

I quoted earlier (chapter 5) from Pascal's *Pensees*, where he talks about the challenge of winning people to Christian faith. He says, "Men and women despise religion. They despise Christian faith. They hate it because they fear it is true. So, in order to win them we must begin by showing that Christian faith is not contrary to reason."

Then Pascal says, "We must show that it [the faith] is venerable in order to inspire respect for it. And then we must show that at its center is love."¹ That is what we are going to talk about today: *At its center is love.*

AN EVENT IN JERICHO

The text we will grapple with is not a parable. It is the account of an event that occurred on the eve of Holy Week. It is narrated by Luke in chapter 19 of his Gospel. Our Lord is journeying from Galilee, in the north, toward Jerusalem, in the south. He is entering Jericho, near the River Jordan. He'll go up from there to Bethany, and will later enter the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

As Jesus entered Jericho, crowds gathered to see this wonder worker. In the crowd was a man named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector, and rich. He sought to see this Jesus but could not, on account of the crowd and because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead to a point

where he knew Jesus would pass, and he climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him. (Sycamore trees have big leaves, unlike olive trees. Perhaps the species is mentioned because Zacchaeus could climb the tree and sit in its leafy branches without being seen.) And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down. I must stay at your house today."

This is something akin to a theophany. It is a marvelous moment to have your name called. Jesus saw him in the tree and said, "Zacchaeus, I see you in that tree. Come down; I want to stay at your house tonight." As you know, many Sunday School flannel graphs have been done about this story, and it has been told to many children. It is a fun text, and wonderful.

"Zacchaeus, come down from that tree. I want to spend the night in your house." And notice the next line, "And so he made haste and came down and received Jesus joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured." It isn't just the Pharisees and Sadducees murmuring. They regularly murmur. They are all murmuring--the disciples included. Jesus bothered everybody this time. They all murmured because "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." Luke was not complimenting Zacchaeus when he called him a chief tax collector, and rich.

The Roman tax collecting system was really sheer genius. They didn't destroy people when they conquered territories, or bring many of them back captive like the Egyptians did, parading throngs of prisoners, because then you have to feed them and that is not economically sound. Instead, conquer the territory and put them back into business, then tax them. Don't bring them back; bring the money back.

‘To do this the Romans put local kings in place, like Herod the Great, and established local authorities to tax the people. You need locals for that—people who know who has the land and the lambs and the wealth. But the tax collecting institution became corrupted because some people would protest the tax, and the tax collector would say, “Okay, I won’t tell them about all your wealth, but I’ll take about five sheep for keeping quiet.” Of course the tax collector goes right ahead and tells the Roman authorities about the man’s wealth anyway, so he’s got the five sheep from extortion plus the commission for collecting the taxes, and the Roman soldiers to back him up.

The people hated the tax collectors because of this system of protected corruption. This is why everyone murmured about Jesus’ going in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. “He has sold out his birthright,” they must have said. “He has sold out his people.” There is hardly anything worse than being a Quisling—someone who sells out to the Nazis. Yet a man named Quisling, who lived in Norway, did that. It makes you the worst kind of villain. And that is what the tax collectors were in the time of Roman reign in the Holy Land.

The text continues. When Jesus came to his house, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything [now he admits to fraud], I will pay back four times as much’ (Luke 19:8, NRSV). Zacchaeus repents concretely because of being with Christ. Zacchaeus doesn’t say he is sorry. He changes. He does something concrete; then he can say he is sorry.

Change is repentance. Repentance is more than being sorry; it is a turnaround. In fact, we can ruin a relationship by saying, “I’m so sorry.

Oh boy, there I did it again. I'm so sorry. You sure put up with a lot. Sorry." But, you're not going to change. Repent, *metanoie*, means "turn around" It is concrete; not just theoretical. I've said to young couples, "Don't do a lot of this 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' It may be a substitute for repentance. Change! Repent and change. Turn around and ask God for grace."

This is what Zacchaeus does. Notice that he determines to give half of his possessions to the poor. Would you call that repentance? "And if you were defrauded," he continues, "line up. I'll repay you fourfold."

Then Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also a son of Abraham." The word "salvation" here is one of the three words in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, that is used to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*, "peace." When the apostle Paul used the word "salvation," the word *shalom* is going through his mind. So you could translate it this way. Our Lord said, "*Peace* has come to this house. Shalom. Salvation. Wholeness has come to this house."

Then notice that Jesus restores Zacchaeus' identity. Salvation or peace has come to his house "since he also is a son of Abraham." In effect, Zacchaeus had given up this identity when he became an unscrupulous tax collector. He has sold out his people. Yet now, "He also is a son of Abraham."

The last sentence of this story is very moving. Our Lord says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost." Our Lord always referred to himself by the term "Son of Man," after a phrase from the book of Daniel. It was a codeword for the Messiah. The Gospels affirm that Jesus is the Son of God, but our Lord always calls himself Son of Man. "For

the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost”; and that sentence concludes St. Luke’s narrative.

THE SURPRISING CHRIST

There are a series of surprises in this incident. The first has to do with the near theophany we mentioned earlier. A theophany is in the first instance an appearance of God; but it has the special character also of ennobling the person to whom God reveals Himself. That was Zacchaeus’ experience.

The surprise is that Jesus would notice one person in a crowd. To be noticed, to be named, by a famous person—we don’t expect that. Imagine going through a reception line at Buckingham Palace while the protocol aide is moving you through. People who are really famous learn how to look to the next person while they are greeting you. “So nice to see you,” they say, then they look to the next person. And you are not offended. What do you expect? There is a long line. Would you expect the Queen of England to say, “Oh, sit down. I want to talk to you. How are things going in your family?” You wouldn’t even know what to say because you don’t expect to be noticed like that when you meet a famous personality.

You would not expect to be noticed by such a person at all if you were only one person in a crowd. Yet Jesus routinely does that. In His ministry He takes special notice of people. You never get the feeling that He is juggling oranges when He is talking to you, or looking to the next person in line. He takes you seriously.

Once He was standing in a crowd and a woman, superstitiously, desperately, wanted to touch his garment. He said, “Who touched me?”

And the disciples said, who touched you? Everybody is touching you.”

”No, somebody touched me, in a very special way.” And here was the woman, who is terrified. He noticed her. And he notices Zacchaeus, even by name. ”Zacchaeus, I see you in that tree. Come on down.” That is the first surprise.

The second surprise is that Jesus would befriend someone who has done so much harm to so many people, and so so publicly. ”Zacchaeus, come down. I want to spend today at your house.” Now, you have to know first century Bedouin/Jewish tradition. When you spend time with someone in their home they are obligated to you, and you are obligated to them. It’s a hospitality protocol that has a great deal of significance, To go in someone’s house or for them to invite you in their house is more than just hospitality; it implies the intimacy of friendship. So Zacchaeus joyfully comes down out of the tree.

The third surprise is that Jesus would fully restore a man who has abandoned his identity and sold out to the oppressors, the romans. ”This man is also a son of Abraham.” That Jesus would say that is a surprise.

The fourth surprise is that a person like Zacchaeus, who has made all his money by being hard hearted and totally corrupt and ruthless would repent. This man became rich by collecting money from both sides of the fence. It is amazing that a man like this would so thoroughly repent that he says, ”Half of my goods I give to the poor,” and ”I’ll repay fourfold anyone that I’ve defrauded.” A tax collector is simply not the type. Who likes to admit that they are guilty of fraud? That is a total surprise.

Now these surprises converge in one sentence that, I think, if we can understand, we will understand the center of the Good News. Pascal had said, "Love is at the core." We'll understand that love that is at the core of the gospel if we can understand one sentence in this passage. The one sentence is, "*They all murmured*" (Luke 19:7, RSV).

Why did they all murmur? Because the people were hoping that Jesus of Nazareth, coming down from Nazareth on His way to Bethany and then into the Holy City, might be the Messiah. But what He has done at Jericho has disappointed that expectation. We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls what the expectations of the people are for the Messiah. The Messiah they are looking for is one who will be like Elijah, the last prophet mentioned in the Old Testament. The last paragraph of the last book, Malachi, says that God will send the prophet Elijah at the great and holy Messianic Day.

Incidentally, that is why there is a vacant chair at the table of the Passover Feast, even at the modern Jewish Seder. It is called the Elijah Chair. At the end of the feast, the smallest boy in the family goes and looks out the door to see if Elijah has come. Then he reports, "He hasn't come yet," and that is the end of the Passover celebration.

But if the Jews of the first century were looking for a Messiah like Elijah, what would he be like? Elijah battled Jezebel, who brought in Baal worship as the wife of Ahab, the worst of all Jewish kings. Elijah had to battle Ahab and Jezebel. Ahab had instituted child sacrifice, which of course was an abomination to the Lord. Elijah had to oppose him, and finally there is the dramatic moment when Elijah confronts the priests and

prophets of the false gods Baal and Asherah at Mount Caramel. He called down fire from heaven to set the sacrifice to the true God afire, while the priests and prophets of the false gods were impotent. When that test was over, Elijah said, "Take all those people and kill them." And that kind of person is what the people in Jesus' day were looking for in a Messiah.

Remember the time that Jesus was at a banquet with the Pharisee, and the woman from the street, a prostitute, came in and anointed His feet and dried them with her hair? Remember what the Pharisee said? If this man were a prophet, He would know what sort of woman that was." The true prophet, the Messiah, will expose and conquer evildoers. This is the way the Old Testament ends. George Frederick Handel began *The Messiah* with these words from the fourth chapter of Malachi:

"But who can endure the day of his coming, . . . For he is like a refiner's fire. . . .

"Behold, the day comes burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. . . .

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances. . . .

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes." (Malachi 3:2; 4:1-5, RSV)

The fact is that John the Baptist, not the Messiah, came in the spirit and power of Elijah, denouncing in stern terms the sins of people like Zacchaeus (see Matt. 11:14). So it is not surprising that many asked John whether he was the Messiah. Although he denied that he was, John, like the crowds in Jericho, was somewhat disappointed in Jesus' mild behavior. He doesn't appear to take hold of evildoers and destroy them. So from prison John asked plaintively of Jesus, "Are you the Messiah, or shall we look for somebody else?" (see Matt. 11:3)

Jesus' answer is beautiful, but it is hardly what the crowds expected as a sign of the Messiah. Quoting Isaiah 61, He says, "Tell John that the poor have good news preached to them, that the prisoners are being set free!"

So back in Jericho, the crowds are right with Jesus when He sees the evildoer Zacchaeus and says, "I see you in that tree." Everyone says, "Finally! Here is our Messiah. He can spot evildoers even in a leafy tree, and He even knows his name! Now He'll say, 'You snake in the tree, come down from there and get what you deserve!'—just as Elijah might have done."

But all this Messianic evidence goes downhill fast. Jesus defends this sinner as a son of Abraham. He even extends the intimacy of friendship by staying at his home. Zacchaeus gains ground here, but Jesus loses ground. He simply was not what the people expected in a Messiah. That is why they murmured.

But how the love Jesus extended to Zacchaeus changed him! "I'll give half my possessions to the poor, and restore fourfold whatever I've extorted from people." We can tell when a man or woman has experienced the love of God. Their hands loosen. They become generous. I know it is true. I've seen it so many times. In fact, sometimes their family must rein them in,

or they'll give the whole family house away. But it is a beautiful thing to see happen. When you've experienced the love of God, you immediately loosen up; you're no longer desperate. You don't clutch at life.

When you experience this kind of love, you don't get your sense of purpose now from the company or from your friends. It has a wonderful affect on your children, because you are not demanding of them, insisting that they give meaning to your life. You now have a source of meaning that gives them meaning as well as yourself. It sets you free.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the more we experience the wide extent of Christ's Lordship, the freer we become, because our hands loosen up.² And that happens to Zacchaeus. Right in front of our eyes. "Half of my goods I give to the poor and to those I have defrauded I restore fourfold." A new sense of justice comes into his life. He wants to do the right thing, and it is just there in simple terms narrated by Luke. His hands loosen. He concretely repents, and that is the venerable affect of grace.

JERICHO IN MODERN PARABLES

Let me put this in a modern parable. We have children and grandchildren in high school. I have two little grandchildren who are only two, two and a half years old, but they are going to be in school pretty soon. You know the most terrifying hour of the day in the American high school? It's the lunch hour. Because during the lunch hour, if you are a nerd and an outsider, you eat in one place. If you're one of the jocks, one of the really popular kids, you eat in another place. If you have no friends at all, then you have no place to eat, and you have to eat in the cafeteria.

When my three children were in high school all the popular kids ate

in “The Pit,” as they called it. The kids who smoked and inhaled went out by the cars, outside the school. They were “the nobodies.” They were thought of as the greasy kids out there, by their cars. Then the nerds with plastic pen holders in their shirt pockets and with pens of all kinds were in the cafeteria, eating by themselves. But the popular kids were definitely in “The Pit.”

Here’s a guy, brand new to the high school, and he is scared to death—especially during lunch. He’s sitting there, obviously in the cafeteria; where else could he go? Here is another boy with the honor of eating in “The Pit.” As everyone knows, he’s the quarterback of the football team. He is sitting there and he sees this kid over in the cafeteria during lunch hour. He walks over to him and he says to him, “Hey, didn’t I see you at church last week?”

And the guy says, “Yeah, I go to your church.”

“My name is John,” says the quarterback.

“Yes, I know who you are,” the new guy says.

“What is your name?”

“Bill.”

“Good to meet you, Bill. Where are you eating lunch? Here? Come on over. I want you to meet my friends.” So the quarterback takes Bill over to “The Pit” and says, “Hey guys, this is my friend. He goes to my church. Bill is his name. I asked him to come and have lunch with us today.”

Now, what just happened in that lunch hour? Bill gained ground. All the teenagers in the cafeteria saw the quarterback come over to Bill, address him, and take him and his lunch over to “The Pit.” Who lost ground? John. As soon as John’s friends get him alone, they say, “Why did

you bring that stranger to our group? Who is he, the nobody? He may ruin our group.”

This is what happened in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. When the Messiah extended love to the sinner, Zacchaeus gained ground, while Jesus lost ground. Everyone murmured.

Suppose Jesus lands at the Las Vegas airport. He is coming down the plane steps, and over there on the tarmac is a limousine with tinted glass. In the back seat, the electric window comes down, just about that far, and Jesus looks over and says, “Hey, Jim. I see you there. May I spend tonight at your place—there on the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth floors of the Blue Lagoon Hotel?”

Jim is a known Mafia godfather. He owns the Blue Lagoon Hotel. “I’d love to have you spend the night with me,” he says. “Yeah, come on over.” And he opens the door to the limousine and Jesus gets in. You tell me: How is Jesus’ reputation going to fare with the Sierra Club and other public interest groups? How is that visit by Jesus to the Blue Lagoon going to play in the *New York Times*? Why, *USA Today* will pick it up with the headline, JESUS SPENDS THE NIGHT IN NEFARIOUS HOTEL! I mean, how can Jesus sustain his leadership, making a foolish choice like that.

THE HIGH COST OF GRACE

The big event we have seen in Zacchaeus’ life is like these modern parables. We have seen that the grace of God is a costly event that happens in our favor. Zacchaeus gains ground, but at Christ’s expense.

The fact is that Jesus profoundly fulfills the Elijah prophecy theologically and actually. He does what Elijah did, but there is a surprise

Remember what Elijah did? He found the 400 false prophets of Baal and the 430 false prophets of Asherah, and he lined them up for judgment. He won a victory. He knew who they were, and he revealed them and their evil acts. Jesus does this too, but here is the difference. At just the moment that the false priests and prophets are to be killed—that is, at just the moment you expect Jesus to rebuke and destroy Zacchaeus—Jesus Christ identifies *with* Zacchaeus and those false prophets and takes their punishment for them, on the Cross! The shadow of the Cross is over this event.

“They all murmured.” Jesus won no friends that day. He lost friends. Maybe this is when He lost Judas, I don’t know. Some people think Judas was a zealot. Maybe here Judas said, “I have had it with this man. He’s now sided with the tax collectors. I might as well betray Him.” Jesus won no friends. The shadow of the Cross is here at Jordan. What Jesus does is to stoop down to find us. St. Augustine put it this way: “Proud man would have died had not a lowly God found him.”³

Here is the Good News. Our Lord fulfills the Elijah prophecy in that he ferrets out evil. But He takes the punishment for the evil doers. That is what happened at Calvary. That is why there can be only one foundation, only one Lord. But that one Lord is very generous. He is able and willing to identify in this case with Zacchaeus, an understandably rejected person, and, surprisingly, even to take his place on the Cross.

CONCRETE LOVE FULFILLS PROPHECY

The narrative about Zacchaeus is not an illustration of grace; it is the very thing itself. Love in the New Testament is not an idea. It is concrete. It is an event. It is the Cross. It is the empty tomb. It is an event that happens.

The Jews in the first century felt that Israel was the "suffering servant of Isaiah 53: "All we like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." The expectation in the first century was that the Messiah will be the ensign who will startle the nation, like Elijah. Jesus Christ does fulfill the prophets, but in a way no one expected. No one expected that Jesus Christ would conquer evil by absorbing it. That is what we see happening here underneath that tree, and in that high school quarterback's acceptance of the new guy at school. These are concrete events that reflect the love of Christ.

After C. S. Lewis' wife, Joy Davidman, died, he wrote down his thoughts in the little book called *A Grief Observed*. He first published it under the name N. W. Clerk. People started coming up to Professor Lewis saying, "We know you are grieving after the death of your wife." We just read a book that we think will be helpful to you." Finally Lewis admitted that he had written the book himself.

Lewis wrote, "What do people mean when they say I'm not afraid of God because I know He is good? Have they never been to the dentist? But this is unendurable." This he wrote before Joy died, when she was suffering from cancer of the hip, and it was so painful. He said,

'This is unendurable and then one babbles, "If only I could bear it, or take the worst of it, or any of it, instead of her," but one cannot tell how serious that bid is, for nothing is staked on it. If it suddenly became a real possibility, then for the first time, we should discover how seriously we meant it. But is it ever allowed?"⁴

In other words we see somebody suffering, maybe your own youngster or someone we love very much and we say, "Oh I wish I could have that disease instead of that youngster." But nothing is staked on that sentence because we can't do it. As much as we love someone, we can't take his or her leukemia or anything else on ourselves.

Then Lewis says, "If it were possible, then we'd see what we really meant; if we really meant it. But is it ever allowed? It was allowed to one, we are told. And I find that I can now believe again. That He has done vicariously whatever can so be done." And here is a great line from Lewis, "He replies to our babble, 'You cannot and you dare not. I could and I dared.'"5

This is the mystery of Jesus Christ. He could take Zacchaeus' place, and He dared to do so. Let's not be too hard on Elijah. Elijah could not take the place of the false priests and prophets, but Jesus Christ can, and that is what no one expected. He would conquer evil by taking it on Himself. It killed Him, but He is the one who could not only absorb evil, and disarm it; He could conquer death itself.

One last quotation from Lewis, this time from his book, *Miracles*. It is from the great chapter of this book in which Lewis makes the case for Jesus Christ. Listen to the way he does it by creating another parable. He writes:

In the Christian story, God descends to re-ascend. He comes down, down from the heights of Absolute Being into time and space and down into humanity and down further still, if embryologists are right, to recapitulate in the womb, ancient and

pre-human phases of life, down to the very roots and sea bed of the nature He created.⁶

That is Lewis' way of saying that Jesus Christ became a real man. He is not a phantom. He is not a Spirit about five inches above the earth. He is a man, a real man. He called Himself the Son of Man, not the Son of Angels. He is not a ghost. He suffered. He conquered death, and His victory is real; but, He is a man.

Lewis continues:

He goes down to come up again, and He brings the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man, stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great, complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift. He must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass weighing on his shoulders.

Or one may think of a diver. First he reduces himself to nakedness and then, flashing through the air he is gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water and into the black and cold water, on down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay.

How do you like that description of white-collar crime or adultery? Here Lewis calls it "ooze and slime and old decay." Typically, he puts it in an unforgettable way. He continues.

Then up again, back to color and light. His lungs are almost bursting, until suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping precious thing he went down to recover.⁷

That's Zacchaeus, the dripping, precious thing. So are the false prophets and priests in Elijah's day, and so are you and I. We had lost our color down in the darkness of the ooze and slime and decay, and, as Lewis said, Jesus lost His color, too. Then, this last line is again vintage Lewis: "He and it are both colored now that they have come back up into the light."

There is the "venerability" of which Pascal wrote. That is what we celebrate on Easter Sunday. Experiencing the love of God has a good effect on your life. You become truly who you are. You get your color back.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 8

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (New York: Modern Library), 64.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, source unknown.
3. St. Augustine, source unknown.
4. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam), 51.
5. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 51.
6. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 115.
7. Lewis, *Miracles*, 115.