

## A SINNER FINDS REDEMPTION

November 4, 2013

Luke 19:1-10

There's a story about a local fitness center, which was offering \$1,000 to anyone who could demonstrate that they were stronger than the owner of the place.

Here's how it worked. This muscle man would squeeze a lemon until all the juice ran into a glass, and then hand the lemon to the next challenger. Anyone who could squeeze just one more drop of juice out would win the money.

Many people tried over time other weightlifters, construction workers, even professional wrestlers, but nobody could do it. One day a short and skinny guy came in and signed up for the contest.

After the laughter died down, the owner grabbed a lemon and squeezed away. Then he handed the wrinkled remains to the little man.

The crowd's laughter turned to silence as the man clenched his fist around the lemon and six drops fell into the glass.

As the crowd cheered, the manager paid out the winning prize and asked the short guy what he did for a living. "Are you a lumberjack, a weightlifter, or what?"

The man replied, "I work for the IRS."

Although we have a while yet before the next tax filing deadline, I guess taxes are something that stay in the back of our minds most of the time.

You know, some people find it tough to be honest during tax time. Here's an actual letter that was received by the IRS a few years ago:

"Enclosed you will find a check for \$150. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not been able to sleep ever since. If I still have trouble sleeping I will send you the rest."

This morning we're focusing on a high-ranking IRS man who cheated not on his return, but on everyone else's. He had figured out a way to skim some money off the top and squeeze the last drop from people's wallets.

As we look at our Gospel reading, we see that Jesus is passing through Jericho on his final trip to Jerusalem, and comes in contact with Zacchaeus, a very wealthy government man from the top rung of the economic ladder.

Zacchaeus was a man of some prominence. His name in Hebrew means, “pure and righteous,” but he was not thought of as being anywhere close to righteous because of the job he had.

As a tax collector, he worked for Rome and was considered a traitor by the Jewish people. The fact that he worked for the Roman IRS indicated to others that he was more interested in money than anything else.

Zack was more than just an IRS agent, however. He was a “chief” tax collector. He was in charge of all the agents and was able to take a “cut” of commission from those who collected taxes for him.

He stood on top of the collection pyramid, stuffing his pockets with shekels before he sent the required taxes to Rome. If Rome charged a 5% tax, he may have collected 10% from the people.

Jericho was a great place to be for Zacchaeus because there were a lot of people coming in and out of the city on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover.

Jericho was considered the “tax capital” of Palestine, the center of a vast trade network that extended from Damascus to Egypt. Zack was in charge of one of the three tax offices in the entire country, and may have had the best job of them all. He was wealthy.

But he was a renegade in the eyes of the religious people. He would have been thought of as fondly as a high-level drug dealer is today. In fact, in the minds of people, tax collectors were often linked with murderers, robbers, and other “sinners.”

Tax collectors were not new to Jesus. Early on in His ministry, Jesus had attracted, and worse yet (in the eyes of the Pharisees), received them warmly.

Jesus was rebuked by the religious leaders for eating and drinking with “tax collectors and sinners.” These two terms were almost synonymous to the Pharisees. There was hardly a life form more offensive than these traitors.

As we read on, we notice that while Zack is very wealthy and successful by the world’s standards, he knew something was missing.

Even people today, if they are honest, will eventually admit that there’s more to life than just trying to make money and obtain possessions.

Notice that it doesn't say that Zack just wanted to see Jesus. No. He wanted to see who Jesus was. He wanted to figure out what it was that made Jesus different from everyone else.

He was drawn to this man who had just given sight to the blind beggar on the outskirts of Jericho.

Now this healer was walking through his town. He may not have fully understood what was going on in his heart, but Zack had a desperate need to get to Jesus. He probably couldn't even explain what drew him to see who Jesus was.

Perhaps some of you have felt that way. You're drawn to Jesus. You're intrigued by who He is and you want to get to know more about Him.

Zacchaeus had at least two problems that day. The first was that he was a short man. I picture him bouncing up and down on his toes, trying to see above the taller guys in front of him.

With all the crowds pressing in, there was no way for him to get close enough to Jesus. In a large crowd like this I wonder if some unhappy taxpayers took out their frustrations with Zack by giving him an accidental elbow or a shove from the back.

His second problem was spiritual. His sins were keeping him from Jesus. Not only was Zack of short stature, he, like us, was not able to measure up to God's standards.

He came up far short in a spiritual sense of ever entering into a relationship with God. He was short on integrity and tall on sin.

Well, Zack was short, but he wasn't slow! He ran ahead of the crowd, looking for a way that he could see Jesus. This picture is a bit amusing, isn't it?

First of all, it would have been considered undignified for such a prominent man in the community to run.

Secondly, I don't know about you, but it seems funny to me that this wealthy man would shimmy up a tree to see Jesus. But he was determined to see Jesus and frankly didn't care what others thought of his sprinting or his climbing.

Zack did not allow anything, not the crowd or his condition, to stand between him and his desire to see the Lord Jesus.

What about us? Do we care enough to pay whatever price is necessary to be right with God?

In verse 5 we see that while Zacchaeus may have been searching, it was really Jesus who was seeking him: “When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.’”

Jesus took note of Zacchaeus, although we are not told why. He stopped, looked up, called him by name, and told him that He must come to His house.

Again we see that while Jesus likely knew what was ahead of him – his probable arrest, and if so a mock trial, then probably death - he stops and ministers to a searching sinner.

He knew right where Zack was because He knew all about him and He was filled with compassion toward him.

This is how it always happens. Jesus makes the first move by coming to the dead sinner and offering life through Himself. We would never be able to come to Jesus unless He came to us first.

He then gives Zack a two-fold command: “Come down immediately.” Get out of the tree, Zack. Right now. Can you imagine what must have been going through the minds of those who were walking with Jesus that day?

How did Jesus know his name? Why did Jesus stop under that particular tree? Why did Jesus want this sinner to come down right away?

And then Jesus gives the second part of the command: “I must stay at your house today.” Why did Jesus express the necessity of going to the house of Zacchaeus? Why the “must”?

The Pharisees and religious leaders would say that because Zack was a chief tax collector he was a “sinner.” You should certainly not enter their home as a guest, and you were especially forbidden to eat their food.

Notice here that Jesus invited Himself to dinner! This is the only instance in the 4 Gospels where we read of Jesus inviting Himself to someone’s home for a meal.

Jesus must stay at his house because it pictures what His ministry is all about. He came to redeem sinners, to reclaim us.

Zacchaeus didn’t waste any time getting out of the tree. Jesus said, “jump” and Zack jumped. He came down right away and welcomed Jesus joyfully and with great excitement. He got way more than he asked for. He just wanted to get a closer look at the Savior but now He was coming over for dinner! He was overwhelmed with joy! The word “gladly” carries with it the idea of “jubilant exultation.”

Now, in contrast to Zack's joy, we see in verse 7 that the entire crowd began to mutter. If the crowd was confused about why Jesus was even talking to Zack, they now go ballistic when they figure out that Jesus has invited himself to dinner at Zack's place.

Notice that it wasn't just some of the crowd. The text says that it was all the people. It may have even included the disciples. The word itself means a low grumble, and indicates that they were complaining and finding fault with what Jesus was going to do.

This root word is also used to describe what the Israelites did in the desert when they complained and grumbled to the Lord.

We might want to get down on the crowd for their response but I wonder how many times we respond in a similar way? Let's admit it. We have categories in our minds of people who are really "bad."

We might be upset if Jesus were to drop in on them for a meal as well. It's so easy for us to think of others as "worse sinners" than we are.

After the meal and conversation with Jesus, Zacchaeus was greatly impacted by the call on his life. He knew he was a sinner and had come to the Savior for redemption. And he found it.

Zack pushes himself away from the table and says to Jesus, "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 phrase, "here and now" indicates that Zack was not waiting to negotiate a contract with Jesus or just trying to slide by. He was fully sold out to Christ.

Jesus had changed his heart and now he wanted to demonstrate that change through his actions. His decision was voluntary and flowed out of a heart of gratitude for what Christ had done for him.

Whenever Jesus meets someone there is change.

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, understood the importance of asking God to change him. One of his prayers said, "Lord, I give you everything there is in this man, William Booth. Do with me what you will."

God loves to hear prayers like this because it shows a willingness to change.

Zack's public confession shows the sincerity of his repentance and as part of his repentance, Zack wants to right his wrongs. The man who had felt small his whole life, and had treated others as if they were small, suddenly becomes a "big" man.

We sometimes think we're generous if we give God 10% of our income. The mark of Zack's transformation and conversion was his staggering generosity. He learned the truth quickly that it is impossible to serve both God and money.

Before he met Jesus his money was everything to him. After his conversion, it took a back seat and became something to be given away.

It was Albert Schweitzer who said, "If you own something that you cannot give away, then you don't own it, it owns you."

I think that verse 10 is a perfect ending to this Gospel lesson: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save those who are lost."

The mission of Jesus is very clear: He is still on a search and save mission. Just as he sought out Zacchaeus, he is seeking out people who need him.

I see four stages that Zacchaeus went through, which have direct application to our lives today.

-Curious. He wanted to get to know who Jesus was.

-Considered. He investigated the claims of Christ.

-Converted. After his encounter with Jesus, he realized that his life needed straightening out

-Changed. His life was radically redirected after his conversion as he began to live a life of gratitude for the grace of God he had experienced..

All of these things are necessary to experience the fullness of life that Christ promises. It is not enough to follow Jesus in your head or your heart alone. We must show our faith in Christ by changed behavior.

The little man encountered a big God – a God big enough to make a dramatic difference in his life. The same God that will do that for you and me if we will answer that call, "Come to me."