

A Small Man's Big Payback

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[0 : 00] Keep your Bibles open, we'll have a look through that passage together, but let's begin by praying. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks to us, who wants to have a real and genuine relationship with us.

And so we pray that this evening we would listen to your words, and we pray that we wouldn't merely hear them, but we would also be able to put them into practice. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, can a bad person succeed with God? We know that God is holy. We know that God cannot stand sin.

So what happens when a bad person meets God? Surely it's going to be a pretty ugly confrontation. Something like one of those science experiments, and this is testing my brain going back a long way, where you get the potassium and you drop it into the water.

It's a massive explosion, a massive reaction. A dangerous confrontation when a bad person meets God. What possible chance can a bad person have with God?

[1 : 22] Can a bad person really succeed with God? It's a very important question for us to ask this evening. And perhaps it's a very important question that you might have asked yourself.

Perhaps you're very conscious of the wrong things that you have done in your life. And perhaps you wonder to yourself, what would happen if I was to meet God?

I'm a bad person. How could I possibly succeed with God? Can a bad person succeed with God?

Well, perhaps for you it's a very important question because of your family and friends. Perhaps you know people who do lots of wrong things, who show no interest in God.

And perhaps you often wonder to yourself, how can my friend, how can this member of my family ever succeed with God? Is it possible for a bad person to succeed with God?

[2 : 30] In the passage that we're looking at today, we see a bad person being confronted with God. We have Zacchaeus, who's a really, really bad guy, meeting God in the person of Jesus Christ.

What will happen when this bad person meets God? Is it somehow possible for this bad person to succeed with God? Well, in verse 1 we see that Jesus has entered Jericho and he's passing through it.

And it's in Jericho that he meets this man, Zacchaeus. And in verse 2 we get Zacchaeus' resume, if you like. But it's hardly a very glowing reference.

Firstly, we're told that he's a chief tax collector. Well, you might ask, what's so bad about that? Some of my best friends work for the tax department. I work for the tax department, what's so bad about that?

But in the days of Jesus, being a chief tax collector was about as popular as being a chief drug dealer might be today. Israel was controlled by the Romans, and there were three types of taxes that were collected in Israel.

- [3 : 51] Firstly, there was the land tax. So if you were a farmer, a certain amount of the produce that you grew on your farm would have to go in taxes.
- Secondly, there was a head tax, a certain annual tax that was paid per person. Neither of these two taxes were particularly problematic. They were collected by the local Jewish council, and people, probably a little bit reluctantly, paid them.
- But there was no kind of dramas really attached to those taxes. But there was a third type of tax, the customs system. Think about it this way.
- Imagine that every car that drives up Doncaster Road is stopped and taxed. So every time someone drives up Doncaster Road, they're stopped, and the value of the items in their car is counted up, and then they have to pay a certain percentage for driving along that road.
- Now, to save themselves some of the administration hassles, Manningham Council decided to open up this tax collection for local businessmen to bid on.
- [5 : 03] They have to put in their quote how much they think they can earn by taxing cars as they drive along Doncaster Road. And people might put in a bid for \$50,000.
- Someone else puts in a bid for \$80,000. Someone puts in a bid for \$100,000, whatever. And the person who puts in the highest bid, they get to be the one who collects the taxes.
- Oh, but only after they pay up front the amount that they think they can collect. So if a person puts in the highest bid of \$100,000, then they get the right to collect the taxes once they've paid the \$100,000 up front to the council.
- Then they start collecting. In order to earn back the money that they've put out in advance, and of course a certain healthy profit margin.
- Usually by cheating people and ripping them off. Now that's the sort of tax collector that Zacchaeus is. He's the guy that people would see stopping people as they travel along the road, and taking a proportion of their goods.
- [6 : 18] It wouldn't have been seen as too far removed from highway robbery. And in fact in the Bible, and in other Jewish literature, the most common terms connected with tax collector are tax collector and robber, or tax collector and prostitute, tax collector and brothel keeper, tax collector and sinner.
- That's hardly a nice company to be keeping. But tax collectors were regarded as the worst scum in society. They were scum.
- And as a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have had chief scum written at the top of his resume. The second thing that we note there is that Zacchaeus is rich, which is hardly surprising given his profession.
- Right? If he's got to pay all that money up front in order to collect the tax, then he's obviously going to have a bit of money in the bank. But it's not a very positive thing to say about Zacchaeus, given the way that he's earned his money.
- I imagine that we would be more likely to be opposed to a rich drug dealer than to a poor one, because a rich one is obviously doing some pretty good business in what they're doing.
- [7 : 38] You see, Zacchaeus is rich through some very doubtful business practices. But the problem is actually even worse than that, because if we'd been reading our way through Luke's Gospel, in the previous chapter, Luke 18, we would have read this.
- This is what Jesus said in Luke 18. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.
- Rich people are often so attached to their money that they have no desire for God. And so as we meet this guy, Zacchaeus, who's a cheap tax collector and rich, we know that he's starting a long way behind.

And the trouble is that these things that are mentioned here, which show us how bad Zacchaeus is, are really just the tip of the iceberg. I mean, anyone knew that he was a scumbag.

Everyone knew that he was whipping people off. But you see, the Bible is also quite clear that the things that we do, the wrong things that we do, flow out of our hearts.

[8 : 42] They flow out of our attitude to God. And so Zacchaeus' problem here is not just a social problem, it's not just that he's unpopular with people, but he's actually out of relationship with God.

He's got a spiritual problem. He's actively disobeying and rejecting God. He's refusing to live God's way. And these actions that we see here are the result.

So this guy, as we meet him, is in real trouble. He's a genuinely bad person. People despise him because of the way that he lives and the things that he does.

And even worse, he's in active rebellion against God. But he's got one thing going for him. Have a look at verse 3.

He's seeking Jesus. Verse 3, he's trying to see who Jesus is. And that is the one glimmer of hope for Zacchaeus in what is otherwise a really bleak picture.

[9 : 54] Perhaps, since he's seeking after Jesus, perhaps there's some hope for him. And yet immediately that chance falls flat on its face because as we read on, we see that on account of the crowd, he could not because he was short in stature.

You can just imagine this guy, this known scumbag, in the crowd trying to see Jesus. He would be getting elbows. No one would be moving aside to try and let him through.

In fact, his safety is probably in jeopardy being out there so much would he be hated. And so he's forced, in verse 4, to go to plan B. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him because he was going to pass that way.

At least now, if he's up the tree, maybe as Jesus passes by, he'll be able to catch a glimpse of Jesus, to see Jesus as he goes past. But that's hardly likely to have a particularly strong impact on his life, just catching a glimpse of Jesus as Jesus walks past on his way through Jericho.

And so things look pretty grim for this chief tax collector, this chief scumbag. But as we come to verse 5, in verse 5 everything turns upside down.

[11 : 16] 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. Zacchaeus had been seeking to see Jesus, but he'd failed.

And then in verse 5, Jesus seeks Zacchaeus. Jesus takes the initiative to form a relationship with him.

It's not playing hide-and-seek with really little kids. I don't know whether you've ever played hide-and-seek with really little kids. But you send them off to hide, and then you close your eyes and turn around to count before going to look for them.

And when you finish counting and you turn around to start looking for them, they jump out and go, I found you! They don't understand the rules of the game.

You're supposed to be looking for them, not the other way around. Well, Jesus doesn't understand the rules. Zacchaeus is supposed to be seeking Jesus.

[12 : 28] Zacchaeus is the bad guy. Zacchaeus is the one who should be searching after Jesus, trying to find some way that he can get back in the good books.

He's the one who needs help. He should be the one chasing Jesus. And you can see, if we jump down to verse 7, that's exactly what the crowd thinks too.

You can see it in their reaction, that Jesus doesn't understand the rules. All who saw it began to grumble and said, he's going to be the guest of one who is a sinner.

The crowd doesn't get it. What's Jesus doing? Doesn't he know the rules? In those days, if you went and accepted hospitality from someone who'd earned their money in such a shady way as Zacchaeus had done, then you're seen as a partner in their crimes.

And you're also undermining the strong social deterrent. People like Zacchaeus would have been ostracized by the community as a deterrent. In that, Jesus goes to his house.

[13 : 34] Jesus breaks all of the rules. He takes the initiative in seeking after the sinner. And you can see there that there's some urgency in the call that he gives the sinner.

Look at what Jesus says to him in verse 5. He gives him three commands. Hurry, come down, I must stay at your house today.

Not, can I please come and stay? But, I must stay at your house today. Jesus has taken the initiative and he's given three commands to Zacchaeus.

And the question is, what is Zacchaeus going to do in response to this initiative by Jesus? Well, keep in mind Jesus' three commands. Hurry, come down, I must stay.

And then look at Zacchaeus' response in verse 6. So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. Zacchaeus hurries, he comes down and he happily welcomes Jesus into his home.

[14 : 43] Zacchaeus allows Jesus to call the shots. Jesus has taken the initiative with him but Zacchaeus responds by doing exactly what Jesus requires of him.

And even more than that, Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus results in a complete change of lifestyle. Have a look at verse 8. Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor.

And if I have deferred anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much. Jesus has sought out Zacchaeus even though he's a really bad person.

Jesus is the one who took the initiative in forming the relationship with Zacchaeus. It's not anything good about Zacchaeus which did this. But once Jesus has initiated and formed that relationship, Zacchaeus cannot remain unchanged.

He cannot remain the same person now that he's met Jesus. And his response is concrete, immediate, and generous. He gives away half of what he has to the poor and he pays back four times as much if he's ripped and run off.

[15 : 58] That's beyond any legal requirement. Zacchaeus is demonstrating that his life is different now. Now that Jesus has taken the initiative and he's formed a relationship with him, Zacchaeus is living differently and he's using his money differently.

A relationship with Jesus cannot leave a person unchanged. It necessarily results in a concrete change of lifestyle.

So here in our passage today we see that a bad person succeeds with God. And Jesus says as much in verse 9 he says today salvation has come to this house because he too is a son of Abraham.

Zacchaeus has succeeded with God. Jesus says that today he's received salvation. He's right with God. And that's despite his failings and despite his bad behaviour because Jesus took the initiative in forming a relationship with him.

A bad person has succeeded with God. Is that some ground of hope for us? Well maybe you say but perhaps this is just an exception to the rule.

[17 : 18] Maybe Zacchaeus just caught Jesus on a good day. Maybe Zacchaeus just got lucky. But no. What happens to Zacchaeus here is a demonstration of what Jesus' entire mission is.

Have a look at verse 10 which is possibly the key verse in the entirety of Luke's gospel. For the Son of Man that's how Jesus refers to himself came to seek out and to save the lost.

Jesus' whole purpose is to take the initiative. Jesus' whole purpose is to seek out bad people, to seek out people who are lost, who cannot help themselves and to save them.

And this verse is picking up the language of Ezekiel 34. And in that chapter God criticizes the leaders of Israel for not being proper shepherds of his people.

God says about the sheep of Israel, the people of Israel, they were scattered because there was no shepherd. And scattered they became food for all the wild animals.

[18 : 36] My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth with no one to search or to seek for them.

God criticizes the leaders, the shepherds of Israel because they failed to care for the sheep. And so what will God do? Well, in Ezekiel 34, this is what God promises to do.

I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed and I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak.

This Old Testament promise where God says he will come and seek the lost is fulfilled here in the person of Jesus as he describes his mission as coming to seek and to save the lost.

[19 : 55] And Jesus points out that Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham. He's one of God's people. He's a member of Israel. He is one of the lost sheep.

But Jesus searched for him and Jesus found him and Jesus saved him. Can a bad person succeed with God?

Well, on their own they've got no chance. On their own they are lost and without hope. But Jesus came to seek and to save those who are lost.

You see, back in verse 1, which we skipped over very quickly, we read that Jesus is passing through Jericho. He's passing through because he's on his way somewhere.

And since chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel, we've read that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. That's where he's going. That's where his eyes are set. That's where he's driving for.

[21 : 02] And he's going to Jerusalem in order to die on a cross because that is where his mission ultimately will be fulfilled. That is how Jesus seeks and saves those who are lost.

Because Jesus died upon that cross in Jerusalem, he took upon himself the wrong things that bad people have done. And he offers forgiveness to all those who trust in him.

That is the way that Jesus seeks and saves the lost. he enables each of us to have a fresh start, a clean slate. He allows bad people, he allows people like us, to succeed with God by taking the punishment that they deserve.

Let me ask the question again. Can a bad person succeed with God? Absolutely. Jesus' entire mission was to seek and to save the lost.

To seek and save bad people in order to bring them to God. And friends, that is good news. Perhaps you're one of the people I mentioned at the beginning who is very conscious of the wrong things that you have done.

[22 : 23] Perhaps you are someone who wonders to yourself, how can I possibly succeed with God? The message, the clear message from this passage to you tonight, is that Jesus came to seek and to save people like yourself.

You can succeed with God, you can have salvation today, because Jesus takes the initiative, and Jesus has died for you.

All you need to do is to respond to him, to put your trust in him, and to accept the forgiveness that he offers you. But perhaps you are someone who already knows the forgiveness that Jesus offers.

What does this passage have to say to you tonight? I think it raises a very important question. Are we aligned with the mission of Jesus?

If Jesus' mission is to seek and to save the lost, then we need to ask ourselves, are we aligned with that mission?

[23 : 36] Because Jesus' mission is still to seek and save the lost. That is still what Jesus is about. The way that Jesus exercises this mission now is through us.

Through Jesus' death and resurrection, he offers forgiveness to people, and he's commanded his followers to take that good news to people of all nations, to tell bad people that they can succeed with God by placing their trust in Jesus.

Are you aligned with that mission? This is something that I've really struggled with over the last two years. At the start of last year, Anna and I moved from Sydney to Melbourne, and as a result, we moved away from a lot of our non-Christian friends who are up in Sydney.

And because my time is split between Ridley Theological College and Holy Trinity Church, I spend a lot of time around Christian people. And it's been really hard to have ongoing contacts with non-Christian people.

And that's been a challenge for me to constantly assess, am I aligned with Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost? It might be tempting for me to say, well, that's just the way it is, that's just the circles I'm moving in, and that's just the way it is.

[24 : 59] But I don't think an attitude like that matches up with Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost. And so I had to ask myself, how can I align myself more with Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost?

And as a result, I've gone and joined an indoor soccer team as a way of being in contact with non-church people. What about you?

As you assess your life, are you aligned with Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost? At least the first question to ask, step one, is do you have contacts with non-Christian people?

And for many of you, the answer to that would be yes. Through work, or through sport, or through school, TAFE or uni, you have many interactions with non-Christian people.

And that's great. But for some others, perhaps the answer is no. Perhaps as you assess your life, you think, well, really, I don't really have that many quality contacts with non-Christian people in my week.

[26 : 14] I think this passes a challenge for us to better align our lives with the mission of Jesus. What needs to change in order to develop those friendships so that you have opportunities to share the gospel?

But that's only really step one, having interactions with non-Christian people. I think step two is to pray. We need to ask the question, do we spend good amounts of time praying that our friends would come to know Jesus?

If this passage is telling us that Jesus' mission is to seek and save the lost, then surely we should be all actively praying for our friends who don't know Jesus.

Jesus seeks people and saves them, so we should be confident about praying for our friends. But let me attach a warning to that.

If you do start praying for your non-Christian friends, it will be dangerous, because God will answer those prayers and he'll give you opportunities to talk to your friends.

[27 : 28] When I was at uni, I had a friend named John, and I prayed a very wussy prayer, which might show my lack of confidence, but I prayed a prayer, God, please, in my conversations with John, let me be vaguely interested, and may the conversation steer somewhere towards Christianity, it was a prayer, basically, yes, where is that?

Well, the next week, as we were working together in a church room at uni, John turned to me and he said, Tim, this Christianity thing, can you explain it to me? As weak as my prayer was, my friend John, God answered it, far beyond my hopes and dreams, and gave me a great opportunity to share the gospel.

people. If Jesus' mission is to seek and save the lost, then our prayer life should be aligned with that, and we should be praying actively for our non-Christian friends. My story about John leads me to step three.

When we pray, opportunities will come because God answers that prayer, and we need to be ready to take them when they do come. When John asked me, what's this Christianity thing about, explain it to me, I need it to be ready to explain it to him?

Are you in a position to do that? If you pray for your friends and I ask you, what is the gospel? Are you in a position to explain it to them? Or do you need to learn to be better at doing that so that you can be better aligned with the mission of Jesus?

[29 : 02] There's a number of challenges in this passage, I think, for each one of us tonight. Can a bad person succeed with God? Absolutely.

Because Jesus came in order to seek and to save the lost. Amen.