



March 22: It's Not Too Late to Live Differently | Luke 19:1-10

What follows is a compelling example of receiving grace and taking responsibility to change.

Found in *Les Misérables*, in that pivotal moment in Jean Valjean's life, when he is confronted with unexplainable kindness and grace.

After nineteen years in prison for stealing bread and attempting escape, Jean Valjean is released hardened, angry, and marked by society as an outcast. Everywhere he goes he is rejected, turned away from inns, feared by strangers, and reminded by his yellow passport that he is a former convict.

Hungry and exhausted, Jean arrives in the small town of Digne (Dean-na), where a kindly Bishop welcomes him into his home without suspicion. Invited to stay the night, Valjean eats, rests, and experiences kindness and acceptance.

Yet years of bitterness remain. In the night, he steals the bishop's silver and flees—only to be caught by the police and brought back to face the man he has wronged.

"Ah! here you are!" the Bishop exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes wide, and stared at the venerable Bishop with an expression which no human tongue can render any account of.

"Monseigneur," said the police officer, "so what this man said is true, then? We stopped him to look into the matter. He had this silver--"

"And he told you," interposed the Bishop with a smile, "that it had been given to him by a kind old fellow of a priest with whom he had passed the night? I see how the matter stands. And you have brought him back here? It is a mistake."

"In that case," replied the brigadier, "we can let him go?"

"Certainly," replied the Bishop.

"My friend," resumed the Bishop addressing Jean Valjean, "before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them." Jean Valjean was trembling in every limb. He took the two candlesticks mechanically, Jean Valjean was like a man on the point of fainting.

Then the Bishop drew near to him and said in a low voice: "Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man."

But Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless.

The Bishop...resumed with solemnity, "**Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.**"

Jean Valjean's life changes in a single moment.

When the bishop responds to his theft not with condemnation, but with astonishing grace, space is created for Jean to change. By claiming the stolen silver as a gift and adding the candlesticks besides, the bishop offers Valjean more than money—he offers him a new beginning.

The bishop blesses Jean and calls him to become an honest man. And through that unexpected grace, Valjean discovers this powerful truth: it is not too late to take ownership of our lives; to choose and/or deepen our resolve to walk with God.

There are moments in life when we are forced to face the truth about ourselves. Moments when we can no longer blame others, ignore our choices, or pretend how we are living our lives doesn't matter.

As we continue in our series, **It Is Not Too Late**, today we look at how repentance is a pathway for transformation. When we act on the grace God has given us and take ownership of our lives, we can change, we can experience new life.

Receiving God's grace and stepping into new life, this taking responsibility for our lives is not easy. The cards are stacked against us from day one.

Because this world tends to reinforce the negative stories we already believe about ourselves. Social media and phone cameras preserve every statement, workplaces remember mistakes...I used to be called "Dory" from Finding Nemo in one workplace because I occasionally forgot things.

Even families can lock us into roles we once played.

And public debates often deepen this divide—recent political clashes in the United States, and in our neighborhoods, show how quickly competing narratives convince each side they are right and the other is wrong.

Unlike the world's seemingly permanent record, God's grace holds us accountable without freezing us in our past. And like Jean Valjean, transformation becomes possible.

And that truth brings us to a similar dramatic turning point, Paul the Apostle's encounter with God on the road to Damascus.

Repentance, so clearly displayed in Paul's conversion story, involves at least two examples of the kind of taking responsibility or ownership we mean.

First, Paul takes responsibility for what he has done.

Secondly Paul takes on new, God-given responsibility.

And in between, there is a period of messy transformation.

The turning point, repentance in Paul's story, is set into motion by accountability. On the road to Damascus, Jesus confronts him: "**Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?**"

In that moment Saul, who later is renamed Paul, is forced to recognize what he has been doing. He thought he was serving God but learned it was God whom he was opposing.

That dusty roadside confrontation becomes the doorway to true repentance.

What's remarkable is that later in his life Paul never hides from this truth. In several places he openly admits that he persecuted Christians. He takes responsibility for it and celebrates the grace the Lord gave him.

In addition, he also doesn't allow his dark past to define his future. Accountability becomes the starting point for his transformation.

God, through the Holy Spirit, still confronts us in similar ways today.

Sometimes it happens through Scripture, when a passage suddenly feels like it is speaking directly to us. Sometimes through a song on the radio as we are driving. Sometimes it happens through our conscience, that quiet or not so quiet inner voice reminding us that something we said or did wasn't right.

Sometimes it comes through another person who lovingly points out something we could not see ourselves. Sometimes we are confronted by watching others live faithfully for Christ. And sometimes it comes through the consequences of our own choices.

When we stop denying and start owning our actions, change becomes possible.

For many people, Paul's story feels extreme. Most of us haven't persecuted the church. But accountability still has the power to change everyday lives.

One example is our words. Someone speaks harshly in an argument and later realizes the damage those words caused. At first, it's easy to justify it: "**They started it.**" But when a person admits, "I shouldn't have said that," it opens the door to an apology, healing, and growth.

Another example is resentment. A person holds onto bitterness toward someone who hurt them. Over time they realize that anger is shaping their attitude and relationships. When they finally acknowledge, "**I've been holding onto this too long,**" that honesty becomes the first step toward forgiveness and freedom.

A third example is spiritual drift. Sometimes people slowly pull away from their relationship with God and blame busyness or circumstances. We might say, "Church is boring." But when someone recognizes, "**I stopped prioritizing my faith,**" that moment of accountability can become the turning point that brings them back to prayer, community, and renewed commitment to the Lord.

In each of these situations, the pattern is the same. Accountability isn't meant to trap us in guilt, it's meant to open the door to grace. Just as with Paul, when we face the truth about ourselves, God can begin shaping something new in our lives.

We should note. God calls Ananias to do something risky. Sometimes God will call us to put ourselves in harm's way and at other times, God will not. The goal is not to be risky for the sake of being risky or to be careless. It is about listening to God and responding faithfully.

Another example of someone who takes ownership of their lives is found in one of my favorite movies.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne (played by Tim Robins) says the powerful line, “**Get busy living, or get busy dying.**” The moment captures a simple but profound truth: life always places a choice before us. We can remain stuck in despair, regret, or fear, or we can decide to move forward with hope and purpose.

For Red, (played by Morgan Freeman) the words become a turning point, helping him realize that freedom begins with a decision. The message is that no matter how long someone has felt trapped by their past, **it's not too late to take responsibility for your life** and choose a new direction.

Jesus invites us also to change and grow, just as he transformed Saul into Paul. Transformation begins after repentance and it is often disorienting. Paul could not see for three days after Jesus confronted him. He had to be led by others. He had to give up self-reliance, surrendering to God and leaning on support from other people.

I find it ironic, that just like Paul, I am also discovering that transformation comes through physical limits. Just as Paul had to rely on others for those first few days, I too am trying to learn how to shed excessive self-reliance, trying to surrender to God and receive help from others.

It is humbling to be so needy but it is also beautiful to see such kindness, compassion, and love being expressed. And if the Lord changed Paul's heart in times of difficulty, who am I to argue with the Lord when he wants to do the same in my life.

It is not too late for us. No matter what our past holds, no matter how long we have carried regret, resentment, or spiritual drift, God's grace still meets us where we are.

Like Jean Valjean, like Paul, like Andy Dufrense, we are offered the chance to begin again.

Repentance is not about being trapped in guilt—it is about turning toward the life God is calling us to live. Today can be a turning point. Today we can take ownership of our lives and step into God's grace.

Because our pasts does not have the final word. God's grace does—and it is never too late. Amen.

So, as we enter into a time of reflection, consider this: Where might God be inviting you today to take ownership—either by acknowledging something in your life that needs to change, or by saying yes to a new step of faith God is placing before you?