

Zacchaeus - Curious About Jesus

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[0 : 00] Now, could you turn to that passage that we read earlier, Luke chapter 19, and particularly some words in verse 3.

Psalm 19, verse 3. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. He was seeking to see who Jesus was.

Here was a man who was curious about Christ, but he has wanted to see who Jesus was. What about you this morning?

Are you curious about Christ? Do you want to see who Jesus is? Do you want to find out about Jesus? That's the purpose of our being here this morning. Who is this person who is at the centre of the world's largest faith?

Why is it that so many people from so many different nations, cultures, people of so many different personalities have come to believe in him and believe that he has transformed their life?

[1 : 13] Perhaps you're curious to know if he can help you if you've not already come to know him. Maybe you're not sure how you stand in relation to God. Could Jesus help you with that?

Maybe you've got a problem in your life. Maybe it's something big. Maybe it's something you can't talk about to anybody. Could Jesus help you with that? Maybe you know your life is not what it should be.

Maybe you feel that you've failed in some way. Could Jesus help you with that? Or perhaps you're just curious. What Zacchaeus seemed to be.

Is Jesus real? You've heard so many remarkable things about him. Just as Zacchaeus had no doubt heard about Jesus. But not just perhaps amazing things that Jesus did long ago that I've talked about in the Bible.

But maybe things like I was talking to the children about. That there are people still today who meet with the living Jesus. who know that he's speaking to them. And he transforms their lives.

[2 : 23] I think my microphone has fallen off. I better put it back on. That's funny. The exact same thing happened to the preacher who was preaching in Bucklew last Sunday.

He couldn't find his mic after it fell off. So at least I found it. Okay. So it's not just that Jesus did great things in the past.

But he's still doing great things in people's lives today. And that may make people curious. Maybe it makes you curious. If you've not already come to know him. Is this real? Is this true? Is this something that could apply to you?

Well let's look at this man's experience. Let's look at Zacchaeus. And his meeting with Jesus. And see if we can learn anything for ourselves. To see what Jesus is really like.

And to see if he's real and if he can help us. So we start with Zacchaeus. He was curious about Jesus. He wanted to see who Jesus was.

[3 : 24] Well who was Zacchaeus first of all? We're curious about him. We're curious as to know why he was curious about Jesus. Well we know that he lived in Jericho.

And Jericho at this time was what's called a Hellenized city. That means it had come under great Greek influence. You know how the Greek influence had spread some hundred years.

A few hundred years before Jesus lived. Through the conquest of Alexander the Great. And so Greek had become the kind of common language. Just like perhaps English is in many parts of the world today.

Greek was like that. But not only the Greek language. But Greek literature. Greek culture. So it was the kind of place where King Herod had an opulent palace there.

It was a fashionable place for the wealthy and the influential to live. I'm not sure what area in Livingston is like that. But in Edinburgh we would say it's the Grange. That's the area where a lot of

the wealthy and influential people live.

[4 : 26] So that was the kind of place that Jericho was. And Zacchaeus that's where he lived because he was a chief tax collector. Now the Romans who of course were the other big influence in the world at that time.

Because they had conquered most of the known world. They had a huge empire and it included the land of Israel and Judea. The Romans had a complex tax system.

It included a land tax. A head tax or a poll tax. Which was conducted on the basis of censuses that were carried out. And there was customs or customs and excises we would call them.

And it was this latter area, customs and tolls, that were provided by tax collectors. So anyone moving goods in and out of towns or cities had to pay this tax.

But it wasn't run by the Romans themselves. It wasn't run by Roman officials. It wasn't a sort of a branch of government in that sense. It was farmed out to people.

[5 : 33] And it was farmed out to the highest bidder. So in Jericho, the Romans would say, we're wanting so much tax from this area.

And someone would come forward and say, right, I will pay that amount. Say, whatever it is, 10,000 pounds, a million pounds. He would pay it. And then he would collect the taxes from the people. And he would ensure that he was going to make a big profit out of it. So that's how the system worked. So how were people wealthy enough to do this?

It was because perhaps there were people like maybe being money lenders or as we would call them today, loan sharks, that they had made a lot of money anyway.

And they were now able to buy this privilege of collecting taxes. So in this way, Rome received its taxes in advance. And the tax collector had to exact enough taxes to cover, of course, his initial outlay and to make a profit.

[6 : 36] And there was enough scope for dishonesty in the system to make huge profits. So the tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, were hated and despised for a variety of reasons.

First of all, they were Jews who worked for the Romans. So they were regarded as traitors. They were regarded as collaborators with this occupying power.

Also, they were regarded as unclean because of their close association with these unclean Gentiles. That meant they were religiously unclean, spiritually unclean.

That's the way the people viewed it in those days. And their work, of course, seemed like highway robbery. This is how it's been described. An occupation which depends for success on suspicion, intrusion, harassment and force, tends not to attract the most pleasant personality.

That's probably putting it mildly. Now, not only was Zacchaeus a tax collector, he was, we're told, a chief tax collector. So that was, in addition to his own tax collection, he supervised the work of others.

[7 : 49] And so he was like at the kind of apex of a local pyramid of corruption and oppression. So it hardly goes without saying that he was very wealthy.

He must have been very wealthy in the first place to be able to buy the privilege of collecting tax. And, of course, having this privilege then made him even more wealthy.

So that was another reason for people's envy and hatred of someone like Zacchaeus. We're also told he was a small man.

And we know how it's sometimes the case that people who are small and perhaps they get laughed at or bullied because they're small, when they get power, they love to exercise that power.

And perhaps Zacchaeus was a little bit like that. Anyway, perhaps to get something of the idea, imagine the situation, say, transfer it from Jericho to Northern Ireland.

[8 : 48] Imagine that the local loan shark is the man that the government in London have made responsible for collecting VAT, customs and income tax.

Add to that that the area, the local area, is strongly Roman Catholic and nationalist, and he's a Protestant Unionist. You'll get something of the idea as to how people like Zacchaeus were viewed. So this is the man who was curious about Jesus. He wanted to see who Jesus was. And that tells us, I think, something important in itself.

That the Bible is constantly stressing to us that all kinds of people, even the most unlikely people, can be drawn to Jesus. So, yourself today, or maybe if you're a Christian, a friend of yours, you may think, very unlikely that they would be interested in Jesus.

But in fact, the Bible stresses to us, there's nobody who's too far away, who's too bad, to be interested in Jesus. So, why was he curious about Jesus?

[9 : 59] Well, it's a good thing to be curious in general, because Albert Einstein, famous scientist, once said, the important thing is not to stop questioning. Never lose a holy curiosity.

But he also added, it's a miracle that curiosity survives formal education. That's a warning to everyone who's involved in formal education.

And I think it's something especially true today, that perhaps children are being encouraged to be curious in certain areas, but not in others. To be interested in certain areas, but not in others.

And what Albert Einstein was saying, that we must encourage this, what he calls holy curiosity. To be curious about everything. To ask all sorts of questions.

To ask the questions that other people maybe aren't asking. And to consider things that people aren't considering. That are outside the scope of what's normally considered acceptable.

[11 : 00] You'll never find out anything, unless you're curious. Unless you have a questioning mind. But why was Zacchaeus curious about Jesus?

It's okay to be curious, to ask questions about all kinds of things, but why was he curious about Jesus? Well, we might almost ask, why wouldn't he be curious? Such was the level of public interest in Jesus.

We read both in chapter 18 and in chapter 19 about the crowds that followed Jesus. It was a phenomenon at the time. It was something, you know, it was like a pop concert or something nowadays.

It was something that made the news. Why wouldn't he have been interested? And of course, he had heard that Jesus was helping and healing all sorts of people.

Like the blind man, Bartimaeus, here in Jericho. In Jericho. But Zacchaeus may have heard something very specific about Jesus as well.

[12 : 04] Because Jesus became known, it was a kind of tagline that was given to Jesus by his enemies, that he was the friend of tax collectors and sinners.

And those two were always put together in those days. That, you know, we've already looked at how tax collectors were viewed. They were viewed as the outcast.

They were beyond the pale. They were sinners. They were out of polite society in a sense, or religious society anyway. And it was also known that Jesus even had a tax collector among his disciples.

Matthew, the tax collector. That Jesus had met at his tax collecting office and said, come, follow me. And Matthew did. But again, why would all this be of interest to Zacchaeus?

He was rich. He was wealthy. He had everything he needed. He had power. He had influence. Well, we can only speculate. But in his heart of hearts, he must have been fed up of all the hostility and hatred that he faced on a daily basis.

[13 : 13] And perhaps in his heart of hearts, he felt some shame or guilt over his dishonest activities. Because God has planted a conscience in us.

No matter how far we are from him, no matter how corrupt our lives may be, we still have a conscience. And that conscience can be awakened. And that's often how God starts in bringing people to himself.

Wonder about yourself today. Is there something that's niggling in your life at the moment? It may not be that you're like Zacchaeus, hated by people, and people are hostile to you.

But there's maybe something in your life that you know is not right. And perhaps something over which you have a guilty conscience. Zacchaeus must have wondered, why would Jesus, whom he would have viewed as a rabbi, a religious person, why would someone like Jesus be interested in someone like him?

It's curious. I mean, why? It's as if the local loan shark was wondering why the local minister would be interested in helping someone like him. It's that kind of thing.

[14 : 31] So, what about ourselves? Is there nothing that we're ashamed of? Or perhaps we feel in some way excluded or marginalized. He was, in a very big way, in his society.

We may be in smaller ways. Could Jesus really be interested in us? So, Zacchaeus was curious in Jesus. But what kind of curiosity was it?

Because there's all kinds of curiosity. You know, just a casual curiosity. You think, oh, I must Google that, find out the answer to that, and then you forget about it.

Or there's a kind of curiosity that really becomes all-consuming. You want to know all about it. You know, like, just now, people have an over, a sort of powerful curiosity about what's happening in the World Cup, and people can quote all the statistics and so on about that.

There's all sorts of ways we can be curious. Well, this was a very powerful curiosity. And it's one that overcame great barriers.

[15:35] First, it overcame the barrier of his shortness of stature. He couldn't literally see Jesus because he was so short, he couldn't see over the shoulders of the people in front of him, the crowds that were lining the streets.

So, he ran ahead of the crowd, and he climbed up a tree to see who Jesus was. Now, that, all of that, would in those days have presented a really insurmountable barrier to anyone who was rich and wealthy and influential like Zacchaeus.

First of all, people of any stature in society wouldn't be seen running. And he ran ahead to see Jesus. But he wasn't happy with that because he thought that when the crowd comes along, he still won't be able to see Jesus.

So, he climbs up a tree. Again, that would be something that would be considered just completely beyond the pale. But such was his curiosity to see who Jesus was that he overcame these barriers of embarrassment or whatever.

He overcame the barrier of what people would think of it. We knew that people had a very low opinion of him. Anyway, but this would really add grist to the mill. The very fact that he was out looking to see who Jesus was at all, that he ran ahead, that he climbed the tree, all of these things would really have been acutely embarrassing.

[17:14] I wonder, have we reached that point in our interest in Jesus? Has our curiosity or our interest become so strong that we will actually find ingenious ways to find out more about Jesus?

Or that you don't care what people may think? Because that's what was happening in Zacchaeus' life. It was almost as if the barriers that were put in the way that he wasn't able to see increased his curiosity, increased his interest and his desire to see Jesus and to be close to Jesus.

If that is the case, if there's an increasing interest, an increasing curiosity, that's a sign that God is at work in your life.

Just as he was in the life of Zacchaeus. Just as he was in the life of Ian and Anne McCaskill that I spoke about earlier. Here Zacchaeus was being drawn to Jesus.

Do you feel that magnetic power of Jesus today? So, curious about Christ.

[18:26] But secondly, we see that he was confronted by Christ. Because it's one thing to be curious about something, to have an interest in a subject and as I say, to consult Google or whatever about it.

And it's a kind of at arm's length thing. You find out your answers about it. No, you're quite satisfied with that. But actually, to be confronted with the object of your curiosity, that's another thing altogether.

Because here we see Jesus taking the initiative in verse 5. Up until now, it's mainly been about Zacchaeus, doesn't it? His background, his psychology, his curiosity.

But now, something surprising happens. Jesus notices Zacchaeus. People are crowding around Jesus as they always were, demanding attention.

People like Bartimaeus and so on. But here we see how observant Jesus is. He sees the one person there with, it would appear, a genuine interest in him.

[19:26] Even although he's perhaps half concealed in the leaves of this sycamore fig tree. So, we can be assured that Jesus knows us.

He knows your interest, your curiosity. You may think that you're small or excluded or marginalized in some way. You may think that you're not good enough or you're too bad for Jesus to be interested.

Not so. Jesus noticed everyone and particularly, he noticed people who had that interest in him. But Jesus doesn't only observe.

It's not just that he notices Zacchaeus. And certainly, it's very far from Jesus joining in what would have been the sort of rival commentary of the time where Zacchaeus would have been mocked for what he was doing.

It's not just that Jesus just observes or he refrains from mocking Zacchaeus. He actually stops and speaks to Zacchaeus.

[20 : 26] And so, there comes a time when Jesus actually confronts us. When you suddenly realize that you're not dealing with a subject.

You're not dealing with just something that's intrigued your curiosity. You're dealing with a real living person. And a person who's more interested in you than you are in him.

It's just like that day that I spoke about with the children about when Ian and Anne McCaskill knew that Jesus was speaking to them directly through the words of this passage. We think that we are searching for God.

That's often the way it's put, isn't it? The search for God. All the time, he is searching for us. We may have been talking about Jesus.

But now, you've suddenly come to realize that he's talking to you. And notice, not only does Jesus take the initiative, but Jesus demands a response.

[21 : 37] Jesus doesn't want to just talk to Zacchaeus to pass the time of day or just to show that he's interested in Zacchaeus or he doesn't bear him any ill will. He actually has something to say.

Zacchaeus realizes that he's confronted by Jesus and he has to respond because, as we've said earlier, Jesus says to Zacchaeus, come down.

He had to respond. You know, one way or the other. He had to say, no, I'm not coming down out of my tree or he was going to come down. He was presented with a choice to respond or not.

You see, in one sense, although Zacchaeus up in the tree we might think of it as being a kind of precarious situation, maybe it seemed quite a kind of safe vantage point.

He was up there looking down on what was happening. And you know, sometimes we can be like that figuratively or spiritually. we put ourselves up above and we're sort of looking down at it, observing.

[22 : 48] And that's the way some people approach religion. They approach faith. That they're sort of the observers just considering it. But what happens here is that suddenly Zacchaeus is confronted with Jesus and he has to respond.

he had to come face to face with Jesus. And that's exactly what happens in our encounter with Jesus in the Gospel.

That Jesus meets us face to face and calls us to respond. He calls us to come down. To come down from that supposed sort of neutral vantage point that we've set up for ourselves.

We have to come down and face him and respond to him. Not only does he say to him he's got to come down, he says I must stay at your house today. In other words Jesus invites himself into Zacchaeus' home and not only into Zacchaeus' home but into his life and into his heart.

Zacchaeus had to respond. And we've got to respond because Jesus coming to us and taking the initiative he comes in the same way. He demands that response.

[24 : 05] He invites himself into our lives. Notice too there is a note of urgency about what Jesus says because he says come down immediately or as it's translated here hurry and come down.

I must come to your house today. An immediate response was acquired. Now why does Jesus put it like that?

You know why does he kind of force the issue in a sense? And that kind of sits uncomfortably with us a lot of the time. Well we want to just sort of maybe stay in our neutral vantage point as we think of it and consider things carefully for a while ourselves.

But no Jesus says now. And there's a very good reason why he was doing this with Zacchaeus because we're told here that Jesus was passing through Jericho.

And in fact if we know the history of it we know that he was passing through for the very last time. He was going up to Jerusalem and there he was going to be crucified and no longer was he going to be conducting an earthly ministry.

[25 : 14] No longer was he physically going to be passing through Jericho. This humanly speaking was the last opportunity Zacchaeus had to respond and he had to do it immediately.

He had to hurry and come down. Jesus was going to come to his house that very day. And that's the way the gospel comes to us.

It doesn't come to us saying well you know tomorrow you can think about it next week today.

Remember how God said to the rich fool tonight your soul is required of you.

This may be the last opportunity that we have to consider these things. It's a solemn thought but it's true. Well how did Zacchaeus respond to this? Did he say oh wait a minute this is getting far too heavy I want some time to think about this?

No. He left the safety of his perpetual curiosity. he came down from his pedestal of observation of Jesus and he stood with Jesus and met him face to face.

[26 : 23] And he came down at once. There comes a time when the search is over when the curiosity has been satisfied and the opportunity must be grasped and he grasped it.

And we're told that he welcomed Jesus gladly. He was delighted and amazed that Jesus was interested in him. And Christians we should never lose that sense of delight and amazement that Jesus has been interested in us and Jesus has saved and transformed us.

And it's obvious that Zacchaeus didn't care what people thought. He didn't care what the religious people thought. They were saying he's going to be the guest of a sinner. Jesus is going to be the guest of a sinner.

it. Today it might not be what the religious people think but what secular people think that may hold people back from trusting in the Lord Jesus.

Because today there's a growing sort of animosity against the gospel and against the reality of what Jesus has come to do. But Zacchaeus didn't let any of that bother him.

[27 : 34] He welcomed Jesus and welcomed him gladly. And actually it's more important here not what Zacchaeus thought about this but what Jesus thought about it. He didn't care that they were saying about him he's going to be the guest of a sinner because he viewed that as a badge of honour that he was a guest of a sinner that he was a friend of tax collectors and sinners because that was a living parable of the great work he'd come into the world to do to seek and to save the lost.

And then we see that Zacchaeus was transformed by Jesus in verse 8.

We see here his new mentality whereas before all he cared about was making himself rich. Now he wanted to help others. He wanted to give money to the pool.

He wanted to pay back what he'd done wrong. There's a confession of his own wrongdoing and a desire for restitution to pay back.

So what's the explanation of this transformation? You know if somebody had visited Jerusalem and Jericho in those days some kind of social scientist with his clipboard or his computer and analysed what was wrong with that society he would have pointed out one of the major things wrong with that society was the corrupt tax system and maybe he could draw up some plans as to how that could be reformed and maybe there would be a ten year plan to do it and maybe it would never happen.

[29 : 12] But Jesus walked into Jericho that day and he transformed not just Zacchaeus but he transformed the system because Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector. What's the explanation?

The explanation is quite simply that Zacchaeus met Jesus Jesus had entered his life and he would never be the same again but Jesus explains it he says today salvation has come to this house and he goes on to say that he came to seek and to save the lost and he's stressing there that Zacchaeus was lost he was maybe wealthy he maybe had his own status with the Romans and all the rest of it but he lost his way in life he was far from home he was lost in the desert of his self-centered pursuit of things that would never satisfy but Jesus came to seek and to save the lost not just to seek not just to search for but to actually rescue that's why he came to die he came to redeem us he came to set us free from the chains of sin notice also that here

Jesus calls Zacchaeus a son of Abraham now what was Abraham famed for he was renowned for his faith he believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness and that's exactly what we see with Zacchaeus he trusted Jesus he had faith in him and he responded to him in that faith and repentance and that's the question for us all here today how do we respond to Jesus now how do we respond to the Jesus who confronts us and says come down who says I must stay at your house today I've come to seek and to save the lost are you curious about Jesus or perhaps you know somebody who's curious about Jesus perhaps you've been curious for a long time perhaps that interest has been growing and it's led you to the point this morning where you realize you're confronted with

Jesus and now you're faced with a choice you can't just go on you can't just go on being curious just interested you realize you must respond to Jesus he's become as real to you as he was to Zacchaeus you've got to come down from the relative safety of your curiosity and invite him in or not which is it to be that's the choice that confronts all of us here but the choice that confronts people out there in the world around us and those we know and our friends and acquaintances somehow we've got to confront them with this Jesus with his compassion with his love for those who at the present moment are lost and are far from home may God give us the desire to trust in

him may God give us the desire to share that good news with others let's pray our loving heavenly father we thank you for

Jesus the greatest gift that has ever been given the greatest person that's ever lived in this world our great God and saviour Jesus Christ oh Lord our God we pray that the preaching of his word today everywhere would have impact on the lives of many people impact on people directly who hear that word and also impact indirectly through your own people being inspired and encouraged by that word to bring it to others also we know how the early church grew wasn't only through people like the apostle Paul preaching your word but people then believing that word and telling their neighbours about it Lord we pray that we might continue to see that great work going on Lord encourage us as we think of

[33 : 50] Jesus great work for us and the greatness of his person and that he is interested in us and that he's concerned for us and for the church here and for our community so Lord we ask a blessing upon us upon all whom we love and all whom we are concerned for we ask it in Jesus name Amen now we conclude by singing in Psalm 34 and we're singing there from verse 7 to verse 11 the angel of the Lord surrounds and guards continually all those who fear and honour him he sets his people free come taste and see the Lord is good who trust in him is blessed oh fear the Lord you saints with need you will not be oppressed from verse 7 down to verse 11 to God's praise