

Seeking the Lost

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During a business meeting late last year, the men of the congregation decided that they would like to make this year a year focused on evangelism. In particular, we talked about our desire to see the many fallen-away Christians in this area, who used to be associated with this congregation, return to the Lord.

That's certainly a noble desire, and it's one which I share. However, each one of us has to be honest about what it means for us. What is it that we really want? Do we want all of those people to come trooping back through the auditorium doors without any prompting from us? Do we want them to stay faithful without any involvement from us as well, so that we can go on about our business without interruption?

Friends, if that's what we want, let me tell you right now, it isn't going to happen. It doesn't matter how well I preach. It doesn't matter how well Brian leads singing. If the members of this congregation aren't committed to bringing those people back, they won't come back, and they certainly won't stay even if they do. Evangelism isn't a preacher thing, or even a Really Good Christian thing. It requires all of us. This morning, then, let's see what we must do to be effective. Let's consider seeking the lost.

Jesus, the Seeker

As always, if we want to find out what we should be, we need to turn to the example of our Lord, and indeed, the Scripture has a great deal to say about Jesus, the seeker. Today, though, we're going to focus on a simple story contained in Luke 19:1-10. The first part of the story introduces us to its other main character, **ZACCHEUS**. Now, I know that just as I did, many of you learned the song about Zaccheus when you were young. Probably some of you are singing it in your heads right now. The song is accurate as far as it goes, but in a lot of ways, it misses the point, probably because the point is too subtle for the intended audience of the song. For instance, the song describes Zaccheus as a "wee little man", which is true.

However, that isn't the most important part of Zaccheus's description here. Instead, it's much more relevant to the spiritual aspect of the story that Zaccheus was a tax collector and was very rich. This is not a promising combination! Remember, Roman taxation worked on the free-enterprise system. The Romans had various tax-collecting companies bid on how much they could collect in taxes from a given area, and the highest bidder won the contract. In return, the tax-collecting companies, and their tax-collector underlings, had the right to collect extra in taxes, from which they took their profits.

In practice, here's what this meant. The basic Roman tax rate was ruinous, because it had to be in order to procure the high bid. On top of that, the tax collector used the threat of the Roman army to extort whatever extra he could. If Zaccheus was a tax collector who was very rich, that meant that he was a truly dedicated extortioner! As we'll see a little later in the story, he is widely hated in his own hometown, and with good reason. The rest of the crowd is made up of the people he has been oppressing and ruining. He's been driving his fellow Jews into poverty to enrich himself. This is a genuinely evil man!

However, one day there is a chance event that changes Zaccheus's life. Jesus passes through Jericho, a crowd comes out to meet him, and Zaccheus sees the crowd but can't figure out what's going on because he's short. However, he anticipates where Jesus is headed and climbs up into a sycamore tree. These trees are not like what we call "sycamores" in the United States. Instead, they're a variety of fig tree, and they are fairly low and spreading. The picture on the screen behind me is a sycamore fig. It's obvious to see why Zaccheus picked one of these. They're an easy climb even for a short man.

Next, we see **THE CONVERSATION** between Jesus and Zaccheus. Zaccheus is probably not very far off the ground, so Jesus looks right up at him, calls him by name, tells him to come down, and also tells him that He is coming to stay at his house. Zaccheus hops right down and welcomes Jesus.

At first glance, this seems strange, but there are a couple of things that might account for the tax collector's reaction. First, Jesus demonstrates that he knows Zaccheus's name. This is probably miraculous. It's unlikely that any of the citizens of Jericho have been saying to Jesus, "Come on! You've got to meet this guy Zaccheus!" In fact, Zaccheus is probably the kind of man his neighbors crossed the street to avoid.

Jesus, though, calls him by name, and not only does He call him by name, He reveals His desire to enjoy Zaccheus's hospitality. This is probably the key. Zaccheus has a lot of money, but he doesn't have a

lot of friends. In fact, he's used to being treated like dirt by anyone with a smidgeon of righteousness. Here, though, is a prophet coming through his hometown, creating a stir, and rather than seeking lodging with one of the local Pharisees, He wants to stay with Zaccheus! This is an unimaginable honor, and Zaccheus shows that he is sensible of it. He hurries down to receive the one man who has treated him with respect.

However, this provokes an interesting **REACTION** from the crowd. In a way, it's sad that the song stops with v. 6, because this is the most illuminating part of the story. Jesus announces His intention to stay with Zaccheus, and He is met with grumbling. Not just grumbling from the Pharisees, the kind of people who were upset anytime Jesus interacted with any sinner. Instead, this is everybody grumbling! Even the other sinners are grumbling that Jesus is going with Zaccheus. Zaccheus is not your garden-variety sinner. Instead, he is the lowest of the low, a man who is cruel, greedy, harsh, and a Roman collaborator to boot. In response, everybody says in disbelief, "Jesus wants to go and stay with this guy?!"

Zaccheus hears what his neighbors are saying, he knows why they're saying it, and in response, he does one of the most impressive things we ever see from a man in the gospels. We don't have any idea how long he has toiled to accumulate his fortune, how many lives he has ruined for the sake of gain, but here, in a single stroke, he gives it all away. Once he distributes 50 percent off the top and quadruply compensates all the people he has defrauded, there isn't going to be anything left. What the rich young ruler refused to do in the last chapter, Zaccheus here does. He gives away everything he has to follow Jesus.

This story should illustrate to us the power of a single act of kindness. Zaccheus isn't persuaded to repent because of a mighty miracle or a brilliant sermon. Instead, he changes his life basically because Jesus was gracious to him. Today, none of us can work miracles like Jesus or preach like Jesus, but every one of us has it in our power to be gracious to the overlooked people in our lives. A few simple words from us that give dignity and respect, a simple kind act, may well be the turning point in the eternal destiny of a soul.

This is precisely what happens in Zaccheus's case, as we see from **JESUS' EXPLANATION**. Why did Jesus tell the notorious tax collector He was going to stay at his house? First of all, Jesus knew what would happen when He did. Second, Zaccheus was two things. First, he was a son of Abraham no less than any of the other Jews, which meant he was valuable. Second, he was a sinner, which meant he was lost and needed to be found. Jesus wasn't there to save the saved. He was there to save those who weren't.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's remember first of all Jesus' dedication to seeking and saving the lost, even those who were as far away from righteousness as Zaccheus. It follows, then, that no matter who we are, no matter what we've done, Jesus still loves us and desires to seek and save us, even if the saving cost Him His life. Second, let's remember our obligation to imitate the character of Jesus. Jesus valued everybody, and Jesus went out of His way to be kind to the excluded. Do we? Let's consider as we partake.

The Seeker's Heart

If we want to be like Jesus, we must learn to develop the same seeker's heart that He had. This begins with being **KNOWLEDGEABLE**. This characteristic appears in the apostle Paul in Acts 17:2-3. Last week, we talked about the importance of reading. This week, though, highlights the importance of study. Notice what Paul is doing here to prove his point. He's not healing the sick or blinding his opponents. Instead, he is reasoning from the Scripture to establish that Jesus is the Son of God. In other words, Paul knows the Hebrew Scriptures well enough to locate the passages he needs to make his argument, and he understands them well enough to point out the logical conclusions of the texts in question.

If we want to lead others to Christ ourselves, we must be able to do this. Ultimately, it's not our winning smiles or our charming personalities that persuade others to obey the gospel. Instead, it is the gospel itself as presented by us. Let's say that we are having a conversation with a friend, we mention that we go to the Joliet church, and they casually ask us why. What do we say? Do we stammer out some lame explanation about how our family has always gone there and we've never thought too much about it, or are we able to explain what sets us apart from the denominational world? If they then press us for evidence that God expects believers to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, are we able to provide book, chapter, and verse? If we haven't prepared beforehand, the Holy Spirit isn't going to pop the answers into our skulls for us. We must know the essentials of our own faith and be ready to explain those to others.

However, it's not enough to be a coldly logical Bible-spouting computer. Instead, we must also be **AFFECTIONATE** toward those we hope to persuade. Somewhat surprisingly from our perspective, this

was evident in Paul too. Read with me from 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8. We think of Paul as this fierce warrior for the faith, and he was that, but he was so fiercely impassioned because he cared so much about the people he was trying to teach. We need to make sure that, like Paul, our concern for others is evident in the way we act. Let me give you an example. Last week, Lauren threw her back out and needed to find a chiropractor. Indirectly, John Meyer recommended one to her, and she went to see him. While he was working on her, they started chatting about why she went there, and she mentioned John's name. He asked how John was doing, Lauren responded that he was doing fine, and the chiropractor replied, "Isn't he just the nicest man?"

Friends, is that the witness we are leaving among unbelievers? If our name comes up with an outsider, is he going to testify that we're one of the kindest people he knows? I think I know what the answer is for me, and it tells me that I've got a lot of work to do. In the way that we interact with everybody, from the janitor on up, we need to show a unique kindness, a unique regard, a unique affection for others.

Now, if we have a good handle on the truth, and we really care about others so that we are eager to share it, one might think that we are going to look for or even manufacture opportunities to talk about it. Indeed, a seeker in the mold of first-century disciples will be **OPPORTUNISTIC**. Look at what Paul says about himself in Philippians 1:12-13. Paul wrote Philippians during the time period covered by the last few verses of the book of Acts—the two years of his first imprisonment in Rome. He wasn't stuck in prison, but he was under house arrest as he waited for the Emperor to get around to hearing his case. As all of us can testify these days, being cooped up inside all the time is no fun! However, what would have been misery to us was an opportunity to Paul. He spent those two years preaching Christ to the Praetorian Guard, the very jailers who were responsible for making sure that he stayed confined.

Even today, just about all of us take advantage of opportunities to talk about the things that interest us. Joe Bunch is always happy to talk about his dog. Erik Hensley enjoys conversations about cars. These days, I love to talk about different Bibles, and if somehow you end up discussing the subject with me, you will probably end up hearing more about Bible layout, form, and function than you ever dreamed possible. This isn't because I psych myself up for conversations by saying, "Got to talk about Bibles. . . got to talk about Bibles!" Indeed, the opposite is true. I try to contain my enthusiasm so that I don't become a bore on the subject. Some of you are probably saying to yourselves, "Try harder, Matt." Despite my best efforts, though, Bibles always seem to work themselves into the conversation, because that's what fills my heart.

In the same way, friends, if our hearts are full of Jesus, we will eagerly talk about Jesus anytime anyone gives us an opportunity. We won't have to psych ourselves up to introduce Him into a conversation, because it will happen naturally. The point here isn't that we should drive ourselves to have forced, unnatural conversations. Instead, we must make Christ such a part of our lives that we can't help but mention Him.

Finally, the heart of the seeker is **BOLD**. Paul, of course, was bold, as we see in Acts 19:8. He wasn't afraid to proclaim Jesus even when he knew that it was going to create conflict. Certainly, Paul could handle himself in an argument, but he also knew the price of disagreement. It bothered him so much when his countrymen rejected Jesus that in the early part of Romans 9, he expresses his willingness even to go to hell if it meant that the rest of his nation would go to heaven. When the Jews didn't listen, it ate at him.

However, Paul spoke up, even at the risk of alienating his own people, because he knew that only boldness would lead others to be saved. Today, we have to be willing to accept that risk too. The only way we can guarantee that no one will get mad at us for sharing the gospel is by not sharing the gospel at all. Brethren, that's not tolerance. That's selfishness. If we don't tell the lost the truth, the Bible solemnly warns us that they're going to hell. When we remain silent, that doesn't benefit them. Instead, it benefits us, because we are spared the unpleasantness of conflict. Let's be better than that. Let's be bold.

How Can I Help?

Now that we've laid out in general terms what the heart of the evangelistically inclined Christian looks like, let's ask what each one of us can do right now to help. First, we can **PAY ATTENTION**. Look at Hebrews 10:24. Technically speaking, this isn't directly evangelistic, but it can't really be separated. Let me be honest, brethren. For years, the Joliet church has had a serious back-door problem. We do fine at associating with our families, our closest friends, and the people we've known for 20 years, but we are likely to ignore the people who meet with us when we don't already have a strong relationship with them. As a consequence, there's a steady trickle of people who drift off and whose absence goes unremarked.

In part, this is a difficulty we're stuck with. We haven't had elders for more than two years now, and it's a lot harder to keep the flock together without shepherds. However, if we shrug and allow the process to continue, soon there won't be anybody left here who doesn't feel like part of the in-crowd. If that's the way that we're going to treat new Christians, who are always going to be unfamiliar, evangelism is pointless.

Even if we aren't qualified to serve as elders, each of us can still do our best to help. Here's what I would like to encourage each one of us to do. Find some member here whom we don't know well, and establish a relationship with them. Talk to them after services. Get to know them. Make a habit of calling them or sending them Facebook messages just to see how they're doing. If we only make efforts like that when a brother or sister is already struggling, they will suspect, and rightly so, that we care more about the X on the attendance chart than we do about them. However, when we offer encouragement to brethren who already know that we care about them, that's another thing entirely. Let's make the effort to pay attention.

Second, let's **GREET VISITORS**. Consider the point of Ephesians 5:15-16. There are few times in our lives when we have as much opportunity to make a spiritual impact as in the ten minutes before and the ten minutes after our worship services. That's our chance to show the outsiders in our midst that everything we say about following Jesus isn't just talk, that we are going to do our best to love them and treat them as well as the Lord Himself would. Sadly, that hasn't been happening here recently. I've stood at the back and watched as people I'd spent months trying to get inside the church building stood around awkwardly for a couple minutes and left without a single soul speaking to them. Think they ever came back?

Don't get me wrong, friends. I don't think the members of this congregation are evil, hardhearted people who don't like visitors. I think we're busy, distracted people who don't think about visitors. I think we want to be friendly. We just need to be reminded to be friendly. To that end, we're going to start using the passage on the screen as a reminder. I'm going to put it on a slide at the beginning and end of every one of my sermons, just as I have done this morning, and every time we see it on the screen, I want us to be reminded of our responsibility to greet visitors and make them feel welcome.

Third, let's **BE HOSPITABLE**. This is directly commanded in Hebrews 13:2. The Greek word translated as "hospitality" is *xenophilia*, which means "love of strangers". I think it applies equally to strangers inside or outside the church, to visitors to our assemblies, brethren we don't know well, and even people in the community whom we happen to meet. Whoever they are, there is no better way to get to know them and show them you care than to invite them over for a meal. If we do, it really stands out, because modern-day Americans aren't hospitable people. In this country, formal dining rooms are largely a thing of the past. Americans don't use them because they don't have people over. The dining-room table gets de-cluttered once a year for Thanksgiving, and the rest of the time, it's horizontal junk storage!

Friends, if we're determined to be like first-century disciples, our dining-room tables need to get used. Christians in the first century were extremely hospitable people, to brethren, neighbors, and strangers alike. The simple practice of eating together helped turn all of those groups into friends.

Finally, we can **HELP WITH RECONCILIATION**. Indeed, this work should be one of the primary ways we define ourselves as Christians. Look at how Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:18. This makes perfect sense. God is estranged from sinners because of their sin. We know God, we know the sinners in our lives, so it should be our role to help them get back together. God has already said He'll take them back if they come back, so all we have to do is persuade them to take that step.

This takes us, then, to something else the men said they wanted to see—another Day of Reconciliation. We did this for the first time in 2010, and it resulted in several souls repenting and returning to the Lord. Here's how it's going to work. I've posted on the bulletin board in the back a blank sheet of paper where we can write down names and addresses. If you know somebody in this area who used to be involved with the Lord's church and now isn't, or even somebody you just want to invite, write them on the list: name and address if you've got it, name only if you don't. In a couple of weeks, we're going to send invitation cards to everyone on the list. We'll need volunteers to hand-address them. Then, if you wrote somebody's name on the list, follow that up by personally inviting them to come. Finally, when the day comes, which is going to be Sunday, April 6th, do what you can to welcome the outsiders and former members who do attend. Maybe even plan to invite somebody over for Sunday dinner. Regardless, let's all do everything we can to encourage as many people as possible to be reconciled to God.