

Luke 19:1-10

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[0 : 0 0] We've heard Ron talk about her own personal experience of coming to know Jesus as a person, having encountered Christians and that process of thinking.

This is Luke's first century account of somebody else who came to know Jesus, who met Jesus personally. It's one of the most important encounters with Jesus in the whole Bible, because in just one meeting, we learn so much that's a model that's typical for anybody coming to meet Jesus and follow him.

Now, at the time, it's important to realize tax collectors were not just people, the equivalent of people today who work for the HMRC, who we might sort of not want letters from them, but we don't kind of think of them as bad people for working for the Inland Revenue.

But at that time, the Jewish people were under Roman occupation. They were being oppressed. And tax collectors were collaborators with the oppressors. And almost always, they would take more than they needed to, to give to the Romans.

They were allowed to take money for themselves. So they became very wealthy by being on the side of the oppressors of their own people, of God's people.

[1 : 1 7] Zacchaeus, we're told in verse 2, was a chief tax collector and was very wealthy. He might have been the tax collector for the whole region. It may even have been for that he was chief for the whole nation.

He would have been greedy, wealthy, and despised by the people around him. And he has this life-changing encounter with the living God through Jesus.

So for any of us here this morning, we need to learn from Zacchaeus the steps we need to take if we want to have a life-changing encounter with the living God. I've got three steps for us.

You have to climb up a tree. You have to get over the crowd. And you have to take Jesus home. So first of all, you have to climb up a tree. The next thing we learn about Zacchaeus after we learn about his wealth is in verse 3.

If you just have a look. He wanted to see who Jesus was. But because he was short, he couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him since Jesus was coming that way.

[2 : 2 0] I don't know when the last time was that you climbed a tree. You might do it all the time and think nothing of it. Here's a picture of me up a tree. And it doesn't matter because I'm just a church minister.

So I can climb trees whenever I like. But this is the first century Middle East. And Zacchaeus is a very wealthy and important man. Important wealthy men in the first century Middle East don't climb up trees.

It's a bit like on Friday, it turned on the news. Donald Trump had had his failure trying to get Obama health care. It'd be a bit like on the news as we see Trump trying to cope with what's happened, seeing him up a tree.

I'm thinking, that's extraordinary, President of America. What's he doing up a tree? The fool. Or if you went out into Kelvin Grove Park enjoying the sunshine after the service and we saw Nicola Sturgeon up a tree.

Thought, gosh, how's she going to sort of lead us in a referendum? She climbs trees in the park. It's that kind of idea. There's a massive loss of face from climbing the tree.

[3 : 24] What's the point? The point is that for Zacchaeus to get to Jesus, he had to let go of his dignity. He had to face mockery from the crowds.

And the same is still true today. If you want to have a life-changing encounter with the good God who made you, you have to do the equivalent of climbing a tree. Because people will find out things about you that they will think make you completely mad.

They might think you're a loser. Because you're looking into who Jesus is. Because you've started reading the Bible. Maybe because you'd say you're a Christian or you go to church. In Glasgow today, that is like climbing a tree as a respectable person.

Why? Just think about the way that our culture works. How we raise children. I've got a four-year-old girl, Bethany. It was Red Nose Day on Friday, right? I don't know whether you saw the red noses, but there was a choice.

There were ten different red noses you could have this year. And it wasn't a choice, right? Because of all the options, you got given your red nose when you bought it in foil wrapping.

[4 : 34] So you didn't know what you were getting, right? And you open it, and you got what you got. My daughter, Bethany, said, I really want the DJ. Okay?

Okay. So we buy the red nose. It's in the foil wrapping. She opens it up, and it's DJ. It's the DJ. Okay? What does Bethany think? She's four years old.

She says to her mom, maybe that's how it works. Maybe you just always get the one you want. It's lovely, isn't it? That's how children think. Why does she think like that?

Because her world is full of fantasy. Okay? She's full of fairy stories. And we encourage that. As she gets bigger, she's going to read stories about how if you go through the right wardrobe, you'll enter a different world.

If you get on the train between two platforms, you find a school for wizards. It's amazing being a child. You have this sense of wonder at how the world works, and we encourage that. And then, there gets to a point where we say, it's time to grow up.

[5 : 37] It's time to grow up. Leave it all behind now. This world is all there is. Unless you end up in quantum physics or something like that, then you can carry on believing things that don't make sense.

But if you're like the rest of us, you start saying, we're here by accident. This world is all there is. There's no such thing as good and evil. That's just kind of evolutionary biology at work.

You'll find people around you who still believe in God, but they're a bit like people who would still believe in the tooth fairy. Just grow up. So what really matters around here is what you can see. Sex, money, power, respect.

I really distinctly remember telling a colleague, just after I'd become a Christian at work, that I'd been to church on the Sunday. And he said, what? You don't go to church, do you?

What, the virgin birth and miracles and all that? Come on. It was quite shocking for me as a new Christian. And to be a Christian, you have to be willing to keep your childlike sense of wonder.

- [6 : 41] Because you believe that there's a God who made us, there's a God of all this, who is interested in us enough to have stepped into our world to draw us back to him. It's wonderful.
- But you face mockery for believing that. So why would you be willing to climb the tree? Let me just mention two things that might encourage you amidst the kind of embarrassment of that.
- The first is that you'd be in good company up the tree. You'd be in the company of great writers like J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton.
- You'd be in the company of scientists like Francis Collins, who led the Human Genome Project. He wrote a book called *The Language of God*, a scientist presenting evidence for belief. He's in the tree.
- You'd be in the company of the many artists and poets through the ages and today who feel that the best way they can make sense of the beauty of art is that we have a creative God who made us to be creative.
- [7 : 42] The writer A.N. Wilson, who writes in lots of the different broadsheets, in the early 1990s, A.N. Wilson said publicly that he wasn't a Christian. And he went on this kind of crusade against the Christian faith.
- He wrote books. He wrote a book called *God's Funeral*, charting the history of atheism. And then in 2009, he went public in the left-wing press and the right-wing press saying he'd come to faith.
- He'd become a Christian. A couple of years ago, he wrote an account in the newspapers about how he is amazed by the power of the Christian faith to transform people's lives.
- And that's one of the key things that has meant A.N. Wilson is up the tree. So you look like a fool to lots of people for being a Christian, but the truth is you're in good company. The other thing that can help you face the embarrassment of climbing the tree to see Jesus is the sheer reward of doing it.
- The reward of joy in your heart that nothing else in the world can give you. And that's what we're going to see happens to Zacchaeus. So you have to climb up a tree. Secondly, you have to get over the crowd.
- [8 : 50] Just think about Zacchaeus. He couldn't see Jesus because of the crowd lining the streets. But there's more to it than that, right? Later in verse 7, when Jesus interacts with Zacchaeus, what does the crowd do?
- In verse 7, they mutter. It's a muttering crowd. Why? Because this is a self-righteous, moralistic crowd.
- They're a religious crowd. And what deeply offends them is the idea that God and Jesus would be interested in someone like Zacchaeus because he's a bad person.
- You can spot, if your natural inclination is kind of to be part of that kind of crowd, if you think about how you'd answer this question, how would you use the word sinner?
- The crowd used the word sinner to describe people other than themselves. A group that they look down on because they think, we're not sinners, we keep the rules. They're self-righteous.
- [9 : 53] In Jesus' day, they were the religious, moralistic people. And they thought they were good people and other people were bad people. So they could think, those people, God won't be pleased with them.
- But God will accept me because of what I've done. And here's the point. Zacchaeus can't see Jesus because there's a crowd of people like that in the way.

They've obstructed his view of Jesus. And today, we face exactly the same problem. That we might be interested in Jesus himself, but there's a crowd of people around him that put us off.

They're self-righteous. They're moralistic. Churches are full of them. And they look down on people who don't meet their standards. And we think to ourselves, if that's the fruit of the Christian faith, Christianity can't be true.

This holier-than-now attitude, it can't be true. So what did Zacchaeus do? Well, he didn't judge Jesus by the muttering, exclusive crowd.

[10 : 54] He found a way to see Jesus himself. And for you today, if you want to see Jesus, you'll have to get past Christians in Scotland who offend you by their self-righteousness and maybe by their hypocrisy.

You'll have to get past the reality that there are Christians throughout history who have done terrible things in the name of their religion.

That's the crowd. As you read Luke's gospel, Luke's account of Jesus' life, who are the people who make Jesus angry? Again and again, it's the Bible teachers.

It's the religious people who make him really angry. He says to the crowds, watch out for them. In Luke 7, he goes to a dinner one evening, and it's the dinner of a religious leader, but it's the prostitute there who he commends.

And he criticizes the religious leader. In chapter 15, he tells a story about God's acceptance of people. He tells the story of a father with two sons. One son stays at home and keeps all the rules.

[12 : 01] The other son runs away. He rebels. He loses everything. He comes back. The father commends the younger son who ran away and came back. He has a feast for him. In Luke 18, just the chapter we've just had, Jesus tells the story of two men coming to the temple.

One of them is a religious leader. He says, thank you, God, that I'm not like other men. The other one, Jesus says, beats his breast and says to God, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Jesus says it's that one, the one who asks for mercy, who goes home right with God. What's going on? Jesus wants to be with the outsider. He rejects the muttering crowd.

And you might already know that, but you might not. It might just mean that for some of us today, everything you've ever been told about the Christian faith is wrong. I remember being taught at school, at a church school, that God weighs up our good deeds against our bad deeds when we die.

And if our good deeds are outweigh our bad deeds, he'll accept us. That's what I was taught at school. It's not true. The big problem for humanity is not, can you get over this line that God has set for us?

[13 : 19] Can you be better than other people so that you're good enough for God? No, you get to the real Jesus by realizing he wants to eat with the rebel, the overlook, the outsider, again and again.

Because the one thing they've got going for them is that they realize they're not the people they ought to be. They know they're not the people they ought to be. So it's not that being good isn't a good thing.

Of course, being good is a good thing. The problem is none of us is good enough for God. We're not as good as we think. There was an article about this in the news the other week.

We believe our own propaganda. This article, two weeks ago in the paper, reports from a study by psychologists, 98% of people in Britain consider themselves to be among the nicest 50% of the population.

We believe our own propaganda. The actress Joan Collins was once interviewed for a magazine. She said this, I have never done anything bad to anyone. Never. And that is one of the things I am proud of.

[14 : 21] I have never hurt anybody. I've never been vicious about anybody, never taken any drugs, never tricked anyone. On the contrary, I can say many people have done it to me. Men, husbands, business associates, lawyers, the list is endless.

I basically think that when one meets one's maker, if I ever do, there won't be anything I've done that I need to be ashamed of. Nothing. That's Joan Collins. She's been married five times.

She's admitted that she's been unfaithful in her marriages. But she said, I've never done anything wrong. And if I ever meet this God, there's nothing I'll be ashamed of. Well, the Bible says, get real about ourselves.

That when we stand before God, none of us, when we see pure goodness, will think that our goodness is enough. We won't impress him with the things we've done.

And we all have things that we're ashamed of. The good news is, that's exactly why Jesus came. Not for people who think they're good enough, but for any of us willing to admit that we've not been the people we ought to be.

[15 : 32] And the wonderful thing with Zacchaeus was that he didn't let that muttering, self-righteous crowd get in the way of him realizing that. We mustn't do that either. So you climb up a tree, you get over the crowd, and thirdly, you take Jesus home.

Have a look with me at verse five. 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. This is very special. I've preached on this before, and my third point was, you have to invite Jesus home.

But I've had to change it. Because if you notice, Zacchaeus doesn't invite Jesus home. Jesus invites himself. And this is where the grace of God, the undeserved kindness of God, strikes through the entire body of Zacchaeus like a thunderbolt.

Jesus knows exactly who Zacchaeus is, and before Zacchaeus has had any chance to deal with it and put things right, Jesus says, I'm giving myself to you. I want to be with you.

[16 : 46] It's this wonderful picture of the central truth of the Christian faith that we're more wicked than we ever dared imagine, but we're more loved than we ever dared dream. Did Zacchaeus clean up his act first?

No. No. It's Jesus who takes the initiative and says, I'm giving you myself now as you are. And the results are astonishing.

The first one is joy in verse 6. Zacchaeus welcomes him gladly. And there is this moment when you become a Christian of real joy. A joy at seeing Jesus and seeing how wonderful he is, but also at experiencing his acceptance of you that says to you, you don't have to prove yourself to me.

I know exactly what you're like and I love you. And that joy is completely transforming. So look at verse 8 with me. There's the muttering in verse 8 of the crowd.

Then 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.

[17 : 59] Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a son of Abraham. It's a way of saying, in other words, he's one of God's people now. This is where the order is so important of how that worked.

You see, Zacchaeus doesn't change the way he handles money and then get accepted by God. No, he gets accepted by God as he is and it just is like a thunderbolt through his body, through his soul and it just transforms the way he thinks about money.

He's the perfect model for how the grace of God changes you. There's a creative reshaping of his heart. Just think about it. Before Jesus came, there were rules for God's people about how to handle money.

They're in the Old Testament. It said you had to give 10% of your money to help the poor. Zacchaeus says 50% here and now. The Bible says, Old Testament, if you've cheated somebody, you have to give them back the money and 20% extra.

Zacchaeus says, I'll pay back four times the amount. It's off the scale of what God requires in his law. Why? Because for Zacchaeus, the rules don't apply anymore.

[19 : 16] God's grace has shot through his soul and he's asking a completely different kind of question. He's holding nothing back from God. You see, the moralist who believes that there's a good God who's going to judge him says, how much do I have to do for this God to be accepted by them, to keep God happy?

But Zacchaeus has accounted the grace of Jesus Christ so that he can say, all this money that I was living for, it means nothing to me now. I don't need it for the home that I could live in or the comfort and luxury I could enjoy, the freedom that it gives me, the prestige, the respect of others that it gives me.

I don't need any of that because I know who God is now and I know that he knows me and I belong to him and that's enough for me. I can let go of everything else. He gives back 400%.

Why? Is there a rule? No. It's because God has sent him on an adventure. And I guess for those of us who are here who are already Christians, we need to ask ourselves, do we recognize this kind of joyful heart change in ourselves?

Jesus wants every square inch of our life to be changed and reshaped by his grace as it strikes us so that it transforms our thought life and our sex life and our diary and our bank statement and for some of us it will change what we do for a living.

[20 : 49] We don't ask questions anymore like, how much do I have to give? We don't ask, is it okay for me to have a second home or a second car or a sports car?

We don't ask the questions like that. How much am I allowed to have? No, instead, we just think things like, how much do I really need to live on so that I can give the rest away to support gospel work and to help the poor?

We're glad to ask that because what Jesus has done for us means so much to us. Wouldn't it be wonderful if people at Glasgow thought that of the people at St. Silas?

If they could see from watching our lives that we've been just so transformed by the grace of God that we live radically differently to everybody else. If that's not how we feel, the answer isn't to make up more rules.

The answer is to go back to Jesus and look at him again and again. Think about him more and more. Dwell on the gospel more and more. Just think, why did Zacchaeus climb up a tree that day?

[22 : 02] If you were in a crowd one day and there was a parade coming of somebody famous, and there was someone really short behind you who you knew and you could see over them and they're stuck behind you, what would you do?

You'd let them in front of you, wouldn't you? Of course you would. Why does nobody do that for Zacchaeus? It's because he was despised and rejected because of his sin.

So he climbed up a tree and Jesus invites him down off the tree. How can the grace of Jesus extend to someone like him? Only because Jesus was willing to be despised and rejected in our place.

He beckons Zacchaeus back down from a tree but he could only do that because he was on his way to get up on a tree himself. There's a statement in the Bible, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.

Certainly the early Christians understood that as Jesus got on the cross, on the wooden cross, it was a tree he was being fastened to so that when his life drained away from him, he did it in our place to bear the curse that we deserve for our sin and shame.

[23 : 12] And now that Jesus is risen and ascended, he's alive forever to see any of us who deserve to be despised and rejected for the ways we've treated God and each other and Jesus says, I offer myself to you a grace from God that will bring you eternal joy but to get it, you have to climb up a tree, you have to get over the crowd, you have to take Jesus home.

Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we recognize that we're not the people we ought to be.

We're sorry for the ways that we have done what we shouldn't do, the ways we've left undone what we should have done. that on our own we recognize we deserve to be rejected by you.

And so we thank you for your astonishing grace to Zacchaeus that day, to us today. That you offer yourself to us that we might feast with you.

And so we pray. Thank you for your great gift of forgiveness, of a clean slate, of adoption into your family, born at great cost to yourself.

[24 : 38] We accept that gift today and ask that you will help us more and more to be so transformed by your spirit in seeing your love for us that like Zacchaeus, our whole attitude for things that we've lived for before is transformed to live for you.

We ask for your great glory. Amen.