

To Seek and to Save the Lost

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 November 2004

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 0 0] As we stand, let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you because Jesus has died and has risen as we have just proclaimed. And we thank you for the power of Jesus to change our lives today.

And we ask, Father, that your Holy Spirit would change us as we hear your word. We ask this in his name. Amen. Please be seated. Well, it would be helpful if you turn to Luke 19, 1 through 10, which was just read before the Creed.

This is a story that many of you are very familiar with. It's a story that's a favorite in Sunday school. It was certainly one of my favorite stories. And I think one of the reasons that it is for children is because kids can relate to being short in a crowd and wanting to be able to see the parade and needing to get up front or on somebody's shoulders.

Probably it's popular, too, because kids like the idea of a somewhat responsible adult clambering up a tree in front of everybody so that they can see well. And I think probably there's also the fact that here is an underdog, an underdog who wins.

Jesus picks the least popular person to come to stay at his house. But, you know, this story that we heard is not just a great Sunday school story that's popular.

[1 : 3 1] It's got great characters and so forth. It's incredibly important for us. It's tremendously important. Because what this is saying is it tells us what Jesus' mission is.

In fact, those 10 verses are actually an illustration of what Jesus is all about. Look at verse 10. We'll jump right to the end. He sums it up.

He said, What you've just seen, the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. And that's an important reminder for us at St. John's today.

Because it tells us why we're gathered here today. It tells us why we have the various ministries that we have in this church. It tells us why we train people to be involved in full-time ministry.

It tells us why we serve each other and care for each other in this church. It's because the gospel of Jesus Christ is God's power to save.

[2 : 3 2] And we are bringing the message of the living Jesus into people's lives. Into a world that is lost. And Jesus brings salvation.

And what we see in Zacchaeus is just how powerful fellowship with Jesus is. It's an account of remarkable conversion.

It's the gospel coming into someone's life and utterly changing them. Turning this man's life right upside down. Because as we see here, Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector.

Not only was he in a profession that was considered to be sinful by everyone in that city. He was a chief tax collector. He was in charge of that whole business there.

And he did pretty well in Jericho. Because Jericho was a key city on a trade route from Jerusalem to all the points east. And there was lots of money changing hands.

[3 : 3 0] Lots of business taking place in the city. So it was a great spot for a tax man. Especially for somebody overseeing it all. And Luke tells us that he was rich.

But as I said, he would have been despised by most people in that city. Because he had cheated many of those who he collected tax from. As we find out later in the passage.

But he was also the leader of this occupation that was sinful. And so he was shunned by the people of God. Even though he was a Hebrew. So here's a guy, Zacchaeus, who is as far away from God as one can get in that society.

But of course, everything changes in the course of these ten verses. In a day in Zacchaeus' life. And wonderfully, it all begins with a little thought.

There's a little thought in Zacchaeus' mind. And that was that I want to see who Jesus is. He wanted to see in verse 3 who he was. And you should know that little thoughts that you have about Jesus are dangerous.

[4 : 40] They're dangerous if you want to remain the same and unchanged. They're dangerous if you want to cling on to an idea that Jesus doesn't have anything to do with our life.

And is not powerful. You see, Zacchaeus had probably heard of Jesus and some of the things he was doing. And something in him made him begin to want to look at him.

Well, that's the Holy Spirit working in his heart. However, as of course you know, he's very short. He knows he wouldn't have been well treated by the crowd.

So there's no way that he could get up in front of people. And so he got creative. You know, he figured out where Jesus was going. He goes on ahead and he climbs a tree swallowing his pride so he can get a really good look at this person who he wanted to see.

Well, of course, when Jesus comes to that spot finally with all these crowds, all of a sudden he stops. And there's this dramatic sort of Jesus looking up.

[5 : 41] And he says, Zacchaeus. And that must have shocked Zacchaeus. He must have said, how does this guy know my name? And what else does he know about me? Here's a guy who seems to be able to look into people's hearts.

And right away Jesus says to him, make haste and come down, for I must stay at your house today. And you can't miss, in Jesus' voice there, a real sense of urgency.

He is saying, I must come and stay at your place. You've got to hurry and come down. And he's saying, really, that you are my mission. You are the reason why I came to Jericho.

And I think that this tells us something really important about the Gospel. It tells us that it is very personal. That Jesus comes into our lives and calls us by name.

And he says that you are his mission. That you are the one that he is seeking. That he is looking for. And with that personal call, that personal coming to each of us, there is always a response that Jesus calls for.

[6 : 59] He doesn't call us just to be passive and say, oh, somebody's calling me. He calls us to actively respond. And that's why all through the Gospels you see Jesus saying, come to me, follow me, believe in me.

And in Zacchaeus' case he says, come down. Because I'm going to stay at your house. And what does Zacchaeus do? Well, he is our model. He obeys exactly.

Luke describes it as, he made haste and came down. The same words that Jesus used in his command. But not only that. Not only was it that he responded quickly.

But it also says in that verse, he received him joyfully. In verse 6. There's a real meaning behind that little phrase.

It means that Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his house and his life. It means that with joy, he introduced his family and those he knew to this person, who he was so joyful to have in his life now.

- [8 : 07] And this is really what we as a church hope and pray for above all other things. That people would receive the living Jesus joyfully.
- Into their lives. Into their families. Into those that they know around them. When people believe there is something joyful that occurs in people's lives.
- This is the nature of the gospel of receiving Jesus. And that's because there is a forgiveness of sins. An acceptance by God. Eternal life. New life.
- Real life. With real hope. This is what we pray for. For those around us. And this is what we pray and work for. For one another as well. We are going to have a mission in a week from today.
- Beginning with the Bach Cantata next Sunday. And during this week coming, for the 14th through the 21st, there's going to be a number of events. That are really designed for people who are curious about Jesus.
- [9 : 10] As Zacchaeus was curious. And my hope is, and certainly the hope of many in this church, is that not only will you invite people to these events. But also that you would pray that those who come will joyfully welcome the living Jesus.
- Joyfully welcome the gospel that they will be hearing. It is so important that we as a church are really persistent and active in this kind of prayer.
- That there will be a joyful welcome of Christ. And for Zacchaeus, that joy very simply comes from the fact that he was a sinner accepted by Jesus Christ, who stayed with him through the night and ate with him and became part of his life.
- Well, that is our hope for those around us. But you know, in verse 7, we see that the crowd didn't get Jesus' mission. And so, in verse 7, it says that when they saw him go to Zacchaeus' house and stay with him, they murmured.
- And you know the word murmur is never good in the Bible. It always means that people are grumbling, they're not happy about the way things are turning out, and they want to complain.
- [10 : 28] And they're saying, how could it be that somebody who is so far away from God, Jesus would stay with? How could somebody who's bringing the kingdom, which Jesus said, actually stay at somebody's house?
- But what they really didn't understand, their great misunderstanding, was that what Jesus was doing in Zacchaeus' house was not affirming Zacchaeus in his sin.
- Jesus, as we see in verse 10, was going there to save him. He was going there to transform his life.
- And this misunderstanding about Jesus' mission in welcoming sinners is very widespread in our church today. And so often you'll hear in Anglican churches how important it is that we are an inclusive church.
- You'll hear it over and over again. So important is it to be an inclusive church that those who hold that view are very exclusive of anyone who doesn't hold it.
- [11 : 31] And this is something that stems from a misunderstanding of the gospel of Christ. Because they are absolutely right in saying that we should be inclusive.
- The passage tells us this, doesn't it? It says that the mission of Jesus includes those who are the furthest away from Jesus. And that if we are to be faithful to him, we must include people in our church who have very un-Christian lifestyles.
- And welcome them in to our gatherings. But sadly, those who talk about being inclusive often stop at verse 7.

They don't have a full understanding of the gospel. And so they assume that being inclusive means affirming people in their sin. It means resisting change that God might bring to them.

Because it might be judgmental of God to call for a change in life. But the very nature of the gospel, the very nature of being in fellowship with Jesus, is that he will transform our lives.

[12 : 37] And I want you to see how that happens in this passage. In verse 8, we see that Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.

And you see what's happening here. Is that there is a massive change that takes place in his life. And the only reason for it is, is because he has had fellowship with Jesus that day.

In his home, with his family, and so forth. And because of that fellowship, he changed. Utterly and completely. So radical is his change in lifestyle, that instead of taking away money from people unjustly, he gives half of his wealth to the poor.

Instead of defrauding people, he gives to those same people much more than they actually deserve. You see, there's this fundamental and massive change that goes right to the heart of Zacchaeus' life.

All because he had fellowship with Jesus. And you see, what that tells us, is that the gospel is so powerful that repentance and transformation will always come with it.

[13 : 58] When you come in contact with the living Jesus, when you have fellowship with God through him, he will always change your life. And that change will take place in very practical ways.

It will take place in the way we relate to people. In the way that we use our money. In the priorities we have in our lives. In the goals and the dreams that we have.

Those will be all changed and turned upside down because of fellowship with Jesus. And we would, in fact, be a very hopeless and weak church if we simply included people without telling them about the loving power of God in his gospel.

We would actually be denying them the very thing that Jesus came to give each person. And that is the gift of salvation. And that word's very important.

You see in verse 9, when Zacchaeus publicly announced his repentance, Jesus explained what had happened to him. Jesus said, this is what has happened in verse 9. Today, salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house.

[15 : 06] That word salvation in the Bible always means being delivered from the grip of sin. Being saved. And it also means a restored relationship with God that extends into eternity.

You see, there is a radical and permanent change that takes place as a result of that restoration. As a result of that freedom. And that is the world's deepest need.

That is what this world, which Jesus says is lost, needs above any other thing. And may God help us never to exclude anyone from the freedom and the restoration that can only be found in Jesus Christ.

Well, this account about Zacchaeus, as I said at the beginning, is a real help to us. Because what it does is to clear our vision of what we as Christians and we as a congregation all together are about.

We are meant to be directly involved in a mission that's really clear. And it's Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost. One of the great gifts for me of this passage, and I hope for you as well, is it actually deepens our confidence in the living Jesus.

[16 : 29] It deepens our confidence in the gospel. You know, in that previous chapter, I don't know if you remember, but Jesus said, look, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

And those who heard it were astounded. They said, well, you know, who can be saved then? And what does Jesus say in response? He says, what is impossible with people is possible with God.

And what Jesus is doing in Zacchaeus' life is showing what God makes possible. He chooses to come into the life of a man who not only was rich, but was well known for his sin.

And the result was salvation for Zacchaeus and a radically new life. And so we're able to see how powerful and how far-reaching Jesus is, how powerful and far-reaching his gospel is.

It's saying that there's no one that Jesus doesn't seek. There's no one who has done things that are beyond his ability to save and bring back into fellowship with Jesus Christ.

[17 : 39] There's no one who is beyond being utterly transformed by his power. And this is the great treasure that we have at St. John's.

Jesus Christ is with us. He is alive and risen. That's the gospel that we preach. And we need to remember this and hold on to it because our faith in Jesus and his gospel can easily become eroded.

And we need Zacchaeus to remind us how powerful he is to save and transform real, live people. And I think that we can also look to people in our own congregation to see how transformations continue to happen today.

There are many different ministries as I mentioned at St. John's. Ministries like Living Waters and Discovering Christ and Grief Share and Sunday School, Central Focus Bible Studies, Women at Ten, and Divorce Care.

And there are many others. And in each of these we have seen people utterly transformed by the power of the risen Jesus, by the power of the gospel. on Friday we had a funeral for Ed Fukushima.

[18 : 57] And wonderfully God came into his life a year ago, almost exactly. And he had a new life even as he was dying of cancer. A new life where he was being renewed every day.

And there was an extraordinary change that took place in his life. So much so that the funeral on Friday was really every aspect of it was a testimony to the work of Jesus Christ in his life.

And there was joy in the middle of a very dark time. There was a joy and a grace that surrounded us as we met together. Just as that grace surrounded Ed in the last year of his life.

His life was a testimony to us. An encouragement of the power of the gospel. And you know next Sunday night I would encourage you Joel is going to talk about it but there will be a service on Sunday night where several people from this congregation will give a testimony of the power of Jesus in their life and what God has done in them.

It's encouraging to hear that Jesus who transformed Zacchaeus' life has not changed and he continues to save in the same way. And so we close with Paul's words and their words for us as well.

[20 : 17] He says I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes. May God renew this conviction in each of our lives and in our church.

Amen. Amen. Amen.