

God's Amazing 'Going-Out-to-Get-Us-In' Grace

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First in a series, "Amazed in God's Grace"

Luke 19:1-10

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Please read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

For tree-climbing, a sycamore offers advantages. Its branches begin low, close to the ground.¹ For one without benefit of height, like Zacchaeus, this is important. (Not that he's thought about that before this very moment. How many of you have kept climbing trees after leaving childhood behind?)

A sycamore presents another benefit, especially vital to Zack's particular purpose. It's got lots of leaves. Good for hiding when you want no one to see you. Zack hopes to remain unnoticed while he is looking at Jesus.

By now Jesus has become a big deal. Word is speeding of the things he's been doing and saying. Racing right behind is wild wondering about what he's up to and who he is. Zack's wondering too. But not hoping.

You heard he's a tax collector, right. Good at it too. Got promoted to management! It's one of those things, though, where being good is bad.

Here's how it works. A collector bids for a contract giving him the right to take taxes from his area. That's what he sends on to the government. But he's free, and expected, to take more. He can call on the local garrison to press and squeeze folks for however much he can. He gets to keep that. As I said, Zack's good at it, and makes a lot of money. He pays a price, though. The folks whose already-meagre crops he's shaken down, and whose already-marginal profits he's skimmed are his neighbours around town. You can see why "Zacchaeus" is spoken with spit.²

Why would he expect anything different from Jesus? Not if this rabbi is God's messiah, as folks are saying. He is clearly on the side of the poor. That's not Zack. Zack has made the poor poorer. Hear what Jesus has been saying? About the odds of a rich man getting into God's Kingdom being worse than a camel's chances of slipping through a needle's eye. Not even Zack would bet on himself. No, when it comes to things of the Lord, he is bankrupt and broke.

Why see Jesus then?

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, "The Blind Man and Zacchaeus," Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 177.

² For a description of this tax farming system, see Bailey 176f.

Does Zack even know as he hoists himself and hides up that sycamore tree, past which Jesus will walk on his way out of town?³

II

Can we agree that Zacchaeus cuts a pitiful figure?

Or, can we?

If you want to measure him, be sure to take account of the human wreckage Zack's left on his way to the top. Do you expect he's shed much sorrow as he's stepped over those he's taxed? No, he didn't make up the system; there's plenty of blame around. Still, the odds were stacked in his favour. He took the bet and has been cashing in since.

The crowd shifts to screen short Zack from seeing Jesus. They are short of mercy for him. Imagine not a faceless mob, though, but individual eyes and hearts well-hardened. Hardened by life's shortness of mercy, kindness, generosity, and scruples. Hardened by the likes of Zack.

I wonder if, as much as it was the crowd blocking him, it was also Zack realizing he'd be wiser steering clear of it.

Where does that leave you and me? With Zack, up a tree? Or down in the mob? Maybe both. Each of us, a bit of the villain and a bit of the victim? Both self-righteous and shame-ridden.

How do you feel you'd fare, if God were taking a stroll down your street? Rush out with a "Welcome?" Or, get lost in the crowd? Or stick yourself up a tree instead, hide from the presence of the Lord among the branches, hope the leaves cover your nakedness?⁴

You want to see, but aren't sure you want to be seen — I mean really seen, to the core of your being — by the One who is frightening good and justice himself.

III

*We'd hoped Jesus would stay. Offering hospitality to someone like him would be a great honour. Instead he's moving on.*⁵

What? He's stopped. Just outside the walls. Looking up. Up that tree. What's? . . . Who's that? . . . Is it? . . . Yes! Zacchaeus! . . . It's Zacchaeus! He's been treed!

³ Sycamore trees were not planted in towns and cities but outside. See Bailey 177-79.

⁴ Echoing Genesis 3.7ff.

⁵ Bailey notes that this story and the one preceding it (Luke 18.35-43) are two parts of the same days' events. Jesus is coming into Jericho, and is greeted as any visiting dignitary would be. However, rather than staying on and enjoying the city's hospitality, he moves on . . . until he sees Zacchaeus. Bailey, 172ff.

Listen to him. "Zacchaeus! Come down! At once!" Jesus is joining the fun! Zack's gonna get what he's got coming. Finally!

You heard what happens next! Jesus takes Zacchaeus by his arms. "I've got to stay at your house tonight!" Then he turns back into town, arm around Zacchaeus like they're best friends. He laughs! Zack laughs, though you can tell he hasn't a clue what's happened. Neither do the rest of us.

Into the night, they keep laughing. The rest of us? Not laughing so much. We haven't stopped talking about it. Jesus says he's come to seek and saved the lost. He hasn't stopped either.

IV

It's amazing, God's grace.

Grace is the nature of God's love in action.

Grace. It's unexpected. It's undeserved. It's one way. God always starts. Sure, we can respond. We should respond. But even when we don't, the grace is still given.

God gives grace before we know we need it. Then, maybe, we realize how much we do.

Francis Spufford is a writer. He wrote a book about why Christianity makes sense to him. I want to riff off of something he said.⁶

With grace, God knows you.

With grace, God sees you.

God's grace is absolutely safe.

God's grace is terrifying.

God's grace sees you utterly exposed.

God's grace makes you completely welcome.

God's grace takes no account, at all, of your illusions about yourself.

God's grace lays you out, roofless, wall-less, worse than naked.

⁶ Adapted from Francis Spufford, Unapologetic: Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 2012), 63f.

God's grace knows where your kindness comes chequered with secret cruelties or mockeries.

God's grace knows where your love comes with reservations.

God's grace knows where you hate, and fear, and despise.

God's grace knows what you indulge in.

God's grace knows what parasitic colonies of habit you have allowed to form in you.

God's grace knows the best of you, which might well not be what you are proud of.

God's grace knows the worst of you, which it not what it has occurred to you to be ashamed of.

God's grace knows what you have forgotten.

God's grace has never forgotten you.

God's grace knows all this, and shines on you.

God's grace never stops shining.

God's grace knows what you deserve.

God's grace wants more for you than what you deserve.

God's grace takes what you deserve, and overflows you with love.

God's grace knows you've scampered up a tree, and want to hide. God's grace goes out to get you. God's grace says, *"Come down to me. I've got so much better for you. You see, I've come to look for you. To find you. And to bring you to me. Let's go to your house. And you'll never be the same."*

And you find yourself brought into the amazing grace of God. Amen.