

50. The Calling of Zacchaeus

Luke 19:1-10

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

We now approach a very interesting encounter in Luke's Gospel account. Luke brings our attention to three different individuals and shows us how all three individuals responded personally to Christ and His Word. We looked first at the curious rich young ruler who didn't have any assurance and peace with God even though he had said he had kept all of the commandments. He asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18-30). When Jesus told him to give everything he had to the poor and follow Him, his response to following Christ was to go away sad. His crutch was to lean on his riches. Jesus gave instruction to His disciples that it was hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. After we saw the response of the rich young ruler, Luke took us to another person, a blind beggar. He showed us his spiritual hunger and desperation as this poor blind man cried out to Jesus with all his soul; how gracious the Lord was to him! He was wonderfully healed in response to his faith (Luke 18:35-43). Now, we come to another rich man named Zacchaeus, a man who is to be surprised by the rich mercy and life-changing grace of God!

Zacchaeus the Tax Collector

¹Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ²A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way (Luke 19:1-4).

We have all heard stories of how people's lives change after their encounter with Jesus. Many times, the people that the Lord calls are unlikely candidates! God loves to shower His grace on a life and create wonderful transformation. Sometimes, this can be a gradual process, but most Christians can point back to a special time in their lives when they encountered Christ and His truth, and the inner change began at that moment. When I was thinking of individuals who have encountered Christ in a dramatic way, I remember a friend of mine named Adrian.

I met Adrian in 1981 in England. He was born deaf due to his mother's taking pills to abort him. He suffered a lot of family rejection, bullying, and abuse from close family members, and he was sent to a boarding school for the deaf and dumb at the tender age of five and remained there until he was fifteen. He was expelled at that age because of his retaliation using violence. His elder sister in East London took him in, and at that time, he was introduced to the Kray Twins.

The Kray twins were key powerful figures in London's organized criminal underground, similar to the mafia. (They have been memorialized in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's waxworks in London.) From there, he was given his first "job," and it was there he felt he had met his "real friends" who seemed to accept and protect him. This became his new family, bringing with it a certain lifestyle, and for the first time, he experienced close friendships in his life. He also found that he was very good at what he did, and this gave him some self-esteem. He used to joke with us that the Kray brothers told him that, "They liked to help the handicapped!"

As time passed, he became disillusioned. More and more favors were asked of him, and he began to question his lifestyle. He wanted change, but he didn't know how.

In April 1977, while out with friends and coming home from a pub in East London, he and three friends were set upon by a gang. Adrian was stabbed four times and nearly bled to death. In fact, he did die and was resuscitated on the operating table. While he was on life support and being operated on, he had an "out of the body experience" and watched the doctors operate on him from above as if he was floating above his own body. He heard a voice say to him, "It is not yet time for you to die. I have many great things for you." He was brought back from death's door and was discharged a few days later.

God began to work on him. Soon after, he met his wife and moved to our town in Harwich, Essex, England. It was at that point that Annette, his wife, became a Christian, met us, and invited us to come and teach the Word of God in her living room! When we came to their house, Adrian would not let us use his front living room for the Bible study with his wife, so we went to the cold back room alongside the kitchen.

Adrian must have wondered what was going on. It was obvious that he was interested because he would pause near the door, straining to hear what was being said when he came into the kitchen to make tea. He was not too sure about these "strangers" who had suddenly entered his life and were commanding so much of his wife's attention! (Adrian is deaf, but he can hear to a certain degree with a hearing aid). When we told Annette that we felt that the Lord was calling Adrian to Himself, Annette found it hard to believe, knowing Adrian's past, but Adrian's curiosity finally got the better of him. The Lord provoked a curiosity after the change he saw in his wife, Annette.

During one study, he began listening at the door. Adrian finally came into the room, and he said that he had to know what this was all about, and his heart was opened! Christ gave him a new life and a brand new start! To some people, Adrian would have been voted as one of the "least likely" to ever become a follower of Christ, considering the violent upbringing that he had, yet God is rich in grace to those who we would never expect to come to Christ, people such as Adrian –and Zacchaeus.

Curiosity is a good sign that God is working in a person's heart. Jesus said, "**No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day**" (John 6.44). My curiosity concerning spiritual things took me to five continents on planet Earth searching for truth. Nothing satisfied me, though. I tried philosophy, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but it all left me empty within. The longing and thirst of my soul was not satisfied until I found my rest in Christ.

My searching lasted around five years and reading hundreds of books until I finally came across Hal Lindsay's book, the *Late Great Planet Earth*. For the first time, I heard that Jesus was not dead but very much alive and at work on planet Earth. My curiosity would not let me go until I finally obeyed His call to come down from the "tree of my pride." It was just a short while after reading that book that I was led to Christ and committed my all to Him. Luke introduces us to a man with similar curiosity named Zacchaeus in verse 2 of our passage.

Question 1) Can you think of events or situations in your life which sparked curiosity about God and spiritual things?

The Life of a Chief Tax Collector

Luke describes Zacchaeus to us before sharing the interaction between this hated tax collector and Christ. We should get a picture of Zacchaeus before looking at how he was called to follow Christ. First, we find him living in Jericho, a rich city situated at a crossroads on one of the main trade routes that ran from Mesopotamia to Egypt. All the merchants in Perea, on the east side of the Jordan river, also traded at this crossroads, which was near the road leading up the steep incline to Jerusalem situated in the hills of Judea. William Barclay tells us that the Romans carried Jericho's dates and balsam to worldwide trade and fame.¹ Jericho was a popular resort for King Herod the Great. When it was cold in Jerusalem, all those with money came down to Jericho. All the freshwater springs made Jericho a beautiful city in which to live and a popular resort.

Zacchaeus is described as a chief tax collector, which means that he was the head of a tax collecting franchise for the Roman government. Zacchaeus had tax collectors working for him at all places of entry into the locality. He was at the top of his profession with no more ladders for him to climb. His name was an abbreviation of Zachariah, which means "righteous one." The name was a joke to the Israelites living in the area, for he was one that robbed the poor on behalf of Rome.

Rome would assess an area and put it out to the highest bidder and as long as Zacchaeus paid them what they wanted, he could keep the rest. Any person who was upset with what Zacchaeus charged them in taxes had the Roman soldiers to contend with. He had become very wealthy on the backs of the poor. The word for "wealthy" (verse 2) is the Greek word *plousios*. It speaks of an abundance of earthly possessions that exceeded the norm by far.

To be a tax collector in those days was considered the lowest of the low by the Jewish people. They were traitors to the Jewish people since they were the ones responsible for collecting the harsh taxes exacted by the Roman government. People were amazed and some were offended at Jesus when He chose to socialize with tax collectors. Earlier in His ministry, He had called Matthew, also known as Levi, from his tax booth:

⁹As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.
¹⁰While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"
¹²On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.
¹³But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners' (Matthew 9:9-13).

¹ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible, Book of Luke*, Printed by The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, page 234.

It is likely that Zacchaeus had heard the story of Matthew leaving all to follow Christ. The religious establishment had barred tax collectors from attending synagogue, which meant that the only people they associated with were other tax collectors.

Question 2) What do you think would have been the thoughts of Zacchaeus about Matthew leaving his lucrative business?

Zacchaeus would have wondered why a man would leave such a lucrative business as that of tax collecting. There had to be something about Jesus that was different. Perhaps, he had heard that Matthew didn't question where he was going but just willingly left all and followed Christ. You can bet that Zacchaeus was curious. It was not normal for a Rabbi to hang out with tax collectors. Who was Jesus? Why would He, a righteous man, want to eat with sinners of the worst kind? His curiosity got the better of him. When he heard that Jesus was passing through Jericho, he was at least drawn to see what He looked like. Zacchaeus was seeking to see Jesus, while at the same time, Jesus was seeking Zacchaeus.

We are told that Zacchaeus had a problem in trying to see Jesus, for Zacchaeus was small of stature. The crowd along the road would not let him push through their ranks. I am sure that, when people saw who was pushing to get through them, there was an elbow or a kick designed to hurt him, but his curiosity moved him to desperate measures.

He humbled himself to run ahead along the road to the place where there was a large sycamore fig tree with low boughs and hastily climbed up the short trunk and hid in the wide branches. Which one was Jesus among the crowd? Christ did not look any different from all the regular people. He had no rich robes that distinguished him. There was no blond hair and blue eyes as some pictures portray. He was not on a white horse or even a donkey. He had the same black forelocks in his hair that all Jewish people had. He wore the same prayer garment with tassels that everyone wore.

Zacchaeus did not know Jesus, but Jesus knew him. Perhaps, Christ had come this very way because he knew exactly where Zacchaeus would be waiting. The Lord could have gone directly to Jerusalem from Galilee, but He chose to go by the route of Jericho, no doubt to call Zacchaeus in a personal way. I have read of many stories of Jesus appearing to people in the Middle East and other countries where it is difficult to hear the Gospel of our Lord preached. The Lord just shows up in their dreams and reveals Himself.

Before Zacchaeus could determine which one was Christ, the crowd stopped. One man in the procession paused and stood, looking up into the tree. Zacchaeus must have thought to himself; "Could this be Christ?" I'm sure his heart skipped a beat when the Lord looked up into the tree and called him by name, telling him that he must stay at his house! Christ loves to come to each of us in a personal way and give us a personal call. He knows you; He sees you.

Christ Must Stay at Your House

⁵When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today" (v. 5).

Question 3) Try to imagine some of Zacchaeus' thoughts and feelings at being seen, known by name, and singled out by Jesus himself! Describe how you think he must have felt. How do you think this encounter with Jesus would have changed his life?

I am amazed at the loving consideration of Christ. Not only did He look down from heaven, but also He also came down and entered our painful world. Furthermore, here He is looking up to Zacchaeus and asking him to come down. God always humbles a soul before He brings him to heaven. We must let go of every bough to which we hold and come down. There is a need for all of us to come down in our own estimation of ourselves. John the Baptist had the right attitude when he said, speaking of Christ, **“He must become greater, I must become less”** (John 3:30).

As we become more mature in Christ, we will live more for others and not so much for ourselves. When we know who we are in Christ, the cause of Christ becomes much greater in our estimation than our own personal agenda for happiness. Zacchaeus felt very humbled that he was known by name. He had lived his life climbing to the top of the ladder, but now he realized that the ladder was against the wrong wall. He had chased money and things, but he had become hated by the people around him. He had lost all self-respect due to the way he had treated people, yet Jesus valued him so much that he would come to his house!

Do you realize that the God of the universe knows your name and values you highly? He wants to come and live inside your house. He said, **“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”** (Revelation 3:20). He values us so highly that He calls each of us in a personal way. Each of us have different stories of Christ the Good Shepherd leaving the ninety-nine and searching for us in a personal way (Luke 15:4). No story of redemption is the same. Zacchaeus was singled out by Jesus and directly called by name.

Many people come to Christ when they have a need that awakens them to thoughts of eternity, but Zacchaeus is told that he was to have the honor of Christ's coming to his house. Jesus said, **“I must stay at your house today”** (v. 5). There was no act of the tax collector's faith that brought the Lord to his door except, perhaps, his curiosity, i.e. the fact that he wanted to see Christ. Jesus deliberately came to the place where Zacchaeus was and initiated the conversation that brought a saving response.

The phrase "must stay" (NIV) or "must abide" (KJV) is used. Luke uses the Greek word *dei*, "It is necessary by the nature of things," One must, one has to. It denotes a compulsion of any kind, such as unavoidable, urgent, compulsory necessity."² The calling of Zacchaeus was all written into God's sovereign plan. Christ didn't care about how people would murmur and complain because he went to the house of a notable sinner. Out of necessity, our Lord must come to reach the heart of Zacchaeus.

Ordained to Eternal Life

² Key Word Study Bible, AMG Publishers, 1996. Notes on Page 1604.

He directly calls each one of us that are His. When Paul and Barnabas were sent to preach to Jews and Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch, there were some who responded to the message with abuse and persecution, but the Lord opened the hearts of many: “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). Think about that. The Bible tells us that God has ordained (i.e. to prearrange unalterably; predestine: *by fate ordained*)³ beforehand those who would be saved. We may think that we are the ones searching for God, but we are actually only interested because He has first loved us and called us. He is at work in the world to build His Church. He will use our circumstances to awaken us to call out to Him. We cannot say that the depths of sin that we got into were ordered by God. Our own choices were involved, but the Bible declares that God uses all things to work together for our good to bring us to Christ (Romans 8:28). Being called or predestined to eternal life is a controversial topic, and theologians call it *election*.

What do we mean by the word election? In his book, *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem defines election as “an act of God before creation in which He chooses some people to be saved, not because of any unforeseen merit in them, but only because of His sovereign good pleasure.”⁴ Zacchaeus and all those of us who have been born again are called and chosen before the foundation of the world to be His elected ones:

⁴For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves (Ephesians 1:4-5).

I have to be honest and say that I am not a theologian but a fisherman saved by grace, but my simple early life as a fisherman does not stop me from being amazed and grateful at this marvelous truth that you and I, if we are believers in Christ, were known and called just like Zacchaeus was, before we ever came into the world. I don't have to understand it to receive it. What wonderful grace God has lavished on us! (1 John 3:1). It boggles the mind to think that He planned before the creation of the world to draw us to Himself to be holy, blameless, adopted, and grafted into the covenant of God as His sons and daughters. As well as you and I, Zacchaeus was called before the beginning of the world ever took place. God had us on His mind and heart. Christ must come to our house, i.e. the inner house of our spirit that is the spiritual temple at the very core of our lives: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Christ's coming and living within us is a must. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again” (John 3:7 Emphasis mine).

Zacchaeus was the least likely person that most people thought would be saved, just like my friend Adrian. Christ came to Jericho, a cursed city (Joshua 6:26), and called Zacchaeus. He called the worst of sinners from the worst of cities with the worst of trades. How wonderful is our Savior!

²⁸And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those God foreknew he also

³ Dictionary.com

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Published by Zondervan, page 670.

predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).

Question 4) Why does God choose such notable sinners such as Zacchaeus as well as Saul who became the Apostle Paul? What part of the above verses speaks to your heart?

God sees all of this transitory world in which we live outside of time. He is not bound as we are by time. Life is the outworking of God's plan and purpose. He lives outside of time and has already seen the end and written about it, letting us know the future. If you have been born again of the Spirit of God, you belong to Him. He already sees you as glorified, even though it hasn't yet happened. He has predestined, called, and justified you when He drew you to Himself. You can slow down the process of your sanctification. You can walk away to the point that you must be disciplined, but if you have sincerely given your life to Christ and been born-again, you are His child, called according to His eternal purpose: "God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Zacchaeus' response to a personal call was to come down from the tree:

⁶So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" ⁸But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "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." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:5-10).

I personally think that there was a time gap between verses 7 and 8. It was after dinner at the house of Zacchaeus when he got up and made his vow to give half his fortune to the poor. Furthermore, he would repay four times as much to those whom he may have cheated. This small man showed evidence of a big heart because Jesus took the initiative to reach him where he was, i.e. miserable and lost in his sin. There was a heart-felt response to the grace extended to him. He stood up (verse 8), which seems to indicate that he was possibly reclining or sitting down around a table. It also indicates that he said what he said publicly as if he were making a pledge for others to hear. A true heart-change always results in restitution and getting things right with others.

It is an affectionate call; "Today I must abide in your house." Would Christ be at home in your house? What kind of house do you have? What kind of things has Christ heard in your house? What has He seen that is going on in your house? What idols are there? He comes to live with His people. "I must abide in your house." This is His request. What will your answer be? Many of us want to clean house before we invite a guest over. We want everything to be just right, and anything which we do not want our guest to see, we hide away to make everything presentable. This is not the way it should be with Christ. He wants to come to your house just as it is. There is nothing in your life that He does not already see. There is nothing in your life that can surprise Him, He is looking for you to be vulnerable and transparent before Him. For Him to transform you, this is where it needs to start.

Once He comes into the inner sanctum of your heart, if you are willing, there are things that He will require you to put in the garbage, and guess what, it will give you great joy finally to say goodbye to the things that have ruined you on the inside. Cleaning up your habits, speech, and attitudes will take time. You shouldn't think that it is a one-day cleansing, but an ongoing process as He puts His finger on certain things in your life. There is great joy that comes to a heart that is opened to getting things right with people. "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" ⁹Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (vs. 8-9). Verse 10 gives us the emphasis that stuck in the minds of all that heard Him that day. He has come for the express purpose to seek and to save what was lost. No matter where you are or what you have done in your past life, Jesus the Messiah has broken the chains that held you fast to your sin, and set you free.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I marvel that You have come to seek and to save me and that You long to stay at my house. Come into my heart. Make it Your home forever. I love it that You know me by name. Make my heart Your home and teach me to abide in You. Amen.

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