

# To seek and to save the lost

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[ 0 : 00 ] This morning's reading is from Luke chapter 19, from verse 1 to 10. Luke chapter 19, reading from verse 1.

Jesus entered Jephah and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he could not see over the crowd.

So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.

So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, He is going to be the guest of a sinner. 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.

Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is the son of Abraham. Amen. Amen.

[ 1 : 28 ] Do take a seat, and if you've lost your place, we're in Luke chapter 19. We're going to think about those first ten verses together of Luke 19. A couple of weeks ago, I saw a Facebook post that was asking something like, How would you preach the gospel in one sentence?

I'm not sure this is exactly what I'd go for, but it's certainly a strong contender, isn't it? The last sentence of this morning's reading, The son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

It cuts right to the heart of the Christian faith, doesn't it? Jesus came not only to seek, but also to save. He came to do that not for people who were or who are fine, but he came to do that for the lost.

He came to do that for those who are without hope, those who are under a sentence of condemnation. The hope of salvation that's conveyed through this whole central portion of Luke's gospel that we've been studying over the last year or so.

The hope of salvation in this whole section is summed up in this sentence. Some argue that this is kind of the last verse of the journey narrative we've been following along.

[ 2 : 42 ] They might be right in that. We're going to keep going to the end of chapter 19 before we hit pause on this series. We're going to see Jesus all the way into Jerusalem on this journey. But in any case, whether it's the end of the section or not, this is certainly a key verse, isn't it?

This is the good news of the gospel. If you are lost and hopeless this morning, the good news is Jesus came to save you.

So this account of Jesus' interaction with the tax collector, this kind of fleshes out some of what it looks like, this reality that Jesus has come to seek and to save the lost.

So let's dive in and we'll see in these verses. First, a sinful man who receives, secondly, a necessary salvation. And in the closing verses, we see a proper response to that salvation.

A sinful man who receives the necessary salvation and makes a proper response. Let's meet this man, shall we? Here's Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, we're told.

[ 3 : 50 ] Remember, this is while the country is occupied by the Roman Empire. So he's collecting taxes on behalf of an occupying army, the hated invaders. And the system in operation at the time is that the authorities say, this is how much we demand from you, Mr. Tax Collector.

And then the tax collectors go and charge basically whatever they like and pocket the difference between the two. This is an extortion racket commended by the government.

And verse 8 makes very clear, Zacchaeus has been thoroughly involved in that, hasn't he? He's not just a tax collector, he's a chief tax collector. In other words, he has kind of a contract with the authorities and then he employs a bunch of other tax collectors.

He tells them what he expects from them that is more than he's going to give to them. You know, the layers upon layers of corruption going on here. The amount flowing into his pockets.

Zacchaeus, we can be very confident, is profiting from his countrymen. We're told he was wealthy. And do you remember a few weeks back we thought about the rich young man, the one who thought he'd kept the commandments since his youth.

[ 5 : 01 ] And we said, at least in his case, that his extreme wealth showed he hadn't understood those commandments. It certainly seems to be true again for Zacchaeus, doesn't it?

That his wealth shows he doesn't understand God's commandments. And the earlier interaction with that rich young man, Jesus concluded it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Surely also true here. Even more so. Zacchaeus' wealth has come by fraud, by cheating, by extortion, by collaborating with the oppressors. Zacchaeus is a sinful man.

This is very clear, isn't it? He surely deserves to be shunned by his community. He deserves to be grumbled about. He deserves to be ostracized. This is Zacchaeus.

But verse 3, he wanted to see who Jesus was. And this is the familiar bit of the story, isn't it? You know, the bit that gets taught in Sunday school.

[ 6 : 04 ] The wee little man who climbs the tree in order to see Jesus. This is what makes for a popular Sunday school story. But why does he do that? Why does he climb the tree?

Why does he want to see Jesus? I think, when I've thought about this before, and plenty of people commenting on this account do too, I think I've thought that he's heard about Jesus, like the blind man last week.

And he's intrigued about Jesus and he wants to know more. He knows Jesus is coming. He wants to be part of it in some way. Maybe he wants to see some kind of miraculous happening. Zacchaeus is drawn to Jesus, is the idea.

Even a fledgling faith here, perhaps, as he abandons his dignity to climb the tree to see him. But here's the thing. First, there's no indication Zacchaeus expects anyone to see him.

I don't think he's abandoning his dignity that much. But more important than that, see what it says in verse 3. He wanted to see who Jesus was.

[ 7 : 08 ] Now, that to me doesn't read like he's trying to find out more about somebody he's already heard about. If he'd heard about Jesus, wouldn't he have been more keen to hear Jesus teaching than to see him?

Wouldn't he have been following along, waiting for Jesus to stop and to address the crowd, rather than just kind of gearing himself up for what was only ever going to be a passing glimpse? Zacchaeus doesn't seem to act the way you do when you're interested in somebody's ideas, does he?

If a renowned university lecturer is coming to town, you find out where he's going to be speaking, don't you? You book a ticket so you can go and listen to him. You want to hear what he thinks.

You want to consider his opinions, his perspectives. But if a film starts coming, or a member of the royal family say, you just want a glimpse then, don't you?

You just want to see, to be able to say that you saw them, to say you were there when the queen came to visit. Personal interaction might be lovely. It was interesting last month hearing different stories of people's encounters with Prince Philip, wasn't it?

[ 8 : 15 ] But to be honest, it wasn't really the man's ideas that people were interested in, was it? Just being able to say that you'd met Prince Philip was really what people were looking for.

Now, which of these two ways does Zacchaeus behave? Don't his actions treat Jesus as this kind of interesting celebrity? Somebody to say you've spotted far more than they treat him as a compelling teacher.

In fact, I'm not even sure as he climbs the tree, I'm not sure he knows who he's going to see on the road. It's just he sees a crowd gathering, thinks there's something interesting going on here.

There must be someone worth seeing. I want to know who's at the center of it. He wanted to know who Jesus was. Now, we, we at this point in Luke's gospel know Jesus to be the friend of tax collectors and sinners, but I'm not convinced Zacchaeus knows that.

He's a sinful man who at this point, I don't think even knows he needs saving. No awareness that he needs help. No interest in changing his life.

[ 9 : 22 ] I think it's safe to assume he's enjoying his riches and just casually interested. And yet, yet he does need salvation, doesn't he?

This, I think, is what Jesus means when he speaks to Zacchaeus. Verse five, he tells him to calm down immediately because I must stay at your house today. Not, I would like to stay at your house today.

No, I must stay at your house today. I mean, why is that? Why must he stay with this tax collector, this sinful man? It surely can't be that there's a shortage of other offers, can it?

There's this whole crowd of people who were interested enough to block the sight of other onlookers. It beggars belief to suppose they wouldn't have leapt at the chance of hosting Jesus for the night. Never mind the accepted obligation of the day to provide accommodation for guests.

It's not that Jesus must persuade Zacchaeus, otherwise he'll be out in the cold, is it? So why must he stay here? Well, this is a must of divine necessity, isn't it?

[ 10 : 34 ] Jesus must stay with Zacchaeus because this is what he came to do. Jesus must stay with Zacchaeus because this is part of his divine mission. Jesus must stay with Zacchaeus because the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Jesus is obliged to follow this path because it's God's plan for the salvation of sinners. And at one and the same time, he's obliged to follow this path because he loves this man, isn't he?

I mean, I don't think we're supposed to imagine Jesus kind of holding his nose as he crosses the threshold into Zacchaeus' house, forced against his will because he must do it to fulfill God's plan by some kind of abstract theoretical plan to offer salvation against his will.

No, of course not. Down that road lie all kinds of heresies. No, Jesus delights to offer salvation, doesn't he? Jesus delights to seek and to save the lost, to offer salvation.

He loves this sinful man, and so he calls him to repentance. So what have you and I? Well, the first foremost application is clear, isn't it?

[ 11 : 49 ] If you are a sinful man, a sinful woman, if you are in need of salvation, well, see here the grace of God extended to a sinner. A man shunned by his community but welcomed by God.

Yes, it is harder for a rich man, for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom. I've got that back to front. You know what I'm trying to say. It's hard for a rich man to enter heaven.

But Jesus in that same breath continued, what is impossible with man is possible with God. Salvation is at hand.

If that's what you need to hear this morning, well, do not hold yourself back thinking that you are beyond reach, that you are beyond redemption. Jesus saved the sinful man. But is there more to this idea of divine necessity, I wonder?

Is there a divine necessity for you and I? An obligation to follow a path that results in the salvation of sinners? Now, clearly we're not in the same situation as Jesus.

[ 12 : 55 ] Not least, we don't know the specific will of God in the specific situation the way that Jesus did. It would not be wise for us to walk the streets of the valley saying to people, I must have dinner in your house tonight.

That is not going to be a profitable path. We don't know the specific will of God in the specific situation, but we do know the general will of God, don't we? We do know that the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

We do know that God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. We do know that the person most mired in sin is not beyond God's redeeming power.

So if we know that, then are we not compelled to make that offer of salvation? Where is that offer on our lips?

Aren't we compelled by the knowledge of God's will, God's will that all should be saved? Are we not compelled by that knowledge to go and make that proclamation? Compelled by the command of our Savior to go and make disciples?

[ 14 : 03 ] Compelled by our love of others? Isn't that the rub? Where is that love? I mean, if you believe.

If you believe that people without Jesus face a lost eternity, if you believe that they face eternal condemnation, and if you believe that Jesus offers salvation freely to one and to all, then how can we claim to love people if we don't present these realities to them?

If we don't make that offer that Jesus makes? No one is so lost they cannot be redeemed. There are no helpless cases. There are no incurable situations.

When faced with the love and power of God, any sinner may be healed. If they will only come to Christ, no one is too lost. And conversely, no one is so good that they do not need salvation.

Let's not make the opposite error either. Let's not think of anybody. They live a good life. They're fine. Or they're following a different religion. That will lead them to God in the end because they try to be a good person. No, no.

[ 15 : 08 ] Nobody is so good that they do not need Christ. Without Jesus, everyone is lost. Everyone is lost. But the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

A sinful man. A necessary salvation. A proper response. This, along with the climbing of the tree, Zacchaeus' response is perhaps another familiar element.

This account, isn't it? Half of everything to the poor. And fourfold restitution of what he cheated people out of. It's a considerable response, isn't it?

It's going to be costly for Zacchaeus. He will not be able to continue with his current lifestyle, will he? With over half of his assets given away. This is far more than the minimum that he might have got away with in this situation, isn't it?

Far more generous even than might have been expected of him. There are some situations in God's law where a fourfold restitution is required. But this is not one of them.

[ 16 : 13 ] It really isn't close to any of the situations where that's what's expected. He hasn't stolen a sheep. The applicable law seems to be that of Numbers 5, verse 7, which requires not that you repay four times the amount stolen, but the amount plus one-fifth.

That's reasonable restitution. That's what could be expected of him in this situation, perhaps. And as for giving away 50% of his possessions, nobody expected anything like that, did they?

The rabbis, they had a system where at times they might expect 20% of the capital and 20% of subsequent profits. Sometimes 20% might be expected, but never anywhere close to 50%.

It is well above what was ever required under any system under God's law or by the contemporary authorities. Well above. So Zacchaeus' response to his salvation is extravagant, isn't it?

Abundantly generous. And I think we're allowed to suppose that this abundantly generous attitude would have continued on through his life. Did he remain a tax collector?

[ 17 : 21 ] I've been wondering about that. Maybe not. But on the other hand, maybe it is possible to be an honest tax collector. Even then, maybe it's possible. And as a chief tax collector, well, he had the power to reform his part of the system, didn't he?

Maybe he was able to go and to bring far-reaching change. Repentance doesn't always mean abandoning a situation, does it? Sometimes it means redeeming that situation.

Reforming that situation. Transforming it in accordance with gospel priorities. But in any case, what he did beyond this encounter is into the realm of speculation. But two things are very clear from this account, aren't they?

And important to note. First, the change is in his heart before it's in his actions. And second, the change of actions is a necessary consequence of the change of heart.

His heart's changed first. Do you see verse 6? He came down at once and welcomed Jesus gladly. The words of Jesus' command telling him to come down are the same words used to record his obedience.

[ 18 : 28 ] He does what he's told to do. And he welcomed Jesus not grudgingly, but gladly. His heart has been transformed in this encounter. At the invitation of Jesus, he's thrown himself on God's mercy.

He's turned in repentance and faith. He has a new heart of flesh in place of his heart of stone. Implication. It may well be wise and proper for us to try and change and reform institutions and policies, to limit the effects of sin, to enact laws that will prevent the worst excesses of wickedness.

It may well be wise and good to do that, but that is not our fundamental aim. That is not where our hope lies. True and lasting change comes through changed hearts, comes through repentance and faith.

And it is far, far more profitable for that repentance to come prior to any change in behavior. Folks, we call people to repentance with far, far greater urgency than we call to changed behavior.

Changed heart first. But we inevitably do expect to see changed behavior, don't we? A necessary consequence of a changed heart. For Zacchaeus, this abundant generosity, it was the natural response.

[ 19 : 48 ] Nobody forced him into it. He wasn't under compulsion. This was the natural way for him to react. But if his behavior hadn't changed at all, or if his response had been the minimum he could get away with, you know, quibbling over, well, do I owe that person an extra fifth or just repay what I took?

No, no, I didn't actually cheat. See, if that had been his attitude, then we would have questioned whether his heart was really changed at all, wouldn't we? The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

And once he's found them, once he has saved them, then they will naturally and necessarily live changed lives. It would be hard to think of a theologian more focused on the centrality of grace alone than the great reformer John Calvin, right?

Focused on God's grace, absolutely. But commenting on this passage, Calvin points out that the apostle Paul, too, expects this changed behavior.

Again, nobody doubts Paul's focus on the gospel, right? That salvation comes through grace alone. But it's still the case that Paul to the Ephesians writes, anyone who's been stealing must steal no longer, but must work doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

[ 21 : 13 ] Zacchaeus must stop stealing, must have profitable work so that he has something to share. Otherwise, clearly, he has not believed. The apostle Paul expects true salvation to result in changed behavior.

And therefore, Calvin concludes, we ought therefore to begin with the heart, but our repentance ought also to be evinced by works. If our faith isn't lived out in our actions, if it doesn't have consequences in our lives, then we have to question whether the faith exists at all.

So, folks, if a sober examination of your heart reveals that riches have a hold on you, whether it's clinging to what you have or whether it's yearning for what you don't, if riches have a hold, then you have to question whether that faith is true, or at least whether you're as passionately committed to Christ as you might wish to claim.

If careful consideration shows you that some of your relationships have a higher claim than does your relationship with the Almighty, whether that's boyfriends, girlfriends, children, parents, whoever it might be, if those relationships have a higher claim than your relationship with God, then you have to ask these questions.

Is your heart changed? Because a changed heart will necessarily result in changed behavior. If your behavior hasn't changed, well, then what are you to do about it?

[ 22 : 41 ] Well, here's step one. Hear the comfort of verse 10. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. However lost you might be, if you are looking and saying, I don't know whether there's evidence of faith here, well, if there isn't, then take comfort, because the Son of Man came to seek and to save you.

However lost you are, however much you have deceived yourself or deceived others, however great or however small your sin, the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

So praise God that in Jericho, a sinful man found a necessary salvation and offered a proper response. And praise God that sinners can walk that same road that Zacchaeus walked today.

Amen.