

Sermon for October 9, 2016 - 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 19:1-10 (NIV84)

Theme: The Seeking Savior

- 1) He stirs in our hearts a desire to see him.
- 2) He finds us and calls us to receive him.
- 3) His salvation changes our lives.

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" ⁸ 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." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Have you ever felt a longing in your heart to find meaning in your life, but couldn't figure out how to fulfill it? I think a lot of people feel this way and try to satisfy this longing with the pursuit of wealth, leisure, and a variety of earthly things. But can such pursuits actually calm our troubled hearts? Like a drug, they often numb the pain we feel by temporarily filling us with pleasure. But they can never really solve the problem by giving us the peace and fulfillment for which we long.

St. Augustine, an ancient Church Father, once attributed the longing we have in our hearts to our separation from God. He famously prayed: "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."

God made our hearts restless to get people to reach out for him in repentance so that he might save us from the eternal damnation that threatens our souls. Let us observe how the LORD did this for a man named Zacchaeus so that we might also recognize the LORD's work in and for us, under the theme: **The Seeking Savior** . . . 1) stirs in our hearts a desire to see him; 2) finds us and calls us to receive him; 3) uses His salvation to change our lives.

Part One: He stirs in our hearts a desire to see him

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

Our sermon text takes place during the last leg of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. Since Jerusalem was an entire day's trek away, many Passover pilgrims spent the night in Jericho before continuing on their journey. Jesus, however, did not merely travel through that city to find a safe place to spend the night. No, he came to Jericho to find a specific man, whose heart was restlessly searching for salvation.

² *A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.*

In order to understand Zacchaeus you should know something about the way Rome collected its taxes. They didn't have an Internal Revenue Service like we have in America. No, they sold the right of collecting taxes to wealthy groups or individuals. As long as Rome got its money and riots weren't caused by exorbitant rates, privatized tax collectors were allowed to charge whatever they wanted to cover their costs and make a profit. More often than not, tax collectors abused the system by extorting money from their fellow countrymen in order to get rich. Because of this, the Jews hated tax collectors – considering them traitors.

Zacchaeus was a “chief” tax collector – meaning that he was either very well known in Jericho or a manager over other tax collectors. He lived his life in pursuit of earthly wealth and ease – thinking that these things would fill the longing he felt in his heart for purpose. He worked hard at his job – eager to do what it took to get ahead. Honestly, Zacchaeus could have been any career driven American today whose whole focus is making a profit.

I know, some might be thinking that there is a difference between being a business man in today's world and a tax collector in Jesus' day: business men don't extort money from their neighbors. True, but even everyday business people are tempted to charge a little more just because they can. Isn't that the whole point of supply and demand capitalism? And even if Zacchaeus were an honest tax collector, he still made his career, wealth and success his gods – hoping that they would give his life meaning. Aren't we also tempted to worship those same idols?

But Zacchaeus didn't have peace. A restlessness stirred inside of him that his wealth could not calm. Earlier in life, he didn't care about his relationship with the LORD, but now – as he got older – he began to wonder: “What will happen to me when I die?” Could he, who lived his life in selfish extravagance, ever hope for salvation? The rabbis taught that, being a tax collector, Zacchaeus pretty much damned himself to hell with no hope of forgiveness. Truth be told, they didn't want him to be saved – that's how much they hated tax collectors!

But Zacchaeus heard rumors of another rabbi who performed mighty miracles. That rabbi was not ashamed to eat with sinners. In fact, one of his disciples was a former tax-collector! People were starting to wonder whether or not this rabbi was the Messiah. If he was, Zacchaeus wondered, would he welcome a man like him?

And so a desire stirred in Zacchaeus' heart to see Jesus. Little did he know that this desire did not come from himself, but the Holy Spirit awakened it through the news he heard about Jesus. The LORD wanted Zacchaeus to know His Son and believe in him for salvation. And so, when Zacchaeus heard the news that this famous rabbi was in town . . .

³ *He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.*

In Jewish culture, no respectable man would run or climb a tree in public. Such actions were considered childish. But Zacchaeus' desire to see Jesus ran so deep that he didn't care what people thought of him. He dropped his work, wealth and even his dignity just to see Jesus.

Oh, that we would be like Zacchaeus – willing to drop everything to see Jesus! Sadly, how often don't we do the opposite: allowing other things to steal us away from him? Every Sunday and Monday Jesus is here to meet us, but how often don't we let other "more pressing" needs get in the way of coming to worship? How often don't we hide our faith, afraid of what people might think if they knew what we believed?

Yes, we can learn a lot from this little tax collector; nothing is more important than seeing Jesus because not only does the LORD stir in our hearts a desire to see him, he finds all who are looking for him - calling them to receiving his salvation.

Part Two: He finds us and calls us to receive him.

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

Zacchaeus may have hoped to see Jesus, but little did he know that Jesus was also searching for him. This is why Jesus stopped and addressed Zacchaeus by name.

Yes, Jesus knew more about Zacchaeus than Zacchaeus knew about himself. He knew how Zacchaeus loved money so much that he sacrificed his faith in order to become a tax collector. He knew how Zacchaeus hurt his own countrymen by extorting money from them. Jesus knew it all. And yet, Jesus says that it's necessary for him to stay at his house!

Didn't Jesus know that, by staying at his house, the Pharisees would consider him unclean? Didn't Jesus know, that the people would think poorly of him because he associated himself with sinners? And yet Jesus – the Messiah – says that he *must* stay at his house!

⁶ *So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.*

Yes, Zacchaeus was happy. Jesus' command convinced him that he was the promised Messiah – the LORD himself, who came to take away his sins. Zacchaeus was lost, but now the amazing grace of Jesus found him and worked repentance and faith in his heart in order to receive salvation.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: the Savior who found Zacchaeus and made his dwelling with him, is the same Savior who found us. He knows each of us individually and invites us to receive him. And how do we receive him? Through repentance and faith! Yes, our dear Savior wants

to dwell with us – making his home in our hearts. He knows all about our sins and past unfaithfulness – and yet he is willing to forgive all. He is our Savior who loves us. In him our hearts find rest.

So are we going to continue joyfully answering Jesus' call and gladly welcome him into our hearts? Or do we ignore his call to receive him – thinking that we have more important things to do? Sadly, we lifelong Christians are often tempted to forget what Christ's love means for us. Just as a couple that has been married a long time might forget how empty their life was before they met; so we are often tempted to neglect our relationship with Christ - forgetting how empty our life was before he brought us to faith. This is why it's important for us to take time to meditate on God's law as well as his Gospel. It's only when we see our need for him through the law that we appreciate how he sought us out in love and called us to faith. His salvation truly changes us.

Part Three: His salvation changes our lives.

⁷ *All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' "*

Was Zacchaeus a sinner? Absolutely. But what the people failed to understand is that Jesus didn't come to save the righteous. He came to save sinners – calling them to repentance and faith. This is why he was not ashamed to be Zacchaeus' guest. This is also why he is not ashamed to dwell with you and me.

⁸ *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."*

By making these promises, Zacchaeus is not trying to make himself look good before the Messiah. No, rather he is confessing his new-found faith in Jesus: a faith that changed him.

Notice that Zacchaeus calls Jesus "Lord" - revealing his conviction that Jesus is the Messiah – the LORD incarnate. Jesus saved Zacchaeus from his sin, and, in response to that love, Zacchaeus wants to start a new life. He wants to use his wealth to honor God and help people – for this is why God gave him his wealth in the first place.

⁹ *Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."* ¹⁰ *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."*

Jesus is not saying that Zacchaeus is saved because of his pledge to pay back those he cheated and give half his wealth to the poor. No, Jesus is saying that Zacchaeus is saved because he repented and believes in him – proof of which is his changed heart. Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham – not merely by birth, like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Zacchaeus is also a son of Abraham by faith – something the unbelieving Jews could not claim. Zacchaeus trusted in Jesus, and that faith changed his life. It changed his eternal future – giving him the precious gifts of forgiveness and eternal life – all of which he received by faith.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, our seeking Savior offers us the very same gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation that he offered Zacchaeus. And when we receive these gifts through repentance and faith we also undergo a change. The Holy Spirit creates a new person in our heart – one that does not want to live selfishly, but that wants to honor God in everything. As Christians, we begin to care for our neighbors as Christ cared for us. We want to use our wealth to help support the Gospel and bring relief to those in need.

Now, this doesn't mean that we won't have a selfish nature to contend with. No, we will have to struggle against our sinful flesh until the day we die. But with Christ we can overcome our sinful nature. The good news of his salvation changes us. It moves us to want to do good – putting his glory and the welfare of others ahead of our own. Jesus, our seeking Savior, finds us and fills the longing we have in our restless heart with his forgiving presence. Live in the joy of this fact that, just as Jesus sought Zacchaeus, so he has sought you – calling you by name to be his own and so that you can live with him forever in heaven. Amen.