

Going Out on a Limb for Jesus by Jeff Marshall
 Luke 19:1-10
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There's a story about a local fitness center, which was offering \$1,000 to anyone who could demonstrate that they were stronger than the owner of the place. Here's how it worked. This muscle man would squeeze a lemon until all the juice ran into a glass, and then hand the lemon to the next challenger. Anyone who could squeeze just one more drop of juice out would win the money. Many people tried over time: other weightlifters, construction workers, even professional wrestlers, but nobody could do it.

One day a short and skinny guy came in and signed up for the contest. After the laughter died down, the owner grabbed a lemon and squeezed away. Then he handed the wrinkled remains to the little man.

The crowd's laughter turned to silence as the man clenched his fist around the lemon and six drops fell into the glass. As the crowd cheered, the manager paid out the winning prize and asked the short guy what he did for a living. "Are you a lumberjack, a weightlifter, or what?"

The man replied, "I work for the IRS."

Today, as we begin a new series of sermons on Encounters with Jesus Christ, we are going to look at someone who worked for the IRS – for the Roman Government. His name is Zacchaeus, and his encounter with Jesus can be found in Luke 19. Like many of you I was first exposed to Zacchaeus as a child in Sunday School. I can still remember the little song we learned written by Elsie Leslie. If you know it, sing it along with me, and do the motions:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
 And 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, "Zacchaeus, you come down,
 For I'm going to your house today,
 For I'm going to your house today."

As we dig into this scripture, I want us to examine the two main characters. First, we'll take a look at Zacchaeus, and then we'll notice the star of the show: Jesus.

¹Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ²A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' "

⁸But 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."

⁹Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

I. ZACH: THE PROFILE OF A NORMAL GUY

Zach represents every person who doesn't yet have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Some people call them "unbelievers"—but that word isn't best because they will believe sooner or later. Scripture tells us that *Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.* (Philippians 2:10-11) Some use the word "unchurched," which is not a good word to use because it implies if you attend church, you know the Lord. There are a lot of people who go to church who don't know Jesus. Or we could use the words "pagan", but many people without Jesus will tell you they think they are better than a lot of those hypocrites down at the church. Sure, we know they're lost—Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. But Zach didn't even know he was lost. Compared to most of the people in the world, he was just a normal guy. In the secular world, people without a relationship with God are the normal people. Christians are nuts.

Before I came into a personal relationship with Jesus, I was a Zach, and so were you. A Zach is a person who is primarily concerned about one person: Zach. Here are a couple of ways in which each of us can relate to Zach.

1. None of us really measures up. The one thing we all know about Zach is that he was vertically challenged—a wee little man. If I was making a movie about this story, do you know who I would cast as Zacchaeus? Danny DeVito. He's not quite five feet tall and he often plays a crooked and conniving character. In my mind, that's Zacchaeus before Jesus changed him.

I heard about a guy when went to the doctor's office for a physical. The nurse asked him his weight and he said, "170 pounds." She had him step on the scales and she said, "You weigh 200 pounds." The nurse asked, "How tall are you?" He said, "Six feet." She measured him and said, "You are actually five feet, nine inches." She started taking his blood pressure and he said, "How can you expect my blood pressure to be normal? I came in here as a tall, slender guy, and you've already made me short and fat!"

When it comes to God's standard, we are all wee little people—spiritually. Romans 3:23 says, *For all have sinned and fall SHORT of the glory [standard] of God.* Growing up there was a door casing in our house that we marked one's growth. Over the years we watched those marked get higher and higher. My mother put my brother's mark on that door

casing – he is over six feet tall. I never reached that mark, and it was fun to watch my nephews’ marks on that casing as they grew up. On God’s door casing of righteousness, none of us measure up. There’s your mark, there’s my mark, but God’s mark is a million miles above the highest mark of mankind. We all fall far short of God’s standard: Jesus Christ. He has a name that is above every other name! The first step in salvation is recognizing that in our own goodness, we will never measure up.

2. **Secondly, Zaccheus was desperately seeking something.** Zach was rich, but he wasn’t happy. There was something missing in his life. The details of this story reveal he was a desperate man. He was rich and dignified, yet he ran down the road to try to get in position. Desperate people run. We used to climb trees when we were kids, but most adults don’t climb trees, unless they’re chased by a mean dog, or trying to escape a flood. Climbing a tree is an act of desperation.

Zach had an itch in his heart all his wealth couldn’t scratch. He probably didn’t even know what he needed. He just knew he desperately needed something. When he heard Jesus was in town, he was hoping Jesus might have the solution to his problem. He didn’t know it, but he was looking for God.



How many of you have gotten a Publisher’s Clearing House Sweepstakes letter in the mail? They use their sweepstakes to entice consumers to subscribe to magazines they represent. They used to write letters making it sound like you were one of a very few finalists eligible to win millions of dollars. The letters appeared to be “personal” because they repeated your name several times. Of course, the letters are actually generated by a computer that just plugs a name in the right place. It may sound as if you are the only one getting the letter when, in fact, millions of people are getting the same “personal letter.”

A funny thing happened a couple of years ago—the computer generated a personal letter to the Bushnell Assembly of God church near Tampa, Florida. The church got a letter that said: Dear God of Bushnell Assembly, “God, we’ve been looking for you! You are a finalist to receive our \$11 million Sweepstakes! So don’t just sit there, God, return your sweepstakes form today!” The Tampa Tribune interviewed the pastor, who said he didn’t plan on returning the form because God already has at least \$11 million.

That’s humorous, but when I read the phrase, “God, we’ve been looking for you” I thought it spoke the truth. People today are looking for something. They are looking for God, but they call it happiness, or purpose. They look for it in

money, in human relationships, or in a career. When those things don't really satisfy they may get out on a limb and start looking for it in extreme living, which may include drugs, alcohol, sex, or anything that gives them a brief high.

Are you like Zach? Are you desperately looking for something and you don't even know what it is? Jesus is here today, and He can be the end of your search.

II. JESUS: THE PURPOSE OF A LOVING GOD

The second character of this story is the real star of the show. We see ourselves in Zacchaeus. We've all been there, and some of you are still there, searching for God. The good news is while you are searching for God, He has found you. That's why Jesus came to planet earth. According to Luke 19:10, He came to seek out and to save all the Zachs like you and me. Jesus Christ came on the greatest search and rescue mission in history! Zach was lost, and Jesus came all the way from heaven to find him and help him. In Luke 19, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world. He would be arrested and crucified just a few days after He visited Jericho. But on His way to the cross, He stopped in Jericho to seek out a couple of guys—a blind man named Bartimaeus and a short tax collector named Zacchaeus. Why? Because those guys were desperately seeking God. He's seeking you today, too. The way Jesus related to Zach is the same way He wants to relate to you.

1. He knows you. The first word Jesus spoke to the little guy was, "Zacchaeus!" He called him by his name. Zacchaeus, who had probably been called many unmentionable names must have thought, "He knows my name! How does He know me?" Jesus knew His name for the same reason He knows your name—because He is God. He knows everybody's name. Don't you like it when someone calls you by your name?



A couple of years ago a guy named Scott was interviewed on CNN Headline News. Every day Scott wears an adhesive name tag that says, "Hello, my name is Scott." He says when he wears a name tag, people are friendlier to him. He's trying to start a trend, and he's even written a book suggesting everyone wear a name tag like he does.

But you don't have to wear a name tag for God. He already knows your name. God said in Isaiah 43:1: *Fear not for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.* You may think you are all alone in this world and nobody knows you and nobody cares. But there is a loving God who created the Universe who knows you.

2. He knows what you need—a relationship. After Jesus called his name, He calls Zach to come down from the tree. In the song we learned about Zacchaeus, we would point our finger and shake it like an angry schoolteacher and

say, “Zacchaeus, you come down!” But I believe Jesus spoke those words in love and tender compassion. I’m certain many of the citizens of Jericho expected Jesus to deliver a rebuke to this little tax collector. Can’t you hear them as they whispered to each other, “Oh boy, Zacchaeus is finally going to get what he deserves! This righteous teacher will let him have it with both barrels!”

Jesus would have been telling the truth if He had said, “Zach, you are a dirty, rotten sinner! Repent, repent, repent! You’d better pay back all the money you’ve stolen from these people. If you don’t God’s gonna getcha’ good!” But Jesus didn’t come into the world to condemn sinners—He came to save them. He knew Zacchaeus needed to know he could have a personal relationship with Jesus. Instead of condemning Zach, He said, “Let’s go to your house.” At that point, the religious crowd turned against Jesus and criticized Him for spending time with a sinner like Zach.

So, what do you think they did at Zach’s house? Maybe Jesus said, “Sit there, and I’m going to preach a sermon to you on the sin of stealing money!” Or maybe Jesus slapped him on the forehead and said, “Demon of greed, come out! Repent!” Well, stealing money is a sin, and Jesus did cast out demons on occasions, but the Bible says Jesus went to Zach’s house to EAT with him. I can see them sitting there sipping some juice of the vine and dipping pieces of pita bread in the humus sauce like Israelis still do today. At some point Jesus says, “Zach, tell me about your job.” And before he knows it, Zach poured out his heart to Jesus, confessing how he had been stealing from the people. Before the conversation was over, Zach was a changed man.

Some of you know what you are doing is wrong. I’m not here to point my finger at you and say, “Sinner! Sinner! Sinner!” I’m here to introduce you to Jesus. Sure, you need to make some changes. Zach did, but you don’t have the power to make those changes on your own. But when Jesus becomes your friend, He’ll help you clean up your act.

Isn’t that an awesome thought? Jesus wants to be your friend. One of my favorite hymns is “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” written by Joseph Scriven. I particularly love the third verse. If you know it sing it with me.

Have we trials and temptations?
 Is there trouble anywhere?
 We should never be discouraged,
 Take it to the Lord in prayer
 Can we find a friend so faithful
 Who will all our sorrows share?
 Jesus knows our every weakness,
 Take it to the Lord in prayer.

3. He sees you not as you are—but as who you can become. Everyone else looked at Zach and saw a mean, little, dirty rotten sinner. When Jesus looked at him in that tree, He must have thought, “I’m going to make this short and

sweet!" Do you know what the name "Zacchaeus" means? It means "pure." Jesus didn't see a crooked tax collector, He saw a man who could become PURE. He saw a man who could be so generous he would give half of his money away.

At the tree, Jesus didn't say, "Zach, you're a thief. Now, repent and pay back what you owe to these people, with interest and penalties, then I'll come to your house and eat with you." Instead, Jesus said, "Come one, let's get to know each other, and once you get to know me, you'll see yourself in a different light and you'll want to make some changes."

Jesus says the same to you today. You've made mistakes, there is sin in your life. Jesus is here today to lovingly point His finger at you and say, "I came to seek and to save you. C'mon, let's become friends."

After Zach got to know Jesus, he demonstrated he was a changed man. He paid everyone back four times what he had stolen, and gave half his money to the poor. It's easy for us to say, "I've met Jesus! I'm a Christian! I've been changed!" But the proof is in what you do. Has there been a change in the way you think, talk and live? God will forgive your sin, but sometimes, like Zach, we have to make restitution to others in order to demonstrate our forgiveness.



I like the picture of a kitten that is looking into a mirror and sees a lion. You need to start seeing yourself as God sees you. Sure, you are a sinner, and you don't measure up to God's standard. But Jesus has come to seek and to save you. When God looks at you today, He sees in you what you can become. No matter what mistakes you've made in the past, God sees in you the potential of becoming one of His children.

CONCLUSION

There are two kinds of people here today. Some of you are like Zach. You're searching for something. You've found money and your job can't really scratch that itch in your heart. Jesus is here today, and He knows you—He loves you. He is calling you by name today. He's saying, "I want to have a relationship with you. I can see in you the person

you can become—and that person is beautiful!” So for the “normal” people here today, will you come down from your tree and meet Jesus and let Him change you?

But most of you are what I call former Zachs. We are recovering Zachs. We have already had the experience of meeting Jesus. You may think the story of Zacchaeus is just a nice children’s story about seeking and saving lost people, but He’s already done that for you. Perhaps you shifted your mind into mental neutral several minutes earlier because you thought this message didn’t apply to you.

In order to find our place in this story, let’s go back to the story and focus on the sycamore tree: It held Zach up so he could see Jesus. We are to be like the tree to people who don’t know Jesus. Here’s the powerful APPLICATION FOR BELIEVERS (former Zachs):



ARE YOU WILLING TO BE A TREE TO LIFT PEOPLE ABOVE THE CROWD SO THEY CAN SEE JESUS?

Years ago, I realized that my role is like that sycamore tree. I can’t be Jesus to people. I can only lift people above the crowd so they can see Jesus clearly. That’s our job! We can’t save people, only Jesus can. We can’t change people—only Jesus can. Our job is to lift people up until they see Jesus, then He takes over.

What would have happened to Zacchaeus if there hadn’t been a tree there that day? We don’t know. The good news is God had planted a tree just in the right spot so Zacchaeus could see Jesus. Has God planted you somewhere that it seems your job is to simply lift someone up so they can see Jesus?

Today Jesus invites us to His table to feed us. As you come to this table today, remember that He calls you by name because He wants to have a relationship with you. Come as you are and leave this table on the journey to becoming how God sees you.

Transition into Holy Communion

