

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 what was lost.”

In the last passage, Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, predicted his suffering, death and resurrection to the Twelve. It was to fulfill God’s will for world salvation. It was to save us from our sins and give us eternal life in the kingdom of God. Jesus teaches the meaning of his death and resurrection again and again so that we may believe and be saved. We also learned the crying out prayer of a blind man. When he heard that Jesus was passing by, he called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus heard his cry and gave him sight. In the same way, Jesus opens our spiritual eyes when we cry out for his mercy. In this Easter season, we need to see Jesus and know the meaning of his death and resurrection. May God grant us crying out prayer for his blessing on our Easter Bible conferences. Son of David have mercy on us!

We are now approaching the end of a section of Luke’s gospel that is unique among the synoptic gospels. In chapter 9:51, Luke says that Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem from somewhere in northern Galilee. Jesus traveled down the east side of the Jordan River, spending several months in the region of Perea. While writers of the other synoptic gospels bypass this part of Jesus’ ministry, Luke spends considerable time on it—in fact, about nine chapters of his gospel. Through the study of these chapters we could appreciate the universal love of God for the Gentiles. We also find repeatedly Jesus’ concern for the poor and outcast and his challenge to the rich. We have seen many beautiful parables that appear only in Luke’s gospel: the parable of the good Samaritan, the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the shrewd manager, the parable of the persistent widow, and others. Jesus taught spiritual truths by using many different kinds of examples. Sometimes unlikely people emerged as heroes in his parables, and sometimes he taught good things through bad people. We are forever grateful to St. Luke for his unique gospel that reveals the universal love of God. Today’s passage also appears only in Luke’s gospel. After this event and the following parable, Luke records Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. At this point, Luke’s gospel converges with the other synoptic gospels to record the events of Jesus’ passion week. Today, let’s enjoy another unique event we find only in Luke’s beautiful Gospel.

In today’s passage, Jesus passes through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. There Jesus meets an interesting man named Zacchaeus and brings salvation to his house. It is a gracious moment during Jesus’ journey toward Jerusalem. May the Lord help us to know the heart of Jesus and the way of salvation through this study.

First, Zacchaeus seeks Jesus (1-4).

Look at verse 1. “Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.” Jericho was known as the City of Palms (Dt 34:3). Lying 800 feet below sea level, its climate was tropical, becoming quite warm in the summer. Major trade routes ran through the city, and considerable revenue was generated from taxes on trade. It was a lovely place, most proper for a moment of relief for Jesus and his company on the way to Jerusalem. According to verse 1, Jesus was passing through. But something happened there that became a part of gospel history.

Look at verse 2. “A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.” The name Zacchaeus means “upright one” and comes from the same root as the word “pure.” When his parents named him, they must have had great expectations for him to be a man of God and a source of blessing for his people. He was bright and talented and was given the best education by his parents. But when he had to choose his occupation, he did not choose something noble. He chose to be a tax collector. It was motivated by selfishness and calculated to yield the best possible life according to his own standard. By his own choice, he became a tax collector and then worked his way up to chief tax collector. He was probably a little more clever and a little more ruthless than the other tax collectors. He made a great deal of money. But in terms of his humanity, the cost was higher than he had expected. He had to sacrifice his sense of honor. To the people of Israel, to be a tax collector was tantamount to being a traitor to one’s nation and one’s God. Tax collectors were held in utter contempt by their own people and by the Romans as well. In American history, there is the famous traitor Benedict Arnold. Once a trusted officer of George Washington, Arnold betrayed that trust to side with the British. After that he was hated by the Americans and he was despised by the British. He lived the rest of his days in terrible anguish of soul and without an identity. When he was dying in England, his last request was to be dressed in the uniform he had worn while serving in the

Continental Army. What a miserable man he is who betrays his honor. Moreover, Zacchaeus' conscience must have bothered him every day as he thought about the people whom he had damaged in the course of extracting money from them. Now he had money. He could enjoy all the things that money could buy. But he was not happy. In his heart he felt dirty all the time, like a man with leprosy. Regret became his constant companion. What was worse, demons channeled in through his selfishness and tormented his soul even more.

Look at verse 3. "He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd." Zacchaeus had heard of Jesus and he wanted to see who Jesus was. This was not mere curiosity, but a yearning desire to see the Messiah. Perhaps he was moved by Jesus giving sight to the blind man who called out for his mercy. Perhaps Zacchaeus heard that Jesus called a tax collector Levi to be his disciple and prayed for him to be a shepherd of his people Israel. In any case, Zacchaeus heard of Jesus and was drawn to Jesus. But it was not easy to see Jesus. As Jesus was passing through, a large crowd was with him; it was difficult to get near Jesus. Being a short man, Zacchaeus could not see over the crowd that had gathered around Jesus. And he could not expect any sympathy from the crowd. In fact, the people in the crowd, who had been victims of his tax policies, must have enjoyed this opportunity to give Zacchaeus a hard time. Standing shoulder to shoulder, they deliberately blocked his access to Jesus and nudged him away, while making it look unintentional. It seemed impossible for Zacchaeus to get near Jesus. But he was a man of creativity and persistence who found the way to achieve his goal.

Look at verse 4. "So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way." What an interesting sight! This short man in his designer clothes circled around the crowd, ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore-fig tree to gain a vantage point to see Jesus. Probably Zacchaeus had not climbed a tree for a long time. With his pot belly, it was hard to wrap his arms around the tree to shimmy up. He must have bruised himself and torn his fancy clothes. But after struggling hard, he made it up the tree. He found a good, strong branch that could hold him and sat down on it. In his bright and shiny clothes, he might have looked like a parrot perched in the tree. We must admit that he did everything he could to see Jesus.

St. Augustine said that God made man with an empty place that only God can fill. Until we meet God personally we are restless wanderers trying to fill that void with other things. Zacchaeus had tried to fill his empty place with money. Others try to do so with romance, adventure, human achievement or worldly glory. Sooner or later each person must realize that his eternal soul cannot be satisfied with the fleeting things of this world. Then we must seek God earnestly. Moses foresaw that his people would become corrupted after enjoying God's blessing in the promised land. As a result, they would be punished as prisoners of war in a foreign land. They deserved it. But Moses did not tell them to give up because they made a terrible mistake. Rather, he said, "But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Dt 4:29).

Second, Jesus seeks and saves Zacchaeus (5-10).

Look at verse 5. "When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'" Jesus was moved by Zacchaeus' earnest effort to see him. In the last passage, Jesus heard the cry for mercy from a blind man and stopped. This time, Jesus heard the inner cry of Zacchaeus and stopped. Jesus does not see outer appearance only. Jesus sees the heart. Jesus understood Zacchaeus' inner man. Jesus called him by name, "Zacchaeus." It was God's voice to him. It kindled the hope of God in his heart. It awakened God's purpose for his life. Jesus' one word, "Zacchaeus," expressed God's personal love and desire to save him. Then Jesus called him down from the tree. This was a command, given with a sense of urgency. Jesus boldly intervened in Zacchaeus' life. And Jesus said, "I must stay at your house today." If Jesus had a house, he would probably invite Zacchaeus, as Missionary Lukas and Maria Cho share common life with nine Colombian students. But Jesus had no house. So he invited himself to Zacchaeus' house. Jesus wanted to have fellowship with Zacchaeus. In the same way, Jesus wants to come into our hearts even now. Revelation 3:20 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 him and he with me."

How did Zacchaeus respond? Look at verse 6. "So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly." Zacchaeus did not hesitate. His heart was open to Jesus. He was ready to welcome Jesus. Jesus' calling was irresistible grace to Zacchaeus. With gladness of heart, Zacchaeus obeyed Jesus. It was the expression of faith that was growing in his heart through Jesus' words. His immediate obedience reminds us of Abraham's obedience to God's calling.

Jesus was happy to find Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was happy to be found by Jesus. But the people who saw this were not so happy. They began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" They knew Zacchaeus was a sinner. They knew he had done awful things out of his selfishness. But they did not know his heart. They did not know he was seeking Jesus. Even less did they know Jesus' heart. They began to criticize Jesus for going to the house of a sinner. But Jesus did not mind. Jesus was ready to save this one man. Jesus risked everything to help this one man.

To Zacchaeus, it was really amazing that Jesus cared for him. He could see that Jesus was being sneered at and criticized for associating with him. He might have expected Jesus to change his mind and not go to his house. But Jesus did not deviate at all. Jesus kept smiling at Zacchaeus with a joyful heart. Jesus was ready to bear this misunderstanding for him. Through Jesus' act, Zacchaeus glimpsed the sacrificial love of God. He could understand that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. His heart was melted. He found new hope in Jesus. He could make a new start with Jesus.

Look at verse 8. "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.'" Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' love with repentance. Zacchaeus recognized Jesus as the Lord. Until now, money had been his master. But when he tasted the love of Jesus, he was freed from the love of money. He accepted Jesus as his Lord. He began to see others with the love of God. He made an immediate decision to give half of his possessions to the poor. He also decided to pay restitution to anyone he had wronged. He was completely changed by the love of Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" At the news of this one sinner's repentance, there was a shout of joy in heaven. The angels began to sing sweet hymns of praise to God. Then Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." It was true. Zacchaeus received God's salvation through Jesus. His sins were forgiven. His terrible selfishness was healed. His shame and disgrace was taken away. A true sense of honor as a child of God was restored in his heart. Jesus called him a son of Abraham. He was accepted by God as a man of faith and a spiritual descendant of Abraham. His restoration as a child of God was immediate and complete.

Look at verse 10. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Here Jesus reveals his purpose of coming into this world. Jesus, the Son of Man, came to seek and to save lost sinners. Though Jesus is the Eternal and Almighty God, he gave up his power and glory and came down to this world in the form of a man. If Jesus had remained in heaven, we could never know him. But Jesus came down to this world to seek and to save lost sinners. For this purpose, Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem to suffer and die on the cross as the Lamb of God for the sin of the world.

It is truly amazing that Jesus is seeking the lost. Jesus is the good shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep. Jesus is like the father of the prodigal son who waits eagerly for the lost son to return and then runs to meet him halfway when he sees him coming home. Jesus sought out a broken and lonely Samaritan woman (Jn 4:23). This is the heart of God. God is constantly searching for those who are seeking him. Psalm 14:2 says, "The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God."

Jesus not only seeks the lost, but he also saves the lost. Zacchaeus was lost because his soul was captured by the power of sin and the devil. But Jesus saved his soul and made him a son of Abraham, a child of God. Zacchaeus was lost because his humanity had degenerated due to his selfishness. But Jesus saved him by restoring the image of God in him. Jesus made him a candidate to be a great shepherd for all lost souls. When we come to Jesus, he saves us from our sins and restores us as the children of God.

When we know the heart of Jesus, we are compelled to participate in his mission to seek and to save the lost. It motivates us to visit the campuses and invite students to Bible study. These days, American young people look lost in selfishness and hedonism. But Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Jesus can raise young Americans as shepherds and missionaries for the world. May God help us to participate in Jesus' ministry to seek and to save the lost through one-to-one Bible study.

In this passage we learn that only when we have God in our hearts can we be truly happy people. So we must seek God more than anything. As we seek God, God is seeking us. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. Let's open our

hearts to his love, repent of our sins and receive his grace. May God make us instruments of his saving grace to the lost.