

Going Through the Needle's Eye!

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together now to Luke chapter 19. We're going to look this evening at verses 1 to 10, the account we have here of Jesus and his dealings with Zacchaeus.

As we've been following Jesus on this journey that Luke describes on the way to Jerusalem, it takes up as we saw the major part of this section of the book.

The middle section is largely taken up with that journey of the Lord to Jerusalem. And he's now only 23 miles or so from Jerusalem as you read about him here as he enters the city of Jericho.

So that his journey is just about to come to an end and very soon he'll be entering the city and all of that is going to mean for him in terms of his arrest and his death at Calvary.

And at this particular junction he comes to deal with Zacchaeus and provides for us one of the best known and probably one of the best loved incidents in all the Gospels.

[1 : 13] The event of Zacchaeus' conversion and how he brought out in the way that he spoke to the Lord, how he brought out the fact that his heart had indeed been changed by Jesus.

Now remember back in chapter 18 and at verse 18 on from there that we saw Jesus teaching of how difficult it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

After the rich ruler had actually had this interview with Jesus and had gone away from him without being prepared to really give his heart to the Lord.

Jesus said how difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Those who heard it said who can be saved? But he said what is impossible with men is possible with God. And what you're seeing in Zacchaeus is precisely that.

[2 : 15] It's an incident where a rich man goes through the eye of a needle. Where a man enters into the kingdom of God although he is a very rich man.

What is impossible with men is possible with God. Let's look at three things. First of all the man Zacchaeus was when Jesus met him.

Then secondly the moment Zacchaeus was changed. And then thirdly the man that Zacchaeus had become as a result of that change.

Just very simply these three points. The man that Zacchaeus was when Jesus met him. We're told here that he was called Zacchaeus and he was a chief tax collector and was rich.

And he was seeking to see who Jesus was. But he couldn't actually see him because of the crowd and he was very small in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him for he was about to pass that way.

[3 : 20] He was a very rich man. He was a chief tax collector. We've already come across tax collectors in this account that Luke gives us of Christ's ministry. And tax collectors generally were Jews who had come under the employment of the Roman authorities in order to gather taxes.

And just like tax men in every age they're not very popular. They have to do a job but many people don't like what they're doing and don't like them for what they're doing.

And it was even worse for Zacchaeus. Not only are we told he was rich and he was a tax collector. He was actually a chief tax collector. He was actually above the tax collector.

He was probably somebody who had tax collectors working under him. So that the takings from the tax collection, the extras that were always charged by tax collectors for Zacchaeus, that meant that he was really rich indeed from these pickings.

Jericho was a very good situation for a chief tax collector. There was a place through which many of the trade routes had to go in order to go from one side of the country to another or from one country to another.

[4 : 37] Jericho was very strategically placed and a lot of the trade routes went through it and people who were having to pay taxes would come through on that route. And therefore Zacchaeus cashed in on that.

Now I know we like to think of Zacchaeus as someone that has such a nice sweet story. And it is. It's a beautiful, beautiful passage.

We've been familiar with most of us since we were young I'm sure. But Zacchaeus would not have been a very nice man. He would have been very, very unscrupulous.

He would have been somebody who wouldn't think twice about taking more money than he should from a poor widow. He would have been somebody who would really just manipulate things so that all the extra cash would come into his pockets.

He was a man who was interested in lining his pockets, in filling up his bank accounts in any way he possibly could. And it didn't matter how corrupt the ways were. Someone like Zacchaeus would not have been interested in how he got his money.

[5 : 44] That's why they were hated so much. Not only were they taking in taxes, but the people knew that they were actually charging far more than they should. And that's what really describes the sense of amazement that the people themselves had when Jesus invited this man to go for him to be his guest in his house.

The people grumbled, they all grumbled and said that he has gone to be guest with a man who is a sinner. This man was despised. This is not the kind of person, if you were to say, do you know Zacchaeus?

You wouldn't say, oh yes, he's a really nice man. He's a really kind, gentle soul. No, he's not. To begin with, that's not the kind of person Zacchaeus was at all.

He had made his money in that unscrupulous way. But he was interested in seeing Jesus. He sought to see who Jesus was.

But on account of the crowd, he couldn't because he was small of stature. Now that's a very interesting point in itself. Here is a man you wouldn't think would be interested in someone like Jesus.

[7 : 02] Someone who had really taught, whether Zacchaeus had heard it or not, who had taught about the difficulties that money makes for a person, that riches make for a person.

Who had taught that it wasn't really how much you had of material things in the world that counted, but that you were rich towards God, that you were a member of the kingdom of heaven. You wouldn't imagine that someone like Zacchaeus would really take much of an interest in Jesus.

And the interest he had in Jesus doesn't seem to begin with really to have much of a spiritual interest about it. And indeed, that's one of the great points in the story, that here is a man who began with an interest in seeing who Jesus was.

He'd obviously heard about him. He'd heard about his reputation. Maybe he'd heard him preach before now. Now, who knows, but he was interested in seeing just to cast his eyes on him for himself.

It's a bit like that, isn't it? When you hear somebody's voice very often, whether it's on the radio or whenever it is, and you begin to ask yourself, and you might wonder what that person looks like.

[8 : 07] And especially if it's somebody with a really interesting voice, you really, every time you hear that person, you would really want to get a picture of them or to see them.

And see if your mental image of what that person looks like really fits them in real life. Does the voice and what it projects of this image that you have in your mind, is it really true to life?

Well, maybe there was something like that in Zacchaeus, that he really just wanted to see who this Jesus was, who'd been causing all of this stir as he went about, and all of these large crowds following.

Who is this man? You see, it fits with the question that Luke has been asking all the way from the beginning of the Gospel. Who is this man? So that you and I will come to ask ourselves, who is he to me?

What do I make of him? And the great thing is that even though it was just an interest in seeing him in the beginning, it really developed into an interest in receiving Christ into his life.

[9 : 14] It doesn't really matter what causes our interest in Jesus. What's important is that it's there. What's important is that we do have an interest in him, that we are drawn to him.

After all, Jesus does draw people to think about who he is. You cannot possibly surely read a Gospel like the Gospel of Luke, and all that you find in there about Jesus, without actually asking yourself this question, well, who is he?

What am I to make of him? Where does he fit into my life? What is my future if it doesn't contain Jesus in it? And what Luke is telling us in this passage is that an interest in Jesus is an interest that needs to be widened up, that needs to actually be developed, that needs to actually be taken to Jesus himself, so that it will develop into a receiving of him, a welcoming him into your life.

So here's the man, Zacchaeus. Not a very nice man, a very unpopular man, a man who's hated, but he has this interest in seeing who Jesus was.

And he did something rather unusual for a man of his standing in society. He ran on the head and climbed up into a sycamore tree, for he was about to pass that way.

[10 : 45] He wasn't really concerned what people might think of him. His interest in Jesus was so intense, that something that most people would regard as just rather uncomely, that he ought to be ashamed of himself for doing such a thing, nevertheless he did it.

And surely that says something about our interest in Christ as well. Does it really matter what people think at the end of the day? Does it matter what people's opinion of us is, if it's something to do with our interest in Jesus?

Does it really matter as long as we get to where he is, as long as we get to see him, as long as we actually have our interest developed, as long as that comes to grow into our welcoming of Christ?

That's what matters. For you to get to him, for you to come to him, for you to get to know him, for you to receive him into your life, that is what really counts. Not what somebody thinks of you doing so.

Because that's going to be of no account whatsoever, if you lose your soul. So he was an interested individual, though he was hated by so many people.

[12 : 00] And then you come to the moment that his life changed. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, or I must stay at your house today.

There are probably many trees like this all around the place. Jericho was a place of balsam trees, so it would be a place that had many trees like the one that Zacchaeus climbed.

They were very low trees. This is not the kind of sycamore you get here. They were very low squat trees that you could easily climb. There would be many such trees, and there would be many people like Zacchaeus probably who had gone up into these trees to get a better view of Jesus over and above the heads of the crowd.

But this one man is where Jesus stopped. This one tree is the one that Jesus actually stopped at, and looked up and spoke to the man who was there, and knew him by name.

He knew the exact spot, and he said to Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus. Well, I wonder what the expression on Zacchaeus' face was like.

[13 : 22] He probably didn't expect this. He had an interest in seeing Jesus, but he wouldn't have been expecting this Jesus, this great teacher, this rabbi, whatever he thought of him up to that point.

He wouldn't have actually expected, and he would stop at that tree that he had climbed, and look up into his face and say, Zacchaeus, you're the one that must today find a place in your house for me to be your guest.

That's what happened. And sometimes that's how Jesus brings people into his kingdom. They're not the people we might expect.

If we had been part of that crowd, we would probably have been horrified, as they were indeed, aghast at the fact that Christ had stopped, and this man, why would he want this type of person into his life?

Why would he actually want to be a guest in the house of this man? Why? Because the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. And if the lost is a rich man, he must still save him.

[14 : 34] And if he's a poor man, he must save him. And they are saved on the same account of Christ's worth. Zacchaeus, come down immediately.

Are you glad tonight that Christ knows your life? Surely you're not one of these people that would rather hide it from him? One of these people that knows that Christ knows about you, but is really concerned to not think about that, to not let this really enter into your mind, thinkingly, so that you will actually bring all these things before him and say, Lord, I know that you know my life, and I need you to fix it up for me.

He knew this man. He knew who he was. He knew by name. And one of the really precious things for us, as we come to know the Lord, is that he knows us so well, that he knows us individually, that he knows our condition, that he knows the details of our lives, that he knows our thoughts, that he knows our needs, that he knows our past, that he knows our future, that everything about us is known to him.

Everyone in this building tonight, Christ can lay his finger on you and say, I know everything about you. I know what you're thinking right now. I know what your opinions are of me.

I know what you've done with me up to now. I know what the problems in your life are. I know what's of great concern to you. Zacchaeus, he knows all about him.

[16 : 23] But he said, Hurry and come down. Make haste and come down, for I must stay at your house today. Not only did Jesus make it so very personal to him, not only did Jesus deal with him as an individual, which probably most people would not, by that stage of Zacchaeus' life, they wouldn't be interested in Zacchaeus, the man, the individual, and his needs.

He was just a hated personality. They hated what he did. They hated him for it. They just dismissed him. And Christ stopped over him and took an interest in him personally and dealt with him so personally that you can see that whoever is in need, this is the kind of saviour that comes to deal with our lives.

A saviour who knows every aspect of us and deals with us personally. You're never a statistic in the eyes of Jesus. You're never just a number or a label.

You're a real person with real personal needs. And that's what Jesus stops over and deals with. And you notice it says, Today I must stay at your house.

You didn't say, Zacchaeus, if it's okay with you, I'd like to stay at your house today. I'd like to have dinner with you. That's not what Jesus said to him. He said, Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.

[17 : 48] And that word, must, is really a word that carries such a lot of theological meaning and teaching in it as it's used in such places as this. because it's a word that's packed with Christ's own understanding of his mission.

When Jesus said to Zacchaeus, I must stay at your house today, what he's saying is, my visit to your life and to your house, Zacchaeus, today is part of my mission.

It's part of my ministry. It's what I came into the world to do. I must, it's part of what I came for. It belongs to my saving mission into the world.

I can't avoid it. I can't go past you. You have to today become one of my people. And he did say to him, today I must stay at your house.

Not tomorrow. Not when Zacchaeus thought it was the best time for him to be entertained. No, Jesus said, I must stay at your house. Something that is indispensably the case.

[18 : 59] And also I must do it, Zacchaeus, I must do it today. Time is short. I'm on my journey. I'm passing through Jericho. I'm not going to be here a long time. Today, or not at all.

And what does that mean for Zacchaeus? Well, it means that he's got to decide there and then. He's got to deal with this statement of Jesus as it is.

He's got to give it his whole mind. He can't afford to spend too long over it. And he must decide there and then what he's going to do.

Is he going to say yes to it? Or is he going to refuse and say, I'm not for that. And there's a lesson in that for us too.

We're never encouraged in the gospel to think about receiving Christ tomorrow. We're never encouraged in the gospel to delay anything to do with our soul's well-being.

[20 : 08] We're never encouraged by God anywhere in the scripture to put off what he himself says is important for us to do now. In the gospel, Christ is drawing near to my soul and to your soul whatever our situation in life is, whatever our relationship with him is, and he's saying, what you need me for, whether you're a Christian or not yet converted, what you need me for, you need me for it now.

Now. Today I must abide at your house, not tomorrow. And Zacchaeus then responded.

And there are two things about his response that are interesting and significant for us. So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. The first thing is, he hurriedly came down.

Jesus said, hurry and come down. Zacchaeus complied, he hurried and came down. He did exactly as Jesus required of him, as Jesus dated to him.

He didn't say to Jesus, oh Lord, my house is not very tidy, I would prefer it if you'd leave it till tomorrow or for some time that's more convenient to myself. That wouldn't do.

[21 : 28] That was not going to be of any benefit to Zacchaeus at all. It's not so much what he thinks of himself or of his house or of what his condition in the house or the condition of the house might have been.

Christ has spoken and to benefit from it, Zacchaeus must immediately say yes. Doesn't that say something to you and to me too?

He hurriedly came down. Our obedience to Christ is not obedience if it's just promised obedience.

Our obedience to Christ is not obedience if we're saying to ourselves I will do it but not now. It's only obedience as you obey.

As you hurriedly come down in response to his word. As you respond obediently that's your obedience. That's what Christ is looking for.

[22 : 37] That's what Christ deserves. That's what Christ demands. That's what he's asking for now. And he received him joyfully.

That's the second thing. Now both aspects of that are important. Not just the receiving but receiving him joyfully. when you think of what this means literally for Zacchaeus it meant that Jesus Christ was that very day going to be a guest in his house.

In other words when you think of what it is for a host that Zacchaeus was going to be it was so important for someone as a host to welcome their guests to make sure that their guests were truly welcomed into the meal or the banquet whatever it is.

And when you actually put the spiritual meaning onto that that it conveys to us what it really is saying to us is that receiving Jesus is actually the same thing as welcoming him.

And if we haven't welcomed him we've never received him. Because receiving is welcoming. It's saying to the Lord welcome into my life.

[23 : 53] welcome into my heart. Welcome into this place the soul of mine. Make it your house. I'm pleased.

I'm delighted to have you as my guest. There's nothing greater that you can do. There's nothing more important for us to do.

It works both ways doesn't it? We're thankful that Jesus receives us when we come to him without sin and without confession.

That we come to a saviour who is promising he will receive us. But there's our side of it as well. That when Jesus offers himself in the gospel as he is always doing take me as your saviour is saying we receive him.

We welcome him. And what greater welcome could there possibly be than the welcome of a sinner for a saviour?

[25 : 02] The welcome of someone who is a sinner. A welcome given to one who is their saviour. What greater possible welcome could there be than that?

What greater occasion could there be for a welcome than that? You can't think of any other situation where a welcome is more appropriate or more necessary than in the case of a sinner who would otherwise die and spend eternity in hell forever.

That's the person that welcomes Jesus so that that will not be their eternity. What a welcome. we must give to the Lord when it's a welcoming as a saviour to us.

In an ordinary situation in life when your life is in danger, if you are trapped in a burning house and you couldn't make your own way out of it, you would welcome the voice of a fireman, someone coming in who is equipped to save you.

If you were actually on a ship that sank and you're left in the sea, you would welcome the sound of a lifeboat. and if you're a sinner, as we all are, we surely give a welcome to the sound of the saviour drawing near and saying, Zacchaeus, come down today, you can welcome me as your guest.

[26 : 42] And he received him joyfully. That's a grand word too.

He didn't receive him in a way that was reluctant about it, he didn't receive him in a way that just kind of matter of fact went about it, as if he was just saying, well, he's asked me to welcome him into my house, I don't have much option, so I'll just do it, I'll just go along with it.

He welcomed him joyfully, because something had changed. Zacchaeus would never forget that tree.

Maybe he even went out afterwards and wrote his name on it, because it certainly meant a lot to him, because in that tree he met with salvation.

In that tree he met with someone who changed his whole life. He received him joyfully. And where is joy more appropriate than in relation to a sinner welcoming a saviour?

[27 : 59] Go back to the prodigal returning in chapter 15, returning to his father, returning to the home that he had left. after all of these years away in the wildernesses of life, away wasting his substance, when he came back to his father, what did his father do?

He prepared a great banquet. And then he said, it is appropriate that we rejoice. For this my son was lost and is found, was dead and is alive.

Rejoicing. Joy is so fitting, so appropriate in the soul of someone who has come to know salvation. Not only that, but you remember in chapter 15, it goes further than that and says about this shepherd who lost one of his sheep, who had one of his sheep lost, does he not leave the ninety and nine and go after the one that is lost till he finds it?

And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing, and when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbor saying to them, rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.

Just so I tell you, there will be joy in heaven over one sinner. who repents. Joy is so appropriate in the salvation of one sinner, that not only is there joy on earth and in that sinner's heart, there is even joy in heaven over it.

[29 : 41] There is rejoicing in the presence of God. It is such an important, joyous occasion that God marks it by rejoicing in heaven.

He received him joyfully. Receive Christ. If you haven't received him, receive him because he is offering himself to you now in the gospel.

Receive him because that will make such a radical change in your own whole of your life, in all your comings and goings.

receive him joyfully because there should be no greater joy than the joy that we have in realizing what redemption is.

As we said this morning, God is set on removing sin from the life of his people, from their very persons. God is what joy therefore is appropriate when you think about what it means to be saved.

[30 : 52] The joy of having your sins guilt taken away and the righteousness of Jesus marked in God's record instead of it. The joy of knowing that the power of sin has been broken in your life and that you have the Holy Spirit in your heart to enable you to conquer it.

The joy of expecting in the state of glory to be without the slightest trace of sin in your thoughts, in your desires, in your sight physically, mentally, psychologically, bodily, spiritually, in every possible way.

that's what glory is going to be like. And you can rejoice even in anticipation of it. As Peter said, though you don't see the Lord, yet believing, you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

It's as if he's saying what really belongs properly to heaven, to the state of glory, the rejoicing that is in glory, where there is no sin, and rejoicing on account of the fact that there's no sin.

It has kind of broken the banks of time, if you like, like a river breaking its banks, and it's just overflowed temporarily, at least, into this life, so that sometimes we get a glimpse of it and know it in our hearts.

[32 : 24] You rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory, a glory that you can't, and a joy that you can't fully fit into this life, because it's designed for glory, but oh, how good it is to know it, to experience it, to have the rejoicing of a Christian.

people grumbled. They all said, he has gone to be guessed with a man who is a sinner.

Isn't it wonderful that just like you find at the beginning of chapter 15 as well, some of the most vehement accusations that were thrown at Jesus are the most glorious truths about him.

this man received sinners and eats with them. And here it's a similar grumbling, this man has gone to be the guest with a man who is a sinner.

Is there anything more precious about Christ than that? That he's pleased to enter into our lives to be our guest, though he knows we are sinners.

[33 : 38] blessed Lord, no one else would have done it but himself.

To be the guest of a man who has sinned, and that's what it is for yourself today. As a saved person, you're welcoming Christ into your life.

You're pleased that he's gone in to share your life with you, to be your guest, you the sinner. And then there's thirdly, the message that Jesus gave, which is really the man Zacchaeus had become as well.

Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house since he also is a son of Abraham. But before that Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, behold Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I defrauded anyone, now he's not suggesting by that that he'd never done such a thing, what he knows is, what he's saying is that he knows full well he has indeed done such things frequently.

But now he's saying, I'm restoring that fourfold. In other words, he's gone far beyond what the law actually required in restitution, in restoring what had been gathered in by this kind of defrauding, as he puts it there, of charging taxes well beyond what was required.

[35 : 19] How do you know that Jesus changed Zacchaeus? How do you know that he left that tree with a new heart? Well, because of this. because before he met Jesus, his one concern in life was to fill his bank account in any way he could.

Now his concern is to empty it. To give away as much as he possibly can to those who had poored previously, he would have fleeced the food without even thinking, without a pang of conscience.

But now that Christ has entered into his life, now that Jesus has changed him right round, now that Christ has given him a new heart, he has a new outlook, and a new desire, he is a new creation.

And you can see it in the practicalities of his life, in his concern to make up for all the wrong that he had done to so many people. And Jesus said, today, salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.

It was a new message for a man with a new heart. Jesus was assuring him that he was indeed one of God's children, one of Abraham's spiritual descendants.

[36 : 45] For, he said, the son of man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. You see the way Jesus is putting it. He's saying, today, salvation has come to this house, and we could make a lot of that itself.

It wasn't just that Zacchaeus' life was changed, his household was changed. It brought something into that house that had never been there before. And all the people, however many that were in his house, would know, this is not the Zacchaeus we knew.

This is not the man who left this house this morning. He's quite different to the way he left. He's a new person. But Jesus is saying, not only is that true of him and of this house, but it's all to do with this, that the fact that the son of man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Now, the son of man was Christ, title for himself. And that's really what this whole passage and this whole event is about. It's a demonstration by Jesus of what his mission was for.

It was to seek and to save. Just like in chapter 15, the shepherd with the one sheep that was lost. He went out to seek for it first, and then to save it and take it back home with him to the rejoicing of his friends.

[38 : 28] Why is Jesus proclaimed in the gospel? Why do we bother preaching? we do it week after week?

Why do we focus so much on the same things? Sin, repentance, faith, salvation, regeneration, a new heart, a new beginning, a new chapter, eternity, heaven, hell, justification, righteousness.

is all to do with this. There's one great fact that must be in our minds to the end of the world, that the Son of Man has come, and he's come to seek and to save that which was lost.

And tonight in the gospel, he's still seeking, and he's still saving, and lost sheep are still hearing the voice of the shepherd, and he still requires them today.

Hurry up and come down, give me space in your life, for today I must abide at your house.

[39 : 50] Let's pray. Lord, we give thanks for your own great power, for the grace that brings salvation to us, and we give thanks for the way that you are able to master our lives, to take over our lives, to give us a will that will indeed receive you and welcome you gladly into our hearts.

Lord, we pray that for each of us here this evening we may know that welcome for ourselves, for it is those who welcome you in this life, of whom you have said that they will be welcomed by you into the eternal mansions above.

So grant, O Lord, we pray, that we may come this day and whatever our relation with you now is, that we may welcome you this night, and that if we have welcomed you already, that we will re-welcome you again.

Lord, hear us, we pray now, for Jesus' sake, Amen.