



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Luke 19:2 “And behold, there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus, and he was a chief tax-gatherer, and he was rich.”

The story of Zaccheus is very familiar one to those who love the story of Jesus. He was the wee little man who climbed up into a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see. Cute song. Great story for VBS and kids classes. But there is a deeper lesson that is often lost here. How do we love the unlovable?

There are people that test our limits of patience. That co-worker who is obnoxious and rude. The family member who is demanding. The nosey neighbor. The church member who bugs you with the way they sing, who asks more questions than the police and who invites himself to things he is not invited to. There's the person who not only wears cheap perfume, but they use the whole bottle at a time. Then there is the one who hasn't bathed in a week and wears the same clothes every day. There is the person who picks his nose at his desk. Or, the one who listens in to your phone conversations and then wants to be a part of that conversation. All around us there are people who bother us, bug us, and love to spend their day telling us what we need to do better. They feel compelled to analyze the way we drive, the way we parent, and the way we spend our money. They are quick to give advice about all kinds of things, many of which they have no idea what they are talking about. In church, they love to give pointers to the song leader. They love to correct the preacher. They see mistakes and flaws everywhere but are not in any hurry to help out.

Zaccheus would have been viewed as one of the unlovables. He was a tax collector. The Jews hated that. He was taking their money and giving it to the Romans. The Romans kept the Jews from being an independent nation. Rome ruled. There were Roman laws, Roman soldiers and Roman taxes. How could one of the Jews help the Romans? And, the Romans didn't care much for the Jews. Even tax collectors, weren't loved by Romans. The Jews were odd. They had odd rules. They believed in only one God. On top of that, Zaccheus was a chief tax collector. He was at the top of all the tax collectors. He's the boss. Fellow tax collectors had to report to him and go by his rules. They would be jealous of him.

Unlovable people. They were around in the first century and they are around today. Most generally ignore unlovable people with the hopes that they will just go away. They never do. Jesus, with this one brief encounter with Zaccheus, shows us how the Lord treats the unlovable.

First, the Lord stopped and spoke to Zaccheus. Remember, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He has an appointment with the cross. Much is on His mind. He has been surrounded with people for three years.

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Now, it's time to do what He came to do, die on the cross for our sins. But, here's Zaccheus. He's climbed up a tree to see Jesus. He must have heard that Jesus once went to the home of a tax collector. And, among the apostles, the chosen, there was a tax collector. Jesus was not treating tax collectors like most Jews did. He was different.

Second, Jesus took time for Zaccheus. He invited himself to the home of the tax collector. This was much more than what little Zaacheus ever expected. He was hoping just to see Jesus. Maybe he could shout out something as Jesus passed. Instead, Jesus stopped. Called him by name. And now, He invited Himself to the home of the tax collector. Unbelievable. Doesn't Jesus know who this is? Doesn't Jesus realize that Jews don't go to the homes of tax collectors? Jesus didn't take on the common feelings that others had toward tax collectors.

Third, Jesus offered Zaccheus forgiveness. Folks get excited about the thief on the cross not being baptized, there were many others who Jesus forgave. The crippled man, who was lowered down through the roof while Jesus was teaching. The first thing Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven." Then the one thankful leper who returned to Jesus, he too was forgiven. Jesus did to Zaccheus what no one else would or could. Even if others could forgive Zaccheus, they would not. He's Zaccheus, you know, the tax collector. He doesn't deserve to be forgiven. That's the thought most would have had. Not Jesus.

Fourth, Zaccheus changed. He offered to give back what he has defrauded. He offered to give to the poor. This man had a changed heart. Jesus hadn't reached his home yet and already, there was a change in his thinking.

What do we learn from this?

Don't do what everyone else does. Be kind and love all people. Many folks are hungry for attention. They want someone to listen to them. Now, you may have to put up some boundaries for your sake and theirs, but open your heart and do what you can. You may have a Zaccheus in your life. By you, that Zaccheus may come to know the Lord and even change his life. From middle school on there have been the popular kids and those who wish they were. That doesn't change in high school. That doesn't change in college. That seems to carry through in life. The older one gets, the less he is concerned about what others think about him. But for many people, just to be included, invited, listened to, means so much.

We don't see ourselves this way, but it just may be that we appear unlovable to others. It might be because of our faith. It might be because we don't laugh at their obscene jokes or go drinking with them or act worldly. We may be the very ones who seem odd. It may be that we are the ones who are not invited, included or loved. That should never happen in church. Our fellowship ought to include a place for everyone. But, even if it does, there is one who will stop before us, call us by name and accept us into His family, and that is the Lord.

We don't need more laws about accepting and treating people nice. We simply need bigger hearts that are willing to take a chance and love the unlovable. I wonder what Jesus and Zaccheus talked about at his home? I expect it was more than taxes and the weather. I doubt Zaccheus ever forgot that conversation.

The unlovable meant the One who loves all.

Roger Shouse (used by permission)
