

Righteousness & Mercy
Series: Everything in Between
Luke 19:1–10
Sunday, April 6, 2025 (Lent 5)

Let us pray: Lord, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. So speak your word to us and nourish us, so that we might find *life* in you. Amen.

How many of you remember Howard Dean? Dean is the former governor of Vermont who, at one time, was the frontrunner to be the Democratic nominee for President in 2004. He had built up huge momentum, essentially coming out of nowhere to take the country by storm and raise more money than any other candidate. If you *do not* know who Howard Dean is, here's why. On January 19, 2004, the night of the Iowa Caucus, Howard Dean was giving a speech in which he started talking about where his campaign was going next. He got caught up in the moment, and this is what happened:

<https://youtu.be/l6i-gYRAwM0?si=sm3ZUYXYaW5KVvK&t=14>

That scream at the end *ended* his presidential campaign. It became known as “The Dean Scream” or the “I Have a Scream” speech, and it was all that anyone was talking about. It was all over the news, shown an estimated 633 times in four days by the major cable and network news broadcasts (that's not including local news broadcasts or late night TV, which had an absolute field day with it). A presidential candidate behaving in such an undignified manner, screaming like he was at a frat party. Not his politics or a serious scandal or character flaw but (what we would call in the South) *hollering* ended his presidential hopes. He made *one mistake* (arguably not even a *mistake!*), and he was *done*. I want you to keep that in mind; we're going to come back to it.

Throughout Lent we have been talking about the dichotomies of faith. Life and faith are not always about *either/or*, but that God is often present in the *both/and*. Last week we talked about being *lost and found*,

and what we said at the beginning was that that *does* seem like a dichotomy. That you are either lost *or* you are found, but you can't be both at the same time. We ended up seeing how we often *feel* lost, but God knows exactly where we are, and God is with us every step of the way. Well, today we are looking at the dichotomy of *righteousness and mercy*. And if last week seemed like a *total* dichotomy, *this* does not seem like a dichotomy at all. Righteousness and mercy do not seem like binaries or opposites in any way. I think a lot of people would say that mercy is a *part* of righteousness. They go hand in hand. But I think it helps to understand what we are talking about when we talk about righteousness and mercy.

The Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek, and in both of those languages, the word *righteousness* also gets translated as *justice*. It is about acting in accordance with divine or moral law. It is about being free from guilt or sin; blameless and upright. It is about being pure and holy and right in the eyes of God. Justice is about people getting what they deserve based on how they act. So righteousness is about doing what is right and good, acting in accordance with God's law.

Mercy only comes into play if you have *violated* that law. Mercy can only come with an acknowledgement or declaration of *guilt*. Righteousness is about being *free* from guilt, while mercy can only be given if you *are* guilty. You had to have done something wrong to receive mercy. It is about compassion being shown to an offender. It is not about getting what you deserve. Mercy is about receiving *goodness* and *compassion* that you do *not* deserve.

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, there is a point at which Jesus is talking about what it means to keep God's commandments (You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, turn the other cheek and love your enemies), and at the end of that he says, "Be *perfect* as God is perfect." But there is another version of that in Luke's gospel where Jesus says, "Be *merciful* as God is merciful." So for Matthew, righteousness is about living in perfect accordance with God's law – being blameless and

upright – while for Luke, righteousness is about being merciful. So in that sense, there *is* a difference between righteousness and mercy. Righteousness comes through being perfect, while mercy can only come to the *imperfect*.

We might not think of righteousness and mercy as a dichotomy that we struggle with in our everyday lives. But back to Howard Dean. He made *one mistake*. He did not act the way he was “supposed” to act for someone in his position. He did not act in accordance with what was “right.” And he was cast aside. We live in a culture where if you make one mistake, if you do not act the way I think you are supposed to, if you do not line up perfectly with what I think or believe, then you are cast aside. What would it look like, in the midst of that, to show *mercy*? To show imperfect people goodness and compassion that they do not expect or deserve.

It would look like this story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. A lot of people are only familiar with Zacchaeus from the Sunday School song: *Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he*. He’s the short guy who climbed a tree. But there is *so much more* to Zacchaeus and this story than that.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. *Why* was he rich? Tax collectors were Jewish people who were working with the Roman Empire to collect taxes from their own people. And as a *chief* tax collector, Zacchaeus had to pay the Romans in advance for the taxes assessed in his district. Then he hired people to go out and collect the taxes to pay himself back. So he only made money if he was taking *more* money than he originally paid the Romans. And he also had to pay the people he was hiring to go out and collect it. So as a rich tax collector, Zacchaeus has overcharged people *a lot*.

Tax collectors were severely looked down upon by everyone else. They were considered untrustworthy and unpatriotic. They had sold out their own people to work for the very people who were oppressing

them. When we hear about them in scripture, they are often lumped in with “sinners.” Just last week, we heard how the Jewish religious leaders were complaining because all of the tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to Jesus, and he welcomed them and ate with them. Tax collectors are *not* who any respectable Jewish teacher like Jesus should be spending his time with.

But there is something about Jesus that is drawing them to him. And Zacchaeus is drawn to him. He’s trying to see Jesus, but he can’t because he’s too short, and the crowd is too big. So he *runs* up ahead of Jesus and *climbed a tree* in order to see him. Both of those acts – a man *running* through town and *climbing a tree* – would have been considered shameful. Why? Because they wore tunics, and in order to *run* in a tunic, you had to pull it up. And to *climb a tree* in a tunic, you risked exposing yourself to all of the people below you. So *every single thing* that Zacchaeus is doing is *wrong*.

But as Jesus comes by, he sees Zacchaeus – this man who no one else likes, who has just publicly shamed himself in order to see Jesus. And Jesus says to him, “Zacchaeus, come down from there, because I want to go to your house today.” He wants to go to the house of a traitor, a sellout, a thief who everyone else hates and is laughing at. Jesus wants the person that no one else wants. So Zacchaeus comes down and welcomes Jesus into his home. And, of course, everyone gets upset about it and says, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

It would be a good story if it ended there; one more example of Jesus loving the people that no one else loves. But what we *don’t* sing a Sunday School song about is what happens *next*, and it’s the best part. Something *happens* to Zacchaeus; we don’t know exactly *what*. Jesus never calls him out or criticizes him. There is no shaming or public humiliation; Zacchaeus has already done that to himself. But something takes place within Zacchaeus, and he says to Jesus, “Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

Why *four times* as much? That seems random. There are places in the Old Testament, in Jewish law, where God says that if you have wronged someone or stolen from them, you are to pay back the original amount plus additional compensation for the loss. In some cases, the law says that you are to give back four times what you took. Zacchaeus is not just picking a random number. He is acting in accordance with Jewish law. And by the definitions we talked about earlier, wouldn't that make him *righteous*?

Jesus shows Zacchaeus goodness and compassion that he does not expect or deserve, and it is that experience of mercy that transforms him. He isn't shown mercy *because* he's righteous and because he has already started making things right. It's precisely because he is *not* righteous that Jesus shows him mercy. It's because he *needs* it. Maybe when Jesus gives him something that he does not deserve, he realizes that he has taken *a lot* of things that he didn't deserve. And it changes him.

So many times, the culture we live in says, "We'll show them goodness and compassion *if* we see some indication that they are sorry for what they did, and they are changing their ways. We'll show them mercy if they *deserve* it." I can imagine someone convicted of tax fraud standing before a judge, and the judge saying, "Mr. Zacchaeus, I can see that you are remorseful and sorry for what you did, so I'm going to show you mercy." But can you imagine a judge showing mercy to someone who is completely unrepentant with no remorse at all for what they have done? That's not how the world works. But Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. And thank God for that.

In the upside-down kingdom of God, mercy is shown to the *unrighteous* who do not deserve it, precisely because they are the ones who *need* it. And it is that experience of mercy and grace that leads to transformation. In *our* world, righteousness leads to mercy. If you do the right things and show yourself worthy of it, you'll receive mercy. But in *God's* world, mercy leads to righteousness.

None of us is righteous on our own. We have all messed up. We have all made mistakes. We have all hurt someone. We have all fallen short and missed the mark of what God wants for us. And yet...as Christ was dying on the cross, he calls out to God, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Not, "Forgive them, because they know what they've done, and they're really sorry for it." Forgive them *before* they have earned it or deserved it. And it is that experience of mercy and grace that *hopefully* transforms us and leads us to live lives that say, "Thank you," to God.

You have *already* received mercy and grace from God. You don't have to earn it or deserve it; you *can't*. God *already* loves you. How will that love change you? How will experiencing *God's* mercy lead you to show mercy to *others*? Because our world *needs* more mercy right now. Our world and our country are characterized right now by a complete *lack* of mercy. We are so quick to cast aside anyone who doesn't do what we think they should do, the way we think they should do it. But righteousness is not about *being right*. It is about *doing* what God says is right so that we can be in right relationship with God and with each other.

At this table we experience the mercy of God. In this meal we taste the love and forgiveness of God in Christ's body broken for us and his blood shed for us. Not because we deserve it or have proven ourselves worthy of it. But because we *need* it. We don't receive this meal as a *reward* for our righteousness. We receive it as a gift from God so that we might be *made* righteous; nourished in our ability to go out from here and live in ways that show our love for God and for our neighbor.

So if you *know* Christ, or you would like to know him *better*, come. If you have been here often, or you haven't been here long or for a long time, come. If you *want* to follow Jesus, and if you have *failed*,

come. Because Christ has set a place at this table for you, so that you can taste and see that God is good.

Let us pray...