

Jesus personality which caused Zacchaeus to begin to reflect on who he was and who he had become. Moyer shows Zacchaeus associating the physical blindness of Bartimaeus with his own personal blindness to what he had become. He suddenly saw himself as a very unlikeable person. Like Bartimaeus, he turned to Jesus for healing and experienced an inner transformation. Moyer then closes with an invitation to admit to our own blindness and to invite Jesus to change our lives as well.

In the early 1920s, **W. H. Griffith**, preaching in Britain, emphasized Zacchaeus' social isolation as a hated publican. He relates this incident to the parallel incident of the rich ruler in the previous chapter who, when he was asked to give up his wealth in response to Jesus, went away sadly. The emphasis is on the way that Jesus bridged Zacchaeus' sense of isolation by a call that was personal, definite, and gracious. When the crowd grumbled because of their dislike of this man, Jesus stood with him against his critics and therefore helped him overcome his isolation.

Griffith then continues by developing the sycamore tree as a metaphor for the way we can position ourselves to see Jesus. He explores the disciplines of faith that put us in a position to see Jesus in our lives. He then develops that metaphor into an invitation to discipleship by exploring how we can become a sycamore tree for others. He suggests that our lives can become the vehicle by which others can see Jesus and receive his personal invitation.

**Lloyd Douglas** develops his sermon by trying to recreate the rich tapestry of the scene and inviting us to view what happens to Zacchaeus as if we were there. Each sentence of his sermon helps paint the cultural scenes of the story. He approaches Zacchaeus with some sympathy as someone who by his wealth had isolated himself from society around him. Because religious leaders and society rejected him, Zacchaeus sees himself identifying with Jesus who he also saw as an outsider who challenged his society. Because of that empathy, he responded to Jesus' invitation to come to his house, but he was still intent on impressing and perhaps controlling Jesus by his wealth. His attitude is described as someone who assumes that he is superior but sympathetic to Jesus. Then as they enter Zacchaeus' house, he begins to be disquieted by Jesus' lack of response to his fine art work and exotic foods. Douglas sees Zacchaeus' con-

version as an almost psychological moment when Zacchaeus is peering into the eyes of the unimpressed Jesus and sees there a mirror reflecting who Zacchaeus was supposed to be.

Each of these four preachers, in different social contexts, sees a different focus to the story. Donders lifts up the materialism that threatens his Kenyan students. Moyer speaks of the recovery from psychological blindness. Griffen, speaking to the British in the 1920s, identifies social isolation as the issue. Douglas depicts the outsider, Jesus, appealing to one whose position had made him an outsider as well. One can see in these examples how the questions with which we approach scripture often shapes the answers that we receive.

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## PREACHING THE LESSON

**No story is more fundamental to the Christian religious imagination than is the story of Zacchaeus. It contains several vital messages that must be preached in every generation.**

First, look at how the story renders the character of Jesus. Who is Jesus? He's God's stranger who is passing through, but who is looking for a place to stay. He is a stranger who would be guest—perhaps in your house. The idea of Jesus as one who is "passing through" is Luke's way of saying that Jesus is going to go anywhere he wants to go. He's going to visit Jimmy Swaggart as well as Mother Teresa. He's going to visit the Bosnians as well as the Serbs. He's going to visit the Southern Baptists as well as the Presbyterians. He's going to visit the megachurch on the superhighway and the urban church downtown. When he gets there he requires welcoming: that we listen to what he says and respond.

Second, the story provides a picture of the kind of person that garners the favor of Jesus over and over in Luke's gospel, a person who is experiencing both profound existential lack and profound spiritual openness. Zacchaeus reminds us of the person who rides the elevator to the 15th floor every day, and collects money for the per-

son on the 30th floor. Meanwhile, he has begun to notice the poverty of the stranger, the homeless man, who sometimes begs for food outside the first floor lobby. Sometimes, perhaps, he wonders what would happen if he invited the stranger to be a guest in his home. He is a person doing a good job securing himself in the world financially, but something is missing.

The important thing about Zacchaeus, however, is that he doesn't just sit twiddling his thumbs, wondering if he might be missing something. In the story, Zacchaeus is craning his neck to see Jesus. He is a picture of the searcher, adrift without a compass, uncertain of what he is even looking for, but looking nonetheless. He is open, even eager to find what he's lacking. We can imagine our contemporary Zacchaeus leaving his office, going into the street, and coming close enough for the stranger to make a claim upon his life. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

Third, the story exposes something of the nature of human sin as that which begrudges God's goodness and grace. How frustrating God's grace can be, sometimes, for the righteous. It just seems to condone evil. Imagine that those who give 100,000 dollars and those who give 20 dollars a year to the church should sit together in the same pew. Imagine watching communion being served to the gold digger who married one of your parents for one year and ran off with your family inheritance! Imagine watching the minister baptize the children of your divorced partner and her new husband, while you sit looking on from the balcony! Grace this recklessly given just seems to condone unrighteous behavior. Our hearers know this kind of sin only too well. Sin in this story is anything that works to limit or usurp God's grace—which, of course, works to limit or usurp God's judgment as well. It's the prodigal's brother all over again.

Finally, this story presents us with an image of how judgment and justice are part of the reception of grace. Instead of condoning Zacchaeus' lifestyle, Jesus' compassion toward him undoes Zacchaeus. He seems almost incredulous and becomes effusive in declaring exactly the opposite kinds of commitments in his life to those that have defined his life in the past. The actuality of grace frees him from the need to spend all of his time and energy trying to secure himself in the world. A very different vision of life is emerging. He goes from securing himself in the world to restoring life and selfhood to

others.

The question, of course, is "Where are we in this story?" Where are we as preachers and as congregations in today's world? Are we confronted this day by a Jesus who is going anywhere he wants to? Is ours a situation in which we need to experience the ways that Jesus confounds our prejudices and narrow vision of God's purposes? Is our congregation one in which many are experiencing a profound existential need for meaning, hope and purpose? Have they reached a place where they are ready and open to hear Christ's redeeming word? Or are they those who have become too quick to begrudge God's goodness and grace? Do they need a frustrating, but redeeming, experience of the lavishness of God's grace that can undo their preconceptions and open them to a new vision of community? Do they need to recognize that disciplines of justice accompany the reception of grace? Answering these questions is likely to lead directly into at least one sermon that can be preached on November first.

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## A SERMON

### NEW LIFE FOR AN UNHAPPY MAN

Luke 19:1-10

**Zacchaeus was not a happy man. He was out of tune with himself, with his neighbors and with God.**

First, he did not feel good about himself, and the root of that was a physical trait over which he had no control. He was smaller and shorter than anybody around. As a youth, he had probably endured a lot of teasing about this, and there is a good chance that he had not gotten nearly enough reassurance from his parents and other people. So, instead of developing a healthy acceptance of his size, he became an increasingly self-conscious and aggressive loner.

By the time he reached maturity he had decided that life was a jungle in which the

law was "every man for himself." He had secured a position of power with the Roman government and used it ruthlessly to his personal advantage and to the personal disadvantage of his neighbors. He knew how they despised him for it.

He also felt alienated from God because of his unethical use of his authority.

He had become more and more unhappy with himself and with his whole life. He knew something had to be done. That is why he climbed up in that sycamore tree the day Jesus came to Jericho. He had heard stories of a number of people who had gotten their lives straightened out with this rabbi's help, and something compelled him to go out and size Jesus up for himself. It turned out that a large crowd of people had made a similar decision. To his dismay and chagrin the little man found that he could not see a thing. So intent was he upon seeing that he climbed up in a tree. Zacchaeus might have gone out to stand on the side of the street just out of curiosity, but it took something deeper to send him up that tree to the accompaniment of laughter and taunts that must surely have come from people in the crowd.

Zacchaeus was looking for help. He was looking for help because his feelings of dissatisfaction had become stronger than his feelings of satisfaction. That is a good way for any person to decide whether to look for outside help. Your life day by day ought to be a basically satisfying experience in which you feel in tune with yourself, your family, your friends and God. If it is not, and if you have not been able to remedy the situation on your own, you ought to look for help.

Tragically enough, some who are unhappy never do this. Some of us live unhappy lives of quiet desperation and never do anything about it except resign ourselves to it. Others of us finally reach out only when we come to the point which Zacchaeus had reached, a point at which we feel that we just cannot keep on going in the same old way. Fortunately, some of us treat our emotional and spiritual lives as thoughtfully as we do our bodies. When we get a serious pain in our bodies, we go to the doctor. In the same way, when we get a pain in our inner lives or in some relationship, we seek out the assistance of someone trained to help with those kinds of problems. There is no good reason for waiting until some discomfort reaches crisis proportions before doing something about it.

Go back to the story of Zacchaeus. Here we have this little man who needs help, and

then we have two additional pictures. One is a picture of his neighbors and how they stood in the way of his getting help. One is of Jesus and how he opened up the way for Zacchaeus to be helped.

Look first at Zacchaeus' neighbors. The text only tells us one thing about them. They all had him typed as a scoundrel, and they had nothing but contempt for him. When Jesus shocked them all by going to the tax collector's house as a guest, they grumbled indignantly, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

No matter which way Zacchaeus turned, he encountered a spirit of criticism and condemnation. He needed somebody to talk to, to confide in, to confess to; but a critic is the last person in the world to whom one is willing to make a confession, and everywhere Zacchaeus turned all he saw were critics.

The main thing that stands in the way of our being able to confide in someone, when we feel the need to do that, is our fear of criticism. In our mind's eye, we imagine ourselves talking with our spouse or friend or pastor or doctor about some incident or some pattern of behavior or some fantasy or some conflict which is bothering us, and we see them reacting with surprise or impatience or disgust or embarrassment. Even though we have more reason to believe that they would be understanding and would neither pull away from us or look down on us, our fear of criticism and rejection gives rise to more negative pictures in our minds.

We have many experiences that tend to foster this fear. In childhood and youth many of us get the feeling that being loved and accepted by our parents depends upon our acting in the right kind of way and thinking the right kind of thoughts. We may be afraid to talk over with them or with anybody else thoughts and actions that run counter to this "right" way.

This fear of bringing our problems, conflicts or actions out in the open is strengthened if we later marry a wife or husband who gives advice or lectures rather than a sympathetic ear.

Sadly enough, the church, in my opinion, has often done more to reinforce this fear than to allay it. The church claims to be founded upon a gospel of grace, but all too often it proclaims a gospel of works. I have frequently encountered people who have the very definite impression that being really accepted in the church means acting in a certain way and believing in a certain way. I would guess that a majority of us in this