



“Meals Be Holy”

Luke 19:1–10; Romans 12:1–2

Consider how many stories and parables from the gospels are set around meals. Surely, our own meals can be holy.

When we seek to make every moment, we are striving to intentionally and mindfully live every moment in the awareness of God’s presence. Yes, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, dwells in all believers, but we so often turn away,

allowing God’s presence with us to be drowned out by the static of our lives, a bit like tuning radio stations in and out on an analog radio.

Thus, for meals to be holy, we must intentionally strive for every meal to reflect God’s presence and, therefore, God’s way. Luke tells the story of a man who was transformed at mealtime, finding himself in the unmediated presence of the Holy One -- Jesus. Perhaps we can learn something about finding holiness in our own meals by looking at his story.

Zacchaeus’s story

Zacchaeus lived in Jericho and was a chief tax collector (see the textbox), a very rich man at the top of his chosen trade. Yes, in the eyes of fellow Jews he was an unsavory character or worse. But perhaps even that wasn’t bad so far as Zacchaeus was concerned. We Americans, after all, have had a constant fascination with *la Mafioso* (*The Mafia*). Perhaps Zacchaeus enjoyed the notoriety or the feigned respect that his money could buy.

One day, Zacchaeus hears that this Jesus from Nazareth, the talk of the town, is passing through Jericho. This little tax collector, for he was a short man, runs to catch a glimpse of Jesus even though it was most unseemly for a Jewish man to run. He was probably long past worrying about being unseemly. Zacchaeus even climbs a tree; something else unbecoming for a grown man. Perhaps because Zacchaeus has made such a spectacle of himself, Jesus spots him in the tree and, as was his custom, goes to Zacchaeus’ home. In fact, Jesus even invites himself to dinner!

Can you imagine the joy Zacchaeus must have felt as he welcomed Jesus? What this would do for his reputation . . . talk about success! Of course, the townsfolk didn’t much like Jesus entering the home of the hated tax collector, but Jesus always seemed to hang around with the wrong sorts of people. Having invited himself into Zacchaeus’s home, what happens next will be Jesus’ miracle.

Zacchaeus asks nothing of Jesus, not even an answer to a question. He simply steps forward and, without prompting, commits to giving half of his ill-gotten possessions to the poor – not all, but half. Then, in keeping with the most stringent interpretation of the ancient Judaic law, Zacchaeus promises that he will repay four-fold those he has defrauded. Zacchaeus’ repentance and generosity demonstrate that he is a “son of Abraham” (v. 9) He was lost, but now is found.

Tax Collectors

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, but the Roman tax system was nothing like our IRS. Rome would contract out the collection of taxes in geographic areas. The winning entrepreneurial bidder would agree to pay the contracted amount of taxes to Rome. The tax entrepreneur would then put together an organization to do the actual collection. The winning bidder would employ chief tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, who made the whole thing work. Zacchaeus would have employed lower-level collectors, like Jesus’ disciple Matthew, who would man toll booths and other small tax collection businesses. In all, it was one of the largest enterprises of that time.

In the Roman system, tax collectors would be free to collect all the money they could and keep whatever wasn’t owed Rome under the contract. Thus, not only were they agents of the Roman oppressors, but we can also only imagine the methods they employed in gaining their wealth. Not surprisingly, in the Gospels tax collectors are usually lumped in with the prostitutes.

Notice that Jesus does not ask Zacchaeus to give up all he has. Nor does it seem that Zacchaeus abandoned his life to follow Jesus. Rather, Zacchaeus is redeemed in his life. He is transformed within the life he is living. By God's grace, Zacchaeus points his transformed life toward repentance and away from exploitation. He will be generous to the poor. He will make amends to those he has wronged. He will stay a tax collector, but he will now conduct himself with honor and justice. He will heed John the Baptist's teachings to tax collectors: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you" (Luke 3:13). Zacchaeus will "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8). Even after giving away half of his wealth and making reparations, Zacchaeus would have still been a wealthy and powerful man. But now, he will use his wealth and power and talents for God's purposes. He will be a force for good, pointing others toward just and generous lives.

Metamorphosis

In his book, *Finding the Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg helps us to understand what we are really talking about when we speak of "spiritual growth" or "spiritual formation." It is not as if we lead a "spiritual life" that is compartmentalized from the rest of our life. Rather, when we speak of our spiritual life, we are speaking of the very center of who we are. It is the sum, not a part, of the person God created us to be. There is no authentic spiritual life that is lived on the margins, no Christian spirituality that can be dabbled in. There are no cookbooks or formulae that comprise this life. Rather, it is about a complete metamorphosis,¹ a transformation from our self-centered selves to Christ-centered selves. It is no less a transformation than the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. It is transformation that Paul speaks of in today's passage from Romans, which you might take a few moments to read again. N. T. Wright observes:

The key to it all is the transforming of the mind. Many Christians in today's world never come to terms with this. They hope they will be able to live up to something like Christian standards while still thinking the way the rest of the world thinks. It can't be done. Paul's analysis of human rebellion against God in 1:18–32 included a fair amount of wrong thinking. Having the mind renewed by the persuasion of the Spirit is the vital start of that true human living which is God's loving will for all his children.²

Similarly, Paul's mission to the Gentiles is to preach "the Gospel of God" and "bring about the obedience of faith" (Romans 1:1,5). This obedience is not about following a bunch of rules, nor forcing ourselves to be kind or just or humble because that is what Jesus said to do. The obedience of faith is about doing as Christ would have us do because we want to. We have been made so that we can truly love from a desiring heart. We seek genuine transformation so that we will no longer have to try to reflect the light of Christ to others, but so that we will simply be the light. A light bulb doesn't have to try to make light, it simply does so. Are we a light for others?

The heart of our lives with God

This transformation, this renewing of our entire selves so that we might each become the unique person that God created, is the essence of our life with God. Hence, Soren Kierkegaard's insightful prayer, "And now Lord, with your help I will become myself." The Christian life, the life lived before God, is less about doing the right things than it is *becoming the right person*.

Hence, so much of this transformation is made of the mundane -- making laundry, diapers, and meals holy, so that we never experience this world in the same way again.

¹ "Metamorphosis" comes from the Greek, *metamorphoo*: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (*metamorphoo*) by the renewing of your minds, . . ." (Romans 12:2). *Metamorphoo* is derived from the Greek word, *morphoo*, which means "to form" or "to fashion." It is used once in the NT (Gal. 4:19) where Paul compares our growth in Christ to our formation in the womb. In his *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* entry on *morphoo*, G. Kittel writes, "This growth is an ongoing process, both open and secret, both gift and task, with maturity as the goal."

² Wright, N.T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 2: Chapters 9-16* (pp. 69–70). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Zacchaeus's life is story of transformation. The people whom Zacchaeus had exploited surely would have thought him to be beyond the possibility of redemption and transformation. What could there be to salvage in a man who had sold his soul to the Romans? Yet, when Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, he is saved, for transformation is the essence of salvation. He was lost and yet is found. And it all began with a meal.

We sometimes make the mistake of thinking of salvation only as a one-time event, an instant when we are made right with God by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ, which is itself a gift from God. Yet, being saved is just as much a process. Paul urges believers to work out their own salvation (Philippians 2:12). As Roger Olson puts it, salvation is both gift and task. But to say that salvation is a task, as well as a gift, is not to deny that it is all God's work. For, after telling the Philippians to work out their salvation, Paul, in the very same sentence, writes, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Zacchaeus embraces both the gift and the task and he was never the same. We don't need to hear the rest of the story to know the truth of that. I hope his neighbors embraced Zacchaeus's transformation, though I'm pretty sure there must have been cynics who couldn't see the truth. But people can change; we deny the power of God if we think otherwise, as Alan Culpepper notes in closing:

Another of the impediments to the progress of the kingdom is the enslaving prejudice that we know who people are and that they cannot change. In the wisdom of his years, a sophomore writes off a person who has disappointed him and let him down, a pastor gives up on a "dead" congregation, a coach assumes a player cannot make the team in spite of her desire to play, or an employer pigeonholes an employee on their first meeting. Over and over again, we hear the whisper of the crowd: "He's a rich tax collector."

Yet Jesus stopped for a single person. "Today" came for Zacchaeus because he wanted to see so badly that he ran and climbed a sycamore. Today can be filled with joy because God is still at work bringing the kingdom and because words of grace can still be spoken and forgiveness can still be experienced. What outrageous good news—a camel passed through the eye of a needle!³

³ R. Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 9, 360.