

“Sinners Anonymous: Making It Right”

Let me start today with a story. It was a life-lesson I learned early on that most definitely had an impact. (I still remember.) It was 1963, in South Dakota. I was eight years old (at the time), 3rd grade, driven in life by important things liking fishing in the river, riding my bike around town (with my friends), and trying to figure out if this whole boy/girl thing made any sense.

Here's how it played out. I was hanging out (one afternoon) with a couple of buddies. It was a typical small Midwestern town, a few restaurants, a grocery store, gas station, a number of longtime mainstays, including a Benjamin Franklin store on the main road.

We didn't have much to do (that day), sort of blowing time. We decided to walk into the store and just look around. I remember looking around at a lot of things. I couldn't tell you what they were any more, except for one thing.

I was a baseball junkie. My brother and I had quite a collection of baseball cards. We were always trading and comparing and (often times) competing to see who had the most and the best.

You could buy five cards and a stick of gum for 25 cents. I received 50 cents as a weekly allowance, so each week I could buy at least one pack. Well, this particular week, I had already spent my allowance. Didn't have anything to spend, but those packs of cards and gum were just right there.

I was a good kid. I really was. We did some dumb stuff, looking back, but it wasn't anything real bad. I honestly don't know how (or why) it happened, but it happened. I'd never done it before and I've never even (thought about) doing it since...but that day I did.

I looked around and no one was watching. I took one of the packs, stuck in my pocket, and began walking toward the door. No one saw me. I made it outside; actually made it all the way home.

Opened the pack, took out the cards, popped the gum in my mouth, and I thought it was done. It wasn't done. There was this knot in my stomach that wouldn't go away. I tried to pretend it wasn't there, but it was. I tried to pretend it never happened, but it had.

I still remember starting to cry. I also remember that's when my Dad walked in. I don't how that happened; he hardly ever (just walked) in. In hindsight, it might have been a God-thing. I'll never know.

All I know is that when he asked me what happened, I cried even harder and I couldn't stop. And when I finally stopped, I told him. (I still remember.) He didn't yell at me. He didn't get angry with me. All he did was to ask me what I thought I should do.

Meanwhile, I'm thinking, "I'm eight years old, third grade, a just (stole from a store) and I don't want to go jail. I don't know what I should do." And then I said, "I should probably take it back. I need to return what I stole to the store."

And so we did. We walked to the store, only a few blocks away. It seemed like it took forever. I walked in, laid the cards and the (chewed-up gum) on the counter, and told the man what I had done.

For some reason, I had always been afraid of that man. I didn't know what he would do. All I remember is that he told me he was sorry to hear what I had done, but glad to see what I had just done. He told me never to do it again and (if I wanted to make it up), I could come in on Saturdays and help him sweep the floors.

For the next four Saturdays, that's what I did. I swept the floors in that Benjamin Franklin store. I didn't like it, but I liked it. It wasn't fun, but (each week) when I was finished, I felt good.

Looking back, I learned a lesson I still remember. I gained a respect (for being honest) and for other people I had never known. In my own way, (I guess) I had "made right" what I had done wrong. And from that day on, I was never afraid of that man again.

And so we come to week four in our Sinners Anonymous series. We're working our way through a number of stories (in the Bible) that help us face and deal with and (come to grips) with what it means (for us) to be addicted to sin.

We've been following some of the steps in (a number of) the support groups that are out there, like A.A. and N.A., and tracking what happens in those (recovery programs) with what's happening in our series.

I don't want to go through all of (the steps) again, here today. You can go online and listen to where we've been. I do want to set this up, however, by touching on some of the (higher level) broad-stroke ideas we've been dealing with in the first few weeks of this series.

In a twelve-step program, on a higher (more broad-stroke level), it goes from an admission that we need help (in step one), to a recognition that there is help (in steps two and three), to an honest assessment and admission of our sin and guilt (steps four and five), to a desire and willingness (in steps six and seven) to come clean before God and ask for his help in turning this all around.

In the first (three weeks) of our series, we covered those (broad-stroke ideas) and dealt with the same basic concepts. Today we're dealing with the ideas found in steps eight and nine of those same twelve-step programs.

Take a look at those two steps as we get going. Step Eight: We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. This is a step (in recovery) to actually doing something to make things right.

And Step Nine: We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. In making this (restitution thing) real, we want to make sure that we don't do any (further damage) to those we've already hurt.

And so we come to our story today. It's a story that not only hits on steps eight and nine (in recovery), those steps dealing with (making things right) with those we've hurt, but also with each of the (other steps) leading up to that point in dealing with addiction.

I just love this story about Zacchaeus, a wee little man who wanted to see Jesus. Maybe for those of us on the shorter end, it's even more appealing. There's something about being vertically challenged that has a way of uniting people who would otherwise have little in common.

In Junior High, (I think I've told you this), I won the tetherball championship. I received a trophy at one of the school rallies as the champion. But (to be fair), I wasn't champion of the entire school, but of the "C" Division. "A" Division was the tallest kids. "B" Division was the norm. And then there was the "C" Division for the rest of us who (literally) never quite measured up. I was the champion.

I love this story about this man who was (physically) on the shorter end in life, but who (in spite of his limited stature), wouldn't let anything stop him from seeing Jesus. Luke says he climbed up in the tree. He waited alongside the road. And he did it because he wanted to see. He had to see. And he didn't care (who else) might see.

It would be fun to go there some day and see it. I'm told there's a sycamore tree that still stands along one of the main roads in Jericho. It's surrounded (today) by a fence and said to be the (very tree) in which Zacchaeus sat when he was called by Jesus.

Now, I don't know if that's true or not, that it's the same tree in which Zacchaeus sat, waiting for Jesus. (It probably isn't.) I do know that he sat (waiting for Jesus). And standing by the tree (the exact one or not), you could just picture it happening. Short in stature, he couldn't see. And yet he found a way to make it happen. And when it happened, (when he met the Lord), it changed his life.

Now, we're dealing (in this series) with addiction, with facing and (being honest) about our sin, with coming clean and making amends. Do you think the same thing can happen today, that meeting the Lord can change your life? And do you think there are still reasons (and not just physical height), why people fail to see?

Pride can stand in the way of seeing Jesus. (People who think they have it all together and don't need a Savior in their life.) Prestige can stand in the way of seeing Jesus. (It's not always the most popular thing to do, to be a follower of Christ.)

Power can blur a person's perception. Prejudice can get in the way of having clear vision. Even other people can become that which (blocks us) and keep us from seeing what God in his Son is all about. The good news is that even when we don't see him, he sees us.

It's interesting how a person's name can shape their life. It's interesting how a (person's life) can shape their name. Zacchaeus was quite a name.

Do you know what the name Zacchaeus means? (It was a good name.) It means "the righteous" or "pure one." ("The righteous" or "pure one.") That's quite a name for anyone to have. I wouldn't mind having it myself.

But it's interesting how a person's name can shape their life, and how a person's life can shape their name. It was a good name. It had a good meaning...but not a good reputation.

Zacchaeus was a name (in spite of its meaning) that the people despised. As a tax collector, he was known as a cheat, and rightly so. He took what he (had to) to pay the required taxes to Rome, but he took (even more) to pay (what wasn't required) to himself. His was a reputation (in spite of what it could have been) that was bigger than his name.

Now, this isn't a parable (told by Jesus), but a true story of what happened, and so I don't want to turn it into one. But it's interesting that when Jesus calls Zacchaeus, where is he? He's up a tree. (He's up a tree.) An appropriate place for a man whose life was confused and out of order and who needed to make a change. But Jesus saw him. And he knew his name. And he called him. And it changed his life.

I'll never forget the time (years ago) when I visited a man in the hospital who was coming to the end of his life. He was a faithful man. He was a faith-filled man. I didn't need to tell him anything, but simply remind him of what he already knew.

I remember asking him if there was a Bible passage he wanted me to read, and he said there was. He asked me to read Luke, chapter 3, the second half of the chapter. I found it and I began reading. About two verses in, I asked him if this was the right place. (It was a genealogy.) He said it was, so I kept reading.

When I finished, I asked him why he liked that passage. And he said, "Because God knows all their names." He said, "Because every person counts." I agreed. And we prayed. I still remember.

Zacchaeus was up a tree. His reputation preceded him everywhere he went. And yet he came to see Jesus. He wanted to know about this one they called the Christ. That's where any (significant recovery) begins.

But before he saw Jesus, Jesus saw him. And he knew his name. He knew his life. (He knows your life.) And he can change your life. He can transform your life, just like he did with Zacchaeus.

Friend of sinners...that's one of the charges people made against Jesus throughout his ministry. (We mentioned this earlier in our series.) If you read his story, he was always hanging around with the wrong kind of folks: tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, the sick and the blind, the lame and the outcast. Everywhere he went, Jesus had the habit of spending time with the very ones whose habits kept people from spending time.

Now, we don't know a lot about Zacchaeus. Luke doesn't tell us much. He was short in stature. He wanted to see Jesus. And he was a tax collector. Luke says he was a chief tax collector. That meant that he had other tax collectors working for him. It was a business. It was like a ring. And he was the leader. And he became rich as a result. And the people knew it. And so did Jesus. And that's why he called him to come down and went to his house.

You know, it's interesting, as you go through the Bible, that before people come to know God, that God has already come to know them. In fact, there's nothing about their lives (when he calls) that God doesn't know. And there's nothing about what he knows (when he calls) that keeps him from calling.

People say, "But I don't have what it takes to be anything (in this life) for Jesus. You don't know my life." I say, "Neither do you know mine...But God does (God does)...and he calls us anyway."

Friend of sinners? You bet he is. So much so that he gave his life so that sinners (like you and me) might have ours. (Zacchaeus had no friends, only a reputation.) And he was a sinner. But Jesus called him to come down, went to his home, and it changed his life.

Four times what he had taken from those he had cheated. That's what Zacchaeus did in response - half of his possessions to the poor. That's quite a lot.

Now, if it was a requirement (for being loved) by Jesus, he might not have done it. He might have stayed in that tree and never come down. (Might still be there?) But he didn't because it wasn't, and it never will be.

In his recovery from sin, Zacchaeus made amends. He decided in his life (and in his heart) to pay it back. And he did it (in response) to what Jesus had done for him.

My friends, don't turn this (paying it back) thing into a making yourself (right with God) thing. That's not what these steps are about. The only thing that can make you right with God is what Jesus did for you on the cross. That's the only thing. And he did it. He made it right.

This paying it back thing is nothing more than responding to what he has already done for you. This making it right thing is nothing less than being honest about (and with) the ones you've hurt.

I won't ask you today to (raise your hands) and go public with the names of the ones you've hurt. If there's anyone in your life with whom you need make things right, you'd don't need to name them (out loud) to us or to anyone else. I won't even ask.

I will ask you to (raise your heart) and go private with not just their names but with whatever it was that happened and with whoever it is (to whom it's happened) and make it right. And I'll ask you to do it, not because you have to (to be right with God), but because (in Jesus) you already are right with God, and it's the right thing to do.

When I was a kid, it meant going back to that store and giving back what I had taken. As an adult (over the years), it's meant telling that person I've hurt that I'm sorry. It's meant asking that one I've offended, to give me a chance to (do it over) and start again. It's meant being willing to be honest about my own failures, to becoming vulnerable with my own needs (and my own friends), and to being open and real about the things in my life I'd rather hide and pretend are not there.

There is no one way to make things right when it comes to the people we've hurt. But, if ever it's going to (be right) with the ones we've hurt, it's a step (in our recovery) we need to take.

And so let me close with this. I don't where you are in your faith-walk relationship with Jesus, if you're walking just fine (and it's all good) or you're sitting in some tree (still not certain) and waiting for him to walk by. (It doesn't matter.)

What matters is what you do in response to what he has done. Because where (he is at) in his relationship with you, is that he is calling you to come down from wherever you are in life. He has given his life (on the cross) so that you can have yours. And you are, (in him), right with God, and there's nothing you have done (or will ever do) that will ever change what he accomplished on your behalf. It has already been made right.

How about with everyone else in your life? How about with that (someone else) in your life? If there's a someone else (in the everyone else) in your life, it's time to make it right. Because you'll never fully recovery from your addiction until you do.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for your calling in life to turn from our sin and to place our trust in you, and for the confidence and assurance that (when we do) you have done all that is needed to make us right with God. Lord, help us in our recovery to be honest about not only our sins toward you that have already been forgiven, but also about those sins against others that still remain. If there are things that still need to be made right with any one in our lives, give us the courage and the character to make them right. Help us to face our addiction. In your name we pray. Amen.