

AT THE TABLE OF ZACCHEUS

At the Table (Part 3) | Luke 19:1-10

Good morning. Welcome to part three of AT THE TABLE, a series where we're learning from Jesus how to live more creatively and influentially at the various tables of our lives. To kick us off today I invite you to use your imagination. Suppose some new neighbors ask you to dinner at their house.

As you sit down to the meal, you say: "So Matt, what do you do for a living? He says: *"Oh, I'm a Balloon Operator."* "Wow!" you exclaim. "We've always wanted to take one of those hot-air balloon rides. We'll have to go up with you some time." "No," says Matt. *"I run the controls that operate this high-altitude white balloon that takes pictures of strategic American assets for another government and it pays REALLY well! It's how I bought that nice Tesla parked out there next to your Prius. Would you mind passing the salad?"* It's a hugely awkward moment, but your spouse jumps in and asks: "So Sue, how about you? What do you do?" *"Oh, I run these marketing scams where I get people to over-pay me for common items. I made a killing on selling masks during COVID. People HAD to have them!"*

How are you feeling about your new neighbors? Collaborating with a hostile foreign power. Making money by overcharging people when they're already under stress. It doesn't get much dirtier than that. And if you think you'd feel negatively toward those sorts of people, then you GET what most first century Jewish people felt at the thought of sitting down at the table with a Tax Collector. Someone got that job by buying what amounts to a tax collection franchise from the hated Roman government. They promised to supply the hostile foreign power with what they wanted but could charge in taxes whatever they could get away with and keep the excess for themselves. Like the fantasy neighbors I had you imagine, tax collectors were traitors and scam-artists. Because they were local people, they knew where the money was and how to access it.

Would you want your kids to be taking ethical or vocational cues from those people? No. Would you want your friends to see you hanging around with those people? No. Would you want to be touching the same pile of food with those people? No. Tax collectors were seen as – and probably most were -- dirty rotten scoundrels. Whatever status they might have once had as citizens of Israel they had completely forfeited by selling out to Rome. They could no longer claim to be part of the Jewish family. They were pariahs and outcasts. Nobody reputable sought out their company, much less sat at their lunch table. Which makes the story we read in Luke's gospel so puzzling.

Hear the Word of God as it comes to us from Luke 19 at verse 1: **Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.** Now, this part isn't puzzling at all. We know from the surrounding text that Jesus was on his way to the holy city of Jerusalem. If you were coming from Galilee, the northern region where Jesus lived, one of the most

popular routes to Jerusalem involved traveling south along the relatively flat floor of the Jordan River valley, turning west through the city of Jericho, and then climbing up the switchback road that led into the mountains where Jerusalem sat.

Furthermore, Jericho was exciting to visit. If Jerusalem was the religious capitol of Israel, Jericho was the financial and commercial center. There was a lot of affluence and shopping in that city. King Herod had a winter palace near there. In fact, if you think about it, there was probably no more lucrative location for owning a tax collection franchise than where? Jericho! So, it is NOT surprising that ² **A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.**

But here's where the story starts to get puzzling. Verse three says: ³ **[Zaccheus] wanted to see who Jesus was...** Now, you'd think that somebody who was so in love with money that he'd willingly cut himself off from the community and cult of Judaism would have had no interest in some rabbi from the hick town of Nazareth. But it's been my experience – and maybe yours too – that a lot of us have holes in our lives that mere stuff can't fill. Sometimes when we've been doing life largely alone, we start yearning for companionship but wonder who would want to be with us if they REALLY knew us. There are times when we get to the point where we begin to re-evaluate our values and think about restructuring our priorities, but we're not sure we can make the change stick – not without help.

Maybe Zaccheus had overheard stories about all the other people Jesus had helped. Perhaps he was doubtful about religion in general but thought this rabbi might be different. We don't know; but there was a backstory someplace – a story maybe something like the one that brought me to Christ or that resulted in YOU being his follower or like some of the ones people tell our staff about why they finally came to this church. Nothing but a deep kind of yearning explains what Zaccheus does next.

The text says: ³ **He wanted to see who Jesus was... but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.** That Zaccheus was out in a crowd at all is a stunning indicator of the strength of the curiosity or longing going on inside of him. If you know you are a person who everyone recognizes and everyone hates do you walk into a mob? If you are a "wee little man" (as the old children's song goes) -- someone who can easily be overpowered, beaten up or worse -- do you go out alone in a crowd? If you know you are subject to being lynched (as Zaccheus was) do you go out in a CROWD and hang out near a TREE?

But Zaccheus does. He's like the hemorrhaging woman who fought her way through the throng just to touch the hem of Jesus' garment (Luke 8:44). He's like the kid who fights between the long legs of all the adults and runs ahead to stake out a position along the parade route, just to catch a glimpse of his sports idol sitting atop the float. Something very deep and genuine is driving this man. ⁴ **So he ran ahead and**

climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.
Something good is driving some of you and Jesus is coming your way.

Back in the early 20th century, a young woman named Louisa Fletcher married Booth Tarkington, the most famous American novelist of that time. The Pulitzer prize-winner was, sadly, a hard-bitten alcoholic and Louisa's marriage to him collapsed after only a few years. In time, she married again and had a daughter, but the child suffered with schizophrenia and took her life at 16. In the midst of these dark times, Louisa wrote a poem I will only partially quote here...

*I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door,
And never put on again.*

*I wish we could come on it all unaware,
Like the hunter who finds a lost trail;
And I wish that the one whom our blindness had done
The greatest injustice of all
Could be at the gates like an old friend that waits
For the comrade he's gladdest to hail*

I don't know why, after all his mistakes and all his heartaches and all of his poor selfish grief, Zaccheus even dared to dream that God might be at the gate like an old friend that waits for the comrade he's gladdest to hail. But it turns out that he wasn't wrong to hope for this, because God is like that. As we saw in week one of this series, the God Jesus shows us is someone who pours out 180 gallons of premium red grace to people who have run out of what they need to thrive. As we learned in week two, the God Jesus shows us prizes relationships over rules and wants to sit with people who are sick and need a doctor, not those who think they are perfectly healthy but aren't.

So, the gospel says: **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.** The puzzling or surprising part of this story is that Jesus NOTICES Zaccheus up in that tree. I grew up in a political family. I worked as an advance man for the governor of New York. I know from experience that public figures are, by political necessity, mainly interested in maximizing their influence upon the crowd. They rarely have time for individuals, except as a photo-op. Spending time, one-one-one with individuals is inefficient.

This is what makes Jesus amazing. Here is the major insight of this passage and of week three in our series: The God Jesus shows us is especially interested in people who are ready to make a TURN. He has time for them. Don't get me wrong: Jesus loves everybody. He cared for everybody in that Jericho crowd, like he cares for everyone here today. But what this Bible story tells us is that the people who get his particular focus... the people he keys in on and makes him want to sit AT THE TABLE with are those who are ready to CHANGE... to shift their priorities... to alter their behaviors... to become what they were made to be.

Please notice the difference in directional focus between the Crowd and the Christ (the Savior) in this story. First, note the direction the Crowd is looking. **7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."** In the first century in the Middle East, sitting AT THE TABLE with someone was a sign of care for and commitment to them. It's a statement that we are "family." The fact that Jesus – who is a publicly recognized "holy man," has decided to go dine in the home of Zaccheus is staggering to the Crowd. Why? Because of Zaccheus' PAST. Here's the truth: The Crowd assesses people on the basis of their past. They slot and set people on the basis of who they have been. There is no escaping your history. They'll always bring it up: *You said... You did... You were...* And in today's searchable digital environment, that is even more so.

But unlike the Crowd, the Christ (the Savior) is far more concerned with the FUTURE. He is dramatically less interested in who you have been than in who you want to be. He feels seriously the gravity of our sin and its effects on us and others. But the grace of Jesus is sufficient to overcome it and change the future. I connected this week with a man I love who, 18 years ago this week, faced his demons seriously for the first time. In the public sphere he was a successful businessman and social influencer. In the private sphere, he was a mortally compromised sex and porn addict. Over the past two decades, Christ has helped him repair his soul and marriage and make both of them beautiful and strong. Jesus has used my friend to help dozens of other guys face their demons and change their lives for good.

The Old Testament law stipulates that, if you have done wrong, you ought not to just RECOGNIZE it; you ought to REPENT of it. Lots of people tally their sins: *"Yeah, I've got a sharp tongue. Yes, I drink too much. I admit, I'm selfish with the way I use my money. It's true, I tend to hold grudges."* Far fewer people actually turn from these behaviors and that's what "repentance" means. It is one thing to recognize that you've done wrong and that your failure represents unfaithfulness to GOD as well as to other people. It is another level to say I am sorry for this. It is a higher level still to go on and make practical amends for your debt or transgression. And it is the height of transformation when you establish a pattern of doing abundant good where you've done appalling wrong before.

What makes the Judeo-Christian ethic so unusual and transformative is that it calls for all four of these steps – not just tallying but turning, not just recognizing but repenting. For example, in the Book of Numbers we read that the LORD said to Moses: **Tell the Israelites: If you do something wrong to another person, you have been unfaithful to the Lord. (Step 1) When you realize your guilt, you must confess your sin... (Step 2), pay in full for what you did wrong... (Step 3) add one-fifth to it and give it to the person who was wronged" (Step 4) (Numbers 5:5-7).** St. Paul says that truly: **Godly sorrow brings repentance (2 Cor 7:10).** We don't just cry; we change.

This is what makes the story of Zaccheus not just surprising but stunning.

⁸ Zaccheus stood up and said to the Lord, "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 Old Testament Jewish law stipulated that a faithful act of repentance might move someone to restore one-fifth of what had been taken or lost. In this instance, Zaccheus pledges to do twenty times that. That's how remarkably he wants to make right what he has done wrong.

I believe that God loves it when we desperately and wildly try to make right what we have done wrong. Let me underline that God does not NEED us to do that. His forgiveness and our restitution does not require our balancing the scales. Jesus did that freely upon the Cross. But God loves it when our desire is to make things right and to imitate his over-the-top generosity in doing so. When Jesus sees Zaccheus pledging himself in an extravagant act of repentance, **⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."**

In other words, I know that by his PAST behavior as a tax collector Zaccheus disqualified himself as a member of the Jewish family. BUT by the heart he has demonstrated for the FUTURE, I proclaim that Zaccheus has been re-included in the family and shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. **¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.** My mission, says Jesus, is to help the amnesiac children of God remember WHO they are and find their way HOME.

So, here are the takeaways from today's Bible text. First, please remember that God is far more interested in your FUTURE than your PAST. Jesus shows us that God is way less concerned with who you've been than with who you could become, with his help. Secondly, the story of Zaccheus demonstrates that Jesus isn't impressed when you simply RECOGNIZE that you have issues. What makes him want to come to your house and sit at the table with you and give you his help, is when you are determined to REPENT of your sin. Finally, think about what this suggests about the way you could treat other people when you meet them AT THE TABLES of your life in days ahead.

Look this week for a Zaccheus -- somebody who is yearning for something more than this world's success strategy is supplying for them. Be attuned to people you meet who are ready to not just TALLY their sins but make a TURN. Be a voice in their life who, like Jesus, is less interested in counting what went WRONG before than in celebrating what could go RIGHT in the era ahead. Be for your child, your spouse, your friend or co-worker, that Jesus-inspired person who helps others, with God's grace and truth, to move from who they are to who can be. Be someone from the Land of Beginning Again.

That's your mission this week as you show up AT THE TABLES of your life. For this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.