

Little Man, Big Step : Conversation with Zacchaeus

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[0:00] This is a sermon from King's Church West and I'm going to grab them.

But, so, in lieu of a picture, I'm going to tell you a little story and ask you to guess who they might have been doing this for. So, does anyone know what might have encouraged a then 81-year-old woman to travel 300 miles and camp on the street for three days?

This was about four years ago, three and a half to four years ago, this took place. This is 81-year-old Jessie Young who made her way down from north of the border to London to see the coronation of King Charles.

She traveled 300 miles, slept in a tent on the street for three days for the chance to have the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the King. Now, whenever you think of the Royal Family, I don't mind, but whenever you think of the Royal Family, that is dedication.

That is a passion. And I wonder, is there anyone in life that you would go that far to see? For myself, I remember being a kid and I was running down the front of the stands in Murrayfield trying to catch a glimpse of Thierry Henry as head for playing Barcelona.

[1:48] It did not matter to me that on that pitch was also Samuel Eto'o, Yaya Touré and one Lionel Messi. Did not matter. I was there to see Thierry Henry.

It didn't even matter that Hibs got beat 6-0. I was there to see my hero and I got a glimpse of him playing in the flesh. And it was frankly worth conceiving six goals. I'd do it again.

Today, we're going to continue our series on conversations with Jesus. And we're going to look at the story of Zacchaeus. It's a seemingly unlikely man who's desperate to get a glimpse of Jesus. We're going to go through all the verses together. Then I'm going to break it down and we're going to go through it piece by piece and pick things out as we go. Okay? It's not going to be in the screen. It's going to be in your Bible if you need it.

It's Luke chapter 19 and it's verses 1 through 10. Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus.

[2:48] He was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. And he wanted to see who Jesus was. But because he was short, he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him since Jesus was coming that way.

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.

All the people saw this and they began to mutter, He has gone to be the guest of a sinner. 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. 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. So I love snappy little sermon titles. So I've called this Little Man Big Step.

[3:52] And I think there's a really important message we can take from these verses here. And it's so important that I'm going to risk spoilers and I'm just going to say it up front. Right? If you're making notes and you only make one, this is the one.

If you only remember one thing today, it's this, please. It's that God meets people where they are. We're going to dive a bit deeper into how he does this and how this can affect us as we go through

the verses.

But just as we go through the passage, keep it in your mind at the front of your head. God meets people where they are. So verse one, Verse one, Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus. He was chief tax collector and was wealthy. Now he wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he could not see over the crowd.

So he ran ahead, climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. So pause here and we're going to set the scene for the story. Okay? We are four verses in.

[4:54] It's about 40% of the way into the story. And so far, Luke has barely mentioned Jesus. What Luke has taken time to do though, is tell us who Zacchaeus is and where Zacchaeus is.

So we're going to start there. Okay? Big picture first. Jesus and Zacchaeus are in Jericho. Now Jericho is a wealthy trade city at this time. And it's home to all kinds of luxuries, fancy goods, extravagant buildings.

King Herod's second palace, the king of the region's holiday home, was in Jericho. First century Roman historian, Josephus, described Jericho and its outskirts as the most fruitful country in Judea. And he even went as far to say that it would not be a misnomer to describe as divine this spot. So Jericho is a beautiful, affluent, powerful city.

Powerful, affluent cities tend to have powerful, affluent people. And that does bring us to Zacchaeus. We actually do get quite a lot of information about Zacchaeus in not that many words here.

[6:02] We know that he's too short to see over the crowd. Which I'm sure is relatable to everybody in the room and not just myself. We know that he is wealthy. Even by the standards of this affluent trade city he lives in, he's doing really well for himself.

And Luke goes out of his way to tell us how Zacchaeus got wealthy. Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector. Now modern day HMRC isn't the most popular organisation in the world.

But for first century Jews it was even worse. The tax collectors were hated by Jews. It was seen as traitors for working with Rome and they were known to exploit their fellow countrymen to lend their own pockets.

At this time Jews were waiting for their messiah to rid them of Rome, free them of occupation. And the tax collector working with Rome is effectively to their view an anti-messiah.

Working with Rome, benefiting directly from the occupation and working to maintain the status quo. Tax collectors were vilified, ostracised and threatened with violence repeatedly for their roles.

[7:09] Interacting with Zacchaeus would be not high on anybody's to-do list. People would be more likely to spit at him on the street than to invite him to dinner. To be seen socially with Zacchaeus would be to risk receiving the same treatment he's receiving from the people around him.

There is a reason that in the stories Zacchaeus climbs a tree rather than saying excuse me and working his way to the front of the crowd. So he's really unpopular, we know that.

But he does have an important job and he does have money. He's got everything really that he sought to achieve, everything the world tells him that he should want, everything that he's built his life on really.

If you saw him on the street you might be forgiven for thinking that he's got it all together. That there couldn't really be anything he was missing, anything he could really want or need in his life. But Zacchaeus himself must feel that something is missing.

Because there's one more really important thing we're told about Zacchaeus. And it's that he wants to know Jesus. He hears that Jesus is coming and decides to risk real physical danger in a crowd full of people who hate him.

[8:17] Because he wants to know who Jesus is. When that doesn't work, he doesn't give up, he comes up with a plan B, he climbs a nearby tree to get a vantage point and he sits and waits for Jesus.

He's alone up a tree and waiting for Jesus to pass by. And in verse 5, Jesus does pass by. Verse 5 says, 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. It all happens quite quickly at this point, doesn't it? Jesus turns up, he spots Zacchaeus in a tree and he invites himself to dinner.

He doesn't ask Zacchaeus if tonight works. He doesn't even know if Zacchaeus has done his shopping for the host dinner. The Bible doesn't mention if Zacchaeus is married or not.

So for all we know, Jesus has just invited himself for a sad bachelor dinner of soup and a toast. He doesn't give Zacchaeus time to get ready, to do things right.

[9:26] He doesn't give him time to prepare dinner and formally invite Jesus and the others. Zacchaeus moves up the tree. Jesus calls him out and he invites himself to dinner.

Zacchaeus might not have been ready at that point, but Jesus was. It can be the same for us when we want to share about Jesus. We want to talk to people about Jesus. We want to have the perfect words.

Compare the ideal scenario and just get everything exactly right. We want to be ready. God wants us to move when he's ready. He wants us to step out in faith and act even if we don't feel like we are.

He wants us to listen to the Spirit and trust him. Moses is a great example of this. Remember Moses' Old Testament? Beard, staff, always on his tablet.

That's a great joke. Moses, at this point, he has fled Egypt. He's got no relationship with Pharaoh. He's got no authority in Egypt and by his own admission, he's not a great public speaker.

[10:30] Then you see in Exodus 4.12, God reminds him that it's not about him. God says to Moses, go and I will be your mouth and teach you what to say. God can make you ready.

The same way he made Moses ready. The same way he decided Zacchaeus was ready. When God calls you to speak to someone, I really encourage you to listen and trust. Whether you feel like you're ready or not.

Because even if you are, Jesus is. And that's what's important. Verse 7. We go on. We get people's reaction in verse 7. All the people saw this and began to mutter, he has gone to be the guest of a sinner.

Now, Romans 3.23, Sunday school classic. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Every single person in that crowd was a sinner.

But they were perfectly happy when Jesus was spending time with them. They thought they were better than the tax collector. It's pride, it's arrogance, and it is a fundamental misunderstanding of how Jesus' kingdom works.

[11:39] At this point, he spent his entire ministry going to places other people won't. Spending time with people society says are beneath him. His closest group of friends, his disciples, the closest people to him on earth, includes tax collectors.

The same people these people vilify. And they just don't get it yet that Jesus does things differently. Time after time through his ministry, Jesus has gone where he's needed, not where he is expected. In John 4, Jesus travels to Samaria, home of the enemies of the Jews, to meet the woman by the well as she drew her water. Earlier on in Luke's Gospel, in chapter 5, he goes to Levi's house for dinner with a large group of sinners and tax collectors, despite the Pharisees' vocal complaints and all the stigma surrounding tax collectors.

In Mark 5, Jesus frees the possessed man among the tombs in Jerusalem, despite the fact, Jewish law says anyone who touches a grave is unclean for seven days, despite the fact they were surrounded by ceremonially unclean pigs, and despite the fact that they were in Gentile territory at the time.

Throughout the Bible, Old Testament and New, God meets people where they are, regardless of their circumstance or their location or their lifestyle.

[12:57] In 1 Kings 19, you see God meet with Elijah in the Old Testament. Elijah, at this point, is running for his life. Israel is serving false gods. Elijah has spoken out against them.

He's performed miracles to try and show who the real God is. And he is, at this point, waging a one-man war against Baal and all of his followers, trying to lead Israel back to God. And Israel is

just not listening.

He's frustrated and he's scared and he feels like a failure. Despite all that God has done through him, despite all the miracles that he's seen, he still feels defeated. He flees from assassination, he runs into the wilderness, collapses beneath a bush, and he prays to God.

And the prayer that he prays is that he prays God would end his life there and then. He prays for it all to be over. But God doesn't end Elijah's life there.

It wouldn't be a great story if you did. But God sends an angel to give him food and water and he tells Elijah to rest. The next day, same. God sends an angel, Elijah has food and water and he rests.

[14:08] After a couple of days of this, he tells him to walk from where he is in Beersheba to Mount Sinai. There's a journey of around 250 miles.

And we're told that he walks it in 40 days. Quick maths, anybody? That is 6.25 miles a day.

6.25 miles a day. So he walks about 10 hours or so a day. That's an average speed of about 0.6 miles an hour.

God walks with Elijah from Beersheba to Mount Sinai as Elijah drags himself along at a literal snail's pace. Because he knows Elijah is hurting and he wants to be there for him.

He doesn't rush Elijah. He isn't angry at Elijah for needing a break. He just takes care of him and moves at his own pace. We didn't wait for Elijah at Sinai.

[15:08] We came and met him under the bush in his pain where he was and moved with him. God meets us where we are because he wants us to know that he's available to us wherever we are and however we're doing.

So it's availability is what's important half the time. We like to overcomplicate talking about Jesus, particularly for people who don't have faith. But a lot of the time all it really takes is to be available. We can see from verse 3 that Zacchaeus is already asking questions. He's already looking for Jesus. And I wonder how many people are out there today that are looking for Jesus but don't know where to go.

Or they've been told that they have to do this or they have to stop that or act this way so they can have the right to come and meet Jesus. How many people ever would jump at the chance to ask questions or have conversations about faith if they just felt they had somebody ready and willing to listen?

A few years ago, I gave my Bible to a girl working behind the bar in the hotel. We had a passing conversation about God and she mentioned that she'd never read the Bible.

[16:22] And I felt God tell me to give her mine. And it was brand new, I hasten to add. This has literally been delivered about three days previously. And I said, fine.

Worst case scenario, I look a bit stupid but I'm checking out tomorrow. I don't care. So I asked her, would you like a Bible? And she said yes. So I hopped off the bar stool, up to her room, got it, came down, gave it to her.

She popped it in her bag and she promised she'd read it. And it's at this point that I'd really love to say that I saw her again a year later, 18 months later. She was serving in a local church. She was on fire for God.

Still clutching my old second-hand Bible. But the truth is I've never seen her again. And honestly, I don't think I ever will. She didn't come to know Jesus there and then.

But as Mike shared a couple of weeks ago, that could just be the first step on the journey. You might never know the effect you being available for someone had on their journey to faith.

[17:20] But they will when they're looking back on it a few steps down the line. You don't need to have all the answers. You don't need to have it all together. You just need to make yourself available and listen to God and trust Him when He says something that seems a bit off the wall.

Verse 8 is Zacchaeus' response. We go through. 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've cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.

You notice that Zacchaeus hasn't done anything when Jesus calls him. He hasn't made any changes. He hasn't cleaned up his life to come and meet Jesus. The encounter with Jesus comes first.

Then the behavior changes. Zacchaeus responds to Jesus' call. And then his heart changes. So Jesus meets us where we are because we can't change without Him.

Our call isn't to clean our lives up, give to the poor, right our wrongs and then come to Jesus. We're just called to come to Him. When He calls the disciples, He doesn't tell them to ask their parents forgiveness for leaving the family business.

[18:33] Go make their sacrifices. Become spiritually clean and then follow Him. He just says, follow me. He says, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.

He calls them as they are so that He can turn them into what they become. Men would go out and share the gospel, perform miracles and build the church around the world. He took fishermen, tax collectors and outcasts and He changed the world because they were willing to listen when He called and let Him change them from the inside.

I encourage you to don't discount yourself because of who you think you are, where you're from, what you think you're capable of. Peter was a fisherman. Paul made tents.

God used them to speak to hundreds of thousands of people all around the world. He can use you to speak to the people you meet in your life. The deeper we dive into Him, the more He changes us, the more He makes us like Him from the inside.

In Zacchaeus' case, it isn't a coincidence that the first change we see is in giving away His money. So the Bible uses the word mammon to refer to the love of money and possessions.

[19:41] And specifically, it is used to represent how money and things can fight with God for our attention and our loyalty. Jesus spells it out pretty clearly in Matthew 6, where he just flat out states, You cannot serve both God and mammon.

Zacchaeus giving away his money isn't just an overflow of joy and generosity on his part. It's Jesus breaking him free from the chains that he held on place before.

Zacchaeus giving away everything that he stole, everything he worked and lied and cheated to earn, is proof that it doesn't have a hold on him anymore. Law and logic at the time would demand is to give back what he stole and give his tithe to the temple.

That would be it. That's not what he does here. The money has got so little hold on him now that he gives away half of what he has and pays back four times what he's stolen.

I don't imagine he's got that much left at this point. This isn't the same man standing there, the same man that climbed down from the tree. It's a new creation set free for the loving mammon to push on into something more.

[20:51] Jesus meets us where we are because he loves us far too much to leave us there. He meets us where we are to lead them on into something better.

In verse 9 we have a little glimpse of that something better. 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 save the lost. Jesus said it there. He came to seek and save the lost.

He's not waiting for us to find him. Jesus meets people where they are because he's actively out looking for them. Whenever we find ourselves, whatever we've done, Jesus never stops looking for us.

There's nowhere that we can hide from him. Psalm 139 runs us through this. Verses 7-10. Psalm 139. Where can I go from your spirit?

[21:48] Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens you are there. If I make my bed in the depths you are there. By rise on the wings of the dawn and settle on the far side of the sea.

Even there your hand will hold me. Your right hand will hold me fast. There's nowhere on this earth or under it that he can't find us.

There's no sin that he hasn't already overcome. There's no doubt and there's no fear that can stop him from reaching his people. He's never going to give up on you. He's never going to stop looking for you.

You are his child and he loves you. And he's never going to stop loving you. Spoiler you. He died for you.

And he'd do all of it again in a heartbeat just to bring you alone home to him. Now I don't know where you stand today.

[22:46] Maybe you've fallen away and you're trying to hide from his presence like David in the psalm. Maybe you're standing on the edge of where you are, where you've always been. Just waiting for permission to step forward into something more that God has waiting for you.

Or maybe you're still sat in the branch of your own sycamore tree. You're still yet to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Wherever you are, you don't have to do it on your own. Jesus is there with you, calling you to him, meeting you right wherever you are.

Come down and follow me. He's asking you to trust him. To embrace all the gifts and the calling that he's given you and dive deeper into your relationship with him.

All you have to do is say yes. He'll handle everything else. You don't need to feel ready. You don't need to have it all together. You don't need to earn it.

You just need to listen to his call. Come down from the treetops and follow him. Amen.