

Zacchaeus

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[0 : 0 0] I'm fascinated by this little man, Zacchaeus. And I'm fascinated because Zacchaeus never knew about the cross, didn't know about salvation, never read any of Paul's epistles, partly because they'd never been written.

I mean, that would have been tricky, agreed. But something dramatically changed in him. And you can bet, I mean, I know you're not gambling people, but you can bet your bottom dollar that when a tax man says he's going to give all the money back, he's ripped people off, something's changed.

I have a friend who lives in the U.S. who was the legal correspondent of the Chicago Tribune and an intellectual atheist.

By intellectual, he wouldn't claim to be intellectual, but he was the kind of person, because he was a legal correspondent, who could marshal an argument that would put in jeopardy the idea that God even existed, never mind that he was interested in the lives of ordinary human beings.

And then something in Lee's mind went wrong, and his wife was converted to the Christian faith.

[1 : 3 1] He said that he noticed such a difference in her after she was converted that he couldn't help but go back over the ground that had led him to the point where he had decided that there was no God, that there was no such thing as a religious thought.

It was all kind of socially constructed mumbo-jumbo. The way his wife was left him with a question in his head.

The question was, is there more to this than meets the eye? Listen, if you've been here since four o'clock, you've heard me droning on about a spoken witness.

And I said at the beginning of that, it was my kind of exclusion clause, that of course I believe that the words we use when we're given opportunity and sensitively in the power of the Spirit to try and influence others for Christ are opportunities that we should seize.

But I also said, it's not just about the words. It's about the life as well that's lived.

[2 : 4 9] We don't know a huge amount about Zacchaeus. But we do know three things about him. The first thing is, we know he was little.

He was short. That's the reason why, in a kind of ridiculously comic way, he had to climb up into a tree just to get a sight of Jesus. The second thing we know about Zacchaeus was he was loathed.

Nobody liked him. And there was a reason for this. I mean, you know, I'll be careful how I say this. I mean, I make jokes on the expensive, you know, last time I did it, I made jokes at the expense of tax collectors.

It turns out there's somebody from Majesty's Revenue and Customs sitting on the front row and didn't play out that well. This is... Look, you know, let's just say that probably they're not top of everybody's Christmas card list.

But of course, with Zacchaeus, there was this added kind of issue. And that was, he didn't just collect taxes on behalf of the Roman occupying troops.

[3 : 56] And they were extremely extortionate taxes. But he also put 10% in his own back pocket. And of course, because he was a Jew, he was considered to be a traitor amongst his own people.

You only have to read your newspaper, sadly, a bit too often to see how people can construct hatred in their hearts and their minds towards people who they regard as traitors.

At least to violence and to, you know, frenzied activity on social media, all that stuff. Of course, Zacchaeus didn't have to put up with Twitter.

But what he had to put up with is a load of people who didn't like him. That's why it was that when Jesus invited him around for tea, sorry, when Jesus invited himself around for tea, it says, the crowd muttered.

You know what? I have to say this to you, church, but the people of God have been quite good at muttering for a long time now. Zacchaeus was very unpopular.

[5 : 14] He was little. He was loathed. And the third thing we know, because of his deceptive habits, he was also loaded. As Harry Enfield would put it, he had loads of money.

But there must have been something about him that felt a little incomplete, maybe a little unfulfilled. Maybe he'd heard some news about Jesus, but whatever it was, something made him want to put his eyes on this man.

So he climbs into a tree. I mean, it's pretty comic, isn't it? Funny little guy up in a tree trying to see Jesus.

And Jesus is walking along, and it says he looked up. And in the Greek New Testament, when it says Jesus looked up, the verb is very interesting.

What it means is that Jesus fixed Zacchaeus in his stare. And something happened.

[6 : 29] We don't quite know what happened, but what we do know is that as a result of whatever went on in that exchange, this man's life was changed.

I like to think that maybe this little, loathed, and loaded human being, for the first time in his life, felt the grace of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And something changed. Let me say this very clearly to you, friends. I said it earlier, but it's worth repeating. You will never take up your responsibility to be a witness for Jesus, either with your lips or with your lives, until you have been warmed by the grace of God.

Friend, if that's not happened to you thus far, if you're going to church, has just been a matter of sitting on, I mean, not every church has business class seats like this.

Sitting on hard pews, thinking that maybe tomorrow something might happen for you. Let me tell you, I'm praying that something might happen to you tonight, that the Holy Spirit might whisper in your ear, and the grace of God might warm your heart and you might understand that Jesus Christ calls all his people to be witnesses.

[8 : 07] And look, here's the evidence. Four o'clockers, forgive me for a moment's repetition, but I said this afternoon that you know what, you can argue against God.

You can argue with clergy, and you know, my colleagues have got the stripes on their back to evidence that. You can argue with bishops.

I've got a filing cabinet full of letters. You can argue, but one of the things you cannot argue against is to transform life. I think that's what we see in Zacchaeus.

How do we know his life was changed? Listen to me. I can't even work out the maths. I think that, if I understand the maths correctly in Zacchaeus' little restorative equation here, I think he might have ended up in debt at the end of it.

It says here, here and I give half of my possession of the poor, and if I have cheated anyone out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount. I mean, I can't work that out. I'm sure Zacchaeus didn't have a figure in mind when he said it.

[9 : 23] Something's happened. And friends, if the church is ever going to be the witness that God calls us to be, something needs to happen. And what needs to happen is you need to be so warmed by the grace of God that you almost cannot stop yourself from taking those God-given opportunities for a word in season, for taking those God-given opportunities to live the life.

I don't think my friend Leastro Bell's wife said anything to him, but the life she lived was so different after her heart was worn by the grace of God that this hard-bitten atheist could do no more, no less than start to ask the question, is there more than this than I have up-to-date thought?

We'd all be agreed, wouldn't we, that although we're constantly reading in newspapers in the Western world about the flight away from the Christian faith, you know, when we did the national census, you know, what it looked like is that belief in God was rescinding.

We can all read about that stuff, but listen to me, when you read the papers, isn't it born more on your heart? My goodness, we might be sophisticated, we might be able to split atoms, we might be able to do this, we might be able to do that, but my goodness, there's a lot of need in this world.

You know, tonight, probably within yards of this church, or your church, wherever it is, there'll be people who are aching with loneliness.

[11 : 21] There'll be some people, we see, my wife and I see, you know, not infrequently down the hill, who clearly have issues of poverty.

There are people who are going through relational breakdown. Some of them might be in the house tonight.

There are people who suffer from depression. There are people who are just in need. And friends, if our witness as a church is simply to walk past those who are in need, then I think we will never be the witnessing community that surely somewhere deep down inside us, if we're healthy disciples, we would like to see.

Sitting there saying, so, you know what, have you got a list of great suggestions for us? Well, my answer is, you know, I could give you some suggestions, but what I wanted to happen for you tonight is for you just to be honest before God and for you just to be open to the Holy Spirit whispering in your ear and telling you to wake up and get the coffee on.

And friend, if your heart's cold, don't give up at that. Pray tonight that the fire of God might come upon you and warm your heart in order that you might catch fire.

[13 : 01] I used to work in Slough and we had a guy in our congregation called Ken and Ken was a very committed Christian.

He was, I'll admit, a bit rough and ready and he was a bus driver, he got in trouble with the bus company because he'd stop the bus and try and preach the gospel to people who wanted to get to work.

And, you know, you kind of say of Ken, he was high on passion, probably low on strategy.

And I remember one day, our church, the little church got burnt out twice whilst I was there. Local kids coming in, you know, making a pile of hymn books and setting fire to them. And the second time we're all sitting there in this kind of stinking smoking mess thinking, this is great because the insurance company will cough and we'll end up with even better hymn books and Bibles.

That kind of godly thinking was, you know, taking mastery of the hour. And Ken, so I'd be like, let's have a time of prayer.

[14 : 14] Ken starts off. And actually, it's my prayer for you. Why? Because you're the church. Why? Because each one of you, each one of you could be a meaning maker in the life of another human being.

Might be through your verbal witness. Might be through the way you live your life.

It doesn't really matter which way. But what matters is we will become meaning makers. And friends, the thing about the gospel is, the thing about a verbal witness is, people want to hear about what's changed in your life as a result of your discipleship in Jesus Christ.

Christ. They don't just want to hear about that, they want to see some evidence of it. I've got a friend and he asks this deeply painful question.

He says, what do you like when no one's looking? You know, think about that. What do you like when you get behind the wheel of a motor car? My wife's always offering me corrective therapy on that theme, you know, calm down.

[15 : 38] Right? What do you like when life takes a downturn? Do you hang on to Jesus or do you run for cover and get embittered?

See, what I love about Zacchaeus is, and I'm going to look him up in heaven, what I love about him is, his heart was warmed and he decided he needed to do something as evidence that his heart was warmed.

And if God ever needed his church to stand up, speak up, and live up to the faith that we proclaim, surely it's such a time as this.

church. I remember preaching in this really kind of intimidating church in Oxford called St. Mary the Virgin, which is the university church.

And at the back of the church, there are these great wooden thrones, which I was really hoping were for the bishop to sit in, but apparently not. They're for the chancellor of the university and the vice chancellor and the pro-vice chancellors.

[16 : 53] On, I think it was the 11th of July, where's Russ, in the year 1746, a young preacher stepped into the pulpit.

He announced this text from the book of Acts. It was the words of one of the governors who had just heard Paul give an account of the gospel.

And this governor said, Sir, thou almost persuadest me. That sermon we have in its entirety was preached by John Wesley, and it transpires that it was the last time that Wesley, who of course was a respectable Anglican, didn't believe in stuff like fire, it was the last time that Wesley preached in an Oxford church, which was slightly tricky for somebody who'd been chaplain of an Oxford college.

His ministry went on to prosper. The sermon is called The Almost Christian. Wesley says the almost Christian goes to church.

He said the almost Christian may even pray on occasions, usually in emergencies, admittedly. The almost Christian gives arms liberally and is a pillar of the community, but there is one thing that the almost Christian lacks.

[18 : 23] He's not in love with God. Let me ask you, don't shout out, could you say you're in love with God or are you in love with a certain way of doing religion?

Or are you in love with virtue signaling, as they call it these days, trying to make out you're a really cool person? Or are you in love with God?

Wesley had been ordained for years before it said in the church in London that Wesley who at that point was reading the introduction to Luther's commentary on the epistle to the Romans.

I think we'd agree, it's not what you call a potboiler, right? And as he read it, he said, my heart was strangely warmed and I knew that I was saved.

Friend, whoever you are, however old you are, however young you are, however introverted you are, however extroverted you are, you are, you are a disciple of Jesus, he has a call on your life and it is to be a witness, the witness of lips and the witness of lives.

[20 : 01] And for some of you, you've been doing that for a while, God bless you, God bless you, you are a man, but some of us need to wake up, some of us need to understand that if we're going to do this, we need the fire of God in our souls.

And do you know the great thing is? The great thing is we can seek that anointing, we can seek that fire. Why? Because God's not looking for your ability.

What he's looking for is your availability. Who tonight will answer the call? Who tonight will say yes to God in a new way and find your heart strangely warmed?

Who tonight will go out from this place? You know, one of the things, you know, I'm not making a point here, those of you who are Anglicans, but, you know, at the end of our communion services, I don't think it's just us that does this anymore, but at the end of it, do you remember those words, go in peace to love and serve the Lord?

Words of expulsion, words of propulsion, that's about as liturgically near to get as any respectable Anglican would get to saying get lost and get on with it.

[21 : 35] I believe God's calling his church, and friends, his church is you, and he wants to anoint you for this task, and he wants to warm your heart, that you may be so filled with the good news, so in love with God, that you cannot help but speak it and live it.

And friends, when the church wakes up, when the church wakes up, the world will take notice. We live in challenging times, and in challenging times, God challenges his church, doesn't rant about all the ungodly people, the message of the Old Testament prophets is, when the nation becomes godly, God looks at his church, you and me.

Let's seek the heartwarming grace of God tonight. Let's allow ourselves to be soaked in it afresh, maybe for the first time, that we may be so in love with him, that the evidence in our lives is just hard to miss.