

**Luke 19:1-10**

**BY THE GRACE OF GOD**

Sometimes we see amazing examples of when reality meets fiction, or, another way to put it, when life imitates art. I'm referring to occasions when, with no clear connection between the two, events or circumstances which are portrayed for us in fictional books, or plays, or movies, or TV shows, are then reflected with amazing accuracy by things which happen in real life. Can you think of any examples of that? The one that comes straight to my mind is the British comedy series from the early-mid 1980s *Yes Minister/Yes Prime Minister*. This series revolved around the interactions and clashes of a British cabinet minister, who then became the Prime Minister, and the civil servants he worked closely with. It's now over 40 years old, but whenever I rewatch it I am amazed at how closely it seems to reflect what we see happening between MPs and bureaucrats today. I remember one episode in which a hospital had been built, opened, fully staffed and equipped, but had no patients. While the minister was outraged about this, the civil service was proud of all the efficiency awards this hospital was winning. And then a few years ago in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, the same thing happened; a new hospital was built, equipped, and staffed, but it took a long time for it to start receiving any patients! Just this week there was a story about a school in Western Australia which no longer has any students, but still has a principal. If you've ever watched the Australian TV series *Utopia* you will find it similar also. It is uncanny how those stories which are created as unbelievable fiction can then be played out in reality.

Sometimes what seems highly unlikely, improbable, even impossible, comes true.

A section of Luke's Gospel which comes a bit before our reading today, chapter 15, is often called the 'Chapter of the Lost'. The three parables in that chapter, the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son, may well seem, both to Jesus' first listeners and to us today, as being quite improbable: a shepherd has 100 sheep but leaves the 99 to go and find the one who is lost; a woman who has ten coins when she loses one does all she can to recover it; and perhaps most unbelievable of all, a father whose son treats him as though he was dead and squanders all of his father's hard earned money, welcomes that son back freely, openly, completely, when the son returns home. Many of those who first heard these stories would have thought that Jesus was

over exaggerating a point, that the kind of love and grace they illustrate would never be shown, even by God. And I wonder, if we were able to forget and put aside what we know about the grace of God, would we also see these as outlandish and over the top stories?

Although it may well sound like a parable, particularly up against some of the longer teaching stories Jesus told, like the Parable of the Lost Son, the account of Jesus meeting Zaccheus is Luke reporting on an event which actually happened. Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem and all the events which we remember at Easter; the events which are the climax of why He came down as one of us. We are told He is merely passing through the town of Jericho, when He comes across a man named Zaccheus, who has climbed a tree so he can see Jesus better. What do we know about Zaccheus? He's short, hence he had to climb a tree to see Jesus. But even more significantly in setting up what happens here, Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, and was very rich. Tax collectors were despised by the Jews because they worked for the Roman occupiers. In doing so, they even ripped off their own people, so as a rich tax collector he was both a traitor to his people and very dishonest. He was seen as being both socially and religiously unclean by his own people.

But what don't we know about Zaccheus? The big one is; why did he want to see Jesus? How many of you climbed trees as a child? How many of you have done so as an adult? Would you climb a tree if you were in your good clothes? Even though he was despised by the people of Jericho, we would still expect Zaccheus to dress and act in a dignified way that got the grudging respect of the people who also despised him.

So why did Zaccheus risk ridicule, and losing the small amount of respect he perhaps had from people, by climbing a tree to see Jesus? Perhaps he had heard from others, or perhaps seen and heard himself, about the things Jesus had done and said, and wanted to find out more. Perhaps he wasn't happy with his life, his wealth wasn't giving him the happiness he thought it would, so he was searching for what is really important. Perhaps Zaccheus just did what many of us do when a crowd forms, when in natural curiosity we try to find out more about what is going on. We're not given the answer to that question.

Because the focus of the story isn't about Zaccheus, but about Jesus, and that gives us both the meaning of this account and what it means for us today. As we look at what Luke gives us here, there are a couple of things which are very important. First of all, who starts the interaction here? Jesus. Jesus goes to the tree where Zaccheus is, somehow knows his name – so undoubtedly also knows both what he does and how others

view him – and calls him down so Zaccheus can host Jesus in his house. Out of all the people whose house Jesus chooses to go to, and undoubtedly many in the crowd would have been vying for that honour, Jesus chooses the despised, the outcast, Zaccheus. As Jesus says at the end here; The Son of Man came to look for and to save people who are lost.” (v. 10)

And what is the response of Zaccheus to the acceptance, the love, the grace which Jesus shows him? “I will give half of my property to the poor. And I will now pay back four times as much to everyone I have ever cheated.” (v. 8b) It’s interesting that Zaccheus’ repayment is far over and above what he was expected to do under the Jewish laws from the Old Testament. This dishonest man, who used to rip people off and only care about himself, now meeting the forgiving and accepting grace of God in Jesus no longer thinks about what he *has* to do, but instead about what he *can* do in responding to God’s love for him.

The third set of actions and reactions for us to take note of here, is that of the crowd. What do they say when Jesus calls Zaccheus down and says He will go to Zaccheus’ house? “This man Zacchaeus is a sinner! And Jesus is going home to eat with him.” (v. 7b) Reminds us of the big brother in the Prodigal Son story, doesn’t it; ‘that’s not fair! What about everything I’ve done’. Instead of being happy that the lost has been found, they are upset that the one who they see as being less worthy than them is being rewarded. For them, this grace stuff seems pretty unfair.

Think about the words, the actions, the reactions, of Jesus, Zaccheus, the crowd. How do we relate them to ourselves today? Throw in the way that this account brings the made-up stories, parables, of Luke 15 into reality, and that not long before this, in Luke 18:24, after talking to a rich man Jesus says to His disciples; “It’s terribly hard for rich people to get into God’s kingdom!” Like an absurdly funny TV show, or an outrageously over the top movie, what has seemed impossible before has now come true. How do we fit into this?

What we see here, illustrating in real life what was illustrated in the Parables of the Lost in Luke 15, is that our coming back to God all comes down to God’s grace. It is God who calls us, as we are, where we are. It doesn’t matter what limb we have put ourselves onto, how others may look at us, how much even we may despise ourselves, in Jesus God comes to us and calls us to Him. He says, ‘I want to be with you, everyday’. The call is there for each one of us, because it all starts with Him.

And, like Zaccheus, what is our response? Remember Zaccheus didn't worry about what he had to do, or what others thought he should do, he freely responded to the grace that Jesus had shown to Him. How do we respond to God's grace in our lives? Do we want to show every day what it means that we are with Him, or has it become a bit 'everyday' for us, maybe even becoming a Sunday morning/church thing? How is God calling you to respond to His grace?

And then, how are we like the people in the crowd, or the older brother in the Prodigal Son parable? Do we ever push people to the 'outside' of God's family, either deliberately or inadvertently, by outward words and actions or by inward thoughts and attitudes? Part of responding to God's grace is knowing that it's not our place to judge, not our place to exclude, but as we are called to come down from the tree which separates us from God we are also called to accept everybody equally as part of God's family. We receive God's grace, we share God's grace.

By the grace of God we receive the receive the loving forgiveness and new life which God offers to us all through Jesus. If we've never heard of it before it might seem impossible, outrageous, something which has been made up, but when we hear God's call of love and grace in our lives we know how life-changing it truly is. In Jesus' own words He came to 'seek and save the lost', and that truly is each one of us. By the grace of God we are called, by the grace of God we are saved, by the grace of God we now live each day knowing and sharing His love. Amen.

#### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- Can you think of any made-up stories from books, TV shows, movies, etc, which seemed over the top but later happened in real life?
- Have a look at the account of Jesus and Zaccheus. What do you see happening here? Who is taking the initiative? How does Jesus take the initiative in showing us God's grace and bringing us back to Him?
- Think about what Zaccheus does here. His vow to pay back more than he had taken came after Jesus had shown grace and forgiveness to him, it wasn't the cause of it. How can you respond, in abundance, to the grace God gives you in your life?
- We can easily be like the crowd, and the Prodigal Son's older brother, and judge others as not being worthy of being in God's kingdom. Have an open an honest look at how you accept, treat, and respond to others, particularly any newcomers to your church family. Do you see them all as being equal to you, in need of God's grace?

Pray: thank God that we live in His love because of His grace. Ask Him to help us to remember, celebrate, and share what this means for us in our lives each day.

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