

Zacchaeus: The Man From The Excise Department

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a great delight to be back, and I had a nice time in Toronto, and I had lunch in Toronto with Lisa and her fiancé, and I think on the whole it's a good idea.

And so I hope you will support them, and I'm sure that one of these days Robert will turn up here and you will meet him. The talk today is on Zacchaeus.

It's from Luke chapter 19. I don't know where those fellows, Stephen, James, and Tom Cooper have taken you, but just sort of get this background in mind, because I want you to sort of hear this story in the light of the background.

Remember that the Gospel of Luke, the most beautiful book in the English language, somebody said, is written and addressed to a patron whose name is Theophilus, who was a high-ranking Roman official in the city of Rome, where Christianity had just been discovered to be not Judaism as everybody assumed it was, but something distinctly different, something that was new, and something that a lot of people didn't understand, except that Christians were considered subversive to the empire and were therefore being put to death in very cruel ways.

And so it was that Luke writes to this man, whose name was Theophilus, and tells them, if you want to know what Christianity is about, I'm telling you. And he told them the stories.

[1 : 43] The story we have today of Zacchaeus is a story from the Gospel of Luke, unique to the Gospel of Luke, in that it doesn't show up in Matthew or Mark or John.

And it's a story which, like many other stories, involves encounter with the Roman people, the Roman Empire, because Zacchaeus owed his wealth to the fact that he was a tax farmer.

That is, he got the right from the Romans to collect taxes in a certain area, and he made good on that, so that you find out that he was both collaborating with the Romans, defiling himself with the Gentiles, accumulating considerable wealth, finding a place of social prominence in the community in which he lived, where the community was divided primarily between publicans, of which he was one, and priests.

And they were the two sort of classes that stood up and out of the society and culture of his day. So I want you to look at the man to see that it is through him and through his story that Luke is talking to Theophilus to persuade, to show him to show him what Christian faith means, and no doubt to seek to persuade Theophilus that he too might become a follower of Jesus Christ.

Zacchaeus' name means pure. He was in Jericho. Jericho is really a massive oasis in a desert where the sort of commercial highways intersected coming from east and south and west and north, and very prolific in growing fruit and trees, and it's a very lush kind of area in the midst of this desert.

[3 : 57] And it was there that Zacchaeus had the right to collect taxes, and it was there that he gathered his wealth.

As a chief tax collector, and there's lots of tax collectors in the New Testament, he's the only chief tax collector, his public prominence, his social prominence, the prominence which his wealth gave him, all those things came together.

And he was described in the story, if you look almost at the last line, as a son of Abraham. And that was where he found his identity as a son of Abraham.

Might be useful for you to contemplate where you find your identity. Because most of us are being, in a sense, pushed to the wall at the moment to try and find some identity which is over, above, and beyond our name and social insurance number.

And so people are looking to their culture, to their ethnic origins, to their religious origins, to some kind of grouping of people within whom they can find their identity.

[5 : 24] Social prominence or wealth don't seem to be enough. You need more. And these people, and in a sense, you see, one of the interesting things about it is that the Christian church has been

a predominant source of finding your identity.

I mean, it used to be significant to say, I am an Anglican, or I am a Baptist, or I am a Catholic. That was, but nowadays, you see, that demands a certain kind of, or in the eyes of the public, at least, it demands a certain level of moral rectitude, which it's not popular to have a lot of moral rectitude these days.

It's only, it's only admirable if you, if you have conviction. It doesn't matter what they're about. And so that we don't use those classifications anymore.

And so people in our society tend to be looking for some other form of identifying themselves. And that's hard to do. For Zacchaeus, it was easy to do because he was a son of Abraham, and that identity was something he was born to.

It was not something he had to aspire to, not something he had to acquire. It was given to him.

That's who he was. And he was under the covenant, which was marked by circumcision.

[6 : 51] And he was called a son of Abraham because of the direct lineal descendants from Abraham. Paul goes on to say, there are other kinds of children of Abraham.

Those who practice the faith of Abraham are the children of Abraham. But for Zacchaeus, he was not because he practiced the faith of Abraham, but because the blood of Abraham flowed through his veins.

The other thing that you can find out about him in this story is that he was lost. He was lost in the sense of the fact that he had gone from his father into a far country to seek his wealth and his fortune.

He had gone away to find him. And the reason I say that he was lost is because this story comes to its climax in terms of explanation when Jesus says that he came to seek and to save the lost.

And the story is Jesus seeking and saving this man, Zacchaeus, who was lost, like the prodigal son, like the sheep that the shepherd goes in search of.

[7 : 58] The most famous thing about Zacchaeus, which made him memorable to most Sunday school children, was that he was short.

And so when Jesus came along, he had to climb a tree to sit in it, to see Jesus. And that's how you have the picture of him being short.

I would like to give a talk on personality characteristics of people who are small of stature. Because they bully us.

They're very aggressive, very assertive, know what they want, and have long since been able to compensate for their diminutive stature by developing strong, assertive personalities so that generally you can walk through an office of people who all stand six feet tall and 200 pounds introduced to the boss who can hardly see over the top of his desk.

Well, that was the kind of man Zacchaeus was. And he knew how to compensate for that in that when Jesus was coming along, he climbed the tree.

[9 : 19] And the brief drama comes to its crisis when Jesus with his disciples going through the streets of Jerusalem comes under the tree in which Zacchaeus is perched and stops right under Zacchaeus and says, Zacchaeus, come down right away for today I am going to stay at your house.

It's a fascinating kind of encounter which Jesus initiated and to which Zacchaeus promptly responded.

The famous prophet and teacher and preacher and healer whom everybody knew about stood there in the crowd and identified Zacchaeus.

Well, what happened then was that Zacchaeus joyfully took Jesus to his house. The crowd followed on and watched and they were shocked.

And what happened was a murmur was set up among the crowd and the murmur was articulated as he has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.

[10 : 42] Murmuring is one of the most powerful forces in society. We have technological media murmuring that goes on now in which you can destroy leadership, you can ruin the morale of all sorts of people.

It, interestingly enough, comes in the concordance right after murder. You can go from murder to murmur. And it's enormously effective.

And you see it in the news every day when a murmuring starts up about this or a murmuring stops up. Whether it has even a shred of truth in it doesn't seem to limit the amount of damage that it can do.

And Moses was bitterly opposed to it and I'm bitterly opposed to it. But it's because you can listen clearly and to an unmistakable clear word from God.

Now it may be a preacher who's doing it. It may be somebody standing up and saying this is how God has come into my life. It may be somebody bearing witness to Christ as Christians should as his witnesses.

[12 : 11] And somebody makes a very clear statement. And then along comes the murmur. And the murmur destroys anything that has been said and anybody who's heard it.

It's just written off by that process all the time. the care and management of a parish church which is the business that I'm involved in that the constant forces of destruction are the murmuring waves that go through the parish and distort things and undermine things and it does an enormous amount of damage.

And that's what happens here because Jesus says quite clearly that he came to seek and to save the lost. The lost man that he came to save was Zacchaeus and when people heard his message they turned when people saw Zacchaeus come down out of the tree take Jesus to his home they began to murmur against Jesus saying he's gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.

Very interestingly though against the background of that murmuring there's something else that happens that's very important and if you the sort of scholars say that in contrast to the murmuring Zacchaeus stood up and made a statement they all murmured he's gone to be the guest of a sinner Zacchaeus stood up in the presence of them all and made a declaration so you have a wonderful contrast between Zacchaeus who stood up and made a very clear and committing statement about the effects of this encounter with Jesus on his life in opposition to the murmuring which was undermining the work and ministry of Jesus so it's interesting to see those two things in contrast and what Zacchaeus said was behold

Lord the half of my goods I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I restore it fourfold well the significance of that statement you can contemplate but obviously most of the people I talk to including when I talk to myself hope that there's going to come a time in my life when I am going to be able to make a stand to declare what I really believe to declare who I really am and it's not just going to be words from my mouth I'm going to do something so that people will know who I am and what I believe and that moment gets postponed and postponed and postponed and postponed it's a lovely thing that Lisa stood up and said I want to tell you something today because she's had a very interesting encounter with someone you see and the result of that she wants to tell you about it which is which is wonderful well something similar happened to Zacchaeus when he met

[15 : 36] Christ he knew that the life which he was living which presumably he wasn't particularly proud of except that it set him above everybody else provided him with lots of money but it wasn't the life that he wanted to live it wasn't for that reason that he went out and climbed a tree in order that he could just see this prophet go by it was because somewhere in his mind and heart was a longing and a desire to do and to be somebody else other than who he was that he could come to a point in his life where things could really change for him but most of us because of the demands and the pressure of maintaining our home maintaining our mortgage maintaining our lifestyle maintaining our family maintaining our place in society maintaining our reputation in the community most of us get locked into a situation where we never have a kind of moment of freedom where we can stand up and say this is who I am and this is what

I'm prepared to do and do it because that's what obviously what Zacchaeus did because it gives it not as though I am going to do this he says I am doing this half of all I have I'm going to give to the poor and anybody whom I have defrauded I'm going to restore to him fourfold I'm going to put enabled him to do that to bring him to that place where he was he was enabled to do it Jesus said to him Jesus interpreted this event in his life as being the result of today salvation has come to this house since he is also a son of Abraham the son of man has come to seek and to save the lost and that this has taken place and salvation has come to the house of

Zacchaeus now you might ask what is salvation and I'm going to tell you but what it means is that if you look at our life in our world at the moment the thing that is characteristic of our lives is that they are fragmented they're torn apart by all sorts of interests and all sorts of levels of involvement you're caught up in this issue and you're caught up in this issue and this determines what you have to do and this is where you have to go and this is what you have to be and you have to meet the demands of this member of your family and that member of your family and you have this to meet

and that to meet and the other thing to meet so you are all over ringing and somebody coming in the door to ask you to do something else.

And so that our lives are totally fragmented. Salvation means that you put something that is fragmented back together again. You give it some core. You give it some content. You give it some purpose. You give it some meaning. You establish some priorities so that this wholeness is given. And that you no longer are moving off in a whole lot of different directions. Wholeness is what Christ comes to bring us. In other words, to establish the center of gravity of your life so that you're not running around the periphery of your existence doing one thing after another in rapid succession so that the whole center of your being is totally whole.

[19 : 33] There's nothing there. And that's what it means when it says today salvation has come to this house. The purpose of God has intervened in this situation and changed it. And the demonstration of that is that Zacchaeus, who had depended for so long on his cultural position, his social position, his wealth, and so on, suddenly found a whole new basis for his life. It doesn't say what his wife thought of it.

But it does say that she was included in the impact of what happened to him because it says this came not only to Zacchaeus but to his household. So it's a very powerful story, isn't it? A powerful story of what happens when, remember this, Christ initiates this, isn't it? It's Christ who says to Zacchaeus, you come down because I'm coming to your house.

And that's what happens when, you come down because of the house. And that's what happens when you're going to your house. And that's what happens when you're going to your house. But Jesus initiated the transforming relationship in which salvation came to his house.

These things seem to have happened in this story. And I just want to tell you them as I conclude. That Jesus takes the initiative in approaching Zacchaeus.

That Jesus does not turn from the insignificance of the individual to address the mob. He turns from the mob to address the individual. And in our society, of course, it is the other way around.

[21 : 21] People are interested in addressing the mob, but the individual significance gets smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller. You can ignore them.

And the more important you get or the more powerful you get or the more prestigious you get, you have to consider your public. But Jesus, with a great crowd following him, centers out one man. And the story of that day is marked not by all that happened between him and the crowd, but by what happened between him and one person. And that, to me, seems to me a different direction totally from what usually happens in our world.

The third thing is that Jesus knew exactly what he was looking for. He was looking for a man who was lost and that could be found.

And he found him in Zacchaeus. So Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. And for most of us, the religious dimension of our life is kind of wandering around in a no man's land trying to find some meaning or some purpose or something that makes sense to us.

[22 : 33] And it's in the encounter with Jesus that this all came together for him because Jesus knew what he was doing in seeking and saving the lost. I want you again to notice the devastating impact of murmuring.

And then I want you to look finally at the freedom that Zacchaeus found in this event. And when I was in Kenya last year and we were discussing evangelism with people from many different parts of the world, and I told them some of the brilliant, fascinating stories of North America and how people were coming to Christ in North America and putting their faith in Christ.

Do you know what they did? I don't think they believed me. The reason they didn't believe me, because they saw North America largely in terms of the rich young ruler who comes to Christ and is sold the cost and he turns away.

He says, when we hear about Christianity in North America, it doesn't sound like the story of Zacchaeus to us. North America, you know, is the rich country of the world.

So why, if people are really hearing the gospel there, does this kind of thing not take place? You know, are they simply using the Christian gospel as a kind of ethnic identity crisis in which they find some meaning for their lives?

[24 : 21] Or is it not possible that if the gospel is really being preached and people are really responding, that there's going to be a radical difference in their lives, which will be easily demonstrated?

Because for Zacchaeus, there was a radical difference in his life in response to this encounter with Christ. I find that terribly convicting, that that should take place.

And I, you know, I often feel as a clergyman and as a preacher, that the people want to hear about Jesus.

But they want to hear it in a way that it's not going to make a difference. You know, to the things that, the priorities that they've already established.

And yet, it looks as though, even if an outward change doesn't come, there comes in our encounter with Christ, the moment when we can do what Zacchaeus did.

[25 : 45] Not get caught up in the murmur by which they wanted to discount Christ, what he was doing, show his inconsistencies. But where Zacchaeus was able to stand up and say, I found a sort of moment of truth for me, the moment of freedom.

And I want to say that half of what I have, I give you to the Lord. I'll repay anybody fourfold. This meaning is a corrupt man, necessarily. But it meant that his life was going to be lived on a different basis.

The mission I took last week, and I want to give you this line. It's a good one. And the mission I took last week, I was talking about a man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things which he possesses.

And there was an insurance salesman in the front row, whose general theory about life was the opposite. And that he was selling the management of personal security.

And when the talk was over, he came up and he said to me, he said, You know, that's right.

Because in fact, our business has mostly become the management of personal greed.

[27 : 04] And he said, billions of dollars look to me as though they are being put into that. In the business that he's in. I won't tell you what firm he works for or anything else like that.

But there is a kind of line, isn't there? And this amazing story of a rich, socially prominent, aggressive businessman who came to the point where he readjusted his priorities in the light of a relationship to Jesus Christ.

It's something we need to confront, not as a crowd, but individually, because Christ confronts us individually.

It's a prayer. Although it would be fascinating to know what Theophilus thought when he read this story.

A position of power, a position of prominence. What would he think? The only thing we can know, our God, is what we think.

[28 : 16] What we do with the hopes and longings and stirring, which come into our hearts as we think of this story and see what's happening.

So help us to take the story with us, not to lose it in the wave of murmuring, which destroys so much in our world it's valuable, but to hold on to it as a word from you and to look for the freedom and the grace to be able to respond to you as the kind of boldness that's a key.

It is humans... Dogs ■■■■