

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.”

With today’s passage, we are coming to the end of a unique portion of Luke’s gospel. From 9:51-13:21, Luke traced what many call Jesus’ “Judean ministry.” From 13:22-19:27 Luke follows Jesus on what has been called his “Perean ministry.” In these two portions of his gospel, Luke has recorded events and parables which are not found in any other gospels. He has emphasized that Jesus came to save the Gentiles, as well as the Jews. And he has stressed the eternal nature of Jesus’ salvation work. Jesus came to save people from everlasting punishment in hell and to give eternal life in the glorious kingdom of God. Amen. This unique portion of Luke’s gospel ends with Jesus meeting Zacchaeus the tax collector. Through this meeting Jesus reveals that he came to seek and to save the lost. It is a fitting conclusion to Jesus’ earthly life and ministry. In this passage we can learn the faith of Zacchaeus. Most of all, we learn that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

I. Zacchaeus came to Jesus by faith (1-4)

Look at verse 1. **“Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.”** As we studied previously, Jesus had just given sight to a blind man. This fulfilled Isaiah’s messianic prophecy (Isa 35:5). Jesus was fulfilling everything that had been written by the prophets about the Son of Man. In response to Jesus’ mercy, the former blind man praised God with all his heart. Those who witnessed the event also praised God. The buzz around Jesus electrified the city and drew the attention of many as he passed through. Soon, people were coming from every corner to see what was happening. Jesus’ entourage swelled and the streets became crowded with onlookers.

Verse 2 says, **“A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.”** This man's name, “Zacchaeus,” means “upright” or “righteous.” His parents must have named him with the great expectation that he would be a man of God and a blessing to his nation. They helped him enter the best grade school and high school. They might have given him private music lessons. They helped him enter a top university, paying expensive tuition. Perhaps they hoped he would be a rabbi, a doctor, or a professor. However, he became a tax collector. It was a most despised job in Israel. He

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worked with the hated Roman oppressors--idol-worshiping Gentiles--to collect taxes from God's chosen people, Israel. This was an act of national betrayal, and a breach of God's law. It meant abandoning one's Jewish identity and heritage in order to make money. So tax collectors were bracketed with "public sinners" and were not allowed to participate in the religious life of Israel. They were despised and even hated. Jewish tax collectors have come to epitomize able and selfish people who love money. They have been compared to drug dealers, unscrupulous business executives, and so-called "repo men."

Zacchaeus was the "chief tax collector." He had the ability and position to rule over other tax collectors. He must have been aggressive. He exercised considerable power. This often makes people hardhearted and proud. By now, he must have been middle aged, maybe 45. He was closer to the end of his career than the beginning. It was time to finish, not to start something new. He was now rich; but he must have had deep agonies of life.

There is a phenomenon called "mid-life crisis" in our culture. It seeks to describe the psychological trauma that can come rather suddenly when people reach middle age. As grown children leave home, parents pass away, careers plateau, and menopause occurs, suddenly it is clear that youth is gone and retirement looms. One begins to see the real fruit of his life and can evaluate choices made as a young adult. There may be deep satisfaction, nagging regrets, or both. Zacchaeus was in this season of life.

Verse 3 begins, "**He wanted to see who Jesus was....**" As the narrative develops we find that this was not just idle curiosity. It describes a spiritual hunger in Zacchaeus which was compelling. As a man made in the image of God, he had a desire for God, even though it may have laid dormant for years. When Jesus--God incarnate--passed by, Zacchaeus must have experienced a primal longing to see him, just as a baby senses his mother's presence and wants to connect with her. In addition, Zacchaeus must have heard what Jesus did for others, like the blind man. And perhaps he knew that one of Jesus' disciples was a former tax collector. In any case Zacchaeus was drawn to Jesus; he had to see Jesus. It was an expression of his faith.

However, there was a problem. Zacchaeus was a short man. Crowds of people had already lined the streets, and he could not see over them. Most likely, people who were bitter over their tax bills would have enjoyed the chance to frustrate Zacchaeus. When he tried to bull rush his way through, they joined

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together and repelled him, perhaps elbowing his ribs in the process. When he tried to crawl through them on his hands and knees, someone put a leglock around his neck, choking him, while others pinched his buttocks. **Zacchaeus could have given up. But he was determined. Stepping back, he thought for a moment. Then inspiration came. He figured out where Jesus was going, ran ahead, and climbed a sycamore-fig tree.** This put him in a good position to see Jesus. Here we learn that when Zacchaeus had a serious heart's desire, and used his mind and strength, it was possible for him to meet Jesus. This reminds us of God's promise to the Israelites in Babylon. Jeremiah prophesied that after seventy years of captivity: **"Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you and will bring you back from captivity"** (Jer 19:12-14a). It is God's promise that when we seek him with all our hearts, we will find him.

II. Jesus said, "Salvation has come to this house" (5-10)

What happened? 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.'"** To our surprise, Jesus called Zacchaeus by name. Jesus is the good shepherd who knows his sheep by name. In fact, Jesus is God who knew everything about Zacchaeus. Most of all, he knew that Zacchaeus was ready to meet God and begin a new life. So Jesus called him personally, by name. Jesus also invited himself to Zacchaeus' house. To the religious leaders, this was taboo; they forbade entering the houses of public sinners. They branded as guilty by association anyone who did so. But Jesus deliberately went to Zacchaeus' house. Jesus demonstrated publically that he accepted Zacchaeus and his family just as they were. Jesus did not expect them to change first, but only to receive him in faith. Jesus really wanted to be their shepherd and to have an intimate relationship with them.

In this way, Jesus practically invaded Zacchaeus' house. We don't know about the condition of Zacchaeus' house. It may have been busy and messy, filled with unwholesome things, including other public sinners. Suddenly, the holy Son of God stepped into the house, bringing hungry young disciples with him. Zacchaeus' private life was suddenly exposed and he had to serve many people, mobilizing his wife and household. He had no chance to clean things up before Jesus came. Jesus met him just as he was to have intimate fellowship with him.

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How did Zacchaeus respond? He came down at once and welcomed Jesus gladly (6). He knew that it was a great privilege to receive Jesus. He felt the irresistible grace of Jesus. He opened his heart, his home, and his life to Jesus without hesitation. Jesus' invitation to Zacchaeus is for all people. Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, **"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."** Jesus is waiting at the door of our hearts right now, knocking to come in. He wants to make a personal and intimate relationship with each of us, just as we are, that will bless our lives forever. Let's welcome Jesus gladly.

Through Jesus' gracious invitation and Zacchaeus' response of faith, a beautiful relationship began to blossom. However, the crowd was not happy. They began to mutter, **"He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'"** They misunderstood Jesus, were disappointed, and began to criticize Jesus. All the goodwill gained through the healing of a blind man was lost. Here we see that Jesus upset a whole crowd in order to go to the home of a chief tax collector. This shows us that Jesus values one person who is truly seeking him more than a crowd of spectators. It also shows us that Jesus is willing to bear the reproach of many in order to save one person.

The reproach Jesus bore was a preview of what was coming. As he had told his disciples, he would be mocked, insulted, spit on, flogged and killed. Isaiah said, **"...he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors"** (Isa 53:12b). Jesus was treated like a guilty criminal and killed as a substitute for sinners. Because he bore the punishment God's justice demanded, we receive forgiveness of sins and new life. Thank you, Jesus!

Zacchaeus tasted the sacrificial love of Jesus through his visit. As Jesus entered his house and walked through his rooms, Jesus' love entered his heart and began to fill every part, washing away his sins and sicknesses. His deeply hidden guilt, selfishness and despair vanished, and new hope and strength and love filled his soul. He began to see himself from God's point of view. He understood how much his selfishness had grieved God and hurt others, and how misdirected his life had been. At the same time, God's great purpose for his life was renewed. He saw a bright, promising and fruitful future in Jesus. He was thankful to Jesus and wanted to express his love to Jesus who had loved him first. Then God gave him the wisdom to do so.

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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 called Jesus “Lord.” Zacchaeus realized that he had met God in Jesus and received God’s unconditional love and grace. He willingly surrendered to Jesus as his Lord. Moreover, Zacchaeus had come to know God’s heart in Jesus. As God loved Zacchaeus one-sidedly, he wanted Zacchaeus to love him and others without limit. Until now, Zacchaeus had been limited by his money. But when Jesus’ love touched his soul, money did not matter to him anymore. He was compelled to love God and others as Jesus had loved him. So he gave half of his possessions to the poor. He also promised to compensate anyone he had cheated by repaying four times the amount. This was in accordance with the Law of Moses (Ex 22:1). Zacchaeus was making a new beginning of life. From now on his goal would be to please God and to live by the love of God and the word of God.

One of the themes of Luke’s gospel has been to love God and not money. Luke alone tells the parables of the rich fool (12:16-21), the shrewd manager (16:1-8), and the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31). And, of course, he does not fail to include the story of the rich ruler (18:18-30). In studying these parables and stories, we sense great tension between the rich and Jesus, and sometimes feel that there is no hope for the rich. But in this final event before Jesus’ triumphal entry, a rich man meets Jesus, receives his love, and is changed. He generously offers his possessions to the poor and to those he has cheated. Perhaps this would leave nothing for him! But it did not matter. When he had Jesus, he was free from money. He teaches us that rich people have hope too. When they accept Jesus with faith, he opens their spiritual eyes to his surpassing glory and goodness. Those who see Jesus will worship him, giving all they possess to please him. Let’s pray for all the rich people in America to meet Jesus, love Jesus, and give generously for Jesus.

When Jesus saw the outpouring of Zacchaeus’ heart, he made a clear pronouncement. Let’s read verses 9-10. **“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.’”** Here, Jesus teaches us what had happened to Zacchaeus and his own purpose in coming.

First, Zacchaeus became a son of Abraham. Jesus recognized Zacchaeus as a spiritual descendant of Abraham, who followed in his footsteps of faith. Abraham was 75 years old and childless when God called him. Yet Abraham believed God’s promise to bless him and make him a blessing and obeyed God’s call immediately.

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Romans 4:5 tells us that Abraham believed in God who justifies the wicked and was justified by this faith. To Jesus, Zacchaeus had the same faith as Abraham. Through his faith Jesus justified him to be a child of God, restored his identity as one of God's people, and renewed his great purpose for him. Jesus offers this salvation to anyone who would receive it by faith. John 1:12 says, **“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...”**

Second, Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise again. But he stopped in Jericho and spent a day with a man named Zacchaeus. Though their meeting seemed to come about by chance, it was actually a divinely ordained moment when the holy God met a sinner who hungered for him from his soul. Jesus is seeking the lost, even as they seek him. Like the good shepherd in the parable, Jesus seeks the lost until he finds him (Lk 15:4). When a lost sinner takes one tiny step back to him, Jesus runs with outstretched arms to embrace him with love and fully restore him or her as a child of God. Jesus is seeking the lost in our times. He does not give up on struggling sinners or look down on those who have failed or gone astray. Jesus is seeking the lost.

There is a stirring poem that depicts this called, “The Hound of Heaven.” In the poem, God is compared to a hound. As hounds are relentless in pursuing their catch, God is relentless in pursuing a lost sinner. The sinner knows that God is pursuing him, but he flees from God, seeking satisfaction in other things. He is afraid that if God catches him, God will require him to give up everything except God. Yet, nothing else satisfies. Finally, God overtakes the sinner and he surrenders. As stirring as the poem is, its meaning takes on profound significance since it is autobiographical. It was written by Francis Thompson, the son of strict Catholic parents in 19th century England. Thompson abandoned the study of medicine to pursue a writing career. Out of admiration for an earlier poet, he turned to opium as the source of inspiration. This led him to a lifelong struggle with addiction which resulted in broken relationships, poverty, indecent living and an attempted suicide. Though he was pathetic, unattractive, and dirty, God pursued him relentlessly. Thompson never cleaned up his life completely. But he died in faith. His poem has moved many to know that Jesus is relentless in seeking the lost. Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost.

Jesus is still seeking the lost in our times. According to some studies, as many as three in four young people who grew up in Christian homes leave their

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faith while in college. Spiritually speaking, when they leave their Christian faith, they become lost souls. Our college campuses are full of lost young souls. Their parents are crying for them every day, as I cry for my son David. Jesus cries for them even more, and is seeking them to save them. Let's learn Jesus' heart. Let's offer ourselves to Jesus as his instruments to seek and save the lost at UIC, Northeastern, Northwestern, Columbia, Roosevelt, Loyola, Oakton, Truman, Washington, Moraine Valley, and all Chicago area campuses. Let's pray that salvation in Jesus may come to many students, even among the rich, and restore the great purpose of life for which he made them. In this way, may our God make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.