

TO SEEK AND TO SAVE THE LOST

Luke 19:1-10

Key Verse: 19:10

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

In today’s passage, Jesus meets an interesting man named Zacchaeus and brings salvation to his house. May the Lord help us to know the heart of Jesus and the way of salvation through this study!

I. ZACCHAEUS COMES TO JESUS (1-7)

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to die on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The impending suffering and death were on his mind. Yet, the Good Shepherd cared about his sheep than himself. He took care of many people along the way, including a blind beggar, as we studied last week. Who else did he help? Look at verse 1. *Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.* Jericho was situated in the wide plain of the Jordan Valley at the foot of the ascent to the Judean mountains, about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem. It had a tropical climate all year around. It was an oasis known as “the city of palms” (Jdg 3:13). Jericho flourished with date palms, banana trees, balsams, sycamores, and henna (SS 1:14; Lk 19:4). All these trees decorated the city with natural beauty. Jericho was also one of the bustling commercial centers of Palestine, and a significant tax base for the Roman government. Jesus could have enjoyed staying in the resort city for a couple of nights, but he was just passing through the city. Still, something happened there that became a part of the gospel history.

Look at verse 2. *A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.* The name Zacchaeus meant “pure” or “upright.” His parents named him in the hope that he would be a man of God. They did their best to raise him as an upright person in the sight of God. But contrary to their wishes, the young Zacchaeus decided to become a tax collector. Like many young people of our generation, Zacchaeus thought that money would make him happy. So he worked very hard to become a tax collector. He stayed up many nights to prepare for the difficult CPA exam given by the Roman government. When he became a field agent, he would close his eyes to the misery of his own people in order to collect the heavy taxes for his employer and for himself. Soon his reputation as a ruthless tax collector reached Rome and he was promoted to a chief tax collector in Jericho. He became a wealthy man. He owned a mansion on a hill overlooking the Jordan valley. He bought a shiny new chariot. He could afford to buy anything he desired.

Was Zacchaeus happy with his wealth? No, he was not happy. His people called him a traitor who sold his conscience to money. His people hated the Romans that occupied their land. They hated Zacchaeus even more for working for the enemy. They spit on the ground when Zacchaeus passed by. Man’s desire for honor and recognition is great because God made man in his own image. Even Zacchaeus must have wished that his

people would say of him, “He is an upright person in the sight of God.” However, people would whisper behind his back, “Here comes the tax collector scum.” Benedict Arnold was an opportunist. Once a trusted officer of George Washington, Arnold betrayed that trust to side with the British. He was hated by the Americans and was despised by the British. He lived the rest of his life in terrible anguish of soul. When he was dying in England, his last request was to be dressed in the uniform he had worn while serving in the Continental Army. What a miserable man he was!

Zacchaeus was not accepted anywhere. Jews did not recognize him as a fellow Jew, and Romans did not accept him as a Roman, though he was their loyal tax collector. Zacchaeus was rich but he was lonely, with no friends around him. When he hardened his heart and made money by any means, he became a cold-hearted, selfish person. He had money but his money did not make him happy. His life was miserable. He had no purpose in life. Worst of all, he did not see any hope in his future as a tax collector.

But as in the case of many other people, his meeting with Jesus changed his life forever. Look at verse 3. “*He wanted to see who Jesus was...*” Zacchaeus wanted to know Jesus personally. Why? He heard about what Jesus was doing in Galilee—that he welcomed sinners and tax collectors and ate with them. Zacchaeus began to believe that Jesus the Messiah would accept even a scum bag like him. He believed that Jesus would welcome him despite all his sins. Then one day, he heard that Jesus was headed to Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. He desperately wanted to see Jesus. This was not mere curiosity, but a yearning desire to meet the Messiah personally. But there were several obstacles for him to overcome to come to Jesus.

Zacchaeus was vertically challenged. He was known as “Zack the midget.” When he went out to the main street to see Jesus coming, it was already crowded with a sea of people. Walls of people blocked his view. All he could see was the backs of people. No one was willing to give room for the selfish tax collector. It seemed hopeless. But Zacchaeus did not give up. He had to see Jesus. Where there is a will, there is a way. At that moment, he saw a sycamore-fig tree. Instantly he knew what he was going to do. He was already climbing the tree. It was hilarious to look at this short man struggling to climb the tree with his bulging stomach. Children began to laugh at him. But Zacchaeus did not care. His heart was full of hope of meeting Jesus personally. We must say Zacchaeus did his best to come to Jesus.

St. Augustine said that God made man with an empty place that only God can fill. Until we meet God personally we are restless wanderers trying to fill that void with other things. Zacchaeus had tried to fill his empty place with money. Others try to do so with romance, adventure, human achievement or worldly glory. Sooner or later each person must realize that his eternal soul cannot be satisfied with the fleeting things of this world. We must seek God earnestly. The Bible says: “... if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Dt 4:29).

When Jesus arrived at the spot, he looked up and saw Zacchaeus on the sycamore-fig tree. Jesus said to him, “*Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today*” (5). Jesus said, “*Zacchaeus, come down immediately.*” Jesus called him by his name. No one had ever called him by name. Everyone called him “the tax collector,” “the traitor” or simply “the scum.” But Jesus called him by his name. Jesus knew him personally. Jesus knew he was a selfish man but did not pass by him. At this moment, Zacchaeus came to realize who Jesus was. Jesus was his personal Savior. Jesus knew that he was lonely. Jesus knew he was suffering from a sense of dishonor. Jesus knew how unhappy with his life. Jesus knew the hopelessness he felt about his future. Jesus said to him, “*Zacchaeus, come down immediately.*” It was the voice of the Savior. It was an invitation of the holy God, and the moment of divine mercy to Zacchaeus.

Look at verse 5 again. *When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”* Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house. Jesus would’ve invited him to his own home. But Jesus did not have his own house. So he invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house. Why? He wanted to spend time with him. He wanted to talk with him about the secrets of the kingdom of God. Look at verse 6. *So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.* Zacchaeus immediately came down from the tree. He was so happy to have Jesus in his house. No one ever visited his house, not as a friend. But Jesus the Messiah came to stay at his house. Jesus wanted to have a personal fellowship with the selfish man. Jesus wanted to be friends with him. Jesus wanted to be his personal Savior.

Zacchaeus was so happy that he felt like shouting, “Hey, everyone. Jesus is coming to my house today!” What was the people’s response? People there began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner’” (7b). They did not understand the shepherd’s heart of Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus went with Zacchaeus to his house to have a personal fellowship with his sheep. Jesus never ignores anyone who comes to him with a heart’s desire to know him. Like Zacchaeus did, we must overcome all our obstacles to come to see Jesus. No matter how sinful we are, Jesus welcomes us and wants to have a personal relationship with us. He says to us, “Come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” Revelation 3:20 says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.”

II. ZACCHAEUS REPENTS HIS SINS (8)

Zacchaeus had been a heartless tax collector. He demanded and collected taxes from people whom he knew didn’t have enough to eat. In fact, he collected more than he was supposed to (Lk 3:13) to enrich himself. But he suffered from his guilty conscience at night. He heard the crying voices of mothers who pleaded with him not to foreclose their homes for their children’s sake. He was like drug dealers today who don’t care about people whose lives are ruined. Zacchaeus covered his ears and only thought about his bank accounts and stock portfolios. Still, it was rare for him to have a good night. Many times, he had to drink hard liquor or take sleeping pills to invite sleep.

But something happened inside him when he met Jesus. Jesus knew his inner agony. Without saying so many words, Jesus let him know that he came to forgive, not to condemn him. When Jesus told him, “I must stay at your house today,” Zacchaeus realized that Jesus had forgiven him. Heavenly sunshine shone in his dark heart through Jesus’ words.

What did Zacchaeus say to his personal Savior? Look at verse 8. *“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”* Zacchaeus used to pinch pennies. He worshiped money. Money was his god. He never gave anyone anything for free. He used to say, “All I have is mine. All you have could be mine.” But meeting Jesus personally changed everything. Money no longer seemed so important to him. As a sign of his practical repentance, he made a decision to donate half of his possessions to the poor. He decided to pay back four times the amount, if he had cheated anybody. He knew he cheated many people. He didn’t even remember how many. He stopped counting after fifty. So this pledge would leave Zacchaeus with nothing for himself. But it didn’t matter. He was happy. His guilty conscience was gone and his heart was filled with spiritual joy. For the first time in his life, he cried many tears, partly because he was happy to know Jesus, and partly because he realized how he had taken advantage of the helpless people. When he repented and accepted Jesus as his Savior, the image of God in him was restored. He became a man of compassion. His repentance brought a 180 degree change in his life. A new Zacchaeus was born! 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

There were other tax collectors in Jericho. Perhaps some of them were in the crowd that day. But only Zacchaeus came to Jesus. Only he repented his sins. Only he received eternal life. Two young men were walking together on their way to bar for a fun-filled night when they noticed a church sign that said, “The wages of sin is death” (Ro 6:23). One of them was convicted by the sign. He repented his sin of pursuing sinful desires. He turned around and went to church, while the other man continued his way to the bar. One day about twenty years later, newspapers reported two major items on the front page, one about the inauguration of new president and the other about the execution of a criminal. The man who repented his sins on the street was Grover Cleveland, the 22nd president of the U.S. We should not trivialize a decision to come to Jesus and to repent our sins. It is a decision to seal our fate in eternity. It is a life and death matter.

III. A SON OF ABRAHAM (9-10)

Look at verse 9. *Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”* When he saw that Zacchaeus had repented, Jesus was very happy. In the past, Zacchaeus was known as a selfish tax collector and a traitor. People looked down on him and condemned him. But Jesus accepted him and forgave all his sins. Not only so, Jesus said of him, *“This man too is a son of Abraham.”* To be a son of Abraham meant to be one of God’s chosen people. Jesus restored him to be a

child of God. Though the world had given up on him, Jesus found him and restored his sonship in God's family. Zacchaeus was now an heir of the kingdom of God.

Most of all, "a son of Abraham" meant that Zacchaeus would be a source of blessing to others from that time on (Ge 12:2). In the past he was a source of burden and hatred to his people. But now he was to become a source of blessing to all people, beginning with his own family members. So Jesus said, "*Salvation has come to this house.*"

Look at verse 10, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.*" We learn here that Jesus always welcomes those who come to him by faith. Jesus gives blessings to those who repent their sins and make a decision to start a new life in him. Jesus also reveals his purpose of coming into this world. Jesus, the Son of God, came to seek and to save lost sinners. Though Jesus is the Almighty God, he gave up his power and glory and came down to this world in the form of a man. Jesus came down to this world to seek and to save lost sinners. For this purpose, Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem to suffer and die on the cross as the Lamb of God.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep. Jesus is like the father of the prodigal son who waits eagerly for the lost son to return and then runs to meet him halfway when he sees him coming home. Jesus sought out a thirsty and lonely Samaritan woman (Jn 4:23). This is the heart of God. God is constantly searching for those who are seeking him. Psalm 14:2 says, "The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God."

Jesus not only seeks the lost, but he also saves the lost. Zacchaeus was lost because of his sins. But Jesus saved him and made him a son of Abraham, a child of God. Jesus restored the image of God in him. When we come to Jesus, he saves us from our sins and restores us as the children of God.

When we know the heart of Jesus, we are compelled to participate in his mission to seek and to save the lost. It motivates us to visit the campuses and invite students to Bible study. Many young people are lost in selfishness and pleasure-seeking life. But Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Jesus can raise young Americans as shepherds and missionaries for the world. May God help us to participate in Jesus' ministry to seek and to save the lost through one-to-one Bible study!

In this passage, we learned that only when we have God in our hearts can we be truly happy. We must seek God more than anything. As we seek God, God is seeking us. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. Let's open our hearts to his love, repent of our sins and receive his grace. May God make us instruments of his saving grace to the lost! May God bless each of us to be a son of Abraham!