

# Loving The Lost

by Steve Zeisler

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I heard a report on the news last week that said that the U.S. military had taken steps to reclassify some 700 men who had been listed as "missing in action" in Southeast Asia as "presumed killed in action". The report also said that the families, of these men were strongly resisting this reclassification. When I heard that report two responses occurred in my heart. The first response was to sympathize with and feel the hurt of those families. There is probably nothing more devastating to K-- through than the loss of a loved one, and it is certainly understandable that these families would resist any attempt to take away their last hope.

The second thing that occurred to me was the thought that the most loving thing that could be done for these families is for someone to counsel them to face reality. Many of these men have been missing for more than ten years and, because of the nature of that war and the amount of time that has gone by since, there is very little likelihood they will ever be seen again. So perhaps the most loving thing to say to these families is, "You are safe. You are not lost. You are at home and you have so much to live for. Don't let this burden rob you of enjoying the life that you have to live here."

Now the MIA question is a politically difficult one and I am sure I don't understand all the ramifications of it. But I notice that my response to these families facing the loss of their loved ones mirrored the response in my heart to the lost people who surround me every day in this world. We are living in a world that is made up of people who are lost in terms of their relationship to God. They are cut off from him. The scriptures say they live in darkness. I have a sympathetic desire to help them, first of all. I wish it were not so. We have a certain amount of hurt for those who don't know the Lord, but then this sort of realism sets in. Why should those of us who are saved, who have come home, have our enjoyment of Christian living taken from us because we are burdened for those on the outside? Perhaps the wise thing, the realistic thing for us to do, is to minimize the sense of hurt we feel when we face a lost world and move on to enjoy ourselves in our Christian life.

Now there is just enough truth in that suggestion to make it a powerful temptation, because the world we face is lost. The evidence pours into our lives every day from every news article that we read. From virtually every conversation we have with those who don't know the Lord, we learn that they are cut off from God by a vast chasm. The scriptures clearly declare that God wants us to enjoy the Christian life. He wants us to feel delight and fulfillment. He wants us to study the Word and enjoy it. He wants us to worship together and to learn to overcome the weaknesses and frustrations that have held us back. He wants us to rejoice in Christian fellowship.

Now if we want Christian fellowship that is realistic and is centered on the Lord, then the character of Jesus must be reproduced in us. If we want worship to be anything but a hollow, ridiculous act, if we want fruitful Bible study, then we must find that Jesus is at the center and as we grow in Christian faith, we will grow in our concern for the world. Instead of having our desire to become more mature Christians lead us away from the world as it did the Pharisees, we will see that the more we become like Jesus the more committed we become to a lost world. Jesus himself said that he came to seek and to save the lost. The reason an omnipotent and eternally satisfied God would bear the shame and the humiliation and the anguish of becoming a man and dying on the cross is precisely because his heart is attuned to seek and save the lost. And if we grow to know him, we cannot be removed from the world. We are driven ever more towards it.

Ron Ritchie has a plaque on his office door that describes this kind of paradox rather accurately I think. It is a quote from C. T. Studd's little poem that says:

Some like to dwell within the sound of church or chapel bell.  
I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.

There are those people who, because of their sense of how good it is to be a Christian, long to hang out in a situation where they are taken care of and pampered and their needs are met. But those who have grown up in Christ and who have drawn near to him find that they are sent back into the world to love it and communicate God's love.

Now there are a lot of wrong ways to respond to this challenge. The history of the church is replete with examples of how not to do it. One option that you can take is to learn to redefine sin in such a way that you never have to run into anybody who is lost. You can define "lost" so that your whole life is taken up interacting with people where you never have to assume there is anything about them that is broken or hurt, or that they are cut off from God.

Another option is to learn to pressure and force, to pounce on unsuspecting people, buttonhole them to death, wrestle them to the ground, and force the Gospel on them. Another is to learn to manipulate psychologically and play the emotional harp in the hearts of people so they weep and bow down and display all sorts of emotional responses. Their wills are never touched. Their hearts are never changed. But they respond emotionally, at least, to the Gospel presentation. Many churches even refuse to conduct Christian meetings that don't have a call to come forward and receive the Lord.

But I think if we are going to respond properly to this problem we need to recognize how we got there to begin with. We are in the predicament of needing, of being required to care for a broken world because the heart of God is being reproduced in our heart. Jesus got us into this mess. It is his concern for the lost that is going to make us concerned for the lost. And if Jesus got us into the mess, then I think it is incumbent upon us to learn from him how to live that way. He needs to be the model for us of what it means to seek and to save the lost. The way he did it is the way that we ought to go about doing it.

We have tried to say that emphasizing Christian enjoyment will remove us from a concern from the world, but in fact we find that the closer we are to the Lord, the more concern is generated in us to reach out to those who don't know him. And if the concern comes from him then certainly the means the life-style must come from him too.

Now in order to see Jesus as a model I would like to invite you to come to Jericho with me. Jericho is a city with a checkered career. It is first encountered in scripture as a great stronghold that stood in the way of Joshua and the children of Israel as they entered the promised land. And God's miraculous victory won there is one of the most famous accounts in all the Old Testament. In the first century Jericho is described as a garden place one of the richest and most bountiful of the regions in all the land of Israel. Josephus said it was the fattest portion of the land. Herod built a palace there Today Jericho is one of the most important archeological sites in the world and the dramatic discoveries being made there are confounding the archeologists. (I also might add that Jericho is today the home of a restaurant that is absolutely unforgettable! I can say from first hand experience that that restaurant exists in Jericho today and I can guarantee that it will leave its impression on your intestines!)

The New Testament speaks of Jericho in a consistent fashion. Joshua's conquest is mentioned in Hebrews but every other mention of Jericho centers around Jesus' ministry to a broken and lost world. It is as if Jericho is a training center for us to learn how to reach out to a world that is lost a world that is hurt a world that is broken and in darkness. The passage read this morning-- the account of the Good Samaritan-- is one of the most famous of Jesus parables. Those events took place on the road to Jericho and I think it is clearly implied that the Levite and the priest who passed by were men of Jericho. Jericho had a large priestly community and the Lord uses that parable as an example of how not to ignore the hurt and the broken in our world.

The account we are going to study this morning begins in Luke 18 verse 31

**And He took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered up to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." And they understood none of these things, and this saying**

was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said.

And it came about that as He was approaching Jericho, a certain blind man was sitting by the road, begging. Now hearing a multitude going by, he began to inquire what this might be. And they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. And he called out, saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And those who led the way were sternly telling him to be quiet; but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and commanded that he be brought to Him; and when he had come near He questioned him, "What do you want Me to do for you?" And he said, "Lord, I want to receive my sight!" And Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight, and began following Him, glorifying God; and when all the people saw it, they gave praise to God.

And he entered and was passing through Jericho. And behold, there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; and he was a chief tax-gatherer, and he was rich. And he was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. And he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly. And when they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Jesus is modeling for us what it means to seek and to save the lost That is his conclusion. That is his interpretation of the events. These are his words: "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Now the first thing to notice I think is the background the context. And the context is this: Jesus is on his way to die. He knows precisely what lies before him. He knows the anguish that he is going to go through and he has set off on that very course. Jericho is only about 15 miles from Jerusalem and very soon Jesus will be crucified.

When we know of someone who is going to face a difficult trial we try to make life easy for them. We will do everything we can to remove obstacles and pamper and defer to one who is about to suffer (There is a caricature in a lot of old movies of a clod of a husband who has been unresponsive and uninterested in his wife's needs but who immediately begins to pamper her when she becomes pregnant. His reaction suggests that the woman is about to undergo a trial that is difficult and hurtful and demanding and it is proper for those around to show deference to her and try to ease her burden ) When I was in high school football players were given special attention on the Friday before a big game The rest of the student body would shout encouragement and all sorts of good things would happen to those who were about to go out and risk life and limb for old alma mater This is a natural reaction.

But Jesus did not assume that that kind of reaction would be true in his life. He did not expect it or create it by his attitude. Jesus was facing the most difficult burden imaginable. He was going to bear a greater burden than the entire human race has ever borne. And yet he didn't expect his life to be made easy. He didn't ignore the needs of others. It is precisely at this point that he reaches out and shows concern and interest in the needs of those around him. This ought to say something to us I think about what it means to seek and to save the lost. We never have the right to take a day off to say that we have suffered too much that today people ought to pay attention to us. The Lord may give us days like that out of his love for us but we don't have the right to demand them. When he puts people in our lives that he indicates we should respond to whatever it is that we are facing shouldn't become an obstacle to that.

In reviewing this account of the men who were ministered to by the Lord I would like to suggest that there are three kinds of hearts involved in this and the best way to see what is going on is to look at each of them in

succession. The first heart is represented by the crowd, and I think we will find that many of these people are a lot like us. We would fit really well in this crowd. They are religious people. The Passover was approaching and pilgrims from all over the world were on their way to Jerusalem and this crowd was largely made up of pilgrims. And those who were not pilgrims were the local townsfolk of Jericho who were standing on the road cheering on those who were sacrificing time and energy to go to Jerusalem for the Passover. These were people who appreciated what the Passover stood for. They were Worshipers of God, they were doing the right thing at the right time. I think they were Bible students. Rabbis taught as they walked—you can see this all through the Gospels. Very often Jesus' message to his men was given while they were walking. And I think that is what is happening here. Jesus' followers, together with some of these pilgrims, were listening to Jesus discuss truth, perhaps teaching the Old Testament to them as he traveled along. And that is why they are trying to hush up the blind man who is making all this racket.

The problem was that the very things that characterized them as religious people, the very things that made them godly, were barriers to the ones who were outside. This short and despicable tax collector and this deformed beggar were trying so hard to hear what Jesus was saying that they were shunted aside. The very thing that indicated their interest in God was a barrier to those on the outside and I think if we are honest we will have to admit that very often those same things are true of us. My concern to indicate my spirituality very often drives men away from God. I look religious; the things I do and say, the meetings that I go to, the folks I hang out with, all conspire together to make those on the outside seem to think of me as unapproachable, as uninterested. They think the Gospel is not for them.

The second heart in these accounts is the heart of the Lord himself. Now he was all the things that the crowd was. He was religious. He was a pilgrim. He was the Bible teacher. He shared with them all the concern for a godly life style that they share,) but he didn't allow those things to become a barrier to his concern for the outsiders, for the lost ones. And in fact, as he is serving as our model here, we can see that Jesus was very concerned, very alert to the needs around him. And we can imagine ourselves saying, "O.K. I can see how important that is. I need to be serious about my Christian living but I also need to be serious and to reach out and show concern for those around me. " The thing that was impressive about the Lord at this point is not that he was concerned but that he was effective in his ministry. I think that many of us come to the point where we say, "I want to serve the lost and broken," but as soon as we turn to the world we find nothing but obstacles that seem insurmountable to us and we sense that we are ineffective in our ministry.

Jesus was not impeded by what I would call sentiment, or pity. There are many people in the world who, because of what they understand of God, would have been very sentimental and would have shown great pity toward the blind beggar. Jesus' question to the man sounds almost harsh. Let me put it this way, I would have had a hard time asking it. Here is this poor guy suffering, and I come up and say, "What do you want?" Isn't it obvious what he wants? He is asking for alms. He is a beggar. Many of us would have run up to him and handed him some money. But the problem with that approach is that while it is a hundred times better than being a barrier to the man, it still doesn't solve his problem. And I think that many people in the world who have sold out the Gospel for the sake of so-called social action would have given him money because he asked for money, but they would never have asked him a question that would have allowed him to declare that he had faith in the Savior of the world.

And when he was asked that question, the man declared it. He had the burden of blindness and poverty lifted from his life, but he also had the burden of eternal separation from God lifted from him. I think if we confuse pity with love, very often we will be the kind of people who would have given money to this man, but would never have given him the opportunity to express his faith in Christ. Pity and sentiment and a willingness to be hurt for the hurts of those around us and move into a ministry to them is crucially important, but it must never fall short of what it means to love someone. And that is exemplified by Jesus who knew that this man wanted to respond to the Gospel, and so the Lord went all the way and loved him totally.

A second obstacle encountered by those of us who have decided to turn away from our selfishness and minister to the world is prejudice. I think that is what Zaccheus represents here. The difficulty and the hatred that the crowd expressed toward Zaccheus was a prejudiced response to him. Zaccheus was a tax collector. What that meant in this culture was that he had agreed, as a Jew with probably a significant background, to sell everything that he had been given, to throw his culture away, to deny what the religious people around him

had to offer, for a position with the hated Roman Empire that allowed him to get rich. His name means "pure" or "just." Zaccheus probably had godly parents. He probably was brought up with every option to become an observer of the Passover, a worshipper of God and what he had done in a calculated fashion was to look that in the eye and say, "No. I would rather be rich. I would rather serve Rome and get rich."

The reason we are prejudiced against people like this is not only because they gouge us as tax collectors, but because they represent, essentially, someone who has chosen sin and been successful. There is nothing more threatening than that. They have looked at what we have to offer and said, "No thanks. I'd rather get rich." And sure enough they get rich. They turn their back on what we stand for and they are "better off" as a result. That is threatening to us and it is precisely the same kind of threat that we fear as Christians when we observe what is happening to the family in our day.

One of the most important issues facing the Western world, I think, is what is going to become of the nuclear family. We look at individuals in the world who have said, "No thanks. I don't want it," and they are successful in their opposition to everything we stand for. Gay rights activists, militant feminists, some child psychologists, and hundreds of others stand against everything we stand for and the horrible thing about it is that they are successful, they seem to be carrying the tide. And when we are threatened like that, we are prejudiced. We have a hard time loving people like that. If they would only be wretched we could love them. But being successful makes them a threat, so they are extraordinarily difficult to love.

I think one of the most telling passages in Charles Colson's book "Born Again" dealt with this issue. It had to do with Harold Hughes' reaction upon hearing that Colson had come to Christ. Essentially, his reaction was that he wished that no one had ever shared the Gospel with Colson because he wanted the man to go to hell! It infuriated him that someone who was as threatening to everything that Harold Hughes stood for as Charles Colson -- who was powerful and successful and ungodly- should come to Christ. Hughes had to deal with his negative reaction.

I think we live in a world where, if we are going to love the lost, we need to get over our prejudices and say that some of those who are antagonistic toward everything we stand for want to know Jesus and we have got to be able to love them and serve their interests.

The third heart is illustrated by both Zaccheus and the blind man and it represents for me, perhaps, the most important lesson I can learn here this morning. What their lives say loud and clear is that there are people in the world who don't know Jesus Christ who are desperate to know him. So desperate, in fact, that they would fight off the barrier of the crowd, that they would make fools of themselves in order to get some momentary closeness to Jesus, so serious about knowing him that their lives did 180 degree turns once they met him face to face. The beggar had been pushy and sad and he became a man who praised God and followed Jesus. Zaccheus had been avaricious and cruel and he became honest and generous as a result of his encounter with Jesus. These men were serious about knowing the Lord and they were willing to put their lives on the line.

The question I want to ask myself at this point is, "Are there any people who, because of the impact of my knowing the Lord, find themselves with this kind of tenacity to know him?" Paul said that our lives are going to have the effect of being the aroma of Christ in the world and for some people that will be deadly-- their hearts will be more hardened as a result of coming near the Lord. But there are others for whom the effect of this aroma is going to be life-- giving. The test that we need to apply to ourselves is: Do we ever have the impact upon people of creating hope where there is hopelessness? Is there anybody in our neighborhood, in our business where we work, in the stores in which we shop, who finds that the result of our impact on them is to create a thirst for Jesus Christ, so much so that they are willing to be aggressive to know him?

We have already talked about some of the wrong ways to respond to this call to seek and to save the lost -- pressure, manipulation, and so on. The flesh can do those things. It can be very active, in attacking the world. But what the flesh cannot do is to create a hunger so that the world attacks us. If the people in your neighborhood sense that the house you live in is one where help can be found; if they see the little generousities and a willingness to show mercy and honesty and a willingness to admit your mistakes- these things come together to make the statement to the world in which you live that Jesus is worth knowing.

And I think we ought to measure our success as seekers and savers of the lost by asking if we ever have anybody who is rushing toward Christ as a result of what we do-- not just are we advancing on the world, and it is important that we do. Jesus did, but he also had people beating down the door to get to him. Peter says that we need to be ready to give a defense when asked concerning the hope that is in us. The certain conclusion from that statement is that somebody is asking. Somebody has seen something in us that makes them want to know the Lord.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said of his followers that they were the light of the world and that a city set on a hill cannot be hidden. There are people in the world in which we live who are tired of walking around in the wilderness, who are desperate to find a city that they can live in, who are desperate to find a home where there is warmth and companionship, where there is someone to put their arms around them, where there is a place they can sink down roots and say, "I belong here". We live in a world that is made of wandering, desperate people. Those cities set upon a hill cannot be hidden. And they are going to find that the lost and the hurt and the broken of this world are attracted to come there. And I think we need to ask of ourselves as a church and as families and as individuals whether we have that impact on the world around us. If not, we need to pray that the Lord will make us that kind of people.

Lord, we know how attractive you are. We know what a glorious thing it was to see you for the first time in our own experience; we knew that you loved us and that we wanted to be next to you and cared for by you. Now, Lord, we ask that that same kind of attractiveness will communicate itself in our life to the people around us so that sometimes there may be folks like Zaccheus and this blind man who will overcome every barrier to get to know you because they are so drawn to the life that is there. Thank you that you are capable of accomplishing this in us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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