Luke Lesson 76 (2021)

**SAVING ZACCHAEUS, THE CHIEF TAX COLLECTOR**

Luke 19:1-10

Key Verse: 19:9-10

“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.’”

Jefferey Dahmer was a notorious serial killer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1992, he was convicted of 15 of 16 murders committed between 1978 and 1991. When I heard the news of the crime, I was shocked and in disbelief. What he did was indeed horrible and monstrous. While serving his life imprisonment in the Correction Institution, he was beaten to death by a fellow inmate in November of 1994. Some people might have thought that justice was done. Recently, I heard about the pastor who had ministered to this serial killer and even baptized him eight months before he was murdered. Some of his church members were not happy with it and reacted by saying that if the kingdom of God welcomes serial killers like this guy, they would want no part in it. We can fully understand their sentiment and frustration. They expressed something that perhaps we also struggle with from time to time. In our fallen world, some people seem to have committed crimes so great that it’s hard to imagine that God could forgive them. As we study today’s passage, the real issue is not necessarily whether God can forgive them but whether we are ready to forgive them.

In today’s passage, we see a similar issue surrounding a notorious man in Jericho named Zacchaeus. This event is recorded only in Luke’s Gospel and sums up the focal point of Jesus’ messianic ministry. Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Let’s think about the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus (1-6), the reaction of the crowd (7), and Jesus’ explanation of what took place on that day (8-10).

 Look at verses 1-2. “Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.” At that time, Jesus was heading to his final destination Jerusalem, where he would be rejected by the elders, mocked, and crucified. Jericho was a pretty big city and a gateway to Jerusalem. These two cities were connected by a major highway called *“The Jericho Road*.” The phrase “pass-through” indicates that Jesus had no initial plans to stay in Jericho, but he just wanted to pass through it. But, of course, he was traveling with his disciples and the large crowd of people.

Luke introduces a man who lived in Jericho by the name of Zacchaeus. His name “Zacchaeus” is an abbreviation of Zechariah, meaning “the righteous one,” a big name to live up to. At the beginning chapter of Luke’s Gospel, we are introduced to another Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, who lived a good life, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly (1:6). But unlike Zechariah and Elizabeth, Zaachaeus’ life wasn’t upright at all. His lifestyle was problematic.

In Israel, tax collectors were notorious for cheating the general public. They would assess a tax, and whatever they collected over the amount required by the Roman government was theirs to keep. The Jews hated tax collectors, considered them as evil as murderers and robbers. As a result, they were not allowed to join any of the Jewish synagogues. After all, Zacchaeus wasn’t just a regular tax collector but a chief tax collector. It means that he was the administrator for the area of Jericho, which had a checkpoint for international trade goods transported between Judea and Perea. So, as a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus could organize the collection of taxes and take his cut from whatever was collected. It’s no wonder he was very wealthy. Zacchaeus could have lived a comfortable life with his wealth and substantial income resources as far as finance was concerned. Yet his life was nothing but a lie at best, constantly cheating on others. He does not seem even to have a basic conscience. Everybody in the town knew that he was a crook and despised him.

But one good thing about him is that he was curious about Jesus. Look at verses 3 and 4. “He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowds. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.” Zacchaeus must have heard about Jesus, including the fact that one of Jesus’ disciples was a former tax collector named Levi. He also heard that when Levi had a great banquet for Jesus at his house, the Pharisees and the law teachers complained that he was eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. But Jesus replied to them by saying, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (Lk. 5:31-32)

Being a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus must have been impressed by Jesus. He was curious about him, thinking, *“Who is this man that doesn’t condemn bad people, like me, but welcomes them just as they are? Wow! Is he the Messiah?”* So, when he heard that Jesus was in town, he wanted to see him. But being a short guy, he could not see over people who surrounded Jesus. (pic#A) By the way, Zacchaeus might not have wanted his presence conspicuous to others either. So he looked around for a while and found a perfect spot on a sycamore-fig tree down the street. He ran ahead of everyone because he didn’t want to lose the chance. Typically, climbing a tree is for little children, not for grown-ups. But he didn’t care about his dignity because he was determined to see Jesus (Pic#1). Surely, Zacchaeus put considerable effort into seeing Jesus. He could have felt lucky enough even if he could catch a glimpse of Jesus. But what a surprise he had!

Look at verses 5 and 6. “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.” (Pic#2) I am sure that Zacchaeus was shocked when Jesus called him by name. We don’t know how Jesus knew Zacchaeus’ name without being introduced. Well, Jesus is God who created us and knew us even before we knew him. Jesus also invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house, saying, “I must stay at your house today.” Jesus was fully aware that Zacchaeus was a notorious man in the town. People were gossiping about him all the time. But Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house. Perhaps Jesus sensed something sincere and earnest in this man’s heart. In our culture, self-invitation is considered impolite or even rude. Yet Zacchaeus didn’t mind at all. His heart was so open toward Jesus, like a little child, that he gladly welcomed Jesus’ self-invitation. *“Surely, Lord! You are more than welcome!”* It reminds us of what Revelation 3:20 states, “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.”

Nevertheless, Jesus’ friendly interaction with Zacchaeus offended many people. Look at verse 7. “All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’” Of course, Zacchaeus was a condemned man as a chief tax collector. He was a crook who should be convicted and punished. Yet, Jesus, who should have known better, invited himself to be a quest of such a terrible person. They thought that Jesus had no spiritual discernment. They were grumbling about Jesus and his association with Zacchaeus. Now, the people's contempt has shifted from the tax collector to Jesus himself for socializing with sinners.

Look at verse 8. “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.’” Surely, Zacchaeus must have known what people were grumbling about him behind his back all these years. Yet, he didn’t attempt to change. Now after encountering Jesus, he had changed his mind. He stood up in front of everyone and declared that he would make restitution for anyone he has cheated and give away half of his possessions to the poor. According to the Jewish law of the day, legal restitution required only the original amount plus one-fourth, 125% for defrauding (Lev. 6:4-5). But Zacchaeus took it to the next level, declaring that he would restore whatever was cheated four times, 400%. We see that money was no longer his idol or obsession. He was different from the rich young ruler who went away sad because he didn’t want to give away his wealth (Lk. 18:18-22). Zacchaeus’ repentance wasn’t just superficial lip service. It was sincere, changed his heart and action, and bore the fruit of repentance (Lk. 3:8).

Look at verses 9 and 10. “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.’” Hearing what Zacchaeus said, Jesus made a stunning declaration, saying, “Today salvation has come to this house.” Undoubtedly Zacchaeus’ statement displayed the fruit of repentance. Yet, it does not mean that his fruit saved him. However, it revealed that he has come to true faith in Jesus, and Jesus made it explicit in his statement. “This man, too, is a son of Abraham.”

Let’s think a little more. Some people think repentance is not required for our salvation because Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice to forgive our sins on the cross. Jesus cried out, “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!” (Lk. 23:34) However, if we don’t repent of our sins, the power of sin can ruin our life. For example, if Zacchaeus didn’t repent of his sinful life, would he have been forgiven? Do we need to repent of our sins to be forgiven? What about one of the criminals, crucified along with Jesus? He asked Jesus’ mercy, saying, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (23:43) This criminal didn’t have a chance to prove true repentance in his life because he was executed. Now, if he was lucky enough, released from the death penalty to live a new life, and yet kept stealing and robbing others, and his crimes were not discovered, is he a lucky guy? Some might say he is. But that’s an illusion. Why?

It’s because sin always has consequences. Even though God does everything to protect us from the results of our sins, there is the consequence of sin. For example, God warned Cain when he had the desire to murder his brother Abel, “Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.” (Gen. 4:7). And Cain didn’t listen to God’s warning and killed his brother. God’s heart was broken because the power of sin was destroying Cain. God does not necessarily punish all sinners and send them to hell right away. Yet, when we continue to sin knowingly, despite all warning of what will happen, there comes a time when God must allow the consequences of our sin to catch up with us so that we may learn a lesson from our mistakes. In such a case, it is not God who punishes us but our sin. That’s why God continues to warn us not to live in sin. Hebrews 3:7-8 and 15 repeatedly states, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness.” (Heb. 3:7-8, 15)

Look at verse 10 again. “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” The incident in today’s passage is the final event in Jesus’ public ministry before his death in Jerusalem. In hearing of the crowd of people, he made a mission statement again by saying, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Jesus forgave Zacchaeus, one of the most notorious sinners in Jewish society. What does it teach us? Does God’s grace of forgiveness have limitations? No. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus, whose life was a total mess, full of cheating, greed, and selfishness, he didn’t get angry with him, criticized, or condemned him. On the contrary, he had great pity on him, and his heart was broken, like a loving father and mother toward a sick child, knowing that Zacchaeus was suffering from the disease of sin. However, when Jesus showed mercy, people didn’t like it. They grumbled. We see that it was not God who didn’t want to forgive but them.

Let me close my sermon. First, we learn that God always forgives and wants to extend his grace. God’s love and mercy toward us never change. Yet, even forgiveness and grace cannot keep us from experiencing the consequences of sin. We will have to chew the fruits of sin. Sin is a disease that hurts, destroys our lives, carriers, damaging our relationships, minds, hearts, and so forth. Therefore, we should not harden our hearts but come to God in repentance so that we may not suffer from the consequences of our sins until we die but bear the fruit of repentance. Apostle Peter said to the people who killed Jesus, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.” (Acts 3:19) There come the times of refreshing as we repent before God. In the hearing of all people, Jesus declared, “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.” Today is the Father’s Day. I believe that Zacchaeus had the best Father’s Day ever when he repented. Happy Father’s Day!