

Sermon: Off the Hook

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 1:10-18; Luke 19:1-10**

The Book of Isaiah held great meaning for ancient Israel, Judaism, and early Christianity. It's still a big deal for both faith traditions.

The story arc in Isaiah as a whole is that national decadence leads to disaster, followed by suffering that leads eventually to justice, and eventually, to hope and redemption. Along the way, Christians can find many corroborating incidents that reinforce Gospel teachings as well as predictions of the life and suffering of Jesus Christ.

Chapter one in Isaiah can stand alone as an introduction, and the section we heard today condemns Israel's religious practices, including the Temple system of offerings, which is interesting because these practices are established in the Book of Numbers, in chapters 28 and 29. And I say interesting because, even though Numbers appears earlier in the Bible than Isaiah, it was composed several hundred years *after* Isaiah.

So, what's the problem?

Do you ever find yourself doing something and you do it the way you do it because you've always done it that way but one day you realize you've forgotten why you do it at all?

That's the problem in Isaiah. The religious leaders were too caught up in ritual and the people were going through the motions without wondering why. They had lost sight of God, who could no longer endure 'solemn assemblies with iniquity,' including the Sabbath, which was God's idea in the first place. Worship had become meaningless.

For Isaiah, God will reject ritual worship until it includes a genuine change in moral behavior. Until then, the nation is in deep, deep trouble.

In Luke, the focus is on one person: Zacchaeus. He is not just a tax collector; he's a *chief* tax collector, and he was rich. Now, there's only one way for a tax collector to get rich and that's by defrauding the people from whom he collects money on behalf of the Roman governor. It's also why the people grumble about him being a sinner.

For the sake of argument, we will presume that the grumblers themselves are without sin.

Sometimes, we behave like the grumblers in Luke's story. There's no reason for us to extend grace or even courtesy to the modern-day equivalent of the tax collector. Experience tells us that such people are beyond redemption.

But are we willing to concede that those with whom we disagree might find a new path and changed commitments through Jesus' call to come down out of their tree? It depends, one supposes, on their own desire to get a better view than the one they have now.

The problem for us is, we can never tell by outward signs what is going on inside someone else's heart. No one could have predicted what would happen to Zacchaeus that day when Jesus came to town. Maybe the only sinner we should grumble about is ourselves.

Back in Isaiah, God proposed a way for the people to right the ship. It was kind of ingenious, in an 'effort = results' sort of way, and it applies to all who follow God.

God commanded the people to *make* themselves clean, and told them what to do next. God said, "*cease* to do evil, *learn* to do good; *seek* justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." All the same things Jesus taught.

Ceasing to do evil should be straightforward but in *learning* to do good, we might not always succeed. Again, effort equals results, and some may choose not to try.

But what happened in Jericho can happen to anyone.

Notice that Jesus greeted Zacchaeus like an old friend. Luke gives us no reason to think that they knew each other beforehand and yet, Jesus called him by name and Zacchaeus rejoiced.

What actually happened here? What caused Zacchaeus' change of heart?

Without prompting, Zacchaeus tells Jesus that he will give half of his possessions to the poor. Then he said, "if – *if* – I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." He knows full-well that he's defrauded people, otherwise he wouldn't be so generous. But, this is all voluntary and unexpected, and the grumblers heard it.

One scholar said that Zacchaeus was on a quest, as was Jesus, and that one encompassed the other.¹ Zacchaeus' quest succeeded. Jesus not only restored him to the local community but to the entire tribe of all God's children, the children of Abraham, to whom God had once made a promise of salvation.

Jesus came to seek out and to save the lost, and Zacchaeus was as lost as can be.

When Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep, the tax collectors came near to listen, the Pharisees grumbled, and Jesus said, "there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents."

The covenant people of Israel ordered their society and lived in accord with God's will as best they could. The English Puritans who crossed the Atlantic Ocean and established the Massachusetts Bay Colony had similar ideas. Those ideas formed the basis of what became the Congregational Church, which persists to this day, and it persists because we take worship and our call to serve as seriously as God does, and God takes it very seriously.

God extends mercy to those who try to do what is right in God's sight. God is willing to forgive us and take us off the hook if we do what grace demands, as reported by Isaiah.

Jesus extended salvation to Zacchaeus and his entire household because Zacchaeus repented, changed his ways, and came to follow Jesus.

And the salvation Zacchaeus received is holistic: salvation means deliverance, and to be saved is to be made well, to be healed. Salvation means to be saved specifically from eternal death, from judgement, and from all that might lead to such a death, meaning sin.

Is anyone beyond God's grace? That's a question Luke wants us to answer for ourselves. In typical fashion, Luke doesn't tell us how the story turns out. Did Zacchaeus really do what he told Jesus he would do? Did he ever backslide? We don't know.

But we do know that Zacchaeus accomplished quite a lot by climbing that sycamore tree. One hopes the grumblers were paying attention.

Amen.

¹ Tannehill, R. *Luke*. Abingdon Press (1996), 278.