

The Blind Man and Zacchaeus

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Preacher: Preaching Cohort

[0:00] Good morning, church, and welcome. My name is Lexi, and along with Meg, who I'm preaching with today, we're two members of the Table Church preaching cohort. We're a group of people who have been meeting for about a year to learn the art of preaching. And if you've been tuning in over the past few weeks, you've heard from some other preaching cohort members preaching from the book of Luke. And today, Meg and I will be preaching from chapters 18 and 19. But before we do, we want to set the scene. You might know that next Sunday is Palm Sunday when we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna. This is kicking off Holy Week, which leads up to how we commemorate Jesus' death and resurrection. And in Luke's gospel, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem actually happens just after the passage we're about to read today. Our passage is at the end of Jesus' long journey to Jerusalem, which takes place over 10 chapters in Luke, starting in chapter 9, where Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. Now, I don't know about you, but when I set my face toward something, I'm looking for the most efficient route to get there, not the scenic one. When I used to commute, I knew exactly where to stand on the platform so that my train arrived, I could get right on the doors. And when I got to my destination, I could get right off onto the escalator and on my way.

Now, in this new world we're living in, my most exhilarating journey each week or two is to the grocery store. And of course, when I plan my list, I am very methodical about it. I go aisle by aisle, produce first, dairy last, so that I never have to double back or retrace my steps to get something on the other side of the store. No interruptions, no distractions, no inefficiency. So you can imagine, for someone like me, who values efficiency, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem drives me bananas.

Instead of going directly from point A to point B, he takes a long winding route to Jerusalem and makes stops along the way to interact with a variety of people. Luke, the writer of the gospel, highlights each of these interactions to reveal something about who Jesus is and what he is doing.

Jesus invites interruptions into his journey, not as a distraction from his journey, but because of its very purpose. Interaction after interaction and parable after parable, Jesus is telling us more about what the kingdom of God looks like and who is included within it. Jesus does this for his audience, his disciples, and the large crowd following him on his journey. And as readers of the gospel, we're part of this crowd, observing Jesus' journey, following along, curious about what he will do and say along the way. So as I dive in and read the passage, I'd like to invite you to imagine yourself as part of the crowd, following Jesus along the journey, curious about what each stop along the way means. This reading is from Luke 18 to 19, starting in chapter 18, verse 31.

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles, and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again. But they understood nothing about all these things.

[3 : 37] In fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening, and they told him, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. Then he shouted, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.

Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he shouted even more loudly, Son of David, have mercy on me. Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him.

And when he came near, he asked him, What do you want me to do for you? He said, Lord, let me see again. Jesus said to him, Receive your sight. Your faith has saved you. Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God and all the people. When they saw it, praised God.

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd, he could not because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down for I must stay at your house today. So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

All who saw it began to grumble and said, He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner. Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor.

[5 : 17] And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much. Then Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house because he too is a son of Abraham.

For the son of man came to seek out and save the lost. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Park, I am the other half of your preaching team for today. Let's start by looking at this image of these two people. Who of these two would you rather talk to about how the COVID vaccine works?

Most of you are probably looking at these images and you recognize Dr. Fauci. Dr. Anthony Fauci has been a key part of the pandemic response in the U.S. and would be an incredible person to talk to about the COVID vaccine and how it works. Some of you, because you like to be contrarian like me, would choose the second person. Or some of you have just seen this mechanism used in enough sermons to know that the less obvious person is the person to go with. I would argue in this example that you are indeed correct. This woman is Katalin Kariko. She is a Hungarian biochemist who has been working on mRNA vaccines, which are the type of vaccines that came out from Moderna and Pfizer earlier this year.

Her work was essential to creating these vaccines and without her research, we may not have had any vaccines until the end of February. So she would be an incredible resource to talk to about exactly how these vaccines work and why they are so effective. Let's think about our passage. Who would you rather talk to about Jesus? One of his disciples, someone who had been following Jesus for years at this point, or this blind man whose name we don't even know. The disciples, as is often the case, don't really get what Jesus is doing here, as we see very clearly in verse 34 of what Lexi just read. They are confused and don't understand. On the other hand, this blind man having just heard about Jesus and never actually met him in person is bold enough to call him the son of David, which is a title identifying him as the Messiah the Jewish people were waiting for. Peter and James and John are not quite sure what Jesus is all about, but this blind man who has never met Jesus, who is literally on the outside of society, figures out pretty quickly what Jesus is all about. As a kid, I never really understood what the disciples didn't get. It's pretty clear. Jesus says, we're going to Jerusalem. They're going to kill me.

I'm going to come back to life. With all of the foresight and what we call the New Testament that we have, it's pretty hard to not grasp that point. But as I grew to learn more about the Hebrew scriptures that the disciples would have been raised on, the kind of Messiah that Jesus came as didn't fit their preconceived notion of who the Messiah would be. They thought that the Messiah was someone coming with an army to overthrow the oppressive Roman empire who was conquering and ruling over the Jewish people. Instead, Jesus is saying that he was going to die at the hand of this empire, but in doing so conquer the true oppressor of all humanity, death itself. What are your preconceived notions about who God is? When you picture God, is God the Father an old guy sitting on a throne, on a cloud, wearing a long robe? Is Jesus somehow white, even though he was literally a Middle Eastern person? Is the Holy Spirit a wind or a tongue of fire or some other inanimate objects?

[9 : 15] And who formed that original idea of God in you? A lot of us were taught about Jesus and God by someone who looked sort of like us from when we were children. Many people attend churches made up largely of people in the same race as they are in, though not the case in all traditions. Preaching is often seen as a male role in Christian context. And these people were more like the disciples with the proximity and perceived relationship to Jesus than they were like the blind man, marginalized by his community and literally outside the city walls. There is a whole world of people who don't look like us, who know God, and interpret the Bible through a different lens. If you were raised like me hearing from a straight white male preacher about a straight white male God, it might be time to broaden your horizons. And that's part of why we have this preaching cohort. Pastor Anthony is an incredible preacher with a great perspective to share about who God is, but he knows that he only has one perspective. And so he has brought together a group of people who have something new to share, a group of people of color and women and queer people and neurodivergent folks, so that we as a community can hear from a variety of people and have a richer experience and understanding of who God is.

Outside of the table, who are you learning about God from? The Rob Bells, Stephen Furticks, and Pete Enzies of the world? Or is there room for Jeff Chu, Robin Henderson Espinoza, and Shaniqua Walker-Barnes?

Sorry for the name dropping, I will put them all in the chat. Who are you trusting to learn about God and seek God with? And is there room for you to expand that group? Living in DC, we are in proximity to some pretty important people. Meg just mentioned one of them, Dr. Anthony Fauci, who lives in our own city. And some of you might even work closely with these important people. This is your invitation to name drop the most important people sightings that you've had in DC that you want to show off with, because that's what I'm about to do. In the before times, I worked in a building on Pennsylvania Avenue, right across the street from Lafayette Square and the old executive building. We were in an office building and the retail space on the ground floor included an Indian fast casual restaurant, a sports bar, a bank, a jeweler, and a barber. It sounds like the setup to a joke or a riddle, but it's not. I'm just trying to tell you that it was nothing special, a normal office building.

However, the barber shop had a very important client, Mike Pence, the vice president. Every now and again, looking out our conference room window, we would see the Secret Service start shutting down the block around our office, and we knew what that must mean. Mike Pence was getting a haircut. So my colleagues and I, we would decide to go out for a coffee to get a glimpse of Mike Pence in an otherwise empty barber shop, surrounded by Secret Service, getting a haircut. For me and my colleagues peeking through the barber shop window, we didn't actually want to interact with Mike Pence, and we probably would have felt pretty uncomfortable if he looked our way and made eye contact as we intruded on a very mundane experience of his. And if you know me and the work that I do, you also know that Mike Pence isn't necessarily someone I would consider myself a huge fan of, to say the least.

But there is something about knowing there's a very important person in your midst. Why am I telling this story? I'm telling this story because I think this scene actually resembles what is happening in the story about Zacchaeus. He's in Jericho, and he hears that Jesus of Nazareth, who has made quite a name for himself with his teachings and his healing power, is coming to town.

[13 : 27] Zacchaeus hangs around, eager, curious, waiting to see Jesus. And when Jesus enters, Zacchaeus runs to a tree and climbs it to get a better view. He's seeking to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Unlike the blind beggar who Meg was just sharing about, who calls out from the crowd to get Jesus' attention, Zacchaeus does not seek an interaction with Jesus. He looks on from afar, so at the end of the day, he could tell everyone, you wouldn't believe who I saw around town today. Think of how different this is from the blind beggar who saw clearly who Jesus was, so much so that he called out from the crowd, twice demanding Jesus' attention, calling him the son of David, the promised Messiah, even when the crowd tried to hush him.

It can be easy to assume that in climbing up on a tree, Zacchaeus is also seeking Jesus. After all, story after story in the Gospels, we're used to people coming to Jesus for healing, teaching, an answer to a question or a miracle. So it's understandable if on your first read of the story of Zacchaeus, you think this is what's happening here too. But I don't think this is how we should think about Zacchaeus climbing the tree. Zacchaeus is curious, but not desperate. He's an onlooker, not a seeker. He's peering through the barbershop window. Now I want to be clear, this is not a sermon saying to be more like the blind beggar and less like Zacchaeus. It's not beggar good, Zacchaeus bad.

Actually, I think Luke puts these stories right next to each other to demonstrate that even with these two wildly different interactions and approaches to Jesus, Jesus says yes to both men. I invite you to look again at who begins the interaction in the Zacchaeus story. This is from verse four. So Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree, as we all know, to see Jesus because Jesus was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, hurry down, for I must stay at your house today. Jesus is the one who transforms this interaction from one of a brief glimpse from afar to something more direct and intimate. Zacchaeus had not been seeking an interaction, but Jesus did. Zacchaeus did not invite Jesus over for a meal. Jesus invited himself, and in doing so, he said to Zacchaeus that he was worthy of more than a glimpse.

He wanted to keep company with Zacchaeus. This story is not one where Jesus is being sought, like many others, but where Jesus is doing the seeking. As he says of himself, the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost. Why is this important for us?

I think some of us need to hear that even when we are not in a place of seeking Jesus, Jesus is seeking us. I've been around this community for a few years now, and I know that for many of us, the Table Church was the last stop on our way out of Christianity. We've deconstructed our faith, healed from unhealthy theology, liberated ourselves from abusive structures of authority, and now, even in a place where faith can be rebuilt and transformed, we're still asking, what does it look like to seek Jesus? What does prayer mean to me now? What does it mean to practice spirituality now? And if you're like me, some of the shoulds of a less healthy faith come back.

[17 : 02] I should knock. I should seek. I should pray without ceasing. Shouldn't I be devoting every moment of my life to unlocking a deeper level of intimacy with Jesus? And these are all good things, but what if we believed that Jesus is saying to us, just as you are, I am seeking you out? I'm coming to your house today. Let's have a meal together. I don't think we should feel guilty if we're in a place of being sought by Jesus rather than seeking. There are many reasons why we might be hesitant to seek, and I think there are a few possible reasons why Zacchaeus did not seek Jesus first. He was a Jewish man, but also the chief tax collector, which means he's working on behalf of the occupying Roman Empire and betraying his people in doing so. How rejected must he have felt by his community? And might he have internalized that rejection as unworthiness? Or maybe it was his guilt. The passage says he's very rich, and Jesus' ministry so far had mostly been around the poorest. Perhaps he knew that he benefited from and even perpetuated an unjust system and carried guilt and shame related to this.

But none of these were disqualifiers. Much to the dismay of the crowd around him, Jesus makes a point to call Zacchaeus out from the crowd, and in doing so, Jesus says yes to Zacchaeus. Yes, you are welcome.

Yes, I want to come closer to you. You, the one in the tree. I don't care what the others have to say about you. And this, we know, transforms Zacchaeus. The mere invitation from Jesus to enter into a closer relationship compels Zacchaeus to give away half of his possessions and pay back fourfold anything he has taken unfairly. So today, I invite you all to hear Jesus say, come down from where you are. Hurry, I want to have a meal with you. And may that invitation transform us as well.

There's one character in these stories that we haven't quite talked about yet. We have not taken a look at the character of the crowd. I've been doing an interesting experiment when reading the Bible lately, where instead of seeing myself as Jesus or as the person Jesus is interacting with, I try to put myself in the place of the crowd traveling with him. Let's go ahead and walk through the passage this way. If you are a little bit woo-woo like me, I invite you to close your eyes and put yourself in that place. You've been traveling with Jesus for some time, maybe a few months or years.

You left behind your family, your job, your home, all to follow this guy. And you don't really particularly know why. You know that you're headed to Jerusalem for Passover, and on the way, you're listening to Jesus tell all these fascinating stories. And when you're just outside Jericho, you hear someone crying out from the side asking what the deal is with this big crowd that's going by.

[20 : 07] You realize that this is a blind man who can't see the group, and someone shares that this is Jesus of Nazareth and his followers. And the blind man immediately starts crying out, calling him the son of David.

Why is this man trying to get Jesus' attention? And why is he claiming Jesus is the Messiah? That's not really something you've heard going around in the crowd yet.

Even Jesus' closest followers hurry around this man and try to quiet him down. But Jesus instead draws closer to this man, speaks to him, and heals him.

You witnessed it. This man has asked for sight and is healed. Your tune begins to change. Maybe you were wrong about Jesus' priorities.

Maybe the people you meet on the road are worth stopping for, rather than plowing through to the next city. You enter the city of Jericho, and now you're keeping your eyes open for the people that Jesus is probably looking to connect with again. The poor, those whose society has neglected.

[21 : 10] And you see that Jesus has stopped and is talking to someone in a tree. Someone next to you says that that's Zacchaeus, the tax collector, and you're astonished.

You've just seen that Jesus is focused on those whose society has beaten down. Not a tax collector working with the Romans, the one who is doing that beating down. You grumble with those around you. Why is he being hosted by Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus already has everything he needs. He has plenty of money and everything that comes with being employed by the empire. There's an interesting difference between the crowd's reaction in both of these stories.

They both start out with the crowd pretty grumbly and unhappy, but with the blind man, their tune changes, and they come to rejoice that Jesus has performed this miracle and given this man back his sight. But with Zacchaeus, who has a change of heart in a pretty huge way, we don't get that same reaction. Maybe the blind man is a more sympathetic character. Maybe it's impossible to believe that Jesus came to help someone caught up in the corruption of the Roman Empire, who has gained extravagant wealth by overcharging the Jewish people. It's easier to believe that Jesus can care for those who society mistreats than those who mistreat us. It's easier to think that Jesus has more work to do in food shelters and in homeless shelters than the halls of Congress and our corporate C-suites.

But Jesus is working in the lives of everyone, regardless of where they fall on that spectrum, and regardless of whether we think they deserve it. Who do you think is beyond Jesus's time and attention? And is there room to expand who you think Jesus loves? There's one person I'd like to make sure that you see in that group, and that is yourself. How many times have you heard that God loves you? Let's do some math. The average age of attendees at the table is somewhere around 35.

Let's say that you've gone to church once a week for your whole life. This is to balance out some of us who were not quite regular weekly church attenders, and others who may have been going multiple times a week. Let's say once a week for 35 years. That is 1,800 times. I am not kidding. 1-800. That is bonkers. And if you grew up in a church focused on Jesus, you are hopefully hearing about Jesus's love at least half the time to be conservative. So you have heard that Jesus loves you at least 900 times.

[23 : 52] I wish I could round up to 1,000, but that's not how the math shook out, which is proof that God is not involved in math. Sorry, math teachers. What else have you heard during those average of 35 years?

You've been told that you're not good enough because of your race, or your gender, or your sexuality, or your ability, or your refusal to live by rules that others hand out to you for no reason. And those negative comments stick a lot better. But these stories show us that Jesus is fighting through all of those negative comments. Jesus is stopping at nothing. He is calling you down from somewhere. In a lot of ways, logging on to church online is like climbing a tree. Maybe it feels silly, odd, not as effective as a regular in-person gathering. We don't have that same connection. We don't feel like we're trying to get to know Jesus, but just get some sort of glimpse of who Jesus is and what is happening with him.

But you're still here, and Jesus is still calling you to host him and to know that you are worthy of his time and attention. And so now for the 901st time, I would like to tell you that you are unconditionally loved by God, who made you in their image in perfect love. God created you, loves you, and wants to have a meal with you. Let's pray. God, we thank you so much for this opportunity to gather online, even as different and silly and sometimes unsatisfying as it may feel.

God, we thank you that you are still seeking us when we are worn out and drained and not capable of doing anything more than typing in this website and logging on. Thank you that you are loving us, regardless of if we feel more like the blind man or Zacchaeus or one of Jesus's disciples who has not quite grasped the concept. I pray that you will sustain us in our faith, that we will be able to accept your request to eat with us, and that we may come to know you better. We ask all these things through your name. Amen.

Amen. Amen.