

OUR FRIEND OF SINNERS
Jesus, Our Friend
Dr. George O. Wood

I'd like today to have you see another dimension of our friendship with our Lord. That is his Friendship with Sinners. The gospel text is Luke 19:1-10. "Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. There was a man named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector and rich. He sought to see who Jesus was but could not on account of the crowd because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him because Jesus was to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, make haste and come down for I must stay at your house today.' So he made haste and came down and received him joyfully. When they saw it they all murmured. He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything I restore it four fold.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today, salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.'"

The setting of the story is Jesus is passing through Jericho. If you follow the gospel narrative you soon discover that his next stop is Jerusalem. It would be the week of his passion in Jerusalem. So this is his last time in Jericho. It is the last days of his earthly life.

On the way into Jerusalem he has seen and heard a blind man who is named in Mark Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus has cried out. The Lord as made himself known to Bartimaeus and granted him sight. On the way out of town he finds another man. This time not a man who is blind physically. But a man who is blind spiritually who is rich and powerful but who is unloved and unwanted by those who know him.

Jesus on the way into the town and on the way out of the town demonstrates his concern for these individuals. And indeed it is a tremendous thing to know about our Lord that in those moments of his ministry when we would allow him if he wanted to be, to be preoccupied with his own thoughts. Thoughts about his approaching death and thoughts about the crucifixion. The thoughts about how he would lay down his life for the whole world even for us. We would grant that even if he wanted to be preoccupied with those issues during this time he should have had that privilege. But never is he so preoccupied with himself that he cannot know the individual, the one who stands out even in the crowd, who needs him and therefore he lays aside all of the other concerns that are upon him and takes time to enjoy a dinner, a feast and a stay at the home of a man who had been an outcast in his society. Incredible as it is the Lord on his way to his death takes a moment to have merriment and to be received joyfully by a person who will be his host. As you look at the Lord in these last days of his ministry typical of his earthly ministry during the three years. He continues to do the unexpected. You'd think that in the last days of his ministry he would be more than ever taking his campaign, his message, his doctrine to the multitudes. He is only walking among the multitudes. We find him teaching and we find him talking to the individual. It is to the small company of disciples. It is as if the Lord in those last moments reaches out for the quality of human fellowship rather than the quantity of speaking to a crowd. Which does not necessarily bring with it the relationship to an individual person.

Here on the way outside of Jericho, this town fifteen miles to the northeast of Jerusalem, Jesus takes time to meet a man by the name of Zacchaeus.

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I'd like for us today to see this person Zacchaeus in three ways. We see him first of all as others saw him. Secondly perhaps as he saw himself. And thirdly see him as the Lord saw him.

In looking at Zacchaeus it would be helpful to look at ourselves for the gospels are written for us. There are ways that people see us. There are ways that we see ourselves. But we must never forget as we are sometimes tempted to do how the Lord really sees us.

First of all how Zacchaeus is seen by others. A paradox is seen immediately. Others see him as a success and sinner. At one and the same time he is both. A man of wealth but a man to be despised. We see him in terms of his success by the identification that he is a chief tax collector and he was rich. That denotes his success.

It is the only time in the gospels that the word "chief" is used in reference to the administrative position tax collector. Some six times in all in the gospel of Luke denotes how Jesus had time for tax collectors which is the only one that as chief. Indicating that he had the major and the key administrative responsibility for the collection of taxes within the area which was around the city of Jericho.

Barclay in his Daily Study Bible notes the practice of tax collecting as it existed in first century Palestine under the Roman administration. I want to review it briefly for a moment for it says something to us about the stature of this person that Jesus is going to be meeting with.

The Romans had the practice of exercising two kinds of taxes upon the people. Their tax administration was farmed out. Its responsibility was farmed out to the person who bid highest for the post. There were certain kinds of taxes called stated taxes. These were due and there was not a give and take on the taxes. They were straight out. You had to pay them – no more, no less. A poll tax was simply a tax that all men between the ages of 14 and 65 had to pay annually and all women between the ages of 12 and 65.

There was another tax, which was stated called the grounds tax. It was a tax that was levied on one tenth of all grains was Caesar's and one fifth of all oil and wine.

Income tax was the third stated tax. That is one percent of each person's income was required. There was however a second kind of tax. This is where a tax collector if he were a crafty person could really get rich. A certain assessment was made of the district in terms of what kinds of revenues it should produce in terms of taxation for Caesar. The tax collector was responsible for raising that amount. It was a very dangerous job. You could be immensely successful or out of it real quick. If however the tax collectors paid for the amount that was assessed, all monies he raised over that was his for his own personal use.

Taxes called duty taxes included taxes for using main roads or harbors, markets, the sale of certain articles. There was an import/export tax. Since Jericho was in the center of a very fertile agricultural region as well as a pass roads of trading into the east. It was a certain for trade. Zacchaeus was in a key place financially to be a tax collector. No doubt he had purchased the office at great price. And on top of it he would maintain himself in his office and become very wealthy in the collection of the taxes.

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So here was a man of considerable success. Along with that tax collecting went the normal process in those days that tax collectors if they confronted someone who couldn't pay up could make them a loan at an exaggerated interest rate. The persons then would be responsible for paying the taxes in installments along with the exorbitant interest rates as well. Doesn't sound much different from today, does it?

Tax collectors were classed in the category with robbers and murderers and with good reason in those days. Even if they were Jewish they were barred from the synagogues. They may take no part in Jewish social or religious life.

In our culture a person who is a tax collector could have his pick of homes in our society and all the accouterments of financial success and status.

But strangely enough with all the financial success he also was regarded as a sinner. Not simply regarded as a sinner by the Lord but regarded as a sinner by those who were his peers and who lived in his society and had the chance to see him at work.

The Lord saw wonderfulness in him but if you had related to him in a business transaction you would never have thought him a wonderful person. You would have called him a scoundrel or if you had lived in the first century you would have called him, given your religious perspective, a sinner. He acted contrary to his religious faith. His religious faith said you shall not steal and he stole. His religious faith taught him against usury and yet he practiced usury. His religious faith had taught him concern for human need but he had evidently no concern for human need. In fact I would see this man who in pursuit of money and riches had demonstrated a remarkable non-sympathy for human needs.

He was a mean man and selfish. And on top of that he was a collaborator with the Roman government. So here was this man. As seen by others marvelously successful but a sinner.

How did he see himself?

No doubt he saw himself in several ways. I pick up on just a couple in this story. One way that he probably saw himself as a person of small stature. When he looked in the mirror he was short. Evidently he had this need within him whether it was caused by a psychological fix because of his physical condition or whatever. But he as a small man who wanted to be a big man. He took great pains and effort and ambition to bring that into eventuality.

A man who will drive like this to be a chief financial administrator for an area has to have some ambition. He didn't get that job by hoping that someday the job would drop in his lap. He pushed other people out of the way. He financially climbed the ladder. He was known as the guy who was in his office at six in the morning and left at nine at night. He drove his employees till their fingernails were worn down to a frazzle. This kind of a man was used to deep ego needs for success and stature.

While we can see some negative things to that it also certainly may indicate that being small of stature that he had perhaps found a constant need in his life to have a creative approach to problems. This was a hallmark of his administrative ability. When he was in the crowd and wants to see Jesus he can't get through the crowd. And baptism, it was quite a thing for him to

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even be in the crowd. As chief tax collector there was more than one person who'd like to put a knife right in his back. He was risking his life in the crowd but he wanted to see Jesus. He sees which way Jesus is heading so he runs son ahead and climbs up in a tree. Very resourceful. He's used to getting things done even if he lost his dignity in doing it. Certainly climbing a tree was not the most dignified thing that the chief tax administrator could do.

But here he is in the midst of this crowd thronging around to see Jesus. You have to get a fix on what it looks like. He's with the crowd. Many of whom are followers of Jesus. Others inquirers. Some miracle seekers. Some disciples. But in the midst of all Zacchaeus is trying to get through for a look himself. He wants to see Jesus.

He saw himself as a man whose small in stature with big ambitions. But still he had a great need in his life. That's how he saw himself.

His name Zacchaeus is a tip off as to what might have happened within him when he looked deep within. His name meant "pure" or "righteous." Can you imagine a name like this for the chief financial tax gatherer? Can you see what happened when Zacchaeus would go along to put somebody down on a deal and exercise some extra financial leverage with them?

But incredibly about this man Zacchaeus, no matter how bad he is and no matter how bad we may see him as there is yet something of good within him. Something wonderful. Something that dreams. A pureness. A rightness.

Jesus can meet the most debased sort of people, people who you wouldn't think would have a flicker of interest in righteousness or God. But Jesus will look at them and in a moment begin to pick out and begin to build on that which is right and good within them. He has this way with people, looking at their yearnings for good within them. The Lord knows that this may Zacchaeus lived with this affront. He knew that his name meant pure but always lived another way.

No matter how bad a person may be the Lord looking at his life can also see that which may be redeemed by which is good. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus. I don't know what's all involved in that but given the meaning of the name of Jesus and Zacchaeus' name I wonder if there might not be a connection. Jesus' name meant "God saves" or "He saves" and Zacchaeus' name meant "pure". Zacchaeus wanted to meet a man who matched what his name meant.

He'd heard evidently about Jesus from various sources. Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him. Maybe Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus from the other tax collectors. Who is this man? The chief tax administrator having many people report to him who would extend himself literally out on the branch of a tree to see the Lord. Zacchaeus saw himself in a mixed way. A small man with ambitions and ideas. But also a man whose name meant "pure" but whose life was certainly contradictory of his name.

How did the Lord see him? I think the Lord saw him in at least three ways, may be more.

Zacchaeus certainly indicated to the Lord that he was a person who wanted to get close to him. He wanted to get close in to Jesus.

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A sycamore tree was evidently a tree that had fruit that looked like figs. It was eaten by the poor people. The leaves were like mulberry leaves. A short trunk and wide branches so it as easy to climb.

Just as Jesus is about to go by the tree, he looks up and there is Zacchaeus. The Lord immediately sees that if anyone had gone to that kind of trouble to see him he must really want to get close. When the Lord looked at Zacchaeus he saw his true intention. Zacchaeus indeed wanted to get close. The Lord didn't type him as other people had typed him. It's easy to get lost in what others' views of you are like. Jesus refused to type anyone by what they thought of themselves or what others thought of them. He's willing to start fresh.

The Lord knew his name. Jesus called him by his name. He knows our names.

The Lord secondly saw him as someone he would enjoy his company. He says "Zacchaeus, you come down. I'm going to stay at your house today." It's the only time in the gospels where Jesus ever invited himself anywhere. All of the other occasions we just find Jesus there or find out that someone had asked him. But this time he says to the man "I want to be a guest in your house."

Zacchaeus response indicates that the Lord read truly for Zacchaeus made haste and received him joyfully.

I like that response that he has to the Lord. I like his response because it seems that's the way we always ought to come to the Lord Jesus Christ. We have to come willingly and joyfully.

The Lord resisted certain techniques in drawing Zacchaeus to himself. He did not try to arm twist Zacchaeus. There was no psychological technique that the Lord used on him to try to induce in him some sort of a guilt feeling. In fact the Lord when he witnessed to a persons for the first time never once in the gospels use the fear tactic on an individual. It was always the joy and the love. When you find in the gospels where Jesus uses fear is on individuals who over a period of time have continually hardened themselves to him and no other resort is left. But Jesus is saying, If you go on doing this then this is what's going to happen. But the first approach was winsome and full of love and joy. He says to Zacchaeus I'm going to your house.

When we come to Jesus Christ it ought to be because we want to come. If you come to the Lord Jesus Christ because someone else wants you to come but you don't want to come, you're going to have a miserable time of it. You're never going to be quite sure whether you're really in or you're out. If someone forces you to come or pressures you to come then all of your life as a Christian you're going to have that tendency to walk out the same door you came in. Jesus is looking for persons who want him. And who would enjoy his company.

The Lord says I'm going to your house. I receive you unconditionally just as you are. Don't worry what your house looks like. The Lord evidently didn't make him clean up his house before he came. He didn't say, Zacchaeus before I come to your house I want to know if you're paying your employees right. Get that straight before I come. He didn't say "Zacchaeus, before I come to your house I want to know what art you have on the wall." He didn't say "Zacchaeus, I don't know what kind of family situation you have. If people in your household look

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appropriately for me to come to your house or not. I want you to get them in order before I come.”

Here is a man whom the Lord doesn't say anything about what his house is like. He comes just like it is.

The Lord coming. He sees Zacchaeus and someone who would enjoy his coming. Then the Lord also sees Zacchaeus as the story progresses, as someone who not only wants to get close and who not only wants to receive him joyfully. But he sees Zacchaeus finally as someone who will make it right with others the wrong, which he has done.

The first steps of getting right with God is getting right with other people.

The next thing that happens when you become right with the Lord the hurts and the bitterness you felt towards others in your family or people at work or whatever, all of a sudden yield to the Lord. Zacchaeus says I've got to get right. They were bringing a charge against Jesus that he eats with sinners. And verse 7 says, They all murmured.

The crowds, the religious leaders were always upset with Jesus.

He goes in and all of this is being said that Jesus eats with sinners and Zacchaeus may have gotten wind of some of this and thought “I've got to defend the Lord. I am the kind of person they say. I am a sinner. I'm going to be different from now on.” So he stands up and says to the Lord two things that are really incredible. First of all an act of charity. He says “Half of everything which I have I give to the poor.” And then he says “If I've defrauded anyone [those whom I have defrauded – he recognizes he has indeed defrauded] I will restore to them four fold.” What he pulls out at the moment reflects that he has a knowledge of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament there were two kinds of restoration. One if a person on his own confessed that he has wronged someone financially he then was required to restore what he had taken plus twenty percent. A good rate of interest payback. But if he had robbed someone and was discovered then he was responsible for restoring to the person from whom he had stolen four fold.

What did Zacchaeus do on this occasion? Under the Old Testament law he said, I give to those whom I have defrauded all that I have defrauded plus twenty percent. But instead he says forget the law, I'm going to go beyond its limits. If I have defrauded anyone I'm going to restore to them, not simply twenty percent but I'm going to give them four hundred percent. He evidently was a shrewd investor. With all the cheating that had been done he was able to give it all away.

What an incredible thing this is. Here is a man because of his association with the Lord to make a clean break with the past. That's part of discipleship. He couldn't go on in that town being chief tax collector and behaving like he was. He couldn't have gone on cheating people like he did. If he had said I believe in Jesus and kept on cheating people he'd been no longer pure Zacchaeus. His work would have betrayed his words. So a clean break is needed.

In the same way Christ calls us when we come to him to make a clean break from that which is wrong.

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Something about this by way of conclusion. Verses 9 and 10 tells us something about the man and something about the Son of man.

About the man, it tells us that as a result of his desire to come close and enjoy the Lord's company and in addition get right with others the Lord said, "Salvation has come to this man's house and he also is a son of Abraham." Son of Abraham, Jesus continually told his religious opposition, was not a title bestowed upon a person simply because of his genetic connection. The title "Son of Abraham" was bestowed because one had a faith that was like Abraham's. He trusted in God. Jesus is saying to this man, You are a son of Abraham. You are fully received in God's sight.

Zacchaeus could look back and say, Thank God I interrupted my schedule and came to the Lord. Salvation now is in my house. And things I've always lacked inside of me are now met in Jesus.

There's also something else we see as we look at the close of the story. Something great happens to the man who is saved. But there is also something which is said about the Son of man and explains why Jesus found Zacchaeus in the first place. Jesus says the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost. Lost in the New Testament can mean one of two things. Lost can mean a person who is eternally lost or lost can mean a person who is in the wrong place. Of course ultimately it can mean a person who is without Christ is eternally lose but so often a person is simply in the wrong place. God never meant him to be in that place in his life. Zacchaeus was in a spiritually lost condition because he hadn't found himself and he hadn't found the Lord.

I remember as a kid being lost in a store. Other people knew where I was but I thought I was lost. I remember the sheer panic. I wasn't lost because I was not in existence. I was lost because I was in the wrong place and somebody had to find me. Jesus has caught this man Zacchaeus in the wrong place. He said I've come to find him and put him in the right place. I've come to seek the lost. That explains how Jesus saw Zacchaeus. All along Jesus had been looking for people like Zacchaeus. Jesus did not conduct his ministry without purposes. His fundamental purpose was to seek persons who were in the wrong place and help them find the right place for their lives. So when he was going through that throng that day outside Jericho he was looking at faces. What was he looking at faces for? He was looking for people whose face registered that they had needs. That they wanted him. He kept looking. As he walked down the street he was in his mind picking out the most intently wanting person he could find. He was seeking the lost. When he spotted Zacchaeus their eyes locked. That's the man! It's because he had a purpose that he found Zacchaeus. He sought the lost. He saved the man who was lost. The Son of man has come to save.

I'm seeing more and more the power of the phrase "born again." I've heard it so often that for me for a long period of time it was trite. Born again. It seems like it as used so much. We really don't understand or appreciate the magnitude of what is involved in really being born again. It means starting life all over. Starting it with God. Starting the right way. The greatest needs that a person has who is in the wrong place is not more direction, not more commandments, nor more money. But a whole new life. A new way. A clean slate of being born again. That's what it is to be saved. Jesus came to bring salvation.

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Zacchaeus – his slate is clean. He is a new man. Jesus has come to us as individuals. Never forget that we can be in a crowd like we are right now but he hasn't lost track of any one of us in this room. He says if I can see a person who wants to come to me who will be happy that I'm in their life and who will stand up for me, I'll come. Their life will be new. And I will give them joy. That is literally good news. Jesus says I'm a friend of sinners. He says against us today I'm your friend. We really don't understand or appreciate the magnitude of what is involved in really being born again. It means starting life all over. Starting it with God. Starting the right way. The greatest needs that a person has who is in the wrong place is not more direction, not more commandments, nor more money. But a whole new life. A new way. A clean slate of being born again. That's what it is to be saved. Jesus came to bring salvation.

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Lord, we thank you for the newness, which you bring. For the changes which you bring. Thank you for the privilege of gathering in your presence and the opportunity in our lives to be born again. Sometimes we looked at ourselves before we came to you we didn't like what we saw. Now Lord we're beginning to like the things, which you are doing now that we're yours. We still see some things we don't like but you're working on that. Lord, before we came to you we might have been a person like Zacchaeus that others couldn't stand. We might have been a positive person. But the important thing in this story and for us, is that we see that it's more important how you look at us than how we look at ourselves or how others see us. If we can just for a moment understand what you think of us it change what we think of ourselves and ultimately changes what others think of us. You've come in life to give us marvelous freedom. You've set us free from the old ways, the trappings of externalities that conflict us and bind us and put us on the road to death. We've come instead Lord to set us free in spirit. Free and new and right inside. We praise you. While we're here in prayer I want to give opportunity for anyone to say, Lord, come into my life. If it's your desire to say, Lord, come into my life, slip up your hand where you're at as an indication to the Lord. "Lord, here I am. Come into my life. I'm looking for you today." Thank you. Today salvation has come to you. As we continue in prayer open your life and invite the Lord into your heart.

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