

“The Chain We Forge In Life”

Luke 19:1-10

Series: A Christmas Carol: From Humbug to Hope

Week 1. Making Peace with Your Past

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Christmas stories should open with warmth and a glow, with the scent of fresh cut pine trees and the fragrance of marshmallows floating in hot chocolate. There needs to be pregnant expectant silence or, at the very least, a jingle of bells.

‘Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse
A Visit from St. Nicholas by Clement Clarke Moore

Yet the most famous Christmas story outside the Bible begins not with a glow but a grave.

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that...Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.¹

How can this be a Christmas tale? It begins with a funeral and turns into a ghost story. It seems more fitting for October 31st than December 25th. Nevertheless these ghoulish lines open the scene for Charles Dickens’ beloved *A Christmas Carol*. This little novel took only six weeks to write and first appeared in print on December 19, 1843. Despite its dark and morbid tone, the story of Ebenezer Scrooge became an instant success and a Christmas classic. Every December it appears on stage and screen in plays and musicals, featuring movie stars, Mr. Magoo or muppets.

It didn’t start out as a Christmas tale for the ages. Dickens waged a lifelong battle to halt the abuse of children during the Industrial Revolution. As a child he lost everything he owned when his father John was tossed into debtors’ prison. As an author, he forced wealthy Victorians to see the plight of the poor, the uneducated and the imprisoned. Dickens also challenged fellow Christians to live out the teachings of Jesus. “I have always striven in my writings, to express veneration for the life and lessons of my Savior.” Yet he realized the best way to ignite a revolution of compassion is not with sermons, speeches, and pamphlets, which are easily ignored, but with stories that work their way into your home and heart. Bob Welch writes,

Charles Dickens did not write *A Christmas Carol* simply to entertain us as readers. Dickens wanted to make us uncomfortable, because it’s only after we get a touch uneasy with ourselves that we open ourselves to change. Dickens wants us, as individuals, to confront our own Ghosts. He wants us to feel the chill of regret if necessary and, like Scrooge, to make changes in how we live.²

¹ Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol* (p. 5). . Kindle Edition.

² Welch, Bob, *52 Little Lessons from a Christmas Carol* (Thomas Nelson, 2015) 5-6, Kindle Edition.

And that's just what we hope to do this Advent Season. We may not like to see the Scrooge in us. We'd rather picture ourselves as George Bailey – a likeable and long-suffering guy who just needs a little help from his friend Clarence. Yet like it or not, we're all haunted by ghosts that leave their icy touch on lives. We all need an old acquaintance like Marley to open our eyes to the chains we forge, the chains we drag about, the chains which drag us down.

You know the story. Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly money lender sits in his bone-chilling cold office on Christmas Eve. Scrooge is “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.” (p. 6) Scrooge is closed to the world tighter than an oyster shell clutching its pearl. He strikes out against the Christmas joy of his nephew Fred, his employee Bob Cratchit, two men seeking donations for the poor and even a child singing a Christmas Carol at his keyhole.

If I could work my will,” said Scrooge indignantly, “every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart!” (p. 9)

That's harsh. Scrooge is not just closed, he's blind. He can't see what he's become or the impact his selfish, money-clutching lifestyle has on those who intersect his path. On this Christmas Eve he is about to find out. Four ghosts will hold up a mirror to his life. He will see the terrifying unvarnished truth about himself. It will scare the hell out of him and make him heaven bound. It will prove to be the best Christmas present ever.

While slurping his gruel in his nightgown, Scrooge sees the last person he expects: Jacob Marley his old partner who died seven years past this very night. Actually Scrooge sees through him for he is a ghost. He also can't ignore the heavy chain that wraps about his wraith-like form.

The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel. (p. 20)

Marley is eternally bound and burdened by the things he worshiped in life. He constructed his own prison of greed and selfishness and then willingly locked himself in.

“I wear the chain I forged in life,” replied the Ghost. “I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.” (p. 23)

Then Marley lowers the boom: Scrooge has spent the last seven years forging a frighteningly longer chain. He is destined to drag it through eternity if he does not change.

Link by link we each forge the chain we wear, a custom-made, hand-crafted personal prison. What chain do you drag about? It might be an obsession with money – either lavishly spending it or stingily hoarding it. There are, however, other links which bind us: dishonesty and deception, sarcasm and criticism, fear and worry, guilt and shame, bitterness, resentment, even rage, competition and envy, lust and greed, pride and self-pity. A chain is constructed with many links and you may find a number of these coiling round about you. It is not God’s will for you to live this way. Paul told the Galatians, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). How did we get so bound and burdened by these chains? If Jesus sets us free, why do we keep locking ourselves in this prison?

Scrooge didn’t start life as a cold and confirmed miser. The Ghost of Christmas Past, a glowing child-like spirit, reminds him the course of his life was set by a combination of things done to him and decisions he made. Scrooge revisits his cold and empty school where the other boys bullied him, his headmaster intimidated him and his father abandoned him. Yet into this grey scene his beloved sister Fan enters to tell him that father has changed and he wants young Ebenezer to come home for Christmas. Nevertheless the brightness and love she brings to his life is soon snuffed out when it is revealed she died giving birth to Scrooge’s only nephew Fred. In another scene, a young apprentice Ebenezer enjoys a raucous and joyful Christmas Eve party thrown by his mentor Fezziwig. This sparkling celebration, however, is extinguished by a subsequent memory: the breaking of his engagement to his fiancée Belle. She explains,

“Another idol has displaced me.” “What Idol has displaced you?” he rejoined. “A golden one. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you. Have I not?” (p. 45)

Scrooge then is forced to see Belle go on to enjoy a happy life with another husband and children while he sits alone in his counting house. Scrooge’s character is shaped and molded by abuse, abandonment, isolation, loss and grief. It’s not surprising that one so ill-treated would seek to take charge of his circumstances by amassing wealth so no one could hurt him again. Yet, in worshipping this idol, he willingly pushes away a love that might show him another way to live.

The same decision came to Zaccheus. We know more about him than most figures in the Bible. For one thing he is short. Being below average in height is a disadvantage. Some people, literally and figuratively, “look down on you.” You don’t measure up. Sometimes people don’t take you seriously. Sometimes it’s embarrassing. I felt so proud when I put on the tuxedo for my wedding. It made me feel all grown up, like a man...until I looked inside the coat and found the words: “fine tailoring for ring bearers.” Now the truth is: I was never treated badly or beaten up by other boys.

That may not be the case for Zaccheus. He might have been attacked on the outside. Maybe he felt inferior on the inside. Perhaps like Scrooge he felt he must fight back against a cruel world. Tax collecting was his ticket to power. Our tax burden is nothing compared to what the Jews endured. There was income tax, import and export

tax, crop taxes, sales tax, property tax, emergency tax, toll tax and on and on. All that money did not go to a government elected by you. It did not pay for your schools and social security. It went to the enemy. It paid for the soldiers who harassed you, burned your farms and killed your family.

Moreover, the tax system was a huge pyramid scheme. Collect enough to pay the official above you and keep the rest. So with every person at every level getting rich off the system you can imagine how crushing the tax burden was on the poor Jews at the bottom. And one more thing – the tax collectors at the bottom were also Jews. They were the richest people in their communities. They were also scorned as traitors, collaborators with the enemy. Zaccheus was not just a tax collector. He was the chief tax collector. The whole district of Jericho was his domain. All the citizens feared him, obeyed him and hated him. He didn't get to the top all at once. Like Scrooge there must have been deals he made, corners he cut, people he stepped over or stepped on to grab this prized territory. The man of short stature achieved, by his own drive and determination, the highest stature in the region. Such power is a narcotic. Money does things for you. It opens doors, it turns heads, it gets people to do what you want. Zaccheus probably drove the latest Lexus chariot, wore fashionable Italian leather sandals and used the latest wireless tablet – made of stone.

But these chains and idols also do things to you. You work more for it but enjoy it less. You want more of it but never have enough. You think it will make your future more secure but you worry all the time about losing it. When anything – a person, a pleasure, a possession, a position - becomes your master, it demands you to sacrifice all you hold dear: your ethics, your values, your family, your soul. The more we obey an idol, the more we grasp hold of it, the more it holds us in its grasp until we are chained. Zaccheus, like Scrooge, probably felt trapped. All his power and money didn't win friends and influence people. It only isolated him. Now he's at the top of his game. But he suddenly discovers it's a very lonely place to be.

Then he hears a rumor. Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth will be among the crowds going through Jericho up to Jerusalem for the Passover. He's heard of this rabbi's healings, miracles and massive following. He's is intrigued by all this. But what catches his attention is a refrain that's repeated often, sometimes with disgust. This Jesus is "the friend of tax collectors and sinners." There is even a tax collector in his inner circle.

Zaccheus must see this rabbi. But if he doesn't move fast, all the tiny man will glimpse is a wall of backs and shoulder blades. Driven by curiosity he does something completely crazy. Running ahead of the parade he climbs up into the branches of a sycamore tree. Perched precariously in the crook of its branches, you wonder if Zaccheus gave any thought to how ridiculous this looks. This wealthy, powerful official is now dangling from the branches like a little boy. He feels he is safe so long as no one stops and points him out.

Then the parade stops right under his tree and the one Zaccheus wants to see looks straight at him. And so does every eye below. I imagine at that moment the entire

population of Jericho suddenly lets out one huge collective laugh at the tiny tax collector trapped up a tree. They may also feel this is their opportunity for revenge. The only thing which prevents them is Jesus. The mob waits to see what He will say and do.

What Jesus does next shocks them all. He walks up to the base of the tree and calls his name. “Zaccheus.” Over the years Zaccheus heard many call him names. Yet one of the sweetest sounds in the world is when someone calls your name – especially if it is someone you respect or someone you love. Jesus says, The Good Shepherd “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” (John 10:2-3). Now Jesus calls this lost sheep by his name. ‘Zaccheus’ means “pure one, righteous one.” Until now, those words were never used to describe the tiny tax collector. Jesus can see what Zaccheus was always meant to be. “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). That’s more than Zaccheus bargained for. Jesus comes close to him and wants to go home with him. There is urgency, a necessity in Jesus’ voice as though someone’s life depends on it. The crowd recoils in angry grumbling.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner.’” (Luke 19:7)

Talking to a traitor is bad. Eating with him is worse. Going to his home? That’s a sign of acceptance and approval. What has this small scoundrel done to deserve it? Nothing. Zaccheus is baffled himself but he has a decision to make. Does he do what Scrooge did when he let Belle go? Does he stay in the tree and let the offer pass him by or does he come down? Somehow he senses that when he lets go of those sycamore boughs he will be letting go of his power and control. Yet when Jesus said his name and told him to descend, it was like a get out of jail free card.

So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. (At the house) Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” (Luke 19:6, 8)

Once again in Jericho the walls fell down. When Jesus becomes your Master, the chains begin to break. Did you notice Jesus did not tell Zaccheus what to do with money? He didn’t tell him to quit his job. Zaccheus was still the chief tax collector after Jesus left. He didn’t tell him how to run his business. All Jesus did was call him by name and come into his life. That broke the stranglehold of his former Masters: power and money. That knocked his selfish ego off the throne. That set Zaccheus free from the inside out. That broke the chain. He was free to share, to care, and to be fair with his neighbors. He was now free to live up to his name: the pure and righteous one. Even Jesus marveled at the change.

Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” (Luke 19:9-10)

Today, Jesus is calling your name. He wants to set you free to share. The decision is yours today. Do you want to cling to the tree or let go? Do you want keep forging more links? Today God is inviting you to truly let go.