

John 8:31-36

We would have heard the story of Zaccheus today in Luke 19, except that today we observe the Reformation, and so John 8 is our Gospel reading. So it looks like Zaccheus gets the short end of it. But perhaps not, for I think he fits in well with today's Reformation Gospel. We hear verses 34-36: *"Everyone who commits sin,"* says Jesus, *"is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the Son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

We find Zaccheus sitting up in a sycamore tree. He climbs the tree in order to see Jesus who is about to pass by. Zaccheus is a small man, and not just in stature. He is short-sighted, looking out only for himself. He is not big-hearted; he is small here also; he is not a bit generous toward others. He is extremely wealthy, for he has shorted tax payers, robbing them blind, but using the law to do it.

Zaccheus is the kind of man who would own many slaves. Yet he himself is a slave. He is a slave to his money. His money owns him, and so ultimately, sin owns him, for *whatever is not of faith is sin.*

Zaccheus is struggling lately. He is in a love-hate relationship. He loves his money, and all the Jews hate him. What about God? Does God love him or hate him? Does he know? Zaccheus has a lot of guilt. His guilt drives him up the tree. He has to see Jesus. He has heard of Him. Jesus is the opposite of Zaccheus. He is a poor man, and very popular. And He's a good man. He doesn't take from others; He gives to others.

So Zaccheus is sitting up in his tree, and really it's his prison. He can peer out from this tree cage, down at the people below, down at Jesus. But there's no hope for him. He can see Jesus, but he cannot follow Him. He cannot be His disciple. Zaccheus is not a good man. In the final analysis, he's a thief. He could never approach Jesus, for Jesus would surely shun him, maybe even rebuke him to his face. So Zaccheus sits up in his tree as a slave; a slave to his money, to his fears; a slave to his guilt; a slave to really everything that is wrong in his life.

Zaccheus has his sycamore tree, but you and I have our own trees. We sit up in our own cages; the cages we build for ourselves. We have our own set of fears. We deal with guilt. We may not be wealthy like Zaccheus, but the wealth we do have controls us in many ways. We sit up in our trees and we can feel cut off from others, even from those that we love. We become enslaved by our emotions, by our desires; enslaved by sin as Jesus puts it: *"Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin...And the slave does not remain in the house forever."*

When sin masters us and gets the best of us, we don't feel much like God's children. What does He think of us? Perhaps, like Zaccheus, we are afraid to approach God; afraid of His rebuke. Do we really have a place in His house? Not if we're slaves; slaves to everything that is wrong in our lives. And a slave does not have a place with God forever. We need help and hope just like Zaccheus does.

As Jesus passes by, He looks up and He calls to Zaccheus: *"Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."* Oh my goodness! Does Zaccheus hear Jesus right? He does! Jesus is

not shunning him or rebuking him. Jesus is accepting him. He is welcoming him. Jesus is coming to his house today; not to condemn Zaccheus...to receive him!

Jesus has just set Zaccheus free from his slavery. Not by telling him to stop stealing from others. Not by forcing him to be a better person. Jesus sets Zaccheus free by loving him and forgiving him. Freed by Jesus, Zaccheus now willingly says, *“Half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it four-fold.”* This is what Jesus does in the heart of a sinner. He frees him to be a child of God. He frees him from everything wrong in his life. He loves him so that he now is free to love others.

Jesus is calling to you today: *“Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”* He does not shun you. He does not condemn you for how you have lived, although we deserve it. Jesus receives you. Jesus forgives you. He doesn't wait for you to change your life before He welcomes you into His. He first received Zaccheus, and this moved him to change his life. Jesus cuts the bonds and chains that enslave you. He calls you out of your cage into His loving arms.

Whatever is in your past, or in your present, that causes you guilt and fear, Jesus can handle it. And He does. You see, He climbed up a tree of His own. Not a sycamore tree; the tree of the cross. He climbed that tree to be loaded down with all your guilt and fears, with all your sin; with everything that is wrong in your life. He dealt with all of it. He did this by dying and then rising again. Jesus takes you out of the prisons which enslave you by bursting out of the prison of death for you. Whatever it is that has a hold on you, it is no longer able to make you its slave. Jesus' love now controls you; not sin and the addictions in your life.

He went into the waters of Baptism with you. This is where He receives you. This is why you are no longer a slave. Your Baptism is not just a day in your past; it is for you every day. You never become un-baptized. But you remain God's child with Jesus in these waters.

“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” No matter what you think of yourself; no matter how enslaved you feel by so much wrong in your past, you are free. Jesus declares you free. Free of sin, for God forgives you. Free of eternal punishment, for you belong with Jesus in God's house forever. You are free to love others as Zaccheus did. Free to be generous, kind, uplifting. Jesus didn't tell Zaccheus what to do; he freely desired to live as a child of God.

This is the freedom you have in Christ. And this, in a very real way, is what the Reformation is about - freedom. Freedom from the fear of God's wrath. Freedom from the power of sin, death, and the devil. Freedom from the curse of the Law, for you live under grace. You live assured of eternal life....all because *“the Son has set you free.”* Amen.