

SERMON - ZACCHAEUS SUNDAY - January 21, 2018

According to the Hebrew understanding of holiness (*Qodesh*, *קֹדֶשׁ*), the Jew had to separate his/herself from all that was unclean and non-Jewish. This included separating oneself from all non-Jews (Gentiles) and Jews who were considered to be sinful or unclean. Tax collectors *par excellence*, represented a class of Jews who were avoided. In addition to fulfilling the unpleasant task of collecting the heavy burdensome taxes from one's fellow Jews on behalf of the hated pagan Roman Caesar, the tax collectors were notorious for demanding additional money which they embezzled for themselves.

Jesus' attitude and modus operandi was radically different. "I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world," says the Lord in John 12:47. Instead of judging and avoiding people, no matter who they were or what they supposedly did or did not do, Jesus deliberately sought out *everyone*, and especially those who were avoided and hated by the Jews, including the Gentiles and the tax collectors. Jesus engaged in a "table ministry." The Lord would eat with anyone, and it was at the dinner table that the Lord did some of His most brilliant preaching which led others to repent of their sins and receive salvation for their souls. Table fellowship in the Middle Eastern culture was a very serious, complex social event. The guest at your dinner table was considered an extended member of your family and was treated with great honor and respect. Obviously the observant Jew was very selective about who he or she sat at table with. Jesus ate and spent time with Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes and all the outcasts of society. It is no wonder that the Pharisees condemned Jesus for His practices. The Jews understood mercy (*hesed*, *חֶסֶד*), but only towards a fellow Jew, someone who was within the Covenant. Jesus extended mercy to *everyone*, including the Gentiles.

Jesus' actions transcended His culture and actually should define Christian culture as we know it. As Jesus' ministry grew, so did his popularity among the social outcasts of society. "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" Jesus says in Mark 2:17. If Jesus was to reach the lost, He must have some contact with them. He went to where the need was because "it is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick," Mark 2:17. Jesus broke societal taboos by sitting at Zacchaeus's dinner table, but his presence there shows that He looked beyond culture to people's hearts. Whereas the Pharisees wrote people off by judging others for their sins or their past, Jesus looked past all that and saw their need. The fact that Jesus saw individuals, not just their labels, no doubt inspired them to know Him better. They recognized Jesus as a righteous man, a man of God — the miracles He performed bore witness to that — and they saw His compassion and sincerity.

Jesus didn't let social status or cultural norms dictate His relationships with people. As the Good Shepherd, He sought the lost sheep wherever they have strayed. When Jesus looks up and sees Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree, Jesus invites Himself to Zacchaeus's house for dinner that night. It was a wonderful opportunity to share the good news of the Kingdom with someone who most needed to hear it. Yes, Jesus would be criticized for His actions, but what prophet ever lived without criticism? The example of Jesus cannot be more profound and necessary for us to imitate. Jesus' actions are the ultimate paradigm for how Christians should behave because Jesus is much more than a prophet, He is the Son of God. Jesus spoke truth to sinners and loved them; He offered them hope based on their repentance and faith in Himself (Mark 1:15).

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus didn't require people to change *before* coming to Him. He sought them out, met with them where they were, and extended grace to them in their circumstances. Change would come to those who accepted Christ, but it would be from the inside out. Jesus knew better than anyone that the kindness of God leads sinners to repentance (Romans 2:4). Speaking the truth in love, may we strive to imitate our Savior. May kindness, compassion, love, generosity, non-judgement and acceptance of others be the guiding forces in our lives. Amen.