has given a full day's wage to those who worked only one-twelfth as long as we worked, just imagine what he's going to give us." And in their minds they were already on their way down to the Palestine version of Broadway for a family evening on the town with the two weeks wages they were expecting. But then that preposterous vineyard owner told them that he would pay those who worked one hour the same as those who worked three, six, nine hours, as well as those who worked the full day, twelve hours, exactly the same pay – they would all get one day's wage, one denari, \$50.

Ernie Campbell is a friend of mine and of Fifth Avenue Church. For years he was Pastor of the Riverside Church in New York. Ernie Campbell said, "If only this vineyard owner had used envelopes, this would not have been a problem." But everybody knew, and they saw what everyone else was paid. Now remember, the overall point of the message. Did you remember?

God's Grace is so preposterous that it turns an upside down world right side up. Now for those three sub points.

### **Sub-point #1**

**If your focus is on merit, reward and achievement you will never understand Grace.**

You see, those people who worked from six in the morning till six in the evening got a raw deal, or so they thought, "We have worked twelve times as long as those who got the same wage we got. We have been dealt with unfairly." And they have a valid point. Or do they? The vineyard owner came to them and said, "Now wait a minute. If I'd given you half of what I told you I'd give you, then you'd be right. But I gave you exactly what I told you I was going to give you. I said a denari and you agreed. I gave you a denari." Then he scratched his head and said, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

Suddenly you realize that this parable is teaching us that God is sovereign. God owns everything. God can do what God wants because everything belongs to God. Preposterous, but it's true. God can give to those who worked an hour the same as those who did twelve hours work, because the reward is in working in the vineyard. Those who focused on merit and reward forgot that they had a job for those twelve hours and didn't have to go through the anxiety of waiting for eleven hours, wondering whether there would be anything to bring home to the family. They weren't looking at it from somebody else's point of view. They saw this gracious act only from the point of view of merit and reward. Hear me carefully. Sometimes those of us who have been given a lot can think we're better than those who've been given little. Sometimes those of us who have so much think we've earned it and forget that everything we have – everything – is a gracious gift from God. We didn't have to be born. Life is a gift.

If you ever have the chance to hear John Claypool preach, take advantage of it. He is a phenomenal preacher in Virginia, a great man of faith and a great man of God. John Claypool tells the story of a family in his congregation with four wonderful, healthy children. Everything was good in their life. The wife was pregnant with child number five. The husband and children accompanied her to the hospital for the delivery. The children were in the waiting room, so excited to have new brother or sister. Later as they looked at the newborn child they saw that the little girl had no arms and no legs. "Suddenly," John Claypool says, "This family with everything had a major challenge."

The little girl developed, and grew and had wonderful eyesight and wonderful hearing and she could taste

and smell and she had a delightful personality. She only lived to be 21, and during those years her family and friends had to dress and feed her every day. But they didn't mind because she was such a phenomenal person. The congregation loved it when she came to John Claypool's church, because she brought so much joy and perspective to the congregation. A friend of one of her older brother's came to visit for three days at Easter and couldn't get over what she was living with. One day he said to her, "May I ask you a question? How do you live with this? You must have such rage inside. How can you even believe in God or go to church? You were born without arms or legs. Why aren't you angry and resentful and bitter and in such rage against God."

And the girl said, "Well, I know that I don't have everything you have, but I look at it as a matter of focus. You see I've been given eyesight and I have read some of the finest works of literature ever written. And I have really good hearing, and my parents get me tapes and CD's and I'm able to hear some of the great works of literature while I'm just sitting in the afternoon. I have also heard some of the most beautiful works of music ever created. It is phenomenal what I have heard with my ears. Because I don't have any arms or legs I have to be fed all my meals. And my family, my brothers and sisters, parents, aunts, uncles and friends come over and take turns feeding me. And when they feed me they tell me stories that make me laugh, and we have great times together. We enjoy one another. And I can't get dressed myself so friends or family have to help me get dressed and we laugh at the colors and the shapes and some of the patterns. When I think that I might not have been born I realize what a gift I was given."

Do you understand Grace? Life IS a gift. We don't have a right to eyesight or a right to hearing or a right to friendship. These are gifts of Grace. So the Grace of God is so preposterous that it turns an upside down world right side up. The first sub point is that people who focus on rewards and accomplishment and achievement often don't understand Grace.

### **Sub-point #2**

**God calls us to be first in service, not first in honor.**

I say it as lovingly as I can that sometimes when we're first, the first born or the first in line or the first at a party or the first at anything we expect to get some kind of honor for it. Peter, in Matthew 19, says to Jesus "Lord, we as disciples, have left everything – our nets, our families and our friends. We've left everything to follow you and what are we going to get for all of this?" You see Peter thinks because he's first, he's going to be first in honor. Some of the other disciples say to Jesus,

“Lord, can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in Glory.” They want honor, too. And Jesus responds to them, “You’re going to be first because those who are really first are first in service.” Sometimes people who are last are really first because they understand Grace. Sometimes people who are first are last because they don’t understand Grace. God is a God of Grace. God doesn’t call us to be first in order to honor us but to be first in service to others.

During the last several years I have exchanged pulpits with a Pastor of another congregation in our Presbytery. One year I did it up with Bedford Central Church in Bedford Stuyvestant, Brooklyn, and another time with St. James Presbyterian Church in Harlem. Our choir and Dr. Westenburg and I went to that congregation and their pastor and their choir and their Director of Music came here. This exchange has been wonderful for both congregations. The two churches where we’ve gone have been basically African-American congregations. I have learned that one of the privileges of going to an African-American church is to meet the mothers of the church. And I’m telling you those mothers of the church are phenomenal!

At both churches I was told right away, “If you have any needs or any worries or problems, just ask one of the mothers of the church.” And I said, “How will I know the mothers of the church?” And I was told, “Oh, you’ll know the mothers of the church.” And I said, “Well, are they elected for a three-year term or a six-year term or is it a rotating term?” “Oh no,” I was told, “They’re not elected. They’re just the mothers of the church.” “Is it an honor, and just what does a mother of the church do?” I asked. They told me, “It’s service – if you need a cup of coffee, ask one of the mothers. If you need water in the pulpit, ask one of the mothers. If you need a taxi, or anything, just ask one of the mothers. If no one wants to take care of a child crying in the nursery, the mothers of the church will take care of her. They don’t greet their friends on a Sunday morning, but instead go down the aisles looking for people who are alone and greet and talk with them. At the coffee hour, they don’t look just for their friends, but for the newcomers. You see, the mothers are the servants of the church.”

I worked very hard to prepare my sermons when I went to these two congregations, I’m telling you. But the mothers of the church really didn’t even need a preacher, they made the worship service happen on their own. I got up in the pulpit and I said, “I’m happy to be here.” And they all said, “Amen! Hallelujah! Praise God!” People got excited just over that little remark. And then when I made the first of my three points in the sermon, one of them yelled out, “Good point, young man, good point!” I was so glad when she

called me a “young man,” even though I think she may have needed eyeglasses. And you know how you ask a rhetorical question in a sermon – I said, “Have any of you ever been afraid?” “Oh, yes, oh, yes, I’ve been afraid!” And they followed it up with an on-the-spot illustration. It was terrific. They illustrated the sermon for me.

And if you’re in trouble in an African-American church and the sermon is not going well, the mothers of the church cry out, “Help him, Jesus! Help him, Jesus!” I truly thank God for the mothers of the church because they’re the servants. They’re last, and they do all the jobs no one else wants to do. But they’re also first because in the Divine economy, in the economy of God, the last are first. And those who always want to be first are last. God calls us to be first in service not first in honor. God’s Grace is so preposterous that it turns an upside down world right-side up.

### Sub-point #3

#### **When you have experienced Grace you can be an instrument of Grace to others.**

May I share with you for a moment something that is on my heart? It breaks my heart that so often in the church of Jesus Christ people are so mean to one another. You expect it sometimes out in society but too often in the church we’re not very gracious with one another. The tone of voice that we use is not always a gracious one. The Bible teaches, “If you’ve experienced God’s Grace, life is a precious gift.” God wants us to be gracious to others. And I am so grateful for the graciousness of this congregation. I’m grateful for the graciousness of those who work in our homeless ministry, like Joe Vedella and Margaret Shafer who are on our staff. And Margaret Skinner, who chairs the Homeless Task Force – and I could go on and on.

I’m grateful for our members who are gracious to Veronica, who sleeps on the front steps. Veronica has a section 8 housing voucher and goes out every day to try to find the apartment that she is entitled to by law. But there is no low-income housing available, so she comes back each night without her place to live. We don’t want Veronica to have to sleep on our steps and she doesn’t want that either. She wants to have a place of her own. But until there is a break in availability of low-income housing, she stays at our place. And you know why she comes here. Because here she is treated with grace, she doesn’t get beaten up, and no one bugs her. You know what people do here? They listen to her. Veronica told us that this is the only place in her whole life where anybody listened to her. And she can finish a sentence here – nobody interrupts her with, “Oh, no, no, move on, move on!” The other day she said, “You know, I don’t know where I’d be without this church. If I didn’t

have this church and the experience of God's Grace and love pouring down on me, I don't know where I'd be."

In the eyes of the world, Veronica is last. But God's love is preposterous. In God's economy, she's first. The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Some years ago in Washington, DC there was a very famous funeral. Former Vice President Hubert Humphrey died. You may have seen the funeral service on television. It was during Jimmy Carter's presidency and was attended by a great many dignitaries. The President of the United States is first so he came in to the service last. Everybody else was seated when he and Roslyn, the first lady, came in to take their seats in the first row. The President is first so the President comes in last. It's just the way we do it.

As President Carter made his way in he looked around at those attending, he noticed a man he knew very well – a man nobody was going to sit with. There were Secret Service people around him but nobody wanted to sit with this man so he sat near the back. After Jimmy and Roslyn Carter had taken their seats, he said to her, "I'll be right back." He went back up the aisle and over to the man seated in the back. That man was former President Richard Nixon, who had resigned the presidency a few years before. Jimmy Carter knew it was his first trip back to Washington, DC. He extended his hand to the man who had resigned the presidency in embarrassment, humiliation and disgrace, and said, "Welcome to Washington, Mr. President. Welcome home. Roslyn and I have a space next to us. We'd be so grateful if you'd do us the honor of sitting with us. I know, Mr. President, what Hubert Humphrey meant in your life. I know of your bond of friendship and it would mean so much to me and to Roslyn if you would honor us by coming and sitting with us."

And the last shall be first and the first shall be last. This is preposterous but it is what the Grace of God is all about.