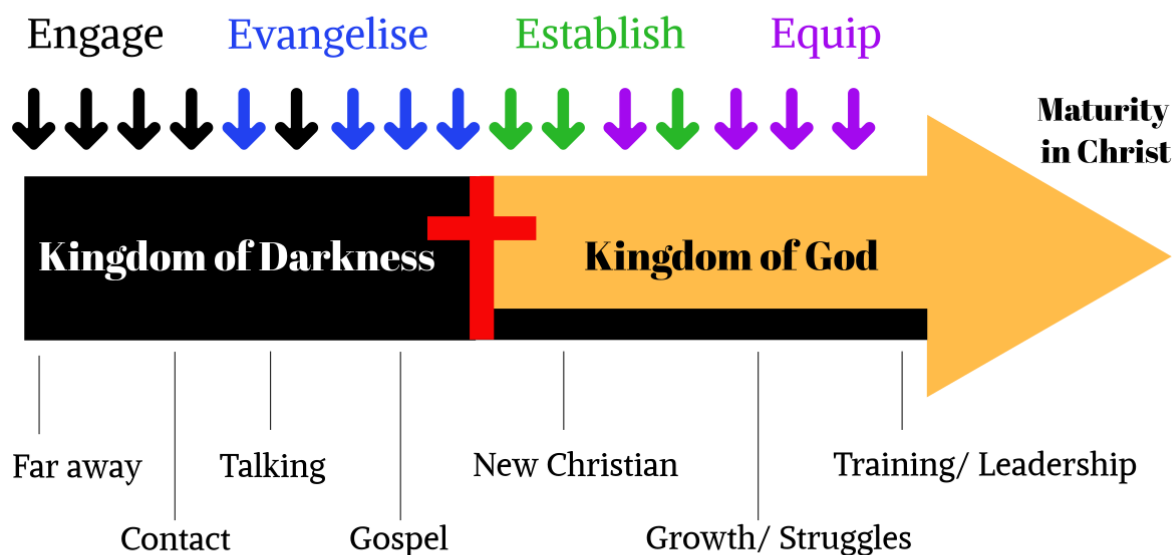


Today we're continuing our series on making disciples. Recently we've been thinking about the need to engage with people where they are and help them move closer to God. For some that might be like Paul – an immediate and dramatic conversion experience, or it might take a longer time and a gradual growing closer to God. Whatever relationship we have with someone we need to introduce them to Jesus because an encounter with Jesus makes all the difference in someone's life. For the next few weeks we're moving on to the next section of our diagram



I love the story of Zacchaeus because it reminds me that God loves everybody – those that are hated, avoided, ridiculed, ignored. The thief, the liar, the drunk, the depressed, the self-righteous and the righteous – all are loved by God.

Here's a man who, as far as the world was concerned, had money and power but was hated because he had cheated the people to get it. He was a chief tax collector and everyone knew that tax collectors collected the taxes they had to – even that made people dislike them because they were doing it for an invading army – but they also skimmed a bit off for themselves.

Here's a man who has power and influence but who knows that there is something missing from his life. There are still people like Zacchaeus – looking for position, power and money, hoping that will make them happy – and, for some people it is enough, at least for a while.

Let's look at the story:

<sup>3</sup> *He wanted to see who Jesus was*.... He must have heard something about Jesus for him to want to go and see Jesus. It's a fairly contained area and stories of this new teacher would have spread. They would have been talking about the miracles Jesus had done – his power to heal and the changes that had happened to people who had met him – a demon possessed man had been set free and was telling everyone Jesus had done it. Blind, lame and sick people told of being made well.

Paul was right when he wrote in Romans 10:17 *faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ*.

For Zacchaeus, his journey to God started through people talking about Jesus. I was speaking to people after a funeral last week and someone approached me and started with this, “So, tell me about faith.” What an amazing opportunity that came about partly because I'm a minister, partly because I always talk about hope for the future for those who have faith, even at funerals and partly, I suspect, because of a perceived lack in their life. We never know when opportunities to talk about Jesus will come up but we need to be ready to take them when they do. However, we also need to be better at instigating that sort of conversation because there are people out there who are ready and willing to listen.

The problem was that Zacchaeus was too short so we're told V4 *So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way*.

I suspect it might have been unusual for him to be alone in a crowd. It's likely given his position that he would be assaulted and shouted at if he were in the middle of a crowd. So, it seems he was desperate enough to see Jesus to take that risk. He may have had years of being subjected to ridicule and short jokes: Did you hear about the psychic midget who escaped from jail? He's a small medium who's at large. You've got to hand it to short people... Well they can't reach for themselves, can they? My friend is really sensitive about his lack of height. It's best not to tease him about though, or he'll punch you in the knee. You should be a preacher – even your sermons would be short.

He climbed a tree. These trees were often planted at the roadside because they grew quite large and offered shade for travellers. They were easy to climb but it would have been totally unexpected and out of character for an adult male, particularly one of Zacchaeus's position, to be climbing trees, but it was the only way he was going to see Jesus. What struck me as I read this story again in preparation for today was the word see. Other translations have that he wanted to see who Jesus was, or what Jesus was like but I'm not sure what he expected to find out by watching Jesus pass by. He might have seen Jesus perform a miracle and that would have been quite exciting. I'm sure it would have been an amazing experience to see Jesus and hear him teaching and performing miracles. But, many of the people who had been in crowds like that over the years were also in that crowd shouting, “Crucify him!” It's not enough simply to see Jesus. It's not enough for people today to know about Jesus. Lots of people know about Jesus but they don't believe he's of any value to them. He makes no difference in their life. Other translations suggest that there was a sense of desperation about Zacchaeus – as if he's thinking, “If only I could see Jesus it would change everything.” That made me think of a story earlier in Luke's gospel where a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years wanted to see Jesus. In fact she decided that if she could only touch his robe he would be able to heal her – she was desperate too. Of course, she did touch Jesus and was healed, but that wasn't enough. She was mortified when Jesus made everyone stop until the

person who had touched him was identified. The disciples were too busy trying to get him through the crowd to the big miracle – he was on his way to heal a child – that they simply said, “We’re in a crowd. Loads of people touched you.” But Jesus knew this was important. The woman had been healed, but she hadn’t been restored. Her bleeding meant that she was considered unclean. She had been considered unclean and an outcast for twelve years. I can’t imagine the effect that would have had on her. She had tried everything to no avail. Because she was ‘unclean’ she shouldn’t have been among that crowd that day because anyone she touched would also be considered unclean and have to go through all sorts of ritual washing themselves. So, when Jesus makes her say it was her who had touched him she would have been mortified, hoping the ground would open up and swallow her. She has made the teacher unclean by what she did and now he’s going to humiliate her in public. But it’s not like that at all. She tells her story and that she has been healed. The whole crowd heard that she was better and was no longer considered unclean. Not only that, Jesus blesses her, “Go in peace.” The blessing of shalom – it means peace, but so much more than that. It includes restoration, wholeness, strength. She came to be healed and went away with much more, and I think there is something of that for Zacchaeus.

I wonder if you are here today like part of the crowd who was with Jesus but never really ‘saw’ Jesus, or if, like Zacchaeus or that unnamed woman, there’s more to it for you? You’re looking for something deeper.

Each of us needs a personal encounter with Jesus because it is only then that we receive restoration and wholeness.

Verse 5 *When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.*

Zacchaeus went to ‘see’ Jesus and he got much more than he bargained for. Like that woman, he is an outcast. Like that woman, he didn’t really want to be the centre of attention for the crowd. Like that woman, he needed to be restored. This is a personal thing. Jesus knew his name. Jesus knew he was up in the tree. Jesus knew the very thing he needed to be made whole. Jesus knows what we need and, if we are to receive it, we must do metaphorically what Zacchaeus did literally get down. He had to climb down from the tree. We need to surrender ourselves. We need to get down from being in charge of our lives and let Jesus take over. We need to surrender the heights of our pride and belief that we can manage perfectly well without God – of course, we might not actually say it like that, but we know in our own lives that we don’t really put God first in everything – but that’s the way to wholeness.

Today, I’m going to visit your house. Just imagine that. An unexpected guest – and possibly some of his closest pals! Wouldn’t you just love that? Anyone saying yes, that would be ok – I’m free for lunch and I bring some folk with me. Here is someone who really wants to ‘see’ Jesus, and Jesus always responds positively to that desire.

Verse 6 *So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.* That’s a normal reaction to an encounter with Jesus. It’s a good thing! Do we need to remind ourselves of the things God has done for us in Jesus because we have lost some of the passion and excitement we used to have?

Verse 7 *All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.*

I know of a congregation where they had done a refurbishment but people were complaining about the large number of young people who were coming because they might damage the new carpet! In a congregation we were part of people used to complain about the behaviour of some new believers because they weren't 'fitting in'. We so often get these things wrong. Rather than be excited that Zacchaeus might be changed by meeting Jesus they thought that Jesus had somehow been contaminated by meeting Zacchaeus. They couldn't see that this person whom they considered 'a sinner' was worth Jesus' time. They also seemed to forget that all of us sin and need to be forgiven. Is there someone, or even a group of people, you think are not deserving of hearing that they are loved by God? This crowd thought that Jesus had made a huge mistake but Jesus doesn't make mistakes.

Zacchaeus didn't care that people were talking about him because he was with Jesus. Those people could have been a stumbling block for him on his journey to Jesus but he was more interested in 'seeing Jesus' than worrying about them. We need to be careful that we are not acting as stumbling blocks for people who want to encounter Jesus.

*Verse 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."*

Do you see the progression? Zacchaeus went to see Jesus, then he welcomed him gladly and now he's calling Jesus, Lord. If Jesus is Lord in someone's life it means that person has surrendered themselves to Jesus. They are no longer the boss of their own life but they are giving control to Jesus. The evidence of that is a changed life. Here's this wealthy man who has cheated people out of money saying he will pay them back, with interest.

Have you ever consciously asked Jesus to forgive you and to take control of your life? Have you surrendered yourself to him?

Like the woman who was healed, Zacchaeus needed to be restored publicly. He had changed but the crowd needed to be aware of that change so that he could be accepted. It also meant that they could hold him accountable in his new lifestyle.

*Verses 9-10 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*

Jesus still seeks the lost and still wants people to be saved from the consequences of sin. Salvation is about the future. Jesus says that all those who have faith in him will be saved and go to heaven with him when he returns. However, it's also much more than that 1 Corinthians 1:18 *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

Of course, salvation is for the future but it is also for now. We 'are being saved' – in the bible salvation is spoken of as something both spiritual and physical, individual and communal and relating to past, present and future.

*Philippians 2:12-13 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,<sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.*

Work out our salvation? Does that mean if we work hard for God we will be saved? No. It means that because we know we are going to be saved, and we are experiencing the grace of God in our lives as he brings us his *shalom* – his wholeness, strength, forgiveness – then we will make every effort to submit to him and do what he has called us to do.

2 Corinthians 6:2 *For he says, "In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.*

Do you need an encounter with Jesus today? Do you need to received his salvation? All you have to do is ask? A simple prayer: Jesus, please come into my life today and change me like you changed Zacchaeus. That's the kind of prayer God will always answer.