

## Luke 19:1-10 Making Time for Jesus

### Introduction

In our lives there are some special opportunities that may only come our way once or possibly twice and need to be grasped. Maybe you can think just now of a special time in your own lives that will be with you the rest of your days. Sadly there can equally be difficult memories as well, but today I want us to focus on taking hold of the most important opportunity that may come our way. All of us make our choices, sometimes clearly, on other occasions with a significant degree of uncertainty about the decision we have made. At this time of year thousands of young people are starting their chosen university courses hoping that the decisions they made last year or possibly only a few weeks ago in clearing will prove to be the best available to them. In our friendships and relationships there has to be a big leap of faith and trust in another person that we may not know too well, which we hope will be vindicated in due course. However, there is another choice that I believe is the biggest call we have to make in the course of our earthly lives and that concerns our relationship with God. Maybe this is your first time in church today; or for a while and God has not been central in your thinking? Your presence here is not an accident. God has a purpose and plan for your life even if you are not aware of it! However, let us for a short time step back 2,000 years to an encounter in the prosperous community of Jericho.

### 1. Time to explore the teaching of Jesus (Luke 19:1).

The streets were crowded because a well-known rabbi was visiting Jericho and the people had turned out to see and hear him. This would be the last time Jesus visited that place before His crucifixion and death. No-one present would have guessed that this would have been the case. Jesus was a healthy young man in his early thirties. We may think that we have decades still to live –which may turn out to be the case-, but there are no guarantees about tomorrow. I have spoken to lots of people over the years who are interested in Jesus and who claim that at some point in the future they will put their faith and trust in Him, but not now! Who knows whether that day will ever come? I suspect that for most, if not all of us, we have had aspirations of doing a whole variety of things, but because we didn't set aside the time or the money or...? nothing happened! Luke in his gospel chooses not to focus on the crowds that had gathered that day. Instead he draws attention to one local person whose life was to be transformed by Jesus. Luke 19:1 tells us: *Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.* God does not owe us a guaranteed 60, 70, 80 or 90 or even 100 years of life. Life itself is a gift that we have once to live for an uncertain period of time. The question can be asked how grateful are we to our creator for this precious gift? Have you ever stopped to think why God created you? Or what the purpose is of life here on earth? I am thankful that after decades of decline it appears that church attendance figures over the last few years in the UK have begun to edge up again, although there is an awful long way to go [some figures given in the *Baptist Times*, 17.9.10] It suggests that a small increase (of several tens of thousands) of additional people are seeking to find out about the Christian faith or have already come to the place of trusting Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Maybe you are here today and this description would

be true of you? In the Bible, in the book of Isaiah it says these words: *Seek the Lord while you can find Him. Call on Him while He is near* (Isaiah 55:6). Do you need to take that step today? I want to give that opportunity to you. No-one has unlimited opportunities each of us is responsible for taking the ones provided to us.

## **2. Time to respond to the teaching of Jesus** (Luke 19:2-6)

(a) **Seeking Jesus** (19:2-4) *A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.<sup>3</sup> He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd.<sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.* Luke focuses his account around one notorious local individual Zacchaeus. He was the wealthiest man in the city and one of a handful of seriously rich private citizens in Israel. How did he get so wealthy? Zacchaeus had won the franchise for collecting taxes on behalf of the Romans in the most densely populated and prosperous part of the country. There were three tax franchises and he had landed on his feet. The system worked this way: The Romans put the contracts for tax collection out to tender. The bidder who offered the highest amount usually got the contract. On top of the fee for the occupying forces of Rome the tax collectors were allowed to charge an additional sum to cover their expenses in operating the tax system. Here was where the abuse could set in as there was no set rate for these charges. Most tax collectors were raking in much more than they were entitled to take in and had become seriously rich at the expense of their neighbours and fellow citizens. As a result they tended to be loathed by the average citizen and their lives in serious risk from freedom fighters who resisted the occupying army of Rome. Almost certainly Jesus would have spent many hours in Jericho, but Luke provides a very short summary of Jesus' encounter with this most unlikely convert. *A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.<sup>3</sup> He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd.<sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.* This man did not want people to notice that he was interested in Jesus and his message. He did not hide up in a tree because he was very small –though this was possibly a partial consideration. He was there to hide behind the foliage to find out more without other people seeing what he was doing. Maybe that has been true of you? Interested in Jesus, maybe even impressed by the lives of one or two Christians you know well; you want to know more about Him and what it means to follow Jesus? Zacchaeus's plan is working well until Jesus stops at the foot of that very tree and then draws the crowd's attention to the occupant of the tree. Suddenly from being satisfied with his plans this man became very vulnerable. Jesus could have made a harsh comment about it being the appropriate place for such a person –out of sight out of mind! He could have asked the crowd how they viewed the collaborator with the enemies of their nation? To have followed that path might have led to Zacchaeus remaining attached to the tree but with a rope around his neck –as still happens in a good number of countries around the world today to perceived collaborators with declared enemies of particular states or terrorist organisations. It is important to note that Jesus had not given up on him. He didn't focus on the many flaws in this man's life or his past failures. Instead He saw what this man could become in the future –if only God had control of His life. This is how God views you and me. He sees the potential we possess to be the men and women He created us to be,

through the enabling power of His Holy Spirit. As a Christian here this morning will we try and see other people as Jesus does? It is not always easy; in fact it is sometimes impossible in our own strength when the person before us has fallen so far short of the life God desires to lead. However, no-one is beyond the reach of the grace of God. Praise God for that!

(b) **Receiving Jesus** (Luke 19:5-6) *When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.<sup>6</sup> So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.* Zacchaeus was a man who had a controlling instinct. He had to know what was going on in some detail before he would commit to anything. I picture him as a nervous man as well. There were Zealots who lived near Jericho, and who was a more inviting target than him! Yet God had plans for this selfish man's life. I believe that the purpose of this visit to that city on that day was to meet with this one man! Luke records: *when Jesus reached **the spot...*** there is no luck or chance with God. It was not an accidental encounter. It was not like the story told in a newspaper [cannot remember which one] last week of a man with serious debts pleading with God to let him win the lottery and then he would be very generous with the money left over once his debts were paid. The first week came and went and he was disappointed so he asked again; the second week he was even more frustrated as he had no success. After a third week of failure he apparently vented his anger on God for letting him down. However, in this remarkable story it was reported that when he finally closed his mouth he heard a voice from the sky saying: come on give me a fair chance – you didn't even buy a ticket! Christians believe in a God who is sovereign in His world. There are lots of things we may never understand but will trust Him to take care of us. What were Jesus' words to this man? He could truthfully have torn a strip of him; recited a lengthy list of his shortcomings or even told the crowd who it was up the tree and embarrassed him. However, Jesus didn't take that option. He told him that He was needed to come down quickly from the tree and go home and get ready for dinner because Jesus was coming to spend the evening at his home. No-one in the crowd would have seen that coming. Jesus treated Zacchaeus with dignity and respect even if his diner host had rarely done that with any of his clients. To be a guest in a Middle Eastern home meant far more than a social time in a person's home today. It was then a public statement of friendship and the guest was regarded for the duration of their stay as a member of that family. Jesus who was perfect identified with a rogue collaborator and spent the evening having dinner with him and his family. Instead of absolute humiliation Zacchaeus cannot believe his good fortune. He walked home with a spring in his step. A man who had no friends outside of his employees, as a collaborator with Rome, was going to receive the most popular man in town for an evening meal.

The coming down out of the tree was the easy bit. What would they talk about over dinner? The tax-collectors would normally have boasted how much they had extorted from people. This was not a good line of conversation with a man of God who could hardly have been expected to approve of such actions. What could I talk about with Jesus? Maybe you've had a meal with a number of guests and the conversation was either a bit tricky or the silences were embarrassing? There was a huge potential for that to happen on this occasion –at least in theory.

### **3. Time to apply the teaching of Jesus in his life** (Luke 19:7-10)

(a) **The Reaction of the Crowd** (Luke 15:7)<sup>7</sup>*All the people saw this and began to mutter, He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'.* If Jesus had been on the verge of seeking re-election to the local council or the Sanhedrin (Jewish ruling council) in Jerusalem then His chances would have taken a massive hit! I suspect no-one in the crowd was happy with His course of action. What about you and me? Do we regard some people as beyond the pale? Their lives unreachable by God; maybe you even thought of yourself that way, that something you have done in the past is too bad to be forgiveable by God? Let me tell you the faith we profess as Christians is based on the undeserved kindness (grace) of God. None of us are good enough to earn salvation. God through Jesus offers His love and mercy to the undeserving, made possible to us through the amazing sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. If you have never trusted Jesus can I ask you this morning to ask yourself this question: what reason (not excuse!) is there for not committing my life to Jesus today?

### (b) **The Transformation of Zacchaeus** (Luke 15:8-10)

<sup>8</sup>*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.* <sup>9</sup>*Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.*<sup>10</sup> *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost* (Luke 19:7-10). He called Jesus **Lord**, a declaration of faith in Jesus. Would it just be words to make the rest of the evening go well by telling Jesus what He wanted to hear –even if he never had any intention of following Him? As a minister over the years I have heard many unsolicited comments in people's homes about coming to church. I suspect if all those that said they would come had showed up then our large premises (in my previous church) would have needed to be extended like those in this church as a result on steadily increasing attendances. In the book of James in the New Testament- a letter written to explain that genuine faith reveals practical lifestyle applications- there are these blunt words: *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead* (James 2:26). How do we know that Zacchaeus' conversion was genuine? Read verse eight: *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.* Leviticus 6:5, in the Old Testament stated: *He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner...* This man is serious about correcting his past mistakes, to the extent that he may no longer be rich at all by the time he has finished but something else is much more important than his bank balance. He chose to give away fifty percent of his wealth to the poor for starters –a free gift. Then instead of the return of the extorted sum plus 20% by way of compensation –he gives four times the original sum as compensation. It appears to suggest that he has kept good records and knows to whom he owe money and can pay it back. What if Jesus had no bothered to cross the road and speak to this man? Is there any likelihood that he would have come to such a transformation on his own? I seriously doubt it. Who knows what can happen when followers of Jesus today attempt to do what He did and offer the hand of friendship and see where it leads? Who knows how many people when they get to know a genuine and sincere Christian will want (in time) to come to know Jesus for themselves? Maybe you are here as a guest of someone in this church – are you ready to commit your life to Christ or want to find out more? I want to give you an opportunity to take that step as we close in prayer Amen.