

Stories of the Master

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SM058 The Blind Men of Jericho

Jesus and his disciples were traveling to Jerusalem and on the way, was the lovely city of Jericho. Jericho was situated seventeen miles to the northeast of Jerusalem, and lay on the desert floor in the lush Jordan River valley. Jericho's abundant waters and constant sunshine was ideal for growing, and rich harvests of balsam and palm were a constant feature of the city and the surrounding area. So many palm trees dotted the city that it became known as the "City of Palms."

Because of its mild weather, Herod the Great had often wintered there, escaping the chilly and wet weather in Jerusalem. He built a palace for himself with beautiful baths and a swimming complex. Jericho was also a place of entertainment. A horse and chariot racing stadium with a theater attracted multitudes from the surrounding areas for pleasure. Herod also built a fortress and named it after his mother. But why build a fortress in Jericho? Because of money! Jericho was a wealthy city not just because of it being an entertainment center, but because it lay in a strategic location on major trading routes. Monies were exchanged, fortunes made and the beauty of the city grew as the wealthy built beautiful villas with baths, tiled courtyards, and frescoes in the city of the palms. This city on the edge of the land of the Jewish people needed protecting!

Jericho was also a tax collecting center. It was difficult enough that the Jewish people had to pay religious taxes. This they did gladly as a fulfillment of the requirements of the Law of Moses. Every year men paid the half-shekel temple tax and 10% of their income to the leaders to run the country, to pay the Levites and the priests for their services, and for the upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem. But in addition to paying their own people, they also had to pay the hated Romans.

The Romans had conquered the land almost one hundred years previous and they levied huge taxes. Collecting taxes could be a profitable business for a man. The Romans would sell the right to collect taxes to the highest bidder. The man with the highest bid would then be required to go out and collect taxes in the amount of his bid and this often opened the door to fraud and abuse. To collect these taxes, the Romans divided the land into tax districts and set up collection points in places such as Capernaum, Jerusalem, Caesarea, and ... Jericho.

The Jews hated their countrymen who collected these tolls from their Jewish brethren to pay the Romans. They also hated them because they considered them thieves. They declared tax collectors "unclean" and their homes and family members unclean. They shunned them and their family members and said it was acceptable to dislike them because of their job and because of their frequent dishonest dealings which profited them.

In the tax collecting city of Jericho lived a man by the name of Zacchaeus. His name meant "righteous one," but the people laughed in derision at him and his name for they hardly considered him to be righteous. "Zacchaeus, righteous one! What a name for such an unrighteous man! What a name for a cheat!"

Zacchaeus was a wealthy man and as the chief tax collector he had others working under him whose work contributed to his great wealth. He was short of stature but he carried great influence

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in the community because of his important government position. But what the people did not know was that Zacchaeus was developing a heart for God and a heart generous to the poor.

It was no use telling the people about this. No one would believe. Taking the position of a tax collector automatically labeled him unclean and banned him from most activities in the community. He was an outsider. He was no true son of Abraham, so the people thought.

One day, Zacchaeus walked out of his beautiful villa with its beautiful palm trees and tiled courtyard. The people hated him even more for the luxurious house in which he lived. He was on his way to the tax collecting booth and he noticed something strange in Jericho. Most of the people were gone. “Where has everyone gone?” Zacchaeus asked a man who was walking quickly toward the eastern gates of the city.

“To see Jesus of Nazareth, tax collector! He’s on his way to the village and will soon be here. But I guess nobody told you, you unclean piece of filth.” And the man laughed at Zacchaeus as he hurried on to the gates where the village elders and others had gone to greet Jesus.

“Jesus of Nazareth, yes, I have heard of him,” Zacchaeus said to himself. “He is the one who has been working wonders in Israel. I’ve also heard that he sometimes dines with tax collectors. I wonder if he would dine with me? But how will I see him? The crowd will never accept me in their presence,” and with these questions Zacchaeus walked slowly to the city gate and then outside the gate and saw in the distance the people of Jericho walking out to greet Jesus to escort him back into their city and pay him honor.

As Jesus and his disciples approached the city, they saw the crowds forming. One of them said, “Jesus, you said you did not want to stop in Jericho but only pass through, but look, the whole city is coming out to greet you and those men look like village elders. They will surely invite you into their homes? What shall we do?” But Jesus said nothing and kept walking toward the city.

At that moment, someone on the side of the road began shouting, “Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me! Jesus, Jesus, Son of David, please have mercy on me.” It was Blind Bartimaeus.

Old Bartimaeus. He had for years sat at this place near the gates of Jericho begging for alms. And the people of the city tolerated him and often gave to him. It was their duty as the people of God to give alms to the poor and thus prove that they truly were God’s people. Whenever anyone would give to old Bartimaeus he would immediately stand and say, “In giving to the poor you have given to God. May you be blessed of God, you and your family, for remembering me.”

But on this day, Bartimaeus had something else in mind besides receiving money. When he heard the crowd forming he asked those who were standing by, “What’s happening? What’s going on? Why is this crowd forming?” And someone said, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, old man.”

“Did you say Jesus of Nazareth? I have heard stories about him! I have heard what he can do. Where is he now? Where is Jesus?” And the man said, “He has just passed you by,” and that is when Bartimaeus began calling out, “Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me! Jesus, Jesus, Son of David, please have mercy on me.”

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Many in the crowd said, “Be quiet Bartimaeus. Be quiet! Can’t you see that the village elders are approaching Jesus.”

“No, I cannot see that, I’m blind, you idiot,” and he started crying out the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” Others then began shouting back at him. “Shut up old man. Shut up.” But when Jesus heard the crowd begin to speak to Bartimaeus that way he stopped and turned in the direction of those who were saying those things to Bartimaeus and said, “You, and you, and you, go to Bartimaeus, gently help him to stand, and escort him here to me.”

The people who had been shouting at Bartimaeus felt ashamed for their actions but they obeyed Jesus and went to the old man and gently guided him into the presence of Jesus. And when he was there Jesus said, “Bartimaeus, what do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus was quiet. His whole life passed in front of him as in a moment. He had been blind for years and as a blind man he had the right to beg for gifts and to be supported by the community. But what would he do if his sight was restored? He could no longer beg. How would he support himself? What would he do then?

But Bartimaeus had already made up his mind and these questions did not matter to him. All that mattered was that he was in the presence of one who loved him, in the presence of one who called him to himself, in the presence of one who could give sight to the blind, and if Jesus could give sight to the blind then he could also lead him into a new life and provide for him.

“Bartimaeus, what do you want me to do for you?” Jesus said with love in his voice.

And with courage and faith Bartimaeus said, “Lord, I want to regain my sight.”

And Jesus said to him, “Then, receive your sight. Your faith has made you well.”

At that moment Bartimaeus gasped, he reached his hands to his face as if to shield it from pain and light and then he blinked and looked and there he saw Jesus standing in front of him smiling and gently laughing.

Bartimaeus turned around and said, “I can see. I can see. Jesus has restored my sight. I can see again!” And the crowd gave out a great shout and people began praising God and saying, “He has given sight to the blind. Bartimaeus can see! Bartimaeus can see! Praise be to God in heaven!”

Bartimaeus turned back toward Jesus to thank him but Jesus had already started walking away as the crowds surrounded him, some begging for help, others for their own miracle, and Bartimaeus quickly walked back to his place where he had begged with others, took the few coins he had collected that day and he followed, too.

From a distance, Zacchaeus took it all in. He had stayed near the gates by himself and watched as Jesus approached. He had heard the shouting of an old familiar voice. He had seen Jesus stop. He had heard words exchanged. He had seen old Bartimaeus escorted to Jesus and then he heard the great shout from the crowd when Bartimaeus’ sight was restored.

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“So, it’s true,” Zacchaeus said. “He really can give sight to the blind. He really can do the mighty works of God” and his heart filled with joy and he longed to see Jesus, but how? Jesus was being swallowed up by the crowd and Zacchaeus could no longer see him, and because he was a tax collector no one would allow him even to get close or to allow him through the crowd for they considered him a cheat, a liar, and unclean.

Just at that moment, an idea formed in Zacchaeus’ mind, an idea that would require an act of great humility. And Zacchaeus ran back into the city.

Interlude

Zacchaeus knew he did not have much time and he knew his only hope to get close to Jesus and to see him was to carry out his plan quickly. He thought about the old sycamore tree that was on the main road. He knew Jesus would have to pass by that tree. By running ahead and climbing into the tree he could gain a good view, and if Jesus passed by, he might even be able to speak to him!

And so, Zacchaeus took off running. A few stragglers who had not gone out with the crowd watched as he ran by them and shook their heads with disgust because men did not run in public. It was considered inappropriate behavior for men. “Has that tax collector no dignity whatsoever,” one said.

But Zacchaeus didn’t care. They despised him anyway, and if they were shocked to see a man running in public they would be even more shocked by his next action for when Zacchaeus came to that tree with its low-lying branches he began climbing it, something no grown man would ever do for that too was beneath the dignity of a man of honor. The foliage on the tree was thick and there Zacchaeus waited.

As Jesus entered the village he was greeted by the elders.

“Welcome Rabbi! We are glad you have come to our city! It seems that you have created a lot of excitement with your visit and with the, shall we say, extraordinary event that has just happened outside our gates.” The men nodded in the direction of Bartimaeus who stood in the back of the crowd, smiling, laughing, and looking with wonder at the beautiful palm trees that filled the city.

“Rabbi, we welcome you to our city and we want you to know that the leader of our synagogue has prepared a feast for you. You are our honored guest.” And as he said this he bowed low.

Jesus smiled and said, “Thank you, but I am so sorry. I will not be able to attend this feast. I am on my way to Jerusalem to perform the great work given me by my Father.”

The village leaders were stunned. The offer of hospitality was a time-honored tradition showing the highest respect. They were offering him a chance to dine with the leaders of the synagogue and the city. They were giving him the highest possible honor, and he was refusing it!

Jesus saw their disappointment and said again, “I am sorry, but I am only passing through. I must get to Jerusalem.” And Jesus continued walking as the leaders stood with embarrassment on their faces. He had refused their offer. He had refused the hospitality of the city, and as they followed,

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rage in their hearts smoldered, ready to burst into flame. They would soon have good cause for just ahead of them was the sycamore tree with Zacchaeus perched on a limb.

The crowd quieted. They had eagerly greeted Jesus. They had seen him give sight to the blind and gave praise to God for this act of mercy. They were overjoyed when village leaders had offered hospitality to Jesus for that would honor the entire city, and they too were disappointed at Jesus's words that he would not stay but would only pass through.

Then someone said, "Look, look in the tree. It's Zacchaeus! Hey Zacchaeus. What are you doing in the tree? Are you going to fly away!" Everyone laughed. "We hope you do fly, tax collector, far away and all your other tax collecting buddies and that you never come back. Why don't you fly to your Roman friends and roost with them!"

Then people started hurling more insults at Zacchaeus, but as Jesus drew close he looked at Zacchaeus and marveled that Zacchaeus seemed not to hear a word they were saying. It's not just that Zacchaeus was hardened to verbal insults, but Jesus marveled that he never took his face off him. Zacchaeus was smiling at Jesus, a peaceful smile as if he were saying, "I did this for you. I took this shame upon myself, to run and climb this tree because I had to see you."

Joy filled Jesus' heart as he looked at Zacchaeus and he said, "Zacchaeus. Hurry and come down from that tree. I must stay at your house today."

Everyone was stunned! Had not Jesus just said he did not have time to stay in Jericho? Had he not just refused the hospitality of the elders, the men of honor in the village? And now he was changing his plans, staying in the city, and dining with a tax collector!

Zacchaeus climbed down from the tree. Astonishment on his face, but utter joy seizing him. He grasped Jesus' hands with his own and smiled broadly and said, "Rabbi, the honor is mine to have you recline with me and to stay at my house tonight."

For years, only his family and his fellow tax collectors had ever set foot within his villa. For years, no one had ever offered any kind of friendship to this man, and here was Jesus of Nazareth, the healer, the teacher, and the prophet, coming to his home!

But the people began to grumble and some of them said out loud, "This is an outrage. He has refused the hospitality of the learned men, the leaders of our community, but he is going to dine with this traitor, this unclean man, this tax collector."

Zacchaeus stopped, wondering if Jesus would listen to them, and he said, "Jesus, my Lord, no one knows this but God, but half of my possessions I give to the poor," and Zacchaeus walked to old Bartimaeus who was still following and put his arm around him. "Bartimaeus does not know because he could not see, but I have often given to him out of my abundance, and yes, I will continue to give and have him as an honored member of my household. And Lord, if I have defrauded anyone of anything I will give back to him four times as much."

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The people fell silent. They had heard stories of Zacchaeus' generosity. Many had seen him quietly walking up to Bartimaeus and putting coins into his bag. And they had heard stories of him paying people back but for years they would not acknowledge the kind of man Zacchaeus was becoming.

Jesus looked upon the people – aware of the struggle in their hearts – and he said, "Today, this man is restored. Today, the kingdom is coming to this man's house. And I say to all of you, this man is a true son of Abraham, and I will dine with him and lodge with him. This is why I have come! I, the Son of Man, have come to seek for and to save those who have been lost!"

Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "Come, we are going to the house of Zacchaeus!" and away they walked as the crowd stood and watched.

Two blind men spoke to Jesus on that day. One man was blinded by physical disease. The other had been blinded by greed and by the disease of people's hatred in their hearts. Jesus spoke a word of healing to the man blinded by disease and he saw again. Jesus spoke a word of healing to a man who had been blinded by his own sin and the insults of others and his heart opened to the love of God.

But the others in Jericho? What of them? Did they remain in their spiritual blindness that was caused by their hardness of heart?

And what about you who hear me today? Are you blind? And if so, why? I have a word for you, "Call upon the Lord. Call upon Jesus. Like Blind Bartimaeus, call upon Jesus and say, "Jesus, son of David have mercy on me." And if others think you are foolish and try to shut you up, don't stop, but call upon him even more.

Are you like Zacchaeus, a man hungry for God, a man so desperate for God that he would humiliate himself in public, not once but twice? Remember, in their culture, it was not proper for a man to run in public. In their culture, it was not proper for a man to climb a tree. But Zacchaeus did both because it was his only hope of seeing Jesus. He threw away his public honor and counted it to be nothing in order that he might gain the highest prize of all – a relationship with Jesus of Nazareth.

Do you want a relationship with Jesus? He offers you life, eternal life. He offers you peace, he offers you his family and the love of his Father in heaven. Is something holding you back? Are you fearful of what others might say? I challenge you to follow the example of Zacchaeus, run, climb that tree, do whatever you must – and there you will find Jesus waiting for you.