

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 7, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:  
OUT ON A LIMB  
Luke 19:1-10**

**INTRODUCTION: CHANGED LIVES**

The New Testament is full of stories about people whose lives were changed as a result of meeting Jesus:

There is the story in John 5 about a crippled man at the pool of Bethesda, who had been an invalid for 38 years (can you imagine that?), whom Jesus asked: “Do you want to get well?” (5:6) Right then and there, Jesus healed him.

There is the story in John 9 about a man born blind who, after meeting Jesus and receiving his sight, gave this testimony to those who were grilling him to find out who had done it and how it had happened. He said: “There are some things I don’t know, some things I can’t explain. But this I know: I was blind but now I see!” (9:25) When he came to see and understand that Jesus was the Messiah – the Son of God and Lord of all – he put his faith in Him and worshiped Him.

There is the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, with a reputation and a history of promiscuity, who met Jesus and received from Him the gift of “living water” – cleansing from her past, a new beginning, and a place in God’s family.

There is the story in Mark 5 of the demonic madman living out in a cemetery who was restored to his right mind by the power of Jesus and then went home to his family and friends, as Jesus instructed him to do, telling them of the wonderful things the Lord had done in his life (5:1-20).

There is the story in Mark 10 of Bartimaeus, this “nobody on the road of life,” a blind beggar who received his sight from Jesus and then followed Jesus on the road (10:46-52).

There is Mary Magdalene. There is Saul the persecutor who became Paul the apostle. There is Simon, the rugged, impulsive fisherman who became Peter the rock, a pillar of faith and devotion to Jesus.

Changed lives, all of them. Changed by the grace and power of God in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Our Scripture reading today is about yet another man whose life was changed dramatically through an encounter with Jesus: A man named Zacchaeus.

## **JESUS AND ZACCHAEUS**

As we saw a few weeks ago with Bartimaeus, Jesus was passing through Jericho. The words *passing through* are significant. Jericho was not His destination. He was on His way to somewhere else, namely Jerusalem. On His way to the cross. That was His destination.

Suppose you have planned a dream vacation to Hawaii. You and your husband (or wife) are going there to celebrate your wedding anniversary. Your travel plans call for a flight from Washington to LAX (Los Angeles), where, after a short layover, you will fly to Honolulu. LAX is not your destination. You are merely passing through on your way to somewhere else. That “somewhere else” – Hawaii – is your destination.

Even though He was just passing through Jericho, it was no coincidence that Jesus met Zacchaeus. There was nothing accidental about it. It was part of God’s perfect plan. It was an appointment made in heaven. Jesus was looking for Zacchaeus even more than Zacchaeus was looking for Jesus!

In Hebrew, the name Zacchaeus means “pure” or “righteous.” It was not a name that Zacchaeus lived up to. It was not a name that reflected his character. In reality, he was anything but pure or righteous. Not only was he short in stature (we might call him “vertically challenged”); he came up short in the character department, too. Everybody thought of him as “a sinner,” with a well-earned reputation for being heartless, ruthless, and greedy. Not exactly the kind of guy you hope your daughter will bring home someday.

Zacchaeus was the head tax man for the Jericho district of the IRS. He had reached the top of his profession, such as it was. And he was the most hated man in town, for two reasons: first, because he worked for the Romans, and the Jewish people hated being under Roman rule; and second, because tax collectors used every means they could not only to collect what Rome required but to get rich at the taxpayers’ expense. Bottom line: They were crooks. Wealthy crooks. And the people resented it.

The way the system worked is that the tax collector made his living by overcharging people and then skimming a certain amount off the top before turning over the required share to Rome. The Roman government encouraged this extortion by using a franchise system for collecting taxes. For a fee, a Jew like Zacchaeus could buy the tax franchise for a certain area, agreeing to give Rome a specified amount of tax revenue each year from that area. Anything the tax collector brought in above the amount required was his to keep. The franchisee was also free to sublet parts of his territory to others – for a fee, of course – so they, too, got in on the take. It is likely that Zacchaeus had done this in Jericho since he is called a “chief tax collector” (Luke 19:2). Jesus was not unacquainted with tax collectors. One of His disciples, Matthew, was a tax collector before he left his business to follow Jesus.

Zacchaeus must have been good at what he did. Apparently, Jericho – “the city of palms” – was a great place to be in the tax business. There is no question that Zacchaeus had done well. But he is Exhibit 1 that wealth does not bring happiness. Material prosperity does not produce inner peace. You can take his word for it.

When he heard that Jesus was coming, Zacchaeus was determined to see Him. The problem was that people were already lined up along the road to see Jesus. Being short, Zacchaeus couldn't see over people's heads. And, given his reputation, no one would make room for him.

But, resourceful fellow that he was, he spotted a tree along the parade route that would enable him to see Jesus as He passed by. The surprising thing is that Jesus didn't just “pass by.” Instead, He stopped. He saw Zacchaeus up in the tree. And He spoke to him, telling him to come down at once.

Notice what Jesus did *not* say to Zacchaeus. He did *not* say: “Zacchaeus, you are the most miserable excuse for a human being I have ever seen. No wonder you don't have any friends. You'd better get your act together, or God is going to punish you!” That is *not* what Jesus said. Nor did He say: “If it's okay with you ...” or “if you don't have any other plans ... could I come over to your house and hang out with you today?” What Jesus said was: “Zacchaeus, come down from that tree at once. I must stay at your house today” (19:5).

As much as Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, Jesus wanted to see Zacchaeus even more. There is a sense of divine urgency, a “must-ness” in what Jesus said to him: “I *must* come to your house today.” It *must* be today, because, after all, Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. He was on His way to die. Time was of the essence. This was Zacchaeus' divinely appointed time.

There are three points I want to highlight from this story, three lessons we can learn, three truths to take hold of from Jesus' encounter with this man who went out on a limb.

### **JESUS CHANGES OUTSIDERS TO BELONGERS.**

Zacchaeus was an outsider, if ever there was one. A social outcast. He may have had plenty of money, but few if any friends. Poor people resented him because he was rich. Rich and poor alike detested him because of how he made his living. The Romans looked down on him because he was Jewish. He was a man who belonged nowhere and to no one (Frank Barker, *Encounters with Jesus*).

Then Jesus came, looking for him. And, in an act of pure grace, He gave Zacchaeus a place to belong in the family of God, a place in the fellowship of His followers. He said: “Zacchaeus, you matter to me. You are the reason I came into this world. You are the reason I'm going to Jerusalem. I came to find and save lost people like you.”

Just as Jesus cares about “nobodies on the road of life” like Bartimaeus, He cares about outcasts and outsiders, too. He cares about the people others love to hate. He remembers the people others want to forget. He cares about people who feel left out and unloved, like unsavory tax collectors and “sinners” of all descriptions.

Some people thought Jesus spent too much time with outsiders and outcasts like Zacchaeus. And they criticized Him for it. They didn’t understand why He would do it. But He did. And He does. Jesus cares deeply about outsiders and outcasts who, it seems, are loved by nobody but God.

Have you ever felt like an outsider or an outcast? Spiritually speaking, we’ve all been outsiders. Once, as Paul says in Ephesians 2, we were all outsiders, cut off from Christ, without hope and without God in the world (2:12). The good news is that Jesus came to seek and to save outsiders and to bring us into a personal relationship with Him – a relationship of love and trust and belonging. Jesus came to bring sinners like Zacchaeus and us into the family circle of God’s love. The good news is that Jesus takes outsiders, draws them (us) to Himself in His grace, and makes them (us) belongers. “Once,” says Peter in 1 Peter 2, “you were not a people, but now you are the people of God” (2:10). Now, “you are a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light” (2:9).

Are *you* an outsider to the promises of the gospel? To the blessings of God’s grace? You don’t need to be. Have you perhaps drifted away from Jesus? Are you holding something back from Him? Has the fire of your passion for the Lord Jesus grown cold? Jesus is seeking *you*. Jesus is seeking you *today*. He wants to give you joy. He wants to give you peace. He wants to give you hope. He wants to give you a home in His family. He wants to give you life. He wants to pull you into the circle of His love, just as He did with Zacchaeus. Let Him do it in your life today.

It is why Jesus came. It is why He was passing through Jericho. It is why He is passing through Kingstowne today. It is because of His heart for people like you and me who are lost without Him.

### **CONVERSION BRINGS CHANGE.**

The second thing to see is that conversion brings change. It has to! We don’t have a record of the conversation between Jesus and Zacchaeus that day, but Luke tells us what happened as a result: Zacchaeus decided to give away half of his wealth to the poor. That is a huge decision! Imagine the difference it could make if more people did that. With what remained, Zacchaeus said, he would repay four times over – way beyond what the Jewish law required – any money he had taken unfairly.

Zacchaeus is living proof that when Jesus comes into your life, change is inevitable. You cannot experience God’s saving grace and not be changed. When Jesus takes up residence in your heart and you become part of His family by faith, change is inevitable.

The change in you may or may not be immediately obvious to people around you. It may not be as dramatic as the changes in Zacchaeus' life. But change will and does happen when Jesus becomes "No. 1" in your life. Your priorities change. Your perspective changes. Your attitudes change. The way you view and handle money changes. The way you do business changes. The way you treat people changes. The way you talk changes. Your habits change. The direction of your life changes. Your relationships change.

If your conversion is authentic, if your relationship with Jesus is real, it can't help but change your relationships with the people closest to you as His character takes root in you and you live under the Lordship of Jesus.

Change is an inside job. It starts in the heart. But it doesn't stop there. Zacchaeus understood this. He understood that God wants us, as John the Baptist said (Luke 3:8), to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. He understood that a changed heart must result in a changed life. He began to produce that fruit as evidence of the grace of Jesus in his life.

Conversion to faith in Christ brings change. It must. You cannot become a follower of Jesus and remain the same. The testimony of a changed life is the greatest testimony to the power of Jesus there is.

The Bible says that as long as it is called "today," as long as you and I live and breathe, it is not too late to change. Not too late to turn around. Not too late, as Zacchaeus discovered, to start fresh as a follower of Jesus.

The good news is that none of us has to be a prisoner of our past. Change is possible, in any and every area of your life. The power to change does not come from within us. It comes from God, who even today is "passing through" the place where you and I live.

### **FAITH COMPELS US TO RIGHT PAST WRONGS**

Here is the third thing: Faith in Jesus compels us to right past wrongs. Faith affects the vertical dimension of our lives. It is through faith in Jesus that we are restored to a right relationship with God. Through faith in Him we receive the gift of forgiveness and a clean heart. But faith in Jesus has implications in the horizontal dimension of life as well. It requires that we seek to make things right with those we have wronged whenever possible.

You can see that in Zacchaeus. He was determined to make things right with those he had cheated or mistreated, by means of a four-fold restitution. He said: "If I have cheated anybody" – and there was no doubt that he had – "I'll pay back four times the amount" (19:8).

This was more than the Jewish law required. But Zacchaeus was all in, in his desire to make things right with the people he had cheated, and to demonstrate that his faith was the real deal.

It is not always possible to make our wrongs right. It is impossible to undo the past. For some wrongs, all we can do is go to those we've hurt and seek their forgiveness.

Sometimes that is not even possible. Or we may ask for forgiveness, and those we have hurt refuse to grant it.

When that happens, you can still have God's peace, because Romans 12:17-18 tells us what God requires:

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil.  
Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.  
If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,  
live at peace with everyone.”

If you have done all you can to make things right, to seek forgiveness and be reconciled – if you have done all that God prompts you to do, the rest is up to God.

You and I are responsible for what we do, for the choices we make, for our obedience or disobedience to God. But we are not responsible for the way others respond when we follow God's promptings.

If God is speaking to you about a wrong you need to make right, don't put it off. Do what you can today to make it right. But make sure you leave the results to God.

If you're beating yourself up over something you can't make right, no matter how you try to fix it, let it go and leave it in God's hands. Don't let the mistakes of your past or the actions of others rob you of God's peace.

## CONCLUSION

When Zacchaeus met Jesus, it changed his life. *Jesus* changed his life. *Jesus* still changes lives. He is still in the business of seeking and finding and saving the lost. He is still in the business of welcoming outsiders and embracing them in His love. He is still in the business of making things right, still in the business of reconciling us to God and to one another and to ourselves.

And, as Zacchaeus discovered, He is able. More than able. That is why Jesus came. It is why He was passing through Jericho. It is why He was on His way to Jerusalem. It is why He went to the cross.

Don't miss out on His grace. Go out on a limb and trust Him with your life. Just like Zacchaeus.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.