

Different Stories, Same Need – Luke 18:35 – 19:10

I heard a moving story this week that I wanted to share with you. It is about a man who was jumped by the criminals he hung around with, and beaten to within an inch of his life. Could God be in this? The man telling the story would say, “Absolutely!”

It happened in New York City. He was attacked and left for dead. It took many surgeries and much time in the hospital to save his life, and put him back together. It was later in his recovery, when he was no longer on the strong pain killers and medicines, that he had a most unusual experience.

His head was clear, so as he sat in bed and started to write things down in a notebook. As he wrote, he suddenly felt a strange presence in his room. Everything went silent and for a brief moment his spiritual eyes were opened, and he saw all the sins he had committed, all the bad decisions he had made that had led him to this bed in the hospital. For the first time he saw himself for who he really was: lost and broken. He felt this extreme pain in his chest, and suddenly realized that he had failed God. He started to shout out, “God, forgive me! My heart hurts! I have failed you! I cannot help myself! Please forgive me.”

This man repeated that over and over until, in pure exhaustion, he fell asleep. The next morning they moved him out of the surgery ward into the rehab ward. There he met a Korean nurse who took him by the hands, looked him in the eye and said, “Listen to me very carefully. God has heard your prayer. He will forgive you of all those things you saw in your room last night.”

The man was shocked. How could she know? Then she gave him this word from the Lord, “Son, I have heard you. I have in you in the hospital, in this condition, alone, because I love you. You were so far into the world that you were fast approaching a day when you would die – without me – so I have you here, alone, so you can hear me and know that I love you and that I forgive you of everything. I am going to fulfill my purpose in you for I have a great purpose for you if you just believe that it is Jesus talking to you tonight. I will always be with you to the end.”

After that she got up and left. The man closed his eyes and prayed: “God, thank you for hearing me. I believe in you, Jesus; thank you.” When he finished that prayer his whole room was filled with the presence of the glory of God and His light and grace shone all through the room. In that moment he felt he was being born again, and baptize with the Holy Spirit. He spend the whole night crying for joy in the presence of the Lord.

The next day he was a new man. He was the first to arrive for the rehab sessions. He left his wheel chair and started to walk with a cane. He walked all over the hospital, preaching about Christ to the other patients.

This all took place in 2012. Ten years later there is no cane, but still a burning desire to share Jesus with others. He is in Canada now, preparing to be a pastor. God’s purposes are being worked out in his life...

As I reflected on this wonderful testimony of God's grace it is clear what the starting point is: this man had to see his sinfulness. We cannot experience salvation if we do not first understand and acknowledge we have something we need to be saved from. That something is sin.

This man got a glimpse of his life, and saw all the wrong things he had done, the things that were contrary to what God wanted, the things he did in rebellion against God. This was the starting point for his transformation by the grace of God. We would call that saving grace. It is just as amazing and wonderful as Sneaky grace, or seeking grace. It is all one grace: God reaching out to us in our lostness drawing us to himself, and then transforming us as we are born again.

We are all sinners in need of a saviour. Scripture makes that abundantly clear:

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Romans 3:23 tells us.

In Psalm 14 we read:

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;
there is none who does good.

² The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.

³ They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good, not even one.

The common problem of every man, women, boy or girl is a sin problem. You may be the richest man in the world, or the poorest beggar, but you stand in the exact same position: a sinner destined for destruction. And it is the sinfulness of people that brings so much of the suffering in our world. Have you wondered why the war in Ukraine? The root problem: sin. It infects everyone.

And there is nothing we can do to rescue ourselves from sin. We cannot earn God's forgiveness by being good, or religious, or generous. By all means, do those things, but know this; you will still be a sinner. There is nothing you can do to remove the stain of sin from your life.

And the bad news for us is that no sin will enter heaven. So as long as we are sinners, stained by the selfishness of sin, or the self righteousness of sin, or the rebellion of sin that takes us so far from God, we will never be able to enter heaven. We will be slaves to sin for eternity if a way to deal with it is not found.

The good news today is that the Way to deal with our sin is through Jesus! He alone can bring forgiveness, cleansing and new life to us. Hear again God speak to us in 2 Cor 5:21:

"For our sake he made himself to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Reformer Martin Luther called this the “great exchange:” our death for his life, our sin for his righteousness, our condemnation for his salvation, our failures for his success, our defeat for his victory.

In our text today we have two stories of that great exchange fleshed out.

The first story is of a blind man who has no hope in life, no future, no help. There was nothing he could do about his condition, so he sat by the road and begged. Then Jesus came by, and everything changed. Here was the one person who could save him from his blindness. Here was the one person who could open his eyes. Here was the one person who could rescue him.

And he did. Jesus came by and asked, “What do you want me to do for you?”

That may seem like an obvious question to be asking a blind man, but think about it. As wonderful as it would be to be able to see again, it would mean no more begging, no more relying on others to look after you, no more idle days. Your whole life will change in a moment. Are you ready?

The blindness of this man represents the spiritual blindness of all of us. We see what we want to see. We see ourselves as okay – do we really want to see the truth? Do we really want Jesus to open our spiritual eyes as he did for the man mentioned at the start of this sermon, revealing all the bad things we have done? Wouldn't it have been easier for Jesus to simply say, “Keep trying harder. You'll make it some day!”

Sure it would be easier to say, but it would be a lie. We can no more free ourselves from sin than the blind man could heal himself. He needed the touch of Jesus, so the blind man responds to Jesus' question: What do you want me to do for you? With “Lord, I want to see.”

And in that moment of faith, as he reached out to Jesus, his eyes were opened and a new life began. In Mark's version of this story, we are told that the blind man throws off his cloak to come to Jesus. This was his beggar's cloak. He was tired of being a beggar. He wanted a new life – and only Jesus could provide that. So he threw off the cloak and went to Jesus. Jesus opened his eyes and gave him a new start in life.

The second person we meet is nothing like this blind beggar. He is rich, and powerful, and successful. Like the blind man, he is a social outcast, but for a very different reason. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, a man working for the Romans, the hated oppressors. The religious leaders were quick to label him a sinner.

Despite his wealth and power and position Zacchaeus had a longing for something more. Therefore, when Jesus was passing by he desired to see this man who seemed to love everyone and change their lives with a touch. The bad news for Zacchaeus was that the crowds were big and he was short. No matter how he tried, he could not see Jesus, so he had to improvise.

Dignified, professional, important “man on the street” Zacchaeus climbed up into a tree simply so he could see Jesus. I wonder if Zacchaeus realized before that moment just how desperate

he was for a change in his life? Suddenly, there he was, a middle aged man clinging to a branch for dear life just so he could see Jesus.

The good news for Zacchaeus was this: Jesus saw him. And Jesus stopped and took time for him, just as he did with the blind man. Oh, is it not wonderful that Jesus has time for everyone, especially those who seek him?

Jesus invites himself over to Zacchaeus' place. It was unheard of for a devout Jew to go to the home of a tax collector. But Jesus wanted everyone to know that God accepts all people who seek him. Yes, even tax collectors.

This story has such a wonderful ending. Zacchaeus is so transformed by Jesus that he moves from being a man who cheated people for personal gain, to become a man who gave his wealth to help others. He repented of his dishonesty, evidenced by his willingness to return what was taken by cheating others. Jesus joyfully announces, "This day salvation has come to this house."

Then Jesus sums up the very purpose for which he came: to seek and to save the lost.

All too often we think of salvation as something like a business transaction: believe in Jesus, he declares you forgiven and you now have a passport to heaven. That may be so, but the salvation Jesus brings is far more than a passport to heaven – it is a transformation of our lives.

Think again about what happened in the lives of the men featured in our text today. The blind man was completely transformed when he received his sight. Zacchaeus was transformed internally, from a selfish, greedy, dishonest man to a generous, joyful man. They would never be the same because Jesus saved them!

This is the message we need to hear today. When Jesus saves us from our sin, he does far more than simply declare we are forgiven. He transforms our lives in so many ways. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone; the new is come." 2 Cor 5:17.

Do you remember the man I told you about at the start of this message? He was in great trouble. If he continued on the path he was on he was destined for an early grave – probably a violent death. But then he met Jesus. Jesus opened his blinded eyes so he could see his sin. Jesus gave him a new heart, a new life, cleansed of the past sins and filled with the Holy Spirit. Today he preaches the Word of God; his journey into the shady parts of town is not to participate in the old vices, but to help rescue others out of that lifestyle. He is a new creation!

I could tell you story after story about lives that have been transformed by the touch of Jesus, but I really do not need to. Each of you has your own story to tell, how Jesus took you from the place of brokenness and sin to the place of salvation and new life; a story of saving grace.

If you do not have a story like that yet, the invitation of Jesus is still there. He says, "Come, follow me." You will not be long in the presence of Jesus when you will confess as Peter did, "I am a sinner" and you will ask for his forgiveness. You will then enter a new life with new values and new priorities. You will pray and really mean it: Thy kingdom come! Where are you today?