

Jesus Gives Physical and Spiritual Sight to the Blind

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who eats with tax collectors and even sinners like you and me, Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen.

The old joke asks the question, Who is the shortest man in the Bible?

(SLIDE) Answer: Not, as we might suspect, Zacchaeus; not Nehemiah (say it out loud); but Bildad the Shuhite. (My apologies, Bible humor is often hard to take...)

Our scripture reading for today has three distinct sections. Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. Along that journey, He encounters people—some who are physically blind, some who are spiritually blind. Some see, and some do not. Along the way, Jesus opens their eyes to the true nature of God’s Kingdom. Today, we get to focus on all three encounters (SLIDE): Jesus’ announcement of His passion, the healing of the blind man, and His dinner with Zacchaeus. All of them involve a kind of sight—physical, spiritual, and relational—that is key to understanding the message of the Gospel.

Most of the time we skip right to the story of Zacchaeus, but before we get there let’s unpack the first two sections to see what we might find. Our text begins with what most people say is Jesus making his third prediction of his death and resurrection. (SLIDE) For me, calling this a prediction, sort of put Jesus into the category of a clairvoyant or some kind of a psychic. I’ve never liked that vision of our Lord. I much prefer to think of these three times in Luke’s Gospel where Jesus

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tell the disciples what is going to happen when they arrive in Jerusalem as his Passion Announcements. I mean, Jesus who is of one being with God, has no need to try to predict the future events. He simply announces what will happen and it happens. So, on their way to Jerico, Jesus calls his 12 closest friends and disciples aside and announces, for the third time, exactly what will happen when they finally get to Jerusalem. Jesus' passion shows the ultimate act of sacrificial love and reveals God's Kingdom. His death will "open the eyes" of the world to the nature of God's Kingdom. It will not be a Kingdom of power, control, and violence, but of grace, mercy, and salvation. The disciples' inability to fully comprehend Jesus' words shows a kind of spiritual blindness. (SLIDE) They can't see the significance of what Jesus is saying about His death. Yet, Jesus is calling them (and us) to see in a new way. We see the Kingdom of God through the lens of the cross and that's the whole key to understanding God's plan for our salvation.

(SLIDE) Along the way they encounter a blind man along side the road. After Jesus restores the man's sight he follows Jesus. This healing is both physical and spiritual. The blind man's persistence in calling out for mercy represents a deep longing for sight—not just physical sight but a deeper, spiritual sight. His faith in Jesus as the Messiah opens his eyes, not only to the world around him, but also to the truth about Jesus. Many people are physically blind, but until Jesus opens our eyes we are all spiritually blind to the nature of God's Kingdom.

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Then Jesus arrives at Jerico. (SLIDE) We have no back story on Zacchaeus. We don't know how he heard about Jesus. Only that he was trying to see Jesus as he passed by. Since his neighbors in Jerico knew his profession and our text tells us no one in the crowd would let him get close enough to see Him, it's fair to think *they* certainly didn't tell Zacchaeus about Jesus. My suspicion is the formerly blind man was so excited about receiving his sight he not only followed Jesus, he shouted his miracle story to everyone and anyone who would listen. My guess is Zacchaeus was one who heard about Jesus because of the formerly blind man's story.

That brings us to Zacchaeus himself. From my Sunday School days I always thought I knew he was a very short person in stature. He literally couldn't see over the heads of the normal height people in the crowd. So, he had to climb the sycamore tree in order to catch a glimpse of this miracle healer. This is where it really gets interesting. Our English translation says Zacchaeus was short in stature, but that's not exactly what the Greek says. In the Greek, the meaning contains a slightly different nuance. It can mean short in stature, but it can also mean a lack of maturity or a person with feminine qualities. It also means unimportant and insignificant. It seems to me Zacchaeus had a lot more going against him than simply being short. As a tax collector, he was most likely very wealthy and perhaps this is telling us the people thought he was too young to have amassed

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such a large fortune through legitimate means. Maybe the people of Jerico disliked him for lots reasons, besides the fact that he took their hard-earned money and gave it to the hated Romans... So, for whatever reason, the townspeople didn't think he deserved a front row seat or any seat for that matter, to see the Messiah. If, like me you were always taught to think of Zaccheaus as just another short guy, I say he was short in many ways, but the real problem was that he was short on reputation.

The thing about reputation is sometimes it's earned and sometimes it's the product of people wanting something to gossip about. In the case of Zaccheaus, my guess is his reputation was more gossip than reality. Here's why I say that... After Jesus calls him out by name, Zaccheaus offers up his confession and repentance. Again, the English translation doesn't help us understand who Zaccheaus is or what his true motivations were. We just read that Zaccheaus will give half of his fortune to the poor and to those he has defrauded, he'll repay four times the amount. I noticed right off the bat he's taking a vow of poverty. By the time he gives all that money away, he'll be penniless. When I read the story in the Greek text I discovered Zaccheaus wasn't speaking about what he will do in the future. Everything he says is in the present tense. His confession should be more like: "I already give half my income to the poor and if I ever defraud anyone, I already repay them four times the amount." Now I've heard of some companies

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who are so confident their product will perform as advertised and expected, they offer a double your money back guarantee, but Zaccheaus gives quadruple your money back if he makes a mistake in your taxes. That's even better than Turbo Tax! Despite his honesty in dealing with his wealth, his reputation is one of being unworthy to even be close enough to Jesus to catch a fleeting glimpse. In one single statement Jesus reverses all the negativity and restores Zaccheaus into a right relationship with God as he announces for all to hear that today salvation has come to the house of this child of Abraham. Zaccheaus' encounter with Jesus is a moment of spiritual sight. Though he was physically able to see Jesus from the tree, his true sight comes when he receives the grace of Jesus. He sees who Jesus truly is, the one who seeks and saves the lost. Jesus brings salvation, not through judgment, but through mercy and grace.

Zaccheaus, like the blind man, and all of us who suffer from spiritual blindness were and are lost in a way that only Jesus can heal. Zaccheaus' story reflects the broader truth that Jesus came to open the eyes of all people, even those who were seen as the worst sinners in society. (SLIDE) Through the cross, Jesus offers forgiveness and the opportunity for transformation, which is ultimately the deepest kind of sight. Through Jesus and His death and resurrection we can see the world as God sees it, and live in accordance with that vision.

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I know many Christians who think following Jesus means following a list of rules that make you justified before God and earn your ticket to heaven. (SLIDE)

I used to think that myself. I used to think God's Kingdom was mechanical. You behave yourself, follow the rules and if you're good enough you get your pass into heaven. My thinking kept me spiritually blind. It took a lot of time and many sermons from my pastors over those years to change my thinking. It was Jesus, speaking through all those sermons by all those pastors who finally opened my eyes and restored my spiritual sight. Not that I see the Kingdom of God in all clarity, I still see as though I'm looking through cataracts that cloud my vision, but in faith I see anything I might do that is good in the eyes of the Lord doesn't come from my desire to keep the rules, but to show my gratitude and love for all Jesus has done for me. (SLIDE)

May Jesus open our eyes to see the great depth and breadth of God's love. May you know that by God's grace and through God's mercy salvation has come to your house today. Amen.