

The Upside Down Logic of Jesus

Matthew 20:1-28

Mark Vroegop

When I was a kid, there were many times when my parents or grandparents would throw out some pithy one-liner sayings that were filled with great wisdom and practical advice. My all-time favorite was a saying that my Dad often repeated: "If it doesn't work, think opposites." There were so many times that we were fixing something together, and the part just didn't seem to fit. But almost miraculously by doing it the opposite way, turning the part upside down, or turning the valve the other direction made a huge difference. I learned two lessons as a child: 1) My dad was really smart, and 2) thinking opposite often works.

Now you won't find that exact piece of sage-wisdom in the Bible, but you will find something that comes pretty close. Namely, that so much of what it means to follow Christ is exactly opposite of how our world works. In fact I have often told people that if they just do exactly opposite of what their flesh wants to do and what the world tells them to do, they'll be closer than they realize to doing what is right.

Our world is broken, and even though we live in a beautiful creation with lots of glorious and thrilling things, it is still not the way things are supposed to be. Enter Jesus. He literally turns your life upside down and inside out, and this is what our text is all about today. **There is an upside down logic when it comes to following Jesus.**

Let's look today at the way in which Jesus turns three words upside down: fairness, victory, and authority.

Fairness: The Generosity of Grace is Beautifully Unfair

Matthew 20:1-16 is a parable that features a landowner and how he compensates various laborers. It comes immediately following an important statement in 19:30 which says, "But many who are first will be last and the last first." And this particular parable ends with a nearly identical statement in 20:16, "So the last will be first, and the first last."

Let's unpack the story one section at a time.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

The parable begins with a basic plot line. Jesus's kingdom is compared to a landowner who needs to hire workers for his vineyard. These workers would have been day-laborers who were employed on an "as-needed" basis. They would often loiter in the marketplace looking for work. They are recruited by the land owner, and they are each promised a typical wage – a denarius. Off to work they go.

3 And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' 5 So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. 6 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?' 7 They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

For some reason the land owner needs more workers. He returns at the third hour and offers a new set of works the opportunity for them to work, and he gives a promise: "whatever is right I will give you." No promise of a particular wage. Off to work they go. And then the land owner does the same thing three more times – at the sixth hour, the ninth hour, and at the eleventh hour (5 p.m.). It is this last group that is really remarkable because the amount of time that they will work will be so insignificant.

With the details in place, the parable's moment of tension arrives:

8 And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' 9 And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. 10 Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. 11 And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 12 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.'

You can imagine the scene, can't you? The master pays the eleventh hour laborers first and gives them a denarius, the same amount he promised to the men hired at the very beginning of the day. The men who were hired earlier saw this moment and assumed (who wouldn't?) that they were going to be paid more. But much to their surprise, the master pays them exactly what he had promised at the beginning of the day: a denarius.

The laborers received the agreed upon amount, but it didn't seem fair in light of the master's actions with the laborers who worked far less hours. Therefore, some of the servants grumbled. The word for grumble is called an onomatopoeia which is a word that imitates the sound it describes. The Greek word is gogguzo, and it sounds like the act of grumbling. They are complaining because the master is obviously unfair. Some workers only put in an hour worth of work and for that matter they didn't even work during the heat of the day! It would seem that the laborers have a point.

However, the Master responds in a way designed to reset their understanding of fairness. First, he reminds them about their agreement: "13 But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?" In other words, there is no unfairness here. They got what was promised.

Secondly, he tells them that he is free to be generous to the other workers. The grumbling men have not been treated unfairly just because the Master was generous to others.

14 Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"

You see, the real problem was not an issue of fairness but one of envy. And the Master's argument is simply that he has chosen to be generous. Why should that make them angry?

Jesus then concludes the parable with a simple, profound, and backwards statement: "16 So the last will be first, and the first last." What is he really trying to say?

Jesus is showing them (and us) the traumatic beauty of God's grace. He is laying out for them that God's grace is beautifully unfair. Now I know that those words don't seem to go together very well but they really do. Let's think about this.

By definition, grace means getting something that you don't deserve; it is unfair. That's why it is grace. However, a problem can emerge in your thinking if you are around, talk about, and observe grace in action because grace can become the new baseline or standard. In other words, you see grace in action and it becomes the new basis of what is fair. You wonder or grumble about why God's grace isn't poured out on everyone. Or you wonder or grumble about the additional grace in the form of reward or blessing that God seems to give to one person which seems greater than another. This might lead you to believe or say that God isn't being fair.

Two things run counter to this: 1) the reality of what we deserve and 2) the sovereignty of God. What do human beings deserve? As natural born sinners we deserve definitive and eternal separation from God. True fairness would be a holy God damning every single human being ever born. The problem then is not just our definition of fairness but our understanding of the problem of sin. Every person ever born after Adam and Eve being separated from God would be righteous, just, and fair. After all that is what happened with angels in Satan's rebellion. There was no second chance, no grace, and no unfairness.

The other aspect here is that God is sovereign over all things. Since damnation would be fair, any act of mercy on his part is both gracious and free. God can be as gracious as he wants without it violating any system of fairness. The master says, "Am I not allowed to do what I chose with what belongs to me?"

To say that “the first are last and the last are first” means that God operates on a system that might seem unfair but it is not. It means that everything that God gives is completely undeserved, and it is his call. Let me give you a few implications of this:

- Salvation is, by definition, an act of a gracious and sovereign God who gives us what we don’t deserve. Everything in life needs to be informed by this truth including things that don’t make sense or questions that are held in tension.
- Even after salvation, God’s blessings and even his rewards are rooted in his undeserved grace.
- If you don’t start from a right understanding of what is truly fair, you will evaluate fairness and greatness incorrectly. Grumbling instead of gratitude will take over.
- On the other hand, if you can view everything as so much greater than what you deserve, it will radically change how you view life right now.

The reason that Jesus gives his parable is because the disciples need to understand how things work in Jesus’s kingdom. They, like us, live in a world whose definition of fairness and greatness is often opposite of Jesus’s. And Jesus wants all of us to see that grace is beautifully unfair. The logic of grace is gloriously upside down.

Victory: Spiritual Triumph May Look Like a Failure at First

The next thing in the text is a statement by Jesus regarding what is going to happen to him. This is the third time that Jesus has explicitly told his disciples what will happen to him (see Matt 16:21 and 17:22-23).

17 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, 18 "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 19 and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."

This explanation gives far more detail, and adds some things that Jesus has not mentioned before. New to this treatment are the following:

- Jewish spiritual leaders will be involved, condemning him to death
- Gentiles will carry out his execution
- His treatment will include mocking, flogging and crucifixion

This is the plan for Jesus’s life, and it must have been horrifying to the disciples to hear. Think about what Jesus is saying. They are on their way to the most sacred city in the world, and the most religious people in their nation are going to condemn him to death. God-less Gentiles – the Romans, no less – will do the bidding of these religious leaders. Not only is he going to be condemned; he is going to be mocked, horribly beaten, and then he will be killed in such a way

that will indicate God's ultimate displeasure. Deuteronomy 21:23 said that everyone who was hanged on a tree was cursed by God. The plan must have seemed like a disaster.

Thankfully, he also mentions the resurrection because his victory over the grave becomes a validating event that he truly is the Son of God, and it secures his defeat of sin and death. But think with me what it must have been like to hear all of that. It doesn't sound like a very good and effective plan, does it?

There's an important lesson here about Jesus's kingdom. Spiritual triumph may look like a failure at first. Just think of it! God took the most unjust, inhumane, and unfair situation, and he used it to bring redemption to his people. He took the worst and most despicable plan of Satan, and he used it for his own glory and to bring people to himself. The world's mentality would have looked at Jesus's death and thought, "You followed the wrong guy." But it is exactly backwards. A tool of torture, oppression, and cruelty – the cross – became a symbol of hope, forgiveness, and life.

This is what God loves to do. He loves to create beauty out of ashes (Isaiah 61:3). He loves to use the weak and foolish things in the world to confound the wise (1 Cor 1:27). And he promises that even in the darkest of moments, when you feel as though everything is coming apart at the seams that nothing will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:31). This is God's way of doing things. It is the upside down logic of God that weakness equals strength (2 Cor 12:9), humility equals exaltation (1 Peter 5:6-7), and suffering produces glory (Rom 8:18).

Spiritual triumph may not be victorious at first. But that is how God often works.

Authority: True Power and Greatness are Found in Serving

The final upside down statement comes from an encounter with Jesus and the mother of James and John.

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able."

There are a number of remarkable things about this request. First, it is interesting that this mother would even make this kind of request. She is obviously desperate (kneeling before him), and it seems a bit brash. Secondly, she asks for the two highest positions of honor. Third, notice that the request is filled with faith because she and her sons believe in the coming kingdom. Finally, the confidence of the disciples is quite presumptuous. They think (v 22) that

they are able to drink the cup that Jesus will drink. So the Zebedee family is filled with faith and pride at the same time. Did you know that is possible? It is.

Faith and pride can easily coexist in your heart by believing that Jesus is the Messiah and, at the same time, believing that you deserve or earned a position of honor. The disciples are not unlike any of us: we tend to overestimate our ability and our moms don't help!

Jesus then offers a mild rebuke, and we find that the other disciples are none too pleased about this request.

23 He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." 24 And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.

Finally, Jesus gives them and us a lesson that is worth remembering about what real authority, power, and leadership look like. Once again we see the upside down logic of Jesus.

25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.

Jesus identifies here that it is often the case that those in positions of authority over reach. The disciples would have been very familiar with the corruption and cruelty often connected the rulers of their day. For example, Herod the Great was so concerned that no one would mourn at his funeral that he gave orders that at his death all the men of the city were rounded up and killed. His soldiers never carried out his orders, but it illustrates the point. Positions of authority or even positions of perceived authority can bring out the worst in people.

The upside down logic of Jesus even affects authority. Listen to what he says:

26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt 20:1-28)

There are three things that Jesus says here:

1. You've got to be different than the world – "It shall not be so among you..."
2. Greatness is found in being a servant – "whoever would be great...must be your servant"
3. The ultimate example of this is Jesus – "even as the Son of Man came..."

A life like this is totally opposite of how our world thinks. And when we are tempted to think, "No way, no one really lives like this!" we are told to look to Jesus. Consider that Jesus, the sovereign Son of God – full of all power and authority – humbles himself by becoming a man,

serves humanity by paying for the sins of those who would believe in him, and he gives his life as a ransom. Don't miss this! Jesus not only paid the ransom, a price paid for the freedom of a common slave; he personally **became** the ransom. He not only paid your debt; he took your place.

And the effect according to Paul was great authority: Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11). Greatness, authority, and ultimate dominion come on the basis of service.

It is gloriously upside down! It is beautifully backwards! It would make no sense unless you knew that this is the way that you were redeemed in the first place.

Preach the Upside-Down Logic of the Bible to Yourself

You see this is why we have to keep preaching the gospel to ourselves. We have to constantly remind our world-saturated, power-hungry, self-exalting hearts that we did not get what we deserve; it's all a gift of grace. We have got to come back – time and time again – to the gospel. We have to tell ourselves often that spiritual victory isn't always obvious or recognizable right now. And we have to preach to ourselves that it was Jesus who first served us by becoming a ransom.

Do you see how backwards this is? Do you think this way? Do you live this way? Do you know the Lord Jesus who lived this way and makes it possible to be like this? Does this motivate you to be a servant and to be okay when people treat you like one? Does this help you process the "unfair" stuff that happens in your life?

Once again we see the radical nature of Jesus's life and his teaching. His life and his words are backwards and often the opposite of the world in which we live. Jesus's logic is gloriously and redemptively upside down.

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