

Loving the Lowly

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[0 : 00] I wonder, have you ever felt, have you ever felt look down on? Somebody looking down on you. If you have, I think everybody's experienced that, having that kind of patronising or being condescended perhaps, or maybe just someone ignoring you.

It is not a nice feeling because you feel like you're lacking in something, like you don't have something, whatever it is. It might feel, it feels like you don't matter to have someone think that for whatever reason that they are better than you.

That they are better than you. If you've ever felt like that, and I'm sure we all have, it is not a nice feeling. Maybe you might have had that feeling in school where another group of people in your class or another, they think they're better than you and it comes across.

They think they look better, that they have better friends, that they feel superior. And it can make us feel, if we feel like that, it can make us feel just a bit rubbish.

There are lots of reasons that people might look down on you. It can range from the trivial, the things that perhaps we think that don't matter, but they matter to us when we get that feeling.

[1 : 26] And if you ever have had that feeling of being looked down on, it makes you feel like you don't belong, doesn't it? It makes you feel that you're not important. And in that moment, you think, oh, you'd rather be, you'd be better off being anywhere else than where you are right now.

It's worth saying, I think, from the off, that some people have said that sometimes walking into a church can feel a little bit like that. And sometimes meeting people who claim to follow Jesus, let me tell you, that's actually happened to me.

I've walked into churches and felt the same, and so you're not on your own if you've ever felt like that. And if that has ever happened to you, it shouldn't have done.

That shouldn't have been the way that you experienced walking into a church. And that person who maybe looked down has no right to do that. So it can happen even in the places where it shouldn't, in lots of places, it can even happen where it definitely shouldn't.

Now, having said all that, sometimes, and I'm not saying this is right, but people look down on others because they know something about their past, their history, don't they?

[2 : 37] If, for example, you've, in your past, in your history, you've been a bit of a wrong one, you've been a scoundrel to other people, or just generally been unkind, people might look down on someone like that because they think, you know, you can't trust him, you can't trust that person.

You might even hear people say, stay away from that one, nothing but trouble with him. And there's a sense, isn't there, that there might be a degree of truth to that.

But even if there's that, even if it is true, that feeling that the individual feels will still haunt even the one with the thickest of skins.

And even the person who says, I don't care what they say, and I don't care what they think of me, deep down it does matter.

It does matter. Because everyone, every single person, without exception, deep down actually wants to be accepted and loved.

[3 : 44] Whatever they've done, whether they've been a scoundrel or a wrong one or whatever, whether they've deserved it or not, deep down everybody wants to be valued and appreciated and thought highly of and accepted and not looked down on.

Everyone wants to be, wants to have that feeling. In our reading from God's Word, the Bible this morning, we meet a man called Zacchaeus and we have a picture painted of him, don't we?

We're told things about him. That's how we kind of get introduced to this man. The first thing that we read is that he was a tax collector. In those days, tax collectors were some of, if not the most hated people.

Israel, where God's people lived, had been taken over by the Romans and the Romans were viewed as the enemy. Zacchaeus was seen as a traitor because he was an Israelite himself, but he worked for the Romans.

He worked for the enemy, collecting money for them. You think of, you know, wars in the past, go with World War II. It would, a similar way would be, it would be like a British person collecting money from British people to give to the Nazis.

[5 : 06] That is, that is what, that is Zacchaeus, the tax collector. He would be hated. But there's more. Not only is it like somebody doing that, but actually he's on the take as well.

He takes a little bit of money and gives it to the Romans and then he takes some and keeps it for himself. Zacchaeus was hated because he took money from his own people, gave some to his enemies and put some in his back pocket.

And he was rich. He was a rich man because of it. He said he was wealthy. He was hated by almost everyone. This is the lowest of the low, was looked down, treated like a nobody who was worth less than nothing.

He had no friends, probably no family that loved him. And you probably think, when you hear that description of what he'd been up to, well it serves him right, doesn't it?

It's not really a surprise. He's getting his comeuppance. Why would anybody treat him any differently? If that kind of a person was in our own society, that's exactly how we would treat him.

[6 : 15] Stay away from him. He's a thieving traitor. It's his own fault. If you knew someone would be stealing from you, making themselves rich and getting away with it, and there was nothing you could do because they were protected, he was protected by the Romans, so there was nothing they could do, you would not like them.

And you'd probably be suspicious of people that did. In fact, you would think any friend of Zacchaeus is probably a wrong one as well.

Well, this is Zacchaeus, a hated, thieving traitor. But as we look at this story, we see the amazing moment of what happens in Zacchaeus' life as he meets Jesus, as he meets the living God.

Because Jesus doesn't treat him like anyone else would. He doesn't treat him like we would. We would treat Zacchaeus exactly the way the crowd do.

There's no doubt about that. We do. But we see something different from Jesus. Three points we're going to see. Jesus sees Zacchaeus.

[7 : 36] Jesus changes Zacchaeus. And Jesus vindicates Zacchaeus. Or clears him, you might say. Vindicates, clears. The first thing is Jesus sees Zacchaeus.

Now, at this point in Jesus' life, Jesus has now become a big deal. It's not at the start of his ministry, but he's been doing lots. He's been healing everyone.

He's been speaking with authority. He's been casting out demons. News has been travelling fast about Jesus. And naturally, people want to see what all the fuss is about.

You can imagine the stories of people who've met him, who've been healed by him, who've heard him speak. And the story is being repeated, waxing lyrical. This man, and now he's arrived in Jericho.

News of everything that he'd done and now he's here. The man who they've heard so much about is now passing through their town. It's like you think of when a football team wins a trophy.

[8 : 37] They do an open-top bus tour through the streets, don't they? And everyone, even if people who are not supporters, they just want to, like, they just go out on the street and try and get a look of this famous team.

Zacchaeus is like everyone else. He's determined, a short man who can't see over the crowd. He climbs up this fig sycamore tree to get a better view.

He doesn't mind looking slightly ridiculous. The stories about Jesus have, without question, made an impression on Zacchaeus. You do wonder, don't you?

You do wonder, perhaps, if he'd heard the stories himself of Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors. We know that Jesus had done that frequently in other towns.

That Jesus had spent time with people like him. Spent time with forgotten nobodies that nobody else gave the time of day. What kind of man was he who acted like this when nobody else did?

[9 : 41] Was he looking for acceptance? Did he think, perhaps, this man might see me differently? Jesus sees and notices Zacchaeus.

That in itself is not normal. He's passing through the town. And he gets to the place, we presume, he gets to the place at the tree, says, verse 5, when Jesus reached the spot.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, said to Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.

He reaches the tree, he notices, he sees, he looks up and he speaks. Jesus slows right down.

What we get here is a picture, a real life picture within the story of how Jesus sees people.

[10:53] Because Zacchaeus' past doesn't matter to Jesus. Jesus slows right down for him. He's on his way through, but he stops.

Jesus overlooks Zacchaeus' past. It doesn't matter to him. He knows Zacchaeus' past, but he doesn't look down on him because of it. He looks up to him in more way than one.

Because Jesus values Zacchaeus despite all his mistakes. Despite the thieving, the lying, the being a traitor. And sees him as a broken man.

He knows he's wronged people.

And yet despite all that, here is this man that he's heard so much about, showing him kindness. Out of all the people that are there, of all the crowd that are there watching Jesus, so many faces, you can picture Jesus looking out, so many faces to see, that have come out to see him on the road.

[12:10] And it is this one man up a tree that he calls down, that he accepts. Jesus Christ.

You know, Jesus Christ looks at each of us, at you, with the same value and love. There isn't a single one of us, there's not a single person here, who doesn't look back at life with at least some regrets.

There isn't a single one of us who can say we haven't made mistakes, we've all been dafties. And if you've ever been looked down on for any reason, whether you deserved it or you didn't, whether you deserved it or not, the one thing that we can say is that Jesus doesn't look down on you.

He never looks down on you. We all long to be accepted, and loved, and cared for, despite all the baggage that we carry, and the lack of peace that comes from it.

But Jesus notices you, and today he sees you, and he wants to speak to you, not look down on you, but look on you with love and compassion and acceptance, because you're made in the image of God.

[13:31] There's a dignity and a value that is given to you. Jesus sees and notices Zacchaeus.

And he sees and he notices us, you, with everything that's going on in life.

And he values you. Jesus sees Zacchaeus. Second thing is, Jesus changes Zacchaeus.

Jesus changes Zacchaeus. See, the impact on Zacchaeus is instant. Verse 6, So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. That word for gladly, it kind of means like rejoicing.

You know, it has lots of meanings, but it kind of means, came down with great joy, you might say. Zacchaeus is overwhelmed. It's like a celebration to him.

Eating with someone in first century Israel was a huge deal. To be invited for a meal, it was like a status sign. If you were invited and turned it down, it caused huge upset and shame on the person putting on the meal.

[14:41] Similarly, it was a great honour for your invite to be accepted. But here, Jesus invites himself. He shows great honour to Zacchaeus.

He says, I want to come to your house. In fact, he says, I must. He doesn't actually ask. He says, I'm coming. I must come to your house. Jesus has eaten and will eat with the VIPs, the important people in society, the like, the people of importance who had credibility, those who weren't looked down on.

Jesus invites himself to the lowest of the low. It's so unexpected and Zacchaeus cannot contain himself. He's rejoicing.

It's a celebration. And it changes him. The compassion and love shown by Jesus changes. It transforms him. Look with me from verse 8.

Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, Look, Lord. Instantly, he now recognises this man in this act of love.

[15:51] Zacchaeus sees and realises that this is the Lord. Look, Lord. Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor and if I've cheated anybody out of anything, I'll pay back four times the amount.

It changes Zacchaeus from the inside out. And this idea, what Zacchaeus decides to do, isn't Jesus' idea. Have you noticed the penalty, this kind of sanction Zacchaeus puts on himself?

Jesus didn't say that he should give half to the poor and, you know, the sanction on what he's cheated. This is, this is, this is Zacchaeus' idea. And you work out financially what that actually means.

You just take some time to consider what this means for Zacchaeus. He's going to start by giving half of everything to the poor. So, and then with the half that he's got left, everyone he's cheated, he's going to give them four times back what he stole.

He's effectively bankrupting himself. He's making himself poor. What you realise is that what he promises to do here, Zacchaeus, he can't actually afford.

[17:07] He's going to be paying this back for the rest of his life. That's how much he's changed by the love of Jesus.

He values other people because Jesus valued him. To see himself rightly, to see what he's done, to see the injustice in the way that he lives and he wants to make it right because he's responding and changed by the love of Jesus for him.

Jesus' love has entered his heart and he can't help but love the people that Jesus loves. Jesus never tells him to do it. But it's Zacchaeus' response to meeting Jesus and experiencing his love.

To turn from his old ways. And he's changed. That's what happens when people meet Jesus. Jesus never leaves anyone as he finds them.

He changes and transforms his compassion and his love. It is so compelling. It's more than just, you know, it is more than just a change in behaviour. It's not just willpower doing this.

[18:22] Just trying to be a better person. You see, meeting Jesus changes people from the inside out. Gives them hope. True hope. Not hope in the way the world says it. You know, wishful thinking.

But it is a future that is certain and definite. Zacchaeus had tried to steal his way to a better life. thought he'd bring him a seat at the table. Maybe that would be that he'd be accepted because of his dosh.

But it only brought him misery, pain, rejection and loneliness. The truth is, you see, the real truth is that we all have a better Zacchaeus in us.

Maybe not the stealing. But looking to something that we think will make us worthy and accepted in other people's eyes. or the alternative that perhaps even we might look down on people who have what we want.

And we're scared of not measuring up. We're scared. If we turn to Jesus, we have a promise here that he's going to change you. He's going to change you.

[19:36] He's going to change you to be the person that he wanted you to be, that you might even dream that the person you might want to be yourself to be the best version of you.

To think of others more important than yourself because that's exactly what Jesus did to Zacchaeus. And it's exactly what Jesus does to you and that's what receiving his love does.

It changes you. Just like Zacchaeus. Jesus sees Jesus transforms. Final one is Jesus vindicates.

Or you might say Jesus clears. Jesus vindicates Zacchaeus. You look with me from verse 9. Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a son of Abraham. for the son of man came to seek and to save the lost. Jesus rescues Zacchaeus.

[20:47] He comes to Zacchaeus' house and saves him from himself. He clears his name and vindicates him. This man is a son of Abraham he says. It means that Zacchaeus, what it really means that Zacchaeus now belongs to God's family.

That's what it means. Zacchaeus always like a self-destruct button but Jesus clears him. He vindicates this man, this man now belongs to God.

In front of the whole crowd who have just said verse 7, they're muttering at Jesus. He's gone to be with the guest of the sinner. What's he playing at? Should we really trust this Jesus if he's gone off with Zacchaeus?

No, no, no. Jesus says in front of the whole crowd this man now belongs to the living God. Jesus, what we see here is just so beautiful.

Jesus Christ himself makes himself less. He's ready, he lowers himself ready to be associated with the worst of people.

[21:53] the lowest of the low makes himself equal to a hated nobody to save him, to save Zacchaeus. What must the people think of Jesus associating eating with the thieving lying traitor?

Yet Jesus associates the lowest of the low, the downtrodden, this broken man that no one else had time for. It's the heart of the gospel.

This is the heart of the good news. It's what Christianity is all about. Following Jesus is following a man who stoops down and lowers himself to save people from themselves.

Who doesn't show favouritism or look at the people the way the world looks at people. The very worst, the most marginalised, the forgotten, the unlovely, the different, the anxious, the depressed, the broken, the suffering, the hurting, Jesus stoops down and meets them where they're at.

This is Jesus and it's why people follow him. Because at its heart when we see Jesus in action here it is the story of God himself coming down from his throne in heaven taking on a human frame, a human body with all the frailty and emotion and pain and ups and downs that we experience and putting himself through that so that he understands what it's like to be a person and to be in our position so that he can die on a cross with humility, stooping himself down, lowering self to a greater extent because it is when he lowers himself again that he suffers on a cross that he pays for our mess.

[23 : 42] This is Jesus' mission. It's his assignment all along and he knows that and he spells it out. You see what he's saying?

He says, what I have done for Zacchaeus here, what I have done for Zacchaeus here is actually a picture of the whole reason that I came. Let me tell you.

Verse 10, for the son of man came to seek and to save the lost. He came, the son of man, he came, he didn't have to come, but he came, came to earth like we've said, and why did he come?

Here's why he came. He came to seek and to save the lost. Zacchaeus thought he was seeking Jesus, climbing up a tree to see him, but it's the other way around. You see, Jesus was seeking Zacchaeus.

The whole trip, the journey through Jericho, yes, he had a destination wherever he was traveling, but Zacchaeus was part of the plan of the journey.

[24 : 39] He knew he was going to meet Zacchaeus there, and he was going to meet this lost man and rescue him. To seek Zacchaeus and to save him.

Being lost is not something we experience much more anymore, is it? You just whack out Google Maps and you can see exactly where you are. Unless you've got, if you've ever had, it doesn't happen much if you've had your phone die on you, it's a nightmare, because you kind of rely on that anymore.

I don't know any streets or any names, I just kind of have to rely on my phone. But we know that, if that ever does, we know that frightening experience of not knowing where to go.

Jesus came to seek, to find. Those who are not lost on a map, but are lost in life. No direction, no compass, but direct themselves, the way that we did, directed ourselves with no clear plan of who we are or who we want to be, being tossed and turned and churned upside down by life and looking for any way to find ourselves, wanting purpose and value, but looking in all the wrong places.

That's who Jesus has come for. Which means, doesn't it, this is what it means, it means that he's come for you, and it means that he's come for me. The God who made you has come to find you and have a relationship with you.

[26 : 14] to rescue you. And he won't stop. He'll pursue the lost with such passion and vigour and perseverance that nothing will stop him from pursuing you.

That is how much he loves you. Like a frantic father who's lost his child. child. I remember when I was wee, I was abroad on holiday and my cousin who was younger than me, about four or five, went missing on the beach and he'd gone back to the hotel and was going up and down the lift when my uncle found him.

But for those five, ten minutes, there was total panic on every grown up's face. You can imagine that. Total panic and frantic.

Pursuit. We just got to fight. We're in a foreign country. There's panic and stress. Jesus pursues the lost aggressively, frantically.

He's desperate to find you. He's seeking after you to assure you that he loves and accepts you. Jesus sees, Jesus transforms, Jesus clears, he vindicates, he sees you, he wants to transform you, he wants to clear your name and accept you as his own.

[27 : 56] You know, today, today's a great day to accept the offer like Zacchaeus did. Even if you've done that before, years ago, you know, the service when we meet as God's people here this morning, this time right now, when we're hearing from the living God speak to us through his word, there's a moment in time where the pages of scripture, the Bible, is where we, each of us, are meeting with the risen Jesus.

Each of us. It's hearing from Jesus this morning. We're meeting with him. And you know, as we're hearing him, he stops, like he stops at Zacchaeus and he says, with great compassion, and to each of us personally, I must come and stay with you.

I must come into your life. Will you let him in? Will you let him in afresh into your life?

And if you welcome him in, he'll change you. all the bitterness, the hurt, the mess, the anger, the addictions, the sins, all of that, the stuff, the baggage, the cleansing and the cleaning process of your heart to make it more like the heart of Jesus will begin.

And you will hear the clearance, the words of vindication that he says about Zacchaeus, he says about each of us. Today, salvation has come to this house.

[29 : 43] Let me pray. Almighty God, we thank you for your son, Jesus, and we thank you that you call each one of us to follow you.

and you know in our lives that we've experienced hurt and pain and suffering. You know there's times when we have been marginalised and put to one side or maybe we felt that.

There may be times when we've deserved it. God but Lord, we thank you that you are a God of grace that shows us kindness that we didn't deserve. You're a God that says to each of us, I must come into your life.

life. And I pray that today, each one of us afresh, we would welcome you in. And that we would know your hand of grace making us more like your son.

That we would know your voice of vindication that says today salvation has come to this house for you are a son of Abraham.

[31 : 09] That each of us belongs, who's turned to Jesus, belongs to the family of God. We praise you for your grace. We praise you that you see us, you notice us, you change us, and you clear the guilty, that you forgive us and our future is secure in you.

We praise you and we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.