

Welcome

If you know me, you know I'm a fan of superheros. So I was thrilled when Netflix produced a series of TV shows on Marvel's Defenders - Daredevil, Luke Cage, Jessica Jones and Iron Fist.

Iron Fist was last, and I had so thoroughly enjoyed the first seasons of the other three that I couldn't wait. Danny Rand is my favorite of the four characters, and the Iron Fist is a martial artist. Like that's his whole power set. And since the action was so good in Daredevil, I was hyped through the roof.

And then Iron Fist released. And it was... very bad.

You'd think the worst thing would be that the main actor didn't know martial arts. He wore a hoodie in every action sequence so he could put the hood up and they could use a stunt double who actually knew how to fight.

But the worst worst was what they did to his character. In the show, Danny Rand is an idiot. He's naive to the point of implausibility. Other characters betray him over and over, then apologize, and he forgives them. He's Charlie Brown, trying over and over to kick that football.

What made me sad about the way the show depicted Iron Fist is how different he is in the comics. Danny Rand in the comics is one of the kindest, most positive and optimistic characters in the Marvel Universe. But he's not gullible. He's not an idiot.

We're not going to talk any more about Iron Fist today, but I wanted to begin here because I think so often we miss this subtle distinction between being kind and being a doormat. Iron Fist in the comics is kind. Iron Fist in the show is a doormat.

And too often, this is the picture we have of Christians - that we're supposed to be doormats. We hear "love your neighbor" as "let people treat you however they want."

I want to show you today that living that way - as a doormat - is nice, not kind. And Niceness isn't a fruit of the Spirit. Kindness is. So what does Christian kindness look like? For that, we need a different TV show to help us out.

But before we get to all that, we're going to begin by worshipping God. Because we learn to be kind by receiving God's kindness toward us.

Message

Welcome to CataVision! This summer, we're going to explore some of our most beloved television shows. Why? Because we're practicing listening well and creating spiritual conversations.

The shows we're engaging have been popular, which indicates they resonate with us. There's something about them that connects with us - not just as individuals, but at a cultural level. So this summer, we're going to ask, "Why?" What message in these shows is resonating? And how do we engage that message in a faith-filled way?

So that's what we're doing this summer: first, listening to the show and second, responding in faith. We began with WandaVision, a show about learning to see past our self-deceptions and be honest with ourselves. Reality TV helped us understand our need for authenticity. Then we spent a couple of weeks in Heaven and Hell with The Good Place and Lucifer. Sonya Brown took us into the Upside Down, where we saw that it's not quite as scary as Stranger Things makes it out to be. Breaking Bad helped us recognize our capacity for sin and need for Jesus. And last week, the Mandalorian showed us how to reject legalism for religion grounded in love.

Today, we're heading across the pond to London, to a show that dropped in August last year and almost immediately became a sensation (and it just so happens that season 2 premieres this week!).

Ted Lasso is a show about an American college football coach who gets hired to coach British football (what we call soccer). Ted has an awe-shucks demeanor and, frankly, comes off as an idiot in the first few episodes. He doesn't know the first thing about soccer - he frequently asks the very players he's supposed to be coaching for clarifications about strategies and basic rules.

And he's so unfailingly *nice*. When nearly *nobody* is nice to him in return. Journalists, players, his boss (who hired him so he would fail) - they all treat him with derision. In fact, maybe the only reason we like Ted in the first couple of episodes is because he is so nice to people everyone else overlooks - the driver who picks him up at the airport and the towel boy for the team, for instance.

It's worth pausing here for a moment to note that this is the vision a lot of us have for the authentically Christian life. I know Christians right now are more known for being angry and against things, but we all know that's not right. When we picture what a Jesus-follower is *supposed* to look like, we end up with this awe-shucks, kinda goofy, kinda old-fashioned idiot. Someone who's a doormat, who lets everyone walk all over them.

That's our picture of Jesus, too.

Turn with us to [Luke 19](#).

I want to look at a story with you today that is probably familiar to most of you. It comes with its own theme song. But it's precisely our familiarity with this story that causes us to miss how revolutionary Jesus' kindness is here. This is a story about a man named Zacchaeus. He's become famous for his height - according to the song, he's a 'wee little man'.

But pay attention when we read his story - the Bible doesn't describe him as particularly short; only that he's not tall enough to see over the crowd that's come out to see Jesus. I don't know about you, but I've been in plenty of crowds that I can't see over, and I'm 5'11.

The other thing Luke tells us is that Zacchaeus is the “chief tax collector in the region.” Palestine in Jesus’ day was occupied by the Roman Empire, and like all empires, Rome collected taxes. Rome didn’t much care about how taxes were collected; as long as they got their money, they were happy. We know that in Palestine, the local tax collectors operated sort of like the mafia - they collected more than Rome required and they kept the extra.

So imagine a mafia boss who is also a traitor - they’re working for the enemy. That’s how people saw tax collectors. They were vultures, profiting off the injustices of the Empire *and* they were traitors to Abraham’s children. And Zacchaeus wasn’t just a tax collector. He was the *chief* tax collector in the region. He was Jon Gotti. Al Capone. Don Corleone.

With that in mind, let’s read about Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus:

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way.

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.”

Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled.
-- Luke 19:1–7 (NLT)

Yeah... for Luke’s original audience, it’s safe to say that Zacchaeus’ *height* wasn’t the focus of the story. No, they were scandalized by the idea that this young preacher could walk up to such an evil man and ask to eat with him. In Jesus’ day, that would have been the equivalent of saying, ‘Hey, would you host a house party with all your friends? I would like to attend.’

What kind of ‘friends’, exactly, did Jesus think a guy like Zacchaeus had?

Put yourself in the place of all those folks watching this encounter. Zacchaeus is the man who has cheated them. Repeatedly. He lives in the lap of luxury precisely *because* he’s stolen from them. He’s the face of the Roman occupation there. He’s the reason their kids go to bed hungry sometimes. He’s the reason that, no matter how hard they work, they can’t get ahead.

And Jesus walks *right up* to this guy. He doesn’t go to the mayor. Or to the local megachurch pastor. To *Zacchaeus*.

There’re only a couple of options here - either Jesus is corrupt or he’s an idiot. Corrupt religious leaders aren’t new - plenty in Jesus’ day were in bed with Rome, profiting off their own people. Maybe Jesus is one of those. Or maybe he’s just... clueless?

One of my favorite scenes in the first season of Ted Lasso is when Ted confronts the former owner of the Football Club, Rupert. He’s a wealthy, misogynistic jerk who enjoys using his power to make other people feel small. In an effort to get Rupert to leave the team alone, Ted

challenges him to a game of darts, winner take all. Rupert agrees, and takes an early lead over Ted.

But Ted, once the whole pub is paying attention, warns Rupert that men like him - who are, in Ted's words, judgmental instead of curious, are always going to lose. He then hits two triple 20s and a bullseye to take the win.

It's a powerful moment that illustrates that, despite appearances, Ted is no dummy. He knows exactly what's going on and how people look at him. He just refuses to be cruel in return. Ted insists on treating everyone - even the Ruperts of the world - with dignity and respect.

This interaction reframes every interaction Ted has in the show. He's not clueless - he's *ruthlessly* kind. To his boss. To those cocky players. To the press that wants to eat him alive. And at every turn, Ted responds with kindness.

Not niceness. This isn't accidental. It's not cowardice. It's a careful, calculated choice by Ted.

That careful calculation is exactly what we see in Jesus. Look what happens in the story of Zacchaeus, how he responds to Jesus' decision to associate himself publicly with the notorious tax collector:

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!"

Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." -- Luke 19:8–10 (NLT)

In response to Jesus' invitation, Zacchaeus makes a public announcement. He's going to give away half of everything he owns. Straight up. And out of his remaining wealth, he's going to pay back everything he ever stole. What's more, he's going to make restitution. He's going to pay interest - 400% - on everything.

That's an important detail - Zacchaeus has amassed his wealth by investing his ill-gotten gains. But that *also* means that the people whose money he took *couldn't* generate that same wealth. In other words, Zacchaeus is paying reparations. He recognizes that his sins go beyond the moment of the theft into long-term harm his sins created. Zacchaeus is so moved by Jesus' kindness toward him that he offers this sign of real repentance.

As in, we can measure it. It's not just words, but actions.

And in response to this measurable repentance, Jesus declares that Zacchaeus has been saved, that he is, in fact, a true son of Abraham.

Jesus' kindness changed him.

This is exactly what Paul observes in his letter to the Romans. Ted Lasso, in his warning against judgment, might almost be echoing Paul's warning here:

Since you judge others for doing these things, why do you think you can avoid God's judgment when you do the same things? Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin? -- Romans 2:3–4 (NLT)

Friends, as we face a cynical world full of people who are afraid to choose kindness for fear of being taken advantage of or walked all over.

But Jesus reminds us that it's only when we choose to treat everyone we encounter with dignity and respect - treat them as honored, beloved members of our own family - that we have a chance to be truly good news to them.

Communion + Examen

As an act of kindness, Jesus invites us to his feast. He treats us as family, whether or not we deserve it.

When in the last week have I shown kindness?

When in the last week have I failed to show kindness?

When might I be tempted not to be kind this week?

How can I show kindness this week?

Assignment + Blessing

How can you be ruthlessly kind this week?