

Luke 19:1-10 - The story of Zacchaeus' repentance

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[0:00] Good morning, Church. The reading is taken from Luke chapter 19, verses 1 to 10.

! You'll find it in your church Bibles on page 1053. And he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.

He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed the sycamore fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, He said, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your home today.

So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, He is going to be the guest of a sinner.

[1:13] 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 the son of Abraham. For the son of man came to seek and save the lost.

Amen. Great. Thank you for reading for us, Yvonne. Do keep your Bible open there. Let me pray as we come to God's word.

Let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, we are so, so very eager to hear your word.

But we know that you are even more eager to speak than we are to listen. And so we pray that you might be gracious to us this morning. That as your word is open, as there are many things to distract us, it's warm in here, we've maybe got other things on our minds, we pray, please, that you might give us hearts and ears to listen.

[2:30] And that you might lead us to repentance and faith in Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Now, the story that Yvonne just read for us is probably quite familiar to many of us in the room.

Even if you've never been to church before, you might somewhere in a memory of school, perhaps, remember a story about a short man climbing a tree somewhere in the Bible.

If you're my age or a bit older, you might have learned a song. I'm not going to sing it. Now, Zacchaeus was a very little man. A very little man was he.

He climbed up into a sycamore tree to see if his saviour he could see. And when the Lord Jesus was... Anyway, right? I'm not going to carry on. The problem with that song, and even with our familiarity with the story, is that I think we can actually miss what's really going on.

Because when you look at the story in its detail, and how Luke's told it, you realise the story has very little to do with the size of Zacchaeus, or really very little to do with the sycamore tree.

[3:36] Those things aren't that important. What the story is really about is about repentance. It's a story about a man who was heading in one direction at the beginning of the story, who is now heading in a totally different direction, who has been transformed.

It's about a man who was at one point an outcast, who has now become an insider. A renowned sinner has become a saint.

A lost person has been found and brought near. So what I want to try and do is show you five surprises from the story that point to this meaning.

And I have a very limited and very dull PowerPoint, which is because my PowerPoint assistant is on camp. That shouldn't be allowed, should it? But anyway, there you go. So I'm going to try and go through it.

The first surprise is this. Jesus is searching for Zacchaeus. Because I think when you read it, you think that actually Jesus is being searched for by Zacchaeus. But really the story is the other way

around.

[4:37] Now, Zacchaeus is eager to see Jesus. You notice that, don't you? Verse 3, he wanted to see Jesus. Verse 4, you see that he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him.

Both of which probably took a little bit of effort for a short man. But it seems that the contrast in the story that Luke wants you to notice is this contrast between Zacchaeus, the running tree climber, and Jesus, the lost person seeker.

That's the comparison we're meant to make. So notice Zacchaeus wants to observe Jesus from the safety of a tree. He wants to stand at a distance, get a good look at what's going on, and make his own assessment.

It's, I think, probably almost certain that climbing the tree is a way for Zacchaeus to actually observe Jesus without being observed himself, right? People don't tend to, as they walk down the street, look up, yeah?

They tend to just kind of walk along. And so Zacchaeus presumably thinks, well, I can see Jesus from here, but it's probable that people won't notice that I'm up here. Zacchaeus had his safe spot.

[5:48] But your contrast is that Jesus does actually stop. And more than that, you're told in verse 5 that when Jesus reaches what is called the spot, right, the particular location, Jesus has been aiming deliberately for this destination and has now arrived at that destination and he looks up intentionally and calls out to Zacchaeus and asks Zacchaeus his immediate action.

I'm coming to your house. Come down from the tree right now. Do it. The contrast is so strong that as we were looking at with the children, when Jesus summarizes the story in verse 10, he says, this story is about the Son of Man coming to seek and save the lost.

In other words, when you actually stop to think about it, this story is not about Zacchaeus looking for Jesus, but Jesus looking for Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus goes to observe from the safety of a tree.

Jesus hunts Zacchaeus down and visits him.

Now, I want to suggest to you this morning that that dynamic is all the way through the Bible. All the way through the Bible, we find that Jesus is looking for his people. That mission that he is on to come and seek and save the lost is the mission that now carries on through the preaching of the gospel like this this morning.

So perhaps I can say to you this morning, maybe you're like Zacchaeus this morning. You've not climbed a tree. Maybe you've sat in the balcony or whatever the equivalent is. You're hoping to observe Jesus from a safe distance.

[7:23] Look and not touch. See but not be seen. I want to find out about Jesus. I want to evaluate Jesus. See what he has to offer. See how that might fit with me. And the surprise for you this morning is that you might be looking to observe Jesus from a safe distance.

But he's calling out to you because he wants to encounter you. He wants you to know him. He wants to come and stay with you. And even for us, if we're Christians this morning, this is for us as well, isn't it?

We don't come to church to find Jesus, right? It's not like Jesus has been hiding from us all week. And unless we gather here like this, we won't discover him. No, actually, Jesus has been with us all week.

And really, the dynamic of church, and Pesh led this really well, didn't he, at the beginning, to call us to worship. It is God calling out to us, inviting us. He is seeking and saving.

Again, he's not hiding from us. He wants to have fellowship with us and speak with us and be with us. So that's the first surprise in the story, that Jesus is the searcher.

[8:28] Second surprise, Jesus shouldn't go to Zacchaeus' house. Now, it's not that Zacchaeus' house wasn't very nice. He was a wealthy man, according to verse 2. So I imagine his house was quite impressive.

Rather, the problem is not his house, the problem is Zacchaeus himself, right? Verse 2 tells you, not just that Zacchaeus was a tax collector, which would have been bad enough, but he is a chief tax collector.

Now, Zacchaeus was a Jewish man who got wealthy by taking money from his Jewish brothers and sisters and passing it on to the occupying Roman forces.

And then, because he was a chief tax collector, he organized other people to do the same. Now, just think about what that means, collecting money from your fellow Jews and passing it on to occupying Roman forces.

What does that make you? It makes you a traitor, doesn't it? That's what it makes you. You are a blasphemer of the nation. You have traded national pride for your own personal fast prophet.
[9:31] He was a betrayer. And in verse 7, we're told that all the people are muttering about this. Jesus has gone to Zacchaeus' house. Jesus has gone to the house of a sinner. In verse 8, which we'll get to in the detail later, Zacchaeus is admitting, essentially, to shady dealing.

So Zacchaeus owns the badge of sinner, if you like. But the problem isn't just Zacchaeus' sin. It is Zacchaeus' sin along with Jesus' righteousness.

So in verse 7, their problem isn't so much just that Zacchaeus is a sinner. It's rather that Jesus wants to be with this guy who is a sinner. So notice their assumption.

The crowd assume that they know a few things about Jesus. They've been with Jesus for a little bit. They've heard him speak. He's spoken with great authority that no one ever else has had.

He's spoken about the sinfulness of sin. He's spoken about the moral requirements of a holy God. And now they see that man walking into the house of a sinner.

[10:35] A notorious chief traitor. And that seems to them a contradiction. Why would Jesus go there? Now Zacchaeus knows it.

The crowd know it. And presumably Jesus is not unaware of it. And I want to suggest to you this morning that unless you actually grapple with that, unless you wrestle with the idea of why would Jesus go to Zacchaeus' house, a notorious sinner, you will not understand the story.

Jesus' eagerness to be with Zacchaeus is the first surprise, isn't it? He searches him down. But it is nothing to do with Zacchaeus' worthiness. Jesus' desire to seek and save the lost is not because the lost are kind of attractive.

It's actually because Jesus is very gracious. Jesus should have called Zacchaeus down from the tree and said, right, listen. Let me tell you that betraying your country for the occupying Romans is a terrible thing to do.

We are going to now prosecute you for that. But instead, he says, let me come to your home. It's a great surprise, isn't it?

[11:50] Jesus is more eager to meet with us than we are with him. Jesus is eager to meet with us even though we definitely don't deserve his attention.

We deserve his judgment. We're going to look at this in a bit more detail in a moment. But what we really need to see here is that this moral transformation that Zacchaeus undergoes is not a condition on which Jesus arrives.

Jesus doesn't say, listen, I'll come round to your house but you must tidy yourself up first. You know, stop defrauding people and then I'll come round. No, it's the very opposite of that, isn't it? Jesus comes round to the man who he knows defrauds people.

Zacchaeus' moral transformation comes as a result of Jesus' visit not as the precondition for it. And so for you and I this morning if we picture ourselves, you know, we're up the tree observing Jesus from a safe distance.

He is looking up our metaphorical tree, whatever that might be. He's inviting himself to come and stay with us. You know, don't you, he's not saying to you, listen, you can have me over as soon as you clean your life up.

[12:58] He's not saying that. He's not saying, listen, I will come over, I will spend time with you as long as you stop thinking like that. As long as you stop doing that.

Clean your act up and I'll be right over. No. Here's the surprise. Jesus wants to come to you in the mess of your life. In the mess of your life.

With all your muck and sin and dirt. Why? Isn't he holy? He is holy. But he wants you to know, he wants me to know that he doesn't want to be with me because I deserve it.

It's not something about me, but he wants to be with me because he's gracious, loving, kind. I don't know whether you do this.

When you have friends around to your flat, right? Do you have a little bit of a clean up before they come? Do you have that place where you shove stuff, yeah? So that they don't notice it. So, you know, I'm going to put this behind that cushion.

[13:59] I'm going to put that behind the curtain. They'll never know it's there. They'll never check there. I once went around to a friend's flat and I was in the kitchen bit and it looked like it was something weird in the oven.

Now, probably a normal person should have just observed that, maybe noted it mentally and then walked on. But I was like, what? It's in the oven. So I'm going to open the oven. I opened the oven and there is their washing up that they've not yet done, right?

And they had shoved it in the oven in the hope that I wouldn't notice when I came around. But being the person I was, I opened the oven and went, why have you got your washing up in the oven? And they're like, oh, we were hoping you wouldn't find it.

Listen, you do that with your friends, don't you? But you don't have to do it with Jesus. You don't have to do it with Jesus. You don't have to pretend that you're better than you are. You know, you don't go, oh, my jealousy, my anger, my selfishness.

I'm going to put those under that cushion and Jesus will never notice it there. Pride, lust, people-pleasing. I'll tuck those behind the curtains. He won't look there. He surely won't look there. Of course, it's a stupid mistake, isn't it?

[15:00] Not only because you can't actually hide that sort of thing from Jesus, but also it's a stupid thing because he's not in your life because he thought you were all sorted anyway. He's come to seek and save lost people.

People lost in their sin, like you and me. He came to us knowing our brokenness and our sin. Let me say to you, if you're a Christian this morning, you know, don't you, that you have no other relationship like this.

No one else is like this to you. No one else is like this. No one else knows all of your faults and failings, sins and messes. Some people will know some of them, but no one else knows all of them and still seeks you out.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a theologian killed by the Nazis in Germany, pointed out that we're very good not only at hiding things from other people, we are very good at hiding things from ourselves. We lie to ourselves all the time.

So much so, says Bonhoeffer, that not only are you essentially a mystery to the person sat next to you, you are also a mystery in some sense to yourself. You yourself will not admit to yourself how bad you really are or what you're really like.

[16:11] You know, it's as if we've shoved the moral mess behind the cushions and we ourselves have forgotten that they're there. But Jesus knows all about us.

He knows our mess. He knows our lostness. And he seeks us out and comes to see us. Next thing to notice, the third surprise, is that hosting Jesus changes Zacchaeus.

I think for Christians reading the story, the surprise is that it doesn't seem to mention Zacchaeus saying that he believes in Jesus, right? I would imagine that if any of our church members here were rewriting the story, they would add that line in, right?

Zacchaeus knelt down and prayed the sinner's prayer, something like that. But there is none of that, is there? Now, that's not because Luke doesn't believe in the sinner's prayer or doesn't believe that you should believe in Jesus or say sorry for your sin.

Of course he thinks those things are important. The point is that he's got a better way of showing you that that happened than just telling you it happened. He wants to show you this radical transformation that Zacchaeus has, this heart transformation which comes through this encounter with Jesus.

[17:23] And he shows you that, not by detailing it, but by showing you its effects in verse 8. So in verse 8, you're not told exactly when it is or to whom the declaration is made, but it seems sometime on the same day that Zacchaeus makes some kind of public declaration that he is going to pay back what he stole.

Verse 8, Look, Lord, here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. If I've cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount. Now, scholars will tell you that Zacchaeus here is going way above and beyond the legal requirements or the expectation of the Old Testament law.

He's not deciding to give away a tenth of what he has, but a half of his possessions away. He's not just making a double restitution that is required for defrauded money. He's paying back four times what was owed.

The transformation is incredible. It is very thorough beyond any of the requirements laid out by the law. In other words, Luke wants you to notice that Jesus has managed to transform Zacchaeus way above and beyond anything that could be expected.

No list of rules would have done Zacchaeus this transformation, right? So Zacchaeus hasn't just received a list of rules and said, okay, I'm going to obey those because if he had, he would have done less. Jesus' transformation is deeper.

[18:46] On the previous page in your Bible, there's a story of a rich man who comes to see Jesus. This man is interested in Jesus. He claims to have kept all the commandments, but is sadly in love with his money.

And Jesus famously tells him and the crowd, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to be saved. In other words, think of the largest moving object you can, a camel, and think of the smallest hole you can imagine, the eye of a needle.

It is impossible for the camel to get through the eye of a needle. And the disciples go, well, who then can be saved? And Jesus replies, what is impossible with man is possible with God.

And so here it is. Jesus is getting the camel of Zacchaeus through the eye of the needle of God's holy requirements. Jesus has entered into the mess of Zacchaeus' life, which was much worse than the rich ruler of chapter 18, and has done what could never be done on his own, and that is he's liberated him from his love of money and has transformed him into a lover of others.

Generous, gracious, kind. Now, of course, Luke doesn't preface this with saying that Zacchaeus said the sinner's prayer or said that he stated his faith in Jesus, because Luke expects you to read it and go, wow, that's a miracle.

[20:11] That's a miracle. What a miraculous turnaround. Jesus has made this notoriously greedy sinner into a remarkably generous saint, all at once, immediately, on the same day.

Zacchaeus doesn't go to rehab, right? He doesn't go on a kind of therapy program for the greedy and the kleptomaniac. He doesn't. Instantly, miraculously, his life has changed.

Let me say to you, the same can be true for us this morning. Jesus, as we've seen, is at the foot of our tree, inviting himself into our lives. He's more eager to be with us than we are to be with him.

He's not expecting us to clean up before he comes. He's expecting us to see that his desire to be with us is a gracious and kind desire. But listen, he's not planning on leaving you unchanged.

In fact, the sign of a genuine encounter with Jesus is a radical transformation that we'll be incapable of in our own strength. This is what the Bible means by repentance.

[21:15] Repentance in the Bible is not your decision or my decision to try and clean my life up. Yeah? It's not that, do you know what? I think I'm going to start going to church. I'm going to start trying to be a better person.

That is not biblical repentance. Biblical repentance is an internal transformation that God does in our hearts, liberating us from the hold that sin has over us so that we are able to turn to God and live for him in a way that way exceeds our natural ability.

And so biblical repentance is not just saying sorry for our sin. Biblical repentance is doing sorry for our sin, if I can put it that way. As we're enabled by the Spirit, we stop loving our money.

Yes, but we also give generously. Zacchaeus gives away half of what he has. Biblical repentance isn't just sad that it stole from people. It pays back four times what was robbed.

You know, repentance isn't just regretful or sad for its pride or its lust or its anger or its selfishness. Biblical repentance does all that it can to cut those things and run from them.

[22:22] I was asked a really brilliant question after the sermon last week. See, if you were with us last week, we were looking at Manasseh's repentance. And someone asked me last week, where's the justice in all of that?

Manasseh, in the Old Testament, filled Jerusalem with the blood of innocent people. And then we're told that he repented and God forgave him. And the question, where's the justice in that?

You know, where's the price for all that innocent blood that Manasseh shed? You know, do you get just to repent, right? And then God forgives you, it's a let-off. Is that what's going on?

Is repentance just a way of dodging the consequences of sin? If it is, we'd all do it, right? No, that's not what biblical repentance is, is it? No sin in the Bible goes unpunished.

That's what the cross of Jesus Christ is about. That's where sin gets punished. But the other answer to the question, which is answered here in Luke 19, is that genuine repentance, biblical repentance, seeks to make restitution for past sins.

[23:23] The repentance that Jesus brings comes with this desire to put things right. The repentant, fraudulent tax collector doesn't get a let-off. Rather, his sin is punished in Christ, and he himself seeks to put things right.

Christ pays his moral debt before a holy God at the cross, and through the change that God has brought in him, he seeks to make restitution. Imagine you were one of the people that Zacchaeus defrauded, right?

He had taken your money off you, yeah, taken it away from you, and suddenly this happens to him, and he pays you back four times what he took. That was better than any savings account.

I wouldn't even get that in an ISA. So, and yet Zacchaeus has put it right because God has worked in his heart. So, let me say, for you and me this morning, it is not possible for us to be both biblically repentant for our sin and hold onto it at the same time.

We can't be Bible sorry and also unwilling to put things right. Sometimes it's obviously impossible, isn't it, to fix the damage from past sins.

[24 : 35] And we need to be clear about that. Biblical repentance doesn't stop a criminal from going to prison if that's where they need to go. It loosens the chains of sin on their hearts. But biblical repentance leads us to seek restitution.

Biblical repentance leads the unfaithful husband to own it and face the consequences and seek reconciliation. Biblical repentance is prepared to say sorry publicly when a public sorry is required. Biblical repentance puts things in place to remove temptation, to find accountability, to stop doing what it was doing and start doing what it should. And it doesn't do those things out of some kind of dry duty.

Rather, we do them because having met with Jesus, we hate our sin as much as he does. And we want to be rid of it and put it right. So let me ask you this morning, if you're a Christian this morning, can I ask you, are you doing repentance?

Not just asking, are you saying sorry? I'm asking you, are you doing sorry? Are you seeking to put right past wrongs? Are you fleeing from the sins of the past, from temptations of the future?

[25 : 53] Are you putting things in your life to help you in that battle? Have you left that friendship group that keeps leading you astray? Have you spoken to that person who you know you've wronged?

Have you put back what it was that you took? Because if you encountered Jesus, then that's what encountering Jesus enables you to do, in his strength, not your own.

Fourth surprise. Repentance is the condition of salvation. This is the tricky bit, right? Notice what happens here.

Jesus hunts Zacchaeus down. He goes to his house, despite knowing he's a sinner, and Jesus' visit, or his call, if you like, wasn't conditioned by Zacchaeus' willingness to repent.

Rather, Jesus' call of Zacchaeus brought to Zacchaeus that repentance. And then Jesus, having witnessed the repentance that he has brought to Zacchaeus, says, verse 9, today, salvation has come to this house.

[27 : 02] And what does that mean? Well, it doesn't mean that Zacchaeus' repentance is a work that he's done which has shown him that he is now worthy of salvation. It's not that, is it? The whole story is written to show you that Zacchaeus is way too bad for that to be the case.

And Jesus is far too gracious for that to be needed. Rather, the point is that this miraculous repentance that Jesus has brought via his visit to Zacchaeus has become the means by which Zacchaeus receives salvation in Jesus Christ.

Literally, verse 9, he receives Jesus. Jesus is the salvation. Perhaps we can put it this way. It was not possible for Zacchaeus to have a saving encounter with Jesus and keep a hold of his sin.

And in turning from his sin, he receives Christ as saviour. Theologically, you might want to say that biblical repentance and biblical faith are essentially two sides of the same coin.

You cannot repent and turn from your sin without also turning to and receiving Christ. And you cannot turn to and receive Christ unless you have turned from your sin.

[28 : 17] They're on the same ticket. They come together. It is possible, isn't it, for us? And I think we can make this mistake. And if you're making this mistake this morning, please listen to me. It is possible for you to be sad for your sin, to regret what you've done, and still not become a Christian.

Plenty of people do that. Plenty of people feel guilty and bad and sad about the things that they've done. That's why the mosque is full on a Friday, right? Full of people who know that they need some kind of forgiveness.

But if you turn from your sin in the Bible sense, if you have an encounter with Jesus Christ which turns you to hate your sin like he hates it, then you will also turn to him and receive from him

salvation.

Perhaps I could be bold enough this morning to phrase it as a question. Let me ask you, do you want Christ? Do you want the salvation that Christ alone can bring?

Do you want forgiveness? Do you want freedom? Do you want eternal life? The eternal life that Christ alone can bring. If you want that, then you must let go of your sin.

[29 : 36] You must let go of your sin. And you let go of your sin when we've had this encounter with Jesus who brings this miraculous repentance. And if you're a Christian this morning and you're going, do you know what?

I want more of Christ. I want more of Christ. I want more joy in my Christian life. I want a greater assurance of future glory. I want freedom from guilt.

I want courage to face the future. Well, let me say if that's what you want, let go of your sin. Pray even if you're bold enough, Lord, show me my sin that I might repent and have more of you.

That's what I want. The fifth and final surprise. Jesus brings great assurance. Jesus brings great assurance.

Verse nine is an amazing statement by Jesus. It's addressed to Zacchaeus. Everyone gets to listen. Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house because, here it is, this man too is a son of Abraham.

[30 : 44] Now, Jesus could have really sort of said to Zacchaeus that he was saved in any number of ways, couldn't he? But he chose to call him a son of Abraham. It's really cleverly put. To be a son of Abraham is to be a genuine part of God's people, a treasured member of the family, right at the center of God's people.

And this is amazing, isn't it? Because Jesus says to the outcast and the sinner, the traitor, now listen, now you're right at the heart of God's people.

You're adopted into God's family. You know God as Father. It's amazing, isn't it, you can imagine, can't you, just the look on Zacchaeus' face as Jesus looks him in the eyes and says, listen, traitor, you're a son of Abraham.

You're right at the heart of God's people. I love you. You're a child of the covenant. You're included in the family. Jesus invited himself into Zacchaeus' home so that Zacchaeus could be invited into Jesus' family.

And notice what that means then for the story. Think about what the story is about. You know, Zacchaeus goes up a tree to see Jesus, to watch from a safe distance. But Jesus wants more, doesn't he?

[31 : 58] He wants to bring salvation. So Jesus climbed his own tree, but not a sycamore tree, a tree to which he was named. Knowing that for Zacchaeus to be included in God's people meant that he would have to be excluded from God's people.

For Zacchaeus to be made holy, Jesus would have to be made sin. For Jesus to be able to say to Zacchaeus, you are mine. Jesus had to say to his father, why have you forsaken me?

So for us this morning, if we've encountered Jesus like Zacchaeus, this is our assurance. Christ was put out so that we might be brought in. He was made sin so that we could be made holy.

So that you and I could hear Jesus say to us, you're mine. You belong to me. You're one of my people. You're included. You're a son of Abraham.

You know, the rest of the world might not think anything of you. They might think you're very insignificant and unimportant. But Jesus says, I have given myself for you. I climbed my tree for you so that you might be mine.

[33 : 11] Let me ask, how do you know if you've encountered Jesus like Zacchaeus? It's obvious, isn't it? You've repented like Zacchaeus and you will keep repenting like Zacchaeus, knowing that you were lost but Jesus found you.

And that's the application, isn't it, of the story of Zacchaeus as we were looking at last week. Repent then so that your sins may be wiped out and times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

Let me pray as I close. Amen. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you are gracious to us and you send the Lord Jesus to call out to us not because we've cleaned our act up but because you love us and you want us to encounter you and know you.

And thank you that in meeting Jesus you don't leave us the same. you transform us and you enable us to take hold of salvation in the Lord Jesus and hear these great words of assurance that we belong to you.

And so Lord, we pray that you might make us ongoingly repentant, turning from our sin and receiving more and more of Christ as we pray in his name.
[34 : 37] Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.