

Zacchaeus's second chance (Luke 19:1-10)

We love to hate rich people that seem to have behaved badly, but how does Jesus feel about them. In this climactic encounter in Luke's gospel Jesus meets Zacchaeus, a rich chief tax-collector, probably the most hated man in Jericho. How did Jesus respond to him?

Rich People we Love to Hate

Throughout history we have loved to hate those who are both rich and have behaved in an outrageous way.

Even in the news in the last week, three prominent rich people have been roundly condemned in the mass media:

Prince Andrew widely assumed to have been mixed up in Epstein's exploitation of young women for sexual gratification.

Roman Abramovich, the Russian billionaire and owner of Chelsea football club has been in the news, because of his ties with Putin and his oppressive regime that has invaded Ukraine.

Peter Hebelthwaite, C. E. O. of P. & O. Ferries, which abruptly sacked 800 crew in order to employ a cheaper foreign workforce was declared by a group of Scottish MSPs to be the 'Most hated man in Britain.'

Rich people who have done wrong become a favourite target of the mass media and social media condemnation. I guess there is that strong sense of injustice: there they are enjoying far greater material blessings than us, despite and often because of their abuse of power or oppression of others.

They are public renowned figures, that we can easily condemn from a distance and feel self-righteous in the process.

Yet, they are also personal figures, human beings like you and me. This was perhaps brought home by the queen's insistence that her son, Prince Andrew escort her down the aisle at his father's and her husband's memorial service. It was a controversial act, condemned by some, yet it showed a mother's concern for a son and desire to show solidarity and forgiveness at an emotionally sensitive moment.

So how as Christians should we think about these issues. How did Jesus respond to these issues? Luke's gospel helps us with this. It is a gospel which shows us far more about Jesus's attitude to wealth and money, but also about his concern for the lost.

Jesus and the Rich

In Luke, Jesus is often very critical of the rich. In chapter 6 as part of a series of blessings and woes he says:

*"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort." (Luke 6:24)*

Parable of the Rich Fool - Luke 12:16-21

In chapter 12, someone approaches him asking him to adjudicate in a dispute about an inheritance. Jesus' responds with a warning about being rich. He tells the story of a rich man who when he has a good crop stores up his riches to enjoy at a later date. But, God says to him, 'You fool!' Tonight you will die, who then is going to enjoy your riches!

Jesus's point is that hoarding riches for yourself does you no good from the heavenly perspective.

Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus - Luke 16:19-31

Later on in chapter 16, Jesus tells another story about a rich man. The rich man dies in this story as well, along with a poor beggar called Lazarus, who used to beg at the rich man's gates. Lazarus is brought to heaven and gets to share the delights of heaven with Abraham, whilst the rich man is left a tortured soul in hell.

When the man complains, Abraham says, that the rich man has had his time enjoying life and his riches, whilst Lazarus suffered. Now it is only right that the situation is reversed.

The Rich Ruler meets Jesus - Luke 18:18-23

Both those parables are unique to Luke, but in chapter 18, just before today's reading, Luke tells about an event, that is also recorded in the other gospels.

A ruler comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus's response is shocking and radical: "Sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come and follow me." (Luke 18:22)

Luke says the ruler was very rich and when he heard it he became very sad. He was not willing to give up his wealth for eternal life.

Jesus then says, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:24-25)

Luke's gospel makes clear that Jesus has a lot to say to challenge the rich and wealthy. Far from condoning the gathering of wealth he warns that failure to use it for God's purposes and to care for others shows that you are outside God's Kingdom.

Jesus and the Hated

But, Jesus also has a lot to say about those who are condemned by the people generally and labelled, 'sinners'! Again this is a particularly strong theme in Luke's gospel.

Levi called by Jesus

Back in chapter 5, Luke tells us about when Jesus called, Levi one of his disciples. Levi was a tax-collector.

Now, tax-collectors were generally looked down on by the Jewish people of the time. They worked for the Romans, who were seen as the enemy who had conquered their land and were oppressing their people. More than that, they took money off people to give to the Romans, often taking more than they really had to to help line their own pockets.

People had to give them the money, otherwise, Roman soldiers might come knocking!

It's no wonder the tax-collectors were despised and hated. They were seen as those who had betrayed God's people and so God himself. If anyone was outside the Kingdom of God, surely it was them!

Yet, Jesus called Levi, a tax-collector to become one of his followers. More than that, when Levi threw a banquet for Jesus and his friends, Jesus ended up meeting with lots more tax-collectors and sinners.

The Pharisees, the strongly moral religious group criticised Jesus for this. Wasn't he condoning their wicked behaviour by spending time with them?

Jesus's response was clear:

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:31-32)

Jesus was not condoning their past behaviour, but he still wanted to help them to a place where they were part of God's kingdom again. He wants to bring them to repentance, a turning from their past wrong ways to living God's way.

Parable of the Lost Sheep, Coin, Son

That story is in the other gospels, but a similar situation also occurs in Luke's gospel, where Jesus is criticised for hanging out with sinners and tax-collectors and Pharisees, this time in Luke 15.

On this occasion, Jesus responds with no less than three parables to make his point. In each parable, something is lost, then it is found and then there is a celebration because it is found. You probably know them as the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost or prodigal son.

In each case, the lost thing or person represents sinners, the one seeking represents God and being found represents a return to God's family and God's ways or repentance. Each time it is God who has a party when people repent.

Jesus does not disagree with the Pharisees that these people's past behaviour was wrong, but he does challenge them to rejoice when they see people turning back to God, rather than wishing that they remain condemned.

Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector

Then finally in chapter 18, just before our reading, Jesus tells another parable. This time about a Pharisee and a Tax-collector. The Pharisee tells God how good he is and the tax-collector pleads for God's mercy. Jesus says it is the tax-collector who goes home right with God!

All these stories show that Jesus's concern is not to join in societies condemnation of those who do wrong, like the self-righteous pharisees, but to seek to help those people back into God's family and to God's ways. When that happens it is a reason to celebrate!

Jesus and Zacchaeus

So, we come to the meeting of Jesus and Zacchaeus. Only Luke records this event, but he makes clear it happens at the climax of Jesus's ministry. In fact it is the last event Luke records before Jesus enters Jerusalem, the place he is heading in order to be crucified.

It happens in Jericho, which is on the road to Jerusalem, the last major stop before reaching the temple-city. Jesus has clearly built up a good reputation among the people through his teaching and healing miracles and crowds from Jericho come out to see him.

Amongst the crowds is Zacchaeus. But Zacchaeus is a figure of hate in Jericho. He is also short. So the crowds become a barrier to him seeing Jesus and so he climbs up into a Sycamore tree to see Jesus.

Zacchaeus was:

But, it is not so much Zacchaeus's height that is the issue. Verse 2 tells us two key things about him. He was a Chief Tax-Collector and he was rich. In fact, Jericho was probably a good place to be a tax-collector, because it was a wealthy town on an important trade route. So Zacchaeus was probably very wealthy!

But how was Jesus going to relate to him. Jesus had a long record of calling tax-collectors. But he also had a long record of challenging and condemning the rich and wealthy.

Jesus seeks the lost

When Jesus reaches the tree that Zacchaeus is in, he stops and looks up. He says to Zacchaeus, 'I **must** come to your house today.' Why must Jesus go to Zacchaeus's house?

Well, verse 10 probably gives us the answer, Jesus says, he, the Son of Man, has come to seek and to save the lost. Zacchaeus may be rich and well off in human terms, but in spiritual and eternal terms he is lost. He has been living a life outside of God's ways and God's families. Like a lost sheep he needs to be brought back into the flock, like a lost coin he needs to be found and returned to the purse, like a lost son, he needs to return to his family. And this is what Jesus is all about!

Zacchaeus

And so Jesus visits Zacchaeus and the result is transformational! Zacchaeus sees this as Jesus's offer of a second chance and grabs it gleefully.

- **Repents:** From Greed to Generosity

Zacchaeus shows that he is repenting from his old ways. As a tax-collector his main motivation has been greed, getting as much money as possible no matter how he treated people or who he worked for.

Now, Zacchaeus shows he wants to reverse that and become someone who is generous and not greedy.

He offers to give away half of his wealth to the poor and to repay four-fold those he has cheated. Zacchaeus has come to realise that wealth is not there to be hoarded, but to be used for God's good purposes.

- **Believes:** A Son of Abraham

Secondly, Jesus says that Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham.

What does he mean by that? It maybe that he is just saying to the other Jews in Jericho, look Zacchaeus is family! You should be pleased that he is now coming back into the fold.

Yet, in the Bible, Abraham is also seen as the father of all those who believe. Jesus goes on to say that 'salvation has come to this house.' When Jesus tells people they have been saved in the gospels, he usually links it to their faith! So, it is likely that Jesus is saying, look here is someone that has come to believe! He believes that belonging to God is far better than having loads of stuff belonging to you! That it is better to have

treasure in heaven than treasure on earth! That God will welcome him back with rejoicing!

- **Is Saved Today!**

So, Zacchaeus repents and believes and Jesus says he is saved.

But, importantly he says, "**Today**, salvation has come to this house." The word today is important. Jesus does not say, that when Zacchaeus has sorted out his finances and shown he has really changed he will be saved. He doesn't have to achieve anything to be saved.

He doesn't have to do anything to make up for his past sins. He is forgiven on the spot. The sins are remembered no more.

His decision to change his ways and trust in Jesus, to repent and believe means that his status is changed instantly. He is accepted by God, accepted by Jesus and his salvation is secured.

So, what are we to learn from these events?

Is Jesus seeking you?

It may be that you are here and realise that you are a bit like Zacchaeus before. Perhaps life has been all about trying to get rich without worrying about the consequences for others or using your wealth for God's works. You've seen no need for God, just money.

But perhaps God is seeking you and wants to invite you back into his family. Are you ready to believe he is offering you a second chance? Are you ready to believe he can forgive you for your past greed? Are you willing to repent and move to a life of generosity rather than greed?

Will you seek God's salvation?

What is our attitude as a church?

And if you are already a member of God's family and part of his church, then are we still living with the priorities of Jesus. He said he came to seek and to save the lost. Is that our desire or are we slipping into the ways of the Pharisees?

Are we content to sit back and criticise bad behaviour in others from a distance? Easily joining in the condemnation of the crowd?

Or are we actively praying and seeing how we can help people to come to Jesus and be transformed like Zacchaeus?