

**Costly Grace**  
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*Luke 18:35-19:10*

Rejection hurts, doesn't it? Sometimes an individual receives so much of it they begin to create an internal narrative in which they believe they deserve to be rejected; they are not worthy of another's time, attention, love or compassion.

By the time we feel that way, it's a slippery slope towards thinking we deserve God's rejection. If God only knew the way we live, all the things we've done in our past, how we've hurt others and ourselves, there's just no way God can love us. We feel like a child who is consistently letting down their parent, one who believes they are entirely unworthy of that parent's love.

Today we are looking at two stories intentionally placed side by side in Luke's gospel: Bartimaeus (as he's known in Mark) and Zacchaeus. Rejection was an all-too-familiar feeling for the both of them, until they had an encounter with Jesus they'll never forget!

Imagine with me this scene: on the hot & dusty road to Jericho, this blind man sits day after day begging for the generosity of others. Some will stop, but most will pass by. They ignore him because his body doesn't work the way it's supposed to.

Maybe some well-intentioned people stop long enough to offer words of encouragement. But there are others who tell him his blindness is all part of God's plan. It is his burden to bear so that God could teach him something or punish some sin he or his father or his father's father committed long ago.

Maybe they were right.

Bartimaeus sat there with these thoughts running painfully through his mind. Until one day, he heard the footsteps of a large crowd coming towards him. He had heard rumors of this man, Jesus of Nazareth. Some thought that he was a prophet sent by God, others that he was Elijah back from the dead. Some even whispered that he was the Messiah, come to rescue Israel.

Bartimaeus knows this is his chance to get answers. To find out why his body didn't work the way it should, to find out why God had been ignoring him all these years!

People tell him to be silent. Jesus has more important things to do than to deal with the likes of him. But he ignores them and yells louder than he's ever yelled: "*Son of David, have mercy on me!!!*"

A hush comes over the crowd, he can hear that they are no longer moving. As the blind man is brought close to Jesus, he can sense that every eye is on him. He fears that he has spoken out of turn, and braces for what is surely about to happen: rejection, humiliation, expulsion.

Piercing the silence, Jesus asks in a soft, gentle voice: "*What is it that you would like me to do for you?*" Bartimaeus is stunned to be honored with a question. He responds: "*I want to be able to see.*"

When he opens his eyes and sees, the first thing he focuses on is the face of Jesus, the Son of God. He knows in that moment that all those empty words spoken to comfort him were untrue. And he realizes that God would never create a plan that intentionally caused him to suffer. No, this God, is in the business of healing, choosing to reach down into the suffering of the world and redeem it somehow.

But this isn't where Luke ends his story. Because as the man who was formerly blind now joins the throng of Jesus' followers, he describes another incredible encounter with a man for whom rejection had become a lifestyle.

The only things we're told about Zacchaeus are that he is the chief tax-collector in Jericho and that he is rich, and well, he's short. The Bible study ladies liken him to a Danny DeVito type character if we were casting a movie, and I think they are right on target.

Everyone in Jericho knew that Zacchaeus got rich from taking advantage of them. As you can imagine, they kept their distance. In fact, he had come to expect people to hate him, to call him names and to even want to kill him. For anyone in the crowd to treat him kindly would be unfathomable.

But on this day, Zacchaeus heard a rumor that a man named Jesus was coming. He had heard other things about this man: how he had healed people, even raising someone from the dead! Zacchaeus ran on ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree to try and catch a glimpse. Now, in ancient

Israeli culture, wealthy men did not run! And they most definitely did not climb trees; but he was desperately curious just to get a peek at Jesus.

Sycamore trees are not that tall, but they have huge leaves, so they're very easy to hide in. This was no doubt Zacchaeus' hope. We can imagine the scene as Jesus and the crowd are passing just below the tree. Jesus pauses and looks up... straight at him.

Zacchaeus' heart stops and his first reaction is one of humiliation. Now the crowd is looking up too as they eagerly await Jesus' condemnation. Everything moves in slow motion. Zacchaeus knows this is what he has coming to him. He has taken advantage of people and he would deserve every last insult and rebuke Jesus would hurl at him.

But then, to his amazement and the crowd's astonishment, Jesus calls up in a soft, gentle voice: "*Zacchaeus, may I come over to your house for dinner?*" What!? Plot twist.

Zacchaeus can hardly believe his ears, but quickly scrambles down the tree, delighted to take Jesus home! For the first time in years, someone hadn't called him a demeaning name, or threatened to hurt him. For the first time in a long time, he was treated as if he was worth something.

It was the realization of that grace that struck him with delight, and perhaps a little guilt. He begins to stammer apologetically, out of a genuine desire to change his life. He promises to pay back everything he's cheated others out of, plus more! Jesus' gracious encounter with Zacchaeus has transformed his heart.

This sounds like the perfect ending to the story, right? If it were not for the crowd, it would be. They expected Jesus to tell Zacchaeus off, they wanted justice! They wanted to see vengeance and wrath! Some in the crowd transfer their anger onto Jesus. This is costly grace.

The crowd can accept Jesus' love towards the blind man, because it makes sense that God came to care for the oppressed and marginalized. But as soon as Jesus offers that same love and acceptance to a man who by all accounts did not deserve it, the crowd goes ballistic.

How is it that in the span of 20 short verses, Jesus offers extravagant love and acceptance to both the oppressed and the oppressor?

Now, I want to make clear that Jesus in no way condones Zacchaeus actions... but my point is, he has not given up on the person behind them.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost. That includes those who have been hurt, and those who do the hurting—which is a tough truth to swallow, and I wrestle with this.

As Richard Rohr writes, *"Pain that is not transformed, is always transmitted."* People who hurt and mistreat others, usually have been hurt and mistreated themselves. Now this by no means excuses people of their actions. But it allows us to see how we might end the vicious cycles of abuse, violence and hurt. Jesus takes the time to pay attention to Zacchaeus like nobody else did; in the process he transforms his pain so that it will no longer be inflicted upon his community.

Only love and grace has the power to transform pain and end the vicious cycle of hurt. Wrath, condemnation, ridicule, rejection only deepen the wound. Hatred turns bitter and rots us from the inside out. But forgiveness heals.

Before we transition to the benediction, I want to pause to give a quick clarification: if you or someone you love happens to find yourself in an abusive relationship, it is not your responsibility to stay in it to embody this type of love and forgiveness. Your responsibility is to get yourself safe.

While it is true that we are called to offer forgiveness to those who have hurt us, in some toxic and abusive situations that may something you come to terms with internally, rather than directly offering it to the one who has hurt you. Please talk to me and I'll confidentially connect you with resources.

This Jesus who offers grace to the one who is hurt and the one who does the hurting may be too much for many of us to swallow. But let us not quickly forget the ways we have stumbled. Let us remember that we worship a God who is in the business of healing and redeeming; one who is in the business of transforming pain so that it will no longer be transmitted.

And let us be brave enough to treat those with love we may feel to be undeserving, in the hopes that it might transform our world. Amen.