



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 19:1-11

To understand more about Zacchaeus.

20 Seconds of Insane Courage

In 2011, *We Bought a Zoo* hit theaters. The movie is based on a book of the same name written by Benjamin Mee, who, along with his family, purchased a 30-acre zoo on the southwest edge of Dartmoor, in the county of Devon in the South West of England. Upon purchase, the zoo was in bad shape and in need of a great number of repairs before it was safe to re-open to the public. Eventually, Mee and his family were able to restore the park into a place of beauty and fun, safe for public enjoyment. In the book, Mee talks about the various challenges he faced and the many times he felt so discouraged that he began to question his decision to purchase it. In the movie version, Mee (played by Matt Damon) says, “Sometimes all you need is twenty seconds of insane courage. Just literally twenty seconds of embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it.” It’s a great quote because it’s true; sometimes all you need is twenty seconds of embarrassing bravery to do something that eventually yields a great outcome.

In Luke 19:1-10, Luke introduces someone named Zacchaeus who is described as a “chief tax collector” who is “rich” (Lk. 19:2). In an urgent attempt to see Jesus and be saved, Zacchaeus climbs up a sycamore tree in order to better see Jesus, a strange and embarrassing act that would have required roughly 20 seconds of insane courage, and one that would ultimately lead to something eternally great.

Zacchaeus

Zacchaeus is described by Luke as both “a chief tax collector,” and “rich.” Throughout Luke’s narrative, he has presented money several times as not necessarily evil, but as a distraction away from true discipleship. We have seen Jesus be accused of being a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Lk. 7:34), but he has yet to depict Jesus as a friend to the rich. This reality, coupled with the less usual word for “man,” indicates Zacchaeus is an unusual person being introduced into the narrative.¹ Below are a few important details concerning this narrative.

PRECISION IN DETAIL

One of the key details Luke gave us from the beginning concerns his attention to detail (Lk. 1:1-3). Now, in the first portion of chapter 19, Luke again shows his consistency. Luke is not content with simply giving the occupation and status of Zacchaeus (“a chief tax collector” and “rich”), but also gives some physical attributes that lend motivation to his actions: “And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature” (Lk. 19:3). Luke indicates that Zacchaeus (not Jesus) was short, and therefore could not see over the crowds of people now following the Messiah. It’s a small detail, but one that demonstrates Luke’s commitment to the eye-witness accounts he collected and compiled into his Gospel narrative.

A SENSE OF URGENCY

Verse 4 continues: “So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.” This is strange and embarrassing behavior, especially for a man of Zacchaeus’ occupation, in the ancient world. That Zacchaeus was willing to act so strangely indicates that he was more than simply curious about what Jesus looked like or who He was. Zacchaeus *needed* to see Him. Again, there is precision in detail. Luke doesn’t describe what he climbs as a general tree, but specifically a sycamore tree. The climb pays off, as Jesus invites Himself over: “And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully.” Jesus’ desire to spend time with Zacchaeus was met with excitement and joy, indicating that he likely understood who Jesus truly was.

A GUEST

Verse 7 gives a detail that is subtle but likely intentional: “And when they saw it, they all grumbled, ‘He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.’” Apart from the crowds being upset that Jesus would lower himself to the destitute standards of a tax collector, Luke also notes that Jesus has gone to Zacchaeus’ home, not only for a meal, but to stay as a “guest.” Recall Luke’s birth narrative in Luke chapter 2, and how the place where Mary and Joseph went translated as an “inn” was not likely an actual inn but the guest room of Joseph’s family home in the city of David (“inn” is the Gk. term κατάλυμα [katalyma]). Now, Jesus will not be denied the guest room of a home belonging to a sinner, a tax collector, and someone who is wealthy. Throughout Luke’s Gospel (and the other three for that matter), Jesus has a way of turning everything you expect to happen on its head. This is a great example of such a reversal.

GRATITUDE

Zacchaeus’ recognition of Jesus is further confirmed by his later actions: “And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold’” (Lk. 19:8). Often the focus of this story is how much Zacchaeus gave away, half of his belongings in this instance (not earnings, but actual belongings). He also commits to restoring fourfold

¹ The typical Greek term for man is ἄνθρωπος (anthrōpos), but Luke instead uses the less common term ἀνὴρ (anēr).

anything he had fraudulently taken. Per the law in Leviticus 6:5 and Numbers 5:6-7, only 20% was required on smaller crimes. A fourfold restoration was, however, demanded in Exodus 22:1 and 2 Samuel 12:6. Either way, Zacchaeus' actions demonstrate that he is repentant of his sin. His desire to give away that which he owns is also congruent with Jesus' command to His disciples to do the same in Luke 12:33, as well as His commandment to the rich, young ruler in Luke 18:22. These actions of Zacchaeus reveal a grateful heart before the Lord, yet another sign that he has been saved. This is confirmed with Jesus words in verses 9 and 10: "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Zacchaeus' plan to see Jesus culminates in an expression of gratitude for who Jesus is, followed by the announcement of the Gospel by Jesus Himself.

What About Now?

There are many takeaways in this story. For one, Zacchaeus is an important reminder that the people you expect to be the most distant from Jesus are sometimes the ones making the most effort to get to Him. Tax collectors and wealthy people are sinners and they typically don't want what Jesus offers, and yet Zacchaeus climbs a tree in an act of desperation to see the Lord. Another takeaway is the importance of action coupled to genuine gratitude. It is not enough for Zacchaeus to express his gratitude to Jesus with words; he demonstrates it by giving away half of his belongings and committing to abundantly restoring that which he has dishonestly taken from others. There is built into this act of repentance a bit of restitution as well. Whenever we rejoice in Christ, that gratitude ought to shape the way we relate to and respond to others as well. There is no separating our love for God from our love for others. A final takeaway is the urgency by which we ought to pursue Jesus. Zacchaeus had a sense of urgency in wanting to see the Lord as displayed not only by the imperfect form of the verb "seeking" and the odd behavior of climbing a tree in the middle of day in public. In a similar way, we ought to do what is necessary to pursue Jesus in all things. We ought to have urgency in introducing others to know Jesus as well. There is no greater priority than Christ; do our actions convey this truth?

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 19:1-2. Into what city did Jesus enter? Who was there? What descriptors are given for Zacchaeus? Are any of them unusual? Why do these descriptors matter?

2. Read Luke 19:3. What was Zacchaeus wanting? What prevented him from doing so?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 19:4. What did Zacchaeus do to compensate for this problem? How would climbing a tree have been perceived in the ancient world? What did his actions suggest about his desire to see Jesus?

2. Read Luke 19:5. What did Jesus say to Zacchaeus when He passed by the tree?
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Day Three

1. Read Luke 19:6. What did Zacchaeus do in response to Jesus' words?
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2. Read Luke 19:7. How did the crowds respond to this interaction? Why was this a problem?
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Day Four

1. Read Luke 19:8. What did Zacchaeus tell Jesus he was going to do? Why was this significant? What did it indicate?
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2. Read Luke 19:9-10. What did Jesus say concerning Zacchaeus? What did He say concerning His own mission?
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Week 68 Discussion: Gratitude Demands Restoration

In Luke 19:1-10, the story of Zacchaeus is a great reminder that gratitude before God looks like (in part) making right what you have done wrong to other people. Once Zacchaeus understood who Jesus was and believed, he immediately recognized the need to restore that which he fraudulently took from others. Talk as a group about how your relationship to Christ shapes the way you make things right with others.

1. Icebreaker: Has anyone ever wronged you and then gone over and above to make it right? How did that make you feel?
2. Think back to when you first came to Christ: Were there any things you had to make right? Share with the group.
3. Do you believe your actions towards others should be impacted by your love for Christ? Why or why not?
4. How have you sought to make right your wrongs since you've come to faith?
5. Is it ever too late to try and right your wrongs? Why or why not?
6. How can the church be more intentional about equipping you to make amends with those you've wronged?

Takeaways:

1. Zacchaeus urgently seeks out Jesus by climbing up a tree close to where He will pass.
2. Jesus asks to stay with Zacchaeus and he joyfully invites Him.
3. Zacchaeus, from a place of gratitude, tells Jesus that he will give away half of his belongings, and make right the wrongs he has committed towards other people.