

Jesus Came to ... Seek and Save the Lost

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on December 25, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ Merry Christmas to you all. I think it's rather exciting and extra special when Christmas Day falls on the Lord's Day, and we get the rare opportunity to share a Christmas morning as a church family. I'm sure you have your own Christmas feast planned, and you'll be opening up gifts later with your family. **But this morning, we get a chance to feast on God's Word and receive the gift of his Spirit who illuminates the truth of Scripture.** Helping us to see Jesus for who he is – the Incarnate Son of God, who is our King, our Savior and Friend.
 - During this Advent season, we've been in a series called "Jesus Came to..." **In the past weeks, we've been considering various passages where Jesus explicitly explains to us why he came to earth.** In Luke 4, he said he came to proclaim good news. In Luke 12, he said he came to cast fire on the earth. And this morning, we'll look at another text where he specifically tells us why he came into this world.

- ❖ If you think about it, it's pretty amazing that Jesus could even say this. **If I were to ask you, "Why did you come into this world?", you wouldn't have an answer.** How many of us decided to be born? How many of us can say with bold confidence, "This is the reason why I came into the world"? None of us can. We were just born. We had no say in the matter. We entered this world without any clue as to why we're here.
 - But consider Jesus. He came as a man – a human being. He is just like us. But at the same time, he's not like us. **Because, unlike us, he consciously decided to come into this world.** Unlike us, he knew his purpose for coming. He knew exactly why he came that first Christmas morning, and he spells it out, once again, in this morning's text. He says in **Luke 19:10**, "*For the Son of Man – that's his favorite designation for himself – came to seek and save the lost.*"
 - **In other words, Jesus came on a rescue mission.** There are lost sheep that need to be found. Lost coins that need to be recovered. Lost sons and daughters that need to be brought back home and restored back into right relationship with the Father. That's what Jesus came to do.

- ❖ **Now what we'll see in today's text is that the very people who are considered "lost" – the ones Jesus came to seek and save (to find and rescue) – may very well surprise you.** And what I hope you come to discover is that you're included in this category of the "lost". That Jesus came that first Christmas morning to seek and to save even you.
 - So as we walk through this story of Christ and his encounter with the wee little Zacchaeus, we're going to flesh out the identity of the kind of person Jesus came for. That kind of person can be described in three ways. (1) Jesus came for those we would least expect, (2) Jesus came for those we might least respect, and (3) Jesus came for those who will bear the fruits of repentance.

Jesus Came for Those We Would Least Expect

- ❖ Let's first consider how Jesus came for those we would least expect. That would've been the reaction of anyone reading Luke's Gospel for the first time. When you're studying biblical narratives like the Gospels, sometimes it's important to put yourself in the shoes of the characters within the story. Thinking what it would've been like to be Zacchaeus or someone in the crowd that day. You can learn a lot about a passage that way.
 - **But when reading a gospel narrative, it also helps to occasionally put yourself in the shoes of the original audience.** To imagine yourself as a reader or listener of Luke's Gospel, hearing it for the first time, all the way from start to finish. Put yourself in those shoes and consider what kind of ideas or assumptions would you have about certain characters or the overall plot line by the time you arrive at our text. That gives you an entirely new perspective, offering you new insights.

- ❖ So I'd argue that the reader of Luke's Gospel – if he or she had been paying close attention up to this point – would be thoroughly confused as to what to think about a rich chief tax collector. Are we dealing with a protagonist or antagonist? A good guy or a bad guy? You wouldn't really know at the start.
 - **Because by the time you arrive at Luke 19, on one hand, you'd assume that anyone rich or anyone in a position of authority would tend to be outside the kingdom of God and antagonistic towards Jesus.** That's been the M.O. of all the rich people or ruling authorities who have encountered Jesus so far in Luke's Gospel.

- ❖ Readers would be familiar with **the Rich Fool** in Luke 12:13-21 who assumed that he who dies with the most toys wins. We would've already met **the Rich Man** in Luke 16:19-31 who disregarded poor Lazarus and ended up in Hades. And we'd still remember **the Unrighteous Judge** in Luke 18:1-8 who ruled unsympathetically and **the Rich Ruler** in vv18-30 who walked away from Jesus sad because he loved money more than the kingdom and its King.
 - So when introduced in Luke 19 to a *chief* tax collector who's also *rich*, a reader would naturally assume this is someone outside the kingdom who will oppose Jesus.

- ❖ But then, at the same time, readers of Luke's Gospel might assume that tax collectors and sinners are welcomed in the kingdom and would be friends of Jesus. We would've read about Jesus calling **Levi the tax collector** to be his disciple in Luke 5:27-32 and feasting at his house with other tax collectors and sinners. We'd still remember **the woman of the city** in Luke 7:35-50 who loved much because she was forgiven much. And we would've just read about **the humble tax collector** in Luke 18:9-14, who went up to the temple to pray, who couldn't even look up to heaven but beat his breast saying, "*God, be merciful to me a sinner.*"
 - So when introduced in Luke 19 to a rich chief *tax collector* who's labeled a *sinner* by others, a reader would assume this is a sympathetic character because Jesus is known by now as "*a friend of tax collectors and sinners.*" (Lk 7:34).

- ❖ So you can see how readers, at this point, would be confused as to what to think about Zacchaeus. **This story is pulling the rug out from under all of our stereotypes and assumptions about who's in and who's out when it comes to the kingdom of God.** And it's all intentional. Jesus is intentionally seeking out Zacchaeus, of all people, in order to break our stereotypes and challenge our assumptions. The whole point is that we can't assume too much about someone based on their outward status.
 - You can't judge a book by its cover. **Or to use a biblical analogy in Luke's Gospel, you can't judge the health of a tree without taking time to observe its fruit.** In other words, you can't assume a sycamore tree is going to be more healthy than an olive tree versus a fig tree. You just don't know yet. You can't tell if it's a good tree until you water it, observe it, and see what kind of fruit it bears. That's what Jesus taught back in **Luke 6:43-44**. *"⁴³For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, ⁴⁴for each tree is known by its own fruit."*
- ❖ **So the point is we shouldn't make too many assumptions about Zacchaeus just based on his status or position.** Just because he's rich or just because he's a tax collector. Don't automatically assume he's in the kingdom of God just because he fits the stereotype. And don't assume he's outside the kingdom just because he doesn't fit the bill.
 - You really have to wait and observe his actions. How does he respond to the call of God? **When you water him with the Word of God, what comes out of him? What kind of fruit does he produce?** That's what you need to look for.
- ❖ And the same goes for us. **We can't be too quick to make judgments about each other.** There are some who grew up in a harsh environment and have rougher edges – but are very close to the kingdom or they're already in. And then there are those who are very religious, very intelligent, very put together – so we assume they're in – but in fact they're far from the kingdom. They seem to have it all together, but they're actually very lost.
- ❖ Just think about it. **Many of us today would look at someone like Zacchaeus and assume he's got it made.** Put aside his particular occupation and just focus on what he's achieved when it comes to money and career. He has it all together. We, on the other hand, are so dissatisfied with money and career. Maybe because we're still in school and not making any money, and there's no end in sight. Or maybe we're struggling at work. We feel so lost in our career path. "Is this what I want to be doing for the next 30 to 40 years? I feel so lost."
 - But that's why we need to meet a man like Zacchaeus. **Because he demonstrates that even someone at the pinnacle of his career – someone who is enormously wealthy – can still feel very much lost and be unsatisfied with life.** We assume, based on his status and position, that Zacchaeus is happy. Because we think that's how we're going to feel if we ever achieve his status and get to his position.
 - But that's a false assumption that Scripture tries, time and time again, to expose. **Money and career were never intended to be the answers.** They were never meant to satisfy you. Zacchaeus is doing well when it comes to money and career, but he's still lost and in need of rescue.

- ❖ **It turns out that Jesus came to seek and save those we would least expect.** Those we thought were doing just fine. And ultimately, that serves to teach us the invaluable lesson that every one of us is lost and in need of rescue. We all need to be sought after and saved. We all would be lost and dead in our sins if Jesus didn't go on a rescue mission for us.
 - **The story begins by portraying Zacchaeus as the seeker, but it ends with him being described as the one who is lost and being sought after by Jesus, the ultimate Seeker.** Praise God that we have a Good Shepherd who won't give up until all his sheep are found.
 - Jesus will keep looking even if that search leads him through the valley of death. We have a Good Shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep (Jn 10:11). That's our Savior whose birth we've come to celebrate this morning.

Jesus Came for Those We Might Least Respect

- ❖ Now just as he came to seek and save those we would least expect, we could also say that he came for those we might least respect. Like I mentioned earlier, readers of Luke's Gospel, by this point, would be sympathetic towards a tax collector. They come across as the good guys. But that's definitely not how Jesus's contemporaries would've viewed them. Tax collectors were routinely despised and rejected.
 - Now we're told that Zacchaeus was small in stature, and because of the crowd, he couldn't see Jesus. **"Small in stature" obviously refers to his physical size as a smaller man.** He couldn't see over the crowd, so he had to climb a tree to get a better view. That makes sense. I recently went with Melvin to the Astros's World Series parade in downtown. We're both relatively tall guys, but we could barely see over the crowd. The crowd was so large that fans were literally climbing trees and light poles to get a clearer view. So it's not surprising that Zacchaeus would scamper up a tree.
- ❖ But the crowd impeded his view in more ways than one. **You see, Zacchaeus wasn't only physically small. He was considered socially small. He was short in social standing.** He would've been lumped in the same boat as the various socially marginalized characters a reader would've encountered in chapter 18 – the persistent widow, the humble tax collector, the little children, the blind beggar.
 - But none of them were considered as bad as a tax collector. Tax collectors were universally despised. Considered as traitors to their own people. Shamelessly working for their Roman occupiers. They were also viewed as cheaters and extortionists. Getting rich off the back of their neighbors. Which explains Zacchaeus's great wealth.
- ❖ So knowing this is how people perceived tax collectors – not to mention *chief* tax collectors – then you can understand the shock when people hear Jesus say in v5, *"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."*
 - That's scandalous. **No self-respecting, God-fearing teacher of the Law would be caught dead sharing table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners.** Listen to their reaction in v7, *"And when they saw it, they all grumbled, 'He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.'"*

- ❖ Back in Luke 5 and Luke 15, it was the Pharisees and scribes grumbling when Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. But now in our text, everyone is grumbling. *“They all grumbled.”* **The implication here is that we’re all guilty of bias to one degree or another.** It may not be towards tax collectors, but we all have a bias towards someone. There’s some kind of person out there that would make us grumble if we ever saw them on the receiving end of God’s kindness and mercy.
 - I’m sure there are some crimes, some offenses, some behaviors that you’d consider so reprehensible – to the point that you’d grumble at the thought of that person dining with the people of God at the Lord’s table. I’m sure there are some people who support particular political viewpoints that you find deplorable. Or they’ve done something in the past that you consider irredeemable. **You just might grumble at the thought of *that* person being a beloved child of God.**
 - But that’s the point. That’s what we have to come to grips with. Jesus very well has come for those we least respect.

- ❖ Did you notice how Jesus told Zacchaeus, *“I must stay at your house today.”* I must come over. It was a divine necessity. **I think it was so necessary – Jesus was so intentional to track down Zacchaeus hiding all the way up in that tree – because he was the exact kind of person Jesus needed to share table fellowship with in order to prove a point and illustrate the wondrous love of God and his immeasurable grace.**
 - After the Rich Ruler sadly walked away from Jesus, the Lord explained how difficult it is for a rich person to be saved. He said it was *“easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”* (Lk 18:25)
 - Now it’s because he said that earlier and because it truly is *that* difficult – that’s why Jesus said his staying over at Zacchaeus’s house was a must. It was imperative that he demonstrate the power of God to accomplish the seemingly impossible. To prove that no one is too difficult for the Lord to save.

- ❖ I wonder if some of you who are not Christians – or at least you don’t consider yourself one anymore – **I wonder if you think you’re too difficult to save?** I wonder if you think you’ve sinned one too many times or that you’ve crossed too many lines.
 - Maybe it’s true that you don’t fit the stereotype of a typical Christian. Maybe certain religious groups or religious people would have a hard time taking you seriously or seriously considering you one of them. **Maybe you don’t feel comfortable in church because you feel like people are always judging you.**

- ❖ My advice would be to simply ignore the crowd. Don’t let the crowd keep you from Jesus. **Don’t let the judgmentalism of others become a barrier that keeps you from Jesus.** You go and climb that tree if necessary. Are you willing to endure judgmental eyes – are you willing to bear the shame – if it means getting close to Jesus? Zacchaeus was willing.
 - **You have to understand that, for a man of his status and position, running down the street and climbing up a tree was shameful.** That’s behavior you’d expect from a child. Not a rich chief tax collector. That’s utterly embarrassing for him.

- ❖ But Zacchaeus could care less. All he cared about was seeing Jesus. **He wasn't going to let the crowd keep him from getting near Jesus.** So he ran and he climbed. And Jesus noticed him. Everyone else managed to still look down at Zacchaeus while he was up in that tree. Only Jesus looked up at him with loving, welcoming eyes.
 - **How others look at you – how they perceive you – matters very little compared to how the Lord sees you.** The crowds may give you little respect, but Jesus is ready to give you abundant mercy.

Jesus Came for Those Who Will Bear the Fruits of Repentance

- ❖ Zacchaeus discovered this to be true. Based on his occupation, the crowd perceived him to be an egregious sinner. But by the time he met Jesus, that's no longer him. **Based on how he responded to Christ's call, Zacchaeus proved to be a repentant sinner.**
 - And repentance is what Jesus came to bring. He came to save the lost by leading them to repentance – to turn them away from the path leading to destruction and put them on the Calvary road leading to life. So here's the third way to describe those who Jesus came looking for – he came for those who will bear the fruits of repentance.

- ❖ **In most of the encounters Jesus has with the lost, their moment of conversion is not depicted in the narrative.** Usually what we're shown is, not the moment of their salvation, but the effects of their salvation. So at some point before v8, Zacchaeus was converted and became a new creation. He became a new man with a new heart – a good tree with healthy roots. **So what we read in v8 should not be interpreted as a boast – but rather as a profession of faith and a clear expression of a repentant heart.**
 - Listen again, "*And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, – notice he didn't address Jesus merely as Teacher but specifically as Lord; for characters in Luke's Gospel, this is a clear profession of faith – the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."*" This is not a boast. This is evidence that Zacchaeus has been converted. Proof that he's been saved. **His actions are consistent with the characteristics of a child of God.**
 - That's why Jesus replies in v9, "*Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.*" He's not just pointing out the obvious. That Zacchaeus is a Jew. That he shares in Abraham's lineage. **No, Jesus is making an emphatic point that Zacchaeus shares in Abraham's faith (Gal 3:7).** By calling him a "*son of Abraham*", the Lord is confirming that this "sinner" – that everyone is grumbling about – is a truly repentant sinner who is securely in the kingdom of God.

- ❖ Just go back to that tree analogy the Bible loves to use. **When a bad tree has been truly converted into a good one – when the roots are made healthy – then that good tree will inevitably bear good fruits.** Back in Luke 3, people were flocking to John the Baptist to receive a baptism of repentance, and John was warning the crowds – not just to go through a ritual that proclaims repentance – but to "*bear fruits in keeping with repentance.*" (Lk 3:8)

- ❖ And later in v12, we read that “¹²*Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”* ¹³*And [John the Baptist] said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.”* So for tax collectors and their occupation, the fruits of repentance look like personal integrity, especially in the righteous use of their authority to collect taxes. That kind of consistent behavior would be evidence of a repentant heart.
 - But if you go back to our text, there’s even more evidence that Zacchaeus is truly changed – that he has a repentant heart. There are three fruits of repentance worth pointing out in our text – joy, generosity, and justice.

- ❖ **First, joy – notice how he responds to the call of Christ with joy.** After Jesus calls him and invites himself over, v6 says that Zacchaeus “*hurried and came down and received him joyfully.*” His obedience to Christ is not carried out slavishly but joyfully. That’s a good sign that you’re a good tree. One way to know you’re a Christian is when you see – after you’ve been watered with the Word of God – that what grows out of you is a joyful obedience. That’s a fruit of repentance.

- ❖ **Second, generosity – notice how Zacchaeus responds with a commitment to give half of his possessions to the poor.** The Mosaic law required a tithe, but he goes well above that by selling half of his goods and giving the proceeds to meet the needs of the poor. Zacchaeus’s generosity is not motivated merely by a sense of duty – but by a sense of gratitude and love.
 - **After meeting Jesus, something fundamentally changed within him.** In his typical encounters with people, Zacchaeus is there to collect. But in this encounter with Christ, he’s the one with the debt. He’s the one who owes. But he didn’t owe Jesus money. He owed him his life. He owed Christ his heart.

- ❖ And after handing over his heart, Jesus transformed it. Zacchaeus used to love collecting money. That was his joy. **But now, after becoming a follower of Jesus, he loves giving money.** His joy is giving money away to help others.
 - Friends, what this means is that – if you call yourself a Christian – and yet there’s a lack of generosity in your life, then there’s something wrong. Perhaps you need to re-inspect the roots – to re-examine your heart. **Because one of the fruits of true repentance is a heart of generosity.** Zacchaeus definitely has it. What about you?

- ❖ **Third, justice – notice how Zacchaeus responds with a commitment to make restitution.** To pay back whoever he wronged. He cares about justice – about making things right. He says, “*And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.*” That demonstrates a heart that goes beyond just sticking to the letter of the law.
 - You see, in the Mosaic law, if you defraud someone, you’re required to give back the money plus an additional 20% (Lev 6:5; Num 5:6-7). That’s how you make restitution. That’s what justice requires. But Zacchaeus commits to giving back whatever he defrauded plus 400%. That’s way more than justice requires.

- ❖ **So again, what this means is that – for those of us who call ourselves Christians – we need to ask if a keen sense of doing justice is animating our hearts.** Have we wronged anyone? Are we willing to make things right? And more than that, are we willing to go beyond the letter of the law and to embrace a spirit of generous justice? Not just giving back to people what they're owed – whether that's just an apology or actual compensation. **A spirit of generous justice is concerned – not just with doing what's right – but with doing what's good for those you hurt, even if that comes at great expense to you.**
 - That's what we see Zacchaeus doing. And that's how you know that he's been transformed into a good tree. Because he's bearing the fruits of genuine repentance – joy, generosity, and justice. So what about you?

- ❖ **Church, it's so important that we examine our own hearts to see if these same fruits are growing and bearing forth in our lives.** But if you're honest with yourself and come to realize that joy, generosity, and justice are lacking, then what do you do? You'll probably get anxious. You might fall into despair. But the answer is clear. Our passage tells you what to do. Go see Jesus. Go look to him.
 - **And, like Zacchaeus, what you'll find is that Jesus has already been looking for you.** No matter how far you stray, no matter how distant you feel, Jesus has been seeking after you for longer than you know. **He also climbed a tree to find you.** But his tree included nails and a crown of thorns. Jesus went to hell and back to find you.
 - This is our God. **When you stand before such a Wonderful Savior, all you need is to look to him with fresh eyes of faith.** Receive his mercy. Bask in his love. Let his kindness lead you to repentance. May you then rest in his peace on this blessed Christmas morning.