

WEEKLY SERMON

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Costly Grace

Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him. Luke 19: 3,4

Luke's gospel often portrays the rich unfavourably. The young ruler who wanted eternal life didn't want to sell his possessions and give to the poor. We might expect this story to go a similar way – Zacchaeus is not only rich but also a tax collector, dishonest, a collaborator with the Romans. But that's not how it goes.

Jesus was probably on his way out of Jericho – there wasn't room for a sycamore tree's heavy foliage and broad branches within the city. The crowd would have made room for a respected rich man, but Zacchaeus wasn't respected.

Perhaps he's afraid of being attacked if he pushes into the crowd. But he really wants to see Jesus. So, he throws his dignity to the winds. He runs – rich and powerful men in that culture didn't run. And he climbs a tree – even more undignified.

If he hoped the leaves would hide his loss of dignity, Jesus has other ideas. He calls up to Zacchaeus. But instead of berating him for dishonesty, he invites himself to tea...

Afterwards, Zacchaeus offers to sell half of what he has and give it to the poor, and to repay four times over anything he's taken dishonestly. A happy ending – but there is a cost. Jesus would almost certainly have been offered hospitality by more 'suitable' people in Jericho and declined, because he was just 'passing through'. The crowd 'grumbled', because he spurned their leaders' hospitality in favour of someone like Zacchaeus. Jesus has turned the crowd's anger away from Zacchaeus onto himself.

This isn't just a fun story for children. It can be seen as a story of a frightened collaborator who throws aside his safety and his dignity in order to see Jesus; of Jesus risking the crowd's anger to reach out to him; and of Zacchaeus' response of repentance and generosity. Jesus offered Zacchaeus grace, but that grace came at a cost, to both of them. The grace Jesus offers us came at a huge cost to him. Are we willing to abandon our dignity, or give things up, to receive it? How much do we want to see Jesus?

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