

**Intro:** There are few situations in American culture that are as infuriating as corruption among people who have power—especially when it is at the expense of people who are powerless. I think particularly when it involves political corruption.

- **Stories of the Bernie Madoff's of the world**—what an irony that that is his last name. This guy made off with millions of dollars in an intricate ponzy scheme—money that his victims will mostly never see again. All to furnish a lavish lifestyle at the expense of trusting clients.
- **When we turn on the news daily and see all the political horse-trading**, the smaltzy politician making backroom deals—or passing laws like legal insider trading for the political class—activities that would land any one of us in prison. There is a moral frustration over it.

**Today we're taking a look at a story that has become a defining moment in the Gospel of Luke.**

**It's a story about a corrupt official who experiences a radical conversion.** It's a simple and short story of a man who becomes the poster boy for all who would believe and repent of their exploitation of the poor and powerless and follow Christ.

**Transition:** Last week, Eli did a fantastic job framing this idea of child-like faith.

- **Luke tells us about a wealth young synagogue official** who comes to Jesus with a sin-sick heart. He's followed all that religion would prescribe for him—but his heart is still empty—he knows something is not right. Eli pointed out that Jesus first offered him status quo theology which was a test of responsiveness. “Go follow the commandments.” This is the answer he would have heard from every other run-of-the mill rabbi. But the man has a sickness heart that no amount of religion can cure—he is an idolater. The one thing he lacked was his unwillingness to vanquish the false god of materialism—and to become like a child. Obedient and receptive in heart.
- This story is followed up by Jesus' teaching on the need for us to come to him as children.
  - They come unassuming.
  - They come believing—**belief is their default mode**—they come wide-eyed and full of wonder—not with world-weary souls poisoned by the fumes of cynicism.
  - They come with knee-jerk faith—and now the story of Zacchaeus will contrast for us the response of the religious synagogue ruler—wealthy and blessed and religious—but lost as a man could be in empty religion. A man who left Jesus saddened by the demand of discipleship that Jesus put in his life. And this corrupt official, Zacchaeus will show us the way.

Let's read the story

**Scripture: Luke 19:1-10**

**Let's sort through the story and crystalize some of its timeless principles of discipleship...**

## **1. A corrupt official (19:1-2).**

(v.1) *“Jesus was passing through Jericho.”* This of course is the historical city where the OT Jesus “Joshua” had conquered the city by an act of faith—a holy earthquake shaking the walls off their foundations and causing them to crumble down the hill. And Now God’s holy Messiah—yehoshua from Nazareth passes through on his way to Jerusalem.

**Jericho was one of three centers where taxes were collected in Roman Palestine.**

- Capernaum the fishing town. It’s the Salmon, ID of ancient Rome.
- Jerusalem the fiery and revolt prone capital city to the south.
- Jericho...

**Jericho is the city where the wealthy lived or retreated in the winter because of its tropical climate, Herod’s winter palace was there**—it was rich in palm trees and balsam groves—the homes were expansive Jewish villas—quite the contrast from backwater Galilee and the maritime culture of Caesarea by the sea, or the rural agrarian society of Nazareth.

(v.2) *“And see, there was a man by the name of Zacchaeus who was a high-ranking tax agent and was a wealthy resident of the city.”*

**Zacchaeus is a king pin in this Jewish tax cartel.** He’s the “boss” of a corrupt engine of the Herodian economy which collects taxes for their client state—Rome. He has an army of tax agents who, after they collect from the surrounding territories—they pay Zach his commission—which has led to riches. He’s also a Jew. **His name is a Hebrew word that means, “Clean. Pure. Untainted by corruption.”** What an irony.

In Jesus’ world, the word *tax collector* was synonymous with the word “sinner.” Chief tax collectors were particularly abhorrent because they were people who already had enough wealth to purchase a tax business and be awarded these contracts to serve Rome. Local governors or Kings were charged with putting the squeeze on the common people—but they farmed this task out to local chiefs who were considered soul-less traitors. Jewish men in collaboration with the wicked and evil occupying force of Rome. It was good work if you could get it, so long as you didn’t mind being anathema.

So this head of the lucrative tax cartel in Israel hears that the miracle man, Yeshua from Galilee will be touring his area. And this sets off a kind of flash mob—an impromptu parade in Jesus’ honor.

## 2. A longing heart (19:3).

(v.3) *“And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but because of he was short, he couldn’t see over the crowd.”*

The news, the rumors the word on the street about Jesus is that he has performed mind-boggling miracles and was walking around teaching things that had never really been heard in Israel before—and the flash mob crowd that has now lined the street to see this famous faith healer—Zacchaeus is intrigued by the stories. And his heart is awakened by the possibility that he may meet a very important figure in Israel.

*Scripture says, “He was seeking to see who Jesus was...”* And this notion of seeking God has a rich OT history.

**Theology of Seeking: Dt. 4:29** *“But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.”*

**2 Chron. 7:14** *“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”*

**Acts 17:27** And Paul told the Philosophers at Mars Hill that *“God has made from one man every nation and every tribe and sovereignly determined the places they would settle, determined the boundaries for their nations, so that men would seek God, fumbling and scratching for truth in the darkness—so that Christ might be found by them.*

**And that’s the heart of the seeker.** Scrabbling, fumbling in the darkness—blundering our way to the truth because God has awakened in us a curiosity about Himself—an interest in more of Jesus—a heart that doesn’t know the answers, doesn’t even really understand the problem—but that lurches in the direction of a loving, gracious God who reveals Christ one particle of light at a time.

God has first sought us out. God is the one coming through our town, making inroads into our lives with the truth—through agents of truth—through followers who are carriers and emissaries of the truth—and God is looking for the seeking heart. God is looking for those who seek to find out who Jesus is. Responding to the light they have.

He was just trying to get a better view to find out what all the fuss was about.

(v.3b-4) *“And so he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Jesus as he was about to pass by.”* His handicap forces him to compensate. To improvise. To find a creative solution so that when the Master passes through town—he isn’t stuck looking at the backs of his pious neighbors.

**So Zacchaeus, the one improvised in soul. Bankrupt in character. Shot through with corruption and far from God,** Scaled a small gnarly sycamore tree—and perched there he waited.

And I can imagine the look of wonder, anticipation, excitement on his face. It was the face of child about to open a present on Christmas morning. Eyes of anticipation fueled by a child-like and curious little heart.

### **3. An encounter with Jesus (19:5-6).**

*(v.5) “And when Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay in your house today.”<sup>6</sup> So Zacchaeus scrambled down the tree and joyfully escorts Jesus to his home.”*

Now the wonder that is plastered on his face—can you see it? Jesus comes right by the tree where he is perched, the Master is surrounded by wealthy well-wishers, the crowd is suffocating and pressing in on the celebrity rabbi from Nazareth—and Jesus stops the parade. He looks up and locks eyes with this publican—this turncoat tax collector who has sold his Jewish birthright for the pap and pulp of wealth. And to Zacchaeus’ astonishment—the Master calls out to him by name.

It turns out that the heart that seeks has already, mysteriously been awakened by God’s Spirit who draws us like gravity—pulling our desires our thoughts into his orbit. Men and women roused by his awesome presence begin to seek more than what they’ve got. Begin to understand their estrangement from a holy God—begin to stammer and articulate their need start to stumble blundering in Jesus’ direction.

Revival comes to this house. And the pious are bent out of shape.

*(v.7) “And when the crowd saw this, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the houseguest of a notorious sinner.”* This of course is always the response of the sanctimonious, self-righteous. They cannot rejoice with the angels over one Son of Adam who has come home. They bellyache and stew and clinch their jaw and wonder why that rotten sinner is getting all the attention.

To their shock, Jesus and the Disciples follow this little elfin Jew. His short legs beating a path to his home to prepare and recline with the Master as his honored guest. I can see him talking Jesus’ ear off all the way, just excited and nervous. According to Palestinian custom, Jesus and his followers would spend the night there. Dinner was usually an all night event. And table fellowship was a social act of acceptance.

**Now remember:** The rich synagogue administrator (from last week) left Jesus sad, empty, clutching to his religion, his stuff and his autonomy his independence from the master.

**In contrast—the little man? At some point in the evening, he is so compelled and stands and makes his declaration.**

*(v.8) “And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Observe Lord, I am giving half of my estate to the poor, and whatever I’ve received from defrauding people will pay back four times as much.”* Well what happened then, in whoville they say—that Zachaeus’ heart grew three sizes that day.

The little boss from Jericho receives Jesus in joy, no pretense of self-righteousness, abandoning ill-gotten gain in decisive act of repentance and faith. The heart of faith propels us to action. Repentance is the flower of a heart that has sent out deep roots of faith.

And today, salvation has come to this house.

Today, a Son of Adam, a lost child of Abraham, is now a child of God. A son of righteousness. Who seeks first the Kingdom of God and the righteousness of that Kingdom—a simple childlike, faith in the Messiah.

He believes “that.” As far he knows—Jesus is the King. Forgiveness of sin is His to give and bestow on the repentant.

And his faith is made visible in repentance. The otherwise undetectable change of heart is now made manifest in practical acts of repentance. His change of heart is evidenced by his change in direction.

**Takeaway:**

**1. Our mission is also to seek and save the lost.** I don't have any idea what is really going on in the hearts and minds of people out there. I don't know how many desperate people are just reaching out for God the only way they know how. However God is working to draw all men to himself—I just know that it's our job to give them Jesus. To welcome them in. To let the belong before they believe.

God mysteriously draws all men—and we follow Jesus—to Jericho, to Idaho Falls, to the world—seeking and saving men and women who are lost and adrift.

**2. We must be careful not to write anyone off.** For Zach's fellow citizens, he was too far gone. If we had lived there we would have written him off just the same. He had forfeited paradise with the saints by being the instrument of Roman oppression of his Jewish countrymen. A remorseless traitor. Growing wealthy on the backs of God's people—this reviled little pimp.

Until one day he hears an astonishing tale of a miracle man who sets hearts free.

Until the day he meets Jesus the friend of sinners and the enemy of stuffy religion.

And his life is transformed.

And in the same way you and I cannot give up on anyone. No matter how far gone they are. No matter how hard their hearts appear to be. We won't write them off. We won't give up praying until they're gone. And we relentlessly pursue the objects of God's infinite concern and grace.