

## YOU NEVER KNOW

One of the courses that I took when I was in High School was World History. My teacher was Mrs. Dale Felts, and she was one of my favorite teachers in High School. The History Faculty at Decatur High School had made the collective decision at that time that anything after World War II was recent history. Remember that this was in the early 1980's, so World War II was not that far in the past. Therefore, anything after World War II would not be taught, because it was recent history.

When we arrived at the period around World War II, Mrs. Felts had us play a game called "Gestapo". The game worked like this. Mrs. Felts secretly recruited a few of the students in the class to serve as "secret agents". We were then told that we were not to use the personal pronoun "I". If we were overheard saying this word by Mrs. Felts or one of the secret agents, we would be punished. The punishments were, of course, very mild. For example, one day those of us who had been caught were forced to stand for the last ten minutes of class.

The game led to comical results. Students were going around the school saying, "Me don't know how to do this." None of us knew who the secret agents were. The agents didn't know who the other agents were. I was one of several people who was falsely accused of being an agent. Others, who were agents, managed to stay under the radar until the end of the game when Mrs. Felts had all of the secret agents stand. I was amazed to see that one of my friends was an agent, and I said, "Aha, now I know who turned me in. It became obvious that you never know who a person is.

This has been confirmed for me a time and again. Back when I was studying at UAH, I tried to take the stairs as much as possible. I thought that would help to keep me in shape. That said, I did take the elevator at times. Several times when I took the elevator, there was a woman who shared the elevator with me. The woman didn't seem very friendly; she never spoke to me and I think the only time I ever spoke to her was to say, "Let me hold the elevator for you. I sensed she would not have been open to conversation. That one time I did speak to her she didn't say anything back to me. I sensed she was unfriendly. It never occurred to me that she would turn out to be a murderer until one day I turned on the TV and saw Amy Bishop being arrested by the police. I shared an elevator with Amy Bishop. It was then I realized she was the same woman with whom I had shared the elevator. You never know.

In our course on Emotionally Healthy Relationships, we've looked at a number of tools to help us make our relationships better. One of those tools, is to stop mind-reading and clarify expectations. The thing is we all like to think we're good at reading other people. We like to think we know what the people around us are thinking. Especially the people who are close to us. Truthfully, we usually don't. What we're really doing most of the time is projecting our own feelings onto them. We judge people according to our own prejudices, or because they didn't read our minds and give us what we need, we get upset at them. Because of these things we often misinterpret other people. We don't know others as well as we think we do. In fact, we really don't know others at all.

I bring this up because I found something in this passage that I never noticed before. I've read this passage many times, but what I never realized before is that this passage contains a translation problem. This problem caused me to look at this story with fresh eyes. The mistranslation has been in front of me the whole time, and I never noticed it before.

In the passage that we just read, Jesus was passing through Jericho, and there was a man named Zacchaeus who lived there. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. Now, this was a job that had a bad reputation. Like lawyers in our society today, tax collectors were stereotypically viewed as corrupt. So, the fact that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector was an important detail in the story.

We're also told that Zacchaeus is short. So, Zacchaeus climbed a tree so that he could see Jesus. When Jesus saw him, "Zacchaeus, hurry come down for I must stay at your house." By doing so Jesus honored this chief tax collector. Zacchaeus quickly came down and received Jesus gladly.

So, this action drew the ire of the crowd. The scripture says when they saw what Jesus did, they started to grumble, saying, "This man has gone to be the guest of a sinner." It's in the reply of Zacchaeus that we see the translation problem. Most modern translations record Zacchaeus's response as, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions *I will give* to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, *I will give back* fourfold."

Now, the verbs "I will give" and "I will give back" are in the future tense in English- i.e., they are yet to happen. But here's the translation problem. In the original Greek these two verbs are not in the future tense- they're in the present tense. So, Zacchaeus doesn't say, "*I will give* to the poor." He says, "*I give* to the poor." He doesn't say, "*I will repay* fourfold." He says, "*I repay* fourfold."

Now, that may seem like a small change, but I think it completely changes the story. I don't know why the translators chose to present these verbs in the future tense. Perhaps, it was for theological reasons. It would be convenient for us to think this man, Zacchaeus, had a life-changing encounter with Jesus. After all the people in the story had proclaimed Zacchaeus to be a sinner. Jesus doesn't contradict them, therefore, it must be true. But an encounter with Jesus can lead to a conversion. Perhaps, the translators felt that this must be what was intended here.

But I have a problem with this translation. I was taught in seminary that our theology must be informed by our reading of scripture. Reading the passage this way reverses the process. Our theology, which says that people need to convert, then informs our reading of the bible, rather than the other way around. It appears the translators attempted to make the scripture fit their theological beliefs. That's always a dangerous thing.

Now, there's another way to look at this passage, which I will get to in a minute, but I want to say that reading this passage correctly, with these two verbs in the present tense, we get a very different understanding of this passage. Instead of this being a story where the presence of Jesus leads to a change of heart, we have a man answering his critics. He is in effect defending himself against the accusations being leveled against him by the grumblers. He's saying, "Yes, I'm a chief tax collector, but you don't know me. You think I'm a sinner because of my job, but I give half of my possession to the poor; I'll bet you didn't know that. If it turns out I have defrauded anyone, I repay them fourfold; I bet you didn't know that either. That's who I really am! Don't judge me by my job!"

Now, that's important, because it reinforces the point I made before. We don't know. We don't know what another person really thinks. We don't know what their values are, unless they tell us. We don't know what their hopes and dreams are unless they tell us. We don't know what their goals are unless they tell us. We don't know what they like and what they don't like. When we try to tell ourselves that we do, then we often misjudge them, and in so doing we sin against them.

Jesus, on the other hand, never makes that mistake. He sees what others do not. Jesus said, "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."

Now, it must be said, that Jesus' response might lend a little credence to the idea that this is a conversion story, because of one word that he says-today. The adverb today means that what is happening now is different from what happened before. So, the translators might have felt justified in going back and changing the text to "I will give" and "I will give back". Maybe that's a good argument- that the context provides a good reason to make the change.

Well, maybe, but I don't think so. Jesus doesn't say that Zacchaeus's response leads to his salvation. He says salvation comes because Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham. At least one way- and I believe the proper way- to read the statement "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost," is that Jesus came to save the nation of Israel, which had been lost. But the nation would not be redeemed by its own righteousness. Rather, it would be redeemed by the saving grace of Jesus Christ who was God incarnate, just as Zacchaeus was, just as you are, and just as I am.

Truthfully, none of us can see the good or the bad in another person. Several years ago, there was a man who wrote a book. I forget the exact title of the book, but it was something like, How to Avoid Being Taken by Online Scammers. The day after that book hit the bookshelves, the author was taken by an online scammer. You never know. None of us can see the good or the bad in another. When we judge others, we are just as likely to be wrong as we are to be correct. Think about how many times you have been misjudged by others and you'll see what I mean. Only God knows the heart. But there's an even deeper point.

In the end, Zacchaeus is no more or less righteous than anyone else. Yes, he gives half of what he owns. Yes, he returns to everyone he defrauds fourfold. But he's also a sinner- a fact that neither he nor Jesus denies. Like all of us he is neither good nor bad, but a mixture of both. It isn't his actions that save him.

It is the grace of Jesus Christ. Christ saves us. Christ restores us to who we were intended to be. Just like the nation of Israel, Jesus came to redeem us when we were lost. We were lost, and now we are found. So, don't be so quick to judge, because you never know. You never know what the heart of a person is really like. You never know who has the hand of God upon them. You never know who has been saved or who is in the process of being saved by the living God. You just never know.