

God's Rescue Mission

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[0 : 00] Well, we turn this evening to Luke's Gospel, the 19th chapter.

Our text is to be found at verse 10. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. I wonder how many of you have heard of a man called Ben Parsonage. In Glasgow, he was at one time a well-kent figure.

He worked on the Clyde and on the waterways of that city for over 50 years. He established an organisation known as the Glasgow Humane Society.

And over those 50 years, with little regard for his own safety, he is reckoned to have rescued or saved upwards of 300 people from drowning.

[1 : 15] The title of his biography sums up his life. Rescue his business.

Rescue his business. And really it's that title that comes to my mind this evening as we turn to Luke at this famous encounter in Luke chapter 19.

Because it is the theme of rescue that is very much at the forefront of this particular passage. It's an incident that takes us to the heart of the mission and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here in these verses, we are being reminded that Jesus Christ is above all in the rescue business. But Christianity is a rescue religion.

And indeed that's what sets it apart. Apart from many other religions. Jesus understood. Jesus saw himself as someone who was on a rescue mission.

[2 : 32] And so according to the Bible, Jesus Christ is the one person of whom it can supremely be said, Rescue is his business.

And indeed in his own words here, spoken right at the end of this encounter in verse 10, The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost.

But what does it mean to say that Christianity is a rescue religion? What does it mean when we say that Jesus is in the rescue business?

Lots of people today are very uncomfortable with that kind of language and with that kind of notion. Any idea of people standing in need of a rescue really goes against the grain.

Well, we might be willing to admit that we need a little help or a little assistance. But a rescue? That is surely just going a bit too far.

[3 : 46] And yet this is the clear implication of the verses before us tonight. Because in this well-known, indeed memorable incident and encounter, we are told, I think, three things about the rescue mission of Jesus Christ.

And the first is this. That it is a rescue mission that is directed towards the lost.

It's a rescue mission directed towards the lost. The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost.

So who are the lost? Who are these people that Jesus has come to rescue? Like so much of Jesus' teaching, we find the origin of his language and terminology are found in the Old Testament.

And the theme of being lost is most notably found in the prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. These were prophets during the time of exile, when many Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon.

[5 : 12] And we find these prophets referring to the people as lost sheep. Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 50 verse 6 says, My people have been lost sheep.

They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place. And in Ezekiel 34 verse 16, God says, I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.

I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. The sleek and the strong I will destroy. And I will shepherd the flock with justice. And it's this kind of prophetic language and prophetic word that stands behind the ministry and the mission of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus understood himself to be the good shepherd, seeking out the lost sheep. And of course, just a few chapters earlier on in Luke's gospel, Jesus describes and indeed defends his own ministry to the Pharisees in just those terms.

He tells, remember in Luke 15, that famous trilogy of parables, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost sons. So what do we mean when we say something is lost?

[6 : 38] I suppose in simple terms, we might say that something is lost when it isn't where it should be. We are lost when we are not where we should be on the map.

Our car keys are lost when they're not where we thought we left them. At the time of the exile, the Jews were lost because they were not where they should have been in terms of their relationship with God.

And those famous parables of Jesus, the sheep, the coin were lost. They were not where they should have been. The parable of the prodigal sons, the two brothers were not where they should have been in relationship to their father.

And here in Luke 19, we're introduced to this man, Zacchaeus. And the implication is this. Here was a man who was truly lost. The man was there by the name of Zacchaeus.

He was a chief tax collector and was rich. It tells us really two important things about Zacchaeus.

[7 : 47] First of all, he was a chief tax collector. One of the, perhaps, one of the most despised members of the community. The lowest of the low.

A treacherous collaborator with the Roman occupiers. Was someone who got rich at the expense of his fellow countrymen.

He was a crook. A swindler. Someone who might have been cursed and spat upon in the streets. Someone who made money, who made a profit on the backs of other people's misery.

He was a social pariah. Not the kind of person you would ever want to be associated with. Indeed, in verse 7, when Jesus goes to his house, we're told, aren't we?

In verse 7, when they saw it, they all grumbled, he's gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. So Zacchaeus was someone in the community who was very much a nobody.

[9 : 00] He was an outcast. He was despised. He was rejected by most others in the community. He was someone who was viewed as being so morally disgusting that no respectable person and certainly no religious person would have anything to do with him.

He wasn't just a tax collector. He was the chief of the tax collectors. He was the top man. And the second thing we're told, of course, is that he was wealthy.

He was rich. He wasn't just nasty. He was rich and nasty. It wasn't just that his wealth, I think, what Luke is telling us here, it's not just that his wealth was accumulated on the backs of others.

It is that he was a man given over in his heart to the pursuit of wealth and riches. He was a lover of money. And I think there's a very clear contrast drawn by Luke here between Zacchaeus in chapter 19 and in the previous chapter, the rich ruler in Luke 18.

I don't have time to look at that, but you remember what Jesus said to the rich ruler after encountering him? What he said to his disciples? How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

[10 : 23] Indeed, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. So Jesus says that and then just a few verses later on we discover Jesus encountering whom?

A rich man. People ask Jesus who then can be saved? Jesus says what is impossible with men is possible with God.

And yet the startling thing I think is this or one of them is this. The rich ruler you remember he went away from Jesus sad and dejected.

Clinging really onto his wealth. And yet this man Zacchaeus we discover is transformed into a generous man who joyfully and cheerfully gives away his wealth.

What a contrast. What is going on? The religious the good person goes away sad from Jesus. The bad person the irreligious person becomes full of joy.

[11 : 40] It's fascinating because you know the gospels tell us don't they that Jesus spent so much of his time and energy dealing with an affirming people who were on the margins. The moral failures.

Prostitutes tax collectors outcast lepers. These are the people for whom he had so much time. And yet those who cloaked themselves in religion and moralism those who considered themselves good

people actually he reserved his strongest and harshest comments for them. Something very unique to the ministry of Jesus. We think of that famous story I refer to it already you know the two sons the two brothers one a rebel tells his father you know dad I wish you were dead can't wait for you to die to get the money that's coming to me let me have it now I want to spend it while I'm still young I want to go in my own way I want to do my own thing absolutely outrageous request insulting in the extreme unthinkable really in this kind of traditional culture and yet this boy who wastes all his money and wine women and song is welcomed back into his father's arms his father says the son of mine was dead now he's alive again he was lost now he's found and yet the other son the good son by the end of the story he's left standing outside bitter and angry and joyless and unforgiving and judgmental and his self righteous pride perhaps more lost than his brother ever was in the far country and so Jesus rescue mission isn't in one sense for good people those that is those that think themselves good and strong and wise and powerful and proud Jesus is for the helpless and the weak and the broken he's for those who realize they're not good enough for moral failures and that says just as offensive let me tell you to many people today as it was in Jesus own day all through Luke's gospel Jesus indicates the welcome that heaven reserves for people who make a mess of their lives the welcome God gives to moral failures other religions generally speaking offer a ladder up to God they say keep these rules and follow this discipline and you'll find your way to God you can do it if you try hard enough you can do it if you work hard enough you can do it if you are good enough so much religion ancient and modern is simply a kind of moralism religion for the strong and the self-sufficient for the great and for the good and Jesus challenges that he confronts that kind of thinking he blows it out the water because he draws those near to those who are in need who can't make it on their own to the broken and the hurting and the lost and the outcast he comes to throw a ladder down from God and to the spiritually desperate I've come to seek and rescue lost people he says I've not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance and so Jesus whole mission is directed towards the lost and the Bible tells us we're all lost we're all not where we should be in relation to God yes some are like Zacchaeus lost rebels prodigals in the far country of disobedience and others are like the rich ruler and the elder brother and they're lost in their morality and their wealth and their even their religion but apart from Jesus Christ no matter who we are we are lost to God now sometimes people find it very hard to admit that they're lost I find it very hard to admit that I'm lost I'm in the car with my wife and we're traveling somewhere and we are and she thinks we're lost

[16 : 25] I don't like to look at the map or the sat nav I know where I am darling yes I know where I am pride is a terrible thing but sometimes we need to admit that's where our spiritual journey really begins when we start to admit actually I'm lost I'm not where I should be I wonder if you can admit that tonight it's a start it's a start but if you can admit that I have good news for you Jesus Christ came to seek and to save the lost it's a rescue mission directed towards the lost secondly it's a rescue mission in which

God takes the initiative a rescue mission in which God takes the initiative you know on the surface the story appears to be about a man seeking Jesus but on closer inspection we discover that actually it's the reverse that's true the initiative here lies with Jesus himself well you say well wait a minute didn't Zacchaeus want to see Jesus in verse three didn't he run ahead of the crowd didn't he climb the fig tree the sycamore tree to get a better look yes that that is all true but when we look a little closer we discover that the story is not so much about a man called Zacchaeus seeking Jesus as it is about Jesus seeking a man called Zacchaeus it's Jesus who seeks and finds not Zacchaeus it's Jesus who calls not Zacchaeus it's Jesus who invites himself to the house not Zacchaeus and indeed the punch line highlights this very point the son of man came to seek and save what was lost we don't rescue ourselves we don't seek after God in Christ God seeks after us after all God is not the one who is lost we are in my experience the car keys don't find themselves do they those three parables in Luke 15 it's the shepherd who goes out to look for the sheep it's the woman who goes out to look for the coin and even in the parable of the prodigals the father actually goes out to both sons in Romans 3 10 and 11

Paul says there is no one righteous not even one there is no one who understands and then he says no one who seeks God we are lost and we are unable to find our way back to God but Jesus has come to seek that which was lost we cannot find him but in his grace he can find us the gospel is not good advice telling us to pull up our socks and do a little better the gospel is Jesus Christ breaking into our lives the gospel is Jesus Christ calling us by name Zacchaeus come down

immediately I must stay at your house today so why why has

Jesus come to seek us out why has he come to find us why has he come to rescue us why do you search for anything imagine you're walking down the street and you pull your hanky out your pocket and perhaps there's a one pea and it falls out and it flips up into the air and it drops out and it lands in the gutter maybe down a drain or a stank and as you look down into the gutter you see where the one pea has rolled and it's fallen down into this drain and you see it protruding from all the the gunge and all the horrible stuff that's gathered there you're in your nice clothes what are you going to do you get down on your hands and your knees and the muck and you know do you try as best as you can roll or do you just leave it why search for anything only if in some way it's valuable to you only if it's worth something to you and

[22 : 00] Jesus says I'm searching I'm on a rescue mission for something valuable to my father and to myself you see the gospel tells us of a God who so values and loves his people that he has stooped down on his hands and knees and humbled himself and got dirty that we might be found and that friends is an astounding message the gospel tells us that we are valued that we are loved and that we are dear to the heart of our creator God you know we live in a world where so many people feel worthless or of no value whatsoever perhaps Zacchaeus felt like that despite all his wealth despite all his money I suspect that inside he was an empty man he felt absolutely worthless and perhaps you feel like that too maybe

I don't know maybe you've been reading to the scientists and the intellectuals of our age who delight to tell us that we're simply the products of chemical biological evolutionary chance we are utterly insignificant we have come from nowhere and we're going nowhere you're simply a blob of matter a pile of chemicals you're no more important than a rock I mean what an unbearable perspective that is or maybe you're someone and your life has gone wrong and things have taken a turn for the worse and there are family problems or there are financial difficulties and you're struggling to cope you feel worthless or maybe you've been through the breakdown of a relationship it's left you feeling alone or empty or unloved perhaps you're someone who's always been told ever since they were a child you're no good you're a waste of space you'll never amount to anything you're no more than a dirty one piece stuck in a filthy drain and who wants that who's going to get their hands dirty for you let me tell you that Jesus

Christ did he got his hands dirty not just his hands got his heart dirty got his whole self dirty came into this world for lost dirty one piece like you and I and he got dirty and messed up just to rescue us he was plunged into the filth and the squalor and the dirt of this broken world and of course here in these verses Jesus we're told is on the way to Jericho where was he going after Jericho he was going to Jerusalem actually tells us that in the previous chapter he was going to the cross and on that cross he was doing for us what we could never do for ourselves he was taking all that makes us feel worthless and all our sin and all our guilt and all our shame covered himself in all our filth that we might be pulled to safety and be made the very children of God and actually it's at the cross that God says I value you and I treasure you because I've shed my blood for you you're special to me you're my son you're my daughter you are somebody and friends that's what happened to Zacchaeus when Jesus came into his life today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a son of Abraham son of Abraham and an heir of eternal life I wonder if we know that this evening do you know yourself to be loved by God what an amazing what an amazing thing that is the gospel tells us that we have a God who loves us who values us who treasures us us we come to know and experience that love when like Zacchaeus we welcome Jesus Christ into our lives that's what it says he came down at once and welcomed him gladly it's a rescue mission directed towards the lost it's a rescue mission in which

God himself takes the initiative and thirdly here it's a rescue mission that changes lives God's grace comes to us where we are but it never leaves us there it pulls us up out of the mud and the mire and gives us a firm place to stand it puts a new song in our mouths even a hymn of praise to our God and really this is what happened this was the experience of Zacchaeus look what he says we read in verse 8 and Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord behold Lord half of my goods I give to the poor if I defrauded anyone of anything I restore it fourfold you see what's happened here those things that had so gripped Zacchaeus' life and so controlled his life and been at the very heart and centre of his life he is now willing and able to let go cheerfully and gladly you know those things that meant he was in control his money his wealth he now gives them up he gives up control of his life suddenly he wants to please

[28 : 40] Jesus Christ he wants to help others he becomes generous because the presence of Christ in his life brings change brings transformation and the idols of his heart are set to one side and their hold and their grip is broken by the power of Christ's love and grace and notice it's so important to notice this this is not a condition of entering the kingdom it is a result of entering the kingdom it's not as if Zacchaeus had to become generous before Christ would have anything to do with him his generosity is not a work that qualified him for acceptance with God it was the fruit of the presence of Jesus in his home and in his life so important to understand that I hear lots of people say this to me

I could never become a Christian I could never keep it going I could never do all of those things that Christians do I could never give this up I never could give that up I could never be good enough and of course they're right but what is impossible with men is possible with God Christianity is about Jesus Christ coming into your life without him it is impossible without the presence of Christ this kind of deep change we see in Zacchaeus' life simply cannot happen this generosity that Zacchaeus shows here went way beyond what the law actually required it was the product of a changed heart it's the power of grace because when

Jesus Christ comes into our lives he makes us a new people he gives us a new heart he gives us a new motivation we cannot renovate our own lives we cannot do it ourselves we do not have the power we don't have the motivation if Jesus Christ isn't in your life then there cannot be real change there can be superficial change you can clean yourself up you can look different but heart change takes the presence of Jesus Christ Zacchaeus didn't give away his money to the poor to make himself right with God or his life acceptable to God he gave away his money because he knew that God in Christ had already accepted him and already lavished his love upon him only the presence of Jesus Christ can make doing the right thing such a joy and a delight not a burden or a means to an end Zacchaeus didn't grudgingly oh okay Lord if you say so I will oh well no Lord Lord half of my goods I give to the poor and if I defrauded anyone of anything I restore it fourfold he's delighted to do it he's pleased to do it let me ask you tonight is Jesus Christ in your life has he lifted you up out of the mud and the mire and do you know

God's love not as a kind of vague abstract idea but as a living power and dynamic in your heart are you a child of God are you valued there always been two kinds of religion in this world religions that seek to do God a favour and a religion that seeks the favour of God religions of works and a religion of grace religions in which men and women seek after God and a religion in which God seeks after men and women religions that are all about self-help doing your best and a religion that's all about a rescue which one is yours tonight in others religions God says oh here are the rules do your best I'll maybe see you in heaven but in

[33 : 54] Christianity God runs out to meet us and embrace us he comes to seek us to find us to rescue us and to lavish his love upon us and so salvation is not a matter of self effort not ten not five not even one percent it is all from beginning to end a matter of God's grace and actually we don't find God's grace God's grace finds us just as it found Zacchaeus all those years ago in a sycamore tree let me ask you has God's grace in Jesus Christ found you has Jesus found you the son of man came to seek and save what was lost rescue is his business can you hear his voice this evening because he is calling your name and he's saying this

I must stay at your house today will you be like Zacchaeus and welcome him gladly rescue rescue is his business has he done business with you let's pray God our father we thank you that the message of the gospel is for people like us we thank you that Jesus came for people like us and our prayer is that the

Lord Jesus himself would come into our lives and reside in our hearts and reign over all that we are and all that we have that he would change us and transform us Lord we know that we do not deserve anything from you we deserve nothing and yet we marvel that all that you give us in Christ help us to welcome him gladly and may he work in us what is pleasing to him lift us up out of the mud and mire and set our feet upon that rock that is Christ Jesus our Lord in whose name we pray amen closing our service we sing from psalm 40 in the

Scottish Psalter psalm 40 the first four verses page 259 psalm 40 first four verses I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did bear at length to me he did incline my voice and cry to hear he took me from a fearful pit from the miry clay and on a rock he set my feet establishing my way psalm 40 verses 1 through 4 I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did me a breath to me he did cry my voice and cry to hear he took me from a fearful pit and from the mighty clay and on a rock he set my

feet establishing my way he put a new song in my mouth a God song to to magnify then he shall see it and shall fear and on the Lord rely die oh blessed is the man who struts upon the Lord relies respect he Lord the proud Lord such us turn aside to light now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ the love of God our heavenly Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest remain and abide with us all this night and always Amen