

**Luke 19:1-10**  
**The Seeking Savior**

Schools, churches, and business of all sorts spend countless hours and a great deal of money to develop a mission or vision statement. You can find the one for Valley Bible on its website under “About VBC” and ‘Purpose.’ These statements are important as they give focus to an organization’s activities, and provide a solid ground for reflection when things seem to be going off track. I even know of families who have their own personal mission and vision statement. They use it to remind themselves of who they are and what they stand for.

Today, we will look at a story with which we are all too familiar - the little man who climbed the sycamore tree to see Jesus. If you are old enough, and been in the Church a long time, you probably learned about this on a flannel-board and sang the children’s song to accompany it. But we must be careful not to approach this narrative as if it were for children only, for the concluding admonition by Jesus marks it as one of the most powerful statements of purpose in human history. To jump ahead to the conclusion, Jesus makes His purpose clear - He came to “seek and save that which was lost.” (v. 10).

That is a good thing. We take great assurance from the fact that God seeks sinners. We know that “there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God” (Romans 3:11). He sought us because He knew that we would not seek Him. He did not wait for us to make the first move, rather “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). God has always sought. Beginning in the garden, when Adam and Eve sinned they tried to hide. Yet, God sought them out asking “where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). A God Who seeks was fundamental to Jewish theology, “for thus says the Lord God, ‘behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out’” (Ezekiel 34:11). The Lord God affirmed it Himself, “I, even I, am the Lord, and there is no savior besides Me” (Isaiah 43:11). It was common knowledge among the remnant of Israel that there could be no salvation apart from the efforts of God.

Yet, both in the time of Jesus and today, some have argued that God does not seek. They suggest that He did not send His Son, Jesus, to redeem mankind. Rather, Jesus was sent to be a good example of right behavior. Jesus was simply a great teacher and a moral leader for others to emulate. Others insist that Jesus came to raise the spiritual consciousness of His age - to bring them enlightenment and show them how to attain a higher spiritual plane of existence. But that is not what Scripture teaches. The Old Testament points to, and the New Testament affirms, that, as He Himself said, Jesus Christ came to “seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). This truth is the heart of the gospel message.

That Jesus came for such a purpose was announced even before His birth. As the angel explained to Joseph, his betrothed, Mary, “will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). That Jesus came to redeem mankind was eventually understood by the disciples, “you know that He appeared in order to take away sins” (1 John 3:5). It was the fundamental message of the early evangelists. As Paul wrote “it is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15). As Peter preached,

“He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31).

In His gospel narrative, Luke is insistent in putting into clear focus the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. We saw this dramatically portrayed in Luke 15. There, in two small parables Jesus spoke of a man who had lost a sheep and a woman who had lost a coin. The theme of each of the stories was the relentless seeking for that which was lost, and the great rejoicing at its discovery. In the more extended parable in that chapter, a father had lost a son. Though the father did not explicitly seek his son, the joy over his return is inexpressibly poignant. Luke loves to talk about the seeking Savior, and this episode about an encounter with a diminutive tax collector is told with enthusiasm. Here, we see Jesus choosing one man out of a large crowd, calling him by name, and bringing him into the kingdom of God.

### **The Setting**

We transition, in this passage, from a blind beggar to a rich tax collector. Yet, both needed Jesus. And both received what they needed. We can pause at the threshold to remark how irrelevant the circumstances of this world are when it comes to faith. We may be born rich or poor, we may be given a good mind or a simply one, we may have great talents or few, we may have powerful friends or not, but we are all born with a sin nature and are in desperate need of a savior. No earthly substitute will do. Our money, our intelligence, our skills, or our connections will never save us. We are lost and need to be found.

Despite what lay ahead, this must have been a pleasant part of the journey for Jesus and His disciples. After many dusty little villages, Jesus had reached Jericho. Herod, then his son Archelaus, had made Jericho a beautiful city. The plain of Jericho (some fourteen miles wide) provided an ideal environment for trees producing balsam as well as cypress and sycamore fig trees. Jericho was located along a chief trade route connecting Arabia with Damascus, and then connecting with the great silk roads to the East. Its advantages were so well known that, in 35 BC, Mark Antony had made a gift of the city to Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, as a sign of affection. Octavian had regained the city as a result of his defeat of Antony in the battle of Actium and Antony's and Cleopatra's ensuing suicide.

Jesus, having recently healed a blind beggar sitting by the road, now “entered Jericho and was passing through” (v. 1). As He approached the city from the Jordan River, Jesus would have passed the four forts that guarded the city walls. The amphitheatre built by Herod still served to entertain the masses. The large palace and beautiful garden were added by his son. Scents from the fragrant trees for which Jericho was known infused the air.

Jesus was not alone. The crowd accompanying Him was large, and had probably increased in size as the news of His miraculous healing of the blind man had spread. People heading to Jerusalem for Passover, merchants and traders travelling along the trade routes, and common people living in the city were all there. And many of them were focused on Jesus, this rabbi Who, it was rumored, had come to establish a new kingdom.

## **The Lost**

Among the crowd, “there was a man called by the name of Zacchaeus” (v. 2). Luke adds the significant detail that “he was a chief tax collector and he was rich” (v.2). As we saw when we discussed Jesus’ call of Matthew, tax collectors were very much disliked by the people because they used their position and influence to extort as much money from the masses as they could reasonably get away with. They had paid the Roman government for the privilege to collect taxes in a given area, and as long as Rome received what was promised, the tax collector kept the rest.

Taxes were nothing new. During Old Testament times, the Jewish people had paid on average about 23% of their income in taxes. Things had not improved under Roman rule. For example, at the time of Jesus, people paid taxes on their person (a varying amount), grain (10%), wine and fruit (20%), income (1%), as well as taxes for transporting their products to market, using bridges and roads, and whatever else the powers that be could come up with. Though being a tax collector meant that you were considered unclean and could not enter the synagogue, and therefore were banned from all normal social relationships, there was nothing sinful in itself about being a tax collector. In fact, when John the Baptist was asked by repentant tax collectors what they should do, he did not command them to renounce their position but rather insisted that they “collect no more than what you have been ordered to” (Luke 3:13).

There were three main tax collecting centers in Palestine during Roman rule there. One was in Capernaum, and another in Caesarea. The third was in Jericho. Thus, Zacchaeus was the chief collector in one of the most lucrative cities in the entire region. Being the chief tax collector, all of the other local tax collectors were under his authority. In other words, Zacchaeus had paid for a given area, and then had sub-contracted out smaller portions of that area to others. He was at the top of the pyramid, and gained a percentage of all taxes collected by the other tax collectors in the region.

That Zacchaeus’ name means ‘pure’ or ‘innocent’ is an irony not lost on the reader. He is one of the few people outside of the disciples mentioned by name in the gospel accounts, and this may be because, like Bartimaeus the blind beggar, he remained a figure in the early Church and could testify to the veracity of the narrative. The only other particular fact Luke includes about Zacchaeus is that “he was small in stature” (v. 3). Why is this relevant? Because, Zacchaeus “was trying to see who Jesus was” but “was unable because of the crowd” (v. 3). One can imagine the frustrated little Zacchaeus trying to lean over or squeeze through the crowd to catch a glimpse of Jesus, but the stubborn masses not giving the wicked tax collector an inch of space in which to do so.

But Zacchaeus was inventive. He had not risen to his position by taking things lying down. He was a problem-solver so he scouted the likely route that Jesus would take as He made His way through the town, and then “he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him” (v.4). Sycamore fig trees have very low hanging branches, and thus were convenient for a small man like Zacchaeus to climb. But we must wonder, why did Zacchaeus climb the tree? This was an act involving some loss of dignity. The snickering of the people must have been noticeable as they turned to look at the self-important tax collector grunting his way up a tree to get himself a view over the crowd.

I imagine Zacchaeus' motive was simply curiosity. Everyone wants to see what the crowd is looking at. But I also think there was more. Perhaps hearing the rumors that this rabbi was going to try to be the new king, Zacchaeus wanted to size up the potential new ruler and begin to take steps to assure his own position would be unaffected by the change in power. After all, in any regime change, Zacchaeus had a great deal to lose. If there was to be a battle for the throne, he wanted to be on the winning side, so taking stock of the new rival was simply good business practice.

But still, let us never overlook the small things in the beginnings of faith. All Zacchaeus had at this point was curiosity. There is no mention of faith. There is no hint that he wanted to see Jesus because he thought Jesus was the Messiah and could save him from his sin. He was simply curious. But God can work with that. We must remember that, be it ever so weak and humble, any seed of faith can be made to grow by the Holy Spirit into a moment of conversion.

Let us also pause to remember that there is no sinner who is so lost that he cannot be found. Matthew was a tax collector; Paul a Pharisee. Both of these men were found by Christ and made leaders of the Church. Though Jesus had preached against the potential evil of riches, the wealth of Zacchaeus was easily overcome by the power of God. And though Zacchaeus was a mature man, his long habits of sin were no obstacle to the work of Christ. With all these things against him, his past, his present position, and his lifetime of sinful habits, Jesus found Zacchaeus and brought him into the kingdom of God.

“‘Come now, and let us reason together,’  
Says the Lord,  
‘Though your sins are as scarlet,  
They will be as white as snow;  
Though they are red like crimson,  
They will be like wool’” (Isaiah 1:18).

As believers, we need to encourage any small step of faith toward Jesus. It is not for us to put up barriers, as the crowds did to Zacchaeus. It is a narrow way, but we do not have the right to make the way any narrower than God intends.

### **The Seeker**

As Jesus made His way through the city, talking with and receiving the attention of the crowds about Him, eventually He “came to the place, He looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house’” (v. 5). Jesus did not ask, He commanded. The Greek words are imperative. Now was the moment. Zacchaeus must not delay. Though Zacchaeus did not know it, the hour of salvation had come.

It is wonderful to consider the plans of God. To think that before the foundation of the world, God had chosen this specific time to be in Jericho; that God had determined that Zacchaeus would be holding tightly to a tree branch watching the crowd go by. Of course, Zacchaeus knew none of this. That Jesus spoke to him was, no doubt a surprise. That He wanted to come into his home was beyond belief. Jesus

used the word ‘must’ which Luke always uses to speak of a divine necessity. Jesus would tolerate no dissent. He must see Zacchaeus, and see Zacchaeus He would.

What did this rabbi want? Was He going to rebuke Zacchaeus for his past wrongdoings? Was He going to make an object lesson of the rich and corrupt tax collector? Zacchaeus had no choice, so he “hurried and came down” (v. 6). Luke adds that “received Him gladly” (v. 6). Zacchaeus had not had many respectable people offer to associate with him. His career had removed him from honorable society. Also, even if Zacchaeus was about to be rebuked or made an example of, he at least had this new rival to the throne in his home. Zacchaeus was used to abuse; he was the tax collector so people spoke ill of him all the time. He could handle some of that if it meant getting close to this rabbi.

Jesus also knew how those in the crowd would respond to His seeking out a man such as Zacchaeus. They did not disappoint for “when they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner’” (v. 7). The phrase “gone to be the guest” means literally to “loosen the clothing” and implies an overnight visit. The crowd hated Zacchaeus. He had been their enemy for years. They knew him and dreaded him. No doubt they feared that this new king was making arrangements to keep the hated Zacchaeus in his place. Yet, you might think that they would support his conversion. After all, to have a godly tax collector at your door would be a good thing!

We can remark that the depravity of people sometimes compels them to resent when good things happen to bad people. It is easy to forget the good things that have happened to us, even though we are no better than Zacchaeus. Thankfully, God does not care about public opinion. Jesus was not discouraged or dissuaded from His choice of action by the grumbling and complaining crowd. He had come to see Zacchaeus, and see Zacchaeus He would.

### **The Discovery**

Luke does not give us the details of what transpired next. It seems the scene shifts off stage to the home of Zacchaeus. Jesus was now in the home of Zacchaeus, and we can infer that Zacchaeus had been converted, for “Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, ‘behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much’” (v. 8).

Clearly for Zacchaeus “the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). He ‘stopped’ - the word literally means “to take a stand” - and he had resolved to make a change. In a true conversion there is always fruit, and Zacchaeus gave ample demonstration of his change of perspective. He was resolved to make good on his new resolutions. Notice that Zacchaeus does not speak of intentions but of actions. Notice that his promises are not contingent upon time or resources. Also, notice that the phrase “if I have” in the Greek is assumed to be true. Zacchaeus is not trying to fool anyone or find a loophole; he knows the full extent of his sin better than anyone.

The Law had its requirements in these situations.

“<sup>1</sup>Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>‘when a person sins and acts unfaithfully against the Lord, and deceives his companion in regard to a deposit or a security entrusted to him, or through robbery, or if he has extorted from his companion, <sup>3</sup>or has found what was lost and lied about it and sworn

falsely, so that he sins in regard to any one of the things a man may do; <sup>4</sup>then it shall be, when he sins and becomes guilty, that he shall restore what he took by robbery or what he got by extortion, or the deposit which was entrusted to him or the lost thing which he found, <sup>5</sup>or anything about which he swore falsely; he shall make restitution for it in full and add to it one-fifth more” (Leviticus 6:1-5).

“<sup>4</sup>If what he stole is actually found alive in his possession, whether an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double . . . <sup>7</sup>If a man gives his neighbor money or goods to keep for him and it is stolen from the man’s house, if the thief is caught, he shall pay double . . . <sup>9</sup>For every breach of trust, whether it is for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, or for any lost thing about which one says, ‘this is it,’ the case of both parties shall come before the judges; he whom the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor” (Exodus 22:4, 7, 9).

The Law required an indemnity of 20% in some cases and double (200%) in others. To Zacchaeus that was insufficient. Zacchaeus gives four times the amount (400%). Clearly he had begun to understand the value of what he had received from Jesus,

“What shall I render to the Lord  
For all His benefits toward me?” (Psalm 116:12).

Jesus affirmed his decision and confirmed his salvation, “ Jesus said to him, “today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham”” (v. 9). How this must have offended the crowd, especially any Pharisees who lingered nearby. After all, Zacchaeus had always been a “son of Abraham” biologically. What was Jesus’ point? Simply this, that now Zacchaeus was truly among the elect. As Paul would later write, “<sup>28</sup>for he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. <sup>29</sup>But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Romans 2:28-29).

Jesus concluded the encounter with a statement of purpose. Looking at the crowd He succinctly stated “the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (v. 10). What had been destroyed, he had come to rebuild. What had been ruined, He had come to make pure. Zacchaeus had experienced this first hand. The grumbling crowds had witnessed the conversion. Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, the cross awaited Him, but His mission was not yet completed. Still there was time “to seek and save that which was lost.”

### **Takeaways**

This is a passage of grace. It is Jesus Who stops and speaks to Zacchaeus. It is Jesus Who invites Himself into his home. It is Jesus Who speaks truth to Zacchaeus and brings him into the kingdom of God. Is that not true of each of us? Let us rejoice in our calling and praise the One Who called us.