

Week 5 – Zacchaeus – Luke 19:1-10

Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 34:11-16

Introduction

Let me begin this morning by asking you who do you despise?

Now, you might protest that there is no one who you despise because “despise” seems like a very strong word

But let’s look at how Webster’s 1913 Dictionary defines “despise” and see if that changes anything

Webster’s says “despise” means:

To look down upon with disfavor or contempt; to scorn; to disdain; to have a low opinion or contemptuous dislike of

Is there anyone or any class of people who might fit any of those feelings?

In today’s political climate many look down on others who hold an opinion different from their own and disdain for them and their political views

For you that might be a Bernie Bro or someone wearing a MAGA hat but you just can’t abide that kind of person

You might have a contemptuous dislike for someone who works at an abortion clinic

Or perhaps a terrorist or terrorist sympathizer would be someone you might despise

Maybe you have a low opinion or contemptuous dislike for those who are in this country illegally and those who support their being here

In a previous sermon, we saw how the Jews despised the Samaritans because they considered them to be half-breed heretics who had polluted the patriarchal bloodline and who refused to worship God properly

And we know from the pages of Scripture that the Jews of Jesus’ day didn’t think very highly of Gentiles – calling them “sinners” and “dogs”

Just about every class of people throughout history has had some other person or group of persons who they characterized as being despicable

And that mindset forms the backdrop of our passage this morning from Luke 19 where we find the account of Zacchaeus and his encounter with Jesus

You probably remember Zacchaeus from the children’s song [[Zacchaeus.mp3](#)]

We find many of the basic elements of the account in that catchy little song

Such as the fact that Zacchaeus was short, he climbed a tree so that he might see Jesus over the crowd, and Jesus called him to come down out of the tree so that he could invite himself over to Zacchaeus’ house

But if all you knew about Zacchaeus and his encounter with Jesus came from the song you would be missing a great deal

Because the account of Zacchaeus has a great deal to tell us about evangelism – especially when it comes to reaching out to the despised around us

Please open your Bible to Luke 19 and follow along as I read the account in its entirety [[Luke 19:1-10](#)]

He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. 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. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” 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.” And Jesus said to him, “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.”

As we begin our study of the passage let's first consider what kind of person Zacchaeus was and in so doing we will see that there is often more present than meets the eye when it comes to people

I. Zacchaeus – Contemptible and Curious

The first thing we are told about Zacchaeus in verse 2 [Luke 19:2] is that he was a "chief tax collector" and that he was "rich"

Tax collectors have never been the most popular of people and here we see that Zacchaeus was not only a tax collector he was a *chief* tax collector which may mean that he oversaw a number of regular tax collectors

But there was more to the hatred the Jews had for tax collectors than just a natural dislike for paying taxes

See, the tax collectors were employed by the Romans - the occupiers and oppressors of the Jews

And the Romans would assess the amount of the taxes and employ the tax collectors to bring it to them

But they didn't pay the tax collectors directly

They simply allowed the tax collectors to charge more than was actually levied and to keep the excess for themselves

Of course, with their penchant for keeping the peace, the Roman authorities kept a lid of sorts on just how much extra a tax collector could charge but as long as the grumbling of the people didn't get too loud, the tax collectors had a rather free hand to charge what they wished

This practice was known as "tax farming" and, as you can imagine, making the taxes as high as one could possibly get away with for the purpose of self-enrichment didn't make the tax collectors very popular with the common folk

In fact, we read in **Luke 3:12-13** that when a group of tax collectors came to John the Baptist and asked how they might be made right with God he told them to "*collect no more than you are authorized to do*"

Zacchaeus' position as chief tax collector may well have given him the opportunity to also demand tribute and bribes from his underlings and he has become very wealthy in an occupation where greed and corruption were just the way the game was played

The Jews hated their Roman oppressors and they hated the Jews who worked for the Romans just as much so, to them, Zacchaeus was a **contemptible** human being and he was **deservedly despised**

And he was a **curious** man as we see in verse 3 [Luke 19:3]

I want you to notice something that would be very easy to overlook – Zacchaeus didn't only want to lay eyes on Jesus

Our text says he wanted to "*see who Jesus was*"

Obviously, he had heard about Jesus prior to this encounter – he had likely heard how special Jesus was

And he wanted to see if he could discern what made Jesus different from everyone else

Maybe he had heard that Jesus had invited another tax collector, Matthew, to be one of his disciples and now Jesus was coming down the street and Zacchaeus was desperate to see for himself what Jesus was all about

I imagine the scene was sort of amusing as it unfolded

As powerful a man as Zacchaeus was, he was also a short man who couldn't see over the crowd in front of him

I imagine him trying to kind of push his way to the front only to have the people around him realize who it was who was trying to squeeze past and him getting shoved all the way to the back of the crowd

No one was going to give Zacchaeus a break and let him have a front-row position

He could have given up, become bitter at the situation, and taken it out on those who were blocking him at tax time

But Zacchaeus really wanted to see Jesus so he did the unexpected – our text tells us he ran ahead and climbed a tree

We aren't told how old Zacchaeus was at this time but I would bet that climbing trees was not one of his usual activities

When I was a boy, I loved to climb the maple tree that grew in our front yard

And when my daughters were old enough to climb I enjoyed teaching them how to do it safely

And I remember the time I surprised my youngest daughter who thought she could escape me by scurrying up the tree by climbing up after her and having her say later that she didn't think adults could climb trees

I would have to say my tree-climbing days are probably behind me unless I was really motivated

Older men and especially wealthy and powerful men don't usually climb trees like little boys but Zacchaeus wasn't concerned about preserving his dignity on this particular day

Zacchaeus was motivated enough that he didn't care if people thought him foolish so up the tree he went so that he might get a good look at Jesus to see who he was

If you were to look at Zacchaeus and his way of life I suspect you would conclude that he was beyond the reach of the gospel

We are surrounded by people just like Zacchaeus who seem to be entrenched in positions far removed from the cross

But here we see that the Holy Spirit was working in his heart – likely without Zacchaeus even being aware of it – and causing him to have an intense interest in discovering who this Jesus is and what it could mean to him

And we never know just who the Holy Spirit might be working on in our day so we can't give up on anyone no matter how unlikely their salvation appears to us

Jesus eventually made his way down the street until he was underneath the very tree that Zacchaeus was perched in so let's look next at what Jesus did

II. Jesus – Seeking Savior

First, we see in verse 5 [**Luke 19:5**] that Jesus knew Zacchaeus and that he called up to him by his name

Of course, we say, Jesus is God so of course he knew Zacchaeus' name and knew all about him

But can you imagine how Zacchaeus must have felt when Jesus not only saw him and acknowledged him but actually called him by his name?

The name, Zacchaeus, means "pure one" but, to this point in his life, Zacchaeus hadn't exactly lived up to his name

He was a tax collector, in fact, a chief tax collector, who willingly served the Roman authorities

He was a crook and a cheat who made himself wealthy at the expense of his fellow Jews

He was a public sinner in the eyes of his countrymen and, as a publican; he was barred from the synagogue and shunned by polite society forcing him to associate only with other tax collectors and sinners

How often Zacchaeus would have heard his name uttered with a hiss and it had probably been a very long time since Zacchaeus had heard his name spoken with kindness

And yet Jesus – an esteemed Jewish rabbi – spoke his name without contempt or disdain but with the offer of fellowship

We are reminded of **John 10:3** which tells us that the shepherd calls his sheep by name and leads them out

It likely startled Zacchaeus greatly to hear Jesus speak his name at all but then Jesus did the unthinkable – he invited himself to be Zacchaeus' guest in his home

Look again with me at verse 5 where we see the Lord's command [**Luke 19:5**] –

"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today"

That word, "stay" indicates that this was to be no short, perfunctory visit – the intent behind it is to abide for a while in a place

Jesus didn't desire to simply share a brief presentation of the gospel with Zacchaeus and then move along

Jesus wanted to spend time with Zacchaeus, to share a meal with him in his home, and to build a relationship with him

The only way to get beyond surface relationships and to build a real connection that can have significant impact is by spending time together and Jesus was willing to spend the necessary time with this deservedly despised sinner

I don't know about you but I was raised to believe that it is disrespectful and rude to just show up at someone's home without having been invited – it just isn't done – no polite individual would ever presume to invite themselves over

So Jesus' action here seems more than a little bit forward to me

But when we consider the reality of the situation before us we can understand why Jesus did what he did – and see that he wasn't being overly forward or rude

Because of his occupation and his way of life, Zacchaeus could never have invited Jesus to come to his home

No self-respecting Jew – and certainly no Jewish teacher or religious leader – would have ever consented to accept his invitation

To set foot in the home of someone like Zacchaeus would have been unthinkable and would have been considered even worse than entering the home of a Gentile

And visiting the home of a Gentile was against Jewish law as we see Peter state in **Acts 10:28** when God sent him to visit the home of Cornelius

So, because Zacchaeus could never have made the invitation and would have contented himself to simply look at Jesus from his perch in the tree, Jesus took the onus and invited himself so that the relationship could be pursued

Rather than being rude, there was nothing Jesus could have done that would have brought higher honor to Zacchaeus

By entering Zacchaeus' home and fellowshiping with him, Jesus broke all the rules and social customs of the Jews in his day

In fact, as we have already seen, he even broke the religious and moral laws of his people and he made himself ceremonially unclean and – according to Jewish law – unfit for worship

And it seems that Jesus didn't want to give Zacchaeus time to think about all of those ramifications because he issued his command with some urgency as he told him to "hurry" down

Because if he had time to think things through, Zacchaeus might well have balked and missed his opportunity to really get to know Jesus and find salvation

But Zacchaeus did as Jesus commanded and he scurried down from the tree and received Jesus joyfully much to the consternation of the people

And the crowd complained that Jesus had gone too far in going to the house of such a sinner as Zacchaeus

They grumbled against Jesus because he broke their laws

But Jesus only ignored the customs and laws of his people that were not a part of God's Law

Over the years, the Jewish religious leaders had built a hedge around God's Law by setting up a complicated set of rules and customs that were designed to foster, maintain, and protect moral purity

The intention behind those rules, or "laws," was honorable but they were of human and not divine origin

And while these "traditions of the elders" served to protect the people from corruption they also prevented them from being obedient to God's commands toward outsiders and sinners

In **Leviticus 19:33-34**, God commanded the Children of Israel to show kindness to strangers – that is to the Gentiles among them

And we see this command concerning dealing with outsiders restated for the church in **Hebrews 13:2**

And we know how often God's Word commands us to show mercy and kindness to sinners, the poor, and the needy whom we encounter

There have always been people who are regarded as outcasts in every society but when we set up rules and regulations that keep us separated from those who we despise we prevent ourselves from fulfilling our duty

So, let's take a look at what we can learn from Jesus' example as we seek to evangelize the way he did

III. Lessons for Us

First, we must make the effort to enter into fellowship and build relationships with the unsaved

Jesus didn't sequester himself away from sinners or stand back and preach condemning sermons at them

Jesus entered into the lives of those who needed to be saved

He entered their homes; he sat down to eat with them; he invited them to the homes of his friends and disciples

Jesus welcomed the religious outcasts and they, in turn, welcomed him

It's interesting that the crowd around Jesus grumbled against him being the guest of a sinner as if Jesus could have been the guest of anyone but a sinner during his time on earth because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

Second, if we are going to enter into relationships with the unsaved we will likely have to take the initiative

If Jesus was going to have any possibility of a relationship with Zacchaeus he was going to have to make the first move

Likewise, we should be willing to take the first step in getting to know the people around us

I still remember being invited to a neighbor's home where I could be introduced to Jesus – I wasn't looking for him but he was looking for me and through the actions of that neighbor we were able to connect

Third, when we interact with the unsaved we must treat the unsaved with dignity and honor

Jesus didn't disparage Zacchaeus or call him out for his wrongdoing

He didn't make him clean up his act before he treated him with respect and kindness – he started there

People today are so used to Christians chastising them for their sins they have developed thick skins to protect them from the slings and arrows of our accusations and belittlements

But, how can we show honor to those who are dishonorable and give dignity to the despised?

It helps if we recognize how Jesus has shown each of us respect and honor when we don't deserve it

Also, it helps if, as we get to know each person and seek to discover how they reflect the image of God

If you had asked the people of Jericho to name the most hated person in town; they likely would have said, "Zacchaeus"

And if you asked them to name the person least likely to accept Jesus their answer may well have been the same

Zacchaeus was a greedy, corrupt, conniving, grasping little man but even in his heart there was a spot that wanted to know about Jesus – who he was and what he was all about

Every person on earth has an empty spot that only Jesus can fill

Perhaps that spot will be buried under all kinds of garbage that will take time and effort to move out of the way

But, we might well help them uncover it if we persist in building a relationship of respect and trust

Too often, we assume that our posture toward the unsaved – especially those like Zacchaeus who are openly evil people – should be to despise them for their sin and keep ourselves separate from them

And the apostle Paul does warn Christians against conforming to the world so we must be conscious of our tendency to take on the characteristics of those we associate with

But, that danger doesn't relieve us from getting involved with the unsaved as Jesus was

In verse 10 of our passage [Luke 19:10], Jesus plainly states his reason for coming into the world when he said:

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"

I seriously doubt that if Jesus were on the earth today we would find him hanging around the church with believers

Rather I believe he would still be found among the lost and the deservedly despised seeking to make friends from enemies

That's where he was 2,000 years ago so why would we assume he would be anywhere else today?

Clearly, salvation came to the house of Zacchaeus and he became a true son of Abraham because Jesus ignored cultural norms and treated Zacchaeus with respect and dignity as he took the initiative to build a relationship with him

And Zacchaeus' salvation was demonstrated by a changed heart that led to a profound change in behavior

And as the Body of Christ in this time and place, I believe we should be doing the same as Jesus did on this day with those who we might be tempted to despise

Conclusion

It has become prevalent in Christian circles to be overly combative with those with whom we disagree

We have the tendency to want to emulate Jesus with the lash in his hand driving the money changers out of the temple and we forget that he spent more time with a knife, fork, and cup in his hand fellowshiping with sinners

So we tend to err on the side of displaying more hostility than we do hospitality toward those we despise

Hostility is easy – all it requires is someone or something that we feel threatens us in any way whether it be someone's behavior or beliefs – but hospitality takes work

As we prepare to partake of the Lord's Table I am struck once again by the juxtaposition of this particular passage with the church calendar

When I laid out my preaching calendar I had no idea this sermon would fall on a Communion Sunday – the fact that it did is God's doing

Jesus went to the home of Zacchaeus and had table fellowship with him and he invites us today to come to his table for to enjoy fellowship with him as we remember what he has done and all he has promised to do for us

And we can't help but wonder at the fact that Jesus is still eager to sit down with sinners and be their friend

Let me encourage you to think about that as the worship team comes to lead us in our final hymn to consider who Jesus might want you to reach out to as you prepare yourself to partake of the elements of the Lord's Table

Let's pray