

## **“ZACCHAEUS OUT ON A LIMB.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Text for the Sermon: Luke 19:1-10**

### **Introduction.**

What an interesting week? We never know what a day will hold do we? I was observing this with the men Thursday night in our Men’s Study on Job. We never know what a day may hold. Job woke up the greatest man of the east, a righteous man and fabulously wealthy, and went to bed the poorest man in the east, utterly miserable. What a difference a day makes.

Zacchaeus woke up the richest man in Jericho, a notorious sinner and fabulously wealthy, and went to bed considerably poorer, and never happier. What a difference a day makes.

### **Luke 19:1, Context.**

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem for the last time. As He was making His way south through Samaria and Galilee He was approached by a very rich ruler who wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. Seeing the place money had in his heart, Jesus told him to give all his money to the poor. This man went away very sad because he was extremely rich.

Jesus observed how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of needle. Hang on to your hats, folks, you are about to witness a camel passing through the eye of a needle. What is impossible with man is possible with God.

### **Luke 19:2, a rich tax collector.**

Rome ruled Israel, as it did most of the nations around the Mediterranean. From all the conquered nations, Rome required taxes from the citizens. Countries were divided up into districts and tax collectors were put in place. There were chief tax collectors with subordinate tax collectors under them. Rome told them how much was required and as long as they got it, no more questions were asked.

Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector over the region along the Jordan river that included Jericho. This was a lucrative district as it was a major cross roads, north and south and east and west.

There were two kinds of tax collectors, bad ones and terrible ones. They were all hated since they were fellow countrymen who were working for Rome. They were traitors, they had sold out. If he had any friends they would only have been other tax collectors.

They were criminals who couldn’t be brought to justice. They all took more than required to keep for themselves. They had great power and authority. To the Jews there was nothing worse than having to pay a tribute tax to the hated occupiers of their country, to Caesar.

Zacchaeus was very rich, meaning he was an extortionist, an embezzler. The least popular man in town. An humiliation to his parents, a blot on the family name. He was detested, disliked, despised, loathed, hated, reviled.

### **Luke 19:3-4, a Jesus seeker.**

But here is where the story takes a strange twist. Why would a man like that want to see Jesus?

There are two explanations, an earthly reason and a divine reason.

It is possible Zacchaeus had heard about this Jesus for some time. About three years before this Jesus had called another tax collector to be one of His personal disciples. Levi, also known as Matthew, had left his lucrative tax collecting district up in Galilee to follow Jesus. That news must have gotten around at tax collector conventions. Who leaves a high paying job to follow a poor itinerate preacher?

Certainly news about this Jesus and His miracles made it to Jericho, enough to gather a crowd of curiosity seekers. A lot of people wanted to see this Jesus that day.

But there is another reason, a spiritual reason that is always at work behind and underneath the human or earthly reason. His curiosity is a divinely aided curiosity. The Holy Spirit prompted Zacchaeus quite apart from his knowledge or awareness to desire to see Jesus.

The seeds of faith and repentance are planted before we know it, before they break through the surface of the soil of our hearts. To Zacchaeus it is a blind feeling, to God it is the beginning of something great ready to be revealed.

The desire, both human and divine, is strong enough to motivate Zacchaeus to go with the crowds even though he knows they hate him. And it is strong enough that when he can't get through the crowds, he throws aside decorum and modesty and climbs up into a nearby sycamore tree. Rich and powerful men don't climb trees.

The smallest means like curiosity are used by God to bring salvation and blessings. The most unremarkable things can lead to eternity. Eternity grows out of mustard seeds.

In this season of Thanksgiving, pause to thank God for all the little things that led up to you receiving so great a gift of salvation.

Let me ask you, young and old, are you a Jesus seeker? Are we pursuing Him? Are we learning more and more about Him? Are we as motivated as Zacchaeus, do we work at it, go out of our way, go out on a limb, get a new perspective? Or are crowds keeping us from seeking Jesus? Noise, hurry and crowds are the modern obstacles keeping us from Jesus.

Zacchaeus positioned himself along the path of Jesus, along the path where grace would be found. We can put ourselves in the path of Jesus and His grace, in worship, in Scripture, in

prayer, in fellowship with His people. These normal, unimpressive avenues of grace are what God uses to bring unexpected blessings. You never know what time spent in these disciplines will bring. No one who seeks ever seeks in vain when they sincerely desire to know God.

Where are the sycamore trees in your life? Are you climbing them? Don't neglect or pass them?

### **Luke 19:5-7, Jesus seeks Zacchaeus.**

It is not just Zacchaeus who sought Jesus, Jesus sought him. What grace, that Jesus would want to go to the home of the likes of Zacchaeus. This is the incredible kindness of God that He takes the initiative toward the worst of sinners.

And of course, there is the question, how in the world did Jesus know His name? Why aren't people struck by this? Why doesn't it lead people to questions about just who is this Jesus who knows all things?

The people there are thinking the opposite. They are thinking if this Jesus really knew who this Zacchaeus was He would not be going near His house. That is the beauty of Jesus, He doesn't care about popular opinion, what others think. He is not put off by notorious sinners the way we are. Jesus didn't stop and consider what this might do to His reputation.

One wonders if such a famous teacher merely calling him out by name and asking to come to his home would have warmed his heart and opened him up to whatever Jesus would say.

How often have unexpected and undeserved acts of kindness changed our hearts? The simplest expressions of love and care and kindness can move mountains of unbelief.

### **Luke 19:8-10, Zacchaeus' conversion and transformation.**

We are not told anything about what happens between verses seven and eight. We are privy to so many of Jesus' conversations and teachings, but not this one.

Did Jesus do what He did a few chapters later in Luke with the two men walking to Emmaus after the crucifixion? Did He show from Moses and the Prophets all that the Scriptures said about the Christ?

Did He do what He did with the Samaritan woman at the well when, in her words, He told all that she ever did, convicting her of sin?

Did He do what He did with Nicodemus and talk about being born again and what he must do to have eternal life? Or how no one can serve two masters?

Did He tell the story of the rich young ruler He had just encountered the day before and the spiritual dangers of being rich?

Did He tell parables like the parable of the sower and the seed that fell among the thorns which are the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires of other things?

Did He talk about the fall and how our sin separates us from God but the mercy of God is revealed in the Christ, who reconciles us to the Father?

All we know about Zacchaeus' conversion is the fruit of it, and by all evidences the fruit is real and great. Zacchaeus' fruit comes from a living branch and root, and that root is true faith and true repentance. His exceedingly great liberality and generosity is evidence of a great repentance and a great forgiveness.

**II Corinthians 5:17** The old has passed away, and all things are made new.

He doesn't I will give, but I give. Not next week, but today.

What he took that was wrong to take, he returned fourfold. And on top of that, from what was his legally, that he gave away up to half to help the poor. This is a heart swelled to overflowing by the generosity of God to forgive so great a sinner of so many sins.

Suppose for a moment the conversation in Zacchaeus' living room that day. Jesus speaks the Gospel to him and his heart is burning within him at the truth he is hearing, and he believes in Jesus and acknowledges his great and many sins and Jesus announces to him that he is forgiven.

Zacchaeus asks, "You mean all my sins?" And Jesus says, "Yes, all your sins."

At that moment Zacchaeus says, "Wow this is awesome, now I am free, I don't have to feel any more guilt or shame about all the money I extorted. I can keep it all and enjoy it. Hallelujah."

Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, let's talk about that money you stole, that money that isn't yours. Let's talk about a concept called restitution, making amends, putting things right."

Repentance that keeps what is not his is not repentance.

Repentance that keeps living in sin is not repentance.

Repentance that keeps lies covered up is not repentance.

Repentance that keeps those pictures or videos in the computer is not repentance.

Repentance that holds on to a couple of cherished secret sins is not repentance.

Repentance that holds on to a grudge or won't forgive that one thing is not repentance.

Zacchaeus gets it. We see how deep and complete was his repentance, he went far beyond what the Law of Moses required (in some cases double, in others adding a fifth). He repays four times whatever he took. If he took 10 shekels, he repaid 40. A hundred dollars becomes four hundred. He speaks of his repentance in the only language he knows, money.

***When do we have to make restitution?*** How big, how much, how long ago, to whom? What about that thing you stole or that money that you kept that wasn't yours fifteen years ago?

I have some personal experience with this.

In the mid 90's during some quiet times with the Lord, He brought to my mind and convicted me about two incidents in my past, both in the early 80's. Over some weeks I wrestled with the Lord about this, confessed it, asked for forgiveness, but He would leave it alone, He kept bringing it up, like He wanted me to do something more about it, like go back and make it right.

One of them was in seminary while I was going landscaping and yardwork for this couple in Massachusetts. I needed a hand saw for a woodworking project I was working on, so I borrowed their saw from their shop with every intention of returning it the next week, but I never did. But Lord, it was just a cheap old used saw. Make it right. So I tracked down the phone number, called them, completely shocked them by my confession and insisting on making it right.

The other was more substantive involving an employer. What I had done was not legally wrong, it was within company policies, but it was ethically wrong, I took advantage of the rules. I sent the owner of the company a check for \$1,000 with a letter of explanation.

One was small, one was bigger, both were equally wrong and both equally needed to be made right. Only after those actions was my conscience free from the Spirit's conviction.

**Psalm 37:21** The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives.

**Matthew 3:8** Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

**Acts 26:20** I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

We understand if we break something we should repair it or pay for it. If we steal we need to return it. How many of us parents have tried to teach these important life lessons when a child takes something from a store or breaks the neighbors window?

Whether the sin was shoplifting, lying, plagiarizing on a paper, cheating on income tax returns, stealing, borrowing and forgetting to return, don't make excuses about how big or little, how long ago, how it is water over the dam, make it right. Deal honestly with the world, repay debts and give restitution for the harm we have caused. And in doing so, be generous. In this way you show the power of the grace of Jesus to be real and transforming in your life.

The rich young ruler walked away sorrowful because the cost of discipleship was too high. He chose money over God, and ended up in the worst imaginable poverty, gaining the world and losing his soul.

Zacchaeus walked away joyfully, because for him the cost of non-discipleship was too high.

Two men both encountered Jesus. One was unwilling to lose his possessions; the other was unwilling to keep them. What made the difference? What enabled Zacchaeus to do this, but not

the rich young ruler? The difference was what they each treasured most, money or Jesus. The difference was a heart transformed by grace. The difference was a knowledge of the love of God and His generous forgiveness.

**Matthew 16:26** For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

As Jim Elliott famously said, “he is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.”

Do you know what I would love to hear? I would love to hear all those incredible conversations as Zacchaeus went door to door with bags of money.

“Dad there is a man at the gate, he says his name is Zacchaeus.”

“What do you want, Zacchaeus, you were just here, you already got what I owe you, in fact more than I owe you.”

“I am here to return something that belongs to you.”

“What are you talking about? Is this a trick, a scam, I don’t trust anything you say.”

"I know how strange this must sound, and you have every reason not to trust me. I'm here because I've defrauded you. I've charged you more taxes than Rome required and kept them for myself. I know that you and everyone else knows that. But now I've come to ask your forgiveness for sinning against you like that, and to make restitution. That's what's in this bag."

"There's a lot in here. It's got to be more than you overcharged me."

"Yes. It's four times what I overcharged you. I've got all the records, you know."

"Why are you giving me four times what you owe me?"

"I'm keeping a vow. I promised Jesus that I would repay everyone I defrauded fourfold."

"You mean the Rabbi Jesus? You know him?"

“Yes, and He showed me how poor I am without Him, money is a terrible idol. I am here to break that idol, now all I want is Him. For the first time I feel alive, I feel love.”

May our repentance be that real, that life changing, a testimony to others that we know Jesus, that Jesus has come to our house and into our hearts.