

The Father's Love

- Good evening, brothers. Tonight I want to share a personal prayer experience that helps put into perspective our ultimate purpose in life. Every one of us has asked God to help us to know his will at various times in our lives.
- Sometimes this question is posed in the context of asking God what we are to do with our lives. Sometimes we are asking for God's perspective when undertaking a new ministry. Sometimes we are seeking God's will in a decision we have to make.
- Sometimes it is a question of desperation or exasperation when we silently ask God "What am I doing in this meeting?" or "Who is this person and what does she want?" or "What is he talking about and why should I care?"
- I hope this last question isn't running through your mind right now. If it is, please be patient with me. I think you will understand and relate to the message that will come through.
- I was in an inquisitive phase of life a few years ago. We were coming out of our forced COVID isolation and I had just left my government engineering job. I went on a week-long retreat to reflect on my life and to seek God's guidance for what was ahead of me.
- About mid-way into the retreat, my spiritual director suggested a scripture reading to me that would help me to know Jesus a little more intimately. It was Luke 19:1-10 about Zacchaeus the Tax Collector.
- When it was time to pray with this Gospel reading, I asked Jesus if he would come outside with me in the twilight hour so we could read the scripture passage in the last rays of daylight. I had a hopeful anticipation for learning something new about myself.
- I centered myself on Jesus and opened my heart and then opened the Bible to read the scripture passage. Let me read it to you to refresh your memory of it.

¹He came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. ²Now a man there named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, ³was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. ⁵When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." ⁶And he came down quickly and received him with joy. ⁷When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner." ⁸But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over." ⁹And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost."

- I was almost finished reading it during my prayer session, and I remember thinking to myself that nothing of significance jumped out at me. As I got to the very last line “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost,” I thought simply “What do I have in common with Zacchaeus who was lost and now is saved?”
- But Jesus instantly replaced that trifling thought with a personal revelation that took this prayerful reading in a completely different direction. This prayerful reading wasn’t going to reflect something about me at all.
- Jesus wasn’t there with me that evening to save me or to give me a personal task or mission. He was there to show me his mission; the mission he has shared with all of his disciples. I felt warmth in my heart and a confidence inside of me.
- As I waited in silence for more to come, I asked him “Did I miss something?” The answer came back “Read it again,” so I did. I got about two thirds of the way through it and stopped with an enlightening thought. Not only did Jesus announce Zacchaeus’ salvation, but he lifted him up in front of all the other Jewish people there because Jesus sees the value of every person.
- All the Jews in the crowd hated this man because he was the chief tax collector and a sinner in their eyes. They all dismissed him as a person. But Jesus saw him for the resourceful and determined man that he was and the loving person that he could become.
- While everyone else hated him and dismissed him, Jesus saw that he needed love and attention. The love that Jesus showed him blossomed in just a few short minutes. Zacchaeus returned that love tenfold pouring out his generosity on the poor and paying retribution to those he had cheated.
- And just as I thought my prayer session might be coming to a close, I noticed a key word in the last line of the verse. It says “the Son of Man has come...to save what was lost,” not “who.” So I asked Jesus what he meant by “what.” He answered me with several more thoughts in my head and heart.
- The “what” is the focus of Jesus’ holistic mission. While he loves each one of us individually and offers every one of us salvation, his mission is to save humanity. But the “what” is not the entire human race. The “what” is his church.
- He would like all people, every human, to be included in his church, but he could never force that because that would not be free will; that would not be love.
- Those who come into his church are coming with love and for love. His church is the Father’s Love reflected back to the Father by all the people of his church.
- Jesus has come to seek the Father’s Love and save it from being lost. That is our mission as his disciples as well.
- In Jesus’ time, the Jewish people were living under an oppressive empire and within an over-zealous religious system. Their religious leaders imposed strict, demanding, and costly rituals

on the people. They focused only on obedience to their interpretation of Mosaic laws to attempt to preserve the Jewish identity. They totally ignored God's love and compassion.

- After several hundred years of living this way, most Jewish people no longer knew the love of God. The Father's Love was lost to them. This is when Jesus came into this world.
- He restored understanding of the Father's Love through his teachings, his examples of service and caring for others, his prayers, his self sacrifice on the cross, and his resurrection.
- In our time, people are not living under an oppressive government or within an over-zealous religion. People are living under a warring and negligent political system and in a culture of self-serving consumerism, which is largely apathetic toward religious values.
- In our time, a great many people no longer know God's love. The Father's Love is lost to them. But Jesus still resides in this world—in the church that he established. He is the Father's Love, but he needs each one of us, who make up his church, to share that love with those who have lost it.
- As his church and his physical presence in this world, we can collectively teach what he taught. We can be his examples of service and caring for others. We can offer our prayers and show others how to pray. This does require self sacrifice, but it allows for renewal to new life, which is the ultimate witness to faith and love.
- So, we no longer need to wonder what God wants us to do with our lives, or how we will serve in ministry. We simply need to assess the gifts and talents he has given each of us and determine how we can use them to show others the Father's Love.
- We no longer have to face the puzzling circumstances of our lives with desperation or exasperation. We simply need to be patient and kind and look for opportunities to show others the Father's Love.
- When I look around this room, and when I encounter all others serving in the various ministries of our church, I know that Jesus' mission is in good hands.
- While none of us loves perfectly and none of us, by ourselves, does a perfect job in our ministries, together we can become that synthesized and powerful force of the Father's Love. What lost and searching soul could remain lost in the light of the Father's Love?
- So brothers, let us go forth and look for the Zacchaeuses of our communities and raise them up to the new heights they are secretly longing for.

Peace Be With You,

Marc Barrett