

Joyous Faith

Spring Quarter: The Gift of Faith

Unit 3: The Fullness of Faith

Sunday school lesson for the week of May 29, 2016

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Lesson Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

The story before us today has Jesus passing through Jericho, a city not far from Jerusalem, the place where Jesus will fulfill his mission by submitting to death on the cross. The story here involves a number of themes that Luke has emphasized in his gospel – including Jesus reaching out to the marginalized and bringing them salvation. We are reminded of the connection with the previous story of Jesus giving sight to a blind man (Luke 18:35-42), whereas, in today's story Zacchaeus is trying to see Jesus.

Zacchaeus is a “chief tax collector” which means he is the CEO and takes a cut of commission from all the tax collectors who work for him. He is a wealthy man, though many consider his wealth ill gained.

Interestingly enough, throughout Luke's Gospel, those who have been receptive to Jesus are tax collectors and sinners; those who reject him are the wealthy and privileged. Zacchaeus seems to be all these things. He is a “ruler” or chief tax collector and he is also wealthy.

Now all tax collectors in Palestine worked for the Romans and so were seen as collaborators. To say the least, Zacchaeus is not popular among the people – some see him as a traitor working with the enemy.

The point here is that we are to see Zacchaeus as a mix of the kinds of people who have accepted and rejected Jesus. Thus, Zacchaeus can be an example of how Jesus saves all kinds of people.

Scholars inform us that Zacchaeus is on a quest. In preceding stories when characters are on a quest they are in some way blocked from attaining their goal: the widow who goes to the unjust judge, the children the disciples try to deter, and the blind man whom the crowd tried to silence. And the same thing is happening to Zacchaeus. He wants to see Jesus, but the crowd will not allow him. Everyone looks down on him because of his job and will not cooperate with him.

But Zacchaeus is resourceful, so he runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree, a tree with a short trunk and wide, lateral branches. Zacchaeus' effort surpasses his wildest hopes.

When Jesus gets to the spot where Zacchaeus is up in the tree, he stops and tells Zacchaeus to come down. The way Jesus invites himself to stay with Zacchaeus is significant to notice. Jesus says, “For I must stay at your house today.” (19:5) Jesus' stay with Zacchaeus is a necessity because it pictures clearly what his ministry is all about – to lead to God those whom others have given up on and who need to repent. Therefore, it is a necessity that Jesus goes to his house to bring salvation. That is Jesus' mission – to reclaim the prodigals (chapter 15).

Notice, the crowd still tries to be an obstacle to this encounter with Jesus. The people grumble that Jesus is going to the home of a sinner. Of course, this is not a new criticism of Jesus in Luke. Actually, the crowd's complaint is both right and wrong. Zacchaeus is indeed a sinner as his own remark will show, but he is not beyond the touch of God or his call. So the crowd has written off Zacchaeus, but Jesus never writes off anyone who remains open to God.

However, the response of Zacchaeus to Jesus is the direct opposite of the crowd's – Zacchaeus recognizes Jesus as Lord and then becomes a role model for the wealthy.

Zacchaeus expresses his great appreciation of Jesus' acceptance of him by declaring his intent to be a different man. Because of his new relationship with God and in an act of repentance, Zacchaeus will do two things: half of his possessions will now go to the poor, and those he has wronged will receive restitution at four times the amount taken. To be sure, Zacchaeus is aware of his sin and desires to right the wrongs he has done.

And here Luke makes him the example of the way the rich should respond to Jesus. They give their possessions to those who cannot repay them, and they do not use their status or position to treat those subordinate to them unfairly.

The story concludes with Jesus fully endorsing Zacchaeus' response. Jesus declares that this very day "salvation has come to (Zacchaeus') house." And the sinner who is a tax collector is now identified as a child of Abraham – what Paul calls a child of faith (Romans 4, Galatians 3). In both his acceptance of Jesus and his manner of handling his wealth, Zacchaeus shows readers how the people of God are to conduct their lives.

But the most exciting thing is what this tax collector's return represents. We see it in the pronouncement in verse 10: "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

The mission of Jesus is to reach out to those who need to repent, who need salvation. This story started out with Zacchaeus seeking Jesus but what we find out is that it is really Jesus who is doing the seeking. So what Zacchaeus, with the many things he represents, points out is that all people need the salvation Jesus gives.

Hope for us All

Zacchaeus' brief encounter with Jesus should give us all hope. Luke has steadily emphasized that the ministry of Jesus is particularly focused on the marginalized, those who are seen as less valuable than others. Even in several of his stories and parables, Luke makes it seem that the wealthy and privileged have little hope of receiving salvation.

But then comes this story of Zacchaeus! Luke's description of him makes him represent all kind of people. He represents those who are powerful and those others look down on. He also represents people who have status and those who do not, those who live on the margin and those who have wealth. All of those groups who have reacted to Jesus so differently throughout Luke's Gospel now comes together in Zacchaeus. Consequently, the good news of this story is that no one is beyond the saving love of God.

Seeking and Finding

Who is really the seeker and finder in this story? It appears that the seeker is Zacchaeus who overcomes multiple obstacles to seek Jesus. But note in verse 3 that the text says, “He (Zacchaeus) was trying to see who Jesus was...”

Zacchaeus actually wanted to understand what people saw in Jesus and why they were attracted to him. Consequently, he demonstrates extraordinary effort to show his determination to know and understand Jesus.

When the crowd creates an obstacle for him, Zacchaeus simply runs ahead to a place where Jesus was sure to pass and climbs up a tree for the chance to see Jesus. Zacchaeus embodies St. Augustine’s famous statement, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” So in his restlessness, Zacchaeus is seeking Jesus.

Then it is, however, that the story takes a surprising turn. At first, it seems to be about someone wanting to know Jesus, but now it becomes a story about Jesus seeking sinners. Jesus stops, calls Zacchaeus and says that he must stay at his house.

This mission of Jesus is clearly seen here. It is a central part of the mission of Jesus to seek people like Zacchaeus. And, as always the case with pronouncement stories (stories in which Jesus makes a proclamation at the end of the narrative), the main point is the pronouncement. Here, the pronouncement states that the mission of Jesus is to seek and save the lost. Thus, it is not really Zacchaeus who is seeking Jesus, but rather it is Jesus who is seeking people like Zacchaeus, people who are sinners. Ultimately, the pronouncement states that the mission of Jesus is to seek and save us all.

Something to remember – nothing is ever really lost until someone looks for it. Persons without Christ are lost for a number of reasons but primarily because God is looking for them.

Repentance

A majority of commentators think that Zacchaeus brief encounter with Jesus changed his life.

The label “sinner” has different meanings in Luke. Scholars explain that at times it designates people who ignore the word and will of God. But at other times it is a title that some leaders use to look down on people who do not conform to their heightened expectations.

Notice here in our story that it is the crowd that says this about Zacchaeus. Perhaps it is his profession and the general expectation that tax collectors are thieves that makes this plausible. In any case, Luke does not have anyone in the story refute the accusation. And the response of Zacchaeus suggests that the charge was accepted.

As we see in the text, Zacchaeus’ encounter with Jesus immediately brings him to recognize Jesus as Lord and to commit himself to a new way of living. However he had acquired his wealth, whether through honest or dishonest means, Zacchaeus was now determined to use it in ways that

Jesus approves. Zacchaeus promises to give half of his possessions to the poor, to those who cannot repay him. In his repentance, he exemplifies what Jesus says wealthy people should do.

Thus, as a result of his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus takes up a new orientation of life. Previously, Zacchaeus had been concerned about accumulating wealth; he is now more concerned to take care of the poor. He reaches out to those who have no status and who can do him no good.

Entering into the presence of Jesus can reorient our lives. Repentance is not just confessing our sin, though that is an integral part of it, rather, it is about changing how we live. Zacchaeus is able to change because he sees how Jesus values him and so he receives the salvation Jesus brings.

A Child of Abraham

According to scholars, when Jesus hears Zacchaeus commit himself to this new way of life, he declares that Zacchaeus is a child of Abraham, that is, one of the people of God. It is the combination of the confession of Jesus and the convincing commitment of Zacchaeus' new life that is the evidence that he is among God's people. Whatever he has been before, Zacchaeus' new orientation of life now makes him as one who belongs among the saved.

Note that the salvation Zacchaeus receives includes more than a promise of life to come. This salvation includes the expectation that we live in a new way. And this new way, received as a gift of God, fills us with meaning and offers dignity to those we need to help.

Key Verse

The key verse of this lesson is 19:10, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." It is reported that on a certain street in San Francisco there used to be a sign in an office window – it may still be there – "We find lost people." In the light of Jesus' pronouncement, that sign defines the church's call to mission. God calls the church to find, invite and welcome lost people.

Action Plan:

1. How does the story of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus give you hope?
2. In what ways were both Zacchaeus and Jesus seeking and finding?
3. How does the class define the word "lost" and what difference does it make to the church?

Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through [Hal Brady Ministries](#).