

BaptistWay Bible Series for Feb. 19: Repentance requires leaving something behind

February 7, 2006

Posted: 2/7/06

BaptistWay Bible Series for Feb. 19

Repentance requires leaving something behind

• Luke 19:1-10

By Lex Robertson

Logsdon Seminary, Abilene

At the beginning of every year, people resolve to exercise regularly and maintain healthier diets. This is a good idea. I have made these resolutions myself for several years now. "This will be the year," I tell myself annually.

I then celebrate my new resolutions by lying around the house watching football and eating black-eyed peas and cornbread all day. "Today is just the first day of January, I still have 364 days to get on that diet and exercise routine."

Once February rolls around, I still haven't started. My intentions still are good, but my actions are not there. By June, even the intentions are gone. All my good intentions, when they are not matched by my actions, are meaningless.

In Luke 18:31-43, Jesus was going through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. Before he entered Jericho, he met a blind man who called out for mercy. When Jesus gave the man sight, the man immediately began to follow Jesus. His response was one of action.

When Jesus finally entered Jericho, in Luke 19:1-10, he met another man whose intentions were supported by his actions. Zaccheus, aside from being “a wee, little man” (as the song goes), was a tax collector. Religious leaders often criticized Jesus for being the friend of tax collectors. Tax collectors were despised in the community, having a reputation for being crooked.

Zaccheus had heard Jesus was coming. He climbed a tree just to get a peek at the Savior. Jesus called him down from the tree and informed the tax collector the one he had been waiting in tree for would be staying with him.

The people standing around began to talk, wondering why Jesus would be the guest of a sinner, and not just any sinner either but a tax collector.

Zaccheus did not waste time. Upon Jesus’ call, this tax collector hurried down the tree. Before the two of them even began to travel to their destination and before Jesus had said another word, Zaccheus proclaimed he would give half his possessions to the poor. Further, if he had cheated anyone (and surely he had, that was the way tax collectors worked), he would pay back four times the amount he swindled. Jesus responded by saying salvation had come to Zaccheus.

Many times, we, as Christians, are thankful for God’s grace and mercy in salvation, but we neglect genuine repentance. Like our new year’s resolutions, our repentance is just a few good intentions with no real action. That is not repentance at all.

To repent means to turn around, to leave something behind and to go in different direction. For Zaccheus, a crooked tax collector, it meant paying

back even more than he had defrauded. It meant a significant sacrifice of the possessions he cherished. It meant living a life that benefited others rather than just himself.

Compare (or contrast) Zaccheus with another man Jesus met. In Luke 18:18-30, a rich ruler asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. He claimed to have kept all the commandments, but Jesus told the ruler he lacked one thing. Jesus instructed the man to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. Upon this instruction, the rich man became sad.

The rich ruler wanted what Zaccheus received—salvation and eternal life. The reason the ruler did not receive salvation had nothing to do with the commandments or any theological tenets. He simply did not repent when Jesus asked him to do so.

Zaccheus did not even wait for instruction. When he met with Jesus, repentance seemed like the only natural response. Both Zaccheus and the other man were rich, but the other one was saddened with the thought of repentance. Zaccheus, however, repented joyfully, knowing a life following Jesus and giving to others is more fulfilling than anything money could buy.

Zaccheus' repentance, though rewarding, was not easy. Giving back four times what he had defrauded had precedence in the Old Testament. In Exodus 22:1, anyone who had stolen one sheep was commanded to return four sheep to the person from whom he had stolen. Even though it was the right thing to do, it probably meant parting with a significant amount of the wealth he had gained honestly in order to redeem the portion he had gained in deceit. Not only that, but he gave half of all his possessions—not just half of his money, but half of everything.

Parting with money is not easy for anyone. For a person who has a lot of money, it can be downright painful, as demonstrated by the rich ruler.

Giving possessions can be a relief, if a person just gives away those things he or she no longer wants, but it also can be difficult. People often define themselves by their possessions—their clothes, cars, jewelry and gadgets. Zaccheus did not care about his material possessions anymore. He had met Jesus, and Jesus was enough.

Revisiting New Year's resolutions, I realize I am a lot like the rich ruler. I want to lose 15 pounds, I just do not want to make the necessary sacrifices. Spiritually, I hope to become more like Zaccheus, whose repentance was not mere rhetoric. The sacrifices may be a little scary, but the reward is immeasurable!

Discussion question

- What would true repentance look like in your life?

