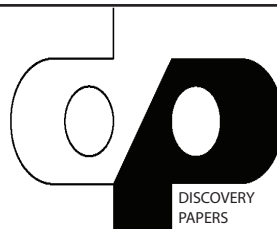


LOOKING UP TO A TAX COLLECTOR

SERIES: INVITED: STORIES OF WELCOME IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE.



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Luke 19:1-10
8th Message
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Sunday School Surprises

We are nearing the end of summer, a summer we've spent in the Gospel of Luke. In the first week of our series, Steve Zeisler introduced us to what we might call Jesus' mission statement, found in Luke 4. There, Jesus entered a local synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah. He declared that he was anointed by God's Spirit to proclaim good news to the poor and to free captives and the oppressed. (See Lk 4:18-19) And we've seen him do just that as we've studied six vignettes from his ministry.

But Jesus has surprised us along the way. His methods, and the recipients of his ministry, weren't exactly what we may have expected. He didn't go to the local jails and free all the prisoners by force or cunning. He didn't only preach to people of low income. Instead, Jesus lived out his mission statement by drawing near to people for whom poverty, captivity, and oppression were spiritual and emotional realities.

Jesus surprised witnesses by associating with people who were considered outsiders for one reason or another. Gentiles, women, children, Roman soldiers, the demon-possessed, diseased and ritually unclean people, infamous sinners. Jesus risked his reputation as he spoke to, ate with, touched, healed, and commended the faith of these outsiders.

Today we turn to Luke 19, the story of Zacchaeus. This story was made iconic in Sunday schools across America. If you grew up at church like I did, you may remember a song about Zacchaeus, which somewhat tells his story.

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
And a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see.*

*And when the Savior passed that way
He looked up in the tree.
And said, "Zacchaeus, you come down!
For I'm going to your house today!
For I'm going to your house today!"*

Does that bring back memories for any of you? Now, pause a moment and think, what do you actually remember about Zacchaeus' story beyond this song? Take a moment to run through the story in your head.

I've been asking around this summer, and off the top of their heads most people only remember that Zacchaeus is short, he climbed a tree, and Jesus called him down. If those are really the main points of the story, then why would we include Zacchaeus in our list of outsiders?

After that song, you may be wondering if one of the main points of my sermon will be that the kingdom of God is for short people. And if I were Steve Zeisler, I'd be making some corny jokes about those who are height-challenged.

Friends, I'm going to disappoint you. Yes, I believe that the kingdom of God is for people of all heights, but those old Sunday school songs and curriculum miss the real significance of Zacchaeus' interaction with Jesus. Let's read the story together and refresh our memory.

Luke 19:1-10:

He entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3 And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. 4 So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. 5 And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." 6 So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. 7 And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." 8 And 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." 9 And Jesus said to him, "Today

salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

A Man Named Zacchaeus

At this point in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ earthly ministry was about to end. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he would soon be arrested, tried, and crucified. His journey had him passing through the city of Jericho, but seeing Zacchaeus, Jesus changed his plans.

Here’s what we know of Zacchaeus based on the text. His name is of Hebrew origin; it means *pure*. Jesus later confirms that Zacchaeus is a Jew by calling him a “son of Abraham” in verse 9. Luke describes him as “small of stature.” He was presumably short enough that he needed to climb a tree to be able to see Jesus over the crowd.

The detail we often forget in our Sunday school memory banks is that Zacchaeus was a tax collector. In fact, he was a chief tax collector, the only one mentioned in the Gospels. He’s on the highest rung of a profession that made him very wealthy.

So what’s the problem? Zacchaeus doesn’t seem like an outsider, a captive, or an oppressed person from any angle. He’s a Jew like Jesus. He’s wealthy, so his life was probably very comfortable—no obvious oppression there. And yes, he’s short, but that didn’t stunt his success in the business world. So why would Jesus’ message of good news apply to Zacchaeus?

If we’d had time this summer to explore the whole Gospel together, we’d notice an echo in the crowds that surrounded Jesus. Witnesses often remarked on and criticized Jesus for his association with “tax collectors and sinners.” (Lk 5:30, 7:34, 15:1 and others from other Gospels.) That was the phrase used over and over. But notice that tax collectors aren’t lumped into the group of garden variety “sinners.” No, they were a class of sinners all their own.

Jewish writings of the time compare tax collectors to murderers and thieves (Mishnah, Nedarim 3:4). Tax collectors were despised by most people groups of the day, but especially by the Jews. Jews despised them because they did the dirty work of the Roman Empire.

Rome taxed only its provinces to pay for its wars and to ensure the prosperity of its Caesars. Provincial governors were required to send the money back to Rome, but they auctioned off tax contracts to individuals

that were called publicans or tax collectors. These contracts required interest upon return, but from what I’ve read, there was little to no oversight of the tax collectors as they collected from the common person.

Tax collectors like Zacchaeus could turn to everyday citizens and charge the required Roman tax, plus enough to cover interest due to the Roman officials, plus whatever profit the tax collector wanted to make. Many tax collectors openly gouged the people with inflated rates. In some cases, when taxes couldn’t be paid, children and even whole families were sold into slavery to meet the tax collector’s demands.

Some Jews also considered tax collectors idolaters. As the bankers of their day, tax collectors dealt in Roman coins. These coins had the face of the emperor stamped on them. Since Romans worshipped the emperors among their pantheon of gods, some considered these coins idols, and thought that handling them would make you ritually unclean.

Zacchaeus may have been a Jew, but as a tax collector, he was by no means an insider. He was likely shunned by all of his Jewish and Gentile neighbors. Plus Zacchaeus was very wealthy.

In first century Israel, there was a small middle class, and an even smaller upper class. Most people were poor. Zacchaeus’ wealth would have made him a prominent person in Jericho and the surrounding region. There’s nothing quite like wealth to make people both envy and despise you with equal passion.

As a child in Sunday school, I was endeared to Zacchaeus because he was short like me, and he climbed a tree, and we sang this sweet song about Jesus going to his house. But I didn’t know all this information about his profession, his wealth, or the way his neighbors likely treated him. As adults, with a picture of Zacchaeus’ life beyond the Sycamore tree, our understanding is much more complex.

I have a lot of sympathy for Zacchaeus. I think it would be a terrible position to be in—a member of God’s people by birth, but rejected and despised by profession. And it’s a profession he may not have even chosen, since most sons were trained in the trades of their fathers. He had great wealth, but I don’t know that money could soothe the sting of that type of rejection. So it’s a good thing that Jesus passed through town. He was the only Jew around who was bold enough to associate with such sinners.

Jesus associated with tax collectors from the very beginning of his ministry. Luke 5 tells the story of Jesus calling a Jewish tax collector named Levi as one of his disciples. That's a bold move! Levi left his profession to follow Jesus. Levi hosted a great banquet and Jesus was his guest of honor. The Pharisees asked Jesus, "Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus responded by saying that it's not healthy people who need a physician, it's the sick. (Lk 5:27-30)

Jesus made a habit of associating with tax collectors, so much so, that he got labeled "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Lk 7:34). Years later Jesus continued such friendships and made a nice bookend to his ministry. He started by calling Levi as a disciple, now he befriends Zacchaeus toward the end of his ministry.

At this point, Jesus has my admiration. He's gone out of his way to show us that no one, no matter their reputation, is beyond his notice and regard.

And that reputation Zacchaeus likely had among the people as a sinner and corrupt businessman? As far as we know, it's all based on assumption. Any disregard for Zacchaeus seems to be based on his role as a tax collector. There's no clear proof in the text that he was corrupt in his practices.

Jesus invited himself to the home of the man with the worst reputation in the city, but he wasn't worried about ruining his own. Of course we could say that it's because Jesus was so loving. But I think Jesus shows more than love here. I think Jesus has better *vision* than most people.

Having Kingdom Vision

It's easy to spot people who live in physical poverty—the state of their homes, clothes, or bodies are often signs of their circumstances. But it can be much harder to spot someone who is poor in spirit. Jesus had kingdom vision. Kingdom vision means that Jesus disregarded Zacchaeus' reputation, looked past the sheen of his wealth, and saw Zacchaeus the man. Jesus saw a man who at his core was eager to know the Lord.

As followers of Jesus, do we have kingdom vision? Can we look past the exterior, past what someone presents to the world, and see the soul? Souls in need of good news are not always easy to spot.

Vincent Furnier is a man better known as Alice Cooper, the lead singer of the hard rock band Alice Cooper. You may not follow his music, but you may recognize him by sight if you Google his photo; he's known for this signature eye makeup. He's called the godfather of shock rock. From those facts and by looking at him, would you believe that Alice is a Christian?

It's true. Alice was introduced to Jesus several decades into his career and he's been following Jesus ever since. I've been to several leadership gatherings and events in Phoenix with Alice. I once heard him say that he often gets criticized and rejected by other Christians because he still makes edgy rock music and because he tours with people like Marilyn Manson.

If you don't know, Marilyn is a man and a musician who is very controversial. He's known for dark heavy metal. And he looks far scarier than Alice Cooper! In response to his Christian critics, Alice said he was happy to tour with Marilyn Manson because there was no better mission field for someone like him.

Like Jesus did with Zacchaeus, Alice was able to look past Marilyn Manson's off-putting reputation and see a need in Marilyn's soul. Can we follow these examples? We may not be ready to leap forward and invite ourselves into the homes of people with questionable reputations, but at the very least, can we slow down and think?

We humans are judgmental beings. We probably make a hundred judgments a day about people based solely on how they dress, their body shape, the way they talk, or the cars they drive. What if we started to *notice* the judgments we make...and then pause and ask ourselves: which of my judgments are based on assumptions? Am I being kind? Am I being generous with my thoughts?

What if we looked at people the way Jesus looked at so-called sinners and saw souls in need? How might kingdom vision change our city, our nation, and our world?

Zacchaeus, Money, and Salvation

Jesus got the same flak that Alice Cooper did when he toured with Marilyn Manson. Jesus went home with Zacchaeus and people grumbled that he was the guest of a sinner. Before Jesus could respond, Zacchaeus stood before Jesus and said in verse 8, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."

Zacchaeus reveals a lot about his character in this statement. At the time among Jews it was considered generous to give 20% of their goods to the poor.¹ At 50%, Zacchaeus went far beyond the standard. His fourfold restitution for fraud also exceeded what was required in the Torah, which asked Jews to give back the full portion, plus 1/5th. (Lev 5:16 and Num 5:7)

Notice too that the verbs *give* and *restore* in this verse are in the present tense. The ESV translates them exactly as they appear in the Greek, making Zacchaeus' statement one that reveals an on-going practice. It sounds like Zacchaeus is, and has been, both an ethical tax collector and someone who is beyond generous with his wealth.

If you were to open other translations, you might see Zacchaeus' statements about his financial dealings translated in the future tense—*I will give half my goods to the poor, and I will pay back those I've defrauded*. There's a debate among both Bible translators and scholars about how this should be translated. Though Luke writes in simple present tense, there are instances when you can interpretively translate the present to indicate future action. Doing so would change Zacchaeus' story a bit. If Zacchaeus said, *I will give* and *I will pay back*, then his words imply that he's had some sort of conversion experience in his time with Jesus; that he's repented and feels motivated to clean up his financial practices to honor God.

After much reading and thought, I'm persuaded that if meeting Jesus resulted in repentance and conversion for Zacchaeus, that Luke would have been more explicit and descriptive in his language. I think Luke would have used the future tense to make Zacchaeus' meaning absolutely clear to his readers. Remember, Luke wrote his narrative to a man named Theophilus who wasn't a witness to Jesus' ministry. Luke said he wrote an "orderly" account (Lk 1:3). *I'm* persuaded, but you can give it some thought and prayer and make your own determination.

When the people grumble about Jesus' choice of hosts, Zacchaeus stands up before Jesus like he would in a court of law. He defends himself before his Lord, the only man before whom he needs to be justified. Zacchaeus can't control whether or not others believe he is honest—they've probably cemented their judgment because he is a tax collector—but it's important that Jesus see and believe who he really is. So Zacchaeus states the simple truth of his financial practices—that he is an ethical tax collector and a generous man.

Jesus' response in verses 9-10 is significant. He says, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

As 21st century Christians, when we hear the word "salvation" our minds automatically think of spiritual conversion, of a profession of new faith in Jesus. But we shouldn't jump to that interpretation. The noun *salvation* appears only four times in Luke's entire gospel—three times in Luke chapter 1, and once here in chapter 19.

In chapter 1, Zechariah spoke of salvation at the birth of his son John the Baptist. Zechariah prophesied that John's birth foreshadowed the salvation of the coming Messiah. He called the Messiah the "horn of salvation" for God's people. This use of salvation is rooted in the Old Testament use of the word where salvation was God's work of delivering his people from their enemies. For Jews, salvation meant deliverance and redemption. (Luke 1:68-71 and its echoes from the OT in 2 Sam 22:3, Psalm 18:2, and Psalm 106:10.)

Zechariah proclaimed that salvation was near, and soon Jesus was born. Then flash forward 30 years to Jesus' mission statement proclaimed in the synagogue in Luke 4:18. Jesus said,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed...

Do you hear salvation as deliverance in these words? After this Jesus said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

Salvation had come. Jesus, the deliverer, was on the scene. From that synagogue he set out to do the work we've studied this summer.

Three years later Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house." Do you hear the echo of *today*? Do you see the thematic ring of deliverance from Zechariah to Jesus to Zacchaeus?

Jesus went to Zacchaeus' house and made that short proclamation. Here's the subtext that I hear in his words—"Today, I deliver you, Zacchaeus, from your enemies. I erase the branding of corruption your neighbors have stamped on you. I redeem you from the oppression of being an outsider. Zacchaeus, you are welcome in the kingdom of God."

Jesus came to seek and save even *this* soul—a man lost not because of sin and corruption, but one thrust out of the fold by the judgment and scorn of his own people. It's amazing how much Jesus and Zacchaeus have in common.

Having Kingdom Faithfulness

Earlier I said that Jesus had my admiration because of his kingdom vision. Now, Zacchaeus has my admiration for his kingdom faithfulness.

The scorn and rejection of his neighbors probably hurt Zacchaeus. He could have given way to the corruption everyone believed of him. His pain could have turned to bitterness and revenge. He could have become a selfish and corrupt tax collector, punishing his neighbors with heavy inflation rates and raking in profits to build his own little kingdom. Instead, Zacchaeus shows incredible resolve and self-control. His financial ethics and generosity to the poor show a remarkable faithfulness to the Torah and to the God he serves.

We have the opportunity to show kingdom faithfulness just like Zacchaeus. Anytime we excel, anytime we have any kind of mastery or power over something, we can choose to use it for our own selfish gain, or to use it to benefit others, which pleases God.

If you have wealth, like Zacchaeus you could ask, how might I manage and use my money in ways that honor God?

If you have high position at work—say you are a supervisor or an executive—how might you lead with equity and generosity?

We all have bodies. Should we use them for our own selfish pleasures? Do we use them to intimidate, hurt, or control others? Or might our first priority be to use our bodies as tools to support the weak, comfort the hurting, and welcome the lonely?

Let's return to the example of Alice Cooper. In considering how he could best serve God, Alice decided to use his skill and love for music to help people in need in his community. With a local church in Phoenix, Alice and his wife Sheryl, a choreographer, founded Solid Rock, a place where teens can safely hang out after school. At Solid Rock the kids have access to all kinds of musical instruments and are matched with adult mentors who teach them how to play. There are dance

classes and rock bands and concerts, ping-pong tables and snacks—all of it meant to simply nurture young people because God loves them.

There are so many ways to live with kingdom faithfulness by simply using the skills and gifts God gives you. What way will you choose?

Climb a Tree for Jesus

Can we go back to the Sunday school Zacchaeus for a few minutes? There's something very endearing about the image of Zacchaeus up in a sycamore tree. Has anyone in here climbed a tree in the last month? Probably not. That's something children do. Climbing trees fits a childlike spirit.

Now think of Zacchaeus. He was a prominent, wealthy, adult male who set aside his dignity and climbed a tree. That's how eager he was to see Jesus. When Jesus spotted him up in the tree and invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house, verse 6 says Zacchaeus received Jesus "joyfully."

Luke doesn't describe this joy, but I picture Zacchaeus with a big smile on his face, jumping down from the tree, rushing ahead of Jesus with a spring in his step, and ushering Jesus into his home. With his reputation, Zacchaeus probably had few or no visitors, and now the Messiah has come to stay! Maybe he ordered music to be played. Maybe there was dancing. Maybe he killed a fattened calf. Whatever he did, he did it joyfully.

When was the last time you were this eager to be close to Jesus? When was the last time you felt or expressed joy because of your relationship with God? Because of what he has done for you?

Maybe it's time we take a page out of Zacchaeus' story and climb a tree for Jesus. I mean that metaphorically, of course. Don't go to the park and hurt yourselves! Those of us with arthritis and bionic parts said goodbye to tree climbing long ago. But maybe it's time for you to reconnect with the joy of the first time you heard of, or saw, or received Jesus. Think about it.

How old were you? Where were you? Who shared this good news with you?

What did it feel like when you heard Jesus welcome you into his kingdom? When you learned that he would deliver you from captivity and oppression? That he would freely forgive your sins?

What was it like when you first heard him call you son or daughter?

I have seven nieces and nephews. My oldest nephew is almost 18; my youngest niece turns 7 in two weeks. When my sister-in-law was pregnant with the oldest, she dubbed me “aunt Coco.” I’ve been “Coco” to my family ever since.

When the kids were little, they would be excited to see me. When I arrived at their homes they would jump into my arms, hug me tightly, and give me sweet little kisses on my cheek. They’d fidget in line, waiting for their turn to have me swing them through the air. There is nothing quite like being aunt Coco. Their childlike eagerness made me feel treasured. I was their delight.

Kids grow up fast. Three of my nephews are teenagers. Now they mostly call me “Corrie.” No aunt. No affectionate “Coco.” No jumping out of the car and racing to give me hugs. I know they still love me, but as they’ve grown more independent, they show their love very differently. It’s checked, more restrained— filtered through a net of self-consciousness.

That’s why I look up to Zacchaeus. It’s refreshing to see a grown man unafraid to show his delight in the Lord. Zacchaeus was unashamed of his eagerness for Jesus. He climbed a tree and declared his love to the world.

I know many of you love Jesus. How have you shown him your love recently? Even if you need to wait till you’re alone today, I encourage you to remember your first love for Jesus. Reconnect with the joy of being welcomed into God’s kingdom as a daughter or son.

God so loved this world, that he sent his only Son Jesus, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God didn’t send Jesus to condemn us, but to save us.

Thank God for that!

Endnotes

1Boch, Darrell L. The NIV Application Commentary: Luke.
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