

“Hugging the Cactus”
by Rom A. Pegram (2/12/17)

Hollywood’s not usually known as a culture of grace. It’s more of a dog-eat-dog world. Personal value is attached to box-office sales and unpredictable swings in fashion. SO ... it was extremely shocking, a few years back, when ONE WAY LOVE made a surprise appearance on the big stage (2011). The occasion was Robert Downey Jr. receiving the *American Cinematheque* [sin-uh-muh-**tek**] Award—a prize given those “making a significant contribution to the art of the Moving Picture”. A *big deal*, in other words. In receiving this award, Downey was allowed to choose who would present him the award ... and he made a bold choice. He selected his one-time costar Mel Gibson to do the honors.

Now, I need to pause and give you some background here. To say Gibson’s reputation had taken some hits at this point would be an understatement...

- An arrest for drunk driving in 2006, during which the actor-director spewed racist and anti-Semitic remarks...
- Followed by public infidelity and a high-profile divorce in 2009...
- All of this culminated then in 2010 when tapes of a drunk Gibson be-rating his girlfriend in the foulest manner were released online...

Reprehensible doesn’t even begin to describe it! Downey’s award ceremony took place a little over a year after this final Gibson incident, one that rightly fixed Gibson’s place as ‘*pariah numero uno*’ in Tinseltown...

Of course, Downey was no stranger to being detested. In the 90s, he became something of a punch line himself as one notoriously unable to kick an addiction to drugs and alcohol. Arrest after arrest, relapse after relapse, those in Hollywood and elsewhere began to think of Downey as more of a junkie than an actor. Professionally, he became a liability; no insurance company would underwrite the film if he were cast in a role! Now, Downey eventually got sober, and his career slowly got back on track. In 2008, he was cast as Iron Man, and the rest—as they say—is history. Today, folks, he’s one of the most beloved and highest grossing actors in the biz. So, this ceremony in 2011 came along at the height of Downey’s career ... and the lowest point of Gibson’s.

But, this was Downey’s moment of glory. Instead of using his acceptance speech to make an ‘aw-shucks’ speech to the crowd, thanking his colleagues, his parents, his family and maybe a little God thrown in, Downey did something unprecedented. I’m going to let him speak for himself. (Check out Robert Downey Jr’s speech at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pF6NGq7tngg>.)

This amazing speech not only testifies to the amazing power of *one-way love*; it’s a beautiful example of the fruit ... of *one-way love*. At his lowest point, Downey was shown mercy by Mel Gibson. He didn’t deserve it—his track record was terrible—but Gibson, for whatever reason, took a risk at great cost to himself. He personally paid the massive insurance premium for Downey on 2003’s *The Singing Detective* so his friend

could get back on his feet. Folks, you don't forget something like that! And *neither should we ever forget the One-Way Love that's come our way either...*

Downey's response was one of gratitude and generosity. It goes far beyond any sense of owing, especially considering the moment & venue. Even to associate with Mel Gibson at this time meant putting Downey's own reputation on the line—sacrificial at the very least. There was no possible gain for Downey in doing this, folks. His response—*his defense of the indefensible*—was the uncoerced act of a heart that had itself been touched by *one-way love*. And his incredible generosity on this occasion was nothing short of the fruit of grace. Grace accomplished what no amount of court-ordered, legal remedies ever could; it created a heart that desired to show mercy to the 'least of these' as scripture says. GRACE ALONE is what produces the conditions that prompt change. And it is a pure gift, folks...

As we continue our study of GRACE, let's take a look at what this gift looks like through a New Testament story you know—the story of Zacchaeus. Here we'll get a picture of *how GRACE really works in our lives*. First comes...

THE INVITATION OF ONE-WAY LOVE. If you grew up in Sunday school like I did, you're probably familiar with the Wee Little Man named Zacchaeus. The name might conjure up picture Bibles or coloring books or slightly irritating sing-along songs. But nothing, folks, can stand in the way of one of the most jaw-dropping examples of *one-way love* in the entire Bible!

To put this ancient story into today's language, let me describe Zacchaeus in this way: *Zacchaeus was essentially the Bernie Madoff of Jericho*. As you may recall, in March 2009, Bernie Madoff pled guilty to 11 federal felonies and admitted to having turned his wealth-management business into a gigantic Ponzi scheme that robbed investors of nearly \$65 *billion* dollars. He was then sentenced to 150 years in prison—the maximum allowed. Thousands of people were swindled out of their life savings and retirement funds. And to say that Madoff remains one of the most hated men in America might be an understatement...

So it was with Zacchaeus. As *chief* tax collector, the Jewish population would have despised him, because he collected taxes for their occupier—Rome. His very profession would have been one that was both traitorous and sinful. Yet, as a Jew, he would have also been shunned by his imperial employers. And the other tax collectors probably hated him, as the *chief* tax collector, because he would have found ways to rob them too. Add to this mix an inevitable 'Napoleon complex', and you have a picture of a *loathsome loan shark* who used his authority solely for personal gain. People hated him! Like Madoff, his reputation would've been well-founded, which makes Jesus' actions here even more surprising. Take note (Luke 19:1-6, NLT)...

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. ² There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. ³ He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. ⁴

So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. “Zacchaeus!” he said. “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.” ⁶ Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy.”

Did you notice that Jesus singled out Zacchaeus, despite the fact Zacchaeus hadn't said or done anything (other than climbing a tree) to warrant/attract his attention? Zacchaeus simply did what he'd do for any passing sideshow; he climbed a tree so he could get a glimpse of what was going on. And I want you to notice here ... there was no hint of repentance, or prayers, or tears of sorrow, or words for that matter. And Jesus didn't say 'I *want* to stay at your house; would you invite me over?' He said, 'I *must* stay at your house'—less a request than an imperative...

Imagine a well-known spiritual leader like Billy Graham ... visits the city where Madoff is incarcerated and, to the astonishment of everyone around, marches right past everyone in town—past city hall, the courthouse, all the churches, the newspaper office and all the mildly curious folks, directly to the prison. He then informs the warden that he *must* have lunch with Bernie! It's his #1 priority! He's not there to chastise Madoff or pick his brain. He's simply there to have lunch and spend time with the guy who no one else wants to get near...

How do you think honest people would respond? If it were us, we'd be just a bit put out—insulted—wouldn't we? Let's talk about this. Next comes...

THE RESPONSE TO ONE-WAY LOVE. With Zacchaeus' response ... we can safely assume he'd be taken back just a bit—*that Jesus would even want to spend time with him*. You can almost hear his response, can't you? 'You want to come to *my* house? You want to associate with *me*? 'You sure you got the right guy?' But what really happened, even if he was thinking some of these things, was this (v. 6): “Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy.” Folks, the exuberance of his response suggests that no one had to tell Zacchaeus he was lost; he seemed well aware of his condition; then, what happens next is a bit shocking (v.8)! “Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, ‘I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!’” He responded to Jesus with great enthusiasm and joy—the fruit of God's grace being spontaneous, almost absurd generosity! Jesus' one-way love has a tendency to invert the way we normally think about these things. So, Zacchaeus' joyful generosity was not the preface to God's grace—it was *the result*...

The truth is Jesus didn't require anything of Zacchaeus. He didn't force or coerce or guilt Zacchaeus into giving back what he stole; he just loved him. And Zacchaeus responded ... in a way that was far more extravagant than anything Jesus probably would have suggested. *He just loved him ... and Zacchaeus responded*. But I think *obedience* would be too weak of a word to describe Zacchaeus' actions, don't you? It's actually more than any LAW would have demanded—giving back 4X as much. Folks,

here Zacchaeus does more than the right thing ... and he does it spontaneously, cheerfully, and abundantly!

This, folks, was the response of a grateful heart. A grateful heart is a generous heart. And a generous heart is a liberated heart. It's no coincidence the very thing to which Zacchaeus was most enslaved (money) is that which he was most inspired to give away—after he'd encountered Jesus' one-way love. So, that's one response. The other is this: With the Pharisee's or the crowd's response ... we see something totally different (v. 7): "But the people were displeased. 'He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,' they grumbled." Jesus was experiencing what we might call ... *guilt by association*; the hatred and suspicion for Zacchaeus ... was now being focused on Jesus!

It's easy for us to look at this episode from our present-day comfortable seat and look down on this crowd (including the Pharisees) for their self-righteous attitude, limited vision and uncharitable spirit. Like Robert Downey Jr.'s speech, this story should violate our deepest beliefs about fairness and justice and reciprocity. So, what would we have done? Make no mistake: *if we had been part of the mob that day, we would've reacted the same way they did ... if we're honest about it...*

Folks, Jesus was consciously ignoring the accepted pecking order of the day. The only ones not threatened by such a move would've been those who didn't really understand what Jesus was doing! The crowd, like us, would've assumed that *God cares about the clean and competent*. But, is that right? Fortunately, Jesus made it very clear on this day what his mission was. The story ends with him saying (vv. 9-10), "...Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost."

I'm not sure how he could make it any plainer! Here, Jesus was not discounting greed and its fallout—like it's no big deal! After all, he shed tears over our sin—gave his very life for our sin. But, here Jesus is simply identifying with a sinner and loving one who least deserved it. *Zacchaeus was just such a man ... and so are we!* So, let me move to the last point:

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD'S GRACE TELLS OUR STORY! One surefire way to know you're beginning to understand grace is when you're finally able to admit you're not the good guy/gal in the story—that you never were and apart from grace never will be. Folks, the freedom of the Gospel—once we open ourselves up to receiving it—is *the freedom to stop pretending we're anything but Zacchaeuses*—sinners in need of a Savior! That's what Paul meant when he wrote to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:15, NIV): "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." It's what Robert Downey Jr. was alluding to when he talked about 'hugging the cactus'...

Folks, here's the bottom line: *Compassion for others*—the desire to serve and sacrifice—*flows out of an honest recognition of who we are ... and God's love for us in*

spite of that! Some have asked me what'll turn a church around; it's recognizing who we are in God's eyes ... and the reality of God's grace in spite of that! That reality will transform lives, then transform the church...

This entire message today could probably be summed up this way: **GRACE inspires what LAW demands!** While the LAW directs, only GRACE ALONE can deliver!

Gratitude, generosity, honesty, compassion, acts of mercy and self-sacrifice—these things all spring from *a heart that knows it's been forgiven!* And the grace Jesus showed Zacchaeus on that day was only a glimpse of what awaited him at the cross—where Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost was finally accomplished. *At that moment,* Jesus not only associated with tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers and movie stars and addicts and preachers and mischievous teenagers ... but *he bore their sins on his shoulders!* He bore *our* sin ... to the very last drop! *It was the apex of one-way love.* And it can't be undone. Those who are lost are found. And *where there was once guilt by association, now there's only glory by association!* So ... that cactus you've been cozy with? You can now hug it all you want—*the needles have finally fallen off...*