

A Little Man Meets a Big God

Series: Journey to the Cross

Luke 19:1-10

March 12, 2017

There's a story about a local fitness center, which was offering \$1,000 to anyone who could demonstrate that they were stronger than the owner. Here's how it worked. The owner/muscle man would squeeze a lemon until all the juice ran into a glass, and then hand the lemon to the challenger. Anyone who could squeeze just one more drop of juice out would win the money.

Many people tried over time – weightlifters, construction workers, even professional wrestlers, but nobody could do it.

One day, a short and skinny guy came in and signed up for the contest. After the laughter died down, the owner grabbed a lemon and squeezed away. Then he handed the wrinkled remains to the little man.

The crowd's laughter turned to silence as the man clenched his fist around the lemon and 6 drops fell into the glass. As the crowd cheered, the manager paid out the winning prize money, then asked the short guy what he did for a living. "Are you a lumberjack, a weightlifter, or what?"

The man replied, "I work for the IRS."

Have you filed your taxes yet? We get extra days this year. Instead of April 15, Tax Day is April 18. Oops, I shouldn't have said that. The procrastinators in the room will wait 3 more days before you start working on them.

It's tough sometimes to be honest during tax time, isn't it? Here's an actual letter that was received by the IRS a few years ago:

"Enclosed you will find a check for \$150. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not been able to sleep ever since. If I still have trouble sleeping, I will send you the rest."

This morning, in our series, "Journey to the Cross", we're focusing on a high-ranking IRS man who cheated not on his return, but on everyone else's. He had figured out a way to skim some money off the top and squeeze the last drop from peoples' wallets.

Our passage this morning has some parallels to last week's topic. As you recall, when Jesus was approaching Jericho, he had an encounter with blind Bart, a poor beggar from the lowest social class. Now, as we look at Luke 19, we see that Jesus has left Bart, is continuing His passage through Jericho on his final trip to Jerusalem, and comes in contact with Zacchaeus, a very wealthy government man from the top rung of the economic ladder.

Turn to page 5 in your bulletin as we look at today's passage from Luke 19:1-10:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of

*a 'sinner.'" But 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." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."*¹

Here we see a little man as he meets a big God.

In verse 2, we begin to learn about this little man. Zacchaeus' name in Hebrew means, "pure and righteous," but he was not thought of as being anywhere close to righteous because of the job he had. As a tax collector, he worked for Rome and was considered a traitor by the Jewish people. But Zack was more than just an IRS agent. He was a "chief" tax collector. He was in charge of all the agents and was able to take a "cut" of commission from those who collected taxes for him. He stood on top of the collection pyramid, stuffing his pockets with shekels before he sent the required taxes to Rome. If Rome charged a 5% tax, Zack may have collected 10% from the people.

Jericho was a great place to be for Zack because there were a lot of people coming in and out of the city. Jericho was considered the "tax capital" of Palestine, the center of a vast trade network that extended from Damascus to Egypt. Zack was in charge of 1 of the 3 tax offices in the entire country, and may have had the best job of them all. Not surprisingly, the last part of verse 2 tells us that he was wealthy.

But he was a renegade in the eyes of the religious people. He would have been thought of as fondly as a high-level drug dealer is today. In fact, in the minds of people, tax collectors were often linked with murderers, adulterers, robbers, and other "sinners."

Tax collectors were not new to Jesus. One of His very own disciples had been a tax collector: Matthew. Early on in His ministry, Jesus had attracted, and worse yet (in the eyes of the Pharisees), received them warmly. In Luke 5:30, Jesus was accused by the religious leaders for eating and drinking with "tax collectors and sinners." These two terms were almost synonymous to the Pharisees. There was hardly a life form more offensive than these tax collecting traitors.

I want to suggest that when Zack, the little man, meets a big God, he progresses through 4 stages:

First, he was curious. He wanted to get to know who Jesus was.

In verse 3, we notice that while Zack is very wealthy and successful by the world's standards, he knew something was missing. Even people today, if they are honest, will eventually admit that there's more to life than just trying to make money and obtain possessions.

Also notice that it doesn't say that Zack just wanted to see Jesus. No. What does it say? He wanted to see **who** Jesus was. He wanted to figure out what it was that made Jesus different from everyone else. He was drawn to this man who had just given sight to the blind beggar on the outskirts of town. Now this healer was walking through town. He may not have fully understood what was going on in his heart, but Zack had a desperate need to get to Jesus.

But Zack had at least 2 problems that day. The first was that he was a short man. With all the crowds pressing in, there was no way for him to get close enough to Jesus. And in a large crowd like that, I can imagine some unhappy taxpayers taking out their frustrations with Zack by giving him an accidental elbow or a shove from the back.

¹ Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)

Zack's second problem was spiritual; his sins were keeping him from Jesus. Isaiah 59:2 says:

*"It's your sins that have cut you off from God."*²

Not only was Zack of short stature, he, like us, was not able to measure up to God's standards. Romans 3:23 says,

*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*³

He came up far short in a spiritual sense of ever entering into a relationship with God. He was short on integrity and tall on sin.

I love verse 4:

*So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.*⁴

This guy was resourceful. He ran ahead of the crowd, looking for a way that he could see Jesus. This picture is a bit amusing, isn't it? First of all, it would have been considered undignified for a rich man to run. Secondly, I don't know about you, but it seems funny to me that this wealthy man would shimmy up a tree to see Jesus. He probably snagged his cloak on some branches but it didn't slow him down. He was determined to see Jesus and frankly didn't care what others thought of his sprinting or his climbing. Zack did not allow anything, not the crowd or his condition, to stand between him and his desire to see Jesus.

What about you? Are you curious? Do you care enough about the condition of your soul to pay whatever price is necessary to be right with God? Are you ready to run away from the crowd in order to see Jesus?

Zack's second stage was that he considered. He considered and investigated the claims of Christ.

In verse 5, we see that while Zack may have been searching, it was really Jesus who was seeking him:

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

Jesus took note of Zack, although we are not told why. He stopped, looked up, called him by name, and told him that He must come to his house. Again we see that while Jesus has set his face toward the Cross, He stops and ministers to a searching sinner. He knew right where Zack was because He knew all about him, and He was filled with compassion toward him.

This is how it always happens. Jesus makes the first move by coming to the dead sinner and offering life through Himself. We would never be able to come to Jesus unless He first came to us.

He then gives Zack a two-fold command: "Come down immediately." Get out of the tree, Zack. Right now. There's always a sense of urgency about following Christ. And then Jesus gives the second part of the command: "I must stay at your house today." Why did Jesus express the necessity of going to Zack's house? Why the "must"? The religious leaders would say that because Zack was a chief tax collector, he was a "sinner." Such a person should never be invited to your home. One should

² Isaiah 59:2a (NLT)

³ Romans 3:23 (NIV)

⁴ Luke 19:4 (NIV)

⁵ Luke 19:5 (NIV)

certainly not enter their home as a guest, and you were especially forbidden to eat their food.

But notice that Jesus invited Himself to dinner! This is the only instance in the Gospels where we read of Jesus inviting Himself to someone's home for a meal. Jesus wants to go to Zack's house because it illustrates what His ministry is all about. He came to save sinners from their sins.

Jesus was offering the kingdom of God to all, even notorious sinners. It was a kingdom of love and mercy, not wrath and judgment. It was a Gospel of forgiveness and grace, not resentment and retribution. It was a message of hope and belonging, not fear and brokenness. This was what Jesus was offering, and it is this very message that Zack and the people saw when Jesus decided to not only stop, but get involved in this sinner's life.

Zacchaeus didn't waste any time getting out of the tree. Verse 6 tells us, "So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly." Jesus said, "jump" and Zack jumped. He came down right away and welcomed Jesus joyfully and with great excitement. He got way more than he asked for – he just wanted to get a closer look at the Savior but now He was coming over for dinner! He was overwhelmed with joy!

Zack's third stage was this: he converted. The big God saved him and forgave his sins.

After the meal and conversation with Jesus, we see in verse 8 that Zack was greatly impacted by the call on his life. Because of what he is about to say, I think we can safely conclude that Zack was converted during the meal. He knew he was a sinner and had come to the Savior for salvation. His conversion is clear because of the life-change we see.

Zack pushes himself away from the table and says to Jesus,

*"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."*⁶

The phrase, "here and now" indicates that Zack was not waiting to negotiate a contract with Jesus or just trying to slide by. He was fully sold out to Christ. Jesus had changed his heart and now he wanted to demonstrate that change through his actions that flowed out of a heart of gratitude for what Christ had done for him.

Zack's final stage was that he changed. His life was radically redirected after his conversion.

Zack's public confession shows the sincerity of his conversion and repentance. He wanted to right his wrongs. Biblical repentance always goes hand-in-hand with restitution because conversion is a radical life-changing event. He's now a different man so he declares that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and will make restitution at four times the amount he swindled. The man who had felt small his whole life, and had treated others as if they were small, suddenly becomes a "big" man.

Whenever Jesus meets someone, there is change. If you've never changed, it may be because you haven't truly been saved.

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, understood the importance of asking God to change him. One of his prayers reads, "Lord, I give you everything there is in this man, William Booth. Do with me what you will." God loves to hear prayers like this because it shows a willingness to change.

⁶ Luke 19:8 (NIV)

Now we come to verse 10. Jesus says:

*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.*⁷

The mission of Jesus is very clear: He came to seek and save what was lost. Jesus is still on a search and save mission. He is seeking out people who need to be saved. If you've never been saved from your sins, you need to know that Jesus is pursuing you even if you are not pursuing Him. He wants to have a vibrant relationship with you. Right now, He's outside the door of your life knocking. Can you hear Him? He knocks and then he waits for you to open the door. Revelation 3:20 says that, "...If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."⁸

When He knocks, He speaks your name out loud. He knows everything about you and has been pursuing a relationship with you for a long time. He knows your pain, your dreams, and all the details of your life. He knows your failures and your sins. He has seen and felt them all. And, He's been trying to get your attention. You may be hearing His voice right now in your heart. Just as He called out to Zacchaeus so too he is calling out to you: "Come to me right now, for I must come into your life."

Zack went through four stages:

- He was Curious. He wanted to get to know who Jesus was.
- He Considered. He investigated the claims of Christ.
- He Converted. The searching Savior saved him and forgave his sins.
- He Changed. His life was radically redirected after his conversion.

What stage are you at this morning? Are you curious about who Jesus is? If so, don't stop there. Investigate. Check Him out up close by reading the Bible. Consider His claims. Keep coming to church. As you do, your next step is to be converted. That's why Jesus came. He came to convert you, He seeks to save you, and He longs to show you His love. And then, He will change your life in ways you can't even imagine.

And so, the call has gone out. Is Jesus living within you or do you just let Him visit once in awhile? If He has taken up residence, have you been denying Him access to some of the rooms in your life?

Jesus is calling your name right now. Will you respond? Will you abandon it all for the sake of the call?

If you are ready to respond to Jesus right now by opening the door to your life, I'm going to ask you to do so during the closing hymn. I'm going to be down on the floor. If you are ready to begin a relationship with a big God, I want to challenge you to come forward this morning. Zack jumped out of the tree in response to Jesus' invitation. I'm asking you to jump out of your chair and come down to the front if you're ready to be saved.

⁷ Luke 19:10 (NIV)

⁸ Revelations 3:20b (NIV)