

PASSION PERSONALITIES: ZACCHAEUS

LUKE 19:1-10

Our passion personality today is Zacchaeus - a rich Jewish tax collector who lived in the city of Jericho. It's actually more likely that this incident occurred the week prior to what we now call Holy Week - Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. But this story tells us so much about why Jesus came that it deserves our close attention when we think about the cross and the resurrection. You had to be a crook to get rich collecting taxes back in Jesus' day,. You had to rip other people off. You had to take advantage of others. What's very interesting in this story is how Jesus treated this man, Zacchaeus – a man who most found easy to despise. Let's read what happened. There are four actions of Jesus in this story that fascinate me. First...

JESUS INVITES CURIOSITY.

Jesus was traveling through Jericho, Zacchaeus' hometown. At this point in time, Jesus attracted large crowds of people so Zacchaeus was understandably curious about Jesus. Maybe he wanted to see a miracle. Perhaps he wanted to listen to Jesus' teaching. He may have been intrigued by the fact that Matthew, one of Jesus' disciples, had been a tax collector just like him. We find out that Zacchaeus was short in stature so the hope of even getting a glimpse of Jesus was going to be a challenge. But Zacchaeus was so curious about Jesus that he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a tree to get a better look.

Jesus still invites curiosity. Maybe that's how your personal spiritual journey towards faith in Christ began: you were simply curious about Jesus. Or, maybe that's why you're here this morning – you're curious about who Jesus is, what He did, and why He's such a big deal to so many people all over the world. Frankly, you might find some of the things people say about Jesus hard to believe – that He's the Son of God, that He died on the cross for people's sins, that He rose again from the grave – but you're curious. Who is this Jesus? Is He really who He claimed to be or who Christians claim Him to be? It's a wonderful thing to be curious about Jesus, because it may lead to something even better and more substantial than curiosity. That's what happened to Zacchaeus.

Here's something important to remember. Far more people are curious about Jesus than they are the local church. Sad to say, many people don't think the local church has any relevance to their lives at all. In some cases, these folk may have had a bad experience in a church and don't want to return. But in many other cases, people aren't so much mad or upset with the local church as they are simply ignorant of or oblivious to the connection between Jesus and the church. A friend of mine who's had a lot of experience leading Bible studies with people who aren't followers of Jesus yet made an interesting observation. He said, "Rick, I've learned that people today need two conversions. They need to be converted to Christ. After that, they need to be converted to the local church."

Just because a person becomes a follower of Jesus, you can't assume he or she will automatically perceive the connection between Jesus and the church.

That may be one reason only a few people that you ever invite to come to church actually turn up on a Sunday. Many people aren't curious about what happens inside a church building at all. In fact, they could care less. But don't assume that those same people have no curiosity about Jesus. They might be very interested in talking about Jesus with you. If they want to "bad mouth" the local church, don't argue with them. Sometimes their criticism is justified. Instead, I encourage you to guide the discussion gently back to Jesus. He's a whole lot harder to criticize than local churches. Jesus said that if you lift Him up, He will draw people to Himself. He didn't say that if you lift up Karl Road Baptist Church that He'll draw people to Himself. Jesus is the most interesting person who has ever lived. People are curious about Him. Remember that as you seek to impact people for Jesus. Don't talk church; talk Jesus. Second...

JESUS OFFERS ACCEPTANCE.

Jesus does something in this story that He does many times. When it comes to people who don't seem to deserve God's grace or mercy, He goes out of His way to reach out to them. Jesus takes the initiative to offer acceptance. Why were tax collectors considered crooks in Jesus' day? It was legalized extortion. Let's say the Romans demand \$50 in tax from you. The tax collector tells you that the tax is really \$150. He collects the tax from you, gives \$50 to the Romans and keeps \$100 for himself. Most tax collectors became wealthy but at a terrible personal price. Everyone hated them! They were considered traitors because they were helping the Romans oppress their own people. If you decided to become a tax collector, it was because being wealthy was more important to you than being liked or being honest. Everybody knew you were a cheat, a liar and a thief – and they treated you like one, too.

The passage we read tells us Zacchaeus had become a very wealthy chief tax collector. Jericho was an important business town and apparently functioned as a major taxation center. Zacchaeus had gotten himself put in charge of other tax collectors so he probably got a cut of everything they collected plus whatever he personally extorted from his own "clients." I doubt there was a more hated, despised man in all of Jericho than Zacchaeus. But he was probably under Roman protection so no one dared touch him.

Notice what Jesus does in our story. First, He not only notices Zacchaeus up in the tree but then engages him in conversation. Then – of all things – He invites Himself over to Zacchaeus' house for dinner and to spend the night. That was a big deal in Jesus' day. To eat a meal with somebody meant that you liked that person, approved of that person's lifestyle, and that you believed God approved of that person, too. To say overnight in such a person's home as Zacchaeus' home was to participate in his sinful lifestyle. So the people of Jericho were

outraged! That Jesus would reach out and show acceptance of a person like Zacchaeus shocked them deeply. They grumbled and got downright cranky about it. They didn't perceive that Zacchaeus' heart was as empty and poor as his house was full and rich – nor did they care. They'd written him off. He didn't merit God's love or good favor by any stretch of the imagination. They'd concluded that he didn't matter to God and he certainly didn't matter to them.

The fact is everyone needs God's acceptance. Do you feel as if God accepts you just the way you are? Do you feel God has no use for you? Do you think some of your sins are unforgiveable? The message of the Bible is all about God's acceptance of you through Jesus' death on the cross. How does that work? As a human being, you usually base acceptance of another person on the basis of approval. If you approve of me, you accept me and vice versa. If you don't approve of me, chances are you won't accept me either. You want nothing to do with me. But God operates exactly the opposite. First, He accepts you in all of your broken, messed up, sinful living and thinking. Then He works on the approval part. That's what Jesus demonstrated to Zacchaeus. Did Jesus approve of his dishonesty? Of course not! But first Jesus offered acceptance and then He began working on the approval piece. In the same way, God grants you acceptance before approval. He can do that because Jesus has already paid the penalty for your sins. And then the Holy Spirit comes into your life and begins to change you so that you end up living a life of which God does approve.

If you're a follower of Jesus today, here's something to remember. When you put your faith in Jesus, God fully accepted you for all time and eternity. He doesn't approve of sinful behavior or attitudes in your life, but He never withdraws His acceptance. Every morning you can get up and say, "God accepts me! God accepts me! God accepts me!" Now if God can treat you like that, it provides the rationale for how you can treat people who aren't believers yet. They may well have immoral lifestyles, horrible attitudes, foul mouths – you name it. You can accept them without approving of their behavior. In fact, you must do that if God is ever going to use you as a channel of His love and grace into their lives. After all, how does God demonstrate His acceptance of people who aren't even Christians yet? Through you and me!

I read about a couple in New Jersey who saw signs on their street and announcements in the local paper notifying the neighborhood that a registered sex offender had just been released from prison and had moved into the area. That couple started praying for the man pictured on the posters and occasionally they would see him on the street. Sex offenders are the tax collectors of our day and age. Neighbors ignored him and wrote graffiti on the walls of his house. After praying, this couple visited him and then opened their home to a weekly breakfast for ex-offenders like him. They've been hosting that breakfast now for over twenty years. The most despised men in the area have one place to go where they feel welcome and are treated like human beings. Many people begin to understand that a holy God can love and accept them when you accept and

love them first. When that begins to happen, it leads to something very interesting that's illustrated in our story about Zacchaeus. Third ...

JESUS PROMPTS REPENTANCE.

The story of Zacchaeus is one of the greatest illustrations in the Bible of something called repentance. What's that? It's a change in your attitude and behavior that results in living life God's way. Most people think repentance is just feeling really bad about whatever you may have done wrong. True repentance involves more. True repentance means there is now an observable change in your attitude or behavior. That's what happened to Zacchaeus. He's just experienced God's incredible acceptance channeled through Jesus. How does he respond? He wants to change! He decides to give away half of his wealth to the poor! He decides to repay four times the amount that he swindled or extorted from others. That's repentance!

Two Christian men developed an unusual accountability relationship. In an effort to break his habit of using profanity, Pete started meeting with Bill, a friend from church. They set up a pretty aggressive plan. Each Sunday, Pete would report to Bill how many times he used profanity during that past week. He agreed to put \$5 in the offering plate for each incident. The first week cost Pete \$100. Although he improved somewhat over the next few weeks, Pete wasn't having the success he wanted. Besides he was giving up a lot of hard earned cash. After the fourth week, Bill told Pete he had unilaterally changed the deal for the coming week, but he wouldn't tell Pete how. Of course, Pete wanted to know, but all Bill would say was, "Trust me. It will cost you both less and more."

The next Sunday, Pete was looking a bit down. It was obvious he had failed pretty badly with his tongue. Bill put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Pete, this will cost you both less and more. It's called grace." After saying that, Bill took out his own personal check made out in advance to the church. It was already signed and dated. Only the amount was blank. He said to Pete, "Your sin stills costs something, but for you it's free. Just fill in the amount. And next week there will be more grace." That first week of grace cost Bill \$55. But the second week his grace only cost him \$20. There was no third week needed. It cost Pete too much to fill in Bill's checks, so he quit sinning. That's repentance.

Was it Zacchaeus' repentance that made him acceptable to God? Not at all. God accepted him, loved him and made him an object of His grace before Zacchaeus repented. Having received that acceptance what was the result? Zacchaeus wanted to change his life! He wanted to get rid of everything and anything that might grieve the heart of God. Out of sheer gratitude to God for His love and acceptance, Zacchaeus proclaimed, "I want to live for God and I want to live God's way. I want to please Him through my attitudes and behavior." Your repentance never earns God's acceptance; it simply proves it. Your repentance is evidence that you have truly encountered God and been changed forever.

You may not be a follower of Jesus today but you're curious. You're not sure if heaven is your eternal destiny. Perhaps you hesitate to become a Christian because you're afraid of what God will want you to change about your life. Here's something I know from God's Word. God will indeed want you to change. That happens to every follower of Jesus. How can you know God personally and not end up changing a whole lot over your lifetime? But here's what you should know as well. The changes God asks you to make are always in your own best interest. Whatever God wants you to change, give up, do away with or stop excusing is something that will just pull you way down in the end.

Or maybe you have another kind of concern. In my years of being a pastor, I've run into several people who were aware that they needed to change, but they wanted to do it on their own before becoming followers of Jesus. They were going to get their lives straightened out and then present themselves to God. It won't work. You can't do it. God accepts you just the way you are and if you'll come to Him just as you are, He will put His Holy Spirit into you and He Himself will enable you and empower you to clean up your life. That's how it happened for Zacchaeus. That's the only way it will happen for you. A fourth action ...

JESUS REVEALS HIS MISSION.

In this story, Jesus said, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." (Luke 19:10 NLT) Many companies and corporations have mission statements. Our Long Range Planning Ministry Team is, at present, praying and laboring over a new mission statement for our church. I believe this was Jesus' mission statement, so to speak. Zacchaeus was a prime example of why Jesus left heaven as the Son of God in order to become human and live among us. Very simply, people matter to God – even very lost people like Zacchaeus.

What does it mean to be lost? Who are the lost Jesus is referring to in His mission statement? Unlike Zacchaeus, you might be a very moral, honest person, but – like Zacchaeus – you can still be lost. In fact, you can be a great spouse, a loving parent, a wonderful citizen and a faithful employee and still be lost. To be lost simply means that you're in the wrong place. If you lose your keys, they're in the wrong place. If you lost your child at the mall, he or she is in the wrong place. If you get lost on a trip, you're in the wrong place. My friend, you were made for a vital, personal and eternal relationship with God through Jesus. If you don't have that and you don't know Him, you're in the wrong place. You need to be found. And like Zacchaeus, it happens when you come to Jesus.

There's a theological concept called universalism. It's the idea that everyone will end up in heaven regardless of whether they trusted Jesus as Savior or not. That's not taught in the Bible. It's also absurd. If that was true, then Jesus wasted His time coming to earth and He need not have endured the cross. His suffering and death are meaningless. But there is a kind of biblical universalism that is true. The good news of Jesus is offered universally to everyone and

anyone. No one is left out. Everyone should have the opportunity to hear and to respond. And how does God go about getting that message out? Primarily through ordinary people like you and me. Are you praying for anyone by name who is not a follower of Jesus today? Are you seeking ways to develop real friendships with people who are not yet followers of Jesus in the hope that one day God will give you an opportunity to share the good news with them? What Jesus offered Zacchaeus – acceptance, approval, eternal life in all of its present and future dimensions, forgiveness, repentance - He offers to you. Then He wants to use you to reach other lost people and bring them into His Kingdom.

Mrs. Back was an 80 year old widow. One of her teenage neighbors, Aaron, had just finished shoveling snow off her sidewalk. “You must be hungry after shoveling so hard! Let me get you a piece of apple pie. Do you like apple pie? You stay right there and let me get you some pie.” Aaron knew it would take ten minutes for Mrs. Back to make it into the kitchen, dish out the pie and bring it to him in the dining room. Aaron sat at the table wondering how long she would make him sit this time before he got his pay and could get out of there. Mrs. Back’s apple pie was great – light golden brown crust, piping hot apples with cold milk in a tall glass. She had barely sat down at the table to enjoy her own slice when she noticed Aaron’s already bare plate. “Let me get you another piece!” There was no declining the offer, and Aaron made quick work of her second offering. But she just kept talking and talking. It was the unspoken dread of the neighborhood – getting caught with Mrs. Back. Aaron wondered how she could be so blissfully unaware that he just wanted to get out of there!

About ten years later on a Monday afternoon, something inside Aaron said, “You need to tell Mrs. Back.” On that previous Friday night, Aaron gave himself to Jesus. He still hadn’t told anyone. But somehow he knew he had to tell Mrs. Back of all people. It was a lovely spring afternoon in May and Mrs. Back was hanging out her laundry to dry. Aaron walked up to the fence, “Mrs. Back, do you know what it means to be ‘born again’?” She dropped everything and looked at Aaron in sheer surprise and delight. “Why, yes, I do.” She had been a pastor’s wife, after all. “Well, the other night,” Aaron explained, “I was born again.” She looked at him and said with a firm voice, “You stay right there!” Aaron watched her hobble up to the back door and then up the steps with her cane. Ten minutes later she came out of the back door, walked over to Aaron and handed him the biggest, most delicious piece of chocolate cake he had ever eaten in his life. She smiled and said, “Eat it!” As Aaron devoured her chocolate cake, she just stood there and gazed at him – celebrating and rejoicing with him. Finally, she said, “For the last fifteen years, since you moved in, I have prayed every day for you. I prayed every day that you would come to know Jesus.”

Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.” That was His mission. It needs to become your mission. It needs to become my mission.