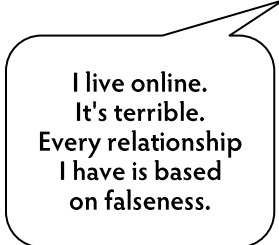


You know, it's really good to be with you. [ATTEMPTS TO ADJUST HEIGHT OF LECTERN] They obviously think I'm slightly shorter than I actually am. [LAUGHTER] I've had people say to me, "I watch you online and you're shorter than you look on TV," [HAVING DIFFICULTY ADJUSTING THE LECTERN] but this is really, [LOOKS UNDER THE LECTERN] this is like, okay, oh, don't worry, just forget it, who needs notes anyway.

Um, it's really wonderful to be with you. As you can tell we're not from these parts, my wife and I are from the deep south – in England, but we're now living in a different type of south. I always knew this day would come when we would have to move to that part of the world and I've been trying to prepare for it, but it's hard. Do any of you eat grits for breakfast? Is that something that happens around here because that's something that happens down there. It's such a strange experience because not only are you fed you also have your teeth brushed at the same time [LAUGHTER], you know, I guess it's efficient but, you know, we like to keep those two things separate back home.

What I would like to do if I can, I'd like to read to you a passage of Scripture from the Gospel of Luke. It's gonna start at verse 35 in Chapter 18 and it goes through into Chapter 19, although there's a chapter heading in the middle the way it was split up. [YOUNG MAN RUNS IN AND ADJUSTS THE LECTERN] Oh, hey, thank you, that's great. Or you could make me shorter, [LAUGHTER] either way, it's fine. It's very, very technical... as you can see. [LAUGHTER] There's two types of smarts. Right? [LAUGHTER] What do they say? Intelligence is knowing that tomato is a fruit and wisdom's knowing not to put it in a fruit salad, or something like that. There we go. Um, and then I would like to try and just raise a couple of questions because we're in a tough cultural moment right now and we have been for a while.

A couple of years ago the British government commissioned a youth survey to see what people were struggling with and the number one issue was loneliness. In a connected world we've never been more disconnected from each other. One person who responded to that survey said, "I live online. It's terrible. Every relationship I have is based on falseness." The loneliness issues were so high in England they appointed a government minister for loneliness. Now, tragically, they only appointed one which would seem to sort of run against the whole portfolio, [LAUGHTER] but it was just, it was at that level and so we're battling with that. We're also battling with a huge amount of fear and that's not just simply to do with where we are with COVID, it's to do with the environmental concerns we have. It's to do with the justice concerns we have. It's to do with the pain that we see. It's to do with where we see everything going. There's just a huge amount of fear in this world. But there's also a lot of anger as well. And so what I'd like to do if I can is I'd like to look at this and then I'm going to just pick one aspect of this. I'm not going to deal with all of it, but I'll try and deal with one as best as I can.



I live online.
It's terrible.
Every relationship
I have is based
on falseness.

So this is a story which is very well known. As the guy who taught me said, when we read a story like this, for some of you it will be so well known, the task is to rescue truth from familiarity; because we're so overly familiar we sometimes miss the thing that's staring us right in the face. What this says:

A blind beggar receives his sight

³⁵ *As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.*

³⁶ *When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening.* ³⁷ *They told him, 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.'*

³⁸ *He called out, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'*

– LUKE 18:35-38 (NIVUK)

I just want to pause just for a moment. This is the first time, by the way, in this Gospel that the Davidic title for the Son of God, Jesus, Son of David is used. It's not used by a scholar or a scribe or anyone like that, but a blind, uneducated beggar is the first person in the Gospel of Luke to apply a royal title to the person of Jesus Christ because he recognizes who He is. It's really quite remarkable.

³⁹ Those who led the way rebuked him

— because in his ignorance they're thinking, *Hey, you're embarrassing us.* And all of us have those kinds of people we feel embarrassed when they open their mouths and wish they weren't part of the family or the group or whatever. This is so interesting. [AUDIO OUT 0:36:30.7] stop to realize that actually people could feel that way about us but it says:

and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'

⁴⁰ Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him.

— and this is so interesting because Jesus so often goes to the people, but the man uses a royal title and now for the first time Jesus is acting like royalty and He orders the man to be brought to Him:

When he came near, Jesus asked him, ⁴¹ 'What do you want me to do for you?'

'Lord, I want to see,' he replied.

⁴² Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.' ⁴³ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.

– LUKE 18:39-43 (NIVUK)

So now to just – well, let's keep going:

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

— as a matter of fact He passed through:

² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

– LUKE 19:1-4 (NIVUK)

So [AUDIO OUT 0:35:31.2] just set up the scene for you so you can just imagine what's happening here. By this stage in Jesus' life He is well known. He's going to a major city, Jericho, and the crowds are coming out to greet Him. He is that well known. People are coming because they want to see Him, they want to hear Him.

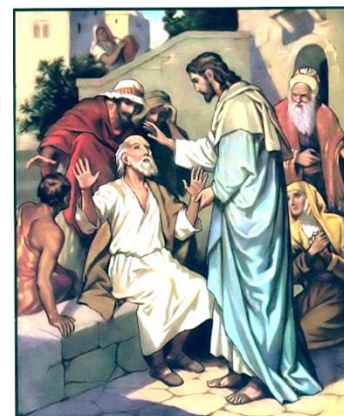
There's a story of a bishop in the Anglican Church, I think is—is that, um, would that be the Episcopalian Church here, the Episcopal Church? Anglican preachers aren't known necessarily for being the most riveting in the world necessarily. And there's a story of, you know, an Anglican bishop in England who went to a very large church, normally very well attended, lots of young people. And as he walked in he was so disappointed to see it was more than half empty, and so he said to the pastor in charge of the church, he said, "Did you tell the people I was coming?" And the leader of the church said, "I didn't, but word seems to have leaked out anyway." [LAUGHTER]

And so there's this point now where Jesus is commanding a following and people are just, even just to see Him, so the crowds have come out en masse. Now for the disciples this is incredibly significant. In Luke Chapter 9 as they're trying to enter a Samaritan village they get thrown out; even the Samaritan towns won't let them in. And now they're coming to Jericho, a major city, and crowds have come to see Him. And there's a blind guy, we know from other accounts his name is Bartimaeus, who is begging by the side of the gate.

Now, if you're a good religious person you have to give alms, you have to give to the poor, that's one of your duties. And so that's how these people made their living, they would sit by the gates of the city where you went in and where you went out, you know, with their little jar, and you would come and you'd put money in their jar and then they would shout out very loudly because you need a big voice if you're gonna have this job, "Bless [AUDIO OUT 0:33:42.9] and may God pour His blessings on you and for your generosity and on your children and your children's children and your children's children's children." I mean, that song was going on even back then. He calls out a blessing and everybody would look around, "Ooh," and they'll see you and they'll go, "Oh, what a generous guy, look at that, giving to the poor." And so that's Bartimaeus' job.

But he's been doing something else as well. When you're poor, when you're insignificant, when you have no social standing, no importance, nothing, people talk as if you're not there. So people will forget that there's a chauffeur sitting in the front of the car driving them while they're sat in the back seat, or there's someone waiting on the table while they're having their meal, you know, or there's someone cleaning their room while they're having an argument with their spouse, they forget that person's there. But those people listen; they're not invited to join the conversation so all they do is listen, and Bartimaeus listens.

And as he hears people talking he hears about Jesus. He hears them talking about what He's saying, what He's doing, what's being reported about Him, and he figures something out they haven't been able to figure out—this is the Son of David, this is the Son of God, and he figures it out before everybody else. And now he's yelling at the top of his voice, he's bringing embarrassment on the community because of his extreme ignorance in their eyes, so they tell him to shut up. And Jesus highlights him, has him brought to him, and restores his sight.



Jesus heals Bartimaeus

Now, there's a large crowd of people there, I want you to imagine the scene. There's a huge crowd, Jesus takes the guy who sits by the gate who everybody knows, who is blind and now he can see. If you were there, what would you do? Well, wouldn't you go and get some friends or run home as fast as you can and say, "You have *got* to see this! And come and join me." So whatever crowd was there when Jesus was coming it's now way bigger. And Jesus is walking through the city and you can imagine – if you've ever been to the Middle East, people will be running out extending hospitality all over the place.

Hospitality is one of the single most important values in most parts of the world. You go to Africa, you go to the Middle East, you go to Asia, they don't even say hello, they ask, "Have you eaten?" That is hello—Have you eaten?—that's the first question. If you say yes, they still feed you. I have the stomach to prove it. [LAUGHTER] So all the crowd would have been out there inviting Him, "Come to my place; my mother makes the best chicken." You wouldn't have experienced anything like this before. And Jesus exits the town and the reason we can be fairly certain He's exited the town is that Zacchaeus, he goes and climbs a sycamore fig tree.

Now, sycamore fig trees, there were laws prohibiting their growth within major cities at that time and even in small villages. Why? Well, the sycamore fig [AUDIO OUT 0:30:59.4] has very sticky fruit, it's like the ancient world equivalence of superglue. Boys love this fruit, you sit there flicking it at people. If it gets in their hair, you have to cut it out. If it goes on your clothes, you have to burn them. You can't get rid of it. And so communities, nobody would allow sycamore fig trees to grow in the cities or in the towns or around them close nearby. You would cut them down. But you'd allow them to grow out away from the roads, not next to the road because then as you're walking in and out they get stuck on your clothes and everything else, and then you have to throw those out.

So they could grow and, as a matter of fact, there were, I think it was the prophet Hosea or Amos, I always – I'm at a point where I keep reading those books and getting them confused. I think it was Hosea,¹ he is described as a picker of the fruit of the sycamore fig tree. People used to pay [AUDIO OUT 0:30:10.5] fruit before



Sycamore Fig Tree

it ripened and then they'll burn it. And it was like a seasonal job; you'll go and pick the unripened fruit, stack it up and burn it because then it wouldn't cause a nuisance to everybody else. And the thing about sycamore fig trees is they have big, thick branches, they grow out really low from the bottom of the tree so they're very easy to climb. You can walk into them. They've got big leaves, low branches, you walk in, you can easily climb up and you're well hidden.



Sycamore figs

So Jesus has walked through Jericho, He's exited the other side, and Zacchaeus, who just wants to see Him and is afraid of the crowd, he hides up in this tree so he can get a view from a distance.

³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot,

— which meant, just imagine, Zacchaeus thinks he's hidden in a tree. Jesus and the crowd, they're coming out of Jerusalem and then all of a sudden they veer off the road, they start walking straight to the tree and they stop where he is.

*he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'*⁶ *So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.*

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter,

— they are angry, and the question I want to ask is why. Why are the people angry? I don't know if you've noticed how much anger and bitterness there is in our world right now. He's gone to be the guest of a sinner. He's gone to be the guest of someone who is wrong.

'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'

– LUKE 19:3-7 (NIVUK)

¹ Transcriber Note: It's Amos, not Hosea. **AMOS 7:14 (ESVUK):** *Amos answered Amaziah, 'I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees.'*

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'

⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'

– LUKE 19:8-10 (NIVUK)

Now why anger? Why are the people so angry? This huge crowd that came out to see Him; this huge crowd that would have been energized by this spectacular healing, this huge crowd that's now even bigger than before.

Well, my mother is from a country called Cyprus. I don't know if you're familiar with that country. It's a small, tiny island in the Mediterranean just off sort of – Israel isn't very far away, Egypt isn't very far away, it's about as far east as you can go in Europe. As a matter of fact, it's a crossover culture. When Europeans go to Cyprus they think they're in the Middle East; when Middle Easterners go to Cyprus, they think they're in Europe. It's got this strange, it's just – it's just there.



Now, the country being so small is hard to defend, and so throughout history for the last 3,000 years it's been conquered by the Hittites, the Phoenicians, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Persians, Alexander the Great came and conquered it, then the Romans, Mark Anthony gave it as a love gift to Cleopatra. I mean, imagine that. Imagine your country not just being invaded and enslaved but given as a gift, you know, to someone, you know, to some woman who the other, you know, the conqueror liked. I mean, that's, I mean, you can give roses but this is a whole other level. [LAUGHTER] And then the Arabians and then the Crusaders. And today Nicosia, the capital city in which my mother lives, is the last divided capital in the world. There's a U.N. line that runs through the middle of it with the Turkish army on the northern side, the Greek Cypriot population on the south. For 3,000 years it's been occupied and enslaved and it's been passed from one group to another to another.

Now I was talking with one of my cousins recently about what I'm about to share with you. And he says, "This makes sense of all of us." He said, "It makes sense of my parents, of me, all of my friends at school, because we know how to complain in Cyprus." I mean, we love it when we meet people who want to complain about stuff and we're sort of like, "Yeah, I've got a 3,000-year history to share with you." And they sort of sit back and they go, "Oh, no." And we're experts at it, and we like to make people feel bad about it. I have a Greek Cypriot friend, he says that his Greek Cypriot mother is a travel agent for guilt trips. [LAUGHTER] We're just, we just know what that means. There are countless U.N. resolutions calling for the Turkish army to withdraw from the northern part of Cyprus, Turkey is the only country in the world that recognizes it. So the entire world, which is quite rare, has agreed that this situation is wrong and something should be done. So imagine what it feels like to be part of a country where everyone seems to think this is wrong and no one's doing anything about it. And it's backed up by thousands of years of history and now decades of inactivity.

And this hit me in a whole new way a few years ago when I was invited to speak to thousands of leaders from across Europe and they hosted the conference in northern Cyprus – on land that used to belong to my family. And when my mother's friends heard that I was willing to go they were so angry with me that I would go and now accept hospitality and speak in a 5-star luxury resort on something that really, in many ways, shouldn't be there in the first place. And on the second day of the conference with about 3,000 people, the talks were being translated I think into, I don't know how many different languages

simultaneously because they were from all over, I got asked the question, "Michael, how do you feel about being here given your heritage?" And all kinds of feelings suddenly come up now within me that I'd been anticipating but I was shocked by them because part of me wants to say, "Would like it back, please." And as I'm standing there and then thinking, *If I say anything about this, people are going to disagree with me.* And this is happening very quickly within my head, and then I start imagining how angry I'm going to be with anyone who will disagree with me and say what I've just said is wrong.

So now I'm wrestling with all of that in my heart and I'm crying out to God, "God, You have to help me." And the best answer I could give was to say – and I think it came from the Lord, "I want to feel about the people here the same way God feels about them. And the way God feels about them is the same grace and love and mercy He extended to me He wants to extend to them. My hope and prayer is that everybody in this part of this world will find that grace and mercy and peace and forgiveness from God in the same way I have." And it was one of the hardest things for me to say, but it was true.

Why are the people angry when He goes to Zacchaeus house? Well, they're living under occupation. There's a Roman occupying army that has taken their land by force. Zacchaeus, who should be one of them, has become a tax collector. Now, tax collectors were paid really low so the way tax collectors made their money was they collected more taxes than were necessary, kept a bit for themselves, and passed the rest on to the empire. And all of us feel this way about taxes – they're always too high. But imagine if you knew that your tax collector was deliberately overcharging you tax so they could put it in their pocket.



And that's the significance of the story when it says Zacchaeus who was wealthy, because the question is where does his wealth come from? And the answer is unless he's inherited a fortune, he's made himself really rich by taking an awful lot off the top. So you can imagine how the people felt about this guy. I mean, he is the most unpopular person in the city. And out of everybody in the city, Jesus invites this guy—actually, no, He doesn't invite this guy to His house, Jesus invites Himself to this guy's house. I mean, what on earth is going on in this story? I mean, it's incredible and it is so—I find it so personally challenging and hard.

I was raised, my childhood was in the Middle East so I didn't grow up in a Christian sort of a culture, if you like, and, you know, we have a way of putting things right in that part of the world and it's called war. And we've been at war with ourselves for thousands of years and it's caused all kinds of untold misery and pain and problem. When I first started and found out about the Christian faith, for me there was a very definite moment. I wrestled with the Christian faith for a long time and then I realized the Christian faith was true and it made me feel depressed. It actually made me feel down. And the reason I felt down was I felt that God, and Jesus in particular, was about to mess up my life because I was doing pretty well.

I came from great family. My family lost everything in the invasion, I mean, they were literally reduced to the shirts on their backs. I mean, they lost everything—everything they owned, everything they had, everything that belonged—everything was taken from them and from scratch, from zero, they made themselves multi-millionaires again. They got education, they worked hard, all of them were able to build up very, very successfully. And so I came from a family that was doing well and I did well at school and I didn't even have to try. May seem hard to look at it right now, I was great at sports; cross-country running, captain of the basketball team, captain of the tennis team, captain of the chess team, captain of the debating scene. I was head of the environmental society school way back in the '80s arguing for things like, you know, recycling and all that kind of stuff which wasn't very much in vogue back then. So I was doing pretty well. I was popular. As you can see, unusually good looking [LAUGHTER] and remarkably humble for an older teenager.

So life was going well and I had this horrible feeling that when I became a Christian, God was going to mess it all up. That I'll go from here [GESTURES HIS HAND ABOVE HIS HEAD] to here [LOWERS HIS HAND TO MID-CHEST] and I realized I didn't want it to be true. And in many levels at times we don't want the Christian faith to be true, but it's for different reasons. After I became a Christian, having come to the conclusion it was true and asked someone to pray for me, expecting to become depressed and actually didn't, and was really surprised by how much joy there was on the other side of that equation, I can remember thinking *I want to answer people's questions* because before I became a Christian someone spent six months of their life answering my difficult questions. And I can remember saying, "I want to answer other people's difficult questions in the same way someone was kind enough to answer mine."

And really, probably for the first 15-20 years one of the questions I'd get asked a lot would go something like this, "Michael, the God you worship is far too bloodthirsty. You Christians say God is loving and

“WHY DID CHRIST HAVE TO SUFFER AND DIE? BECAUSE GOD TRULY IS JUST. WHEN YOU SEE HIM ON THE CROSS, YOU SEE JUST HOW SERIOUSLY GOD TAKES SIN. HE CAN'T JUST WINK AT IT. HE'S NOT JUST GOING TO FORGIVE IT. IT MUST BE PUNISHED AND CHRIST BEARS THAT PUNISHMENT IN OUR PLACE.”

Steve Parks

kind, but if He's so loving and kind, why doesn't He just forgive us? Why does Jesus have to die on the cross? I mean, it's just too bloodthirsty. It's too brutal. It's too crude. It's too primitive. It's too – it is really offensive to me that you think that that would be necessary in order for there to be forgiveness." I would hear that question a lot, maybe some of you have heard it.

But in our culture right now, where we are, people are asking a very difficult question. The question they ask now is, "You Christians talk about forgiveness but it's too easy. Given the scale of the injustice that we face, given the scale of all that has gone wrong, given the scale of all of the

history, given the scale of all of the oppression, given the scale of all of the unjust, given the scale of everything, you Christians come along and say, 'Well, God can just forgive you.' It's far too easy."

So whereas in the past that people thought that the message of the cross was too hard, now it seems to be too little. And as they raise that complaint they're raising a really interesting question. I mean, it's a fascinating one: At what cost does forgiveness come? Because if you've suffered real injustice in your life and someone comes and pats you on the shoulder and says—"Why don't you just forgive them?"—you will know how hard it is to do that.

When you're asked to forgive somebody—we've had a lot of input, uh, Sarah Davis, our CEO is here and one thing she's really committed to is processes of reconciliation and team unity, and there's someone who inputs into our team quite regularly and she's taught us all kinds of things. One of the things she loves to say is, "When you've been really offended and hurt and you forgive someone, it feels like you're writing them a 10 million dollar check." I mean, it really feels like it is the most costly thing you will ever do—and it is. Forgiveness is the most costly thing you and I will ever do and if you think forgiveness is cheap, you only need to ask yourself one question: How much did it cost God to forgive us? And the answer is: It cost Him everything. It cost God everything to forgive us. For God so loved the world He sent His one and only Son, and that Son we're told came willingly.

In the first service I was preaching a different message where Jesus in John 10 talks about freely, "I lay my life down, fully I take it up again. No one takes my life from Me." Jesus wasn't an unwilling participant in this. He freely came to give Himself up.² The price of forgiveness is huge. In order to be forgiven the price that has to be paid is so huge no human being can do it—that's the point. And

² JOHN 10:17B-18A (NIVUK): [Jesus speaking] *"I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."*

actually, this generation's complaint about forgiveness is better than the previous generation's complaint. The previous generation who said, "Why can't God just forgive us?" clearly never really understood what forgiveness meant. This generation we do understand it because we see the pain, we feel the injustice, we see what's going on, and we realize this is a big deal. And we don't want someone to come and just cover things up and pretend it's all fine, we want someone who can deal with it. And the only thing which is big enough to deal with the scale of the pain and the injustice we see is the cross of Christ. It's the only thing which is big enough. God Himself comes in human form to take the penalty, to bear the burden, the result of what we have done wrong onto Himself. There is nothing else which is bigger than that.

Look, have you ever offended somebody and they find out that you've, like, been, I don't know, doing something bad and now you want to make up with them. So you go to them and you tell them 80% of what you did, because if you told them a 100% of what you said and did they would never forgive you, they'll hate you forever. So you tell them just enough so they know you really mean it and it sounds pretty bad and you just cut it to the point where it makes it easy for them to forgive you. Ever done that? We do that all the time. But it makes for a very uneasy peace because we live in terror—what happens if they discover the other 20%? What if they find out all the other stuff I didn't say? Will they ever be able to forgive me then?

We worship a loving God who sees everything we do, all of our failings and shortcomings and weaknesses, He's seen it all. He knows exactly how much of a mess we're in. And the peace that Christ offers us through God is not an easy one, it's a complete one. Because He doesn't say, "Okay, you know, this is a small matter." He says, "This is huge. It's so big the consequence—you want to know how seriously wrong I take this injustice? You want to know how angry, what My wrath looks like? The answer is: It's huge. It's so big you guys can't even possibly hope to pay it, so I'll pay it for you." And that's the message of the cross, that God loved us so much He was determined to pay a price that we couldn't possibly, to bear a burden. God wins peace for us not at the expense of His justice, but by fulfilling it, and He pays on our behalf. And when you've received that kind of forgiveness, it's very hard not to forgive, to take it to others.

But there's a sign that goes with this, because when you realize how much you've been forgiven, you can't be the same again. Look at what Zacchaeus³ does; when he receives forgiveness from Christ, when Jesus makes peace with him and says, "Okay, I'll eat with you," what does Zacchaeus do? Here and now, if I cheated anybody I give back four times the amount. I mean, what does he mean *if*? He's a wealthy tax collector, that's exactly how he's made all of his money, he's cheated everybody. Now you do the math.

Zacchaeus says first of all, I'm giving half away, everything I have from the poor. So imagine if that's the case, imagine that all of the money you have you cheated from other people. Okay? You take half, you give it to the poor. Now that's a lovely thing to do, except he's actually technically giving away money that was never really his in the first place, but just leave that aside. So now you've got half of what you cheated from everybody. And then you say, "I'm going to pay you back four times the amount." Now what's the problem with the math? The guy's eight times short. He cheated a \$1,000 dollars, he gave half away, he's got \$500 left, and now he's gonna pay back \$4,000? I mean, how on earth do you do that?

Now Western commentators, I love people from the West, they've struggled interpreting this text and they picked up on this mathematical problem and they've said, you know, "Jesus should really, like, correct Zacchaeus because Zacchaeus is basically making promises he can't possibly hope to keep." But

³ Transcriber Edit: "Lazarus" is stated in the video, he meant Zacchaeus.

where some people in the West see the mess, Jesus Christ sees the heart. When he receives this grace of forgiveness from God, you know what his response is? "God, everything I have I'm just, I'm giving to You. You gave everything for me, I'm giving everything to You. I mean, everything. I'm not holding anything back. And now you've put me right, I want to put things right. I'm going to do everything I can to put it right."

When you have received forgiveness from God you have at one point been given the richest gift you could possibly give that you could never afford and it's going to take everything from you at the same time. And it's so easy, isn't it, as Christians for us to receive this forgiveness and want to hold on to what we have. We need to be much more radical in how we live our Christian faith. We need to give, we need to serve, we need to understand the depth of the grace that we've been given and be inspired by it to live a life that's just as generous as what we've been given. And it's most one of the most rewarding things you will do.

I'm going to tell one story so I can give these guys [THE WORSHIP TEAM] time who are going to come, and then this is why we're going to sing enthusiastically after this because when you've received this much – [PAUSES] when people win the lottery, they're going to get excited. This isn't like winning the lottery. We're talking about eternal life and time with God where we're at His right hand and there's pleasure forevermore; so whatever pleasure you think you have in this world is *nothing* compared to what God is promising you. [APPLAUSE]

So, there was a guy involved with our ministry for many years, I'm still in touch with him and he's well in his 80s now, called John Bechtel. John, if you're listening to this, then I'm going to try and get the story right this time. He speaks fluent Cantonese, various other dialects not so well in Chinese, but he's a really remarkable man. And as he was growing up in China he saw an awful lot of kids in the summer with nowhere to go, nothing to do, his heart went out to them. He wanted to set up a camp to help them, so he started praying and he found the perfect place to set up a camp. The owner wanted \$250,000 to sell it to him. A guy called Billy Graham, who a few of you may have heard of, uh, my son heard Billy Graham for the first time four years ago online and he came to me and he said, "Dad is Billy Graham an evangelist like you?" And I said, "Yeah... sort of." [LAUGHTER]

A guy called Billy Graham came to Hong Kong and Billy Graham's right-hand man, a guy by the name of Walter said, "I'm going to raise all the money you need in America and I'm going to send it back to you so you can buy this camp." Three months later John got a letter, "Dear John, Fundraising didn't go as well as I hoped. I've only received one gift to help you buy the camp. I'm enclosing it." He opens the letter, there's now a second envelope that's been folded in half and put in the first. It says: "Dear Mr. Bechtel, my name is Belinda Holmes. I heard about your desire to help these children in Hong Kong and I'd like to help. I enclose one dollar, my pocket money, so that you can buy the camp and help these kids. Much love, Belinda Holmes." Well, John was so angry he almost tore the letter and the bill in half and put it in the bin, and his wife challenged him and stopped him and said, "This girl has asked you to use what she sent you to buy the camp, that's what you should do."

He met with the board of who owned the building, he handed them the letter, they read it. They were so moved they agreed to sell the camp to John for one dollar. About 10 years ago in Hong Kong they had a reunion in Hong Kong of all the people's lives who'd been changed by that camp and there were 80,000 people all gathered because their lives were changed. John was in a church over here in the U.S. about 2½ decades later and he told this story. And after he'd finished speaking a lady came up to him in her mid-thirties and said, "Mr. Bechtel, my name is Belinda Holmes and I was the 12-year-old girl who all those years ago sent you that letter." And she had no idea what that dollar had done. Zero. John asked the elders of the church to go into the car parking lot and get everybody who hadn't left back in the

church and he introduced them to this now woman, who at the age of 12 gave what she had because of what Christ had given to her to change the life of someone she didn't know halfway around the world.

That's what the church should look like. God has given us so much in Christ. He's given us everything in Christ. He's given us life and love and forgiveness and peace that we don't deserve, that we can't afford, and He's paid a price for us that we could never get ourselves out of. When you receive it you can't help but fall in love with Him and want to follow Him. And once you've fallen so deeply in love with who's done so much for you, everything else you do is insignificant. And it's not a question of we're trying to pay God back, it's we want to reflect the heart that was poured into us. And so we try and forgive when it's hard, but we also try to learn to live a life which is generous to other people. We want to see transformation and hope. We want to start putting things right where they've gone wrong. Where we want to bless God for the fact that He's blessed us and use every talent we have—our minds, our hearts, our souls, the resources He's put in our hands—to glorify Him, to see His Kingdom grow, and see people meet Christ.

It is entirely possible, sadly, in this world that you may be listening to this this morning and you've been put off the Christian gospel because of the church, and if that's you I want to apologize. So I'd like to do two appeals today if I may. The first one is to those of you who are sitting here saying you're Christians. Very often when we close our eyes and imagine what it means to be an uncompromising Christian, if I were to ask you to imagine that, what do you imagine? A fully Christian so committed they never compromise? Well, when we imagine that person we imagine someone who's very hard, very difficult. We're told in Scripture that the fruit of the Spirit⁴ is love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, gentleness, you know the list, so moved I can't/won't be able to say the words to finish it. So let's not compromise on that. Let us be thoroughly committed, non-compromising Christians and may that fruit mark out our life in distinction to everything else around us. That's what it means to be a Christian.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
Galatians 5:22-23

I was having a taxi ride in London a couple of years ago, I was going to Nigeria, and I was speaking to my taxi driver. And I asked his name and he gave me his name and I said, "Does that name have a meaning?" He gave me the meaning of the name. So I said to him, "That sounds like a Christian name." He said, "It is." I said, "Do you go to church?" He said, "No." And then he began to tell me of all of the injustice and the pain and the selfishness and the greed he'd seen in the church he'd been in, it turned him off completely. He said, "I want nothing to do any more with this. I'm done." So I then said to him, "Tell me, as a taxi driver, has anyone ever paid you with fake money?" And [SNAPS HIS FINGERS] without even hesitation, "Yes," even before I finished asking the question, yes. I said, "Okay," I said, when we get to the end of this journey and I hand you my 20-pound note will you reject it? Will you reject what I'm offering you because in the past someone's given you something fake?" And he just paused. I said, "You already know where I'm going." I said, "**Don't reject the real simply because in the past you've had something counterfeit. Take the real.**"

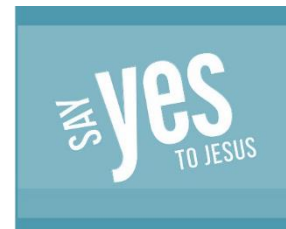
If you're here today and you don't know Christ, or maybe you've walked away from Him because of whatever's happened in the past, I'd love to invite you—you are loved and known by God. He knows your faults as well as all the faults that have been committed against you and He is willing to forgive you if you say yes to Him because He's paid the price. What's amazing about this story is Bartimaeus was oppressed; Zacchaeus was part of the oppressive network—both of them can find forgiveness in God. We're all sinners before Him. We have all failed. God's willing to pay for all of us and then He's

⁴ See Galatians 5:13-24

calling us to live a life in light of His word and His truth that should change and transform this world around us. It's the most exciting thing.

I can be finished off and I need to wrap it up now because I'm about to tell another story that will take eight minutes and I just can't do that; it will be a really bad idea.

So I'm wondering if I could just pray for you if you're here this morning and you know that you need to give your life fresh again totally to Him, or maybe on the outside looking in, or you just simply walked away but you know you need to say yes to Him this morning—yes to Jesus, yes to the price He paid, yes for the penalty He bore, yes to the life He offers, yes to the forgiveness He wants you to receive, and yes to the forgiveness He wants you to extend to others—then I will just ask you to pray this with me. And after I finish praying there are going to be all kinds of people here. This church, I love this church because this church loves people who don't love the church and don't even yet know what it is to follow Him. And they are going to be people here who will want to talk to you afterwards, and so go up and talk to them. I'd normally say shake their hand but maybe not, but don't leave here until you've talked with someone about what God has spoke to you about this morning. I wonder if I could invite you to pray with me.



Father God,

We thank You. Lord, we thank You that You love us so much that You spared nothing in our rescue. Lord, we want to thank You that You brought Bartimaeus, one of the poorest and ignored people in this community to your feet and, Lord, You restored him and You gave him life. Lord, we thank You that You reached out to one of the most oppressive men in the city and through Your love and grace You changed his heart so that he became a benefactor to the place in which he lived to your glory and praise.

And Father, we bring our lives before You now. Lord, we need You to forgive us. Lord, we need You to restore us. Lord, we need You to lift us up again. Lord, help us overcome the tiredness and weariness we feel when there seems to be so much yet to be done. Lord, help us now, Lord, not simply to give our lives to You but to receive the life You want to give us through Christ and His cross. And Lord we pray, Father, that in forgiveness and humility we may serve You in a way that glorifies You and brings honor to Your Name. And we pray all of this in the name of Christ. Amen.

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