Seeking and Saving the Lost
(19:1-10)

Leon Barnes

“And He entered and was passing through Jericho. And behold, there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; and he was a chief tax-gatherer, and he was rich. And he was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. And he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, ‘Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.’ And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly. And when they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.’ And Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much’…” (19:1-10).

Being a tax collector, even in our time, does not generally make one very endearing to people. Have you ever known anyone who said that his dream had been to grow up and become a tax collector? I do not think I have. I have never even heard a mother say about her little child, “I’m just praying that he will grow up to be a good tax collector some day.”

Tax collectors in our modern society are honored, admired, and praised compared to the view of the Jews toward tax collectors during the first century. For the tax collectors of that day, it was not just a job. Being a tax collector meant the man was a traitor to his own nation. He was working for the Roman government, raising money from his own people to support the very government that had overrun his homeland. Besides that, the tax collectors were regarded as thieves. The Roman government would set an amount that the tax collectors were to bring to them, and whatever they collected above that amount was theirs to keep. Such a system invited deceit.

Knowing all of that, imagine what it was like for Zaccheus. He was a Jewish tax collector who worked for the Roman government. He was wealthy, and the implication seems to be that he had gotten his wealth by taking it from his own people. He was short too. You have heard the children’s song that Zaccheus was a “wee little man.” I can imagine children in that time singing similar, songs in derision about the little man who was a thief and a traitor to his nation, who had gotten rich by making his countrymen poor. He would definitely be an outcast and a prisoner in his own home, rejected and without a friend.

Every time I read this story of Zaccheus, my mind goes back to my childhood and the times when someone would say, “Let’s play baseball.” Inevitably, they would choose up sides. When I was chosen first or even among the first, it was a great feeling; but what an empty feeling when everyone had been chosen except me, and the last one to choose says, “I guess I’ll have to take Leon.” Have you been there? Have you seen it with your child? It is terribly hard to be on the outside, no matter how much money you have in your bank account.
JESUS CAME TO TOWN

“And He entered and was passing through Jericho” (19:1). Zaccheus was the chief tax collector in Jericho, and he wanted to see Jesus. I do not know how he heard that Jesus was coming to town. Maybe he overheard someone talking. Most likely, no one would have told him, but still he sought a way to see Him. Because he was so short and the crowd was so big, his efforts seemed futile. He must have known better than to try to push his way into that crowd. Can you not see what would happen to a short man in a crowd that hated him? There would be pushing, shoving, elbows in the side, and stepping on feet. All of it would be “unintentional,” of course.

Zaccheus ran ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree to be able to see Jesus when He passed that way. He may have thought, “No one will ever know I’m up here. Jesus will pass by, and I’ll see Him. When everyone has gone by, I’ll climb down and no one will be the wiser.”

It is admirable that Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus. He may have had a sordid past, but he had a heart. He wanted to see the man who was changing the world by changing people’s lives from the inside out.

“ZACCHEUS, COME DOWN”

When the crowd reached the tree and Jesus was at the foot of it, He stopped, looked up into the tree, and said, “Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house” (19:5). What a shock! The crowd must have wondered why Jesus would bother to tell him to come down. And why would He go to his house? Surely Jesus did not know what kind of man this was, they thought.

Jesus was a soul winner. Even though a multitude was surrounding Him, wanting to hear Him and see the marvelous miracles He performed, He focused on one man who needed to be taught the right way. Jesus would never have fit the mold of being willing to teach only when He had a crowd listening to Him. One person was sufficient for Him to teach the way of God. Many of the greatest lessons Jesus ever presented were presented to one person.

Soul winners focus on sinners. No one is too lost to be saved if he is willing to turn to Jesus for that salvation. Jesus tasted death for every man (Hebrews 2:9). He commissioned His disciples to go into all the world and preach the good news to every creature (Mark 16:15). No one is beyond the reach of the gospel of Christ or the power of God to save. There can never be a better prospect for salvation than one who knows he is in sin and is lost, and who wants to change and be right with God. Zaccheus shows signs of both in this passage.

Jesus met Zaccheus on his social level by going to his house to “stay.” This would infuriate the crowd; but if we worry about what the crowd will think, we will find ourselves crippled in doing what needs to be done to save the lost. A person is more easily touched when we go to his house instead of asking him to come to ours. One reason Jesus was so powerful as a soul winner was His willingness to eat with tax collectors and sinners. He entered their domain and brought them back alive for God. What an example for us!

Zaccheus was thrilled: “He hurried and came down, and received Him gladly” (19:6). While the crowd complained, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner” (19:7), Jesus was demonstrating the heart of God. People are converted one at a time. Nations are not won for God. Even cities never turn to the Lord as a city. People come to God personally, individually, and by their own choice.

WHEN A SINNER REPENTS

Notice the fruit of repentance in the life of this man: “And Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much’” (19:8). He pledged first to give away half of what he had to the poor. This was not repayment or restitution. It was a change of character. He had come to Jesus, and it changed his way of thinking. Care and concern for others now entered his heart. He willingly became generous with all that he had. A conversion that leaves one stingy has to be questioned.

He also sought to do more than correct past sins. What he had taken in a wrong way, he would restore four times over. This is more than just saying, “I took something from another, and now I will return it.” Restitution is not necessarily a part of repentance, but a massive change of life is. Sinners who have repented want to be
different and are not satisfied with just repaying the minimum necessary requirements. If we say that one cannot repent without making restitution for his sins, then one who cannot make restitution cannot repent. Those individuals who were told to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins on Pentecost were the same ones of which Peter said, “This Man, . . . you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23). They could not undo their foul deed, but they could repent of it and begin anew.

When Zaccheus made known his intentions, the Lord’s response was, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham” (19:9). When Jesus came to the house of Zaccheus whose life had been stained by sin, He brought with Him many opportunities for improvement. A new life was available. I doubt that Zaccheus had even imagined such a change when he was seeking to see Jesus. Probably the trip up the tree was more a matter of fascination than a matter of seeking for salvation, but Jesus was seeking for sinners to save.

THE REASON JESUS CAME

Jesus described His mission in the world when He said, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (19:10). It is marvelous to find sinners seeking for God. Such seekers are easy to teach, to love, and to show the way of salvation through Christ our Lord; but if we wait for a seeker to come knocking on our door searching for salvation, we may wait years and never see one.

If we follow Jesus and begin to seek for those who can be saved, even though they are not searching for salvation right now, we will find many like Zaccheus who are in need of a Savior and who can be reached for the Lord. Does it not seem reasonable to you that those sinners who have been saved would be out searching for others like themselves who could be saved as well? We all need the Savior, but unless we are always seeking for honest souls who can be brought to God and are willing to reach out to them, many of those who could have been saved never will be. Jesus knew His mission. He was always open to the opportunity to carry it out. The mission of the Christian is to follow the pattern of the Savior, but we are not always as clear as He was on what that mission is or on how to fulfill it. It would be great if we were determined to take each day to look for and act upon opportunities we have to lead others to God.

Applying Scripture to Life

Giving What We Please

A businessman said to a minister: “My self says to me twenty times a day: I’ll do this, I’ll do that, I’ll give up this and I’ll give up that, but please let me stay at the center!” To this he added: “I’m trying to live the Christian life, but I’m having a hard time of it.”

We have Christians who are willing to give the Lord all the marginal things—bits of time, bits of churchgoing, bits of Bible study, everything but the central thing: themselves!

Paul S. Rees,
“As in Thy Sight”

How to Succeed

A young Indian brave went to the tribal chief, his grandfather, and said, “In your great wisdom, grandfather, can you tell me the most important steps one must take in order to become a chief?”

The old chief replied, “First, he must pluck the fur from the tail of the sacred bobcat. He must bring down the great white buffalo with his bare hands. He must wrestle the brown bear two falls out of three; and, of course, there are the customary trials by fire and water.”

The brave thought for a moment, and then responded, “Whatever happened to wholesome good looks and a nice personality?”

A Parent’s Love

When you were small and just a touch away,
I covered you with blankets against the cold night air;
But now that you are tall and out of reach,
I fold my hands and cover you with prayers.

Donald J. Shelby,
“Decisions! Decisions!”
12 May 1991

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