

Room for Jesus' Company

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[0 : 00] I want to invite you to use your imagination with me for a few minutes here. Because obviously, ancient Palestine, 2,000 years ago, in the time of Jesus is very different from what we see around Cyberport.

Jericho was a large, prosperous city built by King Herod. So when the Romans came in and occupied Palestine, Caesar gave King Herod the city.

And he built this massive city called Jericho, about a mile from the Jericho that you remember from the Old Testament. Basically, it evolved as like a royal estate with grand palaces and these beautiful pools fit for a king.

And a beautiful garden city also developed alongside of it. Because it was in a warm climate, which is nice for you guys from cold winters, it was actually established as the winter capital of Judea.

So the king would go there during the winter months and have his wonderful palace and rule from there. The political importance and wealth of Jericho would have made it a very attractive place for tax collectors, like we read today.

[1 : 14] And that wealth would also draw in, I would say, beggars and people in need. Because that was also a place where they could basically make their living by begging.

For those of you guys who have also maybe thought through the development of cities and infrastructure, water is essential to civilization. And a lot of Jericho's success was owed to the fact that they built these ditches and these different water channels to bring in water from the springs around the city.

So all of these things made it very much an oasis of greenery, as you'll see in this photo behind you. And this is just a photo from one of the tells, like a mound looking into over Jericho, a lush place.

And the next photo is a sycamore tree, a very common tree in Palestine, growing to about 20 to 25 feet, something that you could easily climb up onto if you had some ability.

So when you look at this next photo, this artist's reconstruction of Jericho, I just want you to visualize with me for a minute what it might have been to be like Jesus of Nazareth, this famous rabbi, this famous teacher, this famous savior and messiah, entering into this city for his only recorded visit to Jericho.

[2 : 50] With crowds of people gathering about, there's this buzz going on. And outside, outside the city, there was this blind man, laying by the roadside, calling out, Son of David, Son of David, have mercy on me.

There's people following, there's crowds, he's persistent, even they tell him to be quiet. He's like, Son of David, have mercy on me. And as Jesus slowly makes his way into the city, and the crowds are following, there's a short, wealthy man called Zacchaeus.

Can't really see, so he makes his way up to this tree, peers around, looking for Jesus, looking into the crowd. There's a buzz happening.

You know, when Jesus is out and about, when the crowds are there, there's almost a sense of anticipation. Something's happening. Something's gonna happen. Jesus is gonna do something amazing.

We're in this series on Advent, which celebrates how Jesus came to us. And it really gives us a chance to think about this question.

[4 : 12] Well, if Jesus really came to us 2,000 years ago, what do we do with that fact? Does it even mean anything to me? So today, I wanna take us through these two episodes that we just read from Scripture.

And I wanna show you how these two figures, the blind beggar on one hand, the wealthy tax collector on the other hand, situated in completely different places of the city, both physically and economically and socially, how these two figures had encounters with Jesus that actually left them completely changed.

At the same time, I also wanna show us how these stories translate to us. 2,000 years later, how do we make room for Jesus' company, his presence with us in 21st century Hong Kong?

If you notice in your Scripture reading, the reading actually spans two chapters. And the blind beggar story is in chapter 18, and the Zacchaeus story starts at chapter 19.

So just as a preliminary point, I want you to just remember, this division is maybe understandable if you consider Jesus' actual entry into Jericho as the key event.

[5 : 30] But actually, these two episodes, and I think why it's important for us to read them together is because they actually form a pair. They actually can be read together and complement each other.

And that's how I wanna walk us through this. And just be reminded, even when you're studying and you're reading the Scripture on your own at home tonight, when you're rereading the Bible, don't be sort of sucked into just the chapter and verse divisions.

I think we've said this before, but it's worth repeating. I don't think the chapter and verse numbers, I don't think they're divinely inspired. They're more like a guide for you.

So when you're reading, just be mindful of that. Read the entire context in your own study as well.

Let's take it from the top of that story then with Bartimaeus, the blind beggar.

And in these two episodes, I want us to see, I think God wants us to see that they are both outcasts. Both of them are outcasts.

[6 : 34] And what do I mean by outcast? I think an outcast is simply anyone who is refused or perhaps restricted from full acceptance into society.

The blind man, and we know his name is Bartimaeus from Mark's Gospel, he obviously is an outcast, I think, because of his blindness. And in that day, that blindness basically stops you from full participation in society.

And he's been relegated to begging on the dirty roadside. And if you notice what he says to Jesus, he says what? Let me recover my sight.

And we can't be positive about this, but it's quite probable that Bartimaeus had his sight at one point. And for whatever reason, maybe sickness or some other cause, he lost that sight.

So Bartimaeus may even have known what it was like to have sight before he lost it. And not only is he now physically brought low, begging by the roadside, you know, when he's calling out for Jesus, he's calling out for help, the people around him, what do they do?

[7 : 44] They basically tell him to shut up. Right? Because he's just causing a disturbance. This beggar is just causing a disturbance and stopping us from seeing this massive Messiah, this rabbi, this famous person.

And we learned last week from Alfie that a common perception in this time was that sickness was often connected with sin. Maybe it was a result of the person's sin that caused his sickness, that caused his infirmity.

So there may have been something like that also weighing in the mind of Bartimaeus and the people. That's where Bartimaeus is in life at that point.

Now, Zacchaeus was at the opposite end of the spectrum, right? The title of chief tax collector, this is the only place it appears in the New Testament. But given that Jericho was a major toll collection point in a trade route, it would have made sense for there to be a chief tax collector there, overseeing a bunch of other tax collectors.

It would have been a very logistical place to gather taxes. But what we can be certain about, I think, is that Zacchaeus was loaded.

[8 : 59] He was filthy rich, if you want to use another term. This man had wealth. However, despite his prosperity, he was despised by the average Jew.

Why? Because as a Jewish person, he symbolized the authority of the Roman government who had come to conquer and oppress and basically take our money.

And he was an instrument of that. He was a symbol of that. The story says that the people started grumbling because they considered Zacchaeus to be a sinner.

But Jesus still went to stay with them. Tax collectors in the day were known to overcharge and basically line their own pockets to get more money for themselves and not just collecting for the government.

So there were probably people who were angry over that sense of corruption and perhaps jealous over his immense wealth. One commentator thinks that Zacchaeus' house was probably one of the finest in Jericho because of his position.

[10:15] And I imagine maybe if that was in Hong Kong today, he would have had a nice, nice, beautiful house on the peak. Zacchaeus probably had his circle of friends, his elite friends and tax collecting colleagues.

But at the end of the day, I think it would have been very clear that he was scorned by the average person. He was probably aware of his reputation.

Wildly successful in monetary wealth, but despised by the average person. Like Bartimaeus, Zacchaeus was also an outcast.

It's clear that both of these men recognized that something wasn't right in their lives. Their situations in life didn't really line up with the ideal.

They had this ideal. I mean, there should be acceptance. There should be friendship. There should be community. But somehow, they were outcasts. For Bartimaeus, we know that his blindness was something that burdened him.

[11:21] Or he wouldn't have called out so persistently for healing. Even when people told him to be quiet. Zacchaeus's inner turmoil, it's not explicitly stated in the text, I think, but I think when you look at what he's doing, it's something clear.

We get a clue about his convictions. We see that he actually tried to climb this sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. And in that culture, it would have been very undignified behavior for a grown man to climb a tree.

And so there's something more, I think, we see in the subtext. Something more. It wasn't just curiosity that spurred Zacchaeus to look, to climb. There was something deeper that he was really seeking.

So, fast forward with me about 2,000 years now to Hong Kong, to Watermark, to these seats right now that you're sitting in, to the lives, your own lives, the lives of the people around you.

Think about this for a moment. Who are the outcasts of society? Maybe your mind just went to the homeless people down in St. Barnabas that some of us have been serving.

[12:53] Or the working girls and pimps down on Lockhart Road in the red light district. Or the refugees and asylum seekers that you see around in Hong Kong.

Or maybe the many domestic helpers that may be abused or exploited and often treated as second-class citizens in this world-class city. If those people came to mind, well, you're not wrong. I think you're absolutely correct in maybe thinking about these people. Those are the obvious examples, right? But let's dig a little deeper here.

Because if the issue of being an outcast is actually fundamentally about finding full acceptance in our society, in our communities, amongst our peers, then I think we're actually all in danger of being outcasts.

Or at least every one of us has a part within us that is outcast. You know, we spend so much of our lives creating and following all these standards.

[14:01] Whether we create them ourselves or we see them around us, all these standards that act as dividing walls, separating the good and the bad, the elite and the average, the acceptable and the unacceptable.

But the truth is there are aspects of your life that always fall short of these standards, right? And if these things, if they were all exposed and brought to the forefront, you would become an outcast in some way.

Maybe you already feel that way. Or if you're like Bartimaeus, maybe you had your sight and you lose something like that and boom, everything is lost.

Outcast. These are the parts of our lives that we're not proud of. The things you do and think that you would never come close to posting on Facebook.

You know? When I whip out my phone and I have my Facebook app, now they always ask me at the top in the status update, what's on your mind right now? And there's things I would never type on that impressed post.

[15:08] Right? It's that bad photo that someone tagged you in, you know, when the angle is coming up like this. Right? You hate that photo because the double chin is right there. Right?

I got that. You know what I'm talking about, right? And you just can't click untag fast enough because it's a bad portrayal of you. That double chin is no good.

And I mean, we joke about that and that's a funny example, but I think there's, there is a sense of being outcast based on our physical beauty, isn't there? When you compare yourself to a magazine cover, there are outcasts wrestling with their appearance.

What about relationships? What about broken relationships and things that seem to have scarred us seem to taint our lives? What about sex and drug addictions?

There was an article in CNN about a year ago, I'm sure many of you guys read about, read this, it was written by a British banker who basically literally, he literally wrote the headline was, Leaving Hong Kong Saved My Life Because of the Drug Culture.

[16:26] And like Jericho, this is a wealthy city, a trade hub, a finance hub, with plenty of opportunities for honest and dishonest gain.

Have you done anything in this city that you're ashamed of? I have. And even if we're not obvious outcasts, there is part of us that is anxious, I believe, and even terrified of becoming an outcast. And I think that's why we band together and we gossip about other people and we bully other people and we scorn them and we make fun of them. That's why this us versus them mentality is so powerful because sometimes it's easier to demonize and make someone an enemy, right?

To make myself feel better. And I wonder if some of us, even when we think about being made fun and bullied, how much some of us maybe are still carrying around baggage from being bullied when we were kids.

So we go around with these masks, we save face, we pretend that everything is perfectly fine, even maybe on a Sunday for worship service because we've got to bring our Sunday best, right?

[17:41] We've got to make sure everything's perfectly fine. I want to take us back to Jericho again. Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus understand that things aren't right in their lives and they're looking for the one who can change that.

For Bartimaeus, although the crowd introduces Jesus as Jesus of Nazareth, he instantly identifies him as Jesus, son of David.

A son of David is actually a title for the Messiah who was supposed to come and save the Jews. So as he cries out again despite being rebuked by the people around him to be quiet, he is showing some measure of recognition that Jesus is special.

He has this faith to ask Jesus for a miracle. Jesus, son of David, help me recover my sight. And Jesus meets Bartimaeus in his deepest brokenness, in his blindness.

For Zacchaeus, I love what Jesus does in his situation because there's no indication that Zacchaeus had any intention to call out to Jesus. He was just kind of lurking above in that tree, in that Christmas tree if you want to visualize it.

[19:05] He was just lurking, kind of looking, but something was stirring in him. And in a crowd of people where there was probably a hundred things vying for Jesus' attention, a hundred things around him, there's a buzz, right?

He's a celebrity. There's a crowd. He looks up at this stranger and he calls Zacchaeus by name. Jesus knows Zacchaeus' name.

He sees Zacchaeus. And when he declares that he needs to enter into this man's home as his guest, he is associating himself with Zacchaeus in a very personal, intimate way.

way. For Zacchaeus, on his part, we see that he received Jesus gladly. And that word in Greek is literally rejoicing.

And it's interesting because the word rejoicing is used a number of times in Luke, in this gospel, where Luke is trying to describe someone who has faith. He's expressing faith and he has that faith in Jesus.

[20:14] There's this genuine joy within Zacchaeus as he receives Jesus into his home. He's a changed man because the Messiah has come into his life and Jesus' declaration that he came to seek and save the lost, I think that indicates that Zacchaeus knew that he was lost.

He knew things weren't right. And for Bartimaeus, Jesus told him, your faith has made you well. That's what we read.

It made him well. And that Greek word for made you well is actually translated saved. So we see that even in the text there may be actually more than one aspect of his restoration here. Not only is he physically healed his sight, but there's some aspect of a spiritual salvation there. And it may not have been abundantly clear to these two men that there was a spiritual dimension of being saved, but it's really clear that they were no longer outcasts in their society. So fast forward again to today in this room. When we apply that to ourselves today, I think it's clear that we're all spiritual outcasts.

[21 : 39] Like what I was saying before, the ultimate problem isn't really being an outcast in this society on a horizontal level.

It's being an outcast because God created us to be in this loving relationship with him. But day after day, I find myself forgetting him and turning away from him, whether consciously or unconsciously. God calls that broken relationship, that turning away from him, one way we describe that is sin. And he sent his son, Jesus, to seek and save us, the lost.

I think one of the reasons why the stories of Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus are actually told together is because it's clear that those of us who are rich and prosperous like Zacchaeus are actually no better than that blind beggar.

I don't know the last time you thought of yourself as a blind beggar. That's not one thing that comes up in my mind when I wake up every morning. I'm just a spiritually blind beggar.

[22 : 52] So we need a savior because we can't save ourselves. We can't be perfect. I can't be perfect. I've tried. It doesn't work. I mess up daily.

I fall short daily. We need forgiveness. We need unconditional love and acceptance. And when we receive that gift from the God who created us, we are outcast no more.

We receive a completely new life and identity as a child of God. That's who we were created to be. Children of God.

I was just this past week I was walking to the MTR and saw this little boy maybe around five years old and he was kind of just stumbling.

Not really stumbling but he wasn't walking too steadily. He was just calling out Baba! Baba! And that means basically dad!

[23 : 54] Dad! So I was kind of taken aback and I just looked around to see what was going on.

And I think I saw his dad who was maybe on the other side maybe this far away kind of walking ahead of him and it was clear that seemed clear at least that maybe his dad wasn't very happy with him so he was kind of walking ahead and only occasionally looking back.

I know that's kind of a small illustration but it just hit me at that point when I was thinking about it like why don't I call out to my father with that kind of desperation and that simplicity?

My heavenly father. And he's not quite I don't think our heavenly father is like that dad like a kind of he was being kind of a jerk I think. our heavenly father isn't like that.

But why why don't I call out to him like that? Like I went I went through school I grew up I wear like a nice pair of slacks and shirt now and I think I've got it figured out.

Right? I don't know sometimes what I'm doing in these nice clothes I think maybe I should be wearing a onesie or my school uniform right? Because that would actually be a reminder that in relation to my heavenly father I'm always a child and I need to come with him come to him with that simplicity just like that little boy did.

[25 : 19] But somehow along the way I thought I grew up and I became mature and I fear sometimes that I look at God and I treat him as an equal. I say dad I've grown up now give me my inheritance I want to sort things out now myself.

And that's not the way our heavenly father wants. I think some of us in this room are like Bartimaeus. We want to call out to Jesus because we know we need him and if that's you today I encourage you be bold and call out to him because our heavenly father is not like that father that I saw on the street.

He's not running away from us he never runs out on us. there's healing to be found through faith in Jesus Christ. But the truth is I think many more of us are more like Zacchaeus.

Right? You know we're watching we're observing we suspect something's going on we're kind of too cool for school I always sat in the back row of lectures because I thought I was awesome.

Right? Only the nerds sat in the front row no offense because they were asking questions right? And you're just like oh stop asking another question I want to get out of class. But we suspect

something big is going on.

[26 : 44] You know Jesus is here there's a buzz but we're not quite sure how to approach it right? Maybe we don't think Jesus is really that special. Maybe we don't think that Jesus could really love us based on what we've done the things we've thought the things we've done the people we've hurt I don't know the depths of your heart and mind I know some of you pretty well but I don't really know the very depths of it you might not even know yourself and thankfully I don't need to because I'm not your savior but I want you to know that Jesus sees every one of you in this room right now those of you in the back whom I can barely see well I see Millen but I don't see you clearly people around you might not see you clearly but Jesus sees you and he actually calls each and every one of you in this room by name

Zacchaeus calls you by name and this might be uncomfortable for some of you but just take a moment right now to reflect on the fact that God sees the depths of your heart the depths of your mind he knows every bit of fear anxiety brokenness sin evil that's in your life and despite that he still wants to love you he still wants to forgive you he still wants to love you unconditionally he's God you may be on that sycamore tree just peering around not really knowing what's going on but he knows you're there and he wants to meet you exactly where you're at no more no less so just be honest about yourself because God knows already this is the amazing message of Advent we see it now even more clearly than Bartimaeus because we know

Jesus came as a baby as we've been singing this morning Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus had a glimpse of that but we see the whole picture God the creator of the universe infinite transcendent eternal unbound by time chooses to enter into our world into our lives into history as a human to bring us back to him someone told me once and I always remember the closest analogy he can think of is like if you and I decided we love ants so much that we decided to become an ant so that we can communicate with them that we could talk to them we could walk alongside them so that they knew that we identified with them maybe cockroaches instead of ants depending on your view of humanity right what God did in Advent is infinitely greater than that

I fear sometimes I just treat Jesus as some maybe glorified superhero like Superman I just call him when I need help and he comes to me no this is God God that sentence we repeated this morning God with us he is with us God is with us and he came to us so that we can be unconditionally loved and accepted come back to Jericho one last time with me because the critical element of this story is how Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus responded to Jesus because when we experience how amazing it is that God came to us when we experience this love this grace this unconditional acceptance the inevitable response is active it's generous it's radical it's a radical love and generosity that comes with that the blind beggar

Bartimaeus regained his sight and began following Jesus the text said glorifying God is what the Bible says and what happens when all the people saw his glorifying of God this miracle they gave praise to God you see that as he glorified God it pointed the people around him to the one that deserved glory not that I'm amazing now I can see I can do all these things now it was the one who gave me sight he deserves the glory Zacchaeus' response is astounding half of his possessions he gives to the poor and fourfold repayment for anyone that he had cheated before now if you look into this under the Mosaic law the law of Moses if a thief voluntarily confessed his crime he only had to restore what he took plus 20% on top of that so a fifth that was sort of the repayment the restitution if he stole something that he could not restore then he had to pay fourfold the value of that so you see

[32 : 45] Zacchaeus probably could have at least quibbled and argued I can just pay back 20% on top of what I cheated but no his instant reaction is I'm going to pay back fourfold to anyone who I may have cheated and you see what happens there when grace touches your life when something as amazing as Jesus comes into your life and shows that he is all you need you don't quibble about things like that you don't quibble about money and what you owe and what you don't owe radically generous fourfold anyone he had cheated the money just didn't matter anymore to Zacchaeus and if he was struggling maybe with finding his identity in his wealth then surely it demonstrates that having a relationship with Jesus changed everything and in giving specifically to the poor as we read in the text

I think Zacchaeus there's a hint that he also begins to see the outcasts around him the outcasts of society when Jesus comes into our lives we begin following him I think our response is also to begin seeing the things he sees caring about the things he cares about we really start to care about the

outcasts whether they're rich or poor we care about the people who are marginalized and oppressed we care about social justice because God has a heart of justice and mercy for the poor we want to see and experience God and we want other people to do the same just like Bartimaeus did above all we don't have to walk around wearing these masks anymore because when God the one who created you the one who determines what has value and does not have value when he accepts you and when he loves you you don't have to walk around pretending anymore you don't have to keep faking it you can put down that mask and be real and there's no basis for you to judge others anymore because you don't need to compare yourself with them we're just on a spiritual journey together and we're just trying to become more and more like

Jesus I just want to invite the band to come back up right now and feel free to start playing and the question I want to leave with you is very simple let's take a minute to reflect on that what's your response to Jesus calling you and coming into your life this Advent season for some of you maybe Zacchaeus is your example and your response is to give half your possessions to the poor I don't know that's between you and God but what is your response it's Advent Jesus is coming he's calling he wants you to know that he loves you no matter what's in your heart right now you don't have to be an outcast anymore you don't have to be afraid or anxious about becoming an outcast you can be a child of

God your heavenly father so what's your response idol doesn't grades that could be lifted our way or partir or he is different Certainly we can with Mang those things we know together We can change these to damn them It's that you can enjoy