

To Seek and Save the Lost

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[0:00] You may like to open the Bibles at page 854 to the second of our two readings today from Luke's Gospel, chapter 19, page 854.

Last Sunday today and on Good Friday, we're having three sermons about why did Jesus die. Last week we saw from John, chapter 10, the story of the Good Shepherd that Jesus died to came and laid down his life for the sheep.

And today, from Luke, chapter 19, the story of Zacchaeus came to seek out and save the lost. So let us pray that God will speak to us from his word as we gather today.

Heavenly Father, you speak to us in the words of the scriptures so that our lives may become more like Jesus' life, so that we may be trained in righteousness and corrected for those things that we do and think and say that are wrong.

And so we come before your word this morning, waiting for you and wanting you to change us, to transform us, to correct us, so that we may be more like the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

[1:13] Well, let me say that today in this section of Luke, chapter 19, the story of Zacchaeus, we see a most extraordinary and amazing feat.

If I was to produce a needle for sewing and here have a large camel and get before your eyes a camel through the eye of this needle, you would be amazed and astonished.

But let me tell you that what we see in Luke, chapter 19, is more amazing and more astonishing than that. What we see here is a rich man entering the kingdom of God.

It's a familiar story. It's a beloved story, even from Sunday school days. I suspect that's because the man in the story, Zacchaeus, was a short man.

And in order for him to see Jesus, who's passing down the road, he climbs a tree. And I guess for many children, they resonate and understand that. When you go to the football or you go to a big event in a park or whatever, and there's a big crowd there, if you're a parent of a child or a grandparent, invariably you have to lift them up so they can see or put them on your shoulders so they can see what's happening in front of them.

[2:32] Well, for Zacchaeus, though he's an adult, he's a short man and he couldn't see. Even probably standing on tiptoes would have failed for him to see Jesus passing down the road of Jericho.

And so he goes and climbs a tree. We're told it's a sycamore tree. Unlike English sycamore trees, this would be one a bit like an oak. Apparently it would have edible fruit on it. It would be easy to climb, spreading branches, and it would provide lots of shade in what, after all, was a very hot climate.

And in fact, Jericho is a very hot place in a hot climate. And from this tree, Zacchaeus could see what was going on down below in front of him. Maybe two, we're not sure.

But maybe it was a place from which he could see, but maybe not be obvious to be seen by others, perhaps. But he is seen. And he's seen by Jesus himself.

He's seen by Jesus who doesn't just pass by on his road up to Jerusalem, which is where he's heading. But Jesus stops and sees Zacchaeus up the tree.

[3 : 40] And the very man that these crowds have turned out en masse to see, passing through Jericho, the wonder worker, the great profound teacher, the healer, the people that everybody's talking about, the people that crowds are following as he goes up to Jerusalem, and the crowds of Jericho have spilled out onto the streets to see him, so many people that Zacchaeus had to climb a tree in order to see Jesus.

That very man, that same Jesus, stops, looks up into the tree and beckons Zacchaeus to come down. Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.

That implies overnight, not just for a cup of tea or a meal or a hot cross bun or something like that. But Jesus says to him, I must stay. That's odd language.

Not that I choose to stay, I want to stay, would you have me stay? I must stay. That is, there is a part of the divine plan of Jesus' life and ministry that involves him going to the house and staying with Zacchaeus.

There's a sense in which Jesus, the Son of God, is under command from God the Father himself, to stay the night at Zacchaeus' house. Zacchaeus, hurry down, for I must stay at your house today.

[5 : 08] And Zacchaeus hurries down, scampering or jumping or whatever down the tree. We're told that he hurries down, hurried down from the tree and was happy, full of joy, rejoicing, to welcome Jesus into his house to stay.

And as Jesus later says in verse 9, today salvation has come to this house. In one sense, Jesus himself has come to this house. He is salvation. In another sense, Zacchaeus is the recipient of salvation.

He's saved as Jesus comes and stays at his house because he too is a son of Abraham. Well, it's a lovely little story. He is a man who's a little bit short, shows a bit of ingenuity, he's curious, maybe he's eager, but we're not really told his motivations.

He just wants to see Jesus. After all, everyone else is doing that. You don't miss the opportunity. And so he becomes the host for Jesus to stay and salvation has come to his house. Now, of course, the story is not quite so simple, although it's a great story and a good outcome.

They often say that you can tell the type of person that a person is by the company that they keep. If that were true, I don't think it is true, but if it were true, then you wouldn't want to have much to do with Jesus because throughout Luke's gospel, indeed all the gospels, but perhaps predominantly in Luke, there's this criticism of the company that Jesus is keeping.

[6 : 35] This is a man who eats at sinners' houses, who has company with tax collectors. And here he is. He's going into Zacchaeus' house to stay, probably the night, and Zacchaeus is not just a short man.

He's a chief tax collector, the only chief tax collector, I think, in the New Testament. So the people are grumbling and mumbling about this. In verse 7, we're told that all who saw it began to grumble.

You know, it's that sort of low-grade murmur in a crowd. That's the sort of thing that's going on. And they say, he's going to be the guest of one who's a sinner. And we're told that it's all who saw this, maybe even including the disciples, who ought to have known better, at least by this stage.

After all, one of them had been a tax collector. And Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. That probably meant that he employed other tax collectors and that he earned a commission on what they received as tax collectors.

Jericho was on the Jordan River, down the hill from Jerusalem. If you're going from Jerusalem across to part of the Roman Decapolis cities, like Amman, as it is known today, the capital of Jordan, or Philadelphia in those days, you would go through Jericho.

[7:50] And being on the border of the Jordan River, it's probably an ideal place for a tax-collecting booth. I mean, today, there's an international sort of immigration sort of area there as you come across the Allenby Bridge from Jordan into Israel and so on, into the West Bank.

So this was a place where you would have a tax collector and probably quite a few of them. And we're told that he's rich and the implication of saying he's a chief tax collector and he was rich is implying for us to understand his riches have come from being a tax collector.

And that implies, as in fact Zacchaeus later on himself implies, that's not just come from above-the-table deals. He's probably been a man who's exercised some fraud or extortion, some illegal means of gaining a bit of money under the table or from his employees as well as from people who are meant to be paying taxes or whatever.

Well, even if you're a good tax collector, you are despised by the Jews in Jesus' day. Tax collectors were seen to be in cahoots with the Romans and the Jews generally despised the Romans.

So they despised the tax collectors and even more so if you are somehow a little bit dodgy as a tax collector because in the end you're seeing them wealthy in your town Jericho and part of the money that's bringing their wealth is your money.

[9:12] And maybe they've got it illegally, maybe not. But you would be a despised person. And that probably helps us understand why a short man had to actually run down the road to climb a tree. No one's going to let him stand in front of them because he's despised.

And so off he has to go down the road a bit to find a tree to climb. This is a man who, though rich, is an outcast of society. And what we see here in the story of Zacchaeus is like a summary picture of what Jesus has been on about thus far in his life.

He's on about seeking the outcast. Now often the outcast are the blind or the crippled, the lame, people who are in need of some physical healing, demon-possessed people, maybe the mentally unstable people and so on.

People who in Jesus' society were often a bit oppressed or outcast. He is a rich man. But being a tax collector is regarded as a sinner and an outcast.

It's that sort of person that Jesus comes to so many times, time and time again. In fact, in the chapter just before this, in chapter 18, Jesus has told a parable of a Pharisee, one of the prestigious religious people of society, and a tax collector, the scum.

[10:32] And they both go to pray. The Pharisee prays, God, I thank you that I'm not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. Why, I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all my income.

But there next to him was the tax collector, the scum, who prayed. He wouldn't even look up to heaven as he prayed. He just beat his breast and prayed, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

And Jesus says, which of those two men goes home justified. And not the Pharisee that you might expect, but the tax collector. So here now is Jesus, in one sense, acting out what that parable has been about.

It's a tax collector that he goes to, not to the Pharisees and the Jewish leaders and the aristocracy, so to speak, the prestigious people. He goes to the outcasts. Of all the Gospels, probably Luke has been the one that's pushed that issue the most.

He came not to the religious establishment, but to the outcasts. He came not to the people who are well, but those who are sick. Not to the Pharisees and the righteous or the self-righteous, but to those who knew they needed healing.

[11:39] And so he comes to Zacchaeus, in a sense, summarising or epitomising the whole of Jesus' ministry thus far. It's the last, in a sense, personal encounter Jesus has with somebody before those last days of his life in Jerusalem.

These events would have happened, corresponding to this year, a couple of days ago. A couple of days later, Jesus goes into Jerusalem on that Sunday and then the Friday following, he dies.

So we're in the last fortnight, probably, of Jesus' life here. The second last week of his life. Since chapter 9 in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem.

We were told there in chapter 9. That is, he's now on the journey to die in Jerusalem. And for 10 chapters, Luke 9 through to Luke 19, Jesus has been encountering people on the way, teaching parables and other things on the way, but all the time heading towards Jerusalem.

Now he's in Jericho. We're told at the beginning of chapter 19 that he entered Jericho and was passing through it. On the way, that is, towards Jerusalem, is implied by that. Because that's the goal.

[12:48] With him are the crowds who are like Jesus going up for the Passover festival at Jerusalem. No doubt the crowds are building as he goes as more and more people sort of join in and head off to Jerusalem for the feast.

Jericho's more or less the final town before he would arrive at Jerusalem. From there, an oasis town in the middle of a very dry climate where a little spring produces lots of green palms and fruit around Jericho even to this day.

Way down in the Jordan Valley, 400 feet below sea level, Jesus would begin the steep climb, 25 kilometres up to Jerusalem, 2,400 feet above sea level.

A steep and hard climb, probably a couple of days solid walking. So Zacchaeus, in effect, is the end of Jesus' ministry outside Jerusalem. It summarises and epitomises all that he's on about and is fundamentally a ministry to outcasts.

Well, the ministry to Zacchaeus has profound effects. A greedy and rich man suddenly becomes honest and generous. It's an astonishing and quick transformation.

[14:00] As the people grumble about Jesus going to be the guest of one who is a sinner, Zacchaeus stood there, verse 8 says, maybe well in front of the crowd before he even takes Jesus to his house, maybe it's in his house, but he says, clearly quite publicly, look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.

Now the way he acts, that is actually originally spoken and written is a little bit different from this. Rather than the future tense, that is, I will do this, which is what we've got in front of us, it was actually written in the present tense.

Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much. Zacchaeus is not boasting about what is his current practice, but by using the present tense, I give and pay back, he's underlining the firm resolve here to correct his past behaviour.

He's not boasting that he's a goody because the language, when he says, if I have defrauded anyone, it actually means if I have defrauded anyone and that is the case.

In ancient Greek, you could sort of specify different types of if. Well, this is, if I've defrauded someone and that is in fact the case, I have defrauded them, then I pay back four times as much is what Zacchaeus is saying here.

[15:27] He's not making an idle promise, it is firm resolve. That's the force of the words that he uses in verse 8. Now, when he promises to restore fourfold what he's defrauded from people, that's an astonishing thing.

In the Old Testament, in the books of Leviticus and Numbers, which give a lot of the laws for how the people of God were to live, often the recompense or restitution if you were a thief and you were found out by somebody was 20% extra.

So you steal a shekel and you're found out, so you pay back 1.2 shekels. If you stole a sheep and killed it and then were found out, you had to pay back four sheep.

That's fourfold. But if the sheep that you stole was still alive, you just gave back that sheep with one other. That's double restitution. So fourfold restitution was not really the limit of the law.

So when Zacchaeus says, I will pay back four times what I've defrauded from anyone, he is clearly being more generous than the Old Testament law prescribed.

[16:38] You see, what he's showing here is not just a sort of begrudging I've been caught out here, but a willing and generous transformation to his life from being greedy and covetous to being generous beyond the demands of the law of the Old Testament.

That shows what a dramatic turnaround is happening in his life as Jesus confronts him. If I were to put a camel through the eye of a needle here, you would be amazed, especially because I can hardly get a thread of cotton through the eye of a needle.

But this man, Zacchaeus, being converted as he is confronted by Jesus, is more amazing than that.

We must not underestimate the importance of what we are being told happens here. In the previous chapter, chapter 18, having told that parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus then, a little bit later, goes on to talk about a rich ruler who comes to him with a question about receiving eternal life, salvation, entering the kingdom of God, so to speak.

And the man is very rich and Jesus says to him, because he knows that this rich man is actually, in effect, idolising his wealth, he says to him, give it all away.

[18:00] The man can't do that. He goes away from him sad, clinging to his money. And Jesus looked at this rich man and he said to him, how hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

And here is Zacchaeus, a rich man, to whom salvation comes. He enters the kingdom of God. Jesus in chapter 18, the immediately preceding chapter, just a few verses before this, goes on to say, indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who's rich to enter the kingdom of God.

And we can't imagine a camel going through the eye of a needle. It's an absurd idea. It is impossible. And yet it's even harder than that for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

So when in the very next chapter, a few verses later, we see this rich Zacchaeus converted in salvation coming to him, we must be astonished. This is not an everyday occurrence.

Indeed, the disciples in chapter 18, when Jesus said it's harder to enter the kingdom of God than a camel going through the eye of a needle, they said, well, who can be saved? And Jesus replies to them, what is impossible for humans is possible for God.

[19:18] So that then tells us about Zacchaeus' conversion. It's not his doing. It's God's doing. It's not because Zacchaeus somehow gave away his money that he saved.

It's not because of anything to do with Zacchaeus that he enters the kingdom of God or salvation comes to his house. It is purely an act of God to a man who does not deserve it.

That is, Zacchaeus is saved by the mercy and grace of God, not by anything about himself. When he pledges to give back fourfold what he's defrauded and to give half his possessions to the poor, that doesn't make him saved.

He is saved by the grace and mercy of God and in response to that, that's what he offers rightly to do. Having been saved by God's powerful grace, Zacchaeus, you see, finds something more valuable than money, treasure in heaven and so he's transformed to be generous.

His actions of giving back to those whom he has defrauded shows his repentance, not just a sorrow at what he's done wrong in the past, oh I wish I hadn't done that, I'm regretting that, but what the Bible calls repentance, turning away from wrong behaviour to right behaviour but at the same time providing recompense or restitution or correction for wrong behaviour.

[20 : 55] I think often we take repentance too lightly and think that it's just sorrow at wrong things, oh I wish I hadn't have done that, but we often refuse to make the recompense that we should, but if we repent of our sins then it has a consequence, an implication for us that if we've stolen we give back, that if we've been angry to someone we reconcile, that if we've defrauded someone we pay them back, whatever our sins are that we're repenting of, we work to correct and restore the broken relationships or whatever it's been that our sin has caused.

In the last five or six years I think it is, an English evangelist whose name is J. John was preaching a series of evangelistic or outreach sermons at various cathedrals in England in order to tell people who are not Christians about the Christian faith, that they might become Christians.

And the basis for this sermon series was the Ten Commandments of all things. And I'm not quite sure whether he preached one sermon on each of the Ten Commandments all the way through, but on one of them of course he got to preaching about you shall not steal.

And I'm sure it was at Liverpool Cathedral in England that he was preaching this series and you shall not steal. And as part of that service or sermon he said that if you have stolen and now you're repenting of that sin the cathedral will provide some sort of bins for the returning of stolen goods and we will to the best of our ability return those to the rightful owners.

Well as a result of that sermon series at least at Liverpool Cathedral if not in other cathedrals in England those bins were overflowing with things that people put in them. Money, pens, stationery from their work, medical supplies, wheelchairs, walking sticks, all sorts of stuff, clothes, uniforms, not everything I think they could return to its rightful owner.

[23 : 03] They didn't know all the rightful owners from what I remember reading. That's God's grace at work. Grace coming to those who are lost, shown in repentance which is providing some restitution.

Now even those that kids at one level took the initiative to go up a tree in order to see Jesus, we're not told his motivation. We're not told he was spiritually hungry, he may just have been curious. I mean after all if this great wonder worker was walking through your little town, you'd never seen him on TV because you didn't have any TVs, you'd probably go out and see what the fuss is about as well.

And that's what he does. But the real initiative comes from Jesus all along. But Jesus could easily have just walked by, not even seen him up in the tree. But Jesus stops and he looks up and he eyes him and he tells him to come down.

The initiative is Jesus' initiative, not Zacchaeus' initiative. That's God's grace. You see God's grace is to take the initiative to seek out the lost, to save them.

God doesn't sit by in his heaven waiting for someone who's lost to sort of stumble their way up to God's heaven for help. God seeks out the lost.

[24 : 20] He comes all the way to the lost. In Zacchaeus' case, all the way to the tree that he was in. For us humans, God has come all the way from heaven to earth to seek out and to save the lost.

And that's what we see of Jesus' ministry through Luke's gospel, indeed all the gospels really. story. And the story of Zacchaeus brings all of that to a climax as Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem, but later on, indeed, in this same chapter.

From the beginning of this gospel, before Jesus was born, it was announced that he would be the saviour and he would come in effect for the lost. Mary, when she knew she was pregnant, sang a song that expressed that very thing, the anticipation of the coming saviour who would come in effect for the lost.

Zechariah, the same sort of thing, both in Luke chapter 1. The language here at the end of this section on Zacchaeus, when Jesus says, for the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost, goes even further back than Mary's song and Zechariah's song.

Like last week's passage from John 10, the Good Shepherd, it goes to the same chapter in the Old Testament to the prophet Ezekiel at the time of the exile.

[25 : 41] And if you remember last week, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, Jesus is saying that he is the shepherd long promised from the Old Testament in contrast to the bad shepherds who had treated so badly the sheep.

And we saw in Ezekiel 34 last week those words of ringing condemnation at the bad leadership of the people of God. But later on that same chapter goes on to promise a true shepherd, descended from David, but indeed God himself, the true shepherd who would come.

Part of God's promise there in Ezekiel, 600 years roughly before Jesus met Zacchaeus, God said, I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.

I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed and I'll bind up the injured and I'll strengthen the weak. And that's precisely what Jesus is doing with Zacchaeus and it's precisely what Jesus has done with others on the road to Jerusalem as well.

But when Jesus says at the end of this passage, verse 10, for the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost, it's not just summarising what's gone before and it's not just fulfilling an Old Testament promise either.

[26 : 59] when Jesus says I came to seek out and to save the lost, he's explaining why he came to die and what his death is about. Because he's heading to Jerusalem, this is not the end of his ministry.

He's explaining what he's done but he's also explaining what he's about to do and why he must go and die on a cross. because in dying on the cross he seeks and he saves the lost.

Not just with physical healing but to die for the forgiveness of sins. Zacchaeus is, if you like, a foretaste of that, what his death accomplishes.

Zacchaeus' sins are forgiven, salvation enters his house that day. But in a sense the economy of forgiving sins is settled and resolved when Jesus dies in our place on the cross on Good Friday.

We often see on the news stories of search and rescue missions. There was the search for the man who jumped overboard from the ferry leaving Devonport, I think it was, a few weeks ago. I believe never found.

[28 : 03] Other times people have found safe and well on their rescue missions, whether it's in the mountains or in the forest or out at sea. I remember in 1979 when I was a teenager going with some friends, three other friends and hiking for a week across the Bogong High Plains and on the very last day one of our four got lost.

And so in the end that evening, having not found him, we rang the police and radioed for the police and so the next morning a police search was launched. Just at the time that was launched we actually found him and all was well.

Well Jesus saying, the son of man himself came to seek out and to save the lost is the greatest search and rescue mission. It's a rescue mission for those who are lost and cannot find themselves, for those who are lost and cannot find safety, those who are lost and cannot help themselves.

They're stuck and they're lost. You and I are lost. Zacchaeus is lost and all the people of the story are lost, lost in our sinfulness, our neglect of God, our rebellion against God.

And Jesus came all the way to earth to die on a cross for lost sinners. It's why he came. Not just tax collectors, not just the despised of society either.

[29 : 19] But for each and every person, for each and every person is lost spiritually and in need of the salvation and rescue that Jesus came to bring. His dying on the cross accomplishes that.

His dying on the cross is the bringing of salvation to us. His dying on the cross is the call to us to repent of our sins like Zacchaeus.

Indeed the challenge to make restitution, real repentance, turning away from wrongdoing to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.