



from the desk of . . .

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#802

22 April 2018

Sharing The Gospel – 1

FOLLOWING JESUS

Luke 19:1-10

How many of you use "Twitter"? (X) ... Now, I realize that I'm in the minority, lots of people apparently do, but I don't. I have a friend at the Rec Center, Bob, who seems to be always checking in with it.

Now let me explain Twitter, as I understand it.

Twitter is an online social networking service that allows us to receive messages from people we know personally, or in many cases, from famous individuals we'd like to know. These messages are known as "posts," & they tell us the latest events or activities of those individuals, which are sent to all "followers" of that person. These sent messages are known as "tweets".

This is the preferred means of communication of our President, Donald Trump. He has 6½ million followers & averages 10-12 tweets a day. That's mind boggling to me.

I ask my friend Bob, how many people he "follows."

"114", he told me.

"114! Who all do you follow?"

"Friends & family members, business associates,
& some sports & entertainment figures."

"You follow 114 people,
how many tweets do you get each day?"

"Probably a couple 100."

"How many tweets do you read?"

"Well, I don't read all of them."

Which brings me to my question this morning ...
"what does it mean to 'follow' in our twitter-world
today?" ... Apparently not much. Now I'm not knocking my
friend who's on Twitter, & I'm not knocking Twitter.

But what I'm concerned about is how we've reduced
the definition of what it means to "follow" a person,
to almost meaninglessness.

So, with that thought in mind, what does it mean to
"follow" Jesus Christ? ... Does it mean that we've gone to
His Twitter page & clicked the little box that's marked
"follower"? ... Or does it mean that once upon a time, we
raised our hand at the end of a worship service; or, we
prayed the "sinner's prayer" & asked God to come into
our life? ... Is that all we're talking about when we say
that we're a "follower" of Jesus? ...

Does it mean that we look at Jesus' "tweets" a couple of
times a week we pick up this Book & read a little bit?

Does it mean we come here each Sunday for a gathering of "followers" called the Church? ...
Is that what it means to be a "follower" of Jesus Christ?

Jesus defined "follower" at a much deeper level than Twitter does. To be a "follower" of Jesus means not only to **believe** in Jesus ... it means that we've **adopted** Jesus' **mission for ourselves**.

Okay, look at that statement that you've just written.

"To be a follower of Jesus means
that we've adopted Jesus' mission for ourselves."

Jesus said to a group of would-be followers, (X)
"As the Father sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21)

That's our mission.

We're to do what Jesus said that He had come to do.

So, what's our mission today? ... Why did God put us on this earth? ... Is our mission the same as Jesus' mission? ... Because if it isn't ... then we're not really a follower of Jesus ... we're just a tweeter.

We're going to be looking at a passage of Scripture where Jesus spells out His mission very clearly.

Let's read it out loud together ...

"The Son of Man came to seek & to save the lost."

Jesus said ... "this is my mission ...
to seek & save spiritually lost people."

Okay, how did Jesus accomplish that mission? ...

He went to the cross, where He paid the penalty of humanity's sin. He took the punishment that we deserve (Isaiah 53:4) ... & as a result is now able to offer forgiveness as a free gift because He paid the price. (Romans 5:6-10) And then He rose from the dead so He can offer spiritually lost people new life & a reconnection with God.

And then, when He returned to Heaven, He passed the baton onto His followers, saying, "This is now your mission. You're to tell everyone what I've done. You're to seek spiritually lost people & reconnect them to God."

So, if we're a "follower" of Jesus Christ ...
that's now our mission.

Okay, how do we go about carrying out this mission? ... That's going to be the focus of the next few messages I'll be giving ... on "Sharing The Gospel".

I'm going to be talking about some things to look for that'll lead to spiritually lost people being found & beginning a relationship with God ... & our role in it.

When we've talked about prayer I've touched on this. We need to pray for an open door, (opportunities to talk to others), & pray for an open mouth, (boldness to speak), & then pray for an open heart,
(that the people we speak to will be responsive).

This morning we're focusing on an open door. How do we get opportunities to talk to others about the Gospel?

We're going to be using Jesus as our role model. We've already read His mission statement. Now we're going to read the story where that mission statement is found.

Listen now to *Good News*, as recorded by Luke, to you who have gathered here this morning for worship. Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

Jesus went on into Jericho and was passing through. There was a chief tax collector there named Zacchaeus, who was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but he was a little man and could not see Jesus because of the crowd. So he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, who was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to that place, he looked up and said to Zacchaeus, "Hurry down, Zacchaeus, because I must stay in your house today."

Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed him with great joy. All the people who saw it started grumbling, "This man has gone as a guest to the home of a sinner!"

Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Listen, sir! I will give half my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times as much."

Jesus said to him, "Salvation has come to this house today, for this man, also, is a descendant of Abraham. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen

How do we create opportunities to talk with people about God?

#1 ... **stop** what we're **doing**. Look at the 1st verse.

Jesus "was passing through" Jericho.

In other words, Jesus had no intention of stopping there.

He was on His way to someplace else.

Jesus was headed to Jerusalem, which was about 22 miles south of Jericho. That would be a full day's walk if He was going to get there before dark.

Why was Jesus going to Jerusalem? ...

(He was going there to die.) We're at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, & He was a Man on a mission. He'd been telling His disciples about this repeatedly. (Matthew 20:17-19) He's going to Jerusalem to give His life for the payment of our sins.

As He "was passing through" Jericho Jesus had an agenda. He had no intention of stopping ... until ... He got to the base of a sycamore tree. There He looked up & began a spiritual conversation with a guy named Zacchaeus.

Our lives are characterized by perpetual motion.

And that's the biggest reason why we don't find opportunities to talk about Jesus. We're always on the move. We're always working to cross off items on our "to do" list. We're constantly preoccupied with one jam-packed schedule after another.

We're running through Home Depot looking for a showerhead. We're racing to the Post Office before it closes. We're rushing to the Jewel for something for dinner. We're trying to get a quick workout before going to our meeting. We always have something important to get to. How many of us have a list for this afternoon? ...

If there ever was a person in a sycamore tree who wanted to talk to us about God we'd miss him/her entirely ... because we'd be rushing right past that tree to get to our next engagement.

We've got to stop what we're doing
if we're going to find an opportunity talk about Jesus.

Let me tell you how I've attempted to do this.
I view interruptions as God-given opportunities.
I allow time for conversations.

I'm not suggesting that I'm always looking for ways to talk about God with everyone I see. But I am saying that I'll never have a conversation with anyone about God unless I have a conversation with them period.

So, we have to stop & begin some conversations.

#2 ... look for responsiveness.

In the 2nd sentence there's a missing word in our English translations that's found in the original Greek text. It's the word, "behold." (Kai ἰδοὺ) So, the sentence literally reads, "Behold, there was a chief tax collector there named Zacchaeus, who was rich."

Why don't we have "behold" in our contemporary Bibles? ... Because the translators know it's a word we no longer use. We don't say "behold" in our conversations. We didn't come in here this morning & say, "Behold, Bill gave me a worship program." "Behold, the choir sang 'We Have Seen The Risen Lord'." We don't say, "Behold, we're going to have a CORNFEST meeting this afternoon."

We don't use that word so the translators dropped it. Unfortunately, they eliminated something really important. Luke's attempting to draw our attention to the fact that Zacchaeus is about to become the center of the story. He's about to have a spiritual encounter with Jesus Christ.

Now the reason Luke wants to draw our attention to this is because no one would ever suspect that Zacchaeus would be interested in spiritual things. They imagined him as the last man on the planet to have a spiritual conversation with a rabbi named Jesus.

Let me give you some background.

Zacchaeus was not only a Jew ... but, he was a chief tax collector for the hated Roman government. He was connected to the enemy ... which didn't make him a popular guy in Jericho among his fellow Jews.

And in those days, tax collectors were not paid a salary ... they were paid on commission. They made as much money as they could squeeze out of people.

Or worse yet, as they could collect as bribes.

So, when Luke records that Zacchaeus was a rich man it means that he was pretty good at putting the bite on the Jews in Jericho.

On the other hand, we see a faint trace of interest, of spiritual curiosity on his part.

Look at the next 2 sentences.

Zacchaeus is running down the street to get ahead of the crowd so he can get a good look at Jesus.

I'm trying to visually picture this.

Here's this businessman, Zacchaeus ... sprinting down the road in his 3-piece toga. And then, because he's short, (I'm picturing Danny DeVito), he's got to climb up a tree. Luke tells us it was a sycamore tree. (X) Sycamore trees have a short trunk & a lot of horizontal branches.

It's an ideal tree for climbing.

So, I'm imagining Zacchaeus climbing up this tree with all the neighborhood kids.

The point I want to make is that when we're looking for opportunities to talk about God, we need to keep our eye out for the slightest crack in somebody's door. Some doors may be shut quite firmly. But many of the people that we would least expect to be open to a spiritual conversation, like Zacchaeus ...
 may be the most responsive.

Look for people who are **aware** of their need for God. Maybe because they're under stress, maybe because they're going through a divorce, maybe because they're single parenting, maybe because they're struggling with a chronic illness, maybe they're dying.

#3 ... **learn a name.** "When Jesus came to that place, he looked up & said ... 'Hurry down, Zacchaeus'"

Let's stop right there. How did Jesus know this guy's name? Jesus isn't from Jericho ... He's just passing through. How did He know Zacchaeus' name? ...

"Well, He's the Son of God. He's omniscient. He knows everything." Maybe, but there are other times in the Gospels where Jesus doesn't know certain things (Mark 6:6) ... because in His humanity, He chose to limit His knowledge. I think there's a far simpler explanation.

I believe the reason that Jesus knew Zacchaeus' name was because ... He was just paying attention.

He's walking down the road & He hears in the crowd ...

"Is that Zacchaeus up in the tree over there? That scum ball; is he there with our kids? Are they okay?"

And so, Jesus comes to the base of the tree, looks up & says, "Zacchaeus" He was just paying attention.

Dale Carnegie, who wrote the famous book, (X) "How To Win Friends & Influence People," said that "the sweetest sound in a person's ear is the sound of his or her own name." And admit it, you like the sound of your name. You like it when people are speaking to you & actually call you by name.

Question ... do you learn other people's names?

Do you know the name of your neighbors?

Do you know the name of your mail carrier?

Do you know the name of the man who walks his beagle in front of your house at 7:21 every morning?

Now I know our neighbors by name ... all of them. I know the name of many of the people I see each morning at the Rec Center. That's important.

People like to know that someone knows their name.

(Sounds like the old "Cheers" TV Show ...

"you want to go where everybody knows your name".)

And before you say ... "I'm not good at remembering names" ... let me tell you what I do. 1st of all, I don't try to remember everybody's name. But I do try to learn the names of people that I encounter on a regular basis.

And the way I do it is really profound. I write them down. I write them down when I hear them, so I won't forget them. I also write down any special information about them whenever I hear it.

So, each year, on May 21st, I can put a card in Jason's & Risa's door wishing them a happy anniversary. I want to be their friend ... & friends learn names. And friends remember important stuff. I know that Hans has lived on our street longer than anyone else.

I'm interested in them because I want to be their friend ... & hope that someday I'll have an opportunity to have a conversation with them where I can tell them about "my best friend" ... Jesus.

#4 ... **create** some **hangout** time. This is my favorite part of the story. "When Jesus came to that place, he looked up & said to Zacchaeus, 'Hurry down, Zacchaeus, because I must stay in your house today.'" (X)

"Zacchaeus, hurried down & welcomed him with great joy. All the people who saw it started grumbling, 'This man has gone as a guest to the home of a sinner!'"

Do you know what's amazing about this whole story to me? ... Jesus' boldness. He's just met this guy & the 1st thing He does is invite Himself over to the man's house for dinner!

Let's think about this for a moment.

Bible scholars tell us that Jesus had to take the initiative because Zacchaeus never would have extended such an invitation. Zacchaeus was smart enough to know that any God-fearing Jew, especially a rabbi, would never come socially to the house of a tax collector. And so, if even the idea had occurred to Zacchaeus ... "hey, I'd like to invite Him over" ... he'd never have voiced the invitation. Jesus had to invite Himself. So, He did.

Okay, remember I said that Jesus is our role model here. So, how do we apply this to our lives ... because there are a couple of really important truths that He's presenting.

Now obviously I'm not suggesting that we invite ourselves to dinner with everybody we come in contact with. But Jesus sensed that Zacchaeus wanted to have a spiritual conversation with Him. And that conversation couldn't have happened right there alongside the road.

Whenever the opportunity presents itself to talk to someone about Jesus, really talk, we must remove ourselves from any distraction that might hinder it.

We all need to work on this ... because we'll never have a good, deep conversation on any subject otherwise, & certainly not a conversation about God.

Be honest, how spiritual of a conversation can we have with someone at the Jewel, or at the Senior Center? ...

Now those may be places where spiritual conversations can begin ... but it's pretty hard to get much deeper in those kinds of surroundings.

It doesn't matter that we come to Church on Sunday mornings ... we're not "followers" until we've adopted Jesus' mission ... which is to seek & save the lost. We have to create hangout time with those who don't have a personal relationship with Jesus.

5th, & finally, **anticipate the reward.**

"Zacchaeus stood up & said to the Lord, 'Listen, sir! I will give $\frac{1}{2}$ my belongings to the poor, & if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back 4 times as much.'

"Jesus said to him, 'Salvation has come to this house today, for this man, also, is a descendant of Abraham. The Son of Man came to seek & to save the lost.'"

It's really, really important that you understand something here. When Jesus says, "Salvation has come to this house today," He's not suggesting that salvation has come because Zacchaeus promised to give $\frac{1}{2}$ of his wealth to the poor. We're not saved because of our good works, by charity, or anything else that we do.

Scripture is absolutely clear about this.

We can't earn our way into God's good favor.

We get "saved" by one way, & one way only ... (X)
& that's through faith & not by works. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

It's through faith in Jesus Christ ... trusting in Him to be our Savior, the One who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. We get saved by putting our trust in Jesus to be the new Ruler of our life ... our King, our Lord, our Master, the One who calls the shots.

It's a faith decision ... not good works.

However, good works are the **evidence** of a genuine faith. Good works show that someone has honestly become a follower of Jesus. (James 2:14)

That's why Luke doesn't need to tell us that Zacchaeus came to faith. We know he did that.

Because of the change in his life.

And we'll know that we've become true followers of Jesus when we begin to see major changes take shape in the **direction** of our life.

Zacchaeus went from being a greedy person to being a generous person. " $\frac{1}{2}$ my wealth I'll give to the poor."

Let me tell you ... I know that people have come to faith in Jesus when I see them become generous. To be honest, when I hear people claim to be followers of our Lord, & are not givers to His work ... I have to wonder. Because when we become genuine followers of Jesus, things change; & one of the major changes is that we become **generous** because God is **generous**.

It happened to Zacchaeus.

He went from being a dishonest businessman to being an honest guy saying ... "If I've cheated anybody, defrauded anybody, I'll pay back 4 times the amount."

Imagine the effect that had on the people of Jericho.

And when Jesus & His disciples finally set off again for Jerusalem, having just witnessed all that, how do you think they were feeling? ... I guarantee you that the disciples were "high 5ing" each other.

"Wow, Zacchaeus! Was that cool or what?"

They'd seen a life-change that was nothing short of miraculous. This is why I say ... anticipate the reward. The thing that'll motivate you to look for opportunities, the thing that will cause you to go after conversations about God, is that ... some people are going to respond.

And when they do, dramatic changes take place,
& it's awesome.

If we're **praying** for opportunities & **looking** for opportunities we can **count** on opportunities.

What would it be like to see a friend of yours, a neighbor of yours, somebody you work with, somebody at the Senior Center ... get reconnected with God? ...

What do you say to make that happen? ... We're going to talk about that next. But right now, I want to challenge you to begin looking for opportunities.

MARANA THA