

"Your Money or Your Life"

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Date: 08 March 2011

Preacher: Martin Ayres

[0 : 00] Thank you for having me with you tonight. It's great. I heard on the way in actually someone said they googled me earlier on and that there's a professional golfer called Martin Ayres and they were asking if it was me.

And that might be why I was at the golf club but sadly not. So I don't know, there's no connection with the professional golfer. Thank goodness I wouldn't be a very good one. But it's great to be here with you and as Simon said, my profession before what I'm doing now was I worked in the city as a lawyer. Probably my most embarrassing moment as a lawyer was I worked on a trial for about two years actually.

A huge trial and the other side in the trial had a very formidable barrister called Gordon Pollock QC. Oh, some people know who he is. Huge presence, huge reputation and the legal team, it was absurd.

So Gordon Pollock was giving his opening speech which went on for 86 days, which was a record until our opening speech, which was longer. And then on our side, he had a full area of legal team behind him and then on our side we had a senior QC, then three QCs behind him who were helping him and then each one of those had a junior.

And then you got to the Freshfields team and there were the partners and there were the senior lawyers and then there was me at the back. And one day of this trial, sitting at the back, the smallest person there, my mobile phone rang in the trial. Someone rang me and the theme tune was Ghostbusters.

[1 : 29] And you know when you sort of think, when you pick your theme tune for your phone, I didn't think it would go off in a courtroom. And then when it's going off you're thinking, why have I chosen Ghostbusters?

You know, as the press are all looking in the gallery. It was horrendous. Most embarrassing moment of my career. And word spread through the city so that I had my BlackBerry with me and about 15 minutes later one of my friends emailed me from a different law firm saying, Who are you going to call? He'd already heard what had happened. Horrendous.

So that was my most embarrassing moment with everyone watching me. And I guess I tell that because I just thought we're going to look tonight at a scene from the Bible and we're going to look at somebody's most embarrassing moment of their life.

And his name was Zacchaeus and he was up a tree. A respectable man, a rich man, one of the richest men in the city. And he was up a tree. And it would have been so embarrassing.

But the extraordinary thing with Zacchaeus is I would never have chosen to have my mobile phone go off. But Zacchaeus actually deliberately went through that embarrassment. And he did it because of something to do with Jesus.

[2 : 41] So we're going to have a think together about what on earth could it be that would make someone be prepared to go through that embarrassment themselves. If you have a look at your program sheets, on the other side from the menu, we've got the story printed out.

It's from a first century account of Jesus' life written by a doctor called Luke, who'd investigated through the eyewitnesses. Now I love this story because I think it encapsulates so much about what the Christian faith is about.

So we're going to look at it in three parts, all about this man Zacchaeus. Three things that he did. He climbed up a tree. He took Jesus home. And he gave his money away.

Well, I've put on the sheets there. He let go of his money. So first of all, he climbed up a tree. If you have a look with me at the first paragraph, let me read it for us. Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man, he could not because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him since Jesus was coming that way.

[3 : 52] So I don't know if you saw there, Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector and he was wealthy. And I want to suggest that makes this a hugely important story for us in London this evening.

Because money, you know, whether you're making a lot of it or you're finding that generally you never really have any of it, money is an enthralling thing for all of us. And Zacchaeus was a rich man.

Perhaps he started out in life thinking that he'd like to get a grip on money. But over time, money got a grip on him. And we know that because it says he was the chief tax collector.

And that doesn't mean what it means today. If you were the chief tax collector in Israel at that time, you had betrayed your people. These were the people who would, Israel, the Jewish people, God's people were under Roman occupation.

And the tax collectors were those who had betrayed their people to go and work for the Romans to extort money of the Jewish people, to get it into Roman hands. So tax collectors were bad people and Zacchaeus was the chief.

[4 : 59] So he was a bad person. But I think in one sense we actually need to relate to Zacchaeus a bit as well. Because we'd all like more money, wouldn't we? I mean, who wouldn't want a bit more money? You start out in life by trying to get a grip on money.

But it doesn't work like that. Because you find that you can never get as much as you want. And so then you find you're not in control of the money. Money has its control on you.

Money gets a grip on you. And it's not money for money's sake, of course. I mean, it's not as if we want to be in a counting house somewhere, just counting out money. It's what money gets you.

That's why we want money. It's because the sensible people who we trust in life tell us that we need money to get the things that we can't do without. And so it leaves us thinking that we need more and more.

I don't know what you think you need money for. But I'm guessing for most of us it's not that we're saving up for a penthouse suite on the river or a Porsche. It's because money gets you the things you really think are essential.

[6 : 00] Perhaps the right place on the property ladder. Your pension. A good education for your kids. I know that's really important for so many of us. That's what we would make a sacrifice for.

And people are happy to live a modest life as long as we can get our children the best start in life. But because of that, money has a grip on us. And of course money gets you status as well, doesn't it?

In our society, success is defined in a way by the money that you make. You can walk tall in life if you're making money. And I wonder if it's the status that drives us on actually.

Because it's fascinating what's happened in our society with money. As people have got richer, the thirst for money has not been quenched. And it's interesting because John Maynard Keynes was an incredibly astute economist.

But he predicted when he was writing that as people got richer and the things that in his day were luxuries, like central heating, became just everyday items, people would stop working so hard.

[7 : 09] And he predicted that eventually three-day weeks would be perfectly normal. People would value their leisure time more and they wouldn't want to work five days a week because they could get everything that they need. But of course now, we have those things that in Keynes' day seemed like luxuries.

We all have them and yet we work as hard as people ever have before. And where John Maynard Keynes helps us there, I think, is that he pointed out that it's not absolute income that people are interested in.

It's not how much as an absolute figure people care about. It's relative income that we care about. Relative income. That's why, you know, it's crazy. We think when we look in the papers and we hear that a footballer has fallen out with his club because they only offered him £100,000 a week. But of course the reason is because the star player is on £110,000 a week. And deep down there's a part of us that values ourselves by how much we get paid. And so they feel let down by the club for only being offered six figures a week and not that little bit more.

So when I left Freshfields in 2006, what was going on there, and in a lot of the firms, a lot of the top law firms, was that the figure for profits per partner, they just weren't high enough.

[8 : 24] And Slaughter and May had been the first law firm to reach the magic million that their top equity partners were taking home a million a year. And so at firms like Freshfields, partners who'd worked together for 10, 20, 30 years were starting to look at each other and say, well, are you bringing in enough?

We need to get to that level. And they were buying out the partners so that they could slim down and get that higher ratio. And I was recently reading something by Jim Collins.

I don't know if any of you read Jim Collins, but a phenomenally successful business writer. And he wrote this about the way we strive to make more money. He said, Comparison, a great teacher once told me, is the cardinal sin of modern life.

It traps us in a game that we can't win. Once we define ourselves in terms of others, we lose the freedom to shape our own lives. And I think when it comes to money, that's true.

Money has a grip on us. Well, look, Zacchaeus was a man who cared about money. But as I said, he was worse than us because he'd sold out.

[9 : 30] He'd done something really treacherous to get more money. And yet when we look at the story here, what happened is that he heard that one day this man Jesus was passing through the city he lived in.

And he thought, I'm going to go and see Jesus. And there would have been crowds of people there because of Jesus' reputation. So I think it's a bit like, you know, when you see sports teams doing victory parades through the street and the crowds line the pavements to see them.

And I guess maybe it was a bit like that. And so Zacchaeus, as a short man, knows that he won't be able to see. And so he does the unthinkable, really, and he climbs up a tree. Everyone looking at him.

You know, for some people, climbing up a tree isn't that big a deal. I climbed up a tree quite recently. And, you know, I wasn't embarrassed. It was quite fun. But if you're a very rich man in the first century in the Middle East, it is an extraordinary thing to do.

It's a hugely embarrassing thing to do. This is like if you went out onto the streets today because you heard someone famous was coming. And you looked around and you saw Mervyn King, the governor of the Bank of England, in his suit, up a tree.

[10 : 42] And you think, what are you doing, Mervyn King? They're supposed to be respectable. What are you doing? You know, we cringe at it. Zacchaeus was making a fool out of himself to see Jesus.

And I just wonder, before we go on to look at what happened, whether we need to ponder whether that's not too dissimilar to what we have to do today if we want to see Jesus.

Zacchaeus had to look a fool to see Jesus. Well, today, I think that's true. I mean, if you want to see who Jesus is, if you want to investigate it, then some people will think that you're really foolish.

And that's what happened to me. You know, if you tell perhaps, I don't know, a partner or a friend or colleagues at work, that you've started looking into Jesus and you're doing a course run by a local church, some people are going to think you're a bit daft.

You know, they'll think you're foolish. It was embarrassing for Zacchaeus. But he did it because it was worth it. It was worth it because Zacchaeus had realised something that we all need to realise.

[11 : 48] But no matter how rich he'd become, he was lost. Zacchaeus was a rich man, but he was a lost man. And only Jesus could deal with that.

We're going to think about that later. Let's move on to our second point. He took Jesus home. Just have a look with me at what happened next. So I'm going to read from the second paragraph. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. So picture the scene. This awful, swindling, greedy, cruel man is up a tree.

And Jesus is passing through. The perfect man. The only man who has ever lived, who's never done anything wrong. The crowds were there for a reason.

It was because no one had ever seen anything like Jesus before. People were asking, what is this man? So there would have been lots of people in the crowd who were much nicer people than Zacchaeus.

[12:54] And I guess maybe they're the sort of people we'd expect Jesus to want to spend time with. They're the nice people. But Zacchaeus stops at the tree and he gets Zacchaeus. He looks him in the eye and he says, come down immediately.

He picked out of the crowd, possibly the worst person there. And in doing that, what Jesus showed us is that Christianity is not a religion. Now what I mean by that is, you know, we think of it as one of the major world religions.

But actually religion, the idea of religion is about doing things for your own merit. To achieve something, whether that's to please God and get into heaven or paradise, or even just if there isn't a God, to achieve an inner enlightenment or nirvana.

That's the idea that's going on in religion. But Christianity is not like that. I'm sure lots of you here are very respectable. And if it was about sort of your good works outweighing your bad works, you might be doing much better than I am.

But what's really important for us to understand is that as far as God is concerned, that will get none of us anywhere. It will get you nowhere.

[14:09] We were made for something great. God made us to build our lives on him and to know him, to have a relationship with him. And none of us has followed that up correctly. None of us has treated God as we should.

And so if you have a look in the last sentence of the story, Jesus is speaking and he calls himself the Son of Man. And he explains why he came.

He says, For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. Because we haven't treated God as we should, we're lost. Now I don't know what you think about that, but some of you might be thinking that's a bit offensive, what Jesus says here.

It's certainly very stark. But you know, sometimes we don't know that we're lost. Two summers ago, I went to the Lake District with my wife Cathy on a summer holiday, camping, torrential rain all week.

But we climbed up Helvellyn and we got to the top and we planned to climb up Helvellyn one way and come down the mountain another route. There were several different routes. So we went up Striding Edge, if any of you know that, and we got to the summit.

[15:16] And when we got there, we were in a sort of a cloud of hail. And so the visibility was very poor. You know, you climb up, you know, you think, I'll have a great view. Horrendous.

Gale force winds. And we thought we'd better get down. So we sort of ventured on to the route back down to where we parked our car down near Ullswater. And after about, well, after a little while, basically, we managed to descend down out of the cloud and we could see Ullswater.

And we carried on and we carried on. And after a little while, I realised that Ullswater wasn't the right shape. And we'd come down the wrong side of the mountain. And, you know, there was no way we could get back up because of this weather.

And so, you know, we had to get to the bottom of this mountain, to the wrong lake, and get a taxi around the mountain to get back to our car. It was extremely embarrassing. But, you see, if someone had asked me on the way down the mountain when I was in that cloud, are you lost? I would have said, no, I'm not lost. I had the map. I know where I'm going. We came up striding edge. We're going back down to the car. I thought I knew where I was going. I needed someone to tell me that I was lost because I was heading in the wrong direction.

[16:28] And the message of Christianity is that that's what Jesus has come to do. You know, we might think that whatever we're building our life on is the right decision, but Jesus says that it's the wrong decision, that without him, we're lost.

Lost in such a way that there's no way back on our own. And that's why what Jesus did for Zacchaeus that day is incredibly good news. It's wonderful news for any of us here tonight because it shows us, you see, if Jesus was prepared to find Zacchaeus, a man as bad as him, then he's prepared to find any of us.

There's no one in this room that's good enough, if you like, to find ourselves on our own. But there's no one in this room who's so bad that if we wanted to find God again through Jesus, he would disallow us.

No one is that bad. So what effect does that have on Zacchaeus? Well, let me move on to the third point. He climbed up a tree, he took Jesus home, and he let go of his money. Have a look with me at verse 8.

Well, sorry, I'll go from verse 7 because that's where we left off. All the people saw this and began to mutter, he is going to be the guest of a sinner. But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, look, Lord, here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.

[17:50] Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a son of Abraham. Abraham. So the acceptance from Jesus transformed his life.

You know, I run a youth group and so I spend time with these teenagers and we were looking at this story together recently and one of them, this guy Stav, he's 17 years old, and we looked at this story and he said to me afterwards, he said, I would just never, ever give my money away like that. And I was really pleased that Stav said that because he'd obviously, he'd immersed himself in the story and realised that this is an extraordinary thing. I mean really, can you imagine giving your money away like this?

One day, something happening to you that means you give half of your money away. And more than that, look, he says that he'll pay back four times the amount that anybody's cheated. Well we know from his profession at the time that he doesn't have enough money to do that. He's running out of money. He's giving it all away. So what we need to see, I think, is that when Jesus, what Jesus offers, when Jesus saves you, it is something so precious that whatever you, whatever has a grip on your life now, you can give it away, including money.

[19:07] It loses its grip. If you think about Zacchaeus, he had a money lost, he loved money so much, he betrayed his own people to get more of it. And then along comes Jesus and offers him something so amazing, he lets go.

he lets go of his money. When Jesus came to see him, the power money had over him disappeared. So I'd love you to think about that.

Jesus offers us something that's so amazing, it means you would give away a fortune. And you know, when people in Jericho talked about what had happened, I'm sure they would have said, you know, this rich man became poor that day, he gave away all this money.

That's how it would have looked. But Zacchaeus knew that he'd been a poor man and he'd become rich with what Jesus had offered him. And the offer is the same for us.

In offering that we can be put right with God now and forever, it's something so precious that the things that kind of have a grip on our lives will seem less important because this is what we were made for.

[20:11] Jesus came to offer it to us as a free gift. Knowing that truth has transformed our life. And that's why, you know, I called the talk Your Money or Your Life.

But really, that's not the offer that Christianity makes to us. And yet, I think sometimes that's how we think of it. We think, if I became a Christian, I'd have to do certain things to be right with God.

And actually, the message of Christianity is that Jesus has come and done those things for us. If we trust in him, we are right with God. Now that will change our perspective on things and we'll want to follow God.

But Jesus doesn't point a gun at us and say, you know, give away your money or you won't live. He offers to save us by faith in him. So I guess wherever you are tonight in terms of that offer, you know, I just want to urge you to look into it further.

Zacchaeus climbed up a tree, took Jesus home and money lost its grip on him. So why not be prepared to do the embarrassing and look into who Jesus is? Thanks for your time.

[21:14] I'll hand back over to Simon. APPLAUSE APPLAUSE Thank you.