

encounters with Jesus

1. Zacchaeus

Read

Luke 19:1-10. read it twice.

Take 5 minutes to underline or circle any bits that catch your attention. Note down any thoughts or questions.

Cultural background

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector in the area of Jericho, a role held in great contempt by his countrymen. The position of authority allowed for many abuses to take place. It was not uncommon for people to be taxed two or three times the correct amounts and then for this money to be pocketed. Zacchaeus being the chief tax collector had many others working for him. Therefore his wealth was obvious and it was no secret as to the manner by which he had acquired it.

In the Israelite culture a houseguest was special. As a host your responsibility would have been to accept the guest as one of your family. He was to be served and commanded your total attention

Questions for reflection and interaction

- Who ever heard of a rich man climbing a tree? What state of mind must Zacchaeus have been in to humble himself so much?
- What do the actions of Jesus indicate about his personality? Why did he stop? Why did he have to stay at Zacchaeus' house? With so many people clamouring for Jesus' attention why does he spend so much time with this one person?
- Zacchaeus was extremely responsive to Jesus. What might this tell us about Zacchaeus, about Jesus?
- The people grumbled because Jesus was a guest of a "sinner". What do you think the general public's view was concerning the treatment of and association with "sinner's"? Was Jesus condoning Zacchaeus' actions by staying at his house?
- Zacchaeus after being with Jesus for a while makes some very radical decisions (v8). What was he saying about his past and his intentions for his future?
- What do you discover about the mission that Jesus saw for himself in his response to this dramatic turn about (vs. 9, 10)?
- When Jesus refers to the "lost" what might he mean? What causes lostness?

the 'hard question' section

- In theory, Zacchaeus had 'arrived'. He had a powerful position and he had wealth. But in reality he realised there is more to life than money and riches. In light of the new understandings that Zacchaeus arrived at how do you evaluate your own goals and desires? When you "arrive" at your destination of career, lifestyle and values, will you be satisfied?
- Is it possible for Jesus to make such a change today? Would Jesus spend that much time with you, with so many other people clamoring for his attention? What worth does Jesus see in you? Considering Christ

Luke 19:1 (NIV) Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a `sinner.'"

8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

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2. a rich man and a needle

Read Matthew 19:16-30. Read it twice.
Take 5 minutes to underline or circle any bits that catch your attention. Note down any thoughts or questions.

Cultural background

Life was sometimes used as an abbreviation for eternal life—the life of the world to come. A needle's eye in Jesus' day meant what it means today – a very small hole. The idea that it was simply a name for a small gate in Jerusalem is based on a gate from the medieval period and sheds no light on Jesus teaching in the first century.

Questions for reflection and interaction

- What's your response to Jesus' interactions with the rich man and with Peter?
- When the rich man heard Jesus' reply to his question he was stunned – it wasn't what he was expecting. What do you think he was expecting Jesus to say?
- Jesus said to the man "go sell everything; give to the poor; come follow me." What do you think he was trying to get the man to understand?
- The disciples were astonished with Jesus statement in v24 and asked "who then can be saved?" what do you think of Jesus' answer? Does this then negate the need to give away all your money?
- What do you make of Peter's interaction with Jesus? How was Peter viewing following Jesus?
- What do you think of Jesus' promise in v29? What might it look like in our context? Maybe if anyone in the group has experienced any of these benefits, it'd be good for them to share.

the 'hard question' section

- The man's reluctance to give up his wealth prevented him from entering the Kingdom of God and following Jesus. We may be Christians but what are some of the hurdles we struggle with that may prevent us from actually following Jesus right now?
- Jesus' last words in v30 certainly collide with our "me first" worldview. But if it's true, what implications might this have for the way we live?
- What do you sense God is saying to you about following Jesus?

Matt 19:16 (NIV) Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"
17 "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."
18 "Which ones?" the man inquired.
Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"
20 "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"
21 Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.
23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."
25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"
26 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."
27 Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"
28 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

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3. dinner with Jesus

Read Luke 7:36-50. Read it twice.
Take 5 minutes to underline or circle any bits that catch your attention. Note down any thoughts or questions.

Cultural background

It was considered virtuous to invite a teacher over for dinner, especially if the teacher were from out-of-town or had just taught at the synagogue. That this woman is a *sinner* may imply that she is a prostitute or at least a woman known to be morally loose and probably seeking something disreputable.

Religious people often opened their homes for the poor, and so the woman manages to get in. In banquets where uninvited people could enter, they were to remain quiet and away from the couches guests reclined on, observing the discussions of host and guests.

Jewish people did not consider perfume sinful, but because this woman is a *sinner* and uses the perfume as a tool of her trade, Jesus' acceptance of the gift of perfuming would offend religious sensitivities. Adult women who were religious were expected to be married and thus would have their heads covered; any woman with her hair exposed to public view would be considered promiscuous. That this woman wipes Jesus' feet with her hair thus indicates not only her humility but also her marginal religious status.

Common hospitality included providing water for the feet. Oil for the dry skin on one's head would also be a thoughtful act. A kiss was affectionate or respectful form of greeting.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- Identify the different characters in the story. What might have been going on inside their heads – both before and after Jesus' interaction with the woman?
- Do you identify with any particular character(s)? Why?
- What aspects of Jesus' character does the story highlight?
- What encouragement does this story hold for you?
- What challenges?

the 'hard question' section

- Do you feel you have been forgiven little or much?
- How has your sense of gratitude to God been visible?
- Jesus told her "your sins are forgiven, your faith has saved you, go in peace". Let's speculate: how would her life be any different after this encounter than before – given such limited instructions by Jesus?
- How does your life look any different?

Luke 7:36 (NIV) Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, 38 and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. 39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is-- that she is a sinner." 40 Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. 41 "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. 44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." 48 Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50 Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

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4. the generous landowner

Read Matthew 20:1-16. Read it twice.
Take 5 minutes to underline or circle any bits that catch your attention. Note down any thoughts or questions.

Background information

Wealthy landowners often hired temporary workers, especially during harvest seasons, when workers were needed for short periods of time. Some day laborers were also tenant farmers, with small plots of their own land; others were sons of those owning small pieces of land and had not inherited any of their fathers' land; still others had lost their land and traveled from place to place seeking employment. A denarius was an average days wage. Jewish law mandated that laborers be paid on the day they worked, because the wages were often little more than sufficient for a day's needs. Many workers lived a day-to-day existence, they needed their daily pay to buy food for their families.

Questions for reflection and interaction

What's your response to the story?
Why did the landowner hire the workers at the 11th hour?
What's Jesus point? Why does he tell this story? (consider the previous interactions Jesus has with the rich man and his disciples-the context for this story)
What do you learn about God and his kingdom from this story?
How does this impact you?

Entering the story

As you hear the story read again, allow yourself to identify with one of the characters. As you listen to the dialogue picture the scene. What do you imagine the person you are identifying with is feeling and thinking. What are you feeling and thinking? If you could speak into this story what would you say as the character you are identifying with?

Reflecting on God and his good news

What impresses you about Jesus and his message from this story?
What does this mean for you?

Reflecting on a painting of this story

Try looking at the painting by Rembrandt of this story included in this study material. Take some time to look at the various characters. What impressions and further insights do you get?

Matt 20:1 (NIV) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. 3 "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 6 About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 7 "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' 8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' 9 "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

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5. a costly message

Read Luke 14:25-33. Read it twice.
Take 5 minutes to underline or circle any bits that catch your attention. Note down any thoughts or questions.

Cultural background

Hate could function as a hyperbolic, Semitic way of saying love less, but this point hardly diminishes the offensiveness of the saying in a society where honour of parents was considered virtually the highest obligation and one's family was usually one's greatest joy. Teachers regularly demanded great respect and affection, but in Jewish tradition only God openly demanded such wholesale devotion as Jesus claims here.

A condemned criminal would carry the cross (the horizontal beam of the cross) out to the site of the upright stake where he would be crucified, usually amid a jeering mob. No one would choose this fate for oneself, but Jesus calls true disciples to choose it and thus to hate their own lives by comparison with their devotion to him.

Several years earlier a poorly built amphitheatre had collapsed, with an estimated 50,000 casualties. The failings of inadequate or half-finished structures were well-known. The crucial point here, however, is the builder's shame in a society obsessed with honour.

Herod Antipas had recently lost a war with the neighbouring Roman vassal, so the image of foolhardy war should be meaningful to Jesus hearers. Jesus' point is that one must recognise the cost when one enlists as a disciple of his.

Questions for reflection and interaction

What's your response to this passage?

What is Jesus asking of his disciples and us? What do these sayings mean in reality?

How do these calls from Jesus coincide with your current thinking on following Jesus?

What do you learn about Jesus and the good news?

What do you think God might be saying to you / us here?

Luke 14:25 (NIV) Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: 26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple. 27 And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 28 "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? 29 For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, 30 saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' 31 "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? 32 If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. 33 In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.