

WEEKLY SERMON

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Infectious generosity

Luke 19:1-10

Recently our church held a 'giving review'. It's an annual opportunity to celebrate God's generous grace to us and to think again about how we respond. As Paul encouraged the Corinthian church, the message is: 'See to it that you excel in this grace of giving'. (2 Corinthians 8:7).

Today's gospel reading is the encounter between Zacchaeus, the vertically-challenged tax man, and the Lord Jesus. It's a story of deep repentance that leads to wonderful generosity.

Zacchaeus is financially rich but spiritually lost. He wants to see Jesus and so climbs the tree. But before we know it, the tables are turned. Jesus sees him and (uniquely in the gospels) he invites himself to Zacchaeus's home, where he is warmly welcomed.

We see the shocking grace of Jesus as he identifies himself with the 'sinner' (v7), much to the consternation of the people of Jericho.

But the story doesn't end there. If Jesus going into Zacchaeus's house shows how the Saviour identifies with the sinner, we also see the sinner identifying with the Saviour, and how he willingly identifies not just with his justice but with his generosity.

Zacchaeus repents of his fraudulent behaviour and offers generous restitution. The law of Moses (Numbers 5:7) required a wrongdoer to offer full restitution of the wrong and to add one-fifth to the wronged party. Zacchaeus promises not just 20% but an eye-watering 400%!

The scale of his repentance is shocking. What's happened is that the grace of the Saviour has unlocked the tight fists of Zacchaeus.

How do we learn to 'excel' in giving? The story of Zacchaeus shows us that the way to grow in this area is to keep the amazing grace of the Lord Jesus front and centre in our own hearts and in the lives of our congregations.

It is this grace that sets us free from loving money, hoarding it as our security for the future. It is grace that means that our financial giving can be cheerful and not just a 'paying my dues' kind of giving.

Grace set us free to live generously with the resources that God has given us. The Jesus of Luke's gospel is the friend of the poor and oppressed, but he is also the friend of the rich.

And the message of Zacchaeus is not 'look at your money and feel guilty', but 'look at Jesus and catch his generosity'.

Rev. Canon Andrew Raynes, Vicar of Blackburn Christ Church

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