

## 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.”

Do you ever wonder why you're here? Not just today, but in an ultimate sense? Some of us were born and raised here. Some may have moved here for study or work. Some went away and came back. Some of us originally came here as missionaries, or your parents did. There may be many surface reasons why we're here. But what's the real reason? To many people, asking why I'm here may seem impractical. Who's got time to think about *that*? Life is already so busy and demanding. Some would say, “Just enjoy life whenever you can.” But we all really need to think about this question: *why am I here?* It's because only when we know why can we live a meaningful life. Today's passage is only found in Luke's Gospel, and it pulls together in a powerful way many of its themes. We can learn a lot from Zacchaeus, but we can learn even more from Jesus himself. Jesus interacts with this man, and then makes a big life statement. He says this incident is a picture of *why he came*. What does Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus mean to us? What are his words saying to us today? What does he want us to hear and to learn? May God speak to us through his living words today.

Since the end of chapter 9, Jesus has been traveling with his disciples, teaching and training them, and now they're at Jericho and about to arrive at Jerusalem. It means his ministry on earth is almost over—in fact, he's got only one week left. He's just told his disciples again about what's going to happen: he'll go through unspeakable humiliation and suffering, be killed, and then, rise again (18:31–33). Personally, it's a really hard time for Jesus, yet the demands of his ministry just won't stop. In last week's passage, just outside Jericho, a blind man was crying out to him for mercy. Because of the man's faith, Jesus called him to himself and healed him. Now, in verse 1 Jesus enters Jericho and is passing through. It doesn't seem he's going to stop. But then, the plan seems to change.

Read verse 2. “And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich.” Who is this man? First, he's called “a chief tax

collector.” Luke has often mentioned tax collectors.<sup>1</sup> In fact, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, Matthew, formerly known as Levi, used to be a tax collector.<sup>2</sup> But this man is a “chief” tax collector. The Greek word means he’s either outstanding at his job or has many other tax collectors answering to him. Verse 2 also points out that he’s rich. Obviously, the wealthy city of Jericho has been good for his business. As we’ve seen, Jesus has just encountered a rich ruler (18:18–23). We may wonder why there’s yet another rich man who comes to Jesus. Hasn’t Jesus come to preach good news to the poor (4:18a; 7:22)? Hasn’t he focused on his disciples, who, in following him have become poor (6:20)? Hasn’t he told them to give to the poor and invite the poor (12:33; 14:13)? Hasn’t he already said it’s nearly impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (18:24–25)? So, why does yet another rich person’s story deserve to be included in the account of the life of Jesus?

But this rich man is so unusual. Luke goes on to describe him. Look at verses 3–4. “And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.” Some fascinating details are here. First of all, Zacchaeus is short, which is hardly ever mentioned in the Bible. Human beings generally are impressed by a tall man. A short man can feel people looking down on him. But Zacchaeus didn’t let his stature ever stop him from getting what he wanted. Being a tax collector was a cutthroat business, but this short man rose to the top. Now, facing this crowd, all packed around Jesus, Zacchaeus assesses the situation and takes quick action. He spots a sycamore tree on ahead, starts running to it and climbs up into it. Maybe he sees the little kids doing the same thing, and he jumps right in there with them. When there seems to be no way around taller people, this man, short in stature, finds a way. He’s not at all about his pride or dignity or vanity.

Why is Zacchaeus putting himself out there like this? Verse 3 says it simply: “he was seeking to see who Jesus was.” For over three years the news of Jesus and his remarkable ministry has been spreading. So this chief tax collector no doubt has heard about it, too. He must have been most intrigued by how Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners. Zacchaeus definitely has more than a passing interest in Jesus. The fact that he ends up in a tree just to see him

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<sup>1</sup> 3:12; 5:27,29,30; 7:29,34; 15:1; 18:10,11,13

<sup>2</sup> 5:27–32; 6:13–16; cf. Matt.9:9–13

suggests some level of desperation. Why would a chief tax collector be seeking anything more than money and power? But, as many people have to learn, the hard way, financial success and power never give anybody the meaning of life. In fact, power and affluence tend to make life seem *more* meaningless.

Plus, Zacchaeus has been enduring the social stigma attached to his profession. He's made all his money by collecting taxes for a foreign power that's oppressing his own people. So, though he's rich, enjoying living standards way above others, everybody hates him (7). People talk to him only if they have to, maybe only if they'll get paid. Despite his wealth and job title, he's an outcast.

And then, there's his name. In Luke's Gospel, whenever Jesus encounters a person, it's rare that a name is included—it's just "a woman who..." (7:37; 8:43; 13:11) or "a man who..." (5:12; 6:6; 11:14). But this man has a name: "Zacchaeus." And his name's meaning is surprising. In Hebrew it means "pure" or "innocent." What a name! His parents must've given him that name in the hope that he'd grow up to be a man of integrity and character, a pure-hearted man from whom others could learn. But despite their hopes and dreams for him, his life went in the wrong direction. In his job, squeezing money out of people, he's been doing many things he knows are not right. Every once in a while, the sound of his name, "pure and innocent one," reminded him of his fundamental failure in life. Though he's got a great name, in his sin he's living in darkness.

So Zacchaeus is a medley of contradictions. He's got a religious name, but he's a chief tax collector; he's a short and determined man, but he's a social outcast; he's rich, but he's seeking to see Jesus. And what could he possibly hope to accomplish by just watching Jesus while hiding up in the branches of a tree? Who knows? Probably he himself doesn't even know. But in verse 3 the word "seeking" is important. In this context, it seems to mean he's "intensely desiring" or even "craving" to see Jesus. Why is Zacchaeus so motivated? After living such a driven life, he's gotten himself into a fix. Despite his seeming achievements, he's lost hope for himself.

But, he's found hope in Jesus. Why is Jesus so hopeful to him? It's because all the interactions he's had with people show Jesus to be a source of grace. Where in such a violent and vindictive, self-righteous and judgmental world can anybody

find a source of grace? So Zacchaeus comes to Jesus. And yet, he doesn't dare push himself any nearer to him than from a tree. Maybe he feels too unworthy.

Zacchaeus is an unforgettable depiction of a sinner seeking God. God can reveal himself to us even when we're not seeking him (Isa.65:1). But there's something special about seeking God. Years later, while in Athens, Apostle Paul said this is God's desire. God wants people, regardless of who they are or where they are, to seek him, to feel their way toward him and find him (Acts 17:26–27). In fact, the Bible says God's eyes "run to and fro throughout the whole earth," looking for any person whose heart is fully turned toward him (2 Chron.16:9).

But seeking God is not as easy as it might seem. In various life stages, we all get obsessed by what we're seeking at the moment. Children get obsessed with seeking fun. Teenagers get obsessed with seeking to be cool. Young people get obsessed with seeking to escape their parents' control. Later, they get obsessed with their career, with getting married, having children or raising them. Sometimes, people even get obsessed with ministry instead of God himself. When we're obsessed with other pursuits, we can't even hear it when somebody is trying to tell us something important. For most of us, it seems to take great disappointment, or even failure, to get us to start truly seeking God.

And what's next in today's passage? It's where everything changes. Look at verse 5. "And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.'" Wow. Wait a minute. How does Jesus see Zacchaeus up in that tree? How does he know his name? And isn't Jesus bracing himself to get to Jerusalem? What is this telling us? Even in the midst of his own incredible burden, Jesus is keenly aware of a sinner seeking him. And he's not stopping for anyone else but this man. To Jesus, this ridiculous man, up in a tree, trying to see him, is worth stopping for. And Jesus knows his name. Knowing his name isn't just a technicality; Jesus knows him deeply. He knows his heart, his failure, his loneliness, his shame, his spiritual desire, and yes, even his faith. Jesus is God who knows all about us. When we're walking in close fellowship with him, he can give us such a keen awareness of others.

And notice how Jesus uses the word "must": "I must stay at your house today." Why "must" he? It's the Father's will for him. Jesus is not just in tune with

people; he's keeping in close step with the Spirit's leading.<sup>3</sup> He sees this as God's chance to redeem a lost one. It's God's will to stop for anyone who's truly seeking him. Jesus is ready to respond, ready to invite himself to the man's house, ready to spend time with him and get close to him. And it's all based on his grace. This change of plans, this stopping, is to help Zacchaeus. But it's also to help the disciples. Jesus is modeling for them and for us how to stop what we're doing for anyone who has a real desire to know him.

How does Zacchaeus respond? Look at verse 6. "So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully." It may seem natural, but we shouldn't assume he'd do this. Like Zacchaeus, we may want to get close to God, but then, when he actually offers us the chance, will we take it? Or will we hesitate or calculate? Zacchaeus is somebody who's receiving the kingdom of God like a child (18:16–17). He's moving quickly. He's so eager and willing. In Greek, the word for "received" is rich in meaning. It means to welcome hospitably and kindly, and with friendliness. Touched by such grace, Zacchaeus's heart is wide open. He's ready to serve. And he's joyful about it. Not grumpy, not grudging, not even dutiful, but joyful. The grace of Jesus can change anyone to be like that.

But, as is often the case, there's a problem. Look at verse 7. "And when they saw it, they all grumbled, 'He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.'" Who's grumbling? This time it's not just the Pharisees; it says, "...they all." To everyone there, Jesus seems to be going too far, going into *that* man's house. Up until now, Zacchaeus the chief tax collector has done so much damage. A lot of people have suffered because of him. Underneath, some of these grumblers may be jealous that Jesus is not coming to *their* houses. They just can't understand what he's doing.

And the surprises keep coming. Look at verse 8. "And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.'" He must've heard the grumbling. Since he's rich, he's talking about giving away a whole lot of money. He's making a radical life change. He's making restitution to anyone he's hurt. It's another example of the fruit of repentance (cf. 3:8–14). He's not really defending himself; he seems to be eager to defend his new friend, Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> 4:1; cf. John 5:19; 8:29; Gal.5:16–26

As we've seen in Luke's Gospel, most rich people just can't let go of their wealth. But Zacchaeus actually repents. He's not trying to *earn* the grace of Jesus. He's *responding to* the grace of Jesus. Luke often describes repentance. It isn't just feeling sorry, or getting emotional; real repentance is very practical. It actually changes what we're doing with our money and possessions. If our repentance doesn't affect our pocketbook and our bank account, it may not be real.

And how does Jesus respond? Look at verse 9. "And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.'" Jesus already said, "I must stay at your house *today*." Now he says, "*Today* salvation has come to this house." This one word, "Today," means Jesus' grace is available now, today (2Cor.6:2). The grace of Jesus is as real as today is.

Verse 9 also shows that Jesus sees Zacchaeus differently than how people saw him. Most people saw Zacchaeus as a despicable sinner. They were only thinking about his past. But Jesus sees him as "a son of Abraham." "A son of Abraham" is more than being Jewish. "A son of Abraham" means a man of God, an example of great faith, and even an heir of God's world salvation plan, like Abraham was. How could Jesus say this about Zacchaeus? It's the gospel: salvation only by grace, through faith. This gospel elevates any sinful person into a brand new identity as a child of God. Galatians 3:26 says, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." We need to see ourselves with this new identity. And we need to stop drawing attention to human distinctions like race or other things, but fully embrace and accept one another based on simple faith in the grace of Jesus.

Read verse 10. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." This is Jesus' conclusion. We should pay careful attention to it. Though people are grumbling about what he's doing, Jesus says his interaction with Zacchaeus shows the very purpose of his coming. Read verse 10 again. Jesus came to seek the lost. Jesus came to save the lost. What is this telling us about Jesus? At his core, Jesus is our good shepherd who goes after the lost sheep until he finds it (15:3–7). Jesus is our Savior who saves us through totally sacrificing himself (Heb9:26b). Following him means embracing his purpose for our lives. He wants us, his disciples, to seek and to save the lost, just as he did.

And Zacchaeus makes us think about who the lost really are. Are they just the down-and-out, those needing constant assistance? No, Zacchaeus is quite able and capable. But spiritually speaking, he's lost. In Luke's Gospel, seeking and saving the lost has been the heartbeat of Jesus' ministry. He helped Simon, a fisherman lost in catching fish, to find his real purpose in life, to be catching men for God's kingdom (5:1–11). He helped a woman lost as a town prostitute, to find her true life's purpose in his forgiveness, to love and worship him (7:36–50). He helped a lost Gerasene demoniac, whom everyone else was afraid of, to stop torturing himself and start testifying to many others about how much Jesus had done for him (8:26–39). He even helped the Pharisees, so lost in self-righteousness, to finally hear the truth about themselves, and to learn the value of one person who was lost and is found (11:37–53; 15:1–2,11–32). There were countless more lost ones Jesus sought and saved. And he kept doing it to the very end. Even on the cross, he helped a repentant criminal next to him to receive his grace and took him back to paradise with him (23:39–43).

This is what real ministry is about. Some people try to make ministry about ideas and methods and traditions. But real ministry is always about people. Not ideas, not even principles, but people. What's more, this is not just an old Bible story. Our risen Lord Jesus is alive. He's the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb.13:8). He's still seeking sinners ready to repent. He's still able to save anyone, even the most unlikely person. He's still looking for those willing to join him in his purpose.

May God help us seek Jesus as earnestly as Zacchaeus did and taste his grace that can help us repent. And may God help us find why we are here, our very own life purpose, to seek and to save the lost, just like our Lord Jesus did.