

DO YOU HAVE THE FAITH TO BEGIN A NEW LIFE?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

During our recent men's retreat at Mt. Hermon, we had the pleasure of hearing firsthand the spiritual journeys of several men. We heard how a financial investor, a judge, a lawyer, an auto mechanic, and a former general all were living out their physical and emotional lives on this earth, but each of them sensed that something was missing; they sensed an emptiness within their souls. In time, each man in his own way realized that this emptiness could only be filled on a spiritual level if he placed his faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. And at the retreat, the men related how our Lord had given them a new spiritual life, and that their hearts had been filled with a sense of wholesomeness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. On Wednesday morning at our "Agora" men's breakfast, another man who had heard the teaching of Michael Green, as well as the spiritual journeys of these men, told us that in the midst of his spiritual emptiness--he had lost his marriage, his job, his children, and his brother had died recently--he had placed his faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, and as of Saturday evening at the retreat, his new life in Christ began.

In Luke 18:35-19:10, to which we come this morning, we will discover another three men who had faith to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, resulting in a new life for themselves. As we look at this passage, some of you may need to ask yourselves the question, "Do I have the faith to begin a new life with Jesus, who came to this earth as the Son of Man"? For this is why he came, that we might have life.

Two blind beggars did!

And it came about that as He was approaching Jericho, a certain blind man was sitting by the road, begging. Now hearing a multitude going by, he began to inquire what this might be. And they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. And he called out, saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and commanded that he be brought to Him; and when he had come near, He questioned him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And he said, "Lord, I want to receive my sight!" And Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight, and began following Him, glorifying God; and when all the people saw it, they gave praise to God. (Luke 18:35-43)

Jesus and his disciples had been in Perea, ministering among the people and the Pharisees, teaching about the Kingdom of God. In Luke 18:15-34, Jesus blessed the children and declared that "such is the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all." Then for the seventh time he told his bewildered disciples that he must continue his journey to Jerusalem, to be crucified for the sins of humanity, and that he would be buried, and raised on the third day. The disciples at this point were spiritually blind to God's plan of redemption.

According to the *Harmony of the Gospels*, after the Lord told them this, they continued to think of the return of the physical kingdom. In Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:35-45, James and John and their mother came to Jesus and in their spiritual blindness asked him if they could sit to the right and left of him when he came into his honor and glory. But Jesus rebuked them and told them that they did not understand what they were asking, for before that time he had to face the cross, and they would also have to suffer for his name's sake. In the next two events on the way to the cross, recorded in Luke 18:35-19:10, our Lord is going to use two blind men and a crooked tax collector to show the disciples, the people of Jericho and us that it is only when we place our faith in him can we

be set free from our *spiritual blindness* and *corrupt hearts* and begin a new life that honors him.

"And it came about as He was approaching Jericho..." Jesus had headed south along the Jordan river until he arrived at Jericho, the world's oldest city, located on the north shore of the Dead Sea, 600 feet below sea level. Some 1400 hundred years earlier, Joshua had led the people of Israel out of the wilderness into the promised land, and Jericho was the first city in Canaan that they needed to defeat. The Lord asked his people to march around the city seven times and then the walls came falling down and the city was defeated. Long before the reign of Herod I, Jericho was already "a little paradise," with its palm trees, rose gardens, its streets lined with sycamores, its delightful climate, etc. Herod the Great and his son Archelaus had made it even more beautiful. A grand winter palace had been built there, and also a theater and a hippodrome. In the days of our Lord's ministry the city was also the home of many of the Jewish priests and Levites. When it was their turn to serve in the temple, they would begin the 15-mile, 6-hour journey up to Jerusalem, which was some 2600 feet above sea level. Jericho was also a city of publicans, of government officials who worked on behalf of the Romans, because of its central location for trade between Jordan and Israel and Egypt. Thus there were many tax-collectors stationed there.

"And a certain blind man was sitting by the road begging. Now hearing a multitude going by he began to inquire what this might be. And they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by..." According to Matthew 20:29-34 and Mark 10:46-52, these events occurred as our Lord was walking through the city. In Matthew's account, two blind men were sitting by the road, and Mark names the most vocal one as Bartimeus the son of Timaeus (son of honor). Upon hearing the shuffle of feet and the voices of a large crowd, Bartimeus asked someone who was willing to listen, "What is going on?" He was told that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was passing by, and that he was accompanied by a crowd of local people. Apparently, by word of mouth this man had heard of Jesus.

Try to imagine in your mind's eye the difficult position these two blind beggars were in. They apparently had found each other through family members or friends, so there was some companionship and mutual understanding of their physical, emotional and spiritual state. They were two Jewish men who were placed outside the normal social circles, humbled to the point of depending on others. They had to live with the terrible reality that they had no hope of ever being able to see.

Most humiliating of all was the fact that that they had been reduced to the rank of beggars, a violation of Deuteronomy 15, the Law of God, which said "...there shall be no poor among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, ...If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks" (15:4; 7-8). It was bad enough that these two men were blind, but according to the Law, they should have never been forced to beg among their own people. They were a symbol of how blind the disciples were concerning the kingdom of God, and the nation was about God's wonderful plan of redemption.

"And he cried out, saying, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' And those who led the way were sternly telling him to be quiet; but he kept crying out all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'" Bartimeus, the more vocal of the two blind beggars, called out to Jesus in a most interesting way, addressing him by the Messianic title, "Son of David." Earlier in his ministry, the crowd as well as the Pharisees watched as Jesus cast out a demon who had caused a man to be blind and dumb. The crowd said in amazement, "This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?" The Pharisees at that time said no, he was not the Son of David, the long-promised Messiah, for he had cast out the demon by the power of Satan, they charged.

However, the blind man saw more than those who had eyes to see but whose hearts were hardened to spiritual truth. The crowd called him Jesus of Nazareth, but the blind man used the title "Son of David." He was referring to the great promise of God, recorded in 2 Samuel 7:12-16 to King David, "...I will raise up your seed after you, who will come forth from you and I will establish his kingdom" (see Psalms 89). The prophet Isaiah would write years later, "Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him..." (11:1-9). (See Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:2-24.) This blind beggar also

knew that the Messiah would give sight to the blind, based on Isaiah 35:5, "The recompense of God will come, but He will save you. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened..."

"Have mercy on me," cried the blind man. Mercy is the grace of God extended toward those who are helpless, those who can't change their circumstances. Have you ever felt helpless, that you have no hope, that you are your wit's end? This is when God hears the prayers of his people. If we have never cried out for mercy we are not living realistically. Jesus stopped and commanded that the man be brought to him, and when he had come near, he questioned him, "What do you want Me to do for you?" This is the same statement Jesus made to his two disciples when they came to him in their spiritual blindness and asked to sit on his right hand and his left hand in the kingdom. They should have asked him the same thing Bartimaeus was about to ask, "Lord, I want to receive my sight!" "And Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has made you well (saved you). And immediately he received his sight, and began following Him glorifying God; and when all the people saw it, they gave praise to God.'"

These two men were spiritual symbols of the blindness of Israel when it came to recognizing their Messiah and King. They wanted a king who would overthrow the hated Roman oppressors and establish his kingdom in righteousness. They struggled with the concept of a Servant King who was willing to suffer and die on a cross for their sins (Isaiah 53). The disciples had the same problem with Jesus: They were not aware of their spiritual blindness for they were looking for places of honor in the kingdom. They rejected the necessity of Christ's suffering on the cross, as well as their own call to follow Jesus into their own personal suffering and death for the sake of the gospel (Mark 10:39).

As we look at our own lives, I think many of us also are spiritually blind to all that the Lord is doing in the Age of the Spirit and what he wants to do in our lives during these "difficult days" before his second coming in glory and honor. We need to live life as God intends it to be lived, not as our society would have us believe. You know, I have never in all my life spent a day rafting on a raging river and then was greeted by six beautiful women dressed in bikinis and carrying a case of beer, yet this is the kind of fantasy we see nightly on television commercials. What a distortion of reality, of women, of life itself. Truly, we need eyes to see what God is doing and what he wants to do in and through his people. God wants to bring us to spiritual maturity. Just like a baby grows up and eventually becomes an adult, so also the Christian grows naturally into spiritual maturity. This is what God wants for us, to come to the place where we truly understand "our life is no longer our own; it has been brought with a price." He wants us to willingly "take up our cross daily" so that his life can be clearly seen in us. He wants us to be willing to say to him day by day, "Lord we want our eyes to be opened spiritually so that we can see who you really are and what you really want us to be like in your spiritual kingdom until you come again in honor and glory."

Last week, I was involved in a memorial service for a beautiful young woman of nineteen who died accidentally. Scores of her young friends came to the service. She and many members of her family had a religious background but had put that aside for a variety of personal reasons. As I had the opportunity to talk to them, however, I discovered that many of them, as well as her friends, in the midst of their spiritual blindness were calling out in the best way they could, "Son of David, have mercy on us." The parents did not want a religious service, but they asked a young friend to sing *Amazing Grace*. They asked me to read Psalm 23, and to ask God to bring comfort to the hearts of the family and friends with a prayer. After the large memorial service, most of them accompanied the funeral procession up to Skylawn Memorial Park. There once again I had the opportunity to present the good news of Jesus Christ, as I told the story of the raising of Lazarus. Again I was amazed how many of the spiritually blind came to talk to me with the humble attitude of a sheep looking for a shepherd. I want you to pray with me that in the days ahead many in that family, as well as many of her friends, will come to Jesus and in faith ask him to give them spiritual eyes and eternal life.

Do you have the faith to begin a new life? Two blind poor beggars did!

A rich tax man did!

And He entered and was passing through Jericho. And behold, there was a man called by the

name of Zacchaeus; and he was a chief tax-gatherer, and he was rich. And he was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. And he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to Him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly. And when they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because, he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Luke 19:1-10)

"And He entered and was passing through Jericho. And behold there was a man called by the name of Zacchaeus [the righteous one], and he was a chief tax-gatherer, and he was rich." In Luke 18:18-27, we discovered that our Lord had told the young rich man he could receive eternal life if he sold all that he had and distributed it to the poor; he would have treasures in heaven rather than on earth. Unfortunately, the man was very rich and he felt he could not do this. Jesus understood the pressure he was facing. This is why he said to the disciples, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" Those who heard him said, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answered, "The things impossible with men are possible with God." Now this spiritual principle will be worked out in the life of another rich man. All who knew him would have said of him, "Zacchaeus, the chief tax-collector! That sinner could never be saved!" Well, we will see.

Jesus continued walking from the north of city to the southwestern end in order to get onto the Jericho road that leads up to Jerusalem, and the crowd followed him through the city. Living in the city was a man named Zacchaeus, a Jew. His name was derived from Zakki, which means "the righteous one" (Ezra 2:9; Neh. 7:14). This man was a chief tax-collector in Jericho, one of the three major Roman trade centers. (The others were Capernaum in the north, where Matthew once worked as a tax-collector (Matt. 9:9), and the western seaport of Caesarea.) Zacchaeus was like a commissioner of customs in Jericho. The Romans hired Jews to collect taxes from their countryman. The Jews regarded these tax-collectors as extortionists; the Jewish Zealots looked upon them as traitors; and the Romans hated them. Not the best of occupations for a man like Zacchaeus, except that he was rich. But the Romans and the Jews knew that he had become rich through dishonest means.

Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, but he was unable to because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. Word was spreading fast around town about the healing of the two blind beggars whom most people would have seen or known. Zacchaeus went to seek out this Jesus of Nazareth, only to be confronted with a large crowd surrounding Jesus. You can be sure that no one in that crowd was going to open up a space for him to get closer to the Lord. He was too small to demand a front row seat, so he ran ahead of the crowd on the main street and "...climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way."

"[Jesus] looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.' And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly. And when they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, 'He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.'" Our Lord looked up into the tree and saw a hated and spiritually desperate man looking down on him. Zacchaeus wanted to be cleansed of his sin. He wanted a new beginning, a good relationship with God and his people, and he was willing to make all wrongs right.

David Gooding, in his book "According to Luke," wrote: "In that moment Zacchaeus not only saw who Jesus was, he discovered his own long-lost identity. He was a man loved by God with an eternal love, and longed for so much that God had sent his Son on purpose to find him and to rescue him from his lostness by coming personally to his home and bringing the sense of acceptance with God into his very heart." The Lord once again was willing to eat, fellowship, and sleep with sinners. Why? Because there are no other kinds of people! "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," says Paul (Rom. 3:23). Zacchaeus was thrilled that Jesus had seen him, and he gladly invited him into his home. In contrast, the Jewish crowd showed their true colors of self-righteousness. They began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." Earlier in our Lord's ministry, the same thing happened in Capernaum, when Matthew left his job and followed Jesus. He gave our

Lord a big party and invited his tax-collector friends and other friends... "And the Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying 'Why do you eat and drink with the tax-gatherers and sinners?' And Jesus answered and said to them, 'It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call righteous men but sinners to repentance'" (5:29-32).

"And Zacchaeus stopped [stood in his home in front of all the other guests] and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.'" This rich man is quite different from the rich young ruler. Sitting with Jesus and his disciples in his home, it was not long before he begins to understand the message of the kingdom of God and how one could receive eternal life. Three years earlier, John the Baptist preached, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). Luke records that at this same time "...some tax-gatherers also came to be baptized, and they said to the prophet of God, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And He said to them, 'Collect no more than what you have been ordered to'" (3:10-14). Obviously, Zacchaeus was well taught in the Law of Moses, and now that law was now being used to convict him of sin. According to Exodus 22:1, Numbers 5:6 and Leviticus 6:6, Zacchaeus' heart was willing to go beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law, to true spiritual repentance. Later, on the day of Pentecost, Peter would preach in the temple, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Zacchaeus was willing to repent of his sin and place his faith in Jesus as his Messiah, Savior and Lord.

And what was Jesus' response? "Today, salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham." This is an amazing moment for the crowd as well as Zacchaeus. The Lord saw this man's heart and his declared repentance, his willingness to turn away from sin and step towards Christ as his Savior. Zacchaeus was not just saying these words to Jesus, but to all within hearing range at the dinner. This was a practical demonstration of a true desire to repent of his sins, and he sealed it with his willingness to repay all those whom he had cheated. In response to this public confession, our Lord declared that spiritual salvation had come to his house that day. Why? Was it because of his confession? No, it was because he had placed his faith in Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah, and that faith was the same faith that Abraham had placed in God, as we see in Genesis 15:6, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness." Zacchaeus (the righteous one) was finally declared righteous because of his faith in Jesus as the Christ of God, resulting in good works (Gal.3:7).

"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost," said Jesus. When Luke uses the term "Son of Man," he is speaking of God in his humanity, and God's willingness to relate to fallen humanity. Jesus is the last Adam, in contrast to the first Adam, who fell into sin in the Garden (1 Cor. 15:45). The Son of God is his divine name; the Son of David is his Jewish name. The Son of Man as the Good Shepherd of Psalms 23, Ezekiel 34 and John 10 was willing to "seek and to save that which is lost," whether Jew or Gentile, poor or rich. "I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."

As we have been studying the Gospel of Luke, we have found that 19:10 is the key verse in this book, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost." The story that perhaps best illustrates the work of the Good Shepherd is the one that Jesus told the Pharisees, the sinners and the disciples in 15:4: "What man among you if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?" And what sheep did he seek and find in this gospel? Well, there was Peter, James, John, the former paralytic, Matthew, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, James and Simon the Zealot, Judas, and Judas Iscariot. Then there was the Roman centurion, and the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. There was Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna, who had been formally possessed by evil spirits and cured from sickness. There was Legion, the former demoniac, Jairus, the synagogue official, the hemorrhaging woman who touched the fringe of his cloak and was healed, the crooked woman who stood up for the first time in some 18 years, the Samaritan leper who thanked him, two former blind beggars, and now Zacchaeus. Each and every one of them was willing to place their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and then they began their new life, an abundant and eternal life full of wholesomeness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Do you have the faith to begin a new life? Two beggars in Jericho simply cried out in their physical blindness, "'Son of David! have mercy on us!' And Jesus came to them and asked, 'What would you have me do?' and they said to Him, 'Lord we want our eyes to be opened.' And Jesus said, 'Receive your sight, your faith has made you well, (physically) and saved you (spiritually).'" A rich tax collector wanted to know who Jesus was, so he climbed up a tree to see him as he passed by. Jesus saw his heart and asked if he could stay at his home that night. In the process of discovering who Jesus really was, this man repented of his sins and invited Jesus to become his Lord and Savior, and by faith became a true spiritual son of Abraham. Several men testified last week at our men's retreat that Jesus opened their eyes to the spiritual reality that he was the Son of David, the Son of God, and that if they placed their faith in him as the only one who could save them, he would give them eternal life. Do you have the faith to begin a new life? Place that faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior and you will receive eternal life immediately, for he is the only one who can save you.

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