

The Seeking Savior

Luke 19:1-10

Pastor John Miller

I'm going to read the whole section of our text, Luke 19:1-10, so you get the whole story at once.

"Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich." I would say he was very rich. "And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.' So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, 'He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.'"

Verse 8, "Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.'"

One of my favorite stories is the story about Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who was the great Victorian, British preacher. He was called "the Prince of Preachers." He started what was called "the pastors' college," where he trained men to preach the Word. And every Friday afternoon he would get all his students together in the chapel, where he called on one of the students to give an extemporaneous sermon. Spurgeon would tell them the text and the theme the student was to preach on. Then the student would have to get up, without any preparation, and preach on that text.

One afternoon Spurgeon called on a young man, who was a little bit nervous about the meeting, and told the student to preach a sermon on Zacchaeus from Luke 19:1-10. So this student got up on the stage trembling and said, "Number one, Zacchaeus was of little stature; so am I. Number two, Zacchaeus was up a tree; so am I. Number three, Zacchaeus came down; so will I." And he immediately came down off the stage. I understand that man's fear.

Today we will look at a story that we all like. If you're like me and grew up in Sunday school, you sang the song,

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man;

A wee little man was he.

He climbed up in a sycamore tree

To see what he could see."

What a blessed story this is. There is such theological and Biblical truth that is embedded in this little, short story of Zacchaeus, which we have all grown to love. It is one of the best known and best loved stories in the Bible. And it is only found in the Gospel of Luke.

The key text to our story—and to the whole book of Luke—is verse 10. “The Son of Man...” a Messianic term from Daniel 7, which Jesus used most often for Himself “...has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” Jesus is speaking here. Jesus’ divine mission and the reason for His Incarnation or becoming man was “to seek and to save” the lost. That’s what the story of Zacchaeus is all about. When it looks like Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus, we learn that all the time Jesus was seeking Zacchaeus.

If you are a Christian, the same is true of you. We think we’re seeking God, but then we discover that all the time He was first seeking us to seek Him. So what a marvelous lesson we learn in this story of God’s grace and of Him calling us by His Spirit.

In Matthew 1:21, when the angel Gabriel told Joseph that Mary was going to have a baby, the angel told him, “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” So He came “to seek and to save that which was lost.” In 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul said to Timothy, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”

There are four sections to our story. The first section is verses 1-4, where we see Zacchaeus seeking Jesus. “Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho.” Verse 1 has the context. Jesus had been down into the Jordan Valley on His way up to Jerusalem. And when he went into the city of Jericho, He healed blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, who also followed Jesus.

But now Jesus has entered into Jericho and is going to pass through the city but will have to spend the night there before going up to Jerusalem where He will stay at the home of Zacchaeus. Jericho was a main city on a trade route over which the people going to Jerusalem from the east or the west would have to pass through. It was a wealthy city with a lot of palaces and big estates. It was a very beautiful place. So Jesus was passing through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem where He would be crucified for the sins of the world.

Verse 2, “Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich.” We can’t be sure, but the name Zacchaeus means “clean” or “innocent” or is translated “righteous one.”

It makes you chuckle a little bit if you know the story, because Zacchaeus was anything but “righteous.” Notice that he was chief among the tax collectors or publicans; he was head of all the tax collectors. Tax collectors were hated and despised by the Jewish people. They were Jews who were turn coats. They were serving the Roman government by collecting taxes for Rome.

Nobody loves tax collectors, even today. If you work for the IRS, come up after service and we’ll pray for you. But the fact these tax collectors were working for Rome made it even worse;

they were not allowed to go to the temple, not allowed to go to the synagogue and were rejected and outcast.

Rome would actually sell a franchise in a tax district. The publicans would collect the taxes and pay them to Rome. But what they would do is anything they collected above what Rome required, they kept for themselves. And the fact that Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector meant that he was at the top of the pyramid. They sometimes would hire thugs to scare people, intimidate them and even beat people up to get money out of them. They collected more than Rome required, so the tax collectors were getting rich. And from the region or franchise that Zacchaeus had, he would actually collect money from other tax collectors, so he was very rich and very wealthy.

It was a legitimate job, but Zacchaeus would also get his money by fraud, by embezzlement or by roughing up people. So it was a seedy, despised profession, and no one would have anything to do with a tax collector—except for Jesus Christ.

Jesus came “to seek and to save that which was lost.” Zacchaeus was lost, so Jesus had to go through Jericho, because He had a divine appointment with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was very rich, but there must have been an emptiness in his heart. He wanted to know who Jesus was, and he began to seek Him out.

We recently read the story of the rich, young ruler (Luke 18:18-23). He went sorrowfully away and would not follow Jesus because he had great riches. Jesus told him to “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me” but he wouldn’t do it and went away “very sorrowful, for he was very rich.” Then Jesus turned to the crowd and said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:22-25).

Isn’t that interesting. Today we will see the story of a rich man who actually does “go through the eye of a needle,” because he comes to believe in Jesus Christ.

When Jesus said that “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a need,” the disciples said, “Who then can be saved?” Then Jesus said, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God” (Luke 18:26-27).

So the story of Zacchaeus is the impossibility that God does in saving very wicked, rich individuals. “With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26); no one is outside the love, grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. And no one would ever think that Zacchaeus could or would ever be saved. But I believe we’re going to see Zacchaeus in heaven. Maybe you’ll be sitting next to him at the marriage supper of the Lamb and talk to him.

And there are going to be a lot of surprised people when we get to heaven to see who is there. I think some people will be surprised to see you there. They’ll say, “What are you doing here?!”

And you say, "Like you, it's because I believed in Jesus Christ and was born again. I trusted Christ as my Savior."

So in that day, no one would ever in their wildest imagination think that Zacchaeus would become a follower of Jesus and that his life would be changed or transformed.

Verse 3, "And he sought to see who Jesus was." I like that. Why did he seek Jesus? Let me give you some possibilities. Perhaps he had seen a change in his friend, Levi's life. Levi, also called Matthew, was a tax collector. The Gospel of Matthew was written by a tax collector. Maybe Zacchaeus saw how Levi's life had been changed by Jesus and had heard that Jesus was a friend of publicans and sinners (Matthew 9:11) and was looking for a friend.

Or perhaps it was because of the emptiness in his own life. Sometimes you can have all that money, all that power and position, all that popularity but still have emptiness. Money cannot buy you happiness. So maybe it was out of his emptiness that he was seeking Jesus Christ.

Or maybe he was looking for real love. Maybe he was "looking for love in all the wrong places," as many people do. You will find love in Jesus Christ. Jesus will love you like no one has ever loved you and will love you throughout all eternity. So Zacchaeus might have been seeking love.

Perhaps he was simply tired of his sin and wanted to come to the Savior to be forgiven. I like it when Jesus said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). Isn't that a beautiful promise?

So Zacchaeus was coming to Jesus; he wanted to know who He was.

Are you coming to Jesus today? Are you turning to Him? Are you running to Him? Do you know who Jesus is? The Bible says that Jesus Christ is God incarnate; God had become flesh (John 1:14).

A lot of people are confused about Jesus; they think He's just a moral teacher, He thought He was the Messiah, but He really wasn't, He claimed to die for our sins and raise from the dead, but He was misguided.

The Bible teaches that there is one, eternal God. But God is manifested in three Persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. They are one in essence. There is only one, divine being, but they are three Persons.

You say, "I don't understand that." Neither do I; welcome to the club. But that's how God reveals Himself in His Word. God the Father sent God the Son. And God the Son, the Second Person of the Godhead, came voluntarily from heaven and was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, was born a little baby, and the Bible says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:16). Jesus is the eternal Word, the personal Word and the divine Word, who "became flesh and dwelt among us." So Jesus Christ is God incarnate.

Why is Jesus God incarnate? So that He could go to the Cross, die as the sinless, Son of God for the sins of the world, to pay for our sins and to redeem us and bring us back to God.

Zacchaeus could not see Jesus. Why? He “could not because of the crowd...” meaning “the press of the crowd” “...for he was of short stature.” Zacchaeus was a short man. He couldn’t see over the crowd, he couldn’t see around the crowd and he couldn’t get through the crowd. The crowd was coming down the street in Jericho, and Jesus was with them. And Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus; he wanted to know who He was. He was hungry for God in his life. But something was keeping him from seeing Jesus: the crowd and his short stature.

So Zacchaeus did two, unbecoming things for a man of his position in that culture. Verse 4, “So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way.” These were things that any man of dignity in that culture would never do. Men never ran; it was unbecoming. Even today you don’t see old guys running.

And certainly old guys don’t climb trees. But Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree. It was likened unto the California scrub oaks we have in our state. It had large limbs that grew out horizontally. So Zacchaeus could climb up onto a limb of that type of tree to see Jesus. Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus, so he climbed up a tree.

And he came how? Humbly and sincerely. Remember that we must come to Jesus as little children. In chapter 18, when little children came to Jesus, He said, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it” (Luke 18:17). And Jeremiah 29:13 says, “You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”

So in verses 1-4, Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus. And picture this powerful, wealthy tax collector up in this tree looking down on the crowd as Jesus came by.

In the second movement of the story, verses 5-6, Jesus was seeking Zacchaeus. “And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up...” at that point, Zacchaeus’ heart skipped a beat; it was freak-out time. “He’s looking at me!” No doubt he thought, No one will see me up in this tree, He’ll just pass by and I’ll just get a good view of Him.! But Jesus stopped, looked up “...and saw him, and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, make haste...” or “hurry up!” “...and come down, for today I must stay at your house.’ So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully.”

And we’re going to see that everybody in the crowd murmured and freaked out. “This is insane! Where is He going! He’s going to be a guest of a man who is a sinner!”

Here’s the point—and I’ll develop it more as I go—Zacchaeus thought he was seeking Jesus, but he discovered that Jesus was actually seeking him.

When you become a Christian, you may think that you’re seeking the Lord, and then when the Lord finds you and you become born again, you realize that He was seeking you. Jesus said, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:16).

Some people don't like this concept, but it's Biblical. God seeks us first. God chooses us by grace. God pursues us. He sends the third Person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, to convict us "of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). And Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44).

So the whole reason you're saved is because God was seeking you. God was convicting you and drawing you to Jesus Christ. Someone put it in this poem:

"I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew

He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;

It was not I that found, O Savior true;

No; I was found of Thee."

What a blessing. And Jesus was all the time seeking Zacchaeus.

Again, verse 5, "And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him." Jesus knew where Zacchaeus was. God knows where you are right now. He sees you right now. "All things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13).

And God actually knows what you're thinking. Some of you are in big trouble right now! He knows what we're going to be thinking even before we think it. That's radical! Nothing is hidden from God. He knows you intimately and personally.

Jesus saw Zacchaeus and then Jesus called him by name. He was thinking, How does He know my name?! Jesus knows your name. He knows everyone's name. He has the very hairs of your head all numbered. But think about that: He sees me, He knows me, He knows my name. He called Zacchaeus by name.

Then He said, verses 5-6, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down..." in the Greek these are imperatives, commands "...for today I must stay at your house." I think it's cool that Jesus invited himself over to stay there. And "I must stay at your house" is saying, "I'm going to take my coat off. I'm going to kick my sandals off, settle down and relax and put my feet up and hang out at your house." And He didn't even tell him how long He would stay.

And notice the word "must." That's a very important word. It speaks of what we call the "divine mandate." Jesus "must" needs go through Samaria, because there was a woman there by a well, who He needed to talk to; she needed salvation. Jesus "must" go through Jericho, because there was a tax collector there, who needed to be saved. And Jesus "has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

I like that Jesus invited Himself over for dinner at Zacchaeus' house. It's Biblical; give it a try after church in the foyer. "Hey you! I'm going to your house to eat, to hang out and to watch the

Super Bowl today. I hope you have some good snacks.”

Jesus invites Himself over. I like it that He said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20).

Jesus was seeking Zacchaeus. And how would Zacchaeus receive Him gladly, verse 6? “So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully.” “Joyfully” indicates that he was already believing in Jesus as the Savior. He would receive Him by faith. In John 1:12, it says, “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.”

“Does God seek us and choose us, or do we seek God and choose Him?” Which is it? I believe both are taught in the Bible. God saves us by grace, and God saves us through our faith in Christ, believing and trusting in Him.

How do we reconcile the two—that we are free to resist God’s grace, to say “No” to God’s salvation and that God saves me by grace? I can’t reconcile the two. Charles Haddon Spurgeon said, “I don’t have to reconcile friends.”

Both are taught in the Bible, and I believe they are reconciled in a higher unity that God knows and understands, in some way that we can’t fathom or understand. God chooses us to be saved by His grace, but we must believe and we must receive and we must put our faith in Christ and we must trust in Him as our Lord and Savior, or we will be lost.

You say, “Well, I sought the Lord,” but in reality the Lord was seeking you by His grace, drawing you to Himself.

So I believe both are taught. But what I don’t believe is that regeneration, which is the technical, theological term for being born again, or the moment you are saved and given new life, precedes faith. I don’t believe the Bible teaches that. I don’t believe God has to regenerate us in order that we might believe.

Some say that, because we are “dead in sins” (Ephesians 2:1), that we don’t have free will and don’t have the capacity or ability to believe. I disagree. I think that to be “dead in sin” means to be “separated from God.” This is so often forgotten; the etymology of the word “dead” means “separate” or “to separate.” When you die physically, your body and your soul separate; you leave your body. So if you are “dead in sins,” it means you are separated from God.

It’s not salvation in order that you may believe; you believe in order to be saved. John, in writing his Gospel, said, “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). And John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” It’s a “whoever” Gospel, and you must believe; you must trust and believe in Jesus to be saved.

This story is a picture of how we, like Zacchaeus, are seeking God, but all the time—praise God! —He is seeking us! What a marvelous thing the grace of God is.

I believe that Jesus is seeking you right now. The Bible says that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). So you must believe and trust in and receive Jesus Christ in order to be saved.

If God is seeking you, if God is convicting you, if you hear God's voice, if you sense God calling you today, “If you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 3:7-8). The Bible says, “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Believe in Jesus Christ today.

The third section, in verses 7-8, is that Zacchaeus is now transformed. Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus, the sinner sought the Savior, but the Savior sought the sinner. Now Jesus transforms the sinner. “But when they...” the crowd “...saw it...” Jesus going into Zacchaeus' house “... they all complained, saying, ‘He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.’” So instead of them saying, “Thank You, God; You're going to save this wicked man!” they complained.

Who else could Jesus go to eat with?! The Bible says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). We are all sinners; we've all fallen short. “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10).

So they put this class of people together as sinners. These complainers thought they were good and righteous, but they were self-righteous.

An interesting point is if Jesus was trying to win the approval of the crowd, if Jesus was trying to win friends and influence people, He would have never gone home with Zacchaeus. He would have avoided him at all cost. Jesus lost all the support and approval of the crowd because of His divine mandate, His divine mission; that He “has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

In the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, the shepherd sought out the sheep, the woman sought out the coin and the father saw his son coming and ran toward him, seeking him. God is a seeking Savior. Jesus came “to seek and to save that which was lost.”

But Jesus wasn't trying to win the approval or applause of the crowd. As a Christian, if you go someplace for an evangelistic outreach, sometimes other Christians will get upset with you. “You shouldn't go there. You shouldn't be there. You shouldn't talk to those people.” But Jesus was a friend of sinners and tax collectors.

Now there is a huge gap between verses 7 and 8. There are a lot of things we don't know. Did they eat dinner? Were the disciples a party to the conversation? What did they talk about? What went on in the house? We don't know the time frame or what developed. All we know is that Jesus went into Zacchaeus' house, and the next scene is that Zacchaeus “stood.”

The word “stood” in the Greek literally means “to stand and make an announcement, proclamation or declaration.” Verse 8, “Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord...’ or ‘Adonai’; he believed Jesus was “Lord” “...I give half of my goods to the poor.” This guy was super rich. “And if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.”

Don't be confused by the word “if” here. It is a clause that actually means, “Since I have taken by false accusation, I will restore to him fourfold.” That was the requirement of substitution in the Old Testament if you stole from anybody. Four times what you took needed to be restored to the person you took it from.

Any time a tax collector gives money back, you know they've been saved. The Bible teaches that when you get saved, you're a new creation. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). There will be a change in your life. Zacchaeus had a new heart, a new life and a new love. When he found Jesus, his money didn't mean anything to him anymore.

In the book of James it says that we are saved to display works (James 2:14-24). We are not saved by our works, but works is the fruit or evidence of our salvation. “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

So Zacchaeus was not saved because he gave half his money to the poor. And he wasn't saved because he gave back four times restitution to those he defrauded. He did that because he was saved.

You want to change society? You want to change the world? Preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Change the world one heart at a time. When Jesus comes into a person's heart, their life is changed. It changes people—changes a person's marriage, family, business. It will even change politicians. They can change, believe it or not! When Jesus comes into a person's heart, their life is transformed. What a marvelous truth that is!

So Zacchaeus was changed; he truly had a new heart.

In the last section of our text, verses 9-10, Jesus makes a declaration. Zacchaeus stood and spoke. Now Jesus speaks. “And Jesus said to him, ‘Today...’ an emphatic statement. Not tomorrow or next week, but “today” or “right now.” “...salvation has come to this house.” Salvation is a Person, Jesus Christ. When Jesus comes into your heart, you have salvation.

Jesus continues, “...because he also is a son of Abraham.” What does that mean? It means that Abraham believed God by faith, and God imputed righteousness to him. “He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). Abraham believed God's promise, and God said he was righteous. That is the basis upon which God justifies the unrighteous. So now Zacchaeus is not just a Jew; he is a true son of Abraham by faith in Jesus

Christ and by believing the promises of God.

Then Jesus said this closing statement, in verse 10: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

If you're a Christian, you can't read that without saying, "Thank You, Jesus! You sought me and You saved me by Your grace."

How would He seek and save the lost? Through the Cross. Jesus would go voluntarily to the Cross and lay down His life for the sins of the world. He said, "No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 10:18). He saves us from sin's penalty, from sin's power and one day when we go to heaven, we will be saved from the presence of sin altogether.

Jesus came "to seek and to save that which was lost." The Bible tells me that Jesus is the friend of sinners (Matthew 9:9-13).

He loves you, He died for you and He rose from the dead for you. He is actually seeking you. If there is any sense in your heart right now that God is speaking to you, that God is drawing you to Himself, don't harden your heart. Hear His voice and respond. As Zacchaeus received Him joyfully, so you need to receive Jesus joyfully into your heart. Make your heart Christ's home.