

Zacchaeus: A Seeker Who is Sought

Luke 19: 1-10

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

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The key word in this story is seek, S-E-E-K. It occurs twice in the original Greek text, once in the past tense and once in the present. In verse 3, Zacchaeus "sought to see who Jesus was" by scrambling up a sycamore tree. In verse 10, Jesus called him down from the tree in order "to seek out and to save the lost." Each, it turns out, is seeking the other.

But it's not the kind of seeking we do when we surf the channels for a decent program, or when we seek a flight reservation on the internet. The Greek word is "zateo," and it means, "to seek what you once possessed but have lost." You had it, you lost it, and now you seek it. It's the seeking I did one day in England. On our second day in the country we decided to visit Castle Howard, but when I walked up to the kiosk to pay the entrance fee, I discovered that my wallet was gone. We had a three week trip ahead of us in England and South Africa, and the loss of my wallet with its credit cards and cash was a serious blow to our travel plans. We hurried back to our B&B and searched high and low for the wallet, but to no avail. Then I remembered that when we had left the restaurant the night before, I had been bumped by someone on the sidewalk. Aha! I thought to myself: my pocket was picked. I reported it to the police, cancelled my credit cards, and said goodbye to whatever cash was in the wallet. Fortunately, Carol had our debit card which could only be used with a personal identification number, so we lived for the next three weeks out of ATM machines.

But that's not the end of the story. As we were packing to leave two days later, I saw something brown and leathery peeking out from behind the small tilt mirror on the dresser. It was my wallet. I had used it to prop the mirror at a usable angle, and then had left it there. For two days I sought and then found what I had once possessed. Of course, a wallet can be replaced. So can credit cards. But what about the values and ideals we grew up with, many of which we have compromised along the way? What about our faith in God, jaded by wrong choices and selfish behavior? What about our first love for Jesus Christ, grown lukewarm by neglect? Is it possible that you are seeking landmarks that were once very clear but are now vague and imprecise? Then you can identify with Zacchaeus.

What Zacchaeus lost was HIS PRINCIPAL AIM IN LIFE. I have no doubt that as a young man Zacchaeus had high ideals. Of course he wanted to succeed; who doesn't? But he wanted an honorable success, an honest success. It was his aim to be the kind of man Tom Brokaw wrote about in his book "The Greatest Generation." He would be an exemplary citizen, a good neighbor, a role model for young executives. But things began to go wrong. Zacchaeus was a tax agent for the Romans, and because his territory lay astride one of the major trade routes, a lot of money began flowing through his hands. Like Ebenezer Scrooge he let the glint of gold blind him to his earlier ideals. Before long he was over-charging merchants and pocketing enormous profits. By the time Jesus arrived in Jericho, Zacchaeus was a very wealthy man, but he had lost his aim in life. Now he sits in the sycamore, seeking what he had once possessed and had lost.

Are you out on a similar limb? You're well fed, stylishly clothed, handsomely housed, outwardly successful, and are you seeking the aims you once had but have lost?

Then you need to know that Jesus is also seeking something he once had but has lost: HIS PRINCIPAL ALLIES IN THE WORLD. It's an old and shopworn adage, but it's true nonetheless: God has no hands but your hands to do God's work in the world, no lips but your lips to share the Good News, no eyes but your eyes to see injustice and deal with it, no ears but your ears to hear the cry of the lonely and befriend them, no feet but your feet to rush to the aid of a neighbor in need. So when we forfeit our highest ideals and turn our backs on God, Jesus loses productive allies in the struggle to make the world good again.

So eager is Jesus to reclaim Zacchaeus as an ally that he was the first to speak that day. Zacchaeus had no

intention to speak to Jesus; how could he? He knew Jesus to be the embodiment of all that is good and worthy. Was he not universally considered a prophet? Prophets are God's emissaries, God's spokespersons. Prophets are chosen by God, close to God, so how could he, a man who had squandered his moral capital for a chest full of silver, how could he even approach a holy man like Jesus, let alone speak to him? Thus, the sycamore tree, not only because he was short of stature, but because he was short on integrity.

You and I know a lot more about Jesus than Zacchaeus did. We know he is more than a prophet. He is the Son of God, God with us, God in the flesh. So how can we who have compromised our own standards, let alone God's laws, how can we approach the Son of God, let alone speak to him?

But Jesus reaches out to Zacchaeus, dishonest, corrupt, greedy, avaricious Zacchaeus: "Make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." And you know the rest of the story. Zacchaeus does a one-eighty. Like Scrooge vowing to care for Tiny Tim and giving huge chunks of his fortune to the poor, Zacchaeus gives fifty percent of his wealth to his church's relief fund, and he resolves to pay back fourfold every merchant he has ever defrauded. In short, Jesus finds and reclaims a productive ally. And, judging from the joy in his voice, Zacchaeus finds and reclaims his principal aim in life.

Luke wants us to insert our names in this story, because Jesus is calling you by name, and saying, "Whatever you have done--dishonest contracts, fraudulent deals, adulterous relationships, corporate lies, cheating on taxes--whatever you have done, I want you back on my side; I need you as my ally in the world." And you don't have to do anything, you don't have to prove anything, you don't even have to pay anything, to join forces with Jesus. Where else in this world will you find such free admission? Not at Castle Howard, when I thought I had lost my wallet. Oh yes, last week we walked into the new Udvar-Hazy Air and Space Museum without paying. Though, on second thought, we did pay: last April 15, when I sent my check to the IRS, because the museum is supported by our taxes.

It's true that Zacchaeus gave away half his wealth, but only after Jesus made himself welcome in Zacchaeus' home. What Zacchaeus did is called repentance. He reformed his business practices, set new standards of honesty, and put his whole life on a new footing. But that came after Jesus sought him, after Jesus called him down from the tree, after Jesus invited himself to dinner, after Jesus gave Zacchaeus the right hand of fellowship. When you respond to Jesus, what will he ask you to do? I have no idea, except that he will use your talents, he will bank on your experience, he will honor your dreams, and he will respect your limitations. Whatever Jesus asks you to do, it will fit you perfectly.

Jesus is constantly seeking partners, persons who will join him in his battle to redeem humanity and the entire created order. If you sign up, Jesus will reclaim a principal ally in the world, and (I guarantee it) you will recover your principal aim in life.