

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 27, 2009**

TO SEEK AND TO SAVE THE LOST

Luke 19:1-10

Did you get the gift(s) you were hoping for this Christmas? I heard about a boy named Johnny who got a harmonica from his uncle for Christmas. The first time he saw his uncle after Christmas, he said: "Thanks for the harmonica you gave me. It's the best Christmas present I ever got."

"That's great," his uncle said. "Do you know how to play it?"

"Oh, I don't play it," said Johnny. "My mom gives me a dollar a day not to play it during the day, and my dad gives me five dollars a week not to play it at night."

Sounds like a pretty good deal for Johnny. And maybe for his parents as well!

A WEE LITTLE MAN

As a boy growing up in Pennsylvania, I learned a song in Sunday school that I'm sure many of you learned as well:

Zaccheus was a wee little man
A wee little man was he
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see
And as the Savior passed that way
He looked up in the tree
And He said
"Zaccheus, you come down
For I'm going to your house today
For I'm going to your house to stay"

Sound familiar to you? Some of our teens recently saw a video about Zaccheus at Youth Group featuring two comedians known as the Skit Guys that was just hilarious. Even if you're not a comedian, it is not hard to see some humor in the story of Zaccheus. But this story of the encounter between Jesus and Zaccheus also has a serious message, for it gives us a striking picture of the seeking love and the saving power of the Lord Jesus.

PASSING THROUGH JERICHO

Let's look at the story. Luke tells us in verse 1 that Jesus was passing through Jericho. That is an important thing to remember. Jericho was not Jesus' destination. He was on His way to somewhere else. Specifically, to Jerusalem. He was on His way to the cross. The cross was His destination. That was His goal.

Think of it like this. If you want to become President of the United States, you have to go through Iowa and New Hampshire. Iowa is not the goal. Neither is New Hampshire. Both may be very nice places, but they are not the goal. The destination is the White House. That is what you are aiming for. But the road to the White House passes through Iowa and New Hampshire, because that is just the way the political landscape in America is structured. So, if you want to be President, if you want to win your party's nomination for President, you have to go through Iowa and New Hampshire to reach your destination.

Or think of it this way: You have planned a dream vacation – two weeks in Hawaii. You and your husband (or you and your wife) are going there to celebrate your wedding anniversary. Your travel plans call for a flight from Washington to San Francisco, and then from San Francisco to Hawaii. As beautiful as it may be, San Francisco is not your destination. You are only passing through on your way to somewhere else. That somewhere else – “Hawaii” – is your destination.

Jericho was not Jesus' destination. He was just passing through. But don't think for a moment that it was just a coincidence or some kind of accident that Jesus met Zaccheus. There was nothing accidental about it. It was part of God's perfect plan. It was an appointment made in heaven. As much as Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus, Jesus – the incarnate Son of God – was looking for Zaccheus even more.

ZACCHEUS

In Hebrew, the name Zaccheus means “pure” or “righteous.” But the reality is that Zaccheus was anything but pure and righteous. Though he had a noble name, he didn't live up to it. Not only was he short in stature (if Luke were writing today, he would probably refer to Zaccheus as “vertically challenged”), he was challenged with respect to his character as well. Everybody thought of him as “a sinner.” He had earned a reputation for being heartless, ruthless, and greedy to the core. Not exactly the kind of guy you would want your daughter to marry!

Zaccheus was the head of the Jericho district office of the IRS. As a tax collector, he had reached the top of his profession. And he was probably the most hated man in town.

Why? There are two reasons people held him in such contempt. First, because he worked for the Roman government, and the Jewish people hated being under the thumb of Rome. Second, because tax collectors used every means at their disposal not only to collect the amount of revenue Rome required, but to get rich at the taxpayers' expense. The bottom line is that they were crooks. Wealthy crooks. And the common people resented it.

Here is how the system worked: The way a tax collector made his living was by overcharging his fellow countrymen and then skimming a certain amount off the top before passing on the required share to Rome. Rome actually encouraged this extortion by using a franchise system for the collection of taxes. For a fee, a businessman like Zaccheus could buy the tax franchise for a certain area, contracting to supply Rome with a specified amount of tax revenue each year from that area. Anything the tax collector could collect above the amount required by

Rome, he got to keep. The tax collector could also hire other tax collectors to work for him – for a fee, of course – so they got in on the take, too.

That is probably what Zaccheus had done in Jericho, since Luke says in verse 2 that he was a “chief tax collector.” Evidently Zaccheus was good at what he did. And apparently Jericho was a great place to be in the tax business. The three most important things in real estate, of course, are “location, location, location!” In the time of Jesus, Jericho was a great location. It was a beautiful area. A garden spot. It was called “the city of palms.” And it was a prosperous town. By first century standards, it was an affluent community. And it was situated on a main road, an important trade route connecting Jerusalem and the east.

Zaccheus had done well in Jericho. But this “wee little man” is Exhibit A that wealth does not bring happiness. Material prosperity does not produce inner peace. He was wealthy but he was not happy. Which, sadly, is the case with millions of people today. Even if they didn’t like him, lots of people probably envied Zaccheus for his wealth. But in the eyes of Jesus, Zaccheus was a spiritually bankrupt sinner who needed the gift of eternal life. A gift only Jesus could give.

When Zaccheus heard that Jesus was going to be coming through Jericho, he was determined to see Him. The problem was that the crowd had already gathered. People had already lined up along the road to see Jesus. Because he was short in stature, Zaccheus knew he wouldn’t be able to see over people’s heads. And who in Jericho would make room for him, of all people?

But Zaccheus was a resourceful man. He assessed the situation and spotted a tree along the parade route which would make a great vantage point from which to see Jesus as he passed by.

WHEN JESUS MET ZACCHEUS

But notice what happened: Jesus didn’t “pass by.” When He saw Zaccheus up in the tree, Jesus stopped. And He called Zaccheus down.

I want you to observe what Jesus did not say to Zaccheus. He did not say: “Zaccheus, I know all about you. You are the most miserable excuse for a human being I have ever seen. You better watch out, because God is going to punish you!” That is not what He said. Jesus did not say: “Zaccheus, if you want me to have anything to do with you, if you want God to love you, you’ve got to change. You’ve got to be a better person.” That is not what He said. And Jesus did not say: “Zaccheus, if it’s OK with you, if you don’t have any other plans, could I maybe come over to your house and hang out with you for a while?”

What Jesus said was: “Zaccheus, come down from that tree. I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). I will say it again: As much as Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus, Jesus desired to see Zaccheus even more! There was a sense of divine necessity or “mustness” in what Jesus said to Zaccheus: “I *must* stay at your house.” And there was a note of divine urgency as well: “It must be *today*.” Why? Because Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. He was on His

way to the cross. That is the reason for which He came into the world. He was on His way to die. That was the reason for His birth. And this was Zaccheus' divinely appointed time to meet the Savior. Jesus was on a search and rescue mission. On that particular occasion, as He made His way through Jericho, He was on a mission to bring salvation to Zaccheus and his household.

Jesus may want to make an appointment with you today, just as He did with Zaccheus. Jesus is passing through Kingstowne, just as He passed through Jericho. This is not His ultimate destination. But He is here now. He is here today. And perhaps He is calling out to you by name. If He is, if you hear His voice, don't miss this moment to receive His grace and, like Zaccheus, to give your life to the Savior who gave His life for you.

Did you notice how the crowd reacted when they saw what Jesus was doing? They were not pleased when Jesus called out to Zaccheus and went home with him. They grumbled. They complained among themselves. They said: "This is not the kind of man Jesus ought to be spending time with. Doesn't He know what kind of man Zaccheus really is?"

Of course, Jesus knew. He knows what we are like. Every one of us. He knows what we are like, inside and out. And He knows what we need. He knows we need a Savior. We don't need someone who will simply affirm us in our sin. We don't need someone who will tell us it is OK to do whatever makes us happy, even when it means turning away from God and ignoring His laws for life. And we don't need someone who will just tell us what we ought to do, or urge us to try harder to be better people. That is now what we need.

What we need is a Savior. A Savior is what Zaccheus needed. And it is the reason Jesus came.

I read about an American family visiting Africa. They were staying in a hotel in Nigeria. One morning there was a knock at the door. It was a young man from housekeeping who had come to clean the room. The dad in the family felt so embarrassed. His family had their travel bags, curling irons, and crumpled clothing sprawled across their unmade beds. There were wet towels all over the bathroom floor. He apologized to the young man, but the Nigerian replied graciously: "No problem, sir. For this reason I have come, to put your things in order."

Isn't this what Jesus came to do for us? Isn't it what He did in the life of Zaccheus? Jesus did not demand that Zaccheus straighten out the mess in his life before Jesus would have anything to do with him. No. Nor does He make such a demand of us. He came to straighten up the mess we have made in our rebellion against God. He came to put our things, our lives, in order.

Zaccheus did not receive salvation from Jesus because he made a decision to change and make restitution to those he had cheated. He was not saved because he promised to do good works. That is not the way it works. Zaccheus became a changed man and decided to do what was right *because* he received the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus. He became a

changed man *because* Jesus changed him. Jesus met him where he was and took him just as he was, and then changed him by His saving power.

Why did Jesus come? He came to seek and to save the lost. The Bible shows us a God who has taken the initiative in love to seek and to save lost sinners, wherever they are found. In Jericho and Jerusalem. In France and the U. S. In the Muslim world. On every continent. Christmas, of course, reminds us of the initiative of God in our salvation. It is because He loves us that God sent His Son into the world to die for us. For sinners like Zaccheus. And us. If God's saving love could take hold of a scoundrel like Zaccheus, none of us – and no one you know – is beyond its reach.

Isn't that good news?

Let me share with you one final thought: Jesus wants us to seek the lost in His name. We can't save the lost. Only Jesus can. But we can tell them about Jesus. We can point them to Jesus. We can introduce them to Jesus. We can show them and tell them about the love of Jesus. We can be missionaries right here in northern Virginia and our nation's capital. We can go as missionaries into all the world. And we can support others (like Kelly Orsini) who are serving as missionaries around the world. In all these things we can carry on the mission of the Lord Jesus Himself, who came to seek and to save the lost.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.