

Pray. The last several weeks we’ve been in a series on Jesus’ mission. Jesus gives his mission statement in Luke 4 when he stands up and reads from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

After reading it, Jesus sits down and says, “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, Jesus is saying, “*This is my mission — and I’m accomplishing it right now.*” It’s already set in motion, even if the full reality hasn’t yet unfolded.

That’s where we started, and then over the past few weeks, we’ve looked at ways Jesus fulfills that mission — not so much the nuts and bolts of what He *does*, but the *characteristics* of His ministry as he carries it out. We’ve looked at his mercy and compassion, his sacrifice, and his love marked by both grace and truth. Today’s passage is a very memorable encounter that Jesus has that sheds more light on his mission. We are in **Luke 19:1-10**, and we’ll go through it all in one reading today. This is God’s word to you and me this morning...

Jesus is now approaching Jericho. **Back in chapter 9, Luke tells us that Jesus “resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”** It means his path to the cross is set — he’s on a mission. It’s going to happen, and Jesus is on a purposeful journey, but that doesn’t mean he physically walked in a straight line, getting there as fast as he could. “Resolutely” is more about his attitude, mental and spiritual state, and sense of determination, and he’s actually had some back-and-forth journeys. **(Jericho/Jerusalem photo)** But now he’s



down to the last stretch before getting to Jerusalem, which is 20 miles from Jericho.

Modern Jericho is in the West Bank, part of Palestinian territory under the Palestinian Authority. An article from the University of Notre Dame notes that Jericho is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.<sup>1</sup> It is also unique because it's about 800 feet below sea level, making the journey to Jerusalem all up hill.

**This is the same Jericho where Israel famously saw the walls fall in the Old Testament book of Joshua.** Joshua 6 records that Israel employed an unusual military tactic, at God's command. They marched around the city for seven days: Once each day until the last day when they marched around 7 times. As they finished the very last lap, with trumpets blowing and the army shouting, "the wall collapsed" (Joshua 6:20), and the army then charged in and took the city.

**Archaeologists have found that Jericho's walls fell outward — away from the city.** That's unusual, to say the least. Normally, when an attacking army broke through, walls collapsed *inward*, pushed by battering rams or siege towers. But Jericho's fell the opposite way, suggesting it didn't fall by human hands.

We might wonder how this happened. Before the attack even began, God told Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand" (Joshua 6:2). So, the short answer is: God did it. For some people, that's sufficient. For others it's an insufficient explanation, and many scholars of different studies believe an earthquake probably caused the wall to come down. But: **Whether God directly caused the wall to collapse supernaturally or used an earthquake at just the right moment, the point remains: God did it.**

Sometimes events align with remarkable, providential timing. I was reminded of that last Saturday at an eighth-grade football game where I serve as the stadium announcer up in the booth above the stands and field. It's a little bit like God looking over creation, making grand pronouncements. I know this is sounding heretical but just bear with this for a moment. Late in

the game, with the other team ahead by 7 points and with the ball, with the microphone off, I made a comment to the people in the booth with me, “It sure would be nice if their center snapped the ball over the quarterback’s head for a fumble that we recover.” Two seconds later the ball went over the quarterback’s head – and it was the first time that day it had happened. Unfortunately, we didn’t recover the ball. But, the timing was uncanny. The people next to me wanted me to make more prognostications!

Moments like that remind us: **God often works through what some people call “coincidences.” The Biblical word is that it’s God’s providence.** That’s what happened at Jericho in 1406 B.C. God’s power was behind it. So here, 1440 years later, in this same city where God once displayed His power so dramatically, Jesus now arrives to dramatically change a life.

Additionally, Jericho was important in their day economically because it was a gateway to the east. And: **In that prosperous city lived Zacchaeus, a Jewish man working for the Roman government as a chief tax collector.** That means he oversaw other tax collectors — and he had grown very rich from gaming the system, which tax collectors were infamous for doing. Luke simply says, “He was wealthy.”

So, when Zacchaeus hears Jesus is passing through town, he wants to see Him. By this point, right near the end of Jesus’ public ministry, Jesus’ fame has spread everywhere, and crowds are enormous. But Zacchaeus is short and can’t see over them, so he climbs a sycamore tree **(photo)** to get a better view. This one is in Jericho, at one of two places people believe might be where the events took place that we read about today. And that’s a good climbing tree, right? And for those who are vertically challenged, his actions make sense. If I were short, I’d climb that tree. 🤪



To everyone’s shock – not the least of which would have been Zacchaeus himself – Jesus stops, looks up, calls Zacchaeus by name, and says, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” Jesus takes the initiative, and the people can’t believe it; he is going

to the home of a “sinner,” a man despised by his fellow Jews for collaborating with Rome and enriching himself at their expense.

**We’re not told what was said over that meal; but we can imagine Jesus asking questions, listening, and leading Zacchaeus toward self-examination and truth as Jesus does so frequently.** Perhaps Jesus followed up with a little one-liner like, “So how’s that working out for you?” Whatever was said, something profound happens in Zacchaeus’s heart. He’s been a prisoner to wealth, and he’s set free, because the walls of hard-heartedness come tumbling down.

I will add that Jesus teaches a parable right after today’s reading. The context appears to still be Zacchaeus’ house, though it’s unclear. Maybe Luke puts the teaching here because it fits thematically. Regardless, it’s a parable about spiritual responsibility and being a good steward with what you’ve got, to bring glory to God. It certainly fits Zacchaeus’ situation.

So, Zacchaeus stands up and says, **“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” (verse 8).** That’s radical repentance, even if the word isn’t used. Jewish law required only 20% added restitution in cases of fraud (Leviticus 6:5). Roman law didn’t demand fourfold repayment either. Plus, he pledges to give half of his possessions to the poor. So, Zacchaeus isn’t following a rule — he’s going far beyond it. His generosity shows a transformed heart.

**Jesus responds, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham” (verse 9).** Now, this “son of Abraham” has a double meaning. First, it is affirming his Jewish ancestry and belonging to Israel. But second: it’s a statement about Zacchaeus’ faith, shown by his action. Abraham was known for his faith — and faith always shows itself in action. The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews in the NT recounts some of the people from the OT who are known for putting their faith in action in generous and courageous ways. In calling Zacchaeus a “son of Abraham,” Jesus is saying that Zacchaeus is in that same lineage of faith put to action.

So, there are a couple of application points here. **First, true faith produces generosity.** In my weekly Bible study with a group of guys I've known since as far back as the 4<sup>th</sup> grade...so like 15 years 😂...we looked at this passage a couple days ago and they knew I was preaching on it today...and one of them suggested I should tell the church that if you give generously like Zacchaeus you'll be saved. We laughed — but the truth is the reverse. We don't give to earn salvation; we give because we've been saved. Generosity is *evidence* that God is at work in our lives. So let this plant a seed, because we'll talk about stewardship of financial resources and stewardship of time in greater detail in a few weeks. For now, simply remember that followers of Jesus are called to live generously — not only with our finances, but in every part of life.

This is the main point I want us to take away: **Second, Jesus seeks the lost.** You know, his mission statement earlier in Luke 4 is focused on the poor, the sick, the captive and the blind. Basically, people who are not well off in any way, shape or form, and they're marginalized. And here, he's ministering to a *wealthy* guy who is also marginalized. He's "a sinner" according to the crowd and disliked by basically everyone. No one sees him as human, but just "a sinner." So, by ministering to him (and Jesus ministers to many others who are wealthy or in positions of power and influence, so this isn't the only one) Jesus is letting us know that his mission really is a spiritual one. He's seeking people who are spiritually lost – whether they be spiritually captive, spiritually sick, spiritually poor, or spiritually blind.

**Notice: "lost" as it pertains to Zacchaeus and his spiritual condition does not mean "unchurched" – or atheist or caught up in pagan religions, etc.** Zacchaeus was Jewish, a descendant of Abraham, yet still *lost*. That's worth reflecting on. Sitting in church, belonging to a faith community, or having Christian heritage doesn't automatically mean we're walking closely with Jesus. We can be surrounded by believers, or have a family history of faith, or sit in church on Sundays and still be far from him. Jesus is still seeking us even then. He's seeking *you*. And he calls us, in turn, to seek others — to help them find their way home.

**When we follow Jesus, we're on his team — and his team has a mission: to seek and save the lost.** That might mean reaching out to someone who doesn't know anything about Jesus, but it might also be someone who hasn't been around church in a while. It might mean encouraging someone who's struggling in their faith. Sometimes it means gently speaking truth in love, like Jesus probably did with Zacchaeus and we see him do all the time with a variety of people.

A great example of this is Napoleon Kaufman, the former University of Washington running back who later played in the NFL. He'd been baptized young, but his life, including his language on the football field, didn't reflect his faith. One day, a Christian teammate told him, "You don't seem like the kind of guy who would talk like that." That single sentence got him thinking about his faith — and ultimately led him to be found by Jesus. Today, Napoleon pastors the church he planted in 2003, and his wife leads their children's ministry. But God used one simple word of truth to turn his life around.

That's what this mission is about. Jesus calls us to seek the lost so that he can find them — to extend grace, to help them turn toward Him, and to walk with them as they grow in faith. He wants the walls of hostility toward him to come tumbling down. He wants into our hearts, so we would receive the gospel message...turn from our sin and instead turn to Jesus and trust him. This is salvation. This is what it means to follow Jesus. If you haven't taken that step of faith, there's no time like the present. What are you waiting for? Jesus came to seek and save the lost — the captive, sick, poor, and blind — and when He finds us, he makes us seekers too. And so, if you're on Jesus' team, you're now helping to seek the lost — so they too can experience the salvation Jesus offers and join us in salvation and living on mission for Jesus each and every day. Let's pray...Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://faith.nd.edu/zaccheus-tree-in-jericho/>