

## **Review of Gentle and Lowly by Dane Ortlund** by Dan Pentimone

This review stems from a heart of concern for the truth. It is not my desire to attack the motives of the author. In fact, I would suspect that the author's intention is simply to see Christ honored and believers helped in their spiritual walk. The statements in the book, however, need to be compared to the Word of God to determine if they are consistent with the truth. Since the Scripture is our only source of truth, the goal of this review is to compare Dane Ortlund's book with the Scripture.

### **Ortlund's Normal Christian Life**

Right from the beginning, Ortlund identifies his audience in the introduction on page 13. He tells us exactly who this book is written for. There is no mistaking his description of the 'type' of Christians he is appealing to in his book.

This book is written for the discouraged, the frustrated, the weary, the disenchanted, the cynical, the empty. Those running on fumes. Those whose Christian lives feel like constantly running up a descending escalator. Those of us who find ourselves thinking: "How could I mess up that bad—again?". It is for that increasing suspicion that God's patience with us is wearing thin..."

This description of his intended audience is further clarified on the next page (14) of the introduction.

It is written, in other words, for normal Christians. In short, it is for sinners and sufferers.

Within the opening pages we get a glimpse into Ortlund's perspective on what 'normal Christianity' looks like. For Ortlund, the normal Christian life is not presented as a Spirit-empowered, sin-conquering, God-honoring life. Rather, it is a life "running on fumes". This may be true if we are making our assessment of the Christian life based on what we see in 21<sup>st</sup> century American "Christianity". However, Paul warns against looking at others and making this the standard of how we view our own lives.

**For we dare not make ourselves of the number or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. -2 Corinthians 10:12**

Ortlund's view of "normal Christianity" is seen throughout the book. Notice how Ortlund describes Christians in the following paragraph on page 91:

Consider your own life. How do you think about Jesus's attitude toward that dark pocket of your life that only you know? The overdependence upon alcohol. The lost temper, time and again. The shady business about your finances. The inveterate people-pleasing that looks to others like niceness but which you know to be fear of man. The entrenched resentment that bursts out in behind-the-back accusations. The habitual use of pornography.

What does Ortlund mean when he says, "the overdependence on alcohol"? Would that not be drunkenness? What about "the shady business about your finances"? Would that not be dishonesty? What about "the habitual use of pornography"? Would that not be the practice of adultery according to Jesus in Matthew 5:27-30? To use such terminology to describe Christians represents a clear

misunderstanding of Christianity. Notice that Ortlund does not use terms that describe a simple action, even if done more than once. Instead, he uses terms that communicate patterns of behavior, or as the Bible describes, a practice of one's life. For example, Ortlund uses the following phrases: that dark pocket, the overdependence, time and again, inveterate, entrenched, and the habitual use of.

The term inveterate is defined by the original 1828 Noah Webster's Dictionary ([www.webstersdictionary1828.com](http://www.webstersdictionary1828.com)), as: Deep rooted; firmly established by long continuance; obstinate; used of evils; an inveterate course of sin. And having fixed habits by long continuance; used of persons; as an inveterate sinner. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, ([www.dictionary.cambridge.org](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org)) inveterate means "someone who does something very often and cannot stop doing it". According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)) inveterate means: 1. Confirmed in a habit : habitual 2: firmly established by long persistence.

To use a term like "inveterate" is very intentional in light of the fact that most people don't even use that word. But the meaning is clear. Ortlund seems to believe that a Christian can "practice sin". This, however, is the very issue that the Apostle John addresses in **1 John 3:7-8**.

**Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.**

John warns us against those who would deceive us into thinking that we can practice sin and still be a believer. Yet Ortlund presents the idea that believers, in fact, can and do practice sin.

Again, on page 209, Ortlund describes Christians with these words:

Here we are. Just ordinary people, anxiously making our way through life, sinning and suffering, wandering and returning, regretting and despairing, persistently drifting away from a heart sense of what we will enjoy forever if we are in Christ.

The writer of Hebrews gives the following warning in **Hebrews 2:1-3**:

**Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.**

While the Scripture presents drifting away as something that must be avoided as a most serious offense, Ortlund describes it as ordinary. Are Christians people who are "persistently drifting away"? Again, the use of the term "persistently" is very descriptive. It appears Ortlund wants to bring comfort to those who not only stumble and fall, but to those who persist in their practice of sinning.

It is essential that our understanding of the normal Christian life be based on God's Word. If we ever expect to rise above the "mediocre" and "normal" Christianity of our day, it will never be accomplished by lowering the expectation of what a "normal" Christian is. Instead, we should read, study, and seek to imitate the men and women of faith identified for us in Hebrews 11. While the men and women in

Hebrews 11 are not portrayed as sinless in the Bible, we should never portray their lives as those who practice sin. We should take Paul's advice in **1 Corinthians 11:1: Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ**. The word "followers" literally means "imitators". Rather than lowering the expectation of what "normal" Christianity looks like, we should raise the standard and show what "Biblical" Christianity looks like. We should always teach that believers are called to be holy, for God is holy (**1 Peter 1:15**). Jesus himself taught that we are to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (**Matthew 5:48**).

In our day of "judge not lest ye be judged" Christianity, Ortlund's book fits right in. Rather than lovingly challenging professing Christians to raise the standard of what a Christian should strive to be, Ortlund instead comforts Christians to know that

The sins of those who belong to God open the floodgates of his heart of compassion for us. The dam breaks. It is not our loveliness that wins his love. It is our unloveliness. (p. 75)

In other words, we are encouraged to take great comfort in the fact that the more we sin, the more God's grace abounds or increases to us (see **Romans 5:20-6:2**). Although I am certain Ortlund would object to my portrayal of his view, the reader must decide. Read the following quotes that Ortlund makes repeatedly throughout the book. Can you see how readers might conclude that the more we sin, the more God's grace overflows? The idea that the more we sin, the more Jesus accepts and loves us is seen repeatedly throughout the book. Consider the following:

With Christ, our sins and weaknesses are the very resume items that qualify us to approach him. (p. 64)

When we feel as if our thoughts, words, and deeds are diminishing God's grace toward us, those sins and failures are in fact causing it to surge forward all the more. (p. 68)

But to those who do belong to him, sins evoke holy longing, holy love, holy tenderness. (p. 70)

If the intensity of love maps onto the intensity of misery in the one beloved, and if our greatest misery is our sinfulness, then God's most intense love flows down to us in our sinfulness. (p. 168)

He is a billionaire in the currency of mercy, and the withdrawals we make as we sin our way through life cause his fortune to grow greater, not less. (p. 173)

It means the things about you that make you cringe most, make him hug hardest. (p. 179)

Our sins cause his love to surge forward all the more. (p. 180)

It means that our fallenness now is not an obstacle to enjoying heaven. It is the key ingredient to enjoying heaven. Whatever mess we have made of our life—that's part of our final glory and calm and radiance. (p. 210)

If his grace in kindness is "immeasurable riches"—as opposed to measurable, middle-class grace—then our sins can never exhaust his heart. On the contrary, the more weakness and failure, the more his heart goes out to his own. (p. 210)

That place in your life where you feel most defeated, he is there; he lives there, right there, and his heart for you, not on the other side of it but in that darkness, is gentle and lowly. (p. 216)

Such statements do not evoke the fear of God in those who hear them. Indeed, there is a need for mercy and grace when a believer falls, but never should we encourage people before they sin with such thoughts that the more we sin, the more grace will abound. This is not to say that Ortlund never speaks of repentance. For example, he writes on page 111, “While Christ is a lion to the impenitent, he is a lamb to the penitent”. Such a statement is true, praise God. Jesus is truly our Advocate when we come in repentance to Him. However, Ortlund rarely communicates this concept, while he frequently seeks to comfort those in their sin.

I realize that some will accuse me of misrepresenting Ortlund’s meaning in this book. Some will do this who have never even read the book. They will claim that Ortlund is only presenting one aspect of who Christ is. Therefore, it is incorrect to criticize this book as though it represents the entirety of his beliefs. My response is that a book or a sermon can surely be presented to bring out a truth that is often overlooked and therefore needs to be emphasized. However, everything that is presented about one aspect of truth can never contradict other aspects of truth. Nor can the one truth that is being presented neglect to clearly explain to some degree that there is another aspect of truth that must also fit with this truth. In other words, you must tell the truth, and only the truth.

Consider the following example on page 116. Ortlund writes the following:

Consider the depiction of the risen Christ in Revelation 3. There he says (to a group of Christians who are “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked,” v. 17): “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door”—what will Christ do?—“I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (v. 20). Jesus wants to come in to you—wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, naked you—and enjoy meals together. Spend time with you. Deepen the acquaintance. With a good friend, you don’t need to constantly fill in all gaps of silence with words. You can just be warmly present together, quietly relishing each other’s company. “Mutual communion is the soul of all true friendship,” wrote Goodwin, “and a familiar converse with a friend has the greatest sweetness in it.”

At first glance, Ortlund seems to make a very encouraging point here. Just open the door and invite Jesus in, just as you are. You can be friends and have a meal together. Isn’t that pleasant! Ortlund seems to be saying, see how gentle and approachable Jesus is here. I’m guessing you never thought of Jesus this way before. Ortlund then throws in a quote from an old Puritan about friendship to prove that his point is biblical and then moves on. After all, as Ortlund says on page 155, “The message of this book is that we tend to project our natural expectations about who God is onto him instead of fighting to let the Bible surprise us into what God himself says.” Again, Ortlund throws in another quote, this time from John Calvin, just to show the reader that he is simply reiterating what the Puritans believe.

The problem with the above line of thinking is that it is not only false and unbiblical, but also deceitful and deadly. Let’s begin by reading the passage from **Revelation 3:14-22** in its entirety.

**“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**”

Did you see that Ortlund left out some key parts of the passage? For example, **“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”** It would seem like those words would be pretty important if Jesus said them in the very context of his description of them.

Ortlund seems to neglect to tell us that Jesus' heart is being portrayed here. Of course, since Ortlund says on page 140 that “Punishment is unnatural” to God, he must have felt it unimportant to mention the punishment with which Jesus threatens them (**I will spit you out of my mouth**). To say something is unnatural, means that it is not a part of the nature of something. It presents the opposite meaning of the word itself. To say punishment is unnatural to God means that punishment is not a part of the nature of God. However, the Bible is perfectly clear in **Psalm 89:14: Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before thy face**. We see the complete truth about nature of God in this verse. God is a God of justice, judgment, mercy, and truth. In other words, punishment is part of the nature of God; it is not *unnatural* to him. Consider **Matthew 25:46: And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal**.

Returning to Revelation 3:14-22, What about Jesus' words that followed his description of these people? Before Jesus tells them that He will come in and eat with them, he tells them the following: **I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent**. What we see in this counsel is the mercy of Christ. He offers them an alternative to his judgment and punishment. He offers to sell them gold so that they might be rich. He offers them white garments so that they may clothe themselves and salve to anoint their eyes so that they might see. He then expresses his love (**those whom I love, I reprove and discipline**), and then he urges them to be zealous and repent.

There is no indication whatsoever that Jesus is saying that he will come in and eat with them in their wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, naked condition as Ortlund most definitely states. The truth is that Ortlund has misrepresented the character of Jesus here. Ortlund is taking the Scripture out of context, and this is a most dangerous and deadly deception.

Contrast Ortlund's approach with that of Charles Spurgeon. In Spurgeon's sermon entitled “Turn or Burn” he writes the following warning to Christians:

In the next place, repentance to be sure, must be entire. How many will say, "Sir, I will renounce this sin and the other; but there are certain darling lusts which I must keep and hold." O sirs, In God's name let me tell you, it is not the giving up of one sin, nor fifty sins, which is true repentance; it is the solemn renunciation of every sin. If thou dost harbor one of those accursed vipers in thy heart, thy repentance is but a sham. If thou dost indulge in but one lust, and dost give up every other, that one lust, like one leak in a ship, will sink thy soul. Think it not sufficient to give up thy outward vices; fancy it not enough to cut off the more corrupt sins of thy life; it is all or none which God demands. "Repent," says he; and when he bids you repent, he means repent for all thy sins, otherwise he never can accept thy repentance as being real and genuine.

Spurgeon's warning is consistent with that of the Apostle Paul in **Philippians 2:12-13: ...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**

### **Are Christians Saints or Sinners?**

Ortlund's book clearly demonstrates that Ortlund doesn't understand the difference between sinners and saints. A simple word study of every verse in the Bible including the words "sinner," "sinners," "saint," and "saints" will prove the truth of this distinction. A sinner in the Bible is one who is enslaved or devoted to sin. Every unbeliever is enslaved to sin. A saint is one who has been set free from sin (**Romans 6:7, 18, 22**). No saint is enslaved to sin. Webster's 1828 Dictionary defines a sinner with these words: "It is used in contradistinction to saint, to denote an unregenerate person; one who has not received the pardon of his sins." While some passages may appear to contradict this distinction on the surface, a careful examination of the context will confirm this truth. If you have never conducted this simple study, why not do so with humility before arguing against the conclusion that believers are always referred to as saints in the Bible? John MacArthur, in the MacArthur Study Bible, makes the following comment regarding James 4:8: "Cleanse your hands, you sinners." MacArthur says, "sinner, a term used only for unbelievers" (p. 1882). Again, MacArthur's comment on **James 5:20** says, "sinner, cf. 4:8. A word used to describe the unregenerate."

Ortlund doesn't understand this very basic Biblical distinction, though, and thus his whole foundation is faulty. This is evident throughout his book. When you consider that Ortlund describes Christians in the following terms, it becomes clear why.

#### **Page # Description**

13	Sinners and sufferers
14	Sinners and sufferers
14	Fickle sinners
23	Despicable and unclean
24	Dirty sinners and numbed sufferers
36	Diseased
40	Sinners
40	Unbelieving hearts
63	We are factories of fresh resistances to Christ's love
78	Our hearts are wired in such a way that we constantly drift from a moment-by-moment belief in this full exoneration

82 To-the-uttermost sinners  
84 Our prayer life stinks most of the time  
85 Our sinning goes to the uttermost  
89 We are unrighteous  
92 Our fallen hearts intuitively manufacture reasons that our case is not really that bad  
107 My fallen, prone-to-wander heart  
107 I am a sinner  
107 Spiritual lepers  
107 Sinful self-absorption  
116 Wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked  
156 Wicked  
157 Fallen human heart...far more intractably law-ish  
166 Sinners who find themselves drowning in the sewage of their life  
187 We are sinners...We are perversely resistant to letting Christ love us.  
188 Our law-ish hearts

Maybe the clearest evidence of his misunderstanding of our identity in Christ is found on page 89. Ortlund writes these words about believers:

We are unrighteous; he is righteous. Even our best repenting of our sin is itself plagued with more sin needing more forgiveness.

Again, not only is Ortlund's statement unbiblical, but it is also entirely hopeless. First, it is unbiblical because believers in both the Old and New Testament are called "righteous" repeatedly. I will not take the time to prove this. I would ask you to look up the word "righteous" everywhere it is used in the Bible to understand this truth. It is also unbiblical because the word "righteous" in the Greek comes from the root word "dikaios". The Greek word for "justified" comes from the same root word. In other words, to put it simply, if you are not righteous, you are not justified! Every unbeliever is unrighteous (unjustified), and every believer is righteous (justified). The Apostle John makes this clear in **1 John 3:7: Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.** The necessity for a person to practice righteousness is to be born again first. Apart from the new birth, **all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).** However, after they were born again, Paul's prayer for the Philippian church is that they would be **filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:11).** As believers, our new identity in Christ is that of being righteous and being saints.

Second, his statement is entirely hopeless. If "even our best repenting of our sin is itself plagued with more sin needing more forgiveness", what hope is there? After you get done repenting, you need to repent of your repenting, and then you have to repent of your next repenting, and so on and so forth. In other words, why repent in the first place? While I know Ortlund would never say it directly, the implication is clear. Don't worry, because Jesus accepts you in your wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked condition. Actually, Ortlund did say that earlier!

## Coming To Christ

Not only is Ortlund's view of the Christian life defective, but even his view of coming to Christ is faulty. Ortlund's view of coming to Christ is made evident in the first chapter. He writes on page 20, "...no one in human history is more approachable than Jesus Christ. No prerequisites. No hoops to jump through...The minimum bar to be enfolded into the embrace of Jesus is simply: open yourself up to him. It is all he needs." Such language is inconsistent with the very words of Jesus in the text he is using (**Matthew 11:28-30**). Jesus tells his hearers that they must **"take my yoke upon you and learn from me"**. Ortlund seeks to explain what this means by saying that the "yoke" and "burden" of Jesus are a "non-yoke" and a "non-burden."

In **Matthew 16:24-25**, we see another passage where Jesus explains what it means to "come after me". Notice the cost of such coming after Christ.

**Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."**

Certainly, when a man follows Christ and is regenerated by the power of the Spirit, it is a joy to obey and even suffer for Christ. But to teach that the yoke and burden are a "non-yoke" and a "non-burden" is not true. If it were, Jesus would be saying that it is a "non-cross" and a "non-denying" of self as well. The truth is that if we are to come to Christ, we must count the cost, take up our cross, deny ourselves, and then follow Him. To deny these truths is to present an easy-believism message that is rampant in American "Christianity". Those who would defend Ortlund's use of such terminology have no legitimate right to claim that the "easy-believism", "pray a prayer" message popular in evangelicalism is unbiblical.

Consider a few other passages where Jesus interacts with people who seem to want to come to him and follow him.

## The Rich Young Ruler

**Mark 10:17-27 - And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."**

## Three Potential Followers of Jesus

**Luke 9:57-62 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him,**



**“Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”**

### **The Great Crowds**

**Luke 14:25-33 Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.**

In each of the above examples, Jesus’ message is clear. If you want to come to me and be my disciple (follower), there is a cost to consider. Unless a man follows the directives of Christ, he cannot be a follower of Jesus. To say that there are “no prerequisites” is false if we believe the Word of God. To use the phrase “no hoops to jump through” is to trivialize what Jesus taught consistently throughout his ministry. To say, “The minimum bar to be enfolded into the embrace of Jesus is simply: open yourself up to him. It is all he needs” is to distort the Scripture and present an unbiblical view of what it means to count the cost.

### **CONCLUSION**

Much more can and will be said about Dane Ortlund’s book, [Gentle and Lowly](#). “Grace To You”, a ministry of John MacArthur’s church, put out a critical review of [Gentle and Lowly](#) as well. The review itself was criticized quite harshly. It can be found here: <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B210315>

Having been a false professor of Christ for thirteen years, even while pastoring a Fundamental Baptist Church, I am compelled to warn about the dangers of this book. I was taught the “carnal christian” teaching during my fundamentalist days. My conclusion about this book is this: [Gentle and Lowly](#) is presenting “carnal christianity” in a way that even those who are reformed in their theology can accept it. By sprinkling quotes from the Puritans throughout the book, those who adhere to Reformed teaching are more likely to read and accept this book.

This is in no way meant to be critical of those who found the book helpful or enjoyed it. I am simply comparing this book to the truths found in God’s Word. We are told of the Bereans in Acts 17:11, “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

My final statements represent my great desire in writing this review. First, search the Scriptures for yourself. Whether you are listening to your pastor's sermon, reading a book by a favorite author, or just considering views that you have always held to, compare everything to the Word of God. It is our only sure, sufficient, and perfect authority! Second, if you are a born-again believer in Jesus Christ, indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, go out and walk in the victory provided to you through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Refuse to live in the defeated, normal, ordinary way that Ortlund describes in this book. Live out the life-changing, sin-destroying, Christ-honoring gospel that set you free from sin's power and made you a righteous saint of the Living God! The victory is ours because Christ is the Victor! Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus.

May Christ be Magnified!