

## **Series Gospel of Luke**

### **This Message #31 Seeking and Saving**

#### **Scripture Luke 19:1-10**

We are nearing the end of our long series of messages from the Gospel of Luke. As I have mentioned previously, my primary objective with these messages has been a focus on the public ministry of Jesus, in particular the interaction of Jesus with different kinds of people, many of whom were physically needy and all of whom were spiritually needy.

Jesus validated His claim as Messiah many times over through the miracles He performed. In spite of that fact, people were strongly divided in their opinions about Him. On the one hand, many people responded positively to Him, especially those whose lives were changed through His supernatural actions. These were individuals who expressed their gratitude by throwing themselves at Jesus' feet, and praising God, such as the leper who was cleansed and the blind beggar who received his sight, the individuals who are described in chapter 18. They placed their faith in Jesus and became genuine followers.

On the other hand, there were people who refused to acknowledge the true nature of Jesus in spite of the obvious evidence about who He was. Those who were the most zealous in opposing Jesus were the Pharisees. They incessantly criticized Jesus about His behavior and sought to discredit Him for not following their interpretation of the law. They eventually became so jealous and angry that they made plans to kill Him.

This division of opinion about Jesus which began 2000 years ago continues to exist today. Wherever faithful messengers proclaim the gospel, some people are attracted to Jesus. Some of them call out to Him because of their physical needs and desperate circumstances. Other people are attracted to Jesus after observing the lifestyle and witness of believers. Many are drawn to Jesus by reading the Word of God. When the plight of humanity and the purposes of God are revealed to them, they are eager to place their faith in Jesus.

We can rejoice that the kingdom of God is expanding. The universal Church is growing, but so is opposition to God and His righteous ways. Worldwide, there is more persecution and opposition to believers today than ever before. Jesus, the One who came from heaven because He loved the human race and willingly died so that people could be reconciled to God has, through His actions, divided humanity into two spiritual camps.

In our study of the Gospel of Luke, we have thought about the widely divergent attitudes that people had toward Jesus. Some individuals were so eager to connect with Him that they risked their reputations and lives to be close to Him. Other people become so angry at Jesus and the ways of God that they wanted to get Him out of their sight — to kill Him if necessary.

Today we are going to think about another individual who was eager to see Jesus. He was so eager that he went to extreme measures to do so.

#### **Read Luke 19:1-10**

Most of us know the song about Zacchaeus which is often taught to 2 and 3 year old children in Sunday Schools.

“Zacchaeus was a wee little man, ....”

We don't know how Zacchaeus learned about Jesus or what he knew. Verse three implies that he knew enough about Jesus to want to see “who He was.” He had undoubtedly heard reports about the man who performed miracles and taught spiritual lessons with authority. He was no doubt motivated by curiosity, but also by a deep yearning to see the person of Jesus. He was no longer content with verbal reports. He was, in fact, so eager to see Jesus that he took the extraordinary step of climbing a tree to get a good view.

There were probably many pilgrims on the road with Jesus as He passed through Jericho. They were on their way to Jerusalem for the Festival of Passover. Typically, in a procession, a very important person like Jesus would be surrounded by many other people, all of them trying to be as close to the important person as possible. As the crowd on this day pushed its way through the town of Jericho, very few individuals at the edge of the street would be able to catch a glimpse of Jesus, and if they saw Him at all, it would be only a fleeting glimpse. In these crowded conditions, Zacchaeus was in an especially disadvantageous situation — he was a short man, hence his need for a higher elevation.

We are told that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. Tax collectors were Jewish, but they were considered to be traitors by most of the Jewish people because they worked for the Roman government authorities. They took away Jewish resources and handed them over to the Roman oppressors, and they also typically extorted more money from people than was lawful.

Zacchaeus was a chief among these tax collectors, which meant that he was in charge of several agents. He was in a position to demand a portion or commission from everyone who worked under him. It was an understatement in verse two to say that he had become wealthy. Within his culture, he would be thought of as fondly as a mafia boss today. In the minds of the Jews, tax collectors were at the level of murderers, adulterers, robbers, and other sinners.

Given his physical limitations, we have to give Zacchaeus credit for being creative, and we have to admire his audacity. There he was, a wealthy, distinguished looking government official, acting like a 12 or 13 year old boy, climbing a tree in order to get a good view of the parade of people who were passing by. He was so eager to see Jesus that he did not shrink from doing something that made him look ridiculous and the laughing-stock of everyone.

It is at this point that the story becomes especially interesting. “When Jesus reached the spot,” he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. We don’t know how Jesus knew his name. Luke doesn’t always explain the details we would like to know. We can only assume that this was a divine appointment, and that both Zacchaeus and Jesus had been guided to this encounter. Jesus commanded Zacchaeus to come down from his perch in the tree because, as he said, “I must stay at your house today.”

This is a good place to stop and think about the main theme of this passage. This theme is brought out by the use of the verb, “to see.” Notice how many times this verb appears in the passage: verse three — Zacchaeus “wanted to see who Jesus was;” verse four — He climbed a “tree to see Jesus;” verse five — “Jesus looked up” (and saw Zacchaeus); verse seven — “All the people saw” what Jesus was doing and criticized Him; verse eight — Zacchaeus said to the Lord, “Look” what I am going to do; and in the final verse of the passage, Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

According to these verses, both Zacchaeus and Jesus were, in their own ways, seekers. Zacchaeus, a man, wanted to see Jesus, God's Messiah; and Jesus, the God-man, took notice of Zacchaeus, a man. This double seeking, by God and man, is an important Biblical truth. There are several verses in the Old Testament which call attention to this truth.

God repeatedly told the Israelites that if they would seek Him, He would be found by them. In other words, if the people were sincere in their efforts to discover the reality of God, God would allow Himself to be discovered. Action on the part of people would be matched by the response of God. There would be an encounter between man and God.

The opposite truth is also presented in Scripture. If people have impure and insincere motives, if they are self-seeking and reject the truth and follow evil, God will hide Himself, and not reveal Himself until it is the time for Him to display His wrath against them (*see Romans 2:8*).

The prophet Jeremiah explained the all-important requirement for seeking and finding. He wrote, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." Scripture makes clear that people, if they have the correct attitude about connecting with God, will find God. This is God's promise (*Jeremiah 29:13-14*).

This truth is also in the New Testament. Last week we thought about the verse in the Letter to the Hebrews which states, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (*Hebrews 11:6*). Faith is not explicitly mentioned in the Zacchaeus story, as it was in the account of the blind man, Bartimaeus, but the actions of Zacchaeus represent an expression of faith. He was an unusually earnest seeker of Jesus, and his reward was a personal encounter with Jesus.

Zacchaeus took some initiative in his efforts to see Jesus, but Jesus also took some initiative in inviting Himself to Zacchaeus' house. Jesus said that it was necessary for Him to do this. Zacchaeus came down from his perch in the tree immediately and gladly welcomed Jesus.

This story of Zacchaeus is a picture of the tension between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Zacchaeus had a great desire to see Jesus. The Scriptures clearly teach that those who come to Jesus for salvation do not come on their own initiative, but are drawn by God. The Scriptures indicate that, on our own, none of us would seek God. Instead, God, in His grace and mercy, draws people to Himself. Jesus Himself declared, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (*John 6:44*). Zacchaeus and Jesus made their connection by divine appointment.

The reaction of the crowd to Jesus' desire to spend the day with Zacchaeus was not unexpected. From the standpoint of the Jews of the time, it was unacceptable for a religious leader to associate with a tax collector or other sinner. Jesus, however, was willing to be a guest in Zacchaeus' house. The behavior of Jesus was met with public disapproval, but this provided Jesus with the opportunity to make a significant point about the nature of his mission: He had come "to seek and save the lost."

This was not the first time that Jesus had shocked people by His association with tax collectors. Back in chapter 5 there is a description of the calling of Levi; we know him by his other name, Matthew. "Jesus saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' Jesus answered them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'" (*Luke 5:27-32*).

Jesus responded to the desires and needs of Zacchaeus, showing acceptance of him in spite of his background and recognizing him as a person of value. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus by coming down from the tree and receiving Him with joy, and joy is an appropriate response whenever God reveals Himself in a personal way to us. Joy is not the only new attitude which arises in a person who has met Jesus. There can be many changes.

Zacchaeus suddenly declared that he was changing his attitude toward his possessions. He was no longer going to think only of himself. He was prepared to give half his possessions to the poor and to reimburse those he had cheated. Radical changes in the attitudes and behaviors of people who have met Jesus in a personal way is not unusual. New believers recognize that their “old self, which was being corrupted by its deceitful desires, was made new in the attitude of their minds, and that they had put on the new self, which is created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (*Ephesians 4:23-24*). That was a statement by the Apostle Paul. He also wrote, “if anyone is in the Messiah, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come” (*II Corinthians 5:17*).

As the result of Zacchaeus’ desire to “see who Jesus was,” and God’s grace in drawing Zacchaeus to the encounter with Jesus, and the changes which came about as a result of the encounter, Jesus could say to Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to this house.” This passage in Luke is an illustration of how human seekers connect with God and experience salvation. The important principle to remember is that individuals who sincerely desire and earnestly make the effort to see who Jesus really is will have an encounter with Jesus. The promise of Scripture is: If they seek God, they will find God.

It isn’t likely that any of us will see Jesus parading through our town, and fortunately we don’t have to worry about climbing trees to get a good view. There is a much much easier way to see who Jesus is. He can be found in the words of Scripture. If we are sincere in our desire to see Him, we are assured that God stands ready to meet and engage with us. It is only necessary for us “to seek God with all our hearts.”

Verse 10 is sometimes referred to as the key verse in the Gospel of Luke. It expresses in a succinct way the purpose for Jesus’ earthly ministry — He came to provide salvation; and He came to seek out and appeal to those in need of the salvation He provided. Jesus is still engaged in His search and rescue activity today. He is seeking out people who have lost their way spiritually and who need to find their way back to a relationship with God. When Jesus encounters a person who has the proper heart attitude, there will be a connection, and there will be the revelation of truth, and there will be a change in the person’s life.

It is our responsibility as believers to live and serve in such a way that non-believers become curious enough to begin searching for our God.