

Generous Response

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[0:00] Well, to everyone who encounters Jesus, once Jesus steps into their lives, their lives are never the same again. Maybe it's to do with our current times, but people everywhere are looking for hope.

Robert Kennedy once said, The tiny ripple of hope that you set in motion can change the path of someone's life. That statement is so true for Jesus as he generously responds to the lost. People who encounter Jesus have this new sense of hope in their lives. The story today is of a generous response to generous grace.

It's the story of a man named Zacchaeus. It follows Luke 18, where Jesus told two parables outlining lessons on the kingdom of God, the persistent widow and the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

He highlights the humility of children. He encounters a rich man and a blind man. Now in real time, with a real person, we see Zacchaeus almost living out all of these parables and encounters from chapter 18.

[1:11] Zacchaeus is persistent in his approach to see Jesus. Zacchaeus is a really rich man. He is blinded by the trappings of the world. Zacchaeus was someone willing to do the unthinkable, humble himself, just to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

He climbs a tree. He looks out over the crowd. And when he sees Jesus, all the things that people everywhere want come flooding into his life.

Hope, forgiveness, grace and love. This story is interesting because Zacchaeus is an outsider. The text tells us that he's a tax collector, which we can assume means he didn't have many friends.

As a tax collector, he was the guy that would go knocking on your door and demand money and payment from you. And I like Nick's, Sam, sorry, last week. His analogy is a bit like a traffic find person.

To make matters worse, he was collecting taxes from his own conquered people, Jews, to pay the conquerors the Roman Empire. And so it was his job to knock on the door of his Jewish brothers, collect money, tax money, that would then be given to the Roman government.

[2:24] So the Roman government could then keep the Jews crushed and oppressed. This guy's got no friends. A traitor, an outcast, even to his own people. And yet the man who has no friends is a friend to Jesus.

Because Jesus has this way of just looking past and beyond all the things that we tend to focus on and judge a person by. Jesus doesn't care about what we often care about.

He sees a man who needs hope. He sees his heart. And he meets the man right where he's at. Let's pick up his story in Luke chapter 19, verses 1 to 10.

As Wendy comes up to bring us our reading, here's what we're looking for. We're looking for what this story reveals about the heart of God toward those whom others have rejected. Good morning, everyone.

We're going to read from Luke 9, chapter 19, verses 1 to 10 this morning. Starting from verse 1. Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

[3:28] And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was. But on account of the crowd, he could not, because he was small in stature.

So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for Jesus was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.

So he hurried and came down and received Jesus joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled. He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor.

And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.

And Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

[4:34] So right there, we have Jesus' personal purpose statement. To seek and save the lost.

Here's what's happening. By now in Jesus' ministry, he's gained a very large following, and he's popular. And he's travelling through the town of Jericho. It's about 45 kilometres away from Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. It's the final leg of the Lucan travel narrative, starting at the foothills of Mount Tabor and finishing at the triumphal entry. Jericho was an affluent city.

The rich and aspirational lived there. Balsam trees were planted all throughout the city, and they gave off a fragrant odour, so the city was known for its sweet aroma.

In addition, the city had a spring that gushed with fresh water, an oasis in the middle of a desert. It was a desirable place to live. It was also a trading hub.

[5:33] People would travel to Jericho to sell their goods. It was a prosperous place, so it makes sense that a rich person like Zacchaeus would live in Jericho. And the text tells us how he became rich.

He's a tax collector. Rome was smart in terms of how they received their taxes. After conquering a nation, they would put the collection of taxes out to tender, to the locals, so individuals would bid on them.

If they won the bid, they were required to pay the amount up front. Then Rome would give them the papers that would give them the authority to go door-knocking, and they were expected to recoup the amount that they bid, plus a little bit more for themselves.

But here's the deal. Tax collectors were always associated with sinners, and it's because they were corrupt. The system encouraged them, taking advantage of the powerless.

With Roman bodyguards, a bit like standover men, they notoriously collected far more than their fair share of taxes, and so became very rich. And here we see that Zacchaeus, we're told, is a chief tax collector.

[6:40] He's the godfather. Which means this guy oversees several provinces and has to honour numerous contracts. He's exceedingly wealthy, and he wants to see Jesus.

This is before social media and huge marketing campaigns. When celebrities like Jesus come into town, it's a big deal. So Zacchaeus has heard the stories. Some say he's a miracle worker.

Others say he's the son of God, the Messiah, the one the scriptures have prophesied to come.

People are saying it's Jesus. So he wants to go get a look. But here's the challenge.

The text here says he's a small guy. We don't know how tall, but he's noticeably smaller in stature than his contemporaries. The place is crowded. Jesus is heading in his direction.

He can't see over the crowd. He's persistent in what he's doing. There's a sycamore tree. I could climb a tree, and if I'm lucky, I could get a glimpse of this Jesus.

[7:42] And that's exactly what he does. He climbs a tree and waits for Jesus to come by. Now, this isn't something to take lightly. Culturally, only children climb trees.

Not rich, powerful, dignified people. If he was scorned for being a tax collector, he would now face the public shame of behaving how he looked. Oh, look, he looks like a child, and now he's acting like a child.

Because of his stature. This is an interesting detail in the text, as it tells us that Zacchaeus was willing to humble himself in order to get close to Jesus.

Here's an important principle. If we want to get close to Jesus, we're going to have to ignore what others think and humble ourselves. In Luke 18, the early hand-picked followers of Jesus thought they knew better when it came to who could and could not get close to Jesus.

Earlier in Luke 18, people were bringing babies to Jesus for him to bless them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

[8:58] Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God, like a little child, will never enter it. This is brilliant.

Here are these men, they're insiders, and they have a sense of self-importance, and Jesus points out to these adults, they could learn a lot from the humility of children. Little children aren't concerned about what other people think.

They have a childlike dependence, a humility that these adults don't. You want to enter the kingdom of God? The fact is, you never will, if you don't receive the kingdom of God, like a little child.

Humble and dependent. Zacchaeus shows us, that it's more important to keep our focus on Jesus, than the crowd. The crowd don't care, and they're blind to what God thinks.

The crowd care about appearances, branding, influence, status, titles, prestige, accolades, success, how many likes on Instagram, achievements, reputation.

[10:06] The crowd is hostile, it judges, it mocks, it ridicules, or falsely accuses, it discourages, it shames, it shows no mercy.

The crowd values independence, they desire praise from other humans, rather than praise from God. Culture shapes them, instead of listening to God's word, and allowing God to shape them. There would have been those in the crowd, who assumed that a lying, cheating, greedy person like Zacchaeus, could never get close to Jesus. Jesus makes it clear, it's this very kind of person, that he's willing to generously welcome, unlike the self-righteous, and the religious.

Earlier in Matthew, addressing the teachers of the law, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus said this, truly I say to you, the tax collectors, and the prostitutes, go into the kingdom of God, before you.

For John came to you, in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him. The tax collectors, and the prostitutes believe him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward, change your minds, and believe him.

[11:18] This is a stunning statement. To put this in context, these are the church-going, Bible-believing people of their day, and they are blind. They don't recognize who Jesus is, and how lost they are.

So in the crowd, we've got people like this, who have written Zacchaeus off. There's no way a guy like that, could ever enter the kingdom of God. At the same time, rating themselves more highly, than they should.

Jesus corrects this self-righteous view, that people may have, and he shows them and us, who are welcomed into the kingdom of God. Jesus never allowed culture, to dictate and control what he did. Culture will always be confused, when we lose sight of our creator God. There's something that transcends culture, and that's truth. The beautiful thing about Jesus is, he is the truth.

And he rises above culture. Jesus never lost sight of who he was, and his mission. Jesus would never have approached Zacchaeus, if he'd followed the culture.

[12:28] Culture says, your value is determined by your performance, by what you do. Your worth is everything to do with, whether or not you succeed, by certain standards. And Jesus rises above it all.

Look what Zacchaeus is willing to do, to get a glimpse of Jesus. He puts himself in a humiliating position, so that he can get close.

So Jesus does the unthinkable, and that's because everything Jesus does, is couched in grace. And when we encounter grace, it transforms us, and it brings change.

We need grace now more than ever. We live in such an unforgiving, cancel culture, where retaliation, payback, retribution are normalized. Where if we make one mistake, there's no mercy, there's no forgiveness.

When was the last time, that you heard the media report, a story of someone receiving grace, in our culture? Is your life marked by grace? What unforgiveness, or bitterness are you holding on to?

[13:35] When Jesus goes up to the tree, and says, Zacchaeus, come down, for I must stay at your house today. The shock of this statement, rippled out. They all grumbled, he has gone to be the guest of a man, who is a sinner.

Jesus doesn't care, what the culture thinks. Rich or poor, Jesus doesn't care. What he cares about, is the condition of the human heart. Jesus is saying, I must stay at your house.

In essence, he's saying, I see your heart, I want to get to know you. I want to hear your story, I want to share a meal with you. And meals in those days, weren't wolfed down in front of the telly.

They weren't done in haste. They were long drawn out affairs. They were relational. Jesus was saying this, I don't just want to hang out with you. I want to be your friend.

Just one chapter before, when the rich man asked Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And by the way, that's the best question you could ask. The rich man didn't receive the answer he wanted.

[14:42] Keep doing good. He was told to sell everything and follow Jesus. I'm going to hear a bit more about this next week. But he becomes very sad because Jesus had identified where his heart really lies.

He's independent. His security is in his wealth, not in a relationship with God. He was relying on being a good person, and he isn't prepared to humble himself and be dependent on God. And Jesus concluded, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, it is easier for a camel, literally a camel, to pass through the ivy needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

And those who heard this asked, well, who then can be saved? Jesus says, what's impossible for man is possible for God. Jesus' response to Zacchaeus, who is a very wealthy man, shows us how all things are possible for God.

An exceedingly worldly, wealthy man, yet spiritually bankrupt, finds his heart overturned by generous grace. As Zacchaeus' heart opens to Jesus, grace changes everything.

[15:52] Verse 8, we see Zacchaeus, his generous response. Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.

And Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house, since he is also a son of Abraham. For the son of man came to seek and save the lost.

Zacchaeus is humble. Zacchaeus is repentant. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Notice the order here. While we don't know the time frame, Jesus initiates contact first, and then there's change.

Jesus didn't show up and say, here's the deal, Zacchaeus. I'll spend time with you. We can be friends, but first you have to, but first you're going to have to give away half of all that you have. And then you have to make right everything that you've done wrong. Only when you've done that, we can be friends. Jesus doesn't say that. Basically it's, I see what you're doing up that tree.

[17:05] You're seeking me, and I want to spend time with you. In Romans 2 verse 4 it says, Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead to repentance?

God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. He's patient with us. It's not the other way around. Your repentance doesn't lead God to show you kindness. His kindness, forbearance, and patience are towards us.

Before we've even done anything good, that's generous grace. Zacchaeus has moved. No one has treated him this way before. When grace comes into your life, it causes everything to change radically.

The tiny ripple of hope that Jesus set in motion changes the path of Zacchaeus' life. Zacchaeus' generous response to Jesus coming to his life shows he's truly repentant.

Zacchaeus sees Jesus for who he is. Tax auditors were bookkeepers. And would have kept strict records. Zacchaeus would have known in detail of anyone he defrauded.

[18:19] And he chooses to pay back four times the amount he stole. Now this is possibly in line with King David's declaration in 2 Samuel 12 verse 6. We can look up later. But the law in Numbers 5 verse 7 only required a confession of defrauding and paying back one-fifth extra of the value that you'd wronged the person.

So just say he had ripped you off \$100. He's actually only required to pay back \$120. But he says, I'm going to pay back four times the amount.

So instead of paying you back \$100, he's going to pay you back \$400. It's a repentant, generous response. It's a visible, outward display of a heart changed by grace.

Encountering Jesus, experiencing grace, changes everything radically. Radically. Look at the early church in Acts chapter 2, verses 42 to 47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common.

[19:33] They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Hearts changed by generous grace sees a joyous, generous response.

There's no arm bending there. Did you pick up that in that text? There's no guilt tripping. Of their own free will, they sold property and their investments and they gave.

So we've got to ask, what's different about us? When we repent, are our hearts changed as a result of experiencing God's grace?

What's different about our friendships? About our marriages? About our family life? What's different about our work life?

[20 : 32] What's different about our thought life? What's different about our attitude towards money and wealth? What's different about who we listen to and seek to please?

What's different about how we love and forgive and show grace? What's the difference? It's probably like asking, have we really brought Jesus into the family meal?

Do we set a place for him at the table of our lives? Which, by the way, he provided. What I've learned, and this is a challenge because of our own pride and hard hearts.

But we need to accept the acceptance of God on God's terms. What's not possible for us is possible for God. We can say, I'm struggling with greed or materialism, with forgiving.

I'm actually struggling with being a do-gooding, self-righteous person. If we sincerely want to know Jesus, we need to climb a tree. We need to look out over the crowd.

[21 : 38] Don't worry about what the crowd thinks. Jesus wants to come into all facets of our lives. Welcome Jesus into the home of our hearts. And Jesus responds to even the slightest movement.

Have you ever noticed parents, when they watch their children take their first steps, mums and dads are out of their minds with joy, rushing to capture it on film, even with the smallest of movements.

Parents don't say, well, that was awkward. This kid looks like they're drunk. Look, I've been doing this for years. Watch me, okay? Put the phone away. We're not filming this until this kid gets it right.

Parents are overjoyed at the slightest movement. God responds to even the slightest movement.

This is the heart of God as Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

We don't have to have our lives sorted or all together. In fact, we never will in this life. In humility, come as you are, dependent on God.

[22 : 39] We are welcomed into God's home and we will feast at the great banquet only because of God's generosity and kindness. Jesus persisted in God's mission.

He gave up his wealth and status as creator of the universe. He humbled himself by dying a shameful death, nailed to a tree in the place of lost sinners for us.

And the triumph of the resurrection shows us that God is dependable. Do you see? God responds to even the slightest movement.

In James, we are reminded, draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Grace radically changes everything. Grace finds beauty in everything.

Grace brings hope and experiencing grace means our lives will never be the same again. Ironically, in Hebrew, the name Zacchaeus means innocent or pure one.

[23 : 40] While guilty, after Jesus came into his life, he was declared innocent before God. God desires to work in our lives the same way. Zacchaeus was changed by Jesus.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Only once Jesus steps into our lives, when we encounter Jesus, when we genuinely experience the generous grace of God, the tiny ripple of hope that Jesus sets in motion will radically change the path of your life.

Hearts changed by grace, the response, in all aspects of our lives. When we live a life of generosity, others will see the hope we have in Jesus.

Amen.