

The Process of Caring
Luke 19:1-10

Well brothers and sisters in Christ, as we are focusing on starting up our Christ Care groups this fall we've done so by acknowledge how beneficial meeting together on a regular basis can be for us.

It helps us get past our surface level interaction, start to open up to each other, take off our masks and show who we really are – in other words true community starts to develop.

However – that also means our personality flaws and foibles, our quirks and shortcomings all start to bump up against each other and a small group can easily and quickly turn into an episode of Big Brother.

And friends I think somehow we instinctively know this - and that is why some people are hesitant to move past an arms-length casual connection with their fellow Christians.

But – Brothers and Sisters, that is not Christ's goal and intentions for those who are being knit together into "the Body" of Christ.

And the good news is that the Holy Spirit is not only connecting us, but He is transforming our sinful nature so that it does not work against that connectedness.

Additionally it is through that connectedness that the Holy Spirit often works to bring about some amazing transformation in our lives – amazing results sometimes.

And it's quite exciting to see these results take place in people's lives – especially when we know how much they need to experience it or how much it can benefit them.

And sometimes it's so painfully obvious to us what needs to happen for them, how they might need transformation in their life that we can become focused on trying to push for those results to happen - like this fellow.... (nail video)

Now that ties in with what we talked about last week in terms of just listening and not trying to fix things – even when it seems to be very obvious to us what someone needs.

And this morning we're looking at how to build on that skill of listening. Looking at how we can co-operate with the process the Holy Spirit uses to bring about change over a period of time and avoid the temptation to "Pygmalion" others.

Which is when we begin relationships with others for the purpose of attempting to turn them into a better person?

The term Pygmalion comes from a play by George Bernard Shaw, and it's about two British gentlemen who have a wager with each other about whether or not they can befriend a common working-class woman, teach her manners, proper form and etiquette, change her accent, and then pass her off as a high society lady.

Their experiment works and they get the results they are after, but one gentleman unexpectedly ends up falling in love

with the "high society lady" they have created but she ends up rejecting him because he loved what he had made her into - and not really who she was.

So brothers and sisters have you ever tried to "Pygmalion" somebody?

I have to confess that when I was teenage I had my share of special projects – other kids whom I have befriended in order to try and help change them or fix them or make them into someone more cool and popular.

As a teenage I thought this was the most helpful and caring thing I could do for them.

I mean I wasn't the coolest guy in high-school, but I did know what social faux pas to avoid and these poor souls didn't have a clue and thus were always at the butt of everyone's jokes and at the bottom of the social ladder.

So, I befriended some of them, even dated some of them who seemed to have some potential, with the good intentions of helping them change and avoid being the target of all that high school cruelty.

It seemed to be the least that a good Christian teen could do right? And to me it seemed better than not caring that they were social outcasts.

In fact it was easy to rationalize that I was caring for these people as an expression of my faith, as part of being a follower of Jesus.

After all Jesus associated with those on the fringes of society- the outcasts, the social rejects – like the one we read about this morning - Zacchaeus. And He cared for them, He helped them.

Wasn't I doing the same thing? Not exactly...

You see I was approaching persons and relationships in a very impersonal way. I was focused on what results would occur with the person as a result of my relationship with them.

Now, brothers and sisters in Christ – we know this is going to be a temptation for us as we develop and grow our Christ Care groups, but there are two sides to it.

On one side we will be tempted to produce results by relating to each other the way our society and culture does, with their non-judgmental, tolerant attitude of: “to each his own.”

So we care for each other by staying at a surface level, hoping that people won't be offended by us, that they will stick around and that the results will just somehow happen.

So we empathize with each other, we're happy and sad with each other but beyond that we reveal no conviction, or we work to downplay any differences in beliefs which we ought to be discussing.

And we forget about holding each other accountable to living out our Christian faith, growing spiritually, and seeing some measurable growth in each other's lives.

And the other side of this temptation is for us to go full force into trying to "Pygmalion" people, like I did in high school.

And considering how apathetic many Christians and Churches have become about holding each other accountable and encouraging each other to grow spiritually - pushing for changes and results in other's lives seems like a good thing!

I mean do we really not want to see our fellow Christians grow in reading and understanding and sharing scripture with each other, praying with each other, and participating in worship regularly – or even just coming to faith in Jesus Christ for the first time!

Friends I know we would all want to see these results right!
So why not make that the goal and purpose of our having relationships with people?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, these results we just described are good results to want to see happen in peoples' lives – but it's more of a question of how do we get there?

If we take the "Pygmalion" approach or what we could call "a results oriented" approach to caring for people then the ends end up justify the means and the relationship with that person will suffer, and in fact it will likely not continue not continue for long – and the results won't occur.

Why because when we are focused solely on the end results it's inevitable that we will try to control other people's behavior through persuasion, manipulation or even guilt.

Now if we are honest I think we all can identify instances in our relationships with others where we've focused on caring for people with a results driven orientation.

Because we believe that we are responsible to change others, or solve their problems – Does that sound familiar to anyone?

And friends it's also because deep down we are all affected and shaped by our sinful nature which is incredibly selfish and self-centered and it can twist our motives behind the good intentions to see good results take place in people's lives.

In the end if we are relating to others with results oriented care our sinful nature is trying to use them for our own purposes, for instance...

Maybe I need to see my congregation growing spiritually, participating in worship, reading the bible, becoming enthusiastic about their relationship with Christ because then I feel like I'm a good minister, I'm a successful minister.

Maybe I need to see my daughter playing sports, excelling in school, or being popular because I never got that chance.

Maybe I want to see people convert to Christianity, to have their thinking shaped by correct theology and Christian philosophy because I have a need to be right, it's my pride!

The truth is that sin is so subtle and insidious it can twist our desire for these good things in others' lives into something incredibly selfish and self-centered.

That's why Isaiah 64:6 says; *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

So friends as we care for each other in Christ Care groups we need to understand how our selfishness can creep in so that we don't destroy the very good that we want to see happen in others lives.

And the good news is that there is one who cares for us with no selfish or self-centered desires, and He offers us forgiveness for our sinful selfishness when we confess it, and He gives us the Holy Spirit.

And it is the Holy Spirit who will help us focus on Christ, help us meditate on how Christ cared for others, so that we too can

walk alongside people and co-operate with what God is already doing in their lives through the work of the Holy Spirit without being apathetic and with “Pygmalioning.”

So I pray that as we look at how Jesus cared for Zacchaeus and reflect on it, that the Holy Spirit will work to make this a reality for us.

Now in looking at this story it’s important to know that Jesus had a very clear understanding of who He was as the messiah, and what He had come to do, the results he was to achieve.

The Prophets had promised that the messiah would bring in a new era of peace, prosperity, blessing, justice and freedom for God’s people – pretty specific results.

Yet as Jesus interacted with Zacchaeus, indeed as Jesus interacted with all those whom He ministered to, He took the time to build a relationship with them instead of immediately focusing on telling them what results He would bring in their lives.

Jesus doesn’t say to Zacchaeus *“Hey, Zacchaeus my mission is to seek and save the lost and there is no one more lost than you! You’ve gotten rich and advanced your career by cheating, and lying and betraying your own countrymen by collecting taxes for the Romans. But I’m going to change you!”*

No, instead Jesus knows, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that God is already working in Zacchaeus’ heart – after all Zacchaeus wants to seek out Jesus and is willing to risk the embarrassment of climbing a tree as short man, and the public’s dislike of him in order to get to Jesus.

So Jesus initiates a relationship with Zacchaeus. *“Hey Zacchaeus, come down out of that tree, I need to get to know you, I need to stay at your house!”*

It is the relationship which is the focus here, not Zacchaeus’ unscrupulous and sinful behavior.

Friends all human being are made in God’s image – which means we are all something more than our behavior.

So Jesus can consider Zacchaeus as worthy of having a relationship with because He is made in the image of God – even though His actions don't reflect it.

And Zacchaeus is struck by this, because the crowd certainly doesn't see beyond his behavior.

When they hear Jesus say He is going to stay with Zacchaeus they are not impressed. Doesn't this amount to condoning the cheating, lying and treason this man has committed?!

I think Jesus would still have gone to Zacchaeus' house regardless of what happened next, but by God's power and because of Jesus relational ministry in the face of the hatred from the crowd, Zacchaeus realizes he needs to make some changes.

So right then and there He turns over a new leaf, in front of everyone – He'll use his wealth to support the poor, pay back with interest whatever he's cheated anyone out of.

Jesus didn't even have to tell him what he had to do, He just describes the results – today salvation has come to Zacchaeus, He has responded to God in faith like father Abraham did.

Brothers and sisters, this is how we need to care for each other.

Yes, the results are important – after all what good is it that we've had kind, caring, supportive relationships with each other when in the end we're not helping each other enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

But we won't truly be helping others enter the Kingdom of Heaven by neglecting to develop relationships in a healthy, God-honoring way which co-operates with what the Holy Spirit is already doing in them.

But remember we can't force, manipulate or guilt-trip people into the Kingdom of Heaven either.

What people see and experience in us is what they experience of Christ, after all we are His ambassadors, so we need to

learn to co-operate with His Holy Spirit to bring about the results which He desires in His time.

So as we focus on caring for each other in our small groups, let us keep a balance between the results and the relationship. Let us control our own behavior, not others, and let us allow the Holy Spirit to work His process in people lives – doing what needs to be done.

And we can trust God to work out this process – and bring about His desired results in our lives and in the lives of those we care about and want to minister to.

That's why Paul writes to Phillipians that He is confident of this, so he writes *“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”* (Phil 1:6)

Brothers and sisters let's trust our Lord to work his process of transformation in each of us – and continue to care for each other to support the work of the Holy Spirit. Amen.