

What is Jesus Doing?

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Alan, for reading. Good morning, St. Silas. My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the senior pastor here. If you're watching at home, it's great that you could join us. For those who are here, you can find an outline on the sheets. Do keep Luke's Gospel open in front of you on the sheets, or if you can grab a Bible to hand or look it up on BibleGateway.com at home, then that will help just follow along as we look at this event together. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, as we turn now to this encounter that Zacchaeus had with your son Jesus in Jericho, we ask for your help. Would you open our eyes to see Jesus ourselves today and enable us to open our hearts to welcome him gladly? We ask for our good and in his name. Amen.

Well, we turn now from the somber mood of Remembrance Sunday to this event that's full of joy. There's always joy in a great rescue, isn't there? I'm sure you'll remember two years ago, the world was gripped by the story of the schoolboys in Thailand who got trapped in the caves in the rain when it was flooded, and they'd gone exploring on one of the boys' birthdays. At first, they were feared dead, and then searchers went in, divers went in through and found that the boys had managed to set themselves on a ledge four kilometres into this cave complex. The journalists from all around the world gathered at the entrance to this cave as different things were attempted by the rescuers. Eventually, through an extraordinary system of getting air through, air capsules through for the children and stretchers and pulleys, they managed to get the boys out one by one, and eventually, there was, the news went out across the world, and the big strap line was, they're all out. They got all the boys out safely, and it was a wonderful thing. And I guess those families must think about those rescuers a great deal, those Navy SEALs who went in and got them out. And here in Luke 19, what we find is that at the heart of the Christian faith is the message that that kind of rescue story is on offer to every one of us, and it's true for anyone who has come to know Jesus. We're catching up with Jesus as he goes into Jericho, and it's this culmination of so much of what Luke has been trying to convey to us that Jesus is all about. And so that at the end of this account, he quotes Jesus, really telling us what his whole mission is for in verse 10. He calls himself the Son of Man. The Son of Man was God's title through the prophet Daniel, for the man to whom God is giving all authority over every person in the world. And Jesus says, that's him. And verse 10, have a look, the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. We might not use the word seek and save today, but we are familiar, aren't we, with search and rescue. Just at our earlier service, Lisa from Guernsey was saying to me, growing up in Guernsey, you hear the helicopter blades as they head out to the sea looking for people. Perhaps we could think of maybe as people get lost in the highlands and get in trouble. And they're searched out, often heroically, often at great cost, and then people go and find them, and they rescue them to bring them home to safety.

Jesus says that God has sent Jesus on a search and rescue mission. So how do you get rescued by him? Well, we see from Zacchaeus here three things that you've got to do to be part of that rescue. You've got to climb up a tree, you've got to hear Jesus call, and you've got to welcome Jesus home. So first you have to climb up a tree. Jesus has warned his disciples that Jerusalem, where he's heading, is a place where he will suffer and die. And on route, he passes through Jericho, and we're told in verse 2 he meets Zacchaeus, who's this chief tax collector and is wealthy. Jericho is a major place for trade. It's on this key trade route. And so it was a regional center for the Romans to collect tax, and it made sense to have a chief tax collector there. It's the ideal place for him to be placed. But tax collectors at that time, as we've seen in recent weeks, they weren't the equivalent of HMRC workers today, because what they were doing was taking money from their own people, from God's people, with a sizable cut for themselves in order to give it to the Romans who were using it to reinforce the army and occupy the territory. So they were traitors, and they were looked down on. Don't see Zacchaeus as a familiar friend. Oh yeah, I think I remember hearing about him when I was little. He's a nice man. No, think of him as a notorious rich man who is vilified by the people around him for the way that he has earned his money. Maybe you'd think Fred Goodwin, if you remember him, head of the Royal Bank of

Scotland. I did ask a banker in our church if I could use this example. He said Fred Goodwin was fair game. So Fred Goodwin, he was overseeing RBS when it became the biggest bank in the world, oversaw it overreaching into these subprime mortgages that turned out was junk, had to go to the government, ask for the government to bail out the bank, and then retired on a pension of half a million pounds a year to the Grange in Edinburgh, which I've heard is a rather nice place to live.

And if you're watching from the Grange in Edinburgh, do stay tuned to hear what happens to Zacchaeus. It's that kind of notorious rich man that we need to think of when we think of Zacchaeus. And in that sense, you see, the reason to portray him like that is to recognize that what Luke needs us to do is realize Zacchaeus epitomizes the human condition. He demonstrates for us a lostness that we all share as human beings. We're all lost. If you looked at the people in Israel at that time, this man was about as far from God as you could be. He's immoral, he's a cheat, he's not religious, and he's very rich.

[6 : 46] And we've seen in the last two chapters of Luke's gospel that being rich is dangerous, because money is dangerous. When you've got money, you find it harder to think that you need God, because you're used to not thinking you need anything. The money gives you a confidence, a security, even an identity. We put our identity in the money we have, if we have it.

And then we're seduced by it so that we don't think we could do without it. And then when we hear of Jesus and perhaps a challenge by the way he lived, the cost seems too great to recognize that we would need help from him and turn to him. So we meet Zacchaeus and he's a lost man. And for those of us this morning who are followers of Jesus, he is a reminder to us of our history, of where we were when Jesus met us, and what a change that God has brought about in your life and mine. And if you're not a follower of Jesus today, the challenge really is to, verse 10, to ask yourself, am I willing to accept that it is possible that spiritually I'm a bit lost? It is a horrible feeling to be lost, isn't it? But sometimes you can be lost and not realize it. Shortly after I moved to Glasgow, I went to visit somebody in the car, and on the way back to the church, I plugged into the sat-nav, 69 Park Road, and drove off. And it was only, because I wasn't yet familiar with the city, it was only after quite a while that I realized I was heading for Bishop Briggs, where there is a 69

Park Road. And the thing is that if anyone had asked me at any point early on that car journey, are you lost? I would have said no. I was perfectly confident in where I was going, but I was heading for the wrong place. And it's a challenging, it's an affronting message from Jesus, but it's the message we need to hear that actually, if we're not with him, spiritually, we're heading in the wrong direction in our lives, and we need to realize that we're lost. In fact, lots of us are actually a lot more like Zacchaeus than we might like to admit. Globally speaking, most of us are very wealthy.

And morally speaking, we share this with Zacchaeus, that none of us, none of us can make the mistake of thinking that when we meet our maker, we will be able to impress him with how we've lived.

We mustn't make that mistake. That's abundantly clear from Jesus, that God's standards are too high for any of us to think, when I see God, he's going to be impressed. We're a hopeless case when it comes to God. And yet on this particular day, that means Zacchaeus does something wonderfully right.

[9 : 38] And it's so simple. It's that he knows enough about Jesus to think, I want to see him. I want to see who he is. So verse 3, 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 a sycamore fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

He picks the right type of tree. Sycamore fig trees, I'm told it's wide trunk, lateral branches. This is good tree climbing fodder, if you're a tree climber. I don't know how much tree climbing you've done. I've done more than I normally do this year, since we've had to spend most of the year outdoors, if we've wanted to do anything or see anybody. And there would have been days where, if you've gone to Mugduck Park and you'd seen us as a family, you'd have seen us kind of moderately climbing trees. And if you see me doing that, it's no big deal, is it? Because I'm just a church minister. There's no embarrassment there. But this is the first century, and it's the Middle East, and it's a rich man. This is like seeing Joe Biden making a speech this week in a park, and the camera cuts to a tree, and our first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, is up the tree. It's that kind of idea.

What is she doing up the tree? Just the embarrassment, the loss of dignity. You know, with the kind of health advisors, Patrick Vallance up on the next branch. It's unthinkable.

And I think it's very similar to the situation we face today if we want to see who Jesus is. What stops us? What stops us going on a life course or being willing to meet a friend in a coffee shop to open the Bible or come to church? What stops us? Thinking back to me at university, lots of the time, it was the fear of embarrassment at how that would look, that I might be laughed at if people knew I'd gone to church. I might be looked down on. And yet, how foolish not to have the humility just to think, it is possible, you know, that for all my achievements, that spiritually, I might be a bit lost, and I might have something I could learn from Jesus. I remember hearing of a guy on a plane who is a Christian, and the guy next to him, he said, he found out he was a Christian, and then said, are you a Christian? He says, no, I'm agnostic. He said, all right, where do you go to church? He said, well, I don't go to church, I'm agnostic. He said, really, you're agnostic, and you don't go to church? Surely you want to be at church at least once a fortnight if you're agnostic. You're saying, you don't know. Don't you need to take a look at Jesus? But it's embarrassing, isn't it, to look into Jesus. Now, why is it embarrassing? It's because when you're a child in our culture, you're allowed to have a sense of wonder. You're allowed to believe that if you put your tooth under the pillow, a fairy comes, that if you push your luggage trolley between two platforms at King's Cross, you might end up at a wizarding school, that if you find the right wardrobe, you could end up in another world. And that's what we long for children to have, that sense of wonder. And yet there comes a point when you're growing up where someone says to you, or adults start to say to you, it's time to grow up. It's time to grow up now and realize that all that's real is what you can see. All that really matters around here is money, sex, popularity, power, good looks. It's time to grow up. And in the midst of that, you look at the Christian faith and it speaks to us about how there's a God of all this who made us and loves us and is calling us home to heaven. A place where he will wipe every tear from our eyes and we'll be with him forever.

To believe that, you have to have a sense of wonder. You have to keep your sense of wonder. And it means that with the people around us, we lose our dignity, our respect. So why would you do that? Why would you climb a tree to see Jesus? Well, Zacchaeus was willing to, and what we see from him is that when you're willing to do that, there is wonderful joy on offer. So that's our first point.

[14 : 11] You have to climb a tree. Secondly, you have to hear Jesus's call. We pick things up in verse 5, where there's this remarkable turnaround. So have a look at verse 5. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.

So who is seeking who here? Zacchaeus thought he was looking for Jesus. Jesus stops at the tree.

And Zacchaeus realizes Jesus is looking for him because Jesus is on a search and rescue mission. It's a great misunderstanding today that people talk about searching for God. They say we're all searching for God. And the Bible explains to us, none of us are searching for God in our hearts.

And in fact, we've hidden from God. And Jesus has come to seek us, to find us. And for Jesus to look up at Zacchaeus, the chief of sinners, is very special. The kindness of Jesus is about to strike the soul of Zacchaeus like a thunderbolt. He makes Zacchaeus an offer. And it's the offer he makes to any of us.

It's a personal offer. It's a personal offer. Zacchaeus, I must stay at your house. Jesus is building the kingdom of God. How does he build the kingdom? One person at a time.

[15 : 39] The leper he healed who came back in chapter 17. The blind man by the roadside in chapter 18. And now this rich man up a tree. Today, individuals like you and me, Jesus makes a personal offer.

And could it be that if you're someone looking into Jesus, that the reason you're here right now, the reason you're watching at home, is not just that you're looking at Jesus. It's that he is looking for you. For he's willing to call you his friend. That's what this offer means in that culture.

I must stay at your house today. It's friendship. It's, I want to be your friend. It's a personal offer. And his offer is a gracious offer. The point is, if Jesus can make this offer to Zacchaeus, he can make this offer to any of us. And the contrast is with the crowd. The crowd mutter about what's going on because the crowd is a moralistic crowd. It's self-righteous.

They would use the word sinner to describe people who are not them. And it's just like when the woman anoints Jesus at Simon's house and the people say, if he really was a prophet, he would know the kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner. It's the kind of self-righteousness and judgmentalism that plagues the church. But if you've ever had that experience before from Christians or from a church, of feeling looked down on, of not feeling welcomed, of feeling judged, well, be encouraged to see the distinction here. That while the crowd look on from the outside and mutter, Jesus has gone to the home of Zacchaeus. He wants to be with him. He wants to be his friend. He's gone to Jericho looking for him. Be encouraged. It's the lost he came to seek. And it's the same today. You can't prove yourself to Jesus. He knows what we're like. And he seeks you. And he offers you friendship.

It doesn't matter how lost you are. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter how uncomfortable you feel at church or if you're at home. And the reason you're at home is you would never come into a church. That doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if you don't know when to stand up and when to sit down and when to say the words. None of that matters. Jesus makes you an offer.

[18:11] It's personal. It's gracious. The last thing to see about his offer is that it's urgent. Did you notice that? Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. So he came down at once.

It's important because there's always a reason to put it off. I think I'm just so busy. I'm just in a busy patch right now. I look into Jesus when the busy patch is over. This isn't the year to sort this out. I look at Jesus another time. And so we keep putting him off. And maybe we can remember the day when we stopped putting it off. And we responded to this offer. Or maybe you're someone today who needs to think, well, why not today? Today will be a great day to respond to his offer with urgency. So that's our second step. You climb up a tree.

You hear Jesus call. And thirdly, you welcome Jesus home. So have a look with me at verse 6. So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. This isn't bad news. It's not full of cramping restrictions. It's joy. It's gladness. Because the kindness of Jesus has overwhelmed Zacchaeus.

And the crowd mutter because he's a sinner. They think he's not worthy. Of course he's not worthy. Jesus gives him the personal reassurance in verse 9 that his status before God has completely changed.

A son or daughter of Abraham just means he's one of God's people, one of God's family. So have a look at verse 9. Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a son of Abraham. He went up the tree, a sinner. He came down from the tree, a son. That's what Jesus does for you.

[20 : 15] He takes lost outsiders who have no chance of being friends with God today. And he welcomes us to be friends with God and to be part of his kingdom forever. And he seeks us out and he saves us to be children of God. And when he does that, it turns your whole life around. So look at the response of Zacchaeus in verse 8. 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've cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount. And Jesus sees that as irrefutable demonstration that salvation has come to this man's house, that he gets it. He's accepted the free gift of righteousness. It's not that Zacchaeus changes his ways and that earns him a place in the kingdom. No, it's that the kindness of Jesus has reshaped his heart. It's collided with him and set him on an adventure. He's been transformed from a life based on accumulation to a life based on generosity. And it's a culmination of a theme about money we've seen through Luke's gospel in these recent chapters. Luke's account of Jesus' life, you just compare it with the rich ruler we looked at in chapter 18 two weeks ago. He wanted to do things to earn his way into God's kingdom. And if that's what you think God is like, if you think

God makes you do stuff to get right with him, the rich man couldn't give his wealth up. He couldn't leave his wealth behind. Zacchaeus, on the other hand, has this encounter with Jesus and his kindness.

And in his joy, he can let go of his money and give it away. And there's no tithing of 10% here. Half his possessions away, given away there and then, and a promise to pay back four times the amount to anyone whom he's conned. You wonder, was Jesus the last person ever to have a meal at Zacchaeus' house? Will he have anything left? And I tend to read about Zacchaeus and think, well, it's easy for rich people, isn't it, to give their money away. They'd hardly miss it.

But that's not the case when you think about the figures. I think he's got nothing left. And when we think about our money, you could always have more, couldn't you? No matter how much you have, there's always someone with more than you that makes you realize that you could have more.

But Zacchaeus here is not there to give us rules, set figures that we have to follow about money. His giving is voluntary and it's cheerful. And Jesus says of him, this is transformation.

[23 : 12] This is demonstration of what salvation does to you. The joy of being rescued by Jesus. So friends, it's a story of great rescue. And wonderfully, this is the story that encapsulates the mission of Jesus. No wonder he means so much to people all across the world today.

You don't have to change the world to be accepted by him. Like the lost son in chapter 15, you just have to turn back and come home. Like the cleansed leper in chapter 17, you just have to come back to him and praise God. Like the little children in chapter 18, you just come to him with nothing in your hand. Like the blind man last week, you just approach him as king and ask for mercy. And it's a great thing to be a Christian.

You climb up a tree to see Jesus, only to discover that the reason you were looking for him is that he's looking for you. You look for him as a sinner and you find that he welcomes you in as a son, a child. And Luke puts this event here to illustrate for us what Jesus is doing in the world today.

That he came to seek and to save the lost. And he uses means to do that. When we experience this joy in our own lives, we can stop being like the muttering crowd, looking down on others. And we can be part of Jesus' search party for others. Have you given up on praying for your non-Christian family or your non-Christian friends? Let's not give up. Let's not give up connecting with friends and neighbors. Let's be marked by the joy of rescue so that we speak humbly about the wonderful thing that Jesus can do for you. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we come before you this morning and acknowledge afresh our lostness. We come to you empty-handed like little children.

[25 : 28] We want to see Jesus. Thank you that he came to seek and to save. Thank you that he looks for us and that his offer to us is personal and gracious and urgent.

We welcome him gladly into our hearts today. Open our eyes to what he gives us that we would have, like Zacchaeus, the joy of his rescue mission.

And help us to live lives where that joy overflows in generosity, moved by the wonder of your mercy to us, that we might be useful to you as you in turn seek and save others.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.