

A Son of Abraham

(Some thoughts with Dr. Joel M. Crichlow)

Classification and identification are common functions in everyday living. Classification places us into different groups or categories. We are classified by our place of birth, our race, our color, our possessions, our education, our skills, where we live, and so on. Identification is necessary to place us uniquely, i.e. to separate us from the pack or to locate us in the pack. Often a unique number like a social security number or a title like ‘chief’ does this for us.

The ways in which we are classified can most times be very critical to our being. We can be classified into a position of privilege. We are considered acceptable and we can receive certain favors. That is, based on certain assessments we might have gone to the ‘right’ school, be living in the ‘right’ neighborhood, have the ‘right’ look, have the ‘right’ mix of material possessions, etc.

On the other hand we can be classified into a position of rejection – unacceptable look, unacceptable schooling, and so on. It is not uncommon to find ourselves at one time in an acceptable class and at another time in a rejected class depending on the context. In a rejected class there are no special privileges or favors.

An interesting example of classification is seen in the Bible in Luke chapter nineteen. There we meet Zacchaeus, who is classified as a rich, chief tax collector. Rich and being chief are pretty straightforward. A tax collector, could be somewhat of a problem.

Parts of the text (Luke 19: 1-10, New International Version - NIV) read as follows:

“¹ 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 because he was short he could not see over 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 the lost.”*

Zacchaeus had a problem: he wanted to see Jesus. But Zacchaeus was a short man and there was a crowd of people hindering his view.

When there is a problem we try to find a way to solve it. We look for some resource that can be used to solve the problem. Can we use something that we have? Can we use something that we know? Can we use someone that we know?

Sometimes we can use our looks: our beauty, our height, and so on. But in the case of Zacchaeus, looks came up a little too short to work for him. Some problems cannot be solved by physique. Specifically, getting to see Jesus (to know Jesus) is not determined by a classification based on our looks. Indeed, Acts 10: 34-35 (NIV) says:

³⁴ *...God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”*

Sometimes we can use our money. Zacchaeus was rich. However, the size of the crowd and the little time available did not permit a financial transaction. The moment for his seeing Jesus could have passed before his being able to close a financial deal with the crowd. There are some problems that money cannot solve. Getting to know Jesus is not determined by a classification based on our money. Indeed many times our money can constitute a hindrance.

A certain ruler asked Jesus, Luke 18: 18-25 (NIV): *“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

¹⁹ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’^[a]”

²¹ “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.

²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²³ When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

What about our position or office? Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. How could he use this position to solve his problem? In relation to the crowd, tax collector was by no means a privileged classification. The Jews were at the time being ruled by the Romans. The Romans were their oppressors. The Jewish tax collectors worked for the Roman oppressors. These tax collectors could use their position to extort burdensome taxes from their fellow Jews. Look at the following scriptures ...

Matthew 9: 10-11 (NIV), ¹⁰ “While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’”

In Matthew 18: 15-17 (NIV) Jesus says, ¹⁵ “If your brother or sister^[a] sins,^[b] go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’^[c] ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

Luke 18: 11 (NIV), ¹¹ *The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.’*

Could you imagine Zacchaeus saying, “Make way for me! I am the chief tax collector!” This would most probably have had an undesirable outcome. His position would not work here for him. There are some problems that worldly status cannot solve. We cannot get to know Jesus by relying on a classification based on our position.

Zacchaeus was forced to use his basic instincts and skills. Zacchaeus had to put on the attitude of a child. In Luke 18: 17 (NIV) Jesus says,

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Zacchaeus chose simple, elemental steps. He (walked) ran and climbed a tree. He did child-like things, driven by a faith that Jesus would be there in clear view, and by a hunger to get to see him.

Before we start (walking) running we have to settle the issue of direction. Which way? Jesus said, *“I am the way ...”* John 14: 6. When Zacchaeus set his direction towards Jesus he had set himself on the course to true fulfillment.

Seeing Jesus, knowing Jesus requires setting on course to the Bible, to prayer, to Christ’s church, to fellowship with the believers. We have to rise from slumber, complacency, conceit, doubt and defeat and walk, run to Jesus. Paul cried in Phil 3: 10. *“That I may know him ...”*

However, to get that special communion with Jesus it oftentimes requires that we go beyond the crowd; that we set ourselves apart from the rest; that we stand out on a limb; that we climb a tree. Zacchaeus moved on and up above the rest. He climbed a tree. He opened himself to rebuke, ridicule, insult. He was a prime target to be shot down. But he longed to see Jesus, and his longing was satisfied. They that hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled (see Matthew 5: 6).

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

The crowd also saw Zacchaeus. They saw Zacchaeus a chief tax collector, a thief, a sinner. Jesus saw Zacchaeus – “a son of Abraham”. The crowd had classified Zacchaeus as an outcast, without privilege and not deserving of the favor of God. But it was exceedingly more important how Jesus saw him.

In Genesis 12: 1-3 (NIV), God told Abraham (his name was at that time Abram) “... *I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you ...* ”. But this blessing was conditional. He had to take a step of faith. God told him (Gen 12: 1, NIV) “*Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you*”.

Abraham stepped out in faith. In Hebrews 11: 8-10 we see that “*By faith Abraham, when he was called ...obeyed ...*”

Indeed Abraham’s faith in God reaped the fruit of God’s blessings. He became the father of a great nation. Zacchaeus was a physical descendant of Abraham. However, if Zacchaeus had remained at home we may never have heard anything about him.

In Gal 3: 6-9, we are asked to consider Abraham. “... *those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith*”. Zacchaeus demonstrated faith in Abraham’s God. He demonstrated enough faith to take time off to get to see Jesus. He was therefore in line for the blessing of God.

Zacchaeus’s faith caused him to move in the direction of Jesus. He walked away from his old, depressing situation. He ran to see Jesus. He climbed in faith, not being ashamed to stand alone on a limb, only to find that Jesus was even more eager to see him, indeed to hang out with him – “a son of Abraham”.

The blessing of salvation, the blessing of communion with Jesus and many other blessings continue to flow to sons of Abraham. Every one of us qualifies only as we become

children of faith. A faith that says “Jesus I know that you are there for me and I am reaching out towards you”.

To this Jesus will respond. Not to our looks, not to our possessions, not to our position, not to our associations, not to how others classify us, but to our identification as children of Abraham – children of faith.

The blessings follow simple steps of faith. Steps that take us to the Bible, to prayer, to meditation, to church, to fasting. Many times we will find others to take these steps with us. But often they are steps that we have to take all by ourselves.

Zacchaeus did not do anything fancy or complicated. He did simple, child-like things. Things that showed his hunger to see Jesus. If we hunger and thirst after righteousness, we’ll take the necessary steps of faith, and we shall find Jesus ready and willing to fill us.