

A MAN UP A TREE - LUKE 19:1-10

Interviews of Jesus #3

The young soldier was sent to the 48th infantry near Frankfurt, Germany for his first assignment. In those days our state of the art weapon was the huge 280-millimeter atomic cannon. These guns were moved around in the NATO forests to keep the Soviets from guessing their location during the cold war. Needless to say, guarding these atomic cannons was a job that was taken very seriously for if one of these were to fall into enemy hands our technological edge could be compromised.

It was the first time that this soldier had been given this job by Captain Miller. He wanted everything to go just right. We can only imagine his dismay when, during his guard duty, he reached down to pat his .45 caliber pistol and his hand found an empty holster. He had lost his gun. Here he was defending this strategic weapon in a defenseless position. Now losing a weapon in the military is a serious offense under any conditions. But under this condition, it might well mean a court-martial.

His mind raced as he thought of what he should do. He could fake it. He could just go on with his assignment as if nothing were wrong and then look for his gun later. Maybe he would find it. But in his heart he knew that he must do what was right. There was too much at risk. He had no choice but to radio Captain Miller, confess his situation, and ask for relief.

Captain Miller sent an immediate replacement for guard duty and ordered this young soldier to come to his office at once. With fearful anticipation the young man dutifully made his way to face his superior. As the soldier entered the office, the Captain barked, *Here, I've got something for you.* And he slid the pistol across the desk. *Some kids in the village found it where it fell out of your holster. Luckily, they only got off one round before the shot was heard and another soldier took the gun away from them. Don't ever let this happen again.*

Kids found it - the soldier broke into a cold sweat as he timidly took the pistol and slid it into his holster. How could he have been so careless? He slinked out of the room grateful that he at least hadn't received a court-martial.

When he got back to his barracks, he examined his gun. The magazine was full. The gun hadn't been fired. Later he would learn that he had inadvertently left the gun in the Captain's office in his excitement to get to his important guard duty. Captain Miller had fabricated the story about the kids just to give him a good scare - to teach him a lesson that he would never forget. But the Captain who had the gun all along had been impressed with this soldier's sense of duty. This young soldier had not tried to cover up his mistake, but had rather faced it for the good of the country that he was defending so that the strategic weapon would not be placed in danger. So Captain Miller had decided not to throw the book at him, but to give him another

chance. He decided forgiveness was the best path to take this time. And his example of firm but compassionate leadership was not lost on this young soldier.

Today, when anybody asks Colin Powell about his style of leadership, he has a little motto that he gives. *Pick 'em up; dust 'em off' and get 'em moving again.* This leadership style has enabled him to become extremely successful in life – becoming a general in the U.S. Army, our National Security Advisor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the first Gulf War, and the first African American to serve as the Secretary of State. It was a style he learned from one Captain Tom Miller when he was just a young soldier starting out on one of his first assignments.

There is a time for harsh rebuke. Sometimes this is the only way to get a point across. And if there is hardness of heart, sometimes stern discipline is necessary if any correction of action is to be achieved. But more often the wise course is forgiveness and restoration, especially when there is ignorance or weakness. When a person receives forgiveness, he is often more motivated towards positive behavior.

We have embarked upon a journey together looking at different interviews that Jesus conducted during these wintery Sunday mornings. The interview that we come to this morning illustrates very clearly the gentle and kind manner in which the Lord Jesus Christ usually handled people. Now we must never forget that Jesus was able to be very firm and even confrontational at times. He rebuked the Pharisees strongly. He physically drove the moneychangers from the temple. He challenged the rich young ruler until the young man turned away in shame. But in the vast majority of interpersonal examples that we are given by the gospel writers, Jesus responded in kindness and gentleness - far more so than people would have expected as we will see this morning.

Jesus is on his final trip to Jerusalem. The week of his passion was almost upon him. In order to journey up to Jerusalem from Galilee, Jews almost always went by way of the Jordan River Valley which meant going through the city of Jericho which rests at the southerly end of the Jordan River, just above the mouth of the Dead Sea. As Jesus journeyed through the city of Jericho for the very last time, 2 men's lives would be changed forever. They apparently had very little in common. One was a blind beggar; the other was among the richest citizens of the area. But both of them would never forget the day they met Jesus. The blind man's eyes would be opened so that he could see physically, and the tax collector's eyes would be opened so that he could see spiritually. We are going to look this morning at the interview that Jesus had with this tax collector named Zacchaeus.

Now this interview of Christ as given by Luke involves 3 parties. We would like to look at the 3 parties who were involved in this interview this morning.

1. The first party involved in the interview obviously is the Lord Jesus Christ - because he is the one

who initiated this interview.

We are told that Zacchaeus was a very short man. He wanted to see Jesus, but could not because of the pressing crowds lined up alongside of the road where Jesus was to pass. So Zacchaeus runs on ahead and finds a sycamore-fig tree. This type of tree was a very leafy tree often found planted along the roadside - probably because of the good shade that it provided. It would be similar to our maple trees in purpose although it was not as large a tree as a maple usually is. Zacchaeus climbs up into the tree and camouflages himself in the leaves. It was probably his intent never to be seen at all, but just to get a chance to see this man named Jesus because of his curiosity over all that he had heard about him.

There is an interesting old Jewish tradition that when Matthew was called to become a disciple of Jesus, he mentioned an old tax collecting friend of his who lived in Jericho named Zacchaeus and asked Jesus to look him up if he was ever in Jericho. Now, as with all traditions, we can't be dogmatic as to the authenticity of this story, but it does bring an interesting thought to our minds as we consider this scene. For Jesus stops under this very tree, looks up into it, and calls Zacchaeus down out of the tree, inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house to stay for the evening. We might think this a rather forward thing to do. But if there is any merit to the Jewish tradition and Zacchaeus' old friend, Matthew, was right alongside of Jesus with the other members of the apostolic band making the trip to Jerusalem for the Passover season, it would make perfect sense for Zacchaeus to host the group that night.

Now again, the gentleness and tact of Jesus is worthy of note. And, frankly, Christ's manner irritated the other members of the crowd as we will see in a moment. But Jesus knew that his ministry to Zacchaeus would be far more effective by being courteous and kind than by calling him the wretched, dishonest, calloused scoundrel that everyone else in the community thought him to be. And the manner that Jesus used is certainly worthy of our note.

There is a fable about the wind and the sun who were arguing with each other about who was the more powerful force. Finally, they agreed to a contest to see which one could make a man who was down on earth take off his jacket. The wind tried first, blowing its fierce gale at the man. But the harder the wind blew, the more the man pulled the jacket up around himself. After the wind had exhausted its efforts, the sun just beamed down on the man, warming him with its glowing rays. It wasn't long before the man voluntarily slid the jacket off from his shoulders as he became too warm from the sun's rays.

So it often is in life. We have the tendency to think that the aggressive, harsh measures are the most affective. We tend to think that we must convince a person of the truth of the gospel with argument. But a person who feels attacked usually becomes more defensive. I personally have never met a person who has been argued into the kingdom of God. Jesus, to the dismay of the crowds around him, invited himself to

Zacchaeus' table for food and fellowship. Zacchaeus felt honored and was immediately open to all that Jesus had to say to him.

2. But Luke makes an interesting observation as he gives the reaction of the crowd who had gathered to see Jesus. Let's look at that as well. READ 19:5-7

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."*

Zacchaeus was overcome by joy - the crowd, on the other hand, couldn't believe what Jesus had just done. Now in order to understand their dismay, we must remember something about the cultural background of first century Israel.

In the first century, the Roman Empire was just coming to the end of its peak of power. The nation of Israel was under the absolute control of the Caesar in Rome who had set up the rulers of his choice to govern over the land of Palestine. Now part of the reason for the Roman Empire enduring so long was their military strength - but that is not the only reason. The Romans did much good in the countries where they governed - building roads and temples and water and sewage systems, making communities much more efficient and comfortable to live in. The Romans also were very intelligent in many of the policies that they adopted. It took a great deal of money for the Romans to do all of the building that they accomplished in addition to bringing a lot of money back into the Senate's coffers back in Rome, so the Romans had to levy high taxes on people in order to accomplish all that they wanted. Now taxes have never been popular. And the Romans knew that if they levied the taxes personally, it would make them so unpopular that uprisings were likely to occur. So the Romans tried to identify themselves with the popular achievements - building roads and temples - and have middle men who would take the heat for the taxation. So they would find national citizens who were motivated by greed who would agree to become tax collectors. The Romans would set up an amount of taxes that were expected. Then the tax collectors would be given the authority to collect more taxes, giving to the Romans what they required and keeping the rest for themselves. It would be similar to a franchise today. A private owner might buy a fast food place or a coffee shop, pay so much to the mother company for the name and advertising, and keep the rest of the profits for himself. Tax collectors had Roman franchises for taxation. The tax collectors would take the heat and animosity from the people, but would be generously rewarded for their trouble by the riches that they would accumulate. And, as we can imagine, tax collectors were especially despised people because they were viewed as traitors by the Jews. Here were Jewish people who had sided with the Romans in oppressing their own countrymen because of their own greed for money.

Now verse 2 says almost everything we need to know about this man named Zacchaeus. *A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.* This is the only time in the Bible that the Greek term *chief tax collector* is used. *Tax collector* is found many times, but Zacchaeus was not just an ordinary tax collector. He was the chief tax collector. He was the one who answered directed to the Romans. All of the other Jewish tax collectors in the area worked for him. He was high on the totem pole. And he was wealthy. Sure, he took a lot of heat. But he was filthy rich. And the irony is that his name Zacchaeus means *pure one or righteous one*. Zacchaeus must have just galled the citizens of Jericho. Here this one whose name was pure or righteous one was the person responsible for their high taxes and they could see their monies accumulating in his coffers as he became richer and richer. It's no wonder that they were astonished that Jesus would single out this person to stay at his house. If Jesus were the true Messiah as he had just evidenced in the healing of the blind man moments before, how could he stay at such a wicked man's house? If Jesus were really the deliverer of Israel, how could he side with this Jewish traitor who was helping the Roman oppressors?

Now it is obvious that these people didn't have the insight to see into the innermost thoughts and heart of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus had been motivated to see Jesus at any cost or inconvenience. He had been willing to climb up a tree just to get a glimpse of him. It is obvious that there was a heartfelt need that Zacchaeus was feeling. Jesus sensed that. Jesus realized that Zacchaeus was bothered deep inside by that wicked greed that he had become addicted to. His tough exterior was just a shell hiding the heart that was filled with pain and sorrow. The people couldn't see that. They hated this man so much that they were blinded to his real needs. But Jesus was able to see through that hardened exterior to a heart that was ripe for change.

Now what was most interesting is that Zacchaeus' change would benefit the people. As a result of Zacchaeus' change of heart, he would give his riches away, helping his community. As a result of Zacchaeus' change of heart, the entire city of Jericho and the whole surrounding area would now have an honest, generous chief tax collector - what a blessing that would be. But the hatred of the people and their lack of faith was the biggest detriment to this blessing that was about to come into their lives. If they would have had their way, they would have continued in financial oppression. But Jesus was able to see what the power of God could do in the human heart.

3. And this brings us in closing to the 3rd party affected by this interview. The one most affected by this interview was Zacchaeus himself.

We are not told anything about the conversation that took place in the house of Zacchaeus that night. We can assume that Jesus told Zacchaeus about the kingdom of God and how to become a citizen in it through

faith in him as the Messiah. We can assume that Matthew gave his testimony as to what Christ meant to him and how he had been delivered from the addiction of greed that had lead him to be a tax collector. We can assume that Jesus told Zacchaeus about the fruit of righteousness - loving God with all of one's heart and loving his neighbor as himself. But we can't be dogmatic about what took place in Zacchaeus' house because we aren't given that information. But what we are told speaks volumes to the change that took place in Zacchaeus' house. Probably as Jesus was leaving the next morning - although again, we can't be dogmatic here because we are not given the time - but it was after Zacchaeus had made his commitment that he demonstrated his willingness to become a follower of Jesus by repenting of his former way of life. We are told that Zacchaeus said this to the Lord. I picture it as a public statement that was overheard by some of the citizens of Jericho. I picture the crowds fuming all night because Jesus and his followers were in Zacchaeus' house. I picture them coming the next morning to see what was going to happen next. And as Jesus is leaving to make his way with his apostolic band to Jerusalem, Zacchaeus makes this public confession to the 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 4 times the amount.*

Can you imagine the response of the crowds now? What happened to Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus had met the Lord Jesus Christ and had been freed from his addiction to greed. Jesus concludes by saying, *Today salvation has come to this house.* Deliverance from the bondage of greed. Deliverance from the slavery of sin. Freedom to follow God.

Zacchaeus illustrates true repentance. In response to God's truth given to him by the Lord Jesus, he made a decision to change the entire course of his life. Instead of following his own selfish desires, he decided to follow the Lord is doing what was best for others.

A Sunday school teacher once asked his class what the word *repentance* means. A little boy shot up his hand and answered confidently, *Repentance is being sorry for your sins.* The teacher acknowledged that the answer was a good one, but noticed a timid young girl in the back of the class that had also raised her hand. *What is your answer,* the teacher asked? She replied, *Well, I was going to say repentance is being sorry enough for your sins to quit.*

The young girl's answer was the most complete one. Many people are sorrow for their sins. Sin is a difficult taskmaster. Addiction is a horrible master. Many are sorry when they feel its oppression; many are sorry when they get caught in their sins. But true Biblical repentance means being sorry enough for our sins to quit, to turn from them, to go in a different direction in life. And we can only realize this degree of repentance through the power of God.

Last week, we studied a man who was in obvious demonic oppression. The demon possessed man ran

around naked among the tombs totally controlled by evil spirits. We saw how the Lord Jesus Christ was able to deliver this demoniac from his helpless state so that he could be restored to society as a useful citizen.

This morning, we have seen a far more respectable person. Zacchaeus was a very intelligent, entrepreneurial man. He was a very successful business man. He very likely was the richest man in the whole city of Jericho. Sure he was hated by his neighbors, but he had developed a tough exterior. And secretly, many of those who hated him probably envied his vast wealth. But Zacchaeus was also imprisoned just like the demon possessed man from last week. Zacchaeus was imprisoned by his own greed, his insatiable lust for money. But Zacchaeus also met the Lord Jesus Christ and he was delivered. The reality of his deliverance is found in the fact that he could now freely give his wealth away with joy and peace in his heart.

What is it that imprisons you this morning? Are you truly a free person inside? Or is something binding your spirit? It could be greed, but it could just as easily be lust or an unforgiving spirit or anger or bitterness? These are the more socially acceptable fetters that we are willing to allow in our lives because they don't carry as much of a stigma with them. If you come to the Lord Jesus Christ, asking for his strength and help, he can bring freedom into your life - and that freedom will give you a new strength and joy that you have never experienced before.