

Jesus and ... a bully
Luke 19:3-10
June 26, 2023

Alright kids let me get a WooHoo!

I love that you guys are here with us. We wanted y'all to get to be with your parents, sing together, pray together, hear the same teaching. I'm sure you will have some questions about different things and that's great. Ask your parents and hopefully this all leads to some good conversations.

What we are studying over the summer is how Jesus interacts with different types of people. Today we are talking about how Jesus interacts with a bully. That's right, a bully. Now, this is probably a person that you have heard of before and you've probably never thought of him as a bully. Usually we think of bullies as being big and strong and physically imposing, scary. This person we will talk about today wasn't any of those things. In fact, he is described as being small. But in spite of that, he was a bully. His power didn't come from how big he was. His power came from his job. He was a very powerful person in the Roman government.

And that's a key point. To be a bully, you have to have some kind of power. Physical power, where you can hurt people. Positional power, where decisions you make deeply affect people. Relational power, where you can treat someone in a certain way and deeply affect them.

Being a bully is all about how you use your power. When you have power, you can either be a bully or you can be a blessing. Because you have that ability, that opportunity, that power.

Well the person Jesus encounters in our story for today had lots of power, and he used it to help himself and hurt others. He was not a blessing, he was a bully.

And I should also tell you that Jesus absolutely does not do what you would expect him to do when he meets a bully. Not at all. But I should also tell you that the bully does not do what you would expect him to do when he meets Jesus. Not at all.

Luke 19

1 He entered Jericho and was passing through. **2** And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich.

When it says he was a tax collector, let me explain what that means.

Tax collector - Back when Jesus was alive, Rome was kind of like the biggest country in the world. The Roman Empire was massive. And they got massive by invading one country after the next, stealing their money, sometimes enslaving their people. Then they'd move on to the next country making their empire bigger and bigger. The Romans had invaded Israel and taken it over. So if you are an Israelite, how do you feel about Rome? Boo!

So Rome was in charge of Israel and they were taking so much of people's money. They called it taxes. Kids you might have heard your parents complain about paying taxes before because nobody likes paying taxes.

But these people in Israel were having to pay way too much. It wasn't fair at all.

But a problem for Rome was, they didn't know the people they had invaded. Which meant, they didn't know where people might hide their money so they could pay less taxes. So they would hire tax collectors from the conquered people group because they knew the people from that area and would be able to make sure all taxes were paid. And the deal they made with them, to get them to betray their own people, was

that tax collectors could collect more taxes than they were required to give to Rome and keep the rest for themselves. So these local men would come into someone's home with roman soldiers, and would say "I know you and I know your family and how much money you have. You owe this much." And if people didn't pay or tried to lie, they could just kill them. So it was basically a shake down. And Zacchaeus isn't just a tax collector. He's a chief. He deploys his teams out to collect. He is running the show. Zacchaeus was basically a government sanctioned mafia boss. He sends his men into your house and says "give me money or I will kill you." And all along you know he's taking more money than he's supposed to so he can keep a bunch for himself. And now he's rich because he keeps taking you and your friends' money.

How do we feel about Zacchaeus? BOOOOOO!
He's a bully.

3 And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. **4** So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.

We might miss this because of cultural distance but this would've been embarrassing for him to do. Run and climb a tree? As a powerful, wealthy man? Even today if, say, the mayor or governor were out at a parade and they had climbed up a tree, people would probably take pictures and make fun of them a little bit. It's just not very fitting for such a public figure. Even more in their culture.

Apparently, Zacchaeus has heard some commotion about Jesus and wants to see what the fuss is about. And Jesus is about to meet him.

Now, I know it's a familiar story but...what do you want Jesus to say to Zacchaeus when he meets him? Would you want Jesus to yell at him a little bit? Put him in his place? "Zacchaeus, how dare you steal from us and help the bad guys?! You cut that out right now!"

Well let's see what happens.

5 And 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."

What?!?! Jesus doesn't yell at him or put him in his place. And instead Jesus says "I'd like to spend some time with you. Could I come over to your house to stay?" What in the world is Jesus doing? Was he just kind...to a bully? Did Jesus just be friendly towards the bad guy? The enemy? The guy we just booo'ed?

Watch what happens next...

6 So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. **7** And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

So the crowd thinks exactly what you and I think. What in the world is Jesus doing?!

8 And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." Which means I will give them back, not just what I stole from them, but I will give them back four times what I stole from them. So if he stole one dollar from you he's giving you back 4 dollars.

9 And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

What in the world just happened? Zacchaeus just went from stealing from people to donating half of his money to the poor and giving back what he stole times 4. Which means, it turns out that having Zacc steal from you was an amazing investment! None of my stocks have 4x'ed, I'll tell you that. Zacc goes from bully to blessing, right before our eyes.

Jesus says what happened inside of Zacchaeus is that "salvation has come."

This story is an example of what happens when salvation comes into a person's life. In other words, is an example of what happens when someone becomes a christian.

There are 3 things that happen here. And they happen in a certain order.

There is a sequence of salvation that we see depicted here. It's irreducible and sequential. These 3 things always happen when someone becomes a christian and they always happen in this order...or, to use the language of the story, salvation has not come.

Here they are, in order. grace, repentance, obedience.

When someone becomes a christian, when someone receives salvation, these 3 things will be present and in that order. It's an irreducible sequence. Can't have any missing and can't have them in any other order or you don't have Jesus salvation.

Grace

5 And 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." I don't know how many people were there, enough for it to be a crowd that Zacchaeus couldn't see over the top of. So hundreds at the least. Probably a lot of really Godly, humble people there. A lot of torah observing, temple attending jewish citizens that Jesus would have picked out of the crowd to go stay with. But he picks the bully. The bad guy.

6 So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. **7** And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." This isn't just for dinner. This is where Jesus slept during his time in jericho. It means room and board. So he isn't just going for dinner. In their culture, to stay with someone was to associate yourself with them. To accept them and make a public demonstration of friendship. It was a way of saying "I approve of you and you are one of my people." So OF COURSE the crowd grumbles. Jesus just befriended the most hated man in town!

There are a lot of people in Jericho that day who would have wanted nothing to do with Zacc, but Jesus befriends him publicly.

And now people are hating Jesus. (see vs 7) All those people who already hated Zacc are now hating Jesus. Isn't that something? Jesus was willing to allow the hate directed at Zacchaeus because of his sin to be pointed at himself as He publicly displays His desire to accept and befriend Zacc.

This is a foreshadowing moment of what is going to happen around 10 days later when Jesus dies on the cross. Because on the cross Jesus allowed God's hatred for sin that was directed at us to instead be directed at him, as Jesus publicly displayed his desire to accept and befriend us. Jesus tells Zacchaeus to come down from the tree because he knows very soon he himself will go up one...a tree formed into the shape of a cross.

Most important question - Does Jesus befriend Zacc before or after Zacc changes? BEFORE!

Jesus died for us on the cross so God accepts us as we are. That's what grace is. It is God loving me, accepting me, forgiving me, welcoming me, even though I don't deserve it and haven't earned it. Jesus befriends people before they change.

Which leads us right into our second big word...

Jesus befriends people before they change...that's grace.

AND, his friendship causes people to change. That's repentance.

Repentance

8 And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. Z has turned his back on his family and friends and neighbors in order to get rich. There were days where he sent soldiers into his friend's house, and said "I know where everything is...pay up."

This is a man whose whole life was taking advantage of people weaker than him to make money, deciding to give half of his stuff to people that are weaker than him. This man's whole view on life has changed. Jesus befriend him when he was deserving to be shunned by Jesus has totally changed something inside Zacchaeus.

Sin is like poison. Sin poisons our hearts and makes us not trust God or love people. It makes us put ourselves first, even if it hurts others and dishonors God. The term that theologians sometimes use is that sin causes us to have "disordered affections." We care too much about some things, we don't care enough about other things. We want unhealthy things sometimes and we don't want healthy things sometimes.

Zacchaeus doesn't just need new rules to live by. He needs something to change him from the inside out. He needs an antidote to the poison of sin. Something to reorder his love for power and money, something to displace it and put in its place a love for God and people.

Jesus says "I'm coming to stay with you." so Zacchaeus says "good. Then I will stop cheating." Because I have your acceptance, because I have you, I have what I need to be able to change. to repent." The change is the result of love. Grace will always change you.

Sin and Jesus are in opposite directions. To face one of them means you'll have to turn your back on the other. Repentance is turning your back on sin and going to Jesus because you realize that Jesus is better. He died for you. He's a God who loves people and approaches them with grace and acceptance no matter what they've done.

So repentance is turning from sin to a God who loves sinners like us.

Which brings us to the third word...

Obedience

You remember how Zacchaeus paid people back 4 times what he had taken from them?

8... And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."

Can you even imagine Zacchaeus walking into someone's house that he had previously stolen from. Every time Zacchaeus comes with his gang, with swords out, shaking people down. This time, Zacchaeus comes to people's houses, hands full money to give them, looks them in the eyes and says "I'm so sorry." How much healing and restoration this could have caused in Z's community. How much of a stir it would have caused. People who are crazy taxed and now the person who they hated most is generously helping them out.

This is a real life Ebenezer Scrooge story. Or the Grinch. Zacchaeus' heart just grew 3 sizes.

Here is what is interesting to me...

Leviticus 6:2-5 - 2 "If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the LORD by deceiving his neighbor in a matter of deposit or security, or through robbery,...

5 ..., he shall restore it in full and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs on the day he realizes his guilt.

Which means if I stole a dollar from you, but I meet Jesus and he accepts me by grace, and I repent. I turn from sin and turn to Jesus, my next step is supposed to be to give you back the dollar I stole plus 20 cents. But remember what Zacchaeus does is for every dollar he stole, he gave back 4 dollars.

Zacchaeus ends up giving away well above what the law requires of him. One encounter with Jesus motivates him to obey in a way that a lifetime of knowing the law never could.

This is a man who was willing to betray and oppress his own family and friends, now giving away money freely.

No longer a bully, Zacchaeus is now a blessing. He is making right the wrongs he has done to his community. He is restoring the damage his sin has caused. Jesus says he is a son of Abraham, part of God's people, a member of the family of faith.

Zach encounters God's grace in the form of Jesus and all the sudden he is moved to action in a way that a lifetime of knowing God's law could never move him. He has something deeper and more powerful motivating him. So his actions go well beyond what God's law would have required of him. He's not looking at the rules anymore, he is looking at love.

I have 3 kids. My oldest is a girl and then two boys. For both of my boys, starting when they were very little, like 6 months old they started doing things like pulling their sisters hair. Boys often need to be reminded of rules like "don't pull girls' hair, no spitting on her, do not hit her with rocks." We never cover these rules in premarital counseling though. Why not? Because we know love has overwhelmed the need for lesser laws. A person motivated by love doesn't need those rules. He will want to cherish and pursue and protect.

It's what happens when Jesus's salvation comes into someone's life. They begin to be motivated by love.

This change of heart for Zacchaeus carried him the rest of his life. In history of the church, Clement was the bishop of Alexandria, and in a sermon of his, he says that Zacchaeus actually went on to become bishop of Caesarea. After this encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus eventually became a pastor, who told other people about Jesus's life changing grace that has the power to turn bullies into blessings.

Let's pray

God whether or not we would say that we are bullies, we know that you created us to be blessings. We want to be a blessing. So we ask that your grace, your acceptance, your friendship would change us in the same way it changed Zacchaeus...so that we can repent and obey as we are motivated by love.

Ok so we have some response time now. Any time we hear God's word we want to respond to it.

One way we respond is by singing and praising God.

Another way we respond is by going to God in prayer. So if you'd like to sit and pray, you can pray by yourself or as a family if you'd like to. We will also have people up front here who would love to pray with you about anything going on in your life. So if you'd like to come up front and pray with someone now is the time to do that.

We also respond by taking communion. Communion is when we remember the body and blood of Jesus broken and spilled for us on the cross so that we can be forgiven and accepted and befriended by God. Communion is reserved for those who have experienced Jesus's salvation, it's reserved for Christians. So parents we will trust you to navigate that for your family as you see fit.

So let's stand up together and we will sing and pray and take communion as we respond to God's word.