

DISRUPTING MERCY

THE GIFT OF EXTREME KINDNESS MOTIVATED BY
COMPASSION

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Preview

UP A TREE WITH ZACCHAEUS

An initial thought to ponder: Please open a web browser and search for images of mercy, kindness, compassion, or forgiveness. Pick two or three that resonate with you. Include one that is not from your usual way of thinking: perhaps an image from a religious tradition other than your own, an image from Japanese anime, or from a computer game. Bookmark or print those chosen images and keep coming back to them as you read this book. How do those images of mercy make you feel?

FROM HIS VANTAGE POINT in a sycamore tree, Zacchaeus hoped to see Jesus without drawing attention to himself. The encounter with Jesus did not turn out as Zacchaeus expected, and provides us a perfect example of mercy. The incident exemplifies a way of thinking about mercy as a proactive blessing with the power to transform the recipient's life rather than simply a reactive deliverance from suffering or guilt. It may seem a simple story. It is one we often present neatly to children. But I'd like to explore this encounter a bit further to uncover its richness. As you will see, most of the themes of this book find their roots under this sycamore tree.

The interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus appears in Luke's account of the life of Jesus, as part of an extended discussion on the nature of salvation. The theme picks up momentum when "a certain ruler" approaches Jesus and asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18).¹ After some banter about what it even means to be "good," Jesus disappoints the man by saying it is almost impossible for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. (Today, the word "kingdom" carries the negative connotations of patriarchy and feudal domination, but those were not the images intended by Jesus. If the word is too tarnished for you, I suggest replacing it with the more modern term "society.")

People who watch this interchange are surprised enough to ask, "Then who *can* be saved?" (18:26, my italics). Luke weaves an answer to that question by narrating three consecutive interactions between Jesus and his close disciples (18:28-34), an unnamed blind man (18:35-43), and Zacchaeus (19:1-10). In these encounters, we find out not only who can be saved and the varied forms that salvation can take, but also about the close relationship between salvation, eternal life, and participation in the kingdom of God.

Then Peter said, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake

of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. (Luke 18:28-34)

To the people already committed to following him, Jesus acknowledges that they have already given up what the rich man was unwilling to give up. They have left everything, including homes and family, “for the sake of the kingdom of God,” and are already on the path to inheriting the eternal life that the rich ruler may never find. But then Jesus confuses them by noting that the path they will travel together also leads to being mocked, insulted, spat on, flogged, and killed—not the kind of salvation they expected!

Who can be saved if not the rich and powerful? Those who give up all and suffer along with Jesus. For them, salvation means being blessed within their lifetime with more than they have given up, and the future blessing of eternal life.

Jesus and his disciples then continue their walk toward Jerusalem via Jericho.

As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” Then he shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God. (Luke 18:35-43)

On the outskirts of Jericho, they are accosted by a blind beggar who calls out repeatedly, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” (18:35-43). He is told to shut up by the crowd, but Jesus responds to his marginalization by asking, “What do you want me to do for you?” In asking this question, Jesus acknowledges the man’s request for mercy and pauses to listen and to understand what mercy would mean to such a person. The blind beggar confirms what we expected: he wants to see. In response, Jesus says to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you” and immediately the man can see.

The Greek word *sesōken* is often translated as “healed” in this verse, but its root *sōzō* has the primary meaning of “saved” and is the same word as used in the crowd’s earlier question “Then who can be saved?” The same word is applied later to Zacchaeus, although the nature of his salvation is much different from the physical healing of the blind man.

Who can be saved if not the rich and powerful? Those who are physically broken and socially outcast. For them, salvation may mean, first and foremost, physical healing.

Having received the mercy he asked for, the man follows Jesus, praising God. Nothing in Luke's account implies that mercy was shown because the man deserved it, or did not deserve it, nor because of any prior repentance or future debt. Jesus' own explanation is that the man's *faith* saved him: a faith demonstrated by calling out to Jesus in the belief that Jesus could, and would, show mercy.

From the outskirts of Jericho, Jesus and his followers, including the once blind man, now move through the city, where they meet another man in need of mercy.

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 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." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Luke 19:1-10)

Zacchaeus has a different social standing from the rich ruler who started this whole conversation about salvation. In Matthew's account, the rich ruler is referred to as a "young man" (Matthew 19:22) and is probably a naive youth with inherited money from a well-respected family. On the other hand, Zacchaeus had probably been shunned by the Jewish townsfolk because, as a tax collector, he is a collaborator with the occupying Roman forces. He is a man of considerable power, not just a tax collector but the local *chief* tax collector—probably the head of a tax collecting company who has won a contract to collect taxes on behalf of the Romans—with wealth that came from exploiting his fellow Jews.

Zacchaeus is a short man, looked down upon both literally and figuratively. He wields a lot of power and is consequently disliked, despised, and feared. Though privileged and wealthy, Zacchaeus lives just as much on the edge of the crowd as does the blind beggar. Zacchaeus too is broken and in need of salvation. Although curious, he does not have the faith to call out for mercy.

Nevertheless, Jesus sees him ... deeply sees him ... sees beyond the wealth and beyond the status of social pariah. In a display of proactive mercy Jesus calls out above the babble of the crowd and invites himself to Zacchaeus' home. It is a simple request, but one that reverberates through the hearts of both the crowd and Zacchaeus.

The crowd is aghast and cannot make any sense of this travelling preacher sullyng himself by contact with a known sinner. This tax collector, they are sure, does not deserve any favors. Furthermore, in the normal practice of Middle Eastern culture, the *community* would have selected the most suitable host to honor a visitor, but Jesus had chosen to avoid that hospitality and instead insulted them by preferring the hospitality of their oppressor! Where previously

they were hostile toward Zacchaeus, now they are angry at Jesus.ⁱⁱ Such is often the effect of mercy on jealous observers.

Zacchaeus, on the other hand, is transformed. The details of what caused that transformation are not related by Luke. Perhaps Jesus and Zacchaeus held a longer conversation that evinced the change. But the brevity of Luke's account suggests that the core reason was simply Jesus' act of inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house. This unexpected act highlights several important aspects of mercy. It went against the social current. It was dignifying. It was a gift. It upended the idea of debt.

First, Jesus' compassion for Zacchaeus motivated him to reject the dismissive attitude the crowd held toward Zacchaeus. According to Kenneth E. Bailey,ⁱⁱⁱ the text and the legal restrictions on the placement of large trees imply that Jesus had passed through Jericho at this point and was on his way out of town toward Jerusalem. Earlier on, Luke says that Jesus was just passing through Jericho (19:1) but, having seen Zacchaeus, Jesus changes his mind about continuing to Jerusalem. Despite his own plans, and despite (or perhaps because of!) the antagonism of the townsfolk to Zacchaeus, Jesus repeats his habit of embracing the outsider.

Second, Zacchaeus would have seen the reaction of the crowd. Like them, he would have noted the violation of hospitality customs and recognized that the invitation to eat with him was a slight against the honor of the community. He would understand that Jesus was risking ritual uncleanness by entering the house of a "sinner" the day before Passover. He heard the crowd muttering against Jesus, but whereas the crowd was affronted by Jesus, Zacchaeus "was happy to welcome him" (19:6).

Zacchaeus immediately understood that Jesus' simple act affirmed his dignity and value. Jesus' acceptance of Zacchaeus denied his status as an outcast and acknowledged him as "a son of Abraham" (19:10), meaning, in this context, that he too was a member of the Jewish community. We should not deduce that Jesus invested him with some new value but rather than he recognized and affirmed the value Zacchaeus already had, even if that value had been forgotten. The true Zacchaeus had indeed been "lost" and needed to be "saved" but all along he remained a beloved child made in the image of God.

Zacchaeus was not the only person on the margins who Jesus treated that way: Jesus dealt the same way with the women at the well (John 4:1-42), the thief on the cross (Luke 23: 39-43), the women who wiped his feet with her hair (Luke 7:36-50), people with leprosy (e.g., Matthew 8:2-4), people supposedly possessed by demons (e.g., Matthew 8:28-34), and countless others. Showing mercy in this way was clearly his normal practice.

Third, this posture of Jesus was not a result of anything Zacchaeus deserved or did not deserve, nor was it conditional on any prior repentance or subsequent response from Zacchaeus. It was a free gift.

Fourth, Jesus showed mercy to Zacchaeus in a very strange way: by putting himself in debt to Zacchaeus. On the surface, he did not give anything to Zacchaeus but asked Zacchaeus to give something to him. He invited himself to Zacchaeus' house and there presumably ate a meal and perhaps even slept overnight.^{iv} In the normal course of social interaction that would mean he now owed something to Zacchaeus. The fact that he took the same approach with the women

at the well—whom he asked for a drink of water (John 4:7)—suggests that this is a deliberate strategy. I will say more about that in a later section on mercy as gift.

In this context, the process of asking for help contributed to Jesus' affirmation of Zacchaeus by declaring that he is worthy of being a host.^v Jesus denied the judgment of the crowd that Zacchaeus was a taker and gave him an opportunity to prove them wrong. Jesus placed himself in a position of need and asked Zacchaeus to serve him, saying in effect "I don't care that others spurn you, I would be honored to walk by your side and be a guest at your table."

The effect of this act of mercy was a radical shift in thinking for Zacchaeus that led to a radical shift in his financial and relational intentions. He spontaneously decided to give half of what he owned to the poor and to repay fourfold anyone he has cheated. That response was in no way required by Jesus. The reparations were not a condition of Jesus' mercy but a result of it.

Luke does not spell out the thought process that led to this radical change but I imagine his self-talk going something like this:

Jesus risked his own reputation for me. For me, whose own reputation is a crock of camel dung! Why have I been so proud of making myself rich? Proud of how everyone fears me. What have I become? They all hate me. And they're right: I've got more money than I know what to do with but I am worthless. An outcast like that blind beggar I walk past every day. (Blind no more it seems! I wonder what happened to him?) Where was I? Oh yeah ... outcast and ashamed of myself. But Jesus doesn't see me that way. He's not blind to what I do but seems to think I'm worth spending time with. I wish I was. Maybe I am. But if I want to lead a household worthy of giving hospitality to someone like Jesus, I'll have to be a better me than I've been. Maybe that needs to start with being more generous.

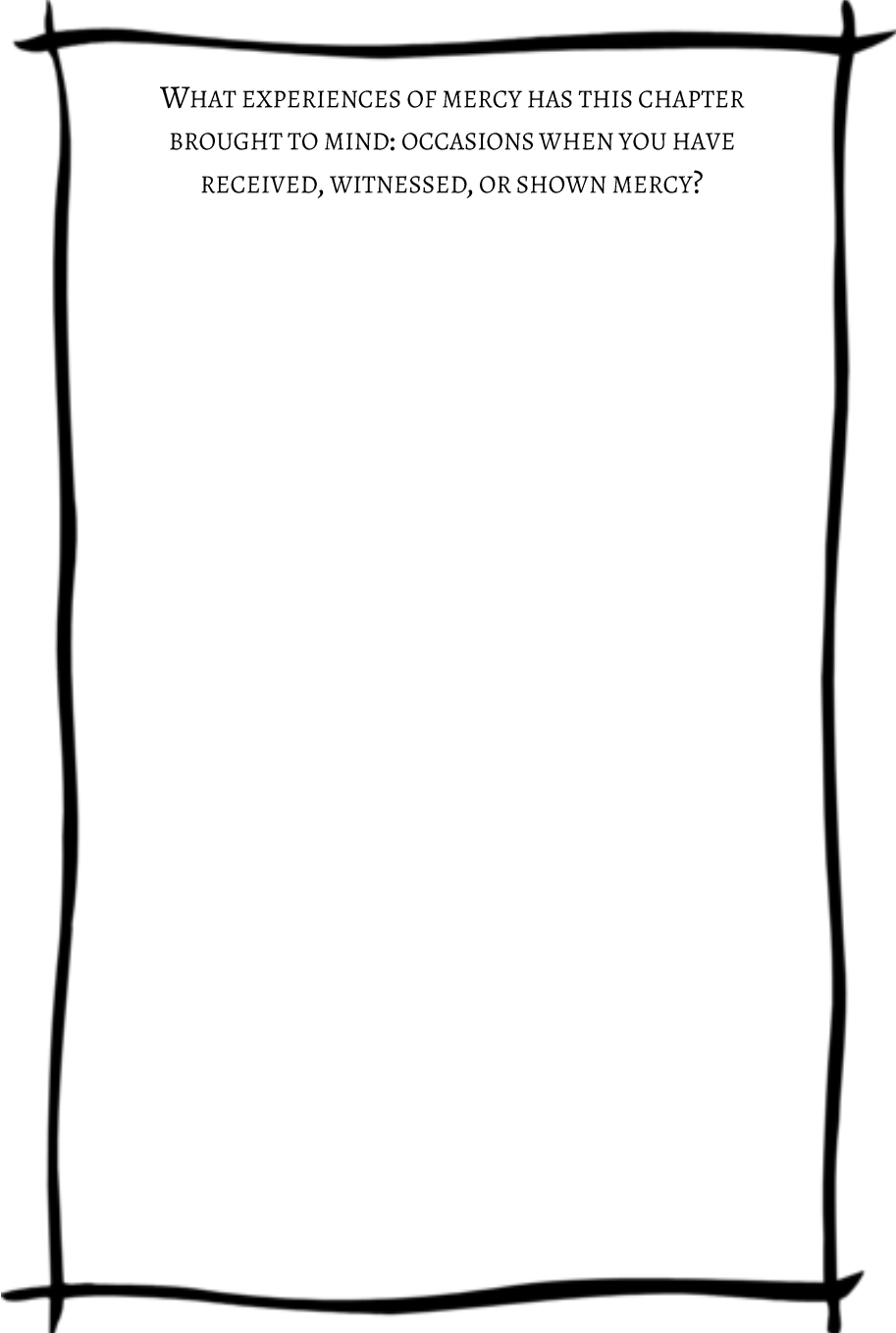
Whether or not that is accurate, there was a change at the root of Zacchaeus' identity. Jesus' mercy sparked a re-evaluation by Zacchaeus that resulted in true repentance: not a heavy sense of moral guilt or even remorse, but a change of mind accompanied by a change in behavior. He started to think of himself differently and as a result realized that he had to act differently. Such a transformation deserves the label "salvation." Jesus comments "Today salvation has come to this house." Today, Jesus has come to this house. Today, mercy has come to this house. Today, the real Zacchaeus, a son of Abraham, who had been lost, has returned to this house.

Jesus has been asked, in effect, "Who can be saved if not the rich and powerful?" He assures his disciples, who have already given up their past lives to follow him, that they will receive more back than they have given up, and they already share a place in the kingdom of God. He responds to a blind beggar's cry for mercy with healing. Jesus responds to Zacchaeus in an act of mercy that transforms his whole outlook. Salvation looks different to each person as God's mercy is applied to their specific needs.

Who can be saved? Those who follow Jesus, the oppressed and the oppressor, and, despite the difficulty of pushing a camel through a needle's eye, even the rich can be saved, for "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27).

The salvation of the blind beggar and Zacchaeus highlight the centrality of mercy in Jesus' strategy. He came "to seek and save what was lost" (19:10) through such acts of proactive, non-transactional mercy.

The story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus is one of many that show the transformative potential of mercy. Mercy is not simply letting someone off the hook so that they "get away with" their failings. It is a generous gift that can lead to a radical reorientation in the life of the recipient. If we were to live mercifully, it would also require a radical reorientation of our attitudes as givers.



WHAT EXPERIENCES OF MERCY HAS THIS CHAPTER
BROUGHT TO MIND: OCCASIONS WHEN YOU HAVE
RECEIVED, WITNESSED, OR SHOWN MERCY?

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version. At the risk of disrupting the flow of many sentences, I cite virtually every reference and allusion to biblical ideas. This is not because I am a fan of so-called proof-texting. Quoting a verse does little to prove anything. Rather, I am aware that many readers may not have extensive knowledge of the Bible and I want to provide clear pointers if they wish to dig more deeply.

ⁱⁱ Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bailey, 175–85.

^{iv} Lodging overnight is implied by Luke's use of *katalysai* in 19:7 (Bailey, 180).

^v Perhaps it is necessary to note that asking someone to help does not always signify the same thing. In other contexts, such a request could be inadvertently or deliberately oppressive. It could embarrass the other if they are unable to comply. It could be an act of power, merely forcing the other to do one's bidding.