

Grace leads us to Righteousness and Salvation

November 2019

Luke 19:1-10 (ESV)

Jesus and Zacchaeus

19 He entered Jericho and was passing through. ² And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. ⁷ And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” ⁸ 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.” ⁹ And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Message

Grace Leads us to Righteousness
and Salvation

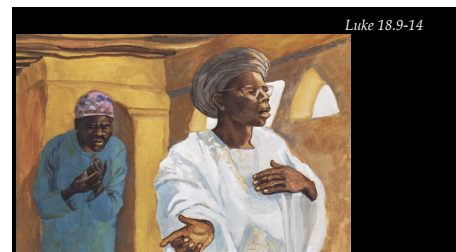
Introduction

Through the last weeks we have traced the Gospel of Grace where God’s right-making power comes to those seeking it in faith.



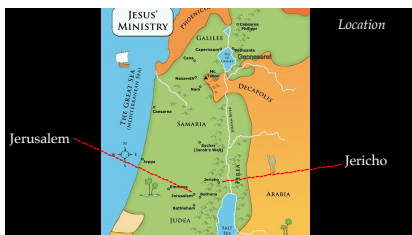
Two weeks ago we considered the story of the Persistent Widow and the Indifferent Judge as Jesus told it in Luke 18. My take-away from that was Jesus’ instruction to be persistent -or faithful- in seeking righteousness. Make Justice the focus of your prayer and interest. Insist on it with “Thy Kingdom Come!”

Then last week followed with another story from Jesus about righteousness with God through faith. This was the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector who both went up to the Temple to pray. I interpreted this as a message about faith in the right-making power of God released in grace when we place faith in God’s mercy - whatever our condition might be.



Both those messages are available on our church website for reading or listening.

As Jesus walks south to his cross in Jerusalem he has been setting out how God’s saving righteousness –God’s right-making power- comes as grace -free favour- through our faith in God’s saving goodness regardless of our condition. God is pleased to make us right with him and right in other ways through trust in him.



Today we skip a few subsequent developments through Luke 18 to come to the end of the account of what Jesus said and did while walking to Jerusalem. The stories were told as teaching but today in Jericho Jesus acts and models how God’s saving grace - present and alive in him- works to bring righteousness to those who seek it and receive it. We move from parables to accounts of things said and done in a real place on a map and in real time.

Luke describes two things that happen near and in Jericho as Jesus comes closer to Jerusalem.

Firstly in Luke 18.35 -on the approach to Jericho- Jesus responds to the pleading faith of a blind beggar. From Mark's Gospel we know the blind beggar's name is 'Bartimaeus'. 'Blind Bart' the beggar cries out for mercy from Jesus the Davidic Messiah.

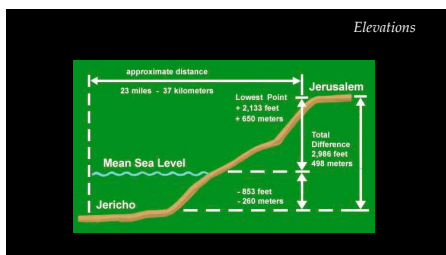
"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Those around him tell him to be quiet but he shouts all the louder so that Jesus hears him and asks to see him. Blind Bart is brought over to Jesus who assumes nothing but says:

"What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me recover my sight." ⁴² And Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well." ⁴³ And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

The right-making power of God as recovery of sight comes as grace in response to faith. This happens before Jesus actually reaches the town.

Jericho is considered to be the oldest continuously inhabited city on earth. When I was there I learned that archeologists anywhere can expect to find up to a maximum of 27 layers of civilization. 23 layers have been identified at Tell Jericho - the mound built up by all the layers of city built there.



Jericho is 258 meters below sea-level which makes it extra hot. For a foot traveller such as Jesus this was his lowest point on his journey to Jerusalem. From here he would begin a 1000 meter climb to Jerusalem at 750 meters above sea-level. Jericho has springs of abundant water which is the reason it has been settled in that heat for 12,000 years. It's an Oasis.

So Jesus approaches the lowest and oldest town on earth, healing known blind beggar Blind Bart, before reaching the main entrance. Consequently Jericho soon knows that Jesus of Nazareth is coming and that he has already worked one miraculous healing that day. Healing Blind Bart is recognized by people as a sign that the Reign of God is among them. God is at hand - Praise the Lord!

So a crowd comes out onto the street to see Jesus.

In the crowd there is one man who is keen to see Jesus but cannot see because he is much shorter than everyone else. Not only is he much shorter but he is as popular as the plague!

- Zacchaeus is a tax collector which makes him less than popular anywhere
- Zacchaeus is a tax collector for the Romans which makes him a collaborator with the occupying power and even less popular.
 - He is a traitor to his people and their cause.
- Zacchaeus is a senior or ruling tax collector so he is even more unpopular.
- Finally Zacchaeus is rich and dressed to show it.
 - His crime pays well and he stinks of dirty money!

The Romans had tendered out tax collection across the empire for the provinces to prominent Romans who had in turn tendered out regions in each province to people such as Zacchaeus making him a senior collector over a region. He then hired local people to do the unpleasant work of collecting money from reluctant Jews. That made Zacchaeus a senior or ruling tax collector, a sort of middleman in the Roman extortion racket. Zacchaeus' tender to the Roman above him in the scheme was worthwhile so long he could get his team of collectors to squeeze out more than what he had paid for the right to collect taxes in that region. This was his profit motive. If need be he could call in support from Roman soldiers.

Anyone in business or with property could expect to be inspected by a tax collector whenever they appeared to be carrying goods or making money. The city gates were always attended by tax collectors poking around in everyone's cargo. Rome was the unavoidable power and Zacchaeus was the local agent standing to get a margin from his neighbours in Jericho.

Imagine what might accidentally happen if little Zacchaeus at 1.5 meter was surrounded by elbows, feet and fists in a crowd? I expect he had experienced more than one bruise or black eye as locals took the opportunity to pay him back.

But Zacchaeus is not a tax collector for nothing. He is smart and there is away around this: Run ahead along the road, climb a tree and secure a bird's eye view of this Jesus as he comes up the road.

There is a sycamore tree in modern Jericho alongside the main road. This is not the same tree but gives an impression.



Here is another view showing how it stands alongside the main road of the modern town that stands beside the ancient ruins.



Then it happens: Jesus comes by, looks up at Zacchaeus in the tree and says:

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”

At that point everyone said: “WHAT?”

Q What indeed? What is happening here?

A It's very simple:

Jesus, Son of God, embodiment of God's presence, the Reign of God in person wants to come to the home of a man despised, ostracized and hated by everyone for good reason. Jesus is inviting himself to enjoy the hospitality of a proverbial sinner, an operative in the occupation and oppression of the Jewish nation.

Do you know any 'scumbags'? They might be as likely a candidate in our minds for a home visit from Jesus. This is what our God and his Messiah do.

There are two responses reported.

Zacchaeus “hurried and came down and received him joyfully.

Those about “saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.”

The Grace of God pre-empted anything Zacchaeus could do. Jesus invited himself saying I must come to your house, ready or not.

At that point Zacchaeus could have declined as others had done, even politely, but happily he was very pleased to receive Jesus.

But let's note that for others:

- Grace is potentially scandalous.
- Grace is not always politically correct.
- Grace can offend.

In Jesus' world hospitality and the sharing of a meal is a big deal.

This is not just a free room for the night. This is a personal connection, a bond of association a big gesture all round. Jesus is bringing great dignity and honour to the home of Zacchaeus and everyone who lives there. This is a gesture of friendship and acceptance.

As it happens Zacchaeus takes in the measure of grace extended to him and grace does its work. His monetary mind begins to click over. Grace draws him towards seeking righteousness. Gratitude for God's goodness leads him towards repentance.

Yes, it really is grace first then repentance! Insisting on repentance before grace is not possible because then it's no-longer grace but meeting conditions for acceptance.

I imagine this happening as Zacchaeus throws a party for Jesus to which all the other public sinners come along with the disciples.

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."

That is quite a commitment. The mathematicians will realize that if 1/8 or 12% of Zacchaeus' wealth had been gained through fraud he would become penniless. Wow!

That is a sinner's repentant response to the grace of God. He makes the accounts right because he himself is now right with God. He makes right because he is made right.

People praised God when blind Bart was healed. This is another cause for praising God whose presence restores sight and makes sinners right.

Jesus responds with two statements, one specific to Zacchaeus and a big end of section self-description.

And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.

Years later St. John would hear the Spirit of Jesus speak to the Church of Laodicea as recorded in the Book of Revelation (3.20)

²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Jesus wants to come to our homes and bring salvation. "But, but my home is a mess and I am a mess and my family is a mess." That may well be so, but Jesus is knocking and wants us to open the door and let him in, in to our lives for sure but also into all those areas of mess we have.

With Jesus in the house Zacchaeus is restored as a member of God's family and a son of Abraham. With Jesus in the house he is restored in his identity and purpose in life.

to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6.8)

It's grace received in faith followed by repentance that brings salvation.
It begins with grace and he willingness to receive it.

Luke records Jesus concluding with a banner statement about his mission.

¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Luke 19:10 Jesus' Mission Description

¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek
and to save the lost.”

Jericho is a place with many resonances and the beginning of the last leg of Jesus' climb to Jerusalem and the Cross. Here Jesus describes his mission.

The Lost are to be saved by the grace and initiative of the one seeking them. If you are lost, let Jesus come and you will know salvation. Jesus in the house makes us right with him. Jesus outside the house does not.

- The Widow of the parable had her case settled and justice was delivered
- The Tax Collector praying in the Temple went home righteous because he appealed for God's mercy.
- Blind Bartimaeus had his sight restored after calling out for mercy.
- But Zacchaeus had Jesus come to his home and bring deep salvation. He was made to stand in who God wanted him to be. That is the measure of righteousness Jesus brings to the lost.

That is the greater measure of salvation to seek.

Jesus wants to come home with you, allow him in.

Allow him into your home life, your wallet, your dreams and more.

Grace will flow, free repentance and righteousness will follow.