Israel Trip

Speak about our trip to Israel and the conflict zones and people groups that we encountered. Continue to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6) – God said to Abraham when making the covenant with him – “Those who bless Israel I will bless, and those who curse Israel I will curse.”

Over the next little while, Yvonne & I will have an evening for anyone who wishes to hear more about the trip, and can see some of the photos etc. Perhaps over the Christmas/January holidays.

This morning we’re going to look at the topic of transforming grace from Luke’s Gospel Chapter 19, but first let’s pray ...

Gracious Heavenly Father,

Thank you for Jesus, our wonderful Saviour. We thank you for the grace you have extended to us right now in our lives through the Gospel story, and we open our hearts to your Word right now. May it penetrate our hearts and life as you move among us this morning. Amen.
Introduction

I grew up during the Jesus movement. A staple of the evangelistic meetings in those days was the testimony. It was thrilling to hear someone recount their journey from lowliness to holiness ... and the more details they gave about the lowliness part, the more interesting their testimony was. Of course, I'm not diminishing the power of these testimonies. I witnessed many of them first hand. I was just a church kid, I didn't have much personal contact with the real ugly stuff of the outside world, but in our little church we saw a number of people experience a radical transformation through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Broken people on drugs, hippy drifter-types – having personal encounters with Jesus Christ that changed them through and through. You’d never know them after they met Jesus. Some of them started street ministries to the counter-cultural community and ministered to kids or other broken people. It was a radical time. It never ceased to amaze me that these gentle, loving, generous transformed souls had been the angry, addicted common criminals of years before.

As a teenager, I grew up in the time of a guy called Nicky Cruz. Such a dramatic conversion. Nicky was a gang leader in the slums of New York City who was saved through the ministry of David Wilkerson. (David Wilkerson had a lot to do with the ministry at Mount Carmel in Israel. We heard this from one of the founding pastors while we were there.).

This grade-school dropout left the ghetto and attended Bible college, eventually becoming an ordained minister. You can read his story in Wilkerson's book, *The Cross and the Switchblade*, or in Nicky's book, *Run Baby Run*. There is no question that Nicky Cruz's transformation was radical, and permanent; he's now in his seventies and still preaching the gospel.

Another dramatic conversion was Keith Green (the musician). Yes, I know it goes back a few decades now, but it was what influenced me. I read his book & listened to his music. Keith was searching for life’s answers. He mentions that he remembers talking with Satan just like you & I are talking now.

Then something amazing happened – He met Jesus and experienced the transformational power of the gospel.

When I became a Christian as a teenager, I knew I would never have a fascinating testimony like Nicky Cruz or Keith Green ... and I also quickly picked up on a couple of
other crucial things. First, even at the tender age of 13, Jesus made a big difference in my life, and made a big change in me. Second, even at the tender age of 13, I could see that there was a lot of transformational work yet to be done.

Before coming to Christ, I had always assumed I was a pretty good kid. I wasn't out-of-control. I wasn't a juvenile delinquent, or at least not much of one. I grew up in a Christian family. I seemed to know a lot about Jesus and the Bible. I mean I went to Church every Sunday. I thought becoming a Christian would involve a few behavioural tweaks here and there, but aside from that, I was pretty much good to go.

I was wrong. As the Holy Spirit began to work in my life, I became aware of many things in me that needed to change. I had never before realized that I was so deceptive, or impatient, or selfish, or egotistical. I was trying to live the Christian life, but was increasingly frustrated at my failed attempts. I remember being at church one Sunday morning, we were singing the song that contains the line, "All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife..." And I thought, "That's me. I haven't done God a huge favour by choosing to follow Christ ... I don't have anything to offer him except my brokenness ... and I'm more broken than I ever realized."

The next line of the song says, "But he made something beautiful of my life." I can attest to the truth of this little chorus from the seventies. It's been about 40 years, and he did make - and he is making still - something beautiful of my life.

I have learned that the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't limited to kicking a drug habit or giving up alcohol or putting down a pack of cigarettes ... in fact, those things are the easiest steps in the process. The real transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that he can take a heart of stone and turn it into a heart of flesh.

He said...
*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.* (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

This is true transformation. You go from being cruel to being kind, from being greedy to being generous, from being self-obsessed to being others-centered. This type of transformation is available to every follower of Jesus Christ ... if you'll take the first step and recognize your need for change.

Jesus said... "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:31-32)
Here's the problem. Many people go through life thinking they're not one of the sick ones. The signs are all around them: they're trapped in bad habits and destructive behavior and imploding relationships, and yet they think, "I'm doing OK. It's not me, it's you."

Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance," and the truth that goes along with that statement is that there is none righteous, not even one. (Romans 3:10). We've all sinned; just not everyone is ready to admit it.

All that any of us has to offer to God is brokenness and strife ... and when you begin to realize that's who you are, you've taken the first step to experiencing his transformational power, and you've begun to see him make something beautiful of your life.

Today we'll look at the story of a man who experienced radical transformation. He was notorious in his own way, like some of those mentioned at the beginning of today's message, and he experienced a transformation not only of habit, but of character -- a complete transformation of heart and soul. It is this kind of transformation that Jesus calls us to, and that God's grace makes available to all who will receive it.

We'll look at the story of Zacchaeus and his dramatic life change. We'll look at how you, too, can experience this kind of change in your life. Here's the story from Luke’s Gospel Chapter 19. Let's read it together ... 

**Luke 19 v. 1-10**

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

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

So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' " 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."
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 what was lost."

Such a great story. Perhaps this story more than any other encapsulates the message of the gospel. Now, let's look at what God is saying to us through this story today, because it teaches us something about the transforming power of God's grace.

The first thing this story teaches is that...

1. God hasn't given up on you, even if everyone else has.

Zacchaeus was not a popular person, to put it mildly. He was a tax collector, specifically, the chief tax collector. He was a Jewish citizen whose job it was to collect taxes for the Roman government. That in and of itself was bad enough, since no one likes paying taxes, but Roman tax collectors had a notorious reputation for bullying citizens and forcing them to pay more than the required amount. As long as taxes were being collected, Rome looked the other way; it was just considered one of the perks of the job.

Tax-collecting already paid well, but tax-collectors had a reputation for extorting all they could from their constituents ... so this made them very unpopular among the masses. They were considered greedy traitors. This rejection by their own people probably caused them to be even more abusive in their collection techniques ... and on and on it went. Zacchaeus was at the top of chain; he was the boss. All the tax-collectors of the city worked for him, and gave him a cut of what they took. So he was very wealthy and very much despised.

When he heard that Jesus was passing through the city, he went out to see him, but he couldn't because (as you know if you attended Vacation Bible School) "Zacchaeus was a wee little man and wee little man was he."

I think Luke is being more than literal when he talks about Zacchaeus. He was not only small in stature, he was small in character. Nevertheless, he wanted to see Jesus, but he couldn't, because the crowd was too big and he was too small. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree, since Jesus was coming that way. Jesus saw Zacchaeus there and he invited himself to Zacchaeus' house.

And the crowd began to murmur. In their opinion, Jesus had no business being in the presence of such a sinful man, especially visiting his home. Sharing a meal in someone's
home was considered an endorsement, a stamp of approval. What was Jesus doing socializing with such a sinner?

The crowd had decided that Zacchaeus was beyond redemption, that he was too far gone. They had given up on him, but Jesus didn’t. Jesus saw something that only Jesus can see in individuals. He didn't see the man Zacchaeus was, he saw the man Zacchaeus could be. And he was right.

(David Warner the cricketer – when he first started he was brash and just a slogger. The selectors saw what he could might become. Now he’s the vice-captain and one of the most exciting players in the history of cricket in all forms).

When Jesus looks at you, he doesn't merely see who you are today. He sees the person you can be. Maybe the rest of the crowd is capable of seeing only your foibles, failures, and faults. Maybe they have given up on you. Jesus hasn't. Maybe you're ready to give up on yourself. Jesus isn't.

Even if no one else sees your potential, Jesus does. That's the first thing to remember if you want to experience God's transformational grace: It is possible. You can change. God hasn't given up on you.

Here's the second thing I want you to notice.

2. Your transformation can (and should) begin right now.

When you read this story, several words and phrases jump out at you. Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

So he came down at once.

Zacchaeus stood up and said "Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor..."

Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house..."

Do you see the urgency in this story? It was like this was Zacchaeus' one big chance, and he couldn't afford to let it pass him by.

When I was young I went to many evangelistic rallies and revival meetings in which the preacher would tell a tragic story about someone who put off making a decision for Christ until it was too late. Some were fire & brimstone – I mean I was really scared.
It was usually done to pressure people to come down the aisle right away and sign that card tonight.

That's not at all the kind of thing that is happening here between Jesus and Zacchaeus. Jesus wasn't pressuring Zacchaeus to make a decision he didn't really want to make. I think instead he was giving Zacchaeus an opportunity to take a step in his spiritual life that he long wanted to take, but had thought could never happen.

That's what I'm telling you today. Many people think that the possibility of transformation -- if it exists at all - is a long time away. It may be months, it may be years, before I can kick this bad habit, before I develop this virtue, before I can change the person that I am.

I'm telling you that change can begin today. Jesus is saying, "Today, let me come into your life. Welcome me into your home and into your heart. Let me help you become the person I created you to be."

If you don't know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, you know what? - You don't have to put it off any longer. You don't have to wait until you're good enough. He accepts you right now. **Today is the best day to come to Christ.**

But I'm also talking to believers right now, those of you have been saved for years, or even decades, and have put off making the final step of total transformation. You've got this bad habit nagging at you, and you pretend it doesn't exist; you've got this sin besetting you, you pretend it's not so bad. You've got this dream of what you can do or what you can be, but you keep pushing it back for another day.

Well, Today's the day. Your transformation can begin right now.

Jesus is saying, "Come down from that sycamore tree. Stop being a mere observer. Get involved. Let me go to work in your life....today."

Here's the third thing I want you to see.

### 3. Your transformation begins with a first step.

(v. 8-9) **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."
Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house..."

We're in tricky territory here, so I'm going to split a theological hair, just to make something clear. Zacchaeus wasn't saved because he gave his money to the poor; he gave his money to the poor because he was saved. He experienced the acceptance, grace, and mercy of Jesus Christ, and it changed the way he lived. His personal experience with Jesus resulted in his generosity toward others. The change of heart leads to a change of behaviour.

The Bible talks a lot about this. Paul says, "You are saved by grace through faith, not of works so that no one can boast."

James would say in response to that, "I agree. And if you have that saving faith, it will be demonstrated by good works, because faith without works is dead."

To which Paul would respond, "Exactly. Because just as we are saved by faith, and we are created to do good works in Christ Jesus." [c.f. Ephesians 2:8-10; James 2:26]

You are saved through faith. Not because of your goodness but because of God's goodness. He loved you in spite of your sin, in spite of your selfishness. He said, "If you will receive me, I will come into your life and I will make a new person."

That happens because you believe.

Your correct response is this: God, since you promised to make me a new person, I'm going to be a new person. I'm going to act different. I'm going to change what I can, and trust you to change the rest."

So Zacchaeus took the first step, and it was a big first step. He said, "I'll give half of my wealth to the poor, and if I've cheated anyone I'll pay them back fourfold."

Here's what I want you to notice about Zacchaeus' first step.

It was personal. He dealt with a subject very dear to his heart: his money, and the fact that he hadn't come by all of it honestly.

It was public. He said it in front of everyone, for all to hear.

It was possible. He didn't promise more than he could actually deliver, he just did what he could. He could give away half of his wealth and still have enough to pay back his ill-
gotten gain and continue to support himself and his family. So his first step was public, it was possible...

*It was a priority.* Zacchaeus said, "Here and now ..."

These are good things to consider if you want to put God's transforming grace to work in your life. Your transformation can begin now, because you belong to Jesus, he has accepted you, he has forgiven you, he has come into your home and your heart, and he's ready to change your life. If you're ready to change your life, then accept his grace and take that first step toward total transformation.

What's the first step for you? I don't know.

What do you need to change? What do you *want* to change? There's something very close to you, very personal, that is standing between you and the person God made you to be.

Take a step toward dealing with it. Do it in a public way, so that you have accountability. Do as much as is possible - don't promise more than you can deliver, just commit to doing as much as you can do.

And make it a priority. Do it now. Start today. And you will begin to see the transforming power of God's grace at work in your life.

**CONCLUSION**

In this story we have seen the transformation of Zacchaeus. As the story opened, he was a *sinner* -- and pretty good at it. We saw him become a *seeker*, as he sought out Jesus on the streets of Jericho. And then he was an *observer*, watching Jesus from the sycamore tree. And that's exactly where many church people find themselves. But it didn't end there for Zacchaeus.

He became a *participant*; he invited Jesus into his home. And then he became a *follower*. And then, a fully devoted disciple. The end result was that, after meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus was not the man he used to be. Never going back to the old way. Transformed forever by Jesus’ and his grace.

Let me make it personal - Where are you in the process?

Do you know it doesn’t matter! Where ever, Jesus is ready to receive you. He is ready to help you become the person he sees you to be -- fully committed, radically transformed, for his glory.

Your transformation may not make headlines and may not fill stadiums -- but you will know that God is at work in your life, you will see the difference, and those around you will experience the difference.

Why? Because you will be different. The one who said, "Behold, I make all things new," is extending the offer to you today.

Come immediately, he says. I must stay with you. I have good news for you.

Today salvation can come to your house, to your life, to your heart.

Today, you can start over.

Today you can take the first step toward transformation.

(offer time of prayer for those wanting transformation)

Let’s pray ...

Thank you Heavenly Father, for the gift of transforming grace through your son Jesus. Zac’s story can be our story today. You don’t care where we are in life – you take us wherever we are. May your Holy Spirit fall on us today and allow your transforming grace to make all things new again. You have good news for us. You want us to start over. Thank you that you see us for what we are to become – a new creation in Christ. Father, give me the courage to start over again and allow my life to be a life of significance in your kingdom. Thank you in the amazing transforming name of Jesus. Amen.

Closing Song – Refiner’s Fire

Sermon adapted from a message by Steve May.