“Jesus and Zacchaeus,” Luke 19:1-10 (Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024)

He entered Jericho and was passing through. **2**And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. **3**And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. **4**So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. **5**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.” **6**So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. **7**And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” **8**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.” **9**And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. **10**For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

PRAY

What I hope to do this morning as we study what is probably a familiar passage to a lot of you is to show you how one becomes a Christian. If you’re here this Easter Sunday morning and you ***know*** you’re not a follower of Jesus Christ, or, perhaps more likely, if you’re here this morning and you’re not sure you’re a Christian, you think you might be but aren’t certain, ***this sermon is specifically for you.*** And if you’re here and you are a Christian, you understand the gospel and you’ve been following Jesus for three weeks or years or decades, I trust you’ll get something out of this sermon as well.

How does someone become a Christian? Three things must happen: you must climb a tree, you must get over the crowd, and you must welcome Jesus home. Full disclosure: about ten years ago I heard Tim Keller preach on this text and the outline I just gave you is almost exactly how he outlined his sermon. And over those ten years I’ve listened to that sermon many times, and thought I’ve tried to come up with a better way to frame this passage I couldn’t. So, credit where credit is due: the outline is Tim Keller’s, but the rest of the sermon is from me.

First, to become a Christian you must climb a tree. We read that Jesus is passing through the city of Jericho. By this point in Jesus’ ministry, he’s become famous and he’s drawing these massive crowds. You can imagine them forming on either side of main street, crowding the sidewalks, as Jesus and his closest disciples walk through.

A prominent man of Jericho named Zacchaeus wants to see him. But Zacchaeus has a problem: he’s short. This is the only time in the Bible a person is described as “small in stature.” He can’t see Jesus. So, Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore fig tree (it’s an easy tree to climb, because the branches form off the trunk close to the ground) to get a glimpse of this famous teacher.

But when Zacchaeus climbed that tree, he immediately opened himself up to ridicule because important men do not climb trees. It wasn’t dignified then, nor is it today. If a parade marched through downtown Jackson, Mississippi, and the Governor wanted to get a better view of it, and he climbed a tree, and someone filmed him on their phone, just imagine how quickly that video would go viral. Everyone would mock him, and I wouldn’t be surprised if Stephen Colbert or Jimmy Kimmel devoted a segment to it on their talk shows.

If you are going to be a Christian, you must climb a tree and by that I mean you have to risk the ridicule of others. In some circles, when they find out you are a Christian, they’ll say things like, “You mean … you believe … in angels and demons and miracles and all that stuff?” They’ll say things like, “Oh, you seemed so smart, not at all like the kind of person who would go for those superstitions.” They’ll think your IQ suddenly dropped 30 points.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy meets the Scarecrow, and he explains that he doesn’t have a brain, she asks him, “What would you do with a brain if you had one?” That’s the question a lot of people will want to ask you when they hear you’ve become a Christian.

But that just comes with the territory as a follower of Jesus, who after all said, “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.” Luke 9:26.

But if you climb this tree ***in Oxford*** then you’ll probably more often find that instead of people openly mocking you for your faith they’ll treat you with contempt.

We are still in the Bible belt, so most would feel uncomfortable publicly ridiculing another person for their Christian faith. But in Matthew 10, Jesus tells his disciples that they will be ***hated*** for his name’s sake. There are two ways to hate: open, hot hostility, or cool, cruel contempt (which means to scorn others and treat them as if they are worthless).

The second is a far more common reaction in Oxford when non-Christians or cultural Christians (people who say they follow Jesus but they don’t, it’s just for show) encounter the real thing.

A true follower of Jesus Christ will be different from everyone else, especially in middle and high school. You’ll try and be kinder, more thoughtful, more respectful of teachers and parents, quick to forgive, and you won’t participate is some of the things other kids do. Perhaps a few of your classmates admire you, but for the most part you’ll be left out of the cool crowd and you’ll get teased for being the “good, Christian kid,” even by some kids who also go to church.

It even happens to adults who really follow Jesus, too. If that’s you, then your friends will notice that you don’t spend your money the way they do, that you have different priorities for your life, and that you don’t laugh at the same jokes. They’ll notice that church attendance is important to you and your family, so you just don’t do certain things on Sundays, and that you do not let your kids do everything their kids do. And when they see this, they won’t like it. They’ll take offense. They may never say anything to your face about it, but behind your back …. And you’ll find you’re no longer invited to be a part of certain friend groups, certain Grove spots, certain parties, and certain hunting camps are now off-limits to you.

But, again, that just comes with the territory. If you’re going to be a Christian, you must climb a tree. You’ve got to open yourself up to the possibility of ridicule and contempt.

Second, if you’re going to be a Christian, you must get over the crowd. We read in verse 3 that Zacchaeus couldn’t see Jesus, couldn’t get close to him, because of the crowd. Maybe all Luke meant was that Zacchaeus physically couldn’t see over the people because he was short. But it’s also possible Luke means that when Zacchaeus tried to push his way to the front where he could see, the crowd wouldn’t let him. They despised Zacchaeus because he was a tax collector.

I’ve heard that people who work for the Internal Revenue Service sometimes tell people only that they work for the government. They know how many people dislike the IRS.

But that’s nothing compared to how unpopular tax collectors were in Jesus’ day. They were Jewish men employed by the Roman government to collect taxes from other Jews to support the Roman occupying army. They were told by Rome, “Collect this much tax, and then a little extra to keep for yourself as wages.” But that’s not how it worked in practice. The collectors would arbitrarily tax the people, with the help of Roman soldiers would collect significantly more than was required, and keep a massive profit for themselves. Zacchaeus, since he was a “chief” tax collector and thus was over a region of the country or perhaps the entire nation, would have cheated many people out of their money and that was how he become so wealthy.

And the people of Jericho hated him for it. We read in verse 7 that the people “grumble” about him and call him a “sinner.”

At that point Zacchaeus could have said, “You know, these people who are close to Jesus, much closer to Jesus than I am, are nothing but a bunch of hypocrites. Who are they to judge me? I’m sure they’ve done plenty of bad things, too. If those are the kinds of people Jesus attracts, then I want nothing to do with him.”

I hate to say this, I don’t want to say it, but you need to hear a pastor say it: a lot of people who claim to be Christians are hypocrites, they are self-righteous, and they are judgmental. A lot of people use the Christian faith to feel superior to other people. Some of the most mean-spirited people you’ll ever meet call themselves Christians.

Now why is that? Why does it seem that Christianity has produced so many terrible people? ***I think it’s because those people have either forgotten or they never understood in the first place how unique Christianity is.***  This may sound like special pleading to you, but I think it’s true.

All the other religions of the world say, “If you’re good enough, if you work hard enough and do your good deeds and worship the way you’re supposed to, then God will accept you. Because then you can be sure you’re a good person.”

But if you think the point of religion is to be a good person, then you will necessarily think you’re better than the people who aren’t doing what you’re doing, and that leads to the spiritual pride. That leads to judgmentalism. That leads to looking down your nose at other people. That also leads to hypocrisy, because you feel like you’ve got to keep up appearances even when you know you’re not doing what you should be doing.

By the way, this is true with more than just religion. If you think money is the most important thing in the world, you’ll look down your nose at those who have less that you. If you think it’s being athletic or being educated, you’ll look down your nose who aren’t. If it’s having a strong work ethic or the right politics, you’ll feel superior to those who don’t.

But Christians who do this forget that Christianity is unique: it’s one of a kind, there’s nothing else like it out there, because the message of Christianity is that no one will ever be good enough for God. No matter how hard you try you will fall short his standard. The Bible says that even your good deeds are only so many filthy rags in God’s sight.

But Christianity also says you don’t have to perfect because God was perfect in Jesus Christ. God became a man in Jesus and lived a perfect life, the life we should have lived but didn’t. Then, on the cross, he died the death we deserved to pay the penalty we owe for our failures. Then, as we are celebrating this morning, God raised Jesus from the dead, vindicating his life, proving that Jesus didn’t die for his sins but for ours. And one day, God promises, if we trust that Jesus is our substitute, that he did those things for us, we will be raised from the dead, too.

When you believe that gospel, that good news, ***you cannot in the same moment be self-righteous or judgmental.***  It’s impossible to be humbled by what God in Jesus Christ has done for you ***and simultaneously*** be full of hypocrisy or look down your nose at others.

C.S. Lewis, in his wonderful book *Mere Christianity,* has a chapter called “Is Christianity Hard or Easy?” He argues that most people think Christianity is hard for the wrong reasons, because they make the mistake of thinking Christianity is like every other religion. They think it’s hard because you have to obey God’s law and give your money away and go to church and say your prayers and do good deeds, and few people have the willpower for all that.

***But that is not why Christianity is hard.*** It’s hard because Jesus ***calls you to die***. He calls you to give your life to him, both the parts you think that are ***bad*** and the parts that you think are ***good***, he calls you to die to yourself and your desires and live the life he gives you. Jesus is not in the business of taking people who used to be mean and making them nice; he’s in the business of taking sinners and transforming them into something completely different, what the apostle Paul calls “new creation.”

You say, “What in the world does that mean?” and my response is, “Keep coming back to Grace Bible. We’ll get there.” It’s not something you can understand in one week, or one month, or one year. Instead, it’s something you spend your entire life figuring out. At least, that’s how it’s been for me. But keep coming back. Keep coming to church (if not this one, then another one in town that teaches the Bible) and figure out what Jesus means when he says, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies.”

In the meantime, don’t let the crowd keep you from Jesus. The only people Jesus ever gets angry at in the Bible are the religious leaders: the self-righteous, the judgmental, the hypocrites. Why would you let the very people Jesus condemned keep you from seeing who Jesus really is?

Plus, if you say, “I don’t go to church because it’s full of hypocrites,” don’t you realize that in saying that you’re admitting your own hypocrisy? ***Is church the only place you refuse to go because of hypocrites?*** Do you say, “I’m not going to another sporting event at Ole Miss because that stadium is full of hypocrites”? Do you say, “I’m not going to live in that neighborhood anymore or eat at that restaurant because it’s full of hypocrites”? Probably not.

Hypocrites and judgmental people are everywhere. Get over the crowd and see the real Jesus, who through his life, death, and resurrection has done so much for you.

Third, and finally, to be a Christian you have to welcome Jesus home. Zacchaeus is up in his sycamore tree, presumably there just to see Jesus, not talk to him.

Yet when you climb a tree and when you get over the crowd, you’ll find that you don’t need to look for Jesus. ***Jesus will come looking for you.*** In verse 5 we read that when Jesus came to where Zacchaeus was, without Zacchaeus saying anything, Jesus “looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.’”

I don’t think any Christian out there feels like they went on this spiritual journey to find Jesus and, after years of searching, they finally pinned him down and found him and figured out the gospel all by themselves.

Instead, what everyone I’ve ever asked has told me is something like this: “Now that I am a Christian, I can see that Jesus was after me all along. He was chasing me, not the other way around. I would have never found Jesus, I would have remained lost, if Jesus didn’t look for me first.” That’s Jesus tells us in verse 10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Why does that matter? Three reasons. *First, you don’t have to prove yourself to Jesus before he will accept you.* How does the story go? Does Zacchaeus run up to Jesus and say, “If I give half my possessions away and stop cheating people, will you come to my house?” and then Jesus says, “Sure”? No, Jesus looks up at Zacchaeus and, before Zacchaeus can speak, says, “Zacchaeus, come down, for I’m staying in your house today.” You’ve heard of people inviting Jesus into their hearts? Well, here we have Jesus inviting himself into Zacchaeus’ heart.

Twice in our passage Jesus says, “Today” to Zacchaeus. You don’t have to clean yourself up first and then Jesus will accept you. There’s no probationary period in Christianity. You don’t have to go to church for six months before you possibly become a Christian. Friends, I don’t care you’ve been living like the devil’s first sergeant: Jesus will accept you ***today.***

*Second, once you go to Jesus, you lose control.* Too many people treat Christianity as if it’s something they control. They say, “I’m a Christian,” but what they mean by that is when they need a little spiritual uplift they’ll go to church. If they’re coming out of a hard time in their life, they might get baptized. If you have another bad stretch a few years later, they might get baptized again. ***But it’s up to them.*** They call the shots. They treat Jesus like a therapist or a masseuse. When you need him, you call him, but otherwise you do your own thing.

***But when you meet the real Jesus, you find he’s in control.***  Jesus doesn’t wait for an invitation. He tells Zacchaeus, “I’m staying at your house today.” And by that Jesus doesn’t mean he’s just stopping by for a cup of coffee. When in verse 7 the people mutter how Jesus is going to be a “guest” of Zacchaeus, the word literally means “lodge.” Jesus wasn’t coming for a visit; he was coming to live with Zacchaeus for some period of time.

When you meet Jesus, he comes to live with you. In that sense, becoming a Christian is a lot like getting married. Getting married is a wonderful thing. It’s been one of the biggest blessings in my life. But when you get married, ***you lose control***. You can’t live like a single person anymore, like you’re the only person on the planet, because there’s this other person in your house and you must factor them into your decisions.

You lose control when you meet Jesus, and you’ll find your life changing in ways you never expected. I don’t think Zacchaeus woke up that morning and said, “You know what? Later today I’m to give half of his possessions away and pay back the people I’ve cheated four-fold.” But that’s what he did. What kind of changes will Jesus bring in your life? I don’t know. It may cost you a lot to follow Jesus. But you won’t regret it. Zacchaeus didn’t regret giving control over his life over to Jesus, and neither will you.

*Third, no one is beyond the reach of Jesus.* I’ve been talking mostly to people who aren’t Christians thus far this morning, now I want to talk to the people in the room who are Christians. There was no one more notorious sinner in Jericho than Zacchaeus. If you took a poll of the citizens of that city and said, “Who would be the least likely man to become a disciple of this rabbi named Jesus?” Zacchaeus would have been the number one response.

Yet once Jesus set his sights on him, Zacchaeus, despite all his greed and graft and theft, didn’t stand a chance.

Here’s what I want you to do this Easter Sunday morning as we begin to close the service: I want you to picture in your mind who you think is the least likely person to follow Jesus. It may be someone famous, some notorious sinner in Hollywood or Washington, D.C. Or it may be someone close to you, someone you love, someone who seems so far away from God that they could never come back.

Do you have that person in your mind? ***OK … they aren’t beyond the reach of Jesus***. We’re going to close the sermon with a time of prayer, and I want you to take that opportunity and pray that Jesus would say to that person, “I’m staying at your house today.” I think that might be the best way we could honor Jesus this Easter. And who knows? Maybe next Easter that person will be sitting beside you in worship. AMEN