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## **Jesus' Take on Salvation**

**Luke 19: 1-10**

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A few years ago, a radio talk show hosted two biblical scholars who had written books on Jesus from different perspectives – one from the more “conservative” end, the other was much more “liberal.” They took calls from listeners and one of them was from a man in his thirties who asked a question that had little to do with their writings on Jesus. The man asked the scholars about salvation. He hadn't been to church in years, he said, but began attending a nearby church because his daughter was now seven and she was beginning to ask those “tough questions” – about God, the meaning of life and death; you know the ones.

All was going well, the man said, until one day she told him what she was learning in Sunday school. Yes, the teacher told her that God loved her but she was also told that if she didn't believe a certain way, and say a certain kind of prayer, she and anyone like her would be thrown into a lake of fire and burn forever. You could hear the man's voice shake – either from anger or anxiety and pain – as he asked the question: “Am I off base here? I believe God loves us but am I wrong to believe that God would never throw anybody into a lake of fire to burn for all eternity?”

The Jesus scholars hesitated to answer because their task was different than the man's real question. Though they came from very different perspectives, they both replied that Jesus hardly said anything about the afterlife because his focus was on this life, how you live in this world, how you love God and your neighbor, now.

Those were good answers but they missed the real question the man was agonizing over: is it OK to believe that the God who loves everyone now, would continue to be a loving God for all – forever? Will my child – and me! – burn for all eternity if we don't believe the same way a lot of other Christians believe?

I suspect that most of us here – and millions of other followers of the Way of Jesus – don't spend much time thinking about whether we, our family, friends, neighbors or people of other religions, are going to burn in hell for all eternity. Though there are little, tiny bits and pieces of scripture that point to that way of thinking, that is quite inconsistent with any overall reading of the Bible, at least if you read it as a whole, not picking out small parts of it to hold up as proof theories of the afterlife, declaring that this is the most important part of our faith. But the Bible, and about 3,500 years of

Jewish and Christian tradition, does speak, very often, about salvation. And in particular, the New Testament and our Christian tradition does affirm – many, many times – that, indeed, Jesus saves, or is our Savior and that it is through his life, teachings, healing and spirit, that our salvation comes. Over and over, 2,000 years of Christianity tells us that somehow, our faith in Christ saves us from something and for something.

Today, I want to explore this with you because it is another one of those things about Jesus that is so compelling to me, and a great example of Jesus' understanding of salvation (and the Bible's, by the way), is the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus.

Jesus is walking through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem and the crowd that's with him is so large that Zacchaeus, "short of stature," as the story and children's songs say about him, has to climb up in a tree to get a glimpse of him. If you've ever been to Israel and have gone to Jericho, there is a big, old sycamore tree that locals insist is the same one from this story. That's doubtful, of course, but it is pretty neat, and you can imagine what the crowds start to say about Zacchaeus when Jesus spots him up in the tree: "He's a traitor! A collaborator with the Romans and the High Priests. He's a Jew, for crying out loud, like us, and he rips us off and gets rich himself! We have nothing to do with him. We cast him out a long time ago."

They were mostly right, you know. Tax collectors were collaborators with the oppressive Roman rulers, as well as with the priestly caste that forced their agenda on their lives, keeping them dirt poor and dictating to them who's in and who's out of the community. So, you can imagine what Zacchaeus was thinking when the crowd stopped and Jesus looked up at him: "What's this prophet going to say? What's he going to do?" You can imagine him looking around thinking: "There's nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. What is this revolutionary character going to do; order them to get a noose and string me up?"

He must have realized in that moment how contrary his way of living was to the meaning of his name. The name Zacchaeus means "clean" or "innocent," and that was certainly not the Zacchaeus who climbed up in that tree. In fact, his life was a total contradiction to the name that was supposed to define his life. In short, he was living a lie, being faithless to his true character, who he was created to be.

But Jesus called to Zacchaeus, "Zacchaeus, come down, quickly, because I must stay at your house today." The crowd, of course, is enraged – can you blame them? - because they have bought into the religious elites system, too. They might be poor, but at least they are not outcastes, stuck in that category – sinners! . . . Relieved, Zacchaeus says, "Look, half my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor and if I've cheated anyone, I pay them back four times as much." Which is an amazing thing. And Jesus responds, "Today, salvation has come to this house."

Did you hear that? When does salvation come for Zacchaeus? Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "Zacchaeus, when you die, you'll reap the rewards and avoid the hell-fire, and salvation will come to you." He says, "Today, salvation has come. . . ." Here, Jesus declares that salvation is a current event; it happened and is happening and happens in the right now. And it means that radical grace, something that is a

sheer gift has transformed Zacchaeus' heart and has moved him to live by a different set of priorities. It is a picture of repentance – he was walking in one direction and his transformation has turned him 180 degrees to walk another way.

I hope you notice this point, too. Zacchaeus' change of heart causes him to do something. It's not enough for him to say, "Come into my heart, Jesus. Thank you," and then keep on living the same basic way he had been. Following some formulaic pattern of heart angst and conversation and it really doesn't matter what kind of life you live, is not salvation; at least not according to Jesus. Zacchaeus' transformed heart manifests itself concretely in an act of justice, promising to restore four-fold what he took from the community. It also shows itself in an amazing act of generosity towards the poor. And, this salvation most likely implies some type of reconciliation with the community. As Jesus says, ". . . for he, too, is a son of Abraham." In other words, "He's one of you."

We miss the point of salvation completely if we think that Jesus is announcing that something wonderful is going to happen to Zacchaeus only after he dies. Zacchaeus is saved from greed, injustice and living as an outcaste among his own people, and for honesty, generosity, integrity and to be a fruitful part of the community.

Do you remember Les Miserable? I love the musical – my all-time favorite- but the book by Victor Hugo written in 1862 is very deep and very powerful – and a lot longer than the musical!

The central character is Jean Valjean who has just been released from prison after 19 years of hard labor for stealing some bread for a starving family member. As part of the probation, he must show his papers to anyone with whom he comes into contact. This, of course, causes him to wander the country, rarely finding work or hospitality; he's shunned and considered an outcaste from every community he encounters.

Late one night, famished and near the end of it all, he comes to the home of a humble priest. Out of habit, he reaches for the papers to show who he is, most likely to be rejected again. Instead, the priest graciously invites Valjean into his home to have dinner – the finest of foods - and to stay the night.

Early in the morning, when Valjean awakens, he finds the house silent and, out of habit of being rejected, he stuffs his knapsack full of the silver place settings used at the dinner table the night before. Then he flees. But before he even makes it to the other side of town, he is caught by the police with the damning evidence in his knapsack – along with the probation papers. He claims that the priest gave him the items but the police aren't buying it.

Off to the priest's home they go for confirmation of what they know is the truth and then to prison where Valjean will live out the rest of his years. But when they arrive, the priest looks into Valjean's eyes and exclaims, "Ah! Here you are! I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"

The police are dumbfounded and protest, but because the priest persists, they leave and Valjean has new life. He has never experienced God's grace like this before, given through a clever lie from an old priest. When Valjean reaches out and grasps the candlesticks, it's as though the priest has reached into his heart and turned a heart of stone into a heart of silver. But really, Jean Valjean now has a heart of flesh. This is an experience of the kind of grace and love for which people readily give up their lives.

And from that point forward, Valjean lives not simply as an honest man, but as a courageous one who, through deep personal sacrifice, continually reaches into his heart and by way of his hands and feet and pocketbook, loves and serves so many others.

Victor Hugo understood salvation as Jesus taught it and lived it because salvation is discovering we are loved beyond our wildest imaginations – and then living our lives accordingly. May you discover that amazing love and grace that saves you for a life of mercy, integrity, compassion and peace-making. And may we all be channels of God's grace and peace.

Amen.