**TO SEEK AND SAVE THE LOST**

Luke 19:1-10
Key Verse 19:10 – *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

In today’s passage, Jesus gives a vivid demonstration of His purpose in coming into this world; to seek and to save the lost. In befriending one lowly tax-collector named Zacchaeus, Jesus shows how much He loves even the worst of sinners by leading us out of the darkness we were utterly lost in and into the light of salvation. In doing so, Jesus expresses His profound desire for us to truly know Him and establish a deep, personal relationship with Him. I pray through this passage, we may remember how amazing it is that Jesus seeks us in the hope that He may dwell within us always and that we in turn will seek to know Him too.

**Part 1 – The Sinner in the Sycamore Tree**

As we have learned over the last few passages, Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. At this point, Jesus and His ministry was at the very height of popularity. He preached continuously about the kingdom of God. Jesus also performed many acts that all the people recognized at the works of the Messiah: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Matthew 11:5). Parents were bringing their little children just so that Jesus could place a blessing upon them while other people were even thinking of making Jesus their king. However, Jesus was not going to Jerusalem to bask in His own glory. He was going there to suffer and die on the cross as a suffering Messiah and be rejected by the very same people He came to save. It would be understandable if Jesus wanted to solely focus on the mission ahead. Instead, Jesus used one of His last days on earth to save one soul from a life of loneliness, misery and complete separation from God.

May we read verse 2 together: **“A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.”** The name Zacchaeus has many meanings but the most common synonyms are “pure, innocent and righteous.” From his name, we can assume parents must have had a great hope for him to grow up as an upright and righteous man of God. Perhaps they wanted him to be a doctor, a judge, a rabbi or some other admirable profession, similar to how our own parents devote everything in sending us to a university like UofT so we may hopefully receive a great education and obtain an even greater job. However, as we learn from this verse, Zacchaeus grew up to become a tax collector.

Out of all the people in Jewish society, tax collectors were one of the most hated and isolated. Their profession was the most reviled in the whole land. This was because tax collectors worked exclusively for the Romans who had colonized Israel and ruled it with an iron fist. By working for these sinful, idol-worshipping Gentiles, tax collectors had sold their Jewish pride, heritage and their God for money, power and a more comfortable life under Roman rule. They were profiting off the suffering of their fellow countrymen by taxing them heavily and even taking more than they actually require so that they could keep the rest for themselves. Because of all this, tax collectors were branded as public sinners and were completely cut off from society. Just being a tax collector was terrible enough but Zacchaeus tops this all off by being the chief tax collector, making him the worst of the worst.

It is hard to imagine what could possible drive someone to choose such a way of life. However, the sad truth is we have more in common with Zacchaeus than we would be comfortable admitting. We all bear our sinful nature that seeks only to gratify our own sinful desires even if it means making others suffer in the process. We care only for our own well-being and look out solely for “#1”. Our thoughts darken and our hearts become blackened as we fall deeper and deeper into sinful despair. And even you do gain what it is you wanted, it is at the cost of your own soul that is now firmly under sin’s unrelenting hold, leaving us without any hope. You only need to look at the events of the last few days to see what people will do and how far they will go when their lives are in complete darkness, ruled by the power of sin and death. Without God, we are all lost.

One could only imagine how many people Zacchaeus had to trample on his way to the top of his profession but verse 3 continues rather interestingly: **“He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.”** It is safe to assume that Zacchaeus’s desire to see Jesus was not due to idle curiosity but had been born out of a spiritual hunger. Because God created man in His own image, we all have a spiritual nature within us that only be satisfied in Him. Zacchaeus had money, power and worldly security as a tax collector, so on the surface you would expect him to be the least likely person to have any interest in Jesus. However, his inner being must have been in complete turmoil, filled with regret, loneliness and despair. Zacchaeus knew fully how messed up his own life was but still had a deep-seated yearning that compelled him to go and see Jesus.

There was one problem though; Zacchaeus was vertically challenged. Even though he had great desire to see Jesus, it did not eliminate the issue of him being too short to see over the crowd. You can imagine how many people intentionally kicked and elbowed him “by accident” as he tried to make his way through the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see Jesus which must have been humiliating for him as he struggled to climb but down-right hilarious for anyone else watching this. Yet in spite of all the ridicule, Zacchaeus made his was up and waited there, all for the sake of catching even the slightest glimpse of Jesus.

We can see how desperately Zacchaeus longed to see Jesus but I wonder if the same could be said for us? I ask, “What is it that I yearn for?” “What do I desperately desire and chase after in life?” We may desire things such as love, money, security, recognition and so much else but none of these can satisfy our deepest longing i.e. our longing for God Himself. It is only God Himself who can fulfil this and as we see throughout the remainder of this passage, this is the very reason Jesus came into this world.

**Part 2: Jesus Seeks and Saves Us Who Are Lost**

May we read verses 5 and 6 together; **“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.”** When Jesus finally sees Zacchaeus sitting up in the sycamore-fig tree, he calls out to him to come down right that very moment and invited himself over to Zacchaeus’ house. There are two things that always amaze me about this verse. First is that Jesus calls out Zacchaeus by name even though this is likely the first time they have ever met. Secondly, Jesus just invites Himself over to someone else’s house. It is one thing to just invite yourself over to someone’s house but what compounds this problem is that Jesus is going into the house of a sinner, which by custom, He was forbidden to do. So, why does Jesus do this?

Jesus knows everything about us, all that resides within our hearts and exactly the things we need most in our lives. By inviting Himself over to Zacchaeus’ place, Jesus offered him the one thing his money and power could not obtain; a friend. Jesus looked beyond the sins that clouded Zacchaeus’ heart and saw the purity and innocence with which he genuinely sought Jesus. Jesus desired to have a personal relationship with Zacchaeus and in so doing, echoes the words of Revelation 3:20 – **“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”** Even though he was a sinner, Jesus was not ashamed to be a friend of Zacchaeus for He wanted Zacchaeus to know Him all the more. This invitation is the same open invitation Jesus offers to each and every one of us. Jesus is waiting at the door of our hearts right now, knocking to come in. He wants to make a personal and intimate relationship with each of us, just as we are, that will bless our lives forever. I pray we may all welcome Jesus gladly in the same way Zacchaeus did.

Although the townspeople were disgruntled by Jesus’ actions (7), Zacchaeus responded to Jesus’ graceful invitation in a way that no one expected. May we read verse 8 together: **“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.””** Zacchaeus realized that he had met God in Jesus and received God’s unconditional love and grace. He willingly surrendered to Jesus as His Lord. Moreover, Zacchaeus had come to know God’s heart in Jesus. As God loved Zacchaeus one-sidedly, He wanted Zacchaeus to love Him and others without limit. Until now, Zacchaeus had been limited by his desire for money. But when Jesus’ love touched his soul, money did not matter to him anymore. He was compelled to love God and others as Jesus had loved him. So he gave half of his possessions to the poor and also promised to compensate anyone he had cheated by repaying four times the amount. This was already twice the amount that he was supposed to repay under the law (Exodus 22:4). No one told Zacchaeus to do this. Instead, Zacchaeus chose to do this to show his repentance for all people he had wronged.

Compare Zacchaeus to the rich ruler from last week. The ruler believed himself to be righteous and to have kept the law perfectly since he was a boy but when Jesus asks him to sell his possessions so he may gain true treasure in heaven, the rich ruler walked away sad. Yet without any provocation, Zacchaeus offers over half of what he owned for he knows how immeasurably valuable the grace and mercy he received from Jesus are. This act of repentance also illustrates an amazing truth; when we truly receive forgiveness and grace from Jesus, there is a remarkable change that happens within us. Only Jesus has the power to transform our entire being completely from prisoners held captive by the slavery of sin to freed people who seek to glorify Him through the new life He has given us. This is why the Apostle Paul can testify in 2 Corinthians 5:17 –“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come!”

Jesus concludes this event with today’s key verse. May we read verses 9 and 10 together: **“Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.””** Let us look at verse 9 first. Through his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus received the gift of salvation for which no price can be put on. In calling him a son of Abraham, Jesus re-established Zacchaeus practically as a member of society and spiritually as one of God’s beloved children. His salvation was not due to his heritage or any righteousness on his part but is clearly the result of God’s one-sided grace. Similarly, just because our parents are Christian, or our friends are Christian or I go to church on Sundays and have Bible Study during the week does not necessarily mean you yourself are saved and are close to Jesus. Rather it is Jesus Christ who saves us and our goal should be to accept His loving grace and deepen our relationship with Him.

Now, let us look closely at verse 10: **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”** Jesus’ greatest desire is for us to be with Him. Even though we are lost in the darkness, Jesus willingly goes to any lengths to find us, even when it meant dying on the cross for our sins. Like the Good Shepherd in the parable, Jesus seeks the lost until he finds them (Lk 15:4). When a lost sinner takes one tiny step back to him, Jesus runs with outstretched arms to embrace him with love and fully restore him or her as a child of God just like the father who welcomed back the prodigal son. Jesus is seeking the lost in our times. He does not give up on struggling sinners or look down on those who have failed or gone astray. With that same broken heart for all mankind, Jesus asks us to go share the Gospel and be His very representatives in this world. I pray we too may have the same love and compassion for those who are lost (i.e. everyone) and help them to know Christ who seeks and saves them.