

Jesus: The Seeking Savior, Part 2

Scripture: Luke 19:1–10

Code: 80-35

INTRODUCTION

The story of Zaccheus illustrates Luke's theme--"the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Christ sought out and saved the sinner Zaccheus and therefore gives us an example of how to make a disciple.

REVIEW

Luke 15 illustrates the same theme with three parables: that of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons.

LESSON

I. THE SETTING (v. 1)

"[Christ] entered and was passing through Jericho. "

Christ "was passing through Jericho" on His way to Jerusalem. To reach Jerusalem from His present areas of ministry in Galilee and Perea, He would have crossed the Jordan River at a point only a few miles north of Jericho. From that point He would have proceeded down the road that led through Jericho and eventually to Jerusalem.

A. The Geography of Jericho

Jericho is about seventeen miles east of Jerusalem. The contrast between them is striking: Jerusalem is on a high plateau, while Jericho has the Dead Sea--the lowest spot on earth--at its southern end. The ascent to Jerusalem's high plateau from the low elevation of Jericho is dramatic, which is why Scripture often says people went up to Jerusalem.

Jericho was at the southern end of the Jordan valley, a fertile area. In fact, Jericho might have received its name from the perfume of its Balsam-wood groves. At the southern end of the valley grew many date palms. The Romans exported the Balsam wood and dates throughout the world. The fertile soil received its water from the Jordan River and from two springs. Aqueducts distributed the water from those springs. Also in Jericho, King Herod and his son Archelaus built an amphitheater and a magnificent palace with beautiful gardens. People referred to the city as the Eden of Palestine.

B. The Economy of Jericho

Not only a beautiful place, Jericho was also at the crossroads of travel in the Middle East. Everyone traveling from the east forded the Jordan River nearby and came to Jerusalem through Jericho. Those coming from the north through the Jordan valley, perhaps from Tyre and Sidon, would come through Jericho on their way to Jerusalem or Egypt. And those from Egypt going north would come through Jericho.

The Romans placed tax centers at all crossroads of travel, so there was one at Jericho. The Roman government sold tax franchises to unscrupulous subjects willing to overtax their people to pay for the occupying Roman army and make a profit. Therefore the Jewish people viewed tax collectors as traitors to Judaism, refusing to let them testify in a court of law or worship in the Temple. They were alienated from the social and religious life of the nation.

II. THE SINNER (vv. 2-7)

A. His Difficulty (vv. 2-4)

"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. "

The "chief tax-gatherer" was perhaps a commissioner overseeing the entire Jericho tax center or having responsibility over the main region. The people viewed him as a despised sinner (v. 7). And as Jesus was passing through the city, that tax collector tried "to see who Jesus was" but couldn't because he was too short to see above the crowd.

The crowd was undoubtedly large because it would have included pilgrims journeying in a steady flow to the upcoming Passover in Jerusalem. Such a crowd wouldn't be any surprise to the citizens of Jericho. It was customary for the people to line the street and welcome the pilgrims on their way. Perhaps many knew each other, having family or business relationships.

Another reason the crowd was so large was that Jesus was among it, and His fame had spread throughout Palestine. Previous to His last visit in Jerusalem, He raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany (John 11:1-46), the next town between Jericho and Jerusalem. Having heard of that and His many other miracles, the entire city would be curious to see Him. They expected Him to exercise His power to defeat the Romans at any time and set up His Kingdom (Luke 19:11). So the crowd of pilgrims and city people probably numbered in the thousands.

Christ's Mission: Preaching Salvation or the Kingdom? Some people think Jesus came primarily to preach about the kingdom. But that's the same as preaching about salvation. Shortly after a rich young ruler inquired about possessing salvation, Jesus said, "It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:23). He equated the kingdom of heaven with salvation. In the next verse He equated it with the kingdom of God. So the kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, and salvation are all the same. Christ's mission on earth was to save sinners (cf. 1 Tim. 1:15).

The tax collector who wanted to see Jesus was named Zaccheus, a familiar Jewish name meaning "pure one" or "righteous one. " His "trying to see" Him implies a continual effort. Why did Zaccheus have that desire? Because the Holy Spirit had begun a work in his life that would lead to salvation. Realizing his sinfulness, Zaccheus wanted to come to Jesus, not run from Him. To overcome the difficulty of not being able to see Jesus above the crowd, Zaccheus ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree. Such a tree has broad leaves and resembles the mulberry. Its fruit is similar to the common fig, so some call it a fig-mulberry tree. It has large, spreading branches low to the ground (providing a good view for Zaccheus) and a short trunk, so it was easy to climb up it and then crawl out on its limbs.

B. His Delight (vv. 5-7)

"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. '"

Jesus came underneath the tree where Zaccheus was and directly addressed him. Some suggest Christ knew his name from the crowd's comments and certainly He knew it supernaturally.

Whichever the case, Jesus' address was certainly a shock to Zaccheus, who was merely trying to see Jesus. "Must" shows a necessity not a request, indicating a divine appointment for a Spirit-prepared heart. "Stay" speaks of lodging with the sense of passing the night. Zaccheus hurried down the tree and gladly welcomed Christ. The crowd was very critical of Christ's being a sinner's guest. The Greek term translated "to be the guest" pictures someone tying his garments during a journey and then unloosing them at the journey's end. It denotes making oneself comfortable at a lodging place. The self-righteous crowd did not realize Christ came to save sinners.

III. THE SAINT (vv. 8-9)

What happened at the house between verses 7 and 8? The account doesn't say. We don't know how long Jesus stayed or what He said about salvation. Certainly Christ confronted his sin and awakened his responsibility to be obedient to Him as Savior and Lord. So Zaccheus would have confessed and turned from his sin and embraced Christ. It seems salvation is unique for each individual, so perhaps the Spirit kept the method from being recorded so no one would consider it the only one.

A. A Change of Behavior (v. 8)

"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.'"

Obviously that dialogue occurred after the salvation discussion, maybe the same or next day. The Greek word translated "stopped" speaks of taking a formal stand and making a declaration. It begins with "Lord," an acknowledgement of the deity and sovereignty of Jesus Christ. That affirmation could come only from one who had embraced Christ as Savior. Then Zaccheus said, "Half of my possessions I will give to the poor," evidence of a transformed character. The taker became a giver. The next thing he did was seek to make restitution for past sinful acts. Because he had defrauded his people he wanted to "give back four times as much." Only a destructive and violent robbery required a fourfold restitution (Ex. 22:1). Robbery involving goods that for the most part could not be restored demanded a twofold penalty (Ex. 22:4-7). And voluntary confession and restitution called for full repayment plus one-fifth the stolen amount (Lev. 6:5; Num. 5:7). So the law required Zaccheus to restore the stolen money and pay a penalty of one-fifth the amount. Now what does that tell us about Zaccheus? His behavior obviously changed. His obedience exceeded God's requirement and was evidence of salvation.

B. A Son of Abraham (vv. 9-10)

"Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.'"

Because Zaccheus had a change of behavior, Jesus proclaimed his salvation. "House" could mean more than Zaccheus but not necessarily. But where is the faith of Zaccheus? How do we know his salvation is not by works? Jesus answered that question by saying Zaccheus was now a "son of Abraham." That phrase refers to one's faith, not racial heritage. Galatians 3:9 says, "Those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer." Furthermore, Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gal. 3:6; cf. Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3). He is a spiritual father to all who believe (Rom. 4:11-18). "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:29). Romans 4 speaks of Abraham "the father of all who believe" (v. 11), "the faith of our father Abraham" (v. 12), and "the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (v. 16). A true son of Abraham has faith in Christ as Savior and Lord, and that described Zaccheus.

CONCLUSION

Ephesians 2:8-10 says, "By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Christ came to seek and save the lost. Those whom He finds He saves by His grace, resulting in a change of their character and behavior. And the lost become found as they embrace Him in faith as Savior and Lord.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What does the account of Zaccheus illustrate?
2. Give some highlights of Jericho's geography.
3. Why was Jericho's location strategic?

4. How did the Jewish people view tax collectors?
5. Why would the crowd in Jericho be large?
6. Is there a difference between the terms salvation, kingdom of heaven, and kingdom of God? Explain.
7. Why did Zaccheus want to see Jesus?
8. Give a brief description of the tree Zaccheus climbed.
9. Explain the meaning of "stay" (Luke 19:5) and "to be the guest of" (v. 7).
10. True or false: Zaccheus hesitated to receive Christ into his house.
11. What happened at the house of Zaccheus?
12. Explain the term translated "stopped" (v. 8).
13. What is the significance of Zaccheus's calling Jesus "Lord" (v. 8)?
14. Giving to the poor is evidence Zaccheus had a _____.
15. What was the law's requirement for Zaccheus's robbery? How did Zaccheus respond to it and what does that tell us about him?
16. Explain the term "son of Abraham" (v. 9). Give scriptural support for your answer.

Pondering the Principles

1. Zaccheus desired to give half his possessions to the poor and a fourfold restitution to those he defrauded. His change of behavior was evidence of his salvation. The Bible teaches that "if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17). J. C. Ryle, referring to that change in the believer's life, said, "He that is born again and made a new creature receives a new nature and a new principle and always lives a new life. A regeneration, which a man can have and yet live carelessly in sin or worldliness, is a regeneration invented by uninspired theologians, but never mentioned in Scripture. . . . Where there is no sanctification there is no regeneration and where there is no holy life there is no new birth" (Holiness [Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1987], p. 17). Is there evidence of salvation in your life? Do you mourn over sin and desire to be free from it? Do you strive to be like Christ? Take this time to do a spiritual inventory of your life (2 Cor. 13:5).
2. That Zaccheus was a son of Abraham showed he had faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. As such it manifested the fruit of obedience (Luke 19:8). Thomas Watson said, "Faith melts our will into God's. It runs at God's call. If God commands duty (though cross to flesh and blood) faith obeys. . . . Faith is not an idle grace; as it has an eye to see Christ, so it has a hand to work for him. It not only believes God's promise, but obeys his command" (A Body of Divinity [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983], p. 219). Are you like Zaccheus, having an eager desire to please God and make restitution for your sins against others?

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