Sacrificial Love — Delivery Transcript

Matthew 13:53–58; John 3:16 (CSB) · Wes Terry · Sunday, December 24, 2023 · *Advent 2023*

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Well, as a church we've been in the season of Advent, so every week during Advent we light one of these Advent candles and each candle represents an Advent theme. For those of you new to the idea of Advent, the word Advent comes from the Latin word adventus, which just means to come, a coming, like a visitation. And most people, when they think of Advent during Christmas, they think of the first coming of Jesus, but it's actually inclusive of more than that. It's also inclusive of this eager anticipation of his second coming.

And so for the last four weeks or the last three weeks, we've been looking at the parables in Matthew thirteen that talk about what that kingdom will look like when it comes, when Jesus comes again. And every parable kind of comes at it from a different angle. The first parable we looked at was the parable of the soils. There's four different types of soil when it comes to people who receive the message of the kingdom, but only one kind of soil receives the message of the kingdom and it actually changes them.

It bears fruit in their life. And it's a reminder that when it comes to the kingdom of God, the offer is universal. The salvation offer is for anyone who would have ears to hear, but it's actually only received by those who have the right kind of condition in their heart. Advent peace is a little bit untraditional in the sense that we can have peace even in the midst of great difficulties and brokenness. And the parable that Jesus gave in Matthew 13 was about a farmer who planted some wheat in his field, but an enemy came and planted some weeds alongside the wheat.

And when the servants of the farmer say, "Hey, do you want us to come and pull up those weeds, those nasty weeds that that evil person planted?" He says to the servants, "No, I want you to let them both grow together." And it's a reminder that in God's kingdom we can have this incredible peace even in the midst of great suffering and evil and brokenness in the

world, that for whatever reason the King of the kingdom has allowed in his patience both to grow together until the time of the harvest.

And then the last parable we looked at was about joy. And we said that the kingdom of God gives us a surpassing joy, but it's an unseen treasure, this joy of God's kingdom. And he in the parable likened it to a treasure that was buried in a field. That one day one guy was just working in the field and he came upon the treasure and what he did is he reburied the treasure, went and sold everything that he had. And liquidated it to have cash so that he could buy that field.

And then the other example Jesus gave was a pearl merchant who spent his whole life looking for valuable pearls. And then when he found one pearl of great price that was incomparable to anything he'd ever seen before, he goes and he liquidates his entire net worth, which would have been sizable, and he buys that pearl. And that's the joy of the kingdom, the kingdom of God. When it comes in its fullness, it will give us a joy that is worth giving up everything for, no matter how much it may cost.

And so, if you wanted to summarize it, we've seen that the hope of the kingdom is a surprising hope. We've seen that the peace of the kingdom is a subversive peace. In other words, it doesn't always look like what we think it's going to look like. And we've seen that the joy of the kingdom is a surpassing joy. This week we're going to finish Matthew 13 and we're going to look at not his final parable, but what he does after the parable. Essentially what Jesus does after the parable is he goes to his hometown.

And how many of you, when you go to your hometown, it's a mixed bag? I know that's true for me in Roby—not because of anything Roby did wrong, but because of what I did wrong. Every time I go back to Roby, everybody knows: "Well, you're a preacher now. That's interesting." It's kind of one of those deals. Jesus in a similar way, he didn't do anything that I did, I promise you that. He was the sinless Son of God. But he comes to his hometown and the people give him an unfriendly welcome because the kingdom that Jesus was preaching was scandalous to them.

It was offensive, the message. And so we're going to see this morning that Advent love is a scandalous love. So it's a surprising hope, it's a subversive peace, it's a surpassing joy, and it's a scandalous love. We're going to pick it up in Matthew chapter 13, starting in verse 53 down to verse 58. Matthew 13, starting in verse 53: When Jesus had finished these parables, he left there and he went to his hometown, and he began to teach them in their synagogue so that they were astonished, and they said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?

Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother called Mary? And his brothers, aren't they, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And his sisters, aren't they all with us? So where

does he get all these things?" And they were offended by him. And Jesus, in response to that, says that a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household. And he did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief. Jesus comes to his hometown and he gets rejected. They hear the amazing teachings of Jesus in their synagogue.

They even see the miraculous works that Jesus performs. And yet even though they saw the miraculous works and heard the amazing teaching, they still rejected him. They were offended. Because it didn't look like what they thought it was supposed to look like, and it didn't sound like what they thought it was supposed to sound like. And the same thing happens today. People can hear the amazing news of the kingdom. They can even see some of the miraculous works that Jesus performs in our day today, but still be offended. What about you?

When you hear the message of the kingdom, just because it doesn't look like what you think it should look like or sound like what you think it should sound like, do you get offended by him? This is not new for Jesus. From the very beginning, this was characteristic of his life, if you think all the way back to the Christmas story when Jesus was born. He was born to a virgin, Mary, and Mary had to carry the offense of being pregnant out of wedlock. When Herod, the king of the Jews at that time, got news that Jesus was being born into the world, this fulfillment of prophecy, he tried to have every boy two years old and under in that area murdered.[1] Even Simeon, who was eagerly waiting for the Messiah—it's one of the classic Christmas texts.

I can't remember the Latin word for it, but it almost always gets read during times like these. He says that finally my eyes have seen the Messiah, I can die in peace. Everybody remembers that part, but what he says right after that part is that this Messiah will be a cause of stumbling for many in Israel, and that he will be a sign that will be opposed. When Jesus and Mary and Joseph get to Bethlehem and they're going to try to get a room at the inn, what happens? They're denied and rejected.

From the very beginning of Jesus' life, people have been offended by him, just as people are offended by him today. And what happens is that because people know this, there's an inclination for people to want to try to remove the offense of Jesus. And there's a whole project that started back in the early 19th century called liberal Christianity. And the whole idea behind liberal Christianity was to liberate Jesus from the offense that he caused. And when I say offense, the Greek word that was used, if you looked at it, was the Greek word *skandalizomai*, where we get our word scandal.

So it doesn't just mean that people disagree with Jesus. It means that people are absolutely disgusted by certain things that Jesus comes to represent. And that's true in our culture, which is why a lot of liberal Christians want to liberate Jesus from that scandal. They're fine

with the love part of Jesus. They're even fine with the pacifist part of Jesus of non-retaliation. Maybe they're good with the forgiveness part of Jesus. But the whole narrow exclusivity when it comes to salvation, they're not so great with that. This whole idea that he's the way, the truth, and the life, those kind of truth claims don't square well in our culture.

So what happens is there's a project to liberate Jesus from those things and keep him from being so offensive to so many people in our culture. The only problem with that approach of liberating Jesus from the offense that he causes in our culture is that that Jesus didn't exist in human history. That Jesus is not a Jesus who would ever change the world. And that Jesus is not a Jesus who can actually change your life. And I just want you to consider these for just a moment. For those who kind of want to liberate Jesus from the offense he causes about his attitude about the Bible, you know, Jesus believed the Bible is the Word of God.

People want to kind of tweak that. Some people want to tweak the part about Jesus and his views on sexuality and marriage and stuff like that. Some people want to change Jesus' views so that he's more supportive of certain policies in the Democratic platform or the Republican platform when it comes to U.S. politics. There's all sorts of approaches to do this, but what they do in order to make that happen is they'll take the four gospels and say, well that's not really as trustworthy as it needs to be for us to come to a true historical portrait of Jesus.

And so they have this historical Jesus, that's the one version of Jesus and they have the—well, they call it the Christ myth, which is the miraculous parts of Jesus and they say they're two different people. But let's just entertain for a moment—let's take away the Bible, okay? Let's pretend like you don't believe the Bible is the Word of God. You treat the four gospels just like you would treat any other historical ancient document. You become suspicious of the miracles and all of those things. Even if you took away the Bible completely and all you used was external sources like Josephus and Tacitus and other historians and writers during the day, you still have a historical core of Jesus that is impossible to be this unoffensive version that people want.

Because even the historical core, when you take all the Bible stuff away, you still have someone who claimed to be the Messiah. You have someone who was crucified by the Romans. You have someone whose Jewish followers worshiped him as God, and you have someone whose followers worshiping as God preached that he actually rose from the dead. Now it's one thing to worship someone as God if you're kind of cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs or you're maybe from a Hindu background and it's kind of more common to deify different people, but you don't have that in Judaism.

In Judaism, it was high scandal to treat anyone as God, much less worship him, and yet these Jewish followers of Jesus worship him as God. You don't have that version of Jesus in history if he's Mr. Rogers, you know. An unoffensive Jesus that kind of makes everybody

happy does not get crucified by the Romans. Okay? That Jesus does not exist in history, no matter how hard people try to remove that offensive aspect of his life and his ministry. The other thing is that Jesus can't change history. When I first came on as pastor, I had a friend on our pastoral team tell me, "Wes, you're not going to be able to please everybody, so you might as well just swallow that and get over it."

And he's not wrong, by the way. You can't please everybody. What he meant by that is you are who you are and you're going to do what you're going to do. You can't be inauthentic to who you are, but just know that it's going to polarize. Some will like it and some won't, and you just got to be okay with that. And in a similar way that's true of everybody who's ever lived, especially Jesus. See, you can try to make Jesus inoffensive in our culture by changing his views on sexuality and changing his views on traditional marriage.

And really promote the parts of Jesus that we like, like forgiveness and love and non-retaliation. But if you make him unoffensive in our culture for that reason, you actually make him offensive in a different culture, such as the Middle East, who would be horrified by an untraditional approach to marriage or untraditional views on sexuality. And they would balk at the idea of non-retaliation or forgiving your enemy. So you made him tasteful in America, but he's distasteful in the Middle East. Vice versa, if you try to make him tasteful in the Middle East, he'd be untasteful in America.

The reason is because Jesus has a way of offending every culture. I like the way that Tim Keller describes this. He says that Jesus is unique in how he attacks the dominant ideology in a culture. So in a Middle Eastern culture, that's kind of an honor-shame-based culture and moral perfection is very necessary in order to be good in that culture, Jesus comes along and says you'll never attain moral perfection, and the only people who are rightly related with God are people who don't lean on their record but lean on mine.

That's offensive in the Middle East. And then in the American culture, where we're very prone and key on individualism and rights and moral laxity, Jesus comes along and says, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you can't enter the kingdom of God. It's not about you as a individual. It's about you being part of a community. You can't live the Christian life alone. So he's offensive in our culture. The point is you can't make Jesus unoffensive in one place and not make him still be offensive in another place.

People who change the world are polarizing. Can we agree on that? They're polarizing. Otherwise, they would not change the world. And Jesus changed the world because of his offense. And when you try to take away the offensive nature, you take away the historical Jesus. He didn't exist in history. That kind of Jesus won't change the world. And the most important part is that kind of Jesus will never change your life. Because if you have a Jesus who always agrees with you and never contradicts you, you don't have a Lord—you have a mirror.

And mirrors don't change your life. Mirrors don't change the world. For someone to be in a relationship with you, the people that you value the most, the most meaningful relationships in your life are relationships that have the right to contradict you and actually make use of that right. That's why your spouse is one of God's greatest gifts to you if you're married. Because they're always contradicting you. Or your mother or your father. It's one of the best gifts of God in your life. Or a brother or a close friend. The wounds of a friend are better than the kisses of an enemy.

You can't have Jesus change your life if he never has the right to contradict you or offend you or say, hey, you want to go left? I think you should go right. Oh, you want to stay? Well I think you should go. And that's the Jesus of the New Testament, that's the Jesus of history, that's the Jesus who changed the world. That Jesus is offensive. And so what we need to come to terms with is instead of apologizing for Jesus' offensiveness in our culture, we need to come to better understand why we get so triggered by Jesus.

And there are explanations of why we get so upset in our text this morning. And I know that our text is not a traditional Christmas text, but the reasons that people get offended in our text are actually the same reasons that people got offended by the original Christmas scandal, Jesus being born into the world. And they're actually revealed in those two verses, in verses 55 and 56, where they raise these questions. Their questions actually reveal the scandal of why Jesus was so offensive. Let's read them again. They ask the question, Isn't this the carpenter's son?

Isn't his mother called Mary? What they're saying here is, this is Joseph's boy, right? Joseph was not a rabbi. Joseph was not some fancy scholar. He was just a carpenter. And so Jesus doesn't come from great stock. And then the reference to Mary, that's a veiled reference to her virgin conception. Isn't this that girl that said she was pregnant because of the Holy Spirit? I mean, we all remember that, right? That was kind of shady, right? Isn't this the guy who has the brother Judas and James? Isn't this the guy who has sisters that are among us right now?

This guy cannot be the Messiah. He's too ordinary. He's too plain. He's too unimpressive. And that's the same reason that people reject Jesus today. I know that for a fact in the Middle East—it's why many Muslims reject the idea of Jesus being the Son of God, because if Jesus is God in the flesh, it's anathema to them. There can be no sense in which Allah would wipe himself after going to the restroom. It's—you know—perish the thought, and yet that's exactly the teaching of Christmas, that the infinite became finite, that the extraordinary became ordinary.

That the God who created everything actually entered into his creation. And it's not just that he became ordinary, it's that he became the most ordinary. He revealed himself to shepherds. He came to a virgin teenager. He got fishermen and tax collectors and zealots to

change the world. Some people reject Christmas. The scandal of Christmas is that Jesus is an ordinary savior. He's an unimpressive savior, and so they reject him. But that's just the way God has decided to change the world. And it's actually one of his favorite ways to change the world.

One of the favorite tools of God is to use ordinary people to do extraordinary things. He loves to use the ordinary. He uses guys like Peter. He uses guys like Andrew. He changes the world through a carpenter from Nazareth who on everybody else's radar looked like nothing. See, we're trained to look for greatness in a certain kind of package. Jesus was not wrapped in that kind of paper. He's unimpressive in that sense, but God chooses to use the ordinary. It may be offensive, but that's how the Lord works. It's a stumbling block to the Jews.

It's foolishness to the Gentiles. The other reason that people get offended by Christmas, the Christmas scandal, is because salvation is reserved for unworthy sinners. If you remember the parable of the soils, there's four different types of soil. The gospel is offered to everybody, but Jesus says there's only one kind of person who can receive the gospel and it actually penetrate and take root in their life, and that's the person who has the good soil. And if you look a little higher, it's the person who has ears to hear, a heart to receive, eyes to see, his heart condition is such that he and he alone will receive the good word.

Well, what is that heart condition? What does it take to be someone who can receive the miracle of salvation? You've got to become someone who recognizes you're not enough. That you—in other words, only ordinary people can get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the poor in spirit. It's not the proud, it's not the highfalutin, it's not the morally impressive people who receive the kingdom of God, it's those who are low. It's those who recognize I can't, but God can. And for many people that's just offensive. It offends their pride. It offends everything in them that naturally speaking, makes them think they would be pleasing to God.

For the vast majority of other religions in the world, the way that you become pleasing to God is by moral effort. By striving, by becoming better, by doing more, by reaching the bar, passing the standard. And then Jesus comes along and says, you'll never enter into the true kingdom. You'll never be reconciled to the God of the Bible, the God of creation, that way. You'll actually have to lean on someone else's record. It takes someone who is perfect and you're not perfect and will never be perfect. And until and unless you're ready to admit that about yourselves, you'll never receive salvation because salvation is only given to unimpressive people.

It's only given to unworthy sinners. Now it may be offensive, but the grace of God cannot be earned. There's an illustration that people like to use in comparative religions where they say basically all religions are like blind men feeling their way around a mountain and some people go up the mountain this way and another person finds a trail that takes them up the

mountain a different way, but we're all kind of feeling our way towards God, doing the best that we can. But that's not the message of Christianity. The message of Christianity isn't that we're blind people trying to feel our way towards the top of the mountain.

The message of Christianity is that the God of creation, the one who created the mountain, actually condescended and came to the bottom of the mountain because we would never be able to find our way to him. So he took on flesh and he lived the sinless perfect life of love and obedience before his heavenly Father, and then he willingly laid down his life on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. And three days later, God raised him from the dead as a way of saying, your sins have been atoned for, the price has been paid, salvation is available through Christ and Christ alone.

But it's only given to unworthy sinners. The grace of God cannot be earned. But people want an eightfold path. People want five pillars. People want the daily prayers. They want something they can control and maintain. And the other thing that's offensive about God's grace is you can be someone who lives a pretty morally impressive life. Like you can beat the average bear. You can give away your goods to the poor. You can not cuss, not drink, not chew, don't go with girls who do that kind of thing. You can do all the stuff you're supposed to do, and then you get to heaven and you stand before God and he says, "Get away from me, you worker of lawlessness."

And you'll say, "Well, but I was so much better than everybody else." And he would say to you, "The standard isn't them; the standard is this." And you don't reach it. And so if that's one person and yet you have another person who is murderous and lame and a thief and a con artist and the very worst that this world has to offer and yet that person at one point in his life comes to realize that his sins have separated him from God and that he has no hope of salvation outside of repenting of his sin and putting his faith and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, that person making that sincere, authentic act of repentance and faith, when that person stands before God, he'll say to him, "You are never coming in here on your own record, but because you have trusted in Christ for salvation, come in and enter the joy of your master."

That's offensive. It's very offensive to many people in our culture, but that's the message of the kingdom. It's an unimpressive savior from the world's point of view, and it's only available for unworthy sinners. The grace of God cannot be earned. But if you can get past the Christmas scandal, there's actually a Christmas miracle. If you look there in verse fifty-eight, it says that Jesus was not able to do many miracles there because of their unbelief. There is a sense in which Jesus would have performed incredible miracles, but was not able to do so because of their lack of faith.

And so there is this idea that Jesus, even though he may be ordinary, and even though his message may be only to the unworthy, for those who can get past that scandal and receive

that message into their life, there's actually a Christmas miracle that awaits them. And one of the best passages I know of that describes that Christmas miracle in juxtaposition with the tendency we have to want to reject it is John chapter 1. And we're going to read John chapter 1 when we light our Christ candle, but if you don't mind turning there for just a moment, John chapter 1 starting in verse 10, I want us to read this passage in light of what we've just been talking about in Matthew's Gospel.

John says of Jesus that he was in the world and the world was created through him and yet what? The world didn't recognize him. That can't be God. He came to his own and his own people, what? Didn't receive him. This can't be how we are rightly related to God. But to all who did receive him, he gave to them the right to become children of God. To those who believe in his name, who were born not of natural descent, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And so Jesus may seem ordinary, but if you can move past the offense, there's a Christmas miracle that awaits. If you can move from a place of unbelief to belief, there lays for you a Christmas miracle. You can have the right to become a child of God. Now how does that happen? Well, if you go back to that text, there's two things. There's two responses. There's something we do, and then there's something God does. The thing that we do is that we believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and we receive him into our life.

In other words, it's beyond just mental assent that Jesus is the Son of God, that he came to earth, that he died on the cross, that he rose from the dead. It's going from a place of mentally ascertaining those facts to a point of actually surrendering yourself or giving yourself to Him as Lord. Another way to think about it, the demons believe that Jesus is the Son of God. The demons believe that He is God's Messiah, that He came, that He lived a sinless life, that He died on the cross.

The demons believe those things and they shudder. They're not going to heaven when they die. The thing that actually makes someone a Christian, the thing that gives you the miracle of salvation is not just believing it up here, but receiving it in here, of actually surrendering your life to him as Lord. If you'll believe and receive, one of the things that's making that possible is a thing the Bible calls repentance. Now a lot of people think about repentance as like saying I'm sorry or kind of crying and being upset that you got in trouble.

That's not the way the Bible describes repentance. The way the Bible describes repentance is that it's a change of mind that results in a change of behavior. And so the way I like to think about repentance is that you're in repentance, you're coming to agree with God about the facts. And you're agreeing with God about the facts about Jesus, about him being the Son of God, about Him being the way of salvation, about His death on the cross, paying the penalty for your sin, but you're also agreeing with Him about the facts concerning yourself.

Namely, that I am a sinner separated from God and I cannot save myself. Agreeing with God that I'm far worse off than I could have even imagined when I compare myself not to the standard of my brother or my friend, but consider myself to the standard of a holy God. I'm far worse off than I could have ever imagined. I agree with God about those facts, but I also agree with God about the fact that I'm far more loved than I could have ever dared to hope. That in his great love for me, my heavenly Father sent Jesus into the world to do for me what I could not do for myself.

And when you believe that, that's what the Bible calls repentance. You're coming to change your mind, and it's changing the way you live. Namely, it's what's motivating you and moving you to say, Jesus, if you've given everything to me, then I'll give everything to you. If you've given up your life for me, who am I to withhold my life from you? And when you believe and receive, the Bible says that God will do two things. Number one, he gives you the right. I'm going to call that enablement. God enables you to respond.

Or you might say it this way: God enables you to have ears to hear. God enables you to have eyes to see. God enables you to change your mind because the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart is persuading you that these things are so. But he doesn't just enable you to respond. He actually regenerates you or changes you. He causes you to be reborn. You notice what it said that these people are born not of the will of flesh, nor of the will of man, but of the will of God.

That God gives you the right, but he also causes you to become a child of God. And that's the miracle of Christmas. And that is a miracle that is available for every person in this room. No matter who you are, no matter where you came from, no matter how many bad things you may have done. Doesn't matter how ordinary you are, in fact, the more ordinary the better in God's kingdom. If you'll believe and receive, if even now the Holy Spirit is in your heart working among you and saying, "This is what I need.

This is the miracle I've been looking for. I can find salvation tonight." If that Holy Spirit work is happening in your heart and you're willing to agree with God that you're a hopeless sinner in need of salvation and that God in his great love for you has saved you in Jesus Christ, and then you'll repent of your sins and put your faith in him, then you can receive the gift of becoming a child of God. And so I'm going to ask Mary to come up and we're going to have a time of response and I don't want to twist your arm or do anything like that, but I do want to give you an opportunity to make Jesus Lord of your life this evening.

So would you just bow your heads and close your eyes with me and just in a very raw moment of honesty before you and the Lord—nobody else looking around except me and God who sees what I can't see. If you would say, I've never made that decision to trust in Jesus for salvation, I've been one of those people who's kind of been offended by Jesus,

wanted nothing to do with Jesus because I misunderstood what it was all about. But tonight the Holy Spirit has brought me to a place where I'm ready to trust in Jesus for salvation.

Would you just raise your hand and keep it raised so that I can see it? Alright, I see that hand on my left. Anybody else? Just raise your hand and keep it raised. I see that one too. Anybody else? Just raise your hand and keep it raised. Alright, you can go ahead and lower your hands. So for those of you who raised your hands, the Bible says that we're saved by God's grace, but that salvation comes through faith. And so I'm going to give you a prayer that you can pray that will articulate a response of faith to the Lord.

And so would you just pray this prayer after me? "Heavenly Father, I admit that I'm a sinner and that my sins have separated me from you. And I believe that Jesus is God's Son, that he is God in the flesh, and that he lived the life I couldn't live, and then he died the death I should have died. And so I repent of my sins and I put my faith in Jesus as Lord. And I believe after dying on the cross for my sins, being buried in the ground, on the third day, God, you raised him from the dead.

And I will live my life with the confidence that even as you gave Jesus a resurrection life, you will give new life to me right now as I surrender to you. And so I give you my heart and I give you my life. I make Jesus my Savior and I make him my Lord. I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen." If you prayed that prayer, even if you didn't raise your hand…

[The recording ends here.]

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1. Transcript note: spoken as "every firstborn child in that area"; Matthew records that Herod ordered the massacre of "all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under" (the killing of firstborn sons belongs to the Exodus account). Source: Matthew 2:16 (CSB), BibleGateway. ↩