

#750 On Being Special, or Not. A Double Crossing.

Colleagues,

You're about to read one of the best things we've sent you all year. It comes from Paul Jaster, who blessed us back in January with a three-part overview of Mark's Gospel. If you're not quite sure who Paul is, see the first paragraph of our introduction to [ThTheol 710](#), the first installment in that series. In the meantime take it from those of who us do know him that most anything Paul writes will yield a handsome return on the time you invest in reading it.

That's certainly the case with his offering today, a stunning example of what can emerge when the Crossings six-step method is employed to analyze what's going on not only in God's Scriptures but also in God's world. I'll leave it to Paul to tell you what he's writing about and why. He does that more succinctly than I would. For my part, I simply observe that anyone else who once sat as Paul did at the feet of Master Teacher Bob Bertram will notice how well the teacher rubbed off on the student. Bob is the one who captured the essence of the theologian's mission in two words: "[necessitate Christ](#)." That's the very thing that Paul is about to do.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

P.S. Another reminder that we welcome submissions to Thursday Theology. E-mail them to cabraun98ATaolD0Tcom or jburceATattD0Tnet.

You're Nothing Special

Crossing McCullough and Mark 9:30-37

Recently, David McCullough Jr. made national news and rocked the graduation circuit by having the rash audacity to tell his own beloved high school students in a commencement address that “None of you is special.” There was a second of stunned silence, and then “Bang!”—the Internet went viral.

David McCullough Jr. is the son of the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and is himself a longtime English teacher at Wellesley High School (Wellesley, Massachusetts). He has his father's wit and mastery of words.

McCullough's speech merits the attention of the Crossings Community, not only for its potent wordsmithing (a perennial Crossings favorite) and acute insight into cherished aspects of our culture (the world we are always crossing with Christ's cross), but also because he instinctively uses five out of the six steps of our own “crossing matrix” as he diagnoses our human malady and proposes his remedy and prescription.

This makes for striking convergences and divergences as one crosses McCullough's speech with Mark 9:30-37, where Jesus, the cross-bound Teacher, addresses disciples who are graduating from Discipleship 101 (ministry around the Sea of Galilee) and moving on to their “higher education” at the more advanced level (the necessity of the cross).

Diagnosis: Steps One, Two, Three

McCullough's “Step One” (the external problem) deflates swollen egos with the piercing line that made the headlines:

"You are not special. You are not exceptional. Contrary to what your U9 soccer trophy suggests, your glowing seventh-grade report card, despite every assurance of a certain corpulent purple dinosaur, that nice Mister Rogers and your batty Aunt Sylvia, no matter how often your maternal caped crusader has swooped in to save you...you're nothing special."

Notice who the culprits are in instilling a cultural epidemic of "I'm the greatest" attitudes, the same ailment that afflicted our Lord's first disciples in Mark 9:30-37: coaches, soccer moms, soccer dads, Mr. Rogers, Barney, a host of relatives...and parents like ME!

"Yes, you've been pampered, cosseted ["petted like a lamb" says Webster], doted upon, helmeted, bubble-wrapped. Yes, capable adults with other things to do have held you, kissed you, fed you, wiped your mouth, wiped your bottom, trained you, taught you, tutored you, coached you, listened to you, counseled you, encouraged you, consoled you and encouraged you again." "You've been feted and fawned over and called sweetie pie." [Yikes! How did he know I always call my daughter 'Sweetie pie'?] "But do not get the idea you're anything special. Because you're not."

McCullough's grounding for this claim? Vast "empirical evidence." Hard scientific facts and basic mathematical calculations that even he, an English teacher, cannot ignore.

"Across the country no fewer than 3.2 million seniors are graduating about now from more than 37,000 high schools. That's 37,000 valedictorians... 37,000 class presidents... 92,000 harmonizing altos... 340,000 swaggering jocks... 2,185,967 pairs of Uggs. But why limit it to high school? After all, you're leaving it. So think about this: even if you're one in a million, on a planet of 6.8 billion that means there are nearly 7,000 people just like you." "And consider for a moment the

bigger picture: your planet, I'll remind you, is not the center of its solar system, your solar system is not the center of its galaxy, your galaxy is not the center of the universe. In fact, astrophysicists assure us that the universe has no center; therefore, you cannot be it. Neither can Donald Trump... which someone should tell him."

Towards the end of his "Step One," McCullough finally puts a label on the disease: "our unspoken but not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another," that old law of nature 'survival of the fittest,' which we try to soften and mitigate in these enlightened days by calling everyone 'special.' Or, as he will say at the start of his "Step Five"—"the narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction."

However, as McCullough points out,

"If everyone is special, then no one is. If everyone gets a trophy, trophies become meaningless."

In fact, McCullough says, we Americans have made it worse! We have dumbed down and grade-inflated what it means to be "special," because we have come to love the praise more than the achievement. This sure sounds like a "theology of glory" to me.

"We have of late, we Americans, to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement." "No longer is it how you play the game, no longer is it even whether you win or lose, or learn or grow, or enjoy yourself doing it... Now it's 'So what does this get me?' As a consequence, we cheapen worthy endeavors, and building a Guatemalan medical clinic becomes more about the application to Bowdoin [College] than the well-being of Guatemalans. It's an epidemic—and in its way, not even dear old Wellesley High is immune... where good is no longer good

enough, where B is the new C, and the midlevel curriculum is called Advanced College Placement."

McCullough's "Step Two" (the internal problem) is a one-liner:

"Our unspoken but not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another...springs, I think, from our fear of our own insignificance, a subset of our dread of mortality."

The "spring" (as in the Latin fons, fountain, source) of the external problem is an internal problem—"fear." Phobia. Fear of our own insignificance. A "subset" (that's a good school word) of our mortality. Is this the same kind of fear the disciples had when Jesus started talking about the necessity of his own suffering, death, and resurrection? Is this the kind of fear that caused them to be so silent when they failed to comprehend what he was saying? Was their fear much more than just a teenager's most mortifying nightmare—looking stupid in front of the class? Was theirs a mortifying fear of their own mortality? Which is a very legitimate fear (as opposed to an imaginary neurotic or psychotic one), since the chance of our mortality is exactly 100.00%. No more. No less. And did they cover up that fear by their competitive jabbering about who was the greatest—teacher's pet—the most "special" to Jesus and God?

But let us quickly add that any legitimate fear is not only a subset of our "mortality." It is also a subset of our life "under the law"—as the word "legitimate" suggests—life "under the lex, the legis." And by "law" we mean the law of God in all its many forms: "natural," "legislated," "revealed." And it really does not matter whether it is a law discovered by scientists or catalogued by jurists, moralists or theologians. Any law (whether discovered by a Darwin, disclosed through a Moses, or passed by a congress) boils down to a "not so subtle

Darwinian competition with one another,” the “survival of the fittest.” Those who live up to the law and/or successfully argue their case are rewarded. Those who do not live up to the law and/or lose the case are penalized. That’s the way laws work: reward and punishment. And deep inside we always know that we are not “the fittest.” There is always someone bigger, brighter, and stronger than ourselves—the very rude awakening many cosseted kids have in college, and a reality for which McCullough’s commencement speech seeks to prepare them.

It is the intersection of those two subsets—our “lack of fitness” under God’s law and our “mortality”—that makes our legitimate dread of death so fearful.

McCullough’s “Step Three” (the eternal problem) is his motivator for a big change in life and attitude. He ticks off several secular imperatives (see “Step Five”) and then he says,

“[Do these things], please, with a sense of urgency, for every tick of the clock subtracts from fewer and fewer; and as surely as there are commencements there are cessations, and you’ll be in no condition to enjoy the ceremony attendant to that eventuality no matter how delightful the afternoon.”

Death. He’s talking about death and funerals. And yet, compared to what Jesus says in Mark 9:30-37, we must note that for Jesus cessation/death/funerals, while indeed a problem, are not yet the biggest problem his disciples face. There is a greater fear. For even as Jesus predicts his own imminent passion and death, he simultaneously intimates that there is indeed a “ceremony” we can “enjoy” attendant to the “eventuality,” yes, even certainty of death, no matter how gruesome the afternoon. It is a cheerful ceremony called “resurrection.” The “marriage feast of the Lamb,” as the book of Revelation puts it. (A Lamb, by the way, that was not “cosseted,” even by his own parent, but crucified

and raised.)

No, by far the greater and more crucial problem his disciples face is missing out on God and God's welcoming presence now and in the future in the person of the Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, and those with whom Jesus "hangs"—particularly, the least, the last, the little and the lost. This too, Jesus states as a law of nature. God's nature. Or is it a promise? "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37).

McCullough's line of thinking suggests that taking little kids in arms like Jesus did and thrusting them before today's disciples no longer has shock value because our kids are "cosseted." Better would be to take in arms the very ones we are trying to keep our cosseted children away from—the druggies, the deadbeats, the dropouts, the sex-predators and the perverts. Those who never make it as far as high school graduation. The untouchables. The ones furthest from our radar. We can all think of places in town we don't want our kids to go.

But the point that Jesus is making—HIS big motivator—is that whoever does not welcome the ones that we dismiss as beneath us does not welcome him, the Christ. And whoever does not welcome him, the Christ, does not welcome God, the very one who sent him. That too is a promise—a threatening one. And that is our greater eternal problem. A threat greater than death, because it is "magnified" by the "sting" of God's judgment and rejection. It's one thing to die as a beloved and welcomed child of God. It is quite another to die as a God-forsaken one.

Prognosis: Steps Five & Six

McCullough has no "Step Four" (the eternal solution). But, Jesus does. And we will come back to Jesus at the end of McCullough's

speech, because McCullough's own conclusion "necessitates" it. And isn't that the whole point of any crossing—to necessitate the crucified Christ? The very element Jesus found so crucial in all of his own "passion predictions."

McCullough's "Step Five" (the internal solution) takes us to "faith" language and the effect that "faith" has on our behavior—precisely the same maneuver Crossers do in their "Step Fives." And it is easy to take his secular 'gospel imperatives' and turn them into Christo-centric, gospel-centered ones.

"As you commence, then, and before you scatter to the winds, I urge you to do whatever you do for no reason other than you love it and believe in its importance."

McCullough never says what "it" is. But in the Crossings Community we see "it" as "him," the "Son of Man," the ultimate "human one," Christ, crucified and raised. And we see the "scattering to the winds" as Pentecost, driven, guided, and propelled by the Holy Gust—the third person of the Trinity.

McCullough continues,

"Resist the easy comforts of complacency, the specious glitter of materialism, the narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction. Be worthy of your advantages. And read... read all the time... read as a matter of principle, as a matter of self-respect."

Crossers say that too! "Read, read, read!" But we add both a "hermeneutic" and a "subject" to that imperative. Read how? Read through the "lens" of Jesus'/Paul's/Luther's Law/Gospel hermeneutic. Read using Crossings' six-step diagnosis/prognosis approach, just as we are doing now.

Read what? Read both the Word & the world. Read both

simultaneously, crossing the two together. The beauty of the Law/Gospel hermeneutic is that it is a way of reading everything. Not just Scripture. And not just words printed on a page or on a Nook, Kindle, iPad, iPhone, or whatever other intelligent device makes you look smart while being mobile. The Law/Gospel hermeneutic is also a way of reading the world—our actions, culture, behavior, rationales, and motives. Everything. The entire package.

More “Step Five”:

“Develop and protect a moral sensibility and demonstrate the character to apply it. Dream big. Work hard. Think for yourself. Love everything you love, everyone you love, with all your might.” “The fulfilling life, the distinctive life, the relevant life, is an achievement, not something that will fall into your lap because you’re a nice person or mommy ordered it from the caterer.” “You’ll note the founding fathers took pains to secure your inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—quite an active verb[sic], “pursuit”—which leaves, I should think, little time for lying around watching parrots rollerskate on YouTube.” “Don’t wait for inspiration or passion to find you. Get up, get out, explore, find it yourself, and grab hold with both hands.”

Notice how McCullough Jr. has to work into his address the subject matter of his father—the Pulitzer Prize-winner—the author of *John Adams and 1776*, who, in turn, as a notable American historian has to work the “founding fathers” into his publishing career. Here “has to” means more of a personal compulsion than a divine necessity. It is an accolade to his dad and to our “founding fathers” for their notable achievements. It is worship. Praise.

This is the very opposite of what McCullough was dissing and

dismissing when he lamented the dumbing down of America—praise without achievement. Here with the founding fathers are the accolades that come with true genuine achievement: the pains that other people take to secure our “inalienable right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness”—both the founding fathers who secured them and his prize-winning father, who, like an evangelist, reminds us of their sacrifice so that we likewise might pursue these “righteous” pursuits.

This is as close as McCullough ever gets to a “Step Four” (the eternal solution)—a sacrifice by someone in the past that is good for us today and forever, and yet, it is not anywhere near to what Crossers have come to know as God’s eternal solution proclaimed in the good news of Jesus Christ. First of all, the scope is so limited—Americans only. Only 4.6% of the current 6.8 billion. Secondly, it’s hard to claim that the founding fathers “secured” an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness when the constitutional compromises these fathers constructed, quite intentionally and deliberately, left out huge portions of the population, including slaves. In fact, it could be argued that the greater “pains” in the birthing of our country were borne by those unmentioned slaves and that the pains they bore were precisely what enabled the founding fathers to pursue their fight for freedom—well, freedom for the propertied and merchant class.

Compare this to how Jesus “has to” work his father in, our Founding Father. Already in his first passion prediction, Jesus says, “The Son of man must undergo great suffering, be rejected, be killed, and after three days rise again.” He must become the servant/slave. He must! He must! This is the language of “divine necessity.” Language that is clearly echoed in Mark 9:30-37. These are the “pains” our Founding Father must take to be faithful to his word of promise and to “secure” life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness because this God does dream big...and

does work hard...and does love everything God loves with all God's might. And that "everything" is "everyone!" Or, so we will claim in the missing Step Four that will be necessitated shortly by McCullough's Step Six. But first, two more lines from his Step Five.

"Don't wait for passion to find you. Get up, get out, explore, find it yourself, and grab hold with both hands."

Interesting choice of words isn't it? Passion! Crossers say exactly the same thing: "Don't wait for passion to find you." But, only because we want to declare that God's Passion has already found you. All the things that Jesus predicted—"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands...and will be killed...and in three days will rise again"—has already happened! It is mission accomplished. A firm achievement logged not only in the annals of history but also in God's Book of Life. Work completed. Once and for all. A work that removes the "sting" of God's judgment and rejection from death. And, thus, its great fearfulness.

And now the only thing for us to do is to get up, get out, and explore "the promise" it brings to our own daily lives. That's what we grab on to with "both hands." We grab on to "the promise" of Christ's passion. Because...well, because any other passion will one day fade and let us down. And this "grabbing on" is precisely what faith is. Faith is grabbing on to the promise of Christ's passion with both hands. Exploring it and living it. It is what Jesus was doing when he was holding class outdoors along the way with those first disciples: trying to get them to let go of the 'law' of God/Moses/legislatures/school systems/nature, survival of the fittest, and grab on with both hands to the 'promise' of his passion.

Which brings us at last to McCullough's "Step Six" (the external

solution).

“None of this...should be interpreted as license for self-indulgence.” “Exercise free will and creative independent thought not for the satisfactions they will bring you, but for the good they will do others, the rest of the 6.8 billion—and those who will follow them. And then you too will discover the great and curious truth of the human experience is that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself. The sweetest joys of life, then, come only with the recognition that you’re not special.”Because everyone is.”

I am stunned! I am shocked. McCullough’s last line—his bottom line—is even more startling than his first line. Given the vast “empirical evidence” he has cited above, how in the world can he claim that “Everyone is special”? This bodacious claim just hangs there—like a thought frozen in midair—totally ungrounded and unsupported.

What’s the Basis for this Claim?

Were I an English teacher and saw this in a student’s paper, I would draw a big red circle around this last line and write in the margin, “What’s the basis of this claim? What’s the rationale? What is the support for your final conclusion?”

Certainly it is not logic. McCullough already said what logic says: “If everybody is special then no one is.”

It is not the English. Nothing in Webster or the Oxford English Dictionary suggests that “special” can ever be used as a universal term.

It is not biological science. There, as McCullough said, Darwinian competition is the norm. The law of nature takes over.

Survival of the fittest. And many are unfit.

It is not our experience. There are far too many unnamed, invisible, unaccomplished people who simply are not on our radar. The very point that Jesus was making when he first took a little child in arm.

It is not TV—Survivor, American Idol, The Apprentice, all the other spin-offs. There only the fittest stay and anything less goes. It is Survivor not ‘survivors.’ American Idol not ‘idols.’ The Apprentice not ‘apprentices.’ Nor is it the Nielsen Ratings. This stupid stuff is on and all the intelligent shows I like get canned because they are not fit enough for the networks’ target audience—those much younger than myself.

It is not history. Well, at least, the history that we read in high school textbooks. For by and large that history is written by the winners, not the losers.

Maybe it is kindness and compassion. But, if so, then it is a bit ingenuous, condescending, and a denial of reality.

In the academic world, “everyone is special” is a common mantra that drives and funds a whole host of special-ed and gifted programs. And yet, every school is painfully aware that there are too many needy kids it cannot reach because of issues that sadly are too widespread and common. Schools cannot afford to design and offer a special-ed program for “everyone,” as special as they may be. And “dream big” programming often gets cut first when the chips are down. Even in the most affluent of times, choices must be made or the taxpayers will revolt. Again, a natural selection of who is “special” and who is not by economic realities.

Astrophysicists tell us that it is getting extremely difficult to differentiate the human species (specialness) from any other

life form. That we are dust just like all other matter in the cosmos: we are star dust and to dust we shall return. That there is an anti-matter world out there—an exact mirror image of our own (only to them we are the anti-matter). That the universe is so big and expansive, it has so many galaxies and universes, that even with all the infinite possibilities for random happenings it is still almost a mathematical certainty that there is another world quite similar to ours. That even “something coming from nothing” (creation ex nihil) is nothing special, because it happens on its own all the time. And so, a personal God intervening in this world of ours is not necessary or needed (see Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing*).

The Missing, but Necessary, Step Four

Maybe a “personal God” is not necessary to create the world as science observes it, but it sure seems we could use one to redeem it. It is the same old problem: how do you make everyone special without giving anyone a big head over it, a big head full of the “narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction”?

I don’t know McCullough’s religious affiliation or what role Christianity might play in his life. Due to the public school venue, he might have left some Christian claims unsaid although he may hold them personally. But whether he knows it or not, the very grounding for which his conclusion begs is provided by Jesus in Mark 9:30-37 in what Crossers have come to know and love as their matter of first importance: “Step Four”—God’s eternal solution.

Here heaven’s Lord, exercising his own free will, humbles himself. He becomes what anyone of the human species who wants to be “first” (special) in the kingdom of God needs to be: “the last of all” and “servant of all.” He hangs with the last, the least, the little and the lost. He even hangs with people who

think they are more special than they really are, who think they are the greatest, and who get a big head about it. He does it for all 6.8 billion who are in the world today...and for all who came before or who will ever follow after. He welcomes them into his own outstretched arms to the point that he gets his arms stretched out and crucified for it. Jesus does the very thing that McCullough exhorts of his own Wellesley students, an act of selflessness, the ultimate act of selflessness, not because he is smart and knows that in the end it is in his own best self-interest, but because God's grace and mercy demand it. Jesus must undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed. He must...he must. For no other reason than Jesus, on his Founding Father's behalf, loves us and believes in our importance.

And yet, there is still more. Something which McCullough (or anyone else) never expected or called for, but which God's mercy did. For this selfless act, God raises Jesus from the dead and gives him the name that is above all others: the name of "Lord"—God's own name. Jesus is the ultimate "Special One" (Philippians 2). To him alone belongs both the "achievement" and the "accolade" of being "special" as in the "new song" of Revelation 5. He alone is worthy of our praise and accolades: "Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God. Power, riches, wisdom, and strength, and honor, blessing, and glory are his."

And yet, by his grace everything that makes him "special" does begin to rub off on those he "hangs with."

Jesus' words in Mark 9 set up two potent syllogisms.

Syllogism One:

Major premise – *Crucified people who are raised from the dead are very special.*

Minor premise – *The crucified Jesus was raised from the dead.*

Conclusion – *Jesus is VERY SPECIAL!"*

Syllogism Two:

Major premise – *Those who are served are more special than the ones who serve.*

Minor premise – *Jesus, God's ultimate VIP, became the least of all and servant of all.*

Conclusion – *All ARE special.*

For Christians, the claim "Everyone is special" is grounded in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To Christians, the law (and its exhortation to achieve...achieve...achieve...or else you will become extinct) is the "spouse" we're not crazy about because it all too often leads to pride or despair. We would rather be "married" to Jesus and to his work and to his accomplishments, for it is what he has done for us that makes everyone "special," in a way that gives comfort and encouragement to those who are so painfully and fearfully aware that they are not.

And note each phase of his life is necessary for this claim to be true, really true—his ministry, his death, and his resurrection. And no one can ever get a big head about it, because this is Christ's achievement not our own. And yet, when we cling to his promises in faith, this very achievement does become "our own." And the fulfilling life, the distinctive life, the relevant life does fall into our laps, not because we are a nice person or mommy ordered it from the caterer, but because it is God's gift in Christ given to those who are open and receptive to the call, gathering, enlightenment and saint-ifying of his Holy Spirit. The Holy Gust that comes as part of this great gift as mentioned in Step Five.

This is the very sequence the original Lutheran confessors set up in the Augsburg Confession, Articles I to VI:

*There is a God (AC I)
and we're not it (AC II).
What we are not Jesus is (AC III).
What Jesus is we become by grace through faith for Christ's
sake (AC IV),
by the means of the Spirit working in gospel word and
sacraments (AC V),
so that we might bear God's "good fruit" in the world (AC VI).*

Strikingly, Jesus never calls his disciples "special," a word of praise, an accolade. Instead, when Jesus starts out a sentence aimed at his disciples "You are...", he finishes it with words like "salt," "light," "witnesses," "friends," "branches." "You are the salt of the world." "You are the light of the world." "You are witnesses of these things." "I am the vine, you are the branches." "You are my friends." "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Rather than give them accolades that can lead to big heads, swollen egos, and fierce Darwinian competition, Jesus gives his disciples a job to do and a mission to share that is the very opposite of paralysis and self-satisfaction.

It is a mission of welcome in Christ's name, especially towards those whom the world would ignore or abandon—only to discover that in those whom we welcome, we welcome Christ, the very Christ who welcomes us. And in welcoming him, we welcome the God who sent him.

Maybe the astrophysicists cannot find the center of the universe, but Christians have one. It is Christ, humbled and exalted, crucified and raised. In him we live and move and have our being. It is his extraordinary life that is our sweetest joy. It is from him that we discover the great and curious truth

of the human experience that trusting in his promises is the best thing we can ever do for ourselves. And we do that not just for our sake, but also for the sake of the rest of the 6.8 billion who share this planet with us—and those who will follow them.

When it comes to being “special,” Jesus is. Jesus is special. And so are all those with whom Jesus hangs—which, by his extraordinary love and grace, just happens to be everyone.

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The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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