

LOOKING FOR INTERRUPTIONS
Luke 18:35-19:9

I. INTRO

- A. Walk through the business district of Toronto on any given day—and you will run into what would appear to be two opposite groups. They **both** make their money off of other people; but one group lives on the street—or in shelters. The other group lives in penthouses or exclusive communities. One group is fairly straightforward about asking for money. They use a cup or a guitar case—or even their hand—pleading for help. They depend on people with a heart—who **want** to help.

-The other group? Well, they don't **ask** for a hand-out; they pretty much take what they want—mostly from people who don't want to give it up. One group is called **beggars**—the other group is known by different names; the **Mafia, loan sharks**—or **Revenue Canada**.

-They both need compassion; one needs our compassion; the other needs to learn compassion. And Jesus listens to—and loves—and has compassion for both!

- B. We know that because one day Jesus was interrupted by both on the streets of a very lucrative city. As you watch Jesus' life, it seems clear that even though he was **very** focused—he was also **very** interruptible. It was almost like Jesus was waiting for people to call on Him for help—whether it's loudly, or in silent desperation.

1. So, today I want to talk about the stories of two men—Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus--**very** different men, with very different needs. But in reality—they both actually had the same problem. They were both blind; one was physically blind—couldn't see a thing. The other was spiritually blind. Both forms of blindness created money problems; one couldn't earn money; the other had a **lot** because he **refused** to see either God or the people he devastated.

2. That would actually describe a **lot** of the sadness in our world, wouldn't it? The sadness of people who live every day in the humiliation of want and need—**never** having enough.

-But there's another kind of sadness; and it's the sadness of people who make money their god—thinking it can actually save them. People who spend their lives acquiring it, thinking about it, worrying about it—only to find out, sometimes too late, that it's just **money**.

3. The great news is that Jesus, Lord of Heaven and Earth—came to make blind eyes see, and hard hearts soft.

II. A TALE OF TWO CRIES

- A. Jesus is in Jericho—a six hour walk from Jerusalem where he will die. This town has quite a history, actually. Archaeologists have discovered the remains there of 20

successive settlements—dating from about 9000 BC—making it the one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world.

1. You may be familiar with the name **Jericho** because it was the very first city to be conquered by the Israelites as they moved from slavery in Egypt into the land God had given them. In fact, a cult prostitute named Rahab, who hid the Israelite spies, was spared when the walls collapsed. She joined the Israelites and ultimately became King David's great great-grandmother—and therefore, an ancestor of Jesus!

-In Jesus' day, there were **two** Jerichos. **Old** Jericho—the ruined city where the **walls came a-tumblin' down**—and Jericho, the magnificent city rebuilt by Herod.

2. Jericho's natural springs made a natural oasis—and also watered the soil for a number of crops. It's location **below** sea level provided fantastic weather. It was a prosperous, **gorgeous** city—filled with palm trees. In the Hebrew Bible, it is called **City of Palms**—a kind of **Palm Springs** of the Middle East. And it attracted the rich and powerful. Herod had a winter palace there—and you can just imagine the kind of business that brought.
3. That's not all. Apparently a lot of the priests and temple assistants lived in Jericho—and traveled back and forth for their 2-weeks of temple duty.

- B. Jericho is where Jesus runs into—and is interrupted—by a blind, disabled man, Bartimaeus. Bart spent his days, along with scores of other disabled people—between the Old Jericho and the rebuilt Jericho—making the only living they could. Begging. Jericho was a wonderful place to beg; in fact, a disabled person could make several times more money there than in Jerusalem. See, Jericho had trade routes running through it that connected 3 continents—so caravans passed through there all the time.

-Secondly, part of the responsibilities and expectations of the priests and temple assistants who lived there was to give alms to the poor. But the best day of Bartimaeus' life was the day he called out to Jesus. That was a **good** day!

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind beggar was sitting beside the road. When he heard the noise of a crowd going past, he asked what was happening. They told him that Jesus the Nazarene was going by. So he began shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" "Be quiet!" the people in front yelled at him. But he only shouted louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" When Jesus heard him, he stopped and ordered that the man be brought to him.

As the man came near, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord," he said, "I want to see!" And Jesus said, "All right, receive your sight! Your faith has healed you." Instantly the man could see, and he followed Jesus, praising God. And all who saw it praised God, too. (Luke 18:35-43 NLT)

1. Mark's account of Jesus' life tells us that this blind guy's name was Bartimaeus. In fact, the three different accounts raise a question.

This account tells us that Jesus was **approaching** Jericho; the others say that He was **leaving** Jericho. He was actually leaving **Old** Jericho—a kind of 1st century tourist attraction—and approaching the new, rebuilt Jericho. This area, being so strategically located, drew **scores** of beggars!

2. We really aren't told much about Bartimaeus--simply that he was blind, which left him with only one option for making a living; begging. We're not really even given his actual name—just Bar Timaeus—or “son of Timaeus.” Because there was no medication for preventing birth related eye infections, blindness was very common in that culture

-So Bart was just sitting there on the street like he had every day for years. The loss of one sense makes a person's other senses razor sharp—like hearing. And Bart could tell there was a crowd coming—buzzing with excitement. It **sounded** like an opportunity. “Surely out of **all** these people, someone will give me **something!**” But when Bartimaeus asked and found out that **Jesus** was coming—he realized that this could be the best day of his life!
 -Well, that kicked him into high gear. Whether he'd been told by people in the caravans or the temple worker community—Jesus had a reputation as a healer; doing things he knew only the promised Messiah could do. He was **not** going to let this opportunity pass by!

3. To be a beggar meant **interrupting** people; demanding their attention. Because, see, when someone passes by—you've only got one shot at getting a handout. And so Bart begins repeatedly yelling at the top of his voice, “**Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!**”

-So much so that the people around him were **not** happy. Beggars said this kind of stuff all the time to get money. And to flatter Jesus with a title only given to the Messiah—**Son of David**—was dangerous. Especially within Herod's summer home—and all the soldiers stationed nearby.

-Notice how rude and condescending the crowd is with this guy—yelling at him to **Be quiet!** You don't talk like that to people you respect. See, beggars were seen as opportunists. Leeches, really. Shoved off to the margins of life. Not **real** people—not worth knowing or noticing. Just...**there!** It's clear, this guy has absolutely no status.

-And the same thing happens every day in every city on this planet, doesn't it? Quito, Mexico City, New York, Tokyo, Calcutta, Ho Chi Minh City, Brussels, Paris, Toronto. People squatting by the side of the road—seemingly content with their respect-less, face-less, money-less existence.

-But this guy has guts. He is irrepressible! He will **not** be shut up! This is his one shot. Jesus likely not pass his way again, and he's **not** about to miss it.

4. Once again, Jesus' **extreme interruptibility** comes into play. In fact, it's like Jesus ears and eyes are **fine-tuned--looking** for people in desperate circumstances! And, unlike us, Jesus' ears weren't fine-tuned to a short-list of **important** people—people who have money and position and power. Jesus

could see beyond all that to the heart. In fact, at the end of his life when he's being grilled by Herod and Pilate—he ignores them!

-Jesus immediately stops the procession—and asks that whoever is yelling be brought to him. And the people around him said, “Cheer up, Dude! This is **your lucky day!** And Bart is so excited he throws off his coat and runs to Jesus—apparently confident that when Jesus is through with him—he'll be able to **see** where it is!

5. Do Jesus' words seem a little strange—given the fact that this guy's blind: **What do you want me to do for you?** But the truth is that, given his profession, he could have just wanted a really good handout. Enough money for a week—or a month—or a lifetime. Sometimes our priorities do get screwed up, you know. I've met people who were blind in other ways—and they really didn't **want** to see—they just wanted to be successful in their blindness. -But it's clear what Bartimaeus wants. You can almost hear the emotion in his voice: **I WANT TO SEE!** And to the astonishment of everyone there—Jesus instantly heals his eyes. And he uses his new gift to **follow** Jesus!

- C. Bartimaeus may have now been part of this crowd that moves from Old Jericho into the rebuilt city. And they encounter someone else; someone who is at a **very** different place in life. He, too, is a taker. He didn't beg—but this guy made a very good living—just by **taking** what he wanted! Let's read the account:

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way. When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. “Zacchaeus!” he said. “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.” Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled. (Luke 19:1-7 NLT)

1. People had a different kind of contempt for Zacchaeus than for Bartimaeus. He was **very** wealthy—and he had made his money by bullying and extortion as a chief tax collector. As nasty as Revenue Canada can be, this guy was in a whole other league. The descriptive word would be, **scoundrel**. Crook.

-To collect their taxes from conquered countries, the Roman Empire sold the **tax collection** business for an area to the highest bidder—called a **publican**. This person would guarantee that the tax would be paid. Then, with the authority of the Roman government behind them, they would collect that tax—**plus** a **very** handsome profit for themselves.

-And they would use any and every means to get their money. These chief tax collectors were **very** scary people. You didn't want to mess with them. Because they had to authority, if you couldn't pay, to take everything you owned, put you in prison—and even sell your children as slaves. If you

refused? Well, you didn't want to explore that option. To do this job, Zacchaeus betrayed his family, his country and his God—pledging his allegiance to Rome for the sake of money.

-I can't help it. When I read about Zacchaeus, this beady-eyed, raspy-voiced, greedy little guy—I can't **help** but envision him as the Danny DeVito of Jericho! And the picture is laughable; the sight of a grown man climbing a sycamore fig tree [picture] to get a better look at Jesus! As you can see, there were a lot of **low** branches for him to climb on. And Jesus sees him, like a little kid at a parade—peering out of the branches of this tree—and calls his name—and shocks everyone by inviting himself to this guy's place for dinner!

-And Zacchaeus is comes bopping down from the tree. He's excited! Thrilled! But the crowd is furious! They're thinking, "**Surely** someone who can heal a blind man's eyes is smart enough to know that this guy has been behind some of the darkest things that have ever happened in Jericho. **Why him?**"

2. Every so often a story teller will place two contrasting scenes side by side for dramatic effect. That's what happens here. Right beside—almost in response to an angry crowd complaining that Jesus is at supper with a crook are these words about what's actually happening.

Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!" Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." (Luke 19:8-10 NLT)

-Do you see the contrast? While people are griping about the moral character of Zacchaeus, Jesus is **transforming** it! Sometimes I'm just like those people in the crowd—thinking that the best way to deal with scoundrels is to avoid them. Or ask God to turn them into crispy critters! You know—make room for **nice** people like...well, **me!**

-That afternoon Jesus was reaching into the sould of someone who was every bit as blind as Bartimaeus—except his eyes **worked**. And by the time supper is over Zacchaeus, too, can see. Being blinded by greed and self-interest is every bit as deadly as having eyes that don't work. But to follow Jesus, he has to trade in his **old** god—**money**. And his transformation is seen in him forcing his old god to serve and follow Jesus.

-He's spent his life accumulating money and stuff; now he's giving it away to help those whom God treasures: people. And he is making things right—**four times over**—with those he's cheated and wronged. His world has been **turned upside down!**

3. There's a statement in this story that summarizes the entire book that Luke has written. It's Jesus' mission statement. Anyone know what it is? **For the Son of**

Man came to seek and to save those who are lost. There are *tons* of good causes in this world to help and support. Jesus says, “My reason for coming here is to find and save/transform the people who are lost to God. I came to turn the *takers* of the world into *givers*.”

-See, when the people God created rebelled against his leadership and chose to put themselves before Him—that warped every person—and every thing. Jesus came to restore all those created in the image of God to their original glory—and restore *everything* that’s been ruined and broken in the process. Does anyone *grasp* how massive that is?

-Think about all the lives ruined by abuse and misuse—and dis-use. Think about a planet that has been ravaged by our greed and stupidity. Think of the diseases that have grown and thrived—and been passed on to others. Think of the millions of babies killed by abortion. The cruelty. Think of the damage that’s been done by a bunch of *takers* who have just kept taking, grabbing, and ripping off—sometimes without *ever* giving back.

-But think especially of the *people*. People who wander this planet—clueless as to who God really is and what He’s up to—and who He loves! Think of the people who have been deceived into thinking that, even though the compass God has put in their souls is broken, they actually can chart their own course and make their own way.. Think of the people who can’t think of any better reason to live for than to make, spend and grab as much as they can, and breed as much as they can.

-Setting all this right is a massive, *totally un-doable* job. We’ve tried to fix things on our own—but they only get worse. Jesus said, “Know this whole twisted mess—made worse, not better, by people? I came to *save* the whole thing—and I will accomplish my mission by seeking out people like—money Nazis--*just like Zacchaeus*, blinded by greed and self interest—and *transforming* them! Supernaturally. One at a time. I will astound *everyone* by working through the very people who once caused the problem—to make it right! God has declared Himself on this. That’s *His* plan—and it *will* get accomplished!

III. CAN YOU...WILL YOU...BE INTERRUPTED?

- A. Somehow there is this widespread notion among people in churches that God’s main goal is to just find lost people, give them eternal life—a free pass to Heaven because of Jesus. After that? Well, it’s pretty much about gathering in groups called churches, shining up our lives and carrying on, pretty much like we used to, until we die, or Jesus comes back. Whichever happens first.

-But when you read through the Bible and the story of Jesus’ life, you find that his plan is massively bigger than that. Does He want to forgive sins and give eternal life? You bet He does! But He wants that life to *fill* our hearts, heal our blinded eyes, and transform our entire value system. And He wants to sign us on as His partners—forever—in making *all people* right—and making *all things* right—and *share His glory* with us!

1. Now, could God put all those who believe in Him in cocoon—and just do the whole thing all by Himself? Yep! He could. But cleaning up the mess would involve either nuking those who cause it—or crushing one of his most precious gifts to those who are made in His image; **free will**. See, the gift of free will means that when Jesus passes our way—and offers hope and forgiveness and life and partnership—and a **love that will not let us go**—we can totally say, “Nah. I don’t think so. I think I’ll just keep doing things **my way!**”

-But God has **still** chosen to use the likes of people like us—who tend to make more messes than we clean up—and let **us** share His power—and experience the joy, at the end of it all, when it will be **mission accomplished!** Even though the way He’s taken is slow, behind the scenes, messy, controversial—and sometimes seems **clumsy**. And that’s **His** choice. Know why? Because He’s God—and I’m not.

2. These two stories are about two very different people who interrupted Jesus. When he passed their way—well, their lives were **never** the same again! Nor were the people’s lives who knew them, begged next to them, or had been taken advantage of by them. Imagine the power of someone who ripped you off knocking in your door one day and saying, “I hurt you—and I was wrong. What I did was evil. I’m here to pay you back four times what I cheated you out of. See, I met Jesus and He changed **everything!**”

-John Newton, after living a scandalous life as the captain of slave trading ship met Jesus and was transformed by grace. He described it in his most famous hymn, **Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found; was blind—but now I see.** That same **blindness** is the core problem for every human being. It’s not that we’re dumb, or even evil. We just can’t **see**—and **that’s** why we lose our way. I mean, we can see sunsets, see to drive, see children—see things way out in space, and see things invisible to the naked eye through electron microscopes. We just don’t **see** what counts. We don’t see ourselves. We don’t **really** see others. -We don’t see God. We see absolutely breathtaking things, DNA spiraling out that creates the entire code for creating a human being, a universe that strangely looks like a cradle for life—like **Someone knew we were coming**—and say, “Yeah, well, it just **happened.**” And the result is that we lose our way. We lose the plot. At the risk of spiritualizing this story, like Bartimaeus, we’re blind from birth—and we go through life with our hand out—reaching for **something**. Taking. Hoping for a better life.

3. And sometimes, like this other guy, Zacchaeus, our blindness is quite intentional. In our **hearts** we know the difference between right and wrong—and we do wrong anyway—and **then** say it’s okay. To **see** means seeing the sadness and brokenness of the world—and doing something about it--something that **costs** you. To **see** means looking into the eyes and hearts of people you hurt, squeeze, use—and throw away! And that means owning some darkness inside. To **see** means looking at what you’ve lost—the values you’ve set aside to get what you have. The problem is that, like Zacchaeus, you **like** what you have and want to keep it. **All** of it.

-So, sometimes we play dumb. “Who...*me?*” Or sometimes we play philosopher, “Welllll, I’m not sure what I believe. After all...!” It’s not that we **can’t** see it all; it’s that we don’t **want** to see. And if you walk around with your eyes closed, you lose your way.

-When Jesus healed Bartimaeus, the **first** thing He did was **follow Jesus** and **glorify God**. When Jesus healed Zacchaeus, the first thing he did was make things right with the poor people he’d spent his life ignoring—and making restitution with the people he’d ripped off. And it’s because the true God became **vastly** more important than his old god. Money.

-The Bible makes it clear that there **is** such a thing as spiritual blindness—and everyone is afflicted with it. And there comes a point where you and I have to cry out to Jesus and say, **Have mercy on me; I want to see!** To team up with Jesus in his mission to **seek and save what has been lost**—we need eyes that actually see.

4. There’s another factor here that I’m a little reluctant to bring up—for fear that I might be misunderstood. Do I have your permission to talk about it? Remember, **you gave me permission!**

-There are a lot of people in Canada, North America—in the world, probably, who would say, “I **really** don’t believe in Jesus or want Him messing around in my life or with my life—and I **really** don’t think I’m blind or lost. In fact, I find that **very** offensive. but I **do** like the idea of making the world a better place. So, here’s the deal: You worry about Jesus—and I’ll just give myself to the environment, helping the poor, stopping oppression and injustice—and making the world a better place.

-These are all **really good things** that are a part of what God is up to. Truly **noble** things. But they tend to go after the symptoms—not the cause. -If you’re going to deal with cancer—does it help to just ease the symptoms? No. When my Mom had lung cancer, they were able to deal with the symptoms and keep her fairly comfortable—but she **still died**. Jesus gave his life on a cross to deal with the **root cause** of the mess. Sin. When He rose from the dead, it was clear that the core solution to the entire mess is the **loving transformation** of people. People **just like Zacchaeus**. Without Jesus—we pretty much miss the point that only **He** can ultimately make everything right!

- B. There is a **lot** in these two stories. I just want to bring out one more thing. Both of these guys in this story went out of their way to be close to Jesus. Bartimaeus yelled his way into the story—to the point where people were totally annoyed with him. **Jesus! Jesus! Son of Da-a-avid! Have MERCY on me!** It became clear in Jesus’ encounter with him that, more than anything, he wanted to **see**. But being healed would change **everything** about his life. He’d spent his life begging—and had found the **best** place to beg in Israel! But now his begging days were over. What do you do when you’ve never had a job—and your only skill is your ability to let people know where you are and ask for help?

-Think about Zacchaeus. He was a little more subtle in getting Jesus' attention. His desperation was quiet, although climbing a tree to see someone **does** scream something! And he was tickled to death to have a personal interview with Jesus—right in his home! But his encounter with Jesus that afternoon **turned his life upside down**. Meeting Jesus changed the **entire** financial structure of his life.

-That's not all. Imagine admitting publicly that you've been a bully; a crook; a cheat. I mean, he'd have to change **everything**. The way he collected money, how he handled people, his connection with Rome—and his relationship with the poor and disabled.

1. Now, here's my point. Jesus is passing our way **all the time!** He really is. When we're desperate. When we're confused. When we're tired of the way we've been living. When our bodies—or minds—or emotions are broken. When we're weighed down by guilt and shame. And Jesus has never changed. He is **still** moved with compassion for the plight we find ourselves in. He **still** looks for--waits for—interruptions. Whether it's, noisy and disruptive--**Jesus, Son of David! Have mercy on me!** Or silently desperate—doubting that He's interested—**hoping** that He is! And He **is!**
2. Here's my thought: What if Bartimaeus, when he finally got to Jesus, had just asked for a handout? For money? It's hard to miss the profound difference between getting a hand-out for a week—and getting new eyes--a new life; a fresh shot at **everything**, right?

-I'm convinced that sometimes people who call out to Jesus mainly want a hand-out. "I call on you—say I'm sorry; you forgive me, give me eternity—then **I just go back to my life.**" I take what you have to give and you...well, you get all my needs and problems. And I think Jesus needs us to **really choose HIM**—follow **Him**--not just grab what He offers. I think He wants to heal our blindness—so that we see this world through **His** eyes.

3. Then there's Zacchaeus—and this one is more messy. What if Zacchaeus had said, "Jesus, this is **so** cool—having you here in my home—with all those uptight religious types outside eating their hearts out! So. What do you want to eat, cause I've got the best! You name it. Rack of lamb. Lamb curry. Lamb parmesan. Baklava. The **best** wine—better than what **you** made!"
-I don't think this meeting was about dinner. I think this meeting was about Zacchaeus being transformed into the person he was created to be. And, like it or not, the transformation **always** involves how we use our bodies, our lives, our opportunities—and our **money**. This meeting cost Zacchaeus a **lot** more than he expected.

-How many of you think that after Jesus left, Zacchaeus was talking to himself, saying, "Oh no! I can't believe I promised Jesus I would **do** that!" I think his joy got even greater. Because of what I know about Jesus—and what happens when people turn from serving money—to serving Jesus as Lord—I think he was changed for good and **never** looked back!

3. Jesus is interruptible! And He's looking for people who will be interruptible. See, His plan is to have His people in **every** corner of Markham, Richmond Hill, Toronto, Oshawa, Ajax, Stouffville; people who grow more and more sensitive to His Spirit; people who are willing to be interrupted. And people who are less and less tied to their money and time and stuff—who will be **His** person wherever they go. Would **you** be that person?

-See, at the core of what God is doing in the hearts of all His people all over the world—is turning us from people who are **blind** to people who really **see**. He's changing **takers** into **givers**. You can't be His partner with what he's up to in this world—you can't have the power of His Spirit moving through you and touching this world through—and **stay** a taker.

-Jesus is passing by—right now. He's coming your way. Would you give Him permission to heal your eyes and rearrange your value system?