

JESUS CAME TO SEEK AND TO SAVE THE LOST

Luke 19:1-10

Key Verse: 19:10

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

We live in a time where it is becoming increasingly hard to tell the message of truth as it is written in the Bible. Sometimes we feel like Elijah on the top of Mount Horeb, **“I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too”** (1 Ki 19:10). So, it is natural for us to build up walls and hide in our Christian community closed off from the outside world. However, today’s passage is very striking and challenging. Jesus was very close to his death, surrounded by enemies and fair-weather-friends but he constantly reached out to the sinful world around him. Jesus was known as a friend to sinners who came to seek and to save the lost. This story of Zacchaeus is a very famous one. Zach is so famous he has a song, “Zacchaeus was a wee, little man, And a wee, little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, For the Lord he wanted to see. And as the Savior came that way, He looked up in the tree, And he said, ‘Zacchaeus, you come down,’ For I’m going to your house today.” You know there aren’t too many people in the Bible famous enough to get their own song. But what makes this story so famous is not Zacchaeus or even his height but the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus. As we read about Jesus’ amazing grace and the amazing effect of that grace, we have to ask ourselves, “how often do we make friends, really make friends with sinners?”

In this passage is the key verse for our study of Luke’s gospel. 19:10 says, **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”** This is Jesus’ own word about the express purpose of why he came to this earth, it is very significant. In fact we’ve seen throughout Luke’s gospel it shaped everything that Jesus did. Then in light of this, we have to ask ourselves, “are we doing the same?” Are we building up walls? Are we comfortable in our families and our happy church community? Or are we, like the Lord, seeking out the lost? May God help us to be moved by the amazing grace of our Lord today.

First, An unlikely seeker (1-4)

As we studied last time, outside Jericho Jesus took the time to heal one blind beggar who began to follow Jesus praising God. This inspired everyone else to follow and praise God as well. So, now there was a very large, and excited crowd following Jesus, praising God and forming a kind of parade through the streets of Jericho (Mt 20:29; Mk 10:46). It was a very exciting event drawing many spectators.

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Verse 2 says, “**A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.**” Jesus’ journey through Jericho is unique to Luke’s gospel. It seems that this man Zacchaeus is the entire focus of Jesus’ visit. Then who was Zacchaeus? It says that he was a chief tax collector. A Roman Censor was actually responsible for the collection of taxes but farmed the job out to locals who could do his dirty work for him but he didn’t pay them. So they could only make money by charging above what was owed (Lk 3:12-13). The chief tax collector would take his cut out of what his underling tax collectors had gathered, making them desperate to extort enough for him and themselves.¹

Roman taxation was only 1% of a man’s yearly income; however, the tax codes were vague and there were crop taxes, import export taxes, sales tax, emergency tax, they could even tax the bundle you were carrying on your back, so no one actually knew what they owed and tax collectors used their power to prey upon the helpless.² What’s more the Jews felt that paying taxes to Cesar was a sin (Lk 20:22) and those who aligned themselves with the Romans were considered pagans as well (Lk 15:1-2; Mt 18:17; Mt 5:46; Mt 21:31; Mk 2:15-16). When a man became a tax collector he brought shame to his entire family³, their offerings were not accepted at the temple⁴, nor could they give testimony in court^{5,6}. The law required such persons must be cut off from their people (Lev 18:29) and they believed that Abraham un-circumcised such public sinners and they were no longer Jewish.⁷

What’s worse, Luke adds that he “**was wealthy**” (3). It was like saying Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and he was really, really good at his job. To become wealthy in an unpaid job, he had to have a regular practice of taking much, much more than what was required and squeezing his subordinates to do the same—he hints at as much in his confession later on (8b). Surely, Zacchaeus was a most hated man in Jericho and for good reason. I don’t want to draw out the details of ancient Roman tax practices, but rather, to help us to understand just what kind of man Zacchaeus was. When we hear the cute song about this adorable short man and look at the cutesy coloring pages, we think he’s a marginalized nice guy just doing his job—like an IRS agent. But this is not the case. Zacchaeus was a very bad man. In modern terms, we might compare Zacchaeus to a Wall Street banker, who liquidates thousands of people’s pensions, foreclosing their homes, leaving them destitute, just to add

¹ <http://www.bible-history.com/sketches/ancient/tax-collector.html>

² <http://www.bible-history.com/sketches/ancient/tax-collector.html>

³ Talmud, Nedar 3:4

⁴ Talmud, Baba Kama 10:1

⁵ Talmud, Sauhedr. 25, sec. 2

⁶ Fausset, Andrew Robert M.A., D.D., "Definition for 'Publican' Fausset's Bible Dictionary"

⁷ Talmud, b. Eruvin. 19a, Midrash Sonc. Trans. 2

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another million to his account that he doesn't really need. Or like a drug dealer who deals out death to his own community and even to his own family, watching them slowly rot away before his eyes while heartlessly doing anything to make a profit. Understanding who he was makes what happens next so unbelievable.

Zacchaeus was a most unlikely seeker of Jesus. But verses 3-4 describe his desperation to see him, **“He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.”** Zacchaeus' name means pure, as many of us parents know, we choose our children's names very carefully as a prayer for them. But Zacchaeus became the opposite of his parent's dreams. Perhaps, he grew up poor and became absolutely determined that by any means he would not be like his parents. Or perhaps a simpler explanation lies in the fact that he was short and felt he had something to prove. One day he saw a tax collector with big bags of money and power and he said “that's what I want!” He became a tax collector but it wasn't as easy as he thought. Ecclesiastes 7:1 and 7 say, **“A good name is better than fine perfume...but extortion turns a wise person into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart.”** The first time he extorted money from a poor widow, her voice was ringing in his ears, “Please that's my only goat, it's all I have to live on!” and a poor old man, “Have mercy, this is all I have,” and a young man being dragged away by his Roman escort, “You traitor! You traitor!” and he went and drank himself into a stupor but it only made the voices louder. However, his drive to make money proved stronger and he slowly began to harden his heart until it became like a steel-plated stone. He became rich; however, the cost was that he was rejected by his people, without a friend in the world, save for other greedy, wicked, cold-hearted tax collectors. He had no prospect of marrying a nice Jewish girl even with his great wealth and so he comforted himself with many prostitutes who only befriended him for his money (cf. Luke 5:29-30). He had everything he ever wanted but the more he got the more his emptiness grew. He could hear the haunting words of Solomon ringing in his ears, **“Meaningless! Meaningless!...Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”** (Ecc 1:2). “Here is a big bag of gold for you Zaccheus” ...meaningless, meaningless. “Here is that new rug you wanted Zacchaeus” ...meaningless, meaningless. “Hey Zacchaeus look at the cute new girl who came today” ...meaningless, meaningless. It began to dawn on him that this wicked life he had chosen would never give him what he wanted. Ecclesiastes 5:10 says, **“Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless”** (cf. Ecc 4:8).

As tax collectors could only befriend other tax collectors, he surely heard how Levi, a tax collector from Capernaum, had begun to follow Jesus, that in fact Jesus sought him. He heard that Jesus had become very well known as **“a friend of tax**

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collectors and sinners” (Lk 7:34) and that they often gathered around him to hear his teachings and he ate with them (Lk 15:1-2). He heard how their lives were being changed by their joyful encounters. And **“He wanted to see who Jesus was”** this man who could understand him and accept him even though he was a filthy sinner. But no matter what he did, he couldn’t see and the people in front of him linked arms and formed a wall just to spite him. Then he saw a sycamore fig tree. It’s very undignified for a grown man to climb a tree—and think what it would do for his hard reputation which he needed to get taxes from people. Yet, he didn’t care in the least; he ran with all his might and though he was so short with a running leap he was able to get up the tree. For once in his life all worldly concerns disappeared and he was consumed with one absolute desire to see Jesus.

It shows us we should be careful about assuming who is searching for Jesus or who will be open to the gospel. George Whitfield, was an English Anglican cleric who was one of the founders of Methodism and the evangelical movement. Whitfield, traveled throughout the country preaching the gospel and made it a custom to stay in people’s houses and speak to them concerning their souls. At one time he was staying in the house of a kind and amiable man, General E— , who was a great admirer of his preaching. The family was so extremely hospitable and kind that, though he could see no sign they were believers, he felt he could say nothing to them—they’re such good people with a good life. But when he went upstairs to bed the Spirit of the Lord said to him, “O, man of God, how shalt thou be clear of their blood if thou dost not warn them?” He struggled all night. Early in the morning, before going away, Whitfield took his diamond ring from his finger, and wrote on the pane in the window these words: “One thing thou lackest.” When he left, the unconverted family was shocked that he had never spoke to them, so much so that they immediately went up to his room. Seeing the words on the glass they burst into tears and there knelt in prayer, confessed their sins and found that “one thing” they were lacking.⁸ There are many around us who may look unlikely but who are waiting, expecting and searching, we need to help them to meet Jesus.

Second, Jesus, friend of sinners (5-7)

How the people must have marveled at the sight of Zacchaeus looking so excited even desperate enough to climb a tree—it was quite the spectacle. This hard man never looked excited about anything, more like Ebenezer Scrooge. But what happened next was far more amazing, verse 5 says, **“When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house**

⁸ http://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/globe/one_thing_thou_lackest.htm

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today.” No one ever made eye contact with Zacchaeus, but Jesus looked at him, eye to eye. Can you imagine what that look was like? Other religious leaders looked at him full of contempt and judgment but Jesus knowing him to the core looked at him with compassion.

People called Zacchaeus a lot of names but Jesus called to him, **“Zacchaeus”**— Jesus knew his name. Working with children, I’ve come to understand the extreme importance of knowing names. Knowing a child’s name assigns value to them and makes them feel important, it establishes a relationship with them. Even at the Hallelujah Light Festival, children I had just met when they came back to play the game a second time asked me, “you remember my name right?” It’s almost like saying “you love me right? You care about me right?” Jesus then radically defied the social conventions and public opinion of his time by inviting himself to Zacchaeus’ house. In Middle Eastern culture to eat with someone was to have fellowship with them, to befriend them. Isn’t it great news that Jesus invites himself into our homes? That he seeks us out and says I need to stay in your house, I need to stay in your heart.

We’ve already thought about what kind of a wicked man Zacchaeus was but Jesus sought out a relationship with him. It seems unthinkable. In fact, verse 7 says, **“All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’”** Sometimes it’s a messy business making friends with sinners, who don’t look promising or like they’ll fit in at our church. When he ate with Levi, he was challenged by the Pharisees who said, **“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”**. **But Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”** (Lk 5:30-31). They would have been happy perhaps if Jesus had gone there to rebuke the sinners and straighten them out but Jesus was eating with them. It seems he went there with no agenda, just to be their friend. He was not explicitly asking tax collectors to clean up their life first and then he would befriend them. Jesus freely gave his friendship to all without any strings attached.

It is a challenge to us. How many non-Christian sinful people have we given our friendship to? In our increasingly secular culture, we often are the only Christian in our class or in our workplace. We can really begin to see the world as “us” and “them.” And we can start to try to avoid “them” so that we may not be somehow defiled by “them.” Or when we do give our friendship to sinners, we do so only for the sake of evangelizing them. That is from the moment we meet them, we are thinking that we want to change them, not accept them as they are. People can always sense this, and so they see that to us, they are just a project and not a friend. Of if we only spend time with them in Bible study and no meaningful time making a relationship. Consider Jesus who

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said to James and John, “‘What do you want?’ They said, ‘Rabbi where are you staying?’ ‘Come,’ he replied, ‘and you will see’” (Jn 1:38-39). Or who said to Nathaniel, “‘Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.’ ‘How do you know me?’ Nathanael asked” (Jn 1:47-48). Or who said to the demoniac at Geresá, “‘What is your name?’” (Lk 8:30). Or to the woman at the well, “‘Will you give me a drink?’” (Jn 4:7). Wherever Jesus went he made friends. He didn’t make people feel they needed to change to be his friends but rather being friends with Jesus changed people forever.

There’s the story of how the wind and the sun competed to make a man take off his jacket. The wind blew and beat on the man as hard as he could but it only made the man pull the jacket on tighter. However, the sun shone on him with such warm radiance that the man took his jacket off of his own free will. This was the case with Zacchaeus. No amount of harsh rebuking could have opened this hardened man’s heart. But overwhelmed by the warmth of friendship from Jesus, he came down at once and welcomed him gladly (6).

Third, The effect of God’s grace (8-10).

Outside his house, the parade of townspeople grumbled unhappily. **“But 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’”** (8). Amazingly, Jesus had just given an amazing invitation to a rich man to come and be his disciple after selling all his possessions but that man went away sad. However, Zacchaeus after one dinner gave away half of his possession to the poor and with the other half gave restitution with 300% interest to all those he cheated, surely leaving him with nothing. And he did all this of his own free will without anyone telling him to do it. What was the difference between these two rich men? **Firstly, Zacchaeus was seeking God.** Deuteronomy 4:29 says, **“But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul”** (cf. Jer 29:13). **Secondly, Zacchaeus was willing to accept Jesus and repent.** It says that he welcomed him gladly. Jesus says, **“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me”** (Rev 3:20). **But most powerful of all was that thirdly, he received the grace of Jesus.** Grace is the most powerful evangelical tool that we have. Rebuking and correcting have their place, but it is the grace of God that draws people to Jesus and changes lives. Only grace could produce such a radical life change in Zacchaeus.

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“Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham’” (9). Though Zacchaeus had become cut off as a Jew, by faith and repentance he could be restored as a true child of God. Jesus said, **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”** (10). In Luke 15, Jesus told the parables of seeking the lost sheep, seeking the lost coin and seeking the lost son. It was because the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around to hear him and the Pharisees muttered, **“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”** He was constantly misunderstood for seeking the lost. It doesn’t mean that he condones their behavior or that he will accept them into the kingdom as they are but that he is seeking them because they are lost. Jesus loves the saved, his children, but his heart is to find all the lost missing none. We who are parents love all our children, but if one were lost we would turn over heaven and earth to find that one, as if nothing else in the whole world existed. This has been the continual theme of Luke’s gospel that Jesus continually went here and there seeking out the one lost sheep wherever they were. And when one sinner repents there is rejoicing in all of heaven (Lk 15:7,10). This is the heart of God, this is the work that God is always engaged in (Jn 3:16, Jn 6:28-29).

If this is the heart of heaven and the work that God wants to do, then we must ask ourselves: am I seeking the lost? Is our church more full of found people or lost people? To seek the lost, 500 Sunday Worship Service attendants and 1000 one to one Bible studies with the lost, is a good prayer topic. There are plenty of churches where there are beautiful programs on Sunday with many saved people singing joyfully to the Lord, it looks like the kingdom of God. But some churches have become so comfortable ministering to the found, to making a nice community of believers, that if a really lost person walked through the door they would be looked down upon and judged harshly instead of welcomed. This isn’t the heart of God. Ministry that is outward focused not inward focused will probably look very messy and require everyone to have a lot of grace and constantly strain the boundaries of our ability to make friends and show the love of Jesus unconditionally. Many of us remember how we were pressed every week and especially at conferences, **“Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full”** (Lk 14:23). It was hard work and too pushy, but it came from a broken shepherd heart for the lost. Dr. Samuel Lee used to say that if we cannot cry for the lost around us, then go buy eye drops to make tears. Such is the passion with which we have sought the lost, because this is the heart of God. I pray we may never lose this passion.

The band Casting Crowns summed it up well in their song “Jesus Friend of Sinners”, “Oh Jesus, friend of sinners Open our eyes to world at the end of our pointing

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fingers, Let our hearts be led by mercy, Help us reach with open hearts and open doors, Oh Jesus, friend of sinners, break our hearts for what breaks yours.”⁹

Through this passage we have been challenged to consider our attitude toward the lost. Jesus stretched the boundaries of what was acceptable for a religious person. He had a radical position on associating with sinners. He expressed love, friendship and acceptance first and truth when necessary. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, it was his passion which he devoted his life to. He was constantly surrounded by the lost and he made them feel that though they were lost sheep he was their compassionate shepherd. Each one of us was once lost, filthy and beyond hope, but by the grace of Jesus we have been found. There are many good things we can do for God and they are very valuable. But as Christians we are called to pattern our life after the life of Jesus. If he was the friend of sinners, seeking the lost, then somehow we need to find the way to do the same. Let us then engage in the work of God to seek the lost in our neighborhood and campuses and fill God's house with the lost.

⁹ Casting Crowns, “Jesus Friend of Sinners”, Come to the Well 2011