

“To Seek and To Save”

Introduction: We have been looking at various encounters Jesus had with people he met along the way, otherwise known as some of Pastor Tim’s favorite texts! Last week we were in Jericho where Jesus opened the eyes of the blind beggar named Bartimaeus. This morning we will see that Jesus was in no hurry to leave Jericho, that while he was passing through the city after his encounter with Bartimaeus, he meets a fellow named Zacchaeus and invites himself over for dinner! [READ]

Regarding Z, I’d wager that more than a few of you could sing a song you learned years ago about one known as a wee little man! Let’s take a minute to refresh our memories as we listen [SONG].

What is before us is one of the most vivid short stories in the Bible. It’s actually a love story in which Z’s eyes are opened to the truth that he is loved entirely beyond his imagination and control. When his eyes become open to that, it dramatically changes his life. Do you know the depth of that love?

I. Zacchaeus

A. Now, the story doesn’t start out with a whole lot of love. It starts out by identifying Z as a chief tax collector, who was wealthy. Which means that nobody in Jericho liked Z, at all! You see, Palestine in the days of Jesus was a conquered nation. The Romans were the conquerors and the occupying power, and they were highly intelligent. Instead of destroying their conquered lands, like precious empires did, the Romans milked them. They did so by levying oppressive taxes on their colonies, taxes that were collected by local folk who knew where the wealth was located. As an incentive, the collectors were allowed to demand as much money from their fellow Jews as they could get away with, keeping the extra for themselves. A chief tax collector, like Z, would also be able to take a percentage from each of the collectors under his control. All of this activity was backed by Roman military might. Today, we would call this practice extortion!

B. So, as you might imagine, Z was a despised man among the citizens of Jericho, especially as they watched all of the capital improvements Z must’ve been making to his house – a patio, a pool, a pickle ball court – with money he had extorted from them! As one commentator put it, the residents of Jericho would have been horrified to learn that of all the inhabitants of the town, Z would have been the one remembered by name to millions of people two thousand years later, and celebrated in a children’s song!

C. Up to this point in his life, it seems as if Z probably didn’t care what others thought. He had been willing to sacrifice everything, even his reputation, in pursuit of the idol of wealth. But when he heard that this fellow Jesus had come to town, he just had to see him, to the extent of running ahead of where Jesus would be walking and climbing a tree so he could get a better look over all the tall people in the crowd. While the text doesn’t directly say this, the fact that Z both ran and climbed a tree – activities that no dignified, grown man in the ANE would do – provides a strong hint that Z had begun to realize, like the rich, young, ruler we met a few weeks ago, that his life was lacking something. Maybe word of something Jesus had said earlier on: “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Lk. 12:15), had filtered down to Z and he was pondering its truth. Something in his life had become very crooked. Could Jesus be the one to help him get things straight?

II. Jesus

A. Indeed, when Jesus passed by the tree where Z was perched, stopped, looked up, locked eyes with him, and said: “Z, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today,” everything in Z’s life began to change. Why? Because Z was experiencing a love that went entirely beyond his imagination and was completely beyond his control. Much, probably, to his surprise, Jesus didn’t come to scold Z but to love him. And in doing so, Jesus didn’t wait until Z had cared for the poor and made plans to make restitution to those he had cheated. Jesus began by loving him first, before Z had done a thing.

B. The order is important. Jesus does not say to Z, “If you stop stealing then I will go to your house and stay with you.” He says the opposite. He says, “Even though I know all about your sin, I want to be with you; let’s go to your house.” Filled with such love, Z stops stealing and makes restitution. Put another way, it is not because Z changed that Jesus now loves him. Z wants to change because he has experienced Jesus’ love for him. It’s the difference between obedience being pounded into us, and love being planted inside of us.

C. And the people, well they were mad. They were looking for the pounding! “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner,” they said of Jesus. How could he do that? What broke the power of idolatry in Z’s heart was Z coming to a deep understanding that he was God’s treasured possession, that he was a son of Abraham, a child of God. It was not Jesus crushing him, but allowing himself to be crushed, on the cross, in his place, as well as in our place. His mission was not just to suffer and die but to change hearts and reorder life.

Jesus must stay at our house. Such knowledge is what truly changes us because it works from the inside out, which is the only way things happen in a true and lasting way.

Do you know that kind of love, a love that is beyond your imagination and control? A love that doesn’t crush others but allows itself to be crushed for the sake of others? We find it at the table, to which we now turn.