

To Seek and To Save
Luke 19:1-10

This is told in the first person, who the story is about:

Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost. I want to tell you my story. It's a story that you may have heard before, but I want you to hear it from me. You see, I come from a very different time and a different place than you people.

I come from the town of Jericho. Many of you think you know about Jericho and the walls that came tumbling down but, in my day, there were actually two Jericho's. There was the one from way back when Joshua and his men marched around the city, but many centuries later, King Herod had a second Jericho built about a mile and a half down the road. In fact, since it can get cold in Jerusalem in wintertime, Herod has a home in Jericho since it's much warmer there in the winter.

So, the Jericho I come from, is more modern and it's a happening place. Being a border city, it has a customs station. The land is very fertile and irrigated so it has beautiful gardens. We have balsam trees that produce spices for food, perfume, and burial. There is also a trade route that passes by Jericho connecting it with Jerusalem on the west and the trans-Jordan on the east, so we get a lot of traffic, which is good because a lot of traffic means a lot of business. And a lot of business means much commerce. And much commerce means more taxes! Most people cringe at the thought of taxes, but I loved it. Not that I enjoyed paying taxes but because I collected them, but I will tell you more about that in a moment.

I'm not a very big person. Where I come from, being short is less than 5 feet tall. And this sometimes puts me at a disadvantage, but I later learned that even though God made me small, He used even my physical condition of a small stature to bring Him glory. [Do you have a physical limitation or handicap and you wonder why God allowed that to happen...]

You know, I am so sorry. I haven't given you my name yet. I apologize. As good Jews, my parents gave me a name that they hoped would reflect my life. My name means "pure" or "righteous." But you may know it as Zacchaeus. How many have ever heard of me? Well, I want to tell you more of my story about how Jesus seeks and saves that which is lost and was I ever lost...

Where do I begin?...Let me just take you to that day when Jesus was passing through my town of Jericho. I later learned that in just a few days from that day, Jesus would be dead. In fact, it's amazing that even though He was on His way to the cross in Jerusalem and knew what awaited Him, to think that He took the time to seek and save me. I'm sorry...I keep getting a head of myself.

As I was saying, one day Jesus was passing through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. With Him was a great crowd. There were His disciples plus others who had joined the

group. You see, it was actually a busy time of year because it was the season of our festival of Passover so there were a lot of Pilgrims passing through as they made their way up to Jerusalem.

Now it is common when pilgrims come through for town folks to come out and greet them, offer them a drink or something to eat but like I said, on this day, there was quite a crowd. You see, near Jericho is a little town called Bethany and we heard about the miracle that had recently taken place there. Didn't you hear about it? Well, we had heard that this Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead when He was in Bethany. Can you believe it? The power to bring life back into a dead person? We in Jericho had heard about it! And then to find out that this same Jesus was coming through our town! And then I got to thinking...would Jesus even talk to me? Would He even want to? Even though my name Zacchaeus means, I was anything but. You see I was in the tax business. Actually, I was a chief tax collector.

You see, where I come from, Rome is in charge and that has caused tension between us Jews and the Roman authorities and one area of tension is in the area of taxes. Let me tell you how I became a chief tax collector. If you wanted to be in charge of an area of taxation, you purchased the area from Rome. Now, this made you a traitor to Israel since as a Jew, when I started working for Rome, I was treated as if I had turned my back on my heritage, on my religion, on my land. Thus, I was not well liked. But keep in mind that I was a chief tax collector. You see, Rome had a set price on taxes that I was accountable for, but tax collectors were known for collecting more on top of that. So, we collected what was due Rome and pocketed the rest. And we would tax everything. If we could get away with it, we'd tax it. We would tax so much a lot of people would end up in poverty. As chief tax collector, I worked in a sort of pyramid scheme with me at top and my tax collectors under me. You see, they did the work for me. Needless to say, I became filthy rich, but even though I could afford anything I wanted...deep down inside, I was miserable. Money did not buy me the happiness I was hoping for.

My fellow Jews hated me because I was a traitor. They said I was unclean, and I wasn't even allowed inside the synagogue. In fact, they would pair us tax collectors with other "sinners." But I couldn't ignore this Jesus coming through town. Perhaps this was my last chance to be somebody. Perhaps this Jesus could restore my dignity. I was full of sin, loneliness, and misery. And would Jesus even notice me?

Well, like I said, there was big crowd there that day so making my way through the crowd would be difficult. Plus, being short, I couldn't see over the people. I kept trying and trying to get a glimpse of this Jesus. But then I had an idea...I would run ahead of the crowd and climb a tree. That way I would be sure to see Jesus. So, I ran on ahead. You must understand, where I come from, we are not running people. We are walking people but that day, did I ever run? Plus, us adults don't climb trees. And you must understand, it took humility for a man of my means, wealth, and stature to run and climb a tree that day.

But when you are miserable, you will do just about anything. So, I ran ahead and a found a sycamore-fig tree. Have you seen these kinds of trees? They are different than the American sycamore trees. They are commonly found along the roadside. Its' wood is used for the coffins of Egyptian mummies. Its fruit was the food of poor people. Probably a lot of the people I overtaxed ate a lot of its figs. But a sycamore tree has a short trunk with branches shooting straight out. They grow to about 40 feet. Plus, it provides good shade in the hot sun. So, I thought it perfect for climbing, hoping to get a view of Jesus. So, I found this one particular sycamore tree and I climbed upon it. Thankfully it was springtime, so the leaves hadn't yet sprouted so I had the perfect view to see this Jesus. But again, would Jesus even notice me? Who was I to have this Jesus even look my way? I had yet to learn the truth that Jesus came to seek and save that was lost.

Well, my plan worked and here comes Jesus and the group and when He got to the place where the tree stood that I had climbed up, can you believe what happened? Some call it coincidence but I now call it divine providence. Jesus looked up and made eye contact with me. It's as if He knew I was there the whole time. He looked up and said **Zacchaeus, come down immediately.**

He even knew my name! How did He know who I was? He not only wanted me to come down but to come fast! I couldn't believe it. Because of my job, nobody wanted to see me. It was me who wanted to see others so I could collect more taxes! But this Jesus did want me! And then Jesus said something amazing: **I must stay at your house today.**" He didn't say He would like to come to my house but must come to my house. You see, this is not common where I am from. We don't invite ourselves over to other people's house and especially the Jews would not want to come to my house, the home of a sinner! To be in someone's house was to say you were a partaker in the kinds of people living there.

But just to think that the One the people are saying is the Messiah is the very one who wants to come to stay at my house? People didn't want me to come to their house; so why would this Jesus want to? What did I have to offer? So, what did I do? Well, I came down. When Jesus calls you, you come. There is no other option. I mean, what other option did I have than to perish? I was lost and Jesus was seeking me. I came down from that tree that day and received Jesus joyfully! Before, it was receiving other people's money that brought me joy but that day, it was Jesus.

Well, the crowd was grumbling that day, my friends. They witnessed what had happened between me and Jesus and the mumbling began. They were shocked that Jesus wanted to be the guest of a sinner! Well, Jesus came to my house that day. Let me tell you that it was a true-life changing experience. Jesus had showed me my need and God's ability to meet that need.

I wish I could tell you more about the story but let me just tell you quickly what happened when. I believed that Jesus is the Messiah that my forefathers said was coming. I believed that despite how sinful I had lived, that I could still be forgiven. I

believed it! How could I not believe it? And God did a most wonderful thing that day. He gave me a new heart. I no longer hated my fellow Jews for how they treated me. I no longer was tied to the love of money. In fact, I no longer had a desire to treat people like objects to get money out of. Was I perfect? No. Sinless? No. Changed? You better believe it!

I made a commitment that day. I told the Lord that half of what I owned I would give to the poor. Perhaps I was the reason many of them became poor and I wanted to help them. I also said that those I have cheated, I would pay back four times. People might hear that and think I was trying to earn my salvation or that I was trying to buy my way into heaven. Far from it. Rather, I was speaking from a changed heart. My heart had been changed and I was a different person. You see, God knew that my heart had been changed because He knows me from the inside. And while others can't see your heart, they do see our actions. I submit that a changed life is a testimony to others that something has happened, and that something is Jesus. I now have a new love for people that previously was not there, especially for those in need. I thought because I was rich that I didn't have a need, but Jesus showed me that I did have a need and He met that need.

Well, Jesus celebrated with me that day. He said: **Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.**

You see, before, Jesus said **I must stay at your house today**. But He later said, **Today salvation has come to this house**. Don't you get it? Jesus is salvation! Just think of it—here I was, a man of wealth, status, and means, with a name that means “pure,” but one who had to humble himself by running and climbing up that tree. And then there was Jesus, who too had it all, but humbled Himself, not in the same way I had to, but humbled Himself, by coming to this earth, living a righteous, perfect life— Someone who really is pure, who also ended up in a tree, on a wooden cross to be exact, and died for me, a lost sinner.

What can I say? Simply this: Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost. I thought I was the one seeking Jesus, but as it turned out, it was Jesus who was seeking me! You see, this is my story but in reality, it's the story of God. Its the same story that is repeated over and over every time God reaches out to a sinner like He did with me. Well, this is my story, but I wonder if Jesus walked through your town or your community? What if He said He must come to your house? What would He find at your house? Is He even welcomed?

And one more thought—who would've ever thought a sinner like me could be saved? Are you reaching out to any “outcasts” like myself? Do you have any hope for such people like me?

Well, did you know someone actually wrote a song about me? How many know it? Let's sing it! (Congregation sings Zacchaeus)