

Luke 19:1-10 + What a Friend We Have in Jesus! + Festival of Friendship Sunday + 9 November 2008

There's nothing quite like having a "good friend". You know who I'm talking about—those people who are more than just acquaintances. You've shared experiences with them. You can talk with them about anything. You can depend on them to be there for you, to calm you down, cry with you, laugh with you, even let you know when you're wrong. They have a special place in your heart, and may even have free access to your fridge.

There's nothing quite like having a "good friend", but in reality, no matter how "good" they are, they can't always be there for you or come through for you. Above all, they can't save you. By that I mean, they can't save you from your worst problem—sin, which has ruined your friendship with the holy God. This is a spiritual problem no earthly friend can fix, but today, you'll meet a Friend who's always there for you and who always comes through for you. Plus he's taken care of that spiritual problem of sin. You'll find out **WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS!**

Many of us have friends, who could best be described as "passive" friends. They prefer to wait to be befriended. They let you do all the work of being their friend. In the lesson before us, we meet a Friend, who isn't like that at all. Jesus isn't "passive" about his friendship with us, but instead **"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."** That's probably the most important thing about Jesus—he seeks us out...to save us.

Why does Jesus seek us out in the first place? Why leave the comforts and glories of heaven to come to our spiritually impoverished world? Why leave heaven for a criminal's death on earth? Well, from the beginning of time, Jesus had a mission—befriend the world, befriend the infants and the toddlers, the children and the teenagers, the married and the unmarried, the young and the elderly, the men and the women. Jesus came to befriend the world because our first parents, Adam and Eve, had ruined mankind's perfect friendship with God. God had commanded them not to eat from a single tree in the Garden of Eden and they willingly disobeyed him. In so doing, they turned us into God's mortal enemies. Still Jesus came to befriend the world, to seek and save sinners just like us.

Jesus proved that with a little man named Zacchaeus. Luke tells us he was **"small in physical stature"**, but more importantly, he had some real shortcomings. We're told, **"[Zacchaeus] was a chief tax collector and was wealthy."** Tax collectors weren't like our modern-day IRS agents. They were usually some of the greediest, most dishonest men in society. They contracted out their services to the Roman government, whom the people hated. They were then allowed to charge whatever they wanted as long as Rome got the taxes it desired. Tax collectors became extremely wealthy by overcharging the people, and were considered the lowest form of life on earth. Like a kid too short to go on a roller coaster, Zacchaeus didn't measure up to God's standard of holiness to enter eternal life.

Surely the guilt of that dishonesty weighed on Zacchaeus' conscience. That's probably why he **"wanted to see who Jesus was."** Jesus was in the midst of his long, final journey to the big city of Jerusalem. News had spread about this Jesus, about his countless miracles and his preaching with a divine authority unmatched by any of the rabbis. Some even said this Jesus was God's Chosen One sent to deliver his people. Crowds flocked to Jesus and Zacchaeus soon realized he couldn't see over them. Just to catch a glimpse of this Jesus, Zacchaeus climbed a nearby tree.

It was probably funny to see that wealthy, little man scramble up into the tree. Some probably even laughed at his shortcomings—his physical stature or his know place in society. Anybody else would've passed by the tree without a glance, but not Jesus. No, Jesus stopped under the tree, looked up at the tax collector in the branches, and gave him what he needed most—forgiveness and deliverance from his sin and guilt. Later Jesus would declare, **"Today salvation has come to this house..."**

Jesus does the same for us. You and I are more like Zacchaeus than we care to admit. We all have spiritual shortcomings. Every one of us deserves God's wrath and punishment because we disobey him daily. We envy. We lust. We let stress become anger and frustration. We fight. We grow discontent. We hate. We let loveless words spew from our mouths. We tear down people we know (and even love) to make ourselves feel better. We try to keep up with the Joneses. We have the guilt of past sins that weigh down on us and current pet sins of weakness that daily bother us.

Jesus has every right to laugh at our shortcomings and scorn us because of them, but Jesus isn't that kind of "friend". No, he extends his invitation to us to be his dearest friends. He says, **"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."** He extends his invitation of forgiveness for that guilt we bear and for the sins we've committed today. He brings salvation to us through the good news of what he accomplished for us at the end of that long road to Jerusalem. You see, at the end of that road was suffering and death for Jesus. Jesus knew it, but he kept going.

He kept going because he came to befriend you. He knew that his death on the cross was the only ransom payment for your sin that God would accept to give you freedom from sin's tyranny. Jesus kept going so he could take the

burden of guilt off your shoulders and place it on his own. Jesus kept going so he could cry out, ***“It is finished.*** The debt of your sin is paid. My forgiveness is yours and I have opened heaven for you. ***Today salvation has come to you...***” Jesus kept going because he knew he’d confirm that deliverance for you by rising from the dead three days later.

Jesus came to save you and allow you to enjoy that gift through faith in him! If that was all Jesus had done for us, he would surely be our best Friend, but he does even more. **He enters our homes to fellowship with us.**

Now when Jesus met Zacchaeus for the first time, he treated the tax collector like an old family friend. ***“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”*** We might think Jesus was being very forward, but Zacchaeus ***“came down at once and welcomed him gladly.”***

For a moment think about what Jesus was doing. He had invited himself over to the house of someone whom society regarded as “the scum of the earth”. Was that home really “fit” for the Savior to visit? The crowds didn’t think so, but Jesus wasn’t concerned at all how “fit” Zacchaeus’ home was. So ***“all the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a “sinner”.’”*** You know what? They were right. Zacchaeus was a sinner and he didn’t deserve to have Jesus come over for dinner, but that’s exactly why Jesus went. Jesus had come to save this man. Now this new Christian needed to be built up in faith by spending time with Jesus.

Jesus does the same for you and me. You don’t deserve to have Jesus even enter your home. You’re a sinner, but that’s why Jesus comes to you today. He comes to rescue you. On top of that, Jesus wants to be a guest at your meals. He wants to be there in the discussion as you pass the potatoes or pour the milk. He wants to be there when you spend time together as a family or alone. In fact, he wants to be the head of your house. He wants to have top priority in every aspect of your life.

Now Jesus doesn’t physically invite himself to your house as a dear Friend, but he does come to your house through his Word. You hear it first here in His house in worship and in Bible study and Sunday School. Then you spend time with him in conversation, reading his Word and responding with prayers and praises. You spend time with your dear Friend when you take time to have devotions together with family and when you make your home a place of worship for our Savior. The more time you spend in his Word and in conversation with him, the more he strengthens you.

What a Friend we have in Jesus! He amazes us with the way he seeks us out to save us and how he enters our homes to fellowship with us, but he does even more. **He touches our hearts...to change our lives.**

Jesus had a purpose in all this—change Zacchaeus’ life forever. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, one of the best at his business. Guilt had plagued this man before, but through Jesus, Zacchaeus had now experienced the joy of God’s forgiveness. It was like the time when a good friend helps you complete a major project that would be impossible without him or her. In every way you can, you want to thank them. That’s how Zacchaeus responded when Jesus forgave his sins. ***“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*** What a difference a Savior makes! He wanted to express his love for his friend, Jesus. So he gave half his wealth back to the Lord and sought to amend his offenses, not to earn God’s favor, but simply to respond with thankful love for Jesus’ love.

Jesus came to change our lives too. Through his Word and in worship, Jesus announces to us that we are saved. ***“Today salvation has come to you...!”*** Starting right here in his house, Jesus comes to our homes through his Word to help us grow in faith, and through the good news of his full and free forgiveness, **Jesus touches our hearts to change our lives.**

Because of what Jesus has accomplished for us and gives to us, our lives change. Our priorities change. Our attitudes and words and actions change. Jesus even changes how we see our world. We see our different callings in life as opportunities to serve God by serving our neighbor—whether that be our spouse, children, friends, co-workers, classmates or the folks next door. Out of thanks, we serve our neighbor and our Lord as faithful parents, spouses, children, employers, employees, retirees, members, citizens and so on. For all he has done for us, as his forgiven friends, we turn from our sins to thank and praise, serve and obey Jesus in every aspect of our lives.

What a Friend we have in Jesus! He died for us. He sought us out to give us the gift of his deliverance from sin and death. He enters our homes so we might grow in faith by association with him. By faith, he enters our hearts to change our lives. No earthly friend can do that. Because of his gracious love for you, be assured Jesus is your Best Friend and always will be! How wonderful is that! Amen.