

A Little Man with a Big New Heart

*“When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”
Luke 19:5*

Palm Sunday

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Luke 19:1-10

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In the White Chair films produced testimony of Stephen Baldwin, the actor tells the story of the manner by which he and his wife were introduced to Christ. When they were living in Arizona, they hired a housekeeper, and after a few weeks his wife commented to him that the housekeeper was always singing, and particular, singing songs about Jesus. When asked by Baldwin if she had other songs in her repertoire the housekeeper laughed. She went on to tell the couple that they were mistaken to think she was just there to just to clean their house. She prophesied that they would both find Jesus and that one day they would begin their very own Christian ministry. Much to their surprise, and eternal joy, they did that very thing. It would seem that long before they were seeking Jesus, He was seeking them.

Today's story is about another man seeking Jesus. However, the significance of Zacchaeus' story is found by looking back at an encounter Jesus has with a man who has a pressing question – “What must I do to inherit eternal life.” That question hangs over the Lukan narrative for the next several encounters, including that with the disciples on the heels of the departure of the rich man, when those present wonder if anyone can enter into Heaven, and with a man on the outskirts of Jericho. This man too has a pressing need – he wants to see. As Jesus approaches the City of Palms, located in the Jordan Valley at the base of the foothills leading up to Jerusalem, this man becomes aware of Jesus' approach.

Hearing that Jesus was nearby he began shouting and pleading: “Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me!” The crowd attempted to quieten him, but Luke tells us, “He shouted all the more.” No crowd, we are told, tried to silence him, but the more they attempted to mute him, the louder he became. No crowd was going to silence or stop him from getting to Jesus. And in answer to his incessant plea, he was brought to Jesus and made his request: Lord, I want to see.”

There is a real sense that he is not the only blind man Jesus had recently encountered. For the rich young ruler with the pressing question was also in his own way, blind. He had come to the right person, ask the right question, and received the right answer—but in his blindness, he could not see how one might inherit the eternal life. Likewise, the query of the crowd and the disciples, indicated they too had a form of blindness, “Who then can be saved?”, they asked. The encounter with the blind man hints at the answer, and the encounter with a second rich man makes the answer quite clear.

When Jesus began his ministry, Mark tells us Jesus proclaimed: “The time has come...the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”¹ When Jesus sent the disciples out on an evangelical tour we read: “They went out and preached that people should repent.”² And in Luke's gospel Jesus has already warned: But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”³ To repent means more than to turn from sin and turn to Jesus—although that is still important. However, to truly repent is not just turn from sin, it is to turn from our old way of living. It is, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead...”⁴ It is fixing our eyes on Jesus.

As we meet this next rich man on the way to Jerusalem, Palm Sunday and Holy Week lie ahead for our Lord. The journey he began in Luke 9:51, when he turned His face toward the holy city, determined to fulfil all that was written about Himself, and to complete the work the Father had sent Him to complete, by dying on a cross. And now he approaches Jericho, with His mind set on the long climb up the mountain which will eventually lead to Mount Calvary, Jesus will meet a man many of us remember from Sunday School, and that question regarding eternal life hang in the air.

¹ Mark 1:15

² Mark 6:12

³ Luke 13:3

⁴ Philippians 3:13

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

Jericho was situated in the fertile valley of the Jordan River. The area around it was splendid for the growing of figs, dates, and olives. The produce of the valley was shipped to all corners of the vast Roman Empire. Jericho was the kind of place where astute merchants could reap a great profit, as could a wily tax collector. Being on a major road leading to Jerusalem, there would have been customs to pay, and every exchange of money came with graft.

It certainly appears as if Jesus' intention was to continue on through Jericho. He was, just passing through. However, it was not to be.

² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.

Zacchaeus was not just a tax collector, but a *chief* tax collector. We might say he owned several tax collecting franchises. Basically, he hired out the job of tax collecting to men like Matthew, who not only raised a small profit for themselves, but also passed along a profit to whomever they worked for. In other words, chief tax collectors got rich off the labor of others who got rich off the labor of others. On top of that, they were despised as Roman collaborators, as sell-outs to the occupying Gentiles. To get the position of chief tax collector, one had to be very good at collecting taxes, and therefore distinguish themselves to some degree among the Romans. In a Ted Talk, "Why the Majority is Always Wrong", the speaker noted that for one to get ahead in any field they had to do what the majority was not doing:

We know that 3% of people are able to achieve extraordinary results. Each of you can become part of those 3% by deciding, as of today, to break your industry standards and to break your industry norms. The alternative of course, is that you become part of the 97% who, in the end, works for those 3%.ⁱ

Zacchaeus a three per-center. And, like Stephen Baldwin, and so many others, he had reached the top and yet found it wasn't all he had hoped it would be. Something was missing. Satisfaction could not be found. Someone has said there are few things worse than striving to climb the ladder of success only to find at the top that its leaning on the wrong building. Leaning on a house build on the sand instead of on the Rock. Of Zacchaeus we might say he had been climbing the wrong trees. But on this day his life would change.

³ 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.

This was no ideal curiosity, like that of Herod. Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was, and nothing could divert him from that purpose. Very likely, he had heard of this rabbi who consorted with tax collectors and sinners. We are told several times in Scripture that news of Jesus spread far and wide. However, for Zacchaeus, there was a barrier – a crowd. His reputation and wealth couldn't help him, and the crowd, who would have known who he was, refused to allow him through. Barclay surmises that very likely Zacchaeus would have arrived home that day black and blue with bruises and the crowd took advantage of his exposure.

One doesn't become a chief tax collector without some determination and ingenuity. Casting all dignity aside – Zacchaeus ran ahead along the road and climbed a tree. It would be hard for anyone to miss a short man in a long robe, perched high in the branches of a tree. But before we go any further, this is a good place for us to pause and reflect on what the crowd might look like in our lives. What is it that gets in our way of getting to Jesus, of seeing who He is?

Possessions
Relationships
Popularity
Careers
Comfort
Entertainment

What are those things that we weigh on the balance of our time, treasure and talents? Are there endeavors we gravitate towards that lead us away from really seeking after Jesus, from setting aside our dignity and climbing a tree. Of putting ourselves out there?

The Lord promises through Jeremiah, “You will *seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*”⁵ In other words, when finding me is the most important quest you have, when I am number one. The amazing thing about grace though is that in another place God promises, “*I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me.*”⁶

Sometimes a housekeeper shows up at our home singing Jesus songs. Sometimes a neighbor ‘just happens’ to be a believer or a co-worker is also a born-again Spirit filled, Jesus loving church goer. It just might be that the Lord wants you to be the one who shows up in someone’s life singing Jesus songs. To be that born-again presence in the lives of those who are dead in their sin.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, 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, “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner.’”

It might be difficult for us to get a sense of the shock and level of amusement it must have been for Jesus to see this short well-dressed man hanging out on the branches of a tree. Although, if you’ve ever seen what some people wear—or aren’t wearing—while shopping at Walmart, you may get the picture. Zacchaeus was noticeable.

Isn’t it interesting how Jesus phrased His request to Zacchaeus? It wasn’t, “I’d like to...”, or “it would be nice if...” Jesus said “I must...” Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem and He knew what awaited. He told the disciples on numerous occasions:

“[I] must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that [I] must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”⁷

Of His ministry has said:

“I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.”⁸

In John’s gospel we see this sense of ‘must’ in chapter four, when we are told “He had to go through Samaria.”⁹ In a practical sense, He didn’t have to go through Samaria. Most Jews

⁵ Jeremiah 29:13

⁶ Isaiah 65:1

⁷ Matthew 16:21

⁸ Luke 4:43

⁹ John 4:4

would go around Samaria. On another occasion He told His disciples not to go among the Gentiles or any town of the Samaritans¹⁰, but this time there was this woman who was going to be at a certain well at a certain time in Samaria, and so Jesus knew He had to go. That sense of 'must'. Now He would pause on the journey to Jerusalem, finding lodging not at the home of some well-respected citizen, or deserving follower, but at the house of one thought by the crowd as being least worthy. Charles Spurgeon, in his sermons on *Men of the New Testament*, notes here the "Divine necessity which pressed upon the Saviour."ⁱⁱ Standing beneath a canopy of a sycamore, Jesus had that sense of *must* once again, that he had to go to the home of Zacchaeus.

Though the crowd hissed their displeasure, no crowd was going to stop Jesus from dining at the home of the little chief tax collector. Further more, the word used by the crowd translated as 'guest' suggests the setting down of travel packs and unburdening beasts of their loads. It indicated an overnight stay. Regardless of what the crowd thought, Jesus had a sense of 'must' that interrupted even His determined trip to Jerusalem.

In that moment, this lost sheep, this chief tax collector, was the one missing from the ninety-nine, and the Good Shepherd had to bring back to the fold. The crowd can sometimes provide us an easy excuse to avoid the outcasts, but it was to the outcasts Jesus must go, and so it is to the outcasts we must go. Although not explicit, it appears Jesus spent the night at the home of Zacchaeus, departing the next morning. The departure demonstrating the stop had not been in vain.

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."

The words of Zacchaeus reflect the outrage of David to Nathan, in regard to a man who had preyed upon the weak, "He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."¹¹ It also reflects the command of Exodus 22:1, "If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep."

Something had happened in the heart of Zacchaeus. A man who had grown rich through the exploitation of others was now moved to give half his possessions to the poor and repay any gotten from cheating. One commentator says:

...[Zacchaeus] declares openly that he has decided (as a spontaneous act of repentance, love and gratitude) to give half his goods to the poor...the Saviour's influence on his life made him realize his selfish attitude towards his possessions and his sinful uncharitableness towards persons from whom he had exacted more than the lawful amount in customs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Though Jesus did not command him to do so, as He had the rich man who had approached Him earlier, Zacchaeus demonstrated that which John the Baptist had called for: "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."¹²

Someone has said: When Jesus comes into a person's life, and gains authority there, selfishness and dishonesty are irresistibly eradicated.^{iv}

¹⁰ Matthew 10:5

¹¹ 2 Samuel

¹² Luke 3:8

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 what was lost.”

The thinking of the majority of people—the crowd--and especially of the religious leaders, would be that Zacchaeus is not one of us. He had, in their eyes, become a non-person. He was other. He was one of them. Echoes of this attitude or viewpoint can be heard when Christians ask, “How can you vote for *[insert your least favorite politician here]* and still call yourself a Christian?” “How can you support *[insert pet issue here]* and be a follower of Jesus?” How can you *[insert any number of dress codes, body piercings, hair colors, etc., here]* and still think yourself saved?”

You see, sometimes we, the church of Jesus Christ, can act as arbitrarily as any crowd, and take it upon ourselves to be the gatekeepers of the kingdom. That’s not our purpose. Now, don’t get me wrong, I am not preaching licence to do whatever you want. There are practices that are not in keeping with a demonstration of the fruit of repentance. Scripture—and let me say that again—*Scripture*—is our guide, not personal preferences, not denominational customs, and certainly not faulty interpretation of Scripture. There was a time, early in its inception, that many a preacher claimed the listening to radio was a sin. “It’s of the devil they would shout,” quoting Ephesians 2:2, “in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air...” (KJV) Yet in following decades radio would take the gospel into countries that had closed churches and outlawed the faith. So much for the crowd.

By all accounts, Zacchaeus repented of his previous life and all its practices. His declaration and that of Christ are testify to a changed life—though the change wrought in the life of Zacchaeus resulted in his following Jesus in a way different from that of the disciples, and different from that of a man we met earlier.

Conclusion

The rich man couldn’t part with the things that crowded his life – his wealth, possessions and likely position in society. Yes, he wanted eternal life, but there were other things he wanted even more, things he couldn’t part from—things from which he could not repent.

Listen again to how that story ends:

Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus replied, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.”

Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!”

Luke 18:24-28

Had they? Had they really left all those things behind, repented of all the things that crowded *their* lives. Peter was very quick to point out to Jesus how much they had sacrificed, how much they had given up, to be His disciples. It was Peter, representative of the others, who made the connection between the riches that crowded the life of the ‘man of great wealth’ and the riches that crowded their lives. And once again, we see a crowd getting in the way of someone truly following after Jesus.

Peter feels like they’ve given up a whole lot. A lot of things crowded the minds of the disciples, and quite possibly led to their abandonment of Jesus. They had to repent of all the things that stopped them from following...really following.

Repentance isn't just about forgiveness of our sins, is to place such a high priority on our relationship with Jesus that it is as if we have turned our backs to everything that is not Him. And while He had earlier stated: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple," Jesus would say here:

"I tell you the truth...no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."

Luke 18:29-30

The two statements are not contradictory—rather, they are explanatory. Jesus is saying that He must come first, and that if we put our hands to the plow and are always looking back, then we cannot truly follow. Just as a driver gets into trouble when distracted or inattentive, the follower too can make a wreck of things by not keeping his eyes fixed upon Jesus. Only by letting go of the things of this earth, can we receive the things of this earth. Until we are prepared to leave everything behind, those things behind us will always be drawing us back, weighing us down. You can hear that in Peter's plea: "Jesus, look at all the things we given up for you...", and in that moment his mind was drawn back to those things as if Jesus should appreciate the sacrifice they had made. It strongly hints that in Peter's mind, eternal life is somehow owed to them because of what they've given up.

But we are owed nothing. On the contrary, everything we receive from God is a gift—and wrapped up in what we receive from God is the gift of the miracle of repentance. That we who are dead, can be made alive. That we who are blind can be made to see. That we who are lost can be found. But even the disciples didn't at first realize that very thing. The story of the rich ruler ends with Jesus taking his followers aside:

Jesus...told them, "**We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.**" The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.

Luke 18:31-34

They still did not see who Jesus was...just like the rich ruler. It was a blind man and a tax collector, people desperate to get to Jesus, who first saw who He was. Do we see who Jesus is? Are we really looking? The real answer to that question is whether or not we have repented, and have received the gift of salvation.

Endnotes:

ⁱ <https://singjupost.com/paul-rulkens-why-the-majority-is-always-wrong-at-tedxmaastricht-transcript/?singlepage=1>

ⁱⁱ Rev. Dr. Chas. T. Cook, ed., *Charles Spurgeon's Sermons on Men of the New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1959), 110.

ⁱⁱⁱ Geldenhuys, 470.

^{iv} Geldenhuys, 471.