

## **BREAKING FREE TO A NEW LIFE**

**Luke 19:1–10**

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Luke 19:1–10 (NIV)

“Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.’ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a “sinner.”’ 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.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.’”

My message this morning is entitled “Breaking Free to a New Life.” Does anybody here want to make any changes in their life? No show of hands, please! I don’t want to embarrass anyone (in case the person you’re living with doesn’t know you want to make a change). People are making a lot of changes in Southern California. Our divorce rate is at times higher than our marriage rate. We think that if we can change marriages or change locations or change jobs, that somehow we’ll be better off.

Here’s a man, in the Scripture today, who’s at a point of change. In fact, I’d say, using the contemporary word, he was in a “mid-life crisis.” He looked around at what he had in life and

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said, “Is this all there is? I want something else.” That’s what mid-life crisis is all about. You say, “I’ve got ‘so’ many years left. I’ve lived this way. Shall I live differently? Shall I reach for more? I need to change. Maybe I need to change.”

See how this man Zacchaeus resolves his need for change? He doesn’t change families. He doesn’t change cities. In fact, surprisingly, we don’t read about him following Jesus and leaving Jericho. As far as we know, he stayed in the city and kept his old job—a different person in the old job—but he made a change in a different way.

I want to look with you at this Scripture today from two vantage points. One, I want you to see with me seven characteristics in Zacchaeus that may, partially or entirely, describe you. Then, five steps that Zacchaeus took to break free to a new life.

#### **I. The first thing I note about Zacchaeus: He lived in a great town.**

You live in a great town. If you live in Costa Mesa, Newport Beach, Santa Ana or Fountain Valley or Huntington Beach, you live in the greatest area of the world—except for Hawaii, I guess. (I’ve never liked Hawaii. I’ve only been to Hawaii twice in my life. Once, when I was a kid and I don’t really remember it. Then several years ago, we stopped on our way home from Japan. We were scheduled to be there three days. Since I’m photosensitive and don’t like the sun, we left after two. We were bored stiff. This time, however, we got to meet friends.)

Hawaii’s a great place to live. This area’s a great place to live. Jericho was great place to live. Jericho was kind of the garden spot of that area of the world. It’s a beautiful city today. If you go to Jericho today it’s still beautiful. All around it is the Judean wilderness and then, there’s this tremendous oasis with palm trees and balsam trees and banana groves. It’s a gorgeous town. In Jesus’ day, it was far more gorgeous than it is now, because in Jesus’ day it was kind of a wealthy suburb. In fact, Herod built his summer palace there. Herod the Great died there. He had

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a theater there. Just like we have the eighty-five million dollar music center going in, Jericho had its cultural center. Jericho had its racing track—its hippodrome. Jericho was the place in which Josephus said the smell of the balsam and palm groves and flowers was such, that when you came within several miles of the city, you could smell it. Mark Anthony thought it was such a great city that when he went to give Cleopatra a gift, he gave her a city. A whole city! It was a great place to live. Zacchaeus lived there.

You can live in a great place and be miserable. Why do you think the Island, certainly one of the most affluent areas of the whole world per capita, has the highest rate—I understand—of alcoholism than about anywhere in the world. Just because you live in a pretty house and live in a nice place doesn't mean that you don't want to make changes in your life.

Jericho was the Palm Springs of the biblical world. There was a man there who wanted to make a change. He not only was a citizen of a lovely city, but secondly...

### **II. He was a mover and a shaker.**

How do you know that? Because he was the chief tax collector. A note on tax collectors: this is the sixth time in the Gospel of Luke that Luke has mentioned tax collecting as a profession.

Every single time he's mentioned it, it's been in a positive light—the very profession that was the most despised in Jesus' day. Jesus took up with the tax collectors because they were the people who wanted a change in their life.

Speaking of taxes reminds me, just a few days ago, we had to get our taxes in, didn't we? I'm reminded of a letter a lady sent to the Internal Revenue Service. She said, "Here is a check for five hundred dollars. It covers taxes that I cheated on a number of years ago. My conscience has been bothering me. If my conscience still bothers me, I will send you the rest of the money that I owe."

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Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. That means he was head of all the other tax collectors. Some New Testament scholars suggest to us that, in the Palestinian world at that time, there were three major tax collecting centers—all of them on routes of trade. One was on the coast of Caesarea; up north in Capernaum; and then down south in Jericho. In the then known world, the trade went from north to south and east to west. Zacchaeus held one of the three top positions. He knew everything and everybody. How would you like to know what everybody's income tax return is? How would you like to know what the import and the export was and how much they made? He knew everything about everybody, and he was high up in that community. He was a mover and a shaker, but he still wanted to make a change.

### **III. The third thing we know about him was that he was wealthy.**

Luke tells us this. It's not hard to understand how he got wealthy, because the Romans put tax jobs out for bid. The highest bidder got it, and then Rome said, "You have to pay us so much." They set the fee and then the tax collector set everybody else's taxes, according to what he knew would pay off Rome, what would pay off his bid and then cut him a profit. He went after it. He was wealthy.

Isn't it fun to work on commission? I know some pastors who are on a commission. I personally think that's wrong. But it's wonderful to have a job with commission. I've only had a job once in my life in which I worked on commission. I enjoyed it so much. I was a poor student, about ready to drop out of college. One day, the business manager of our small college called me in and said, "George, we don't have anybody to run the bookstore and the college is very short on funds. Would you like to run the bookstore? We can't pay you, but we'll make you a deal. If you'll sell the textbooks and give the profit to the college, you can sell the supplies—paper, pens—anything you want." They had a very small supplies department. I thought, "Ok!" Before

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long, I could see the money that there was in supplies, and I had college logos printed on notebooks and three-ring binders and spiral notebooks and college decals. I got toothpaste and aftershave in, and I got a dry-cleaning business and a shirt-laundering business. All of a sudden, I was making a lot of money. I employed my roommate at the grand salary of a dollar an hour, which was more than anybody that was a student was making on campus. I bought a car, took girls out for steak dinners, paid my way through school...I had a wonderful time. I love working on commission.

Zacchaeus was on commission. Surprisingly he wanted to make a change. I could never, as a younger person, understand the Book of Ecclesiastes. Here's a guy who had success in his profession, he'd studied everything, and learning was so exciting. He was rich. He had romance in his life. And he says, "That's all vanity." Just give me some dollars! Give me a career. Give me an education. Give me romance. I'd be happy.

But you find you wind up like Zacchaeus. It's not external things that make you happy. I'm not so sure that when you're young you can fully understand that. Maybe there's a time when certain books of the Scripture become more alive. Ecclesiastes becomes more alive when you hit about middle age. You realize things are things. What really counts in life are relationships. What really counts is our relationship with God and what's going on the inside of the heart.

#### **IV. He had a home.**

That means he had a family. Usually, in the Scripture, when a person is described as having a house (like in "salvation has come to this house," Cornelius and his house was saved), he had a family. There was still some discontent in his life. You have to understand that's why he got to Jesus, because there was discontent.

#### **V. He was short.**

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The Greek is *micro*—“small.” Everybody looked at him through a microscope, I guess you could say. Probably everybody who lives has to overcome some handicap or another. I had to look in a mirror when I was a kid and overcome a face I thought looked like a pepperoni pizza. We all have something we need to overcome in life. Zacchaeus’ problem was he was short, but he didn’t let that deter him. Just because you’re big or little doesn’t mean you can’t take part in all there is in life.

#### **VI. He was a possibility thinker!**

Jesus is coming to town. Zacchaeus thought, “I’m too short. People don’t like me. I don’t like parades. If I stand in line, I won’t be able to see Him.” He was the kind of person who, once he made up his mind, would do something. I think that’s why he was successful. Once he made up his mind to do something, he was going to find a way to do it, hook or crook. So he finds a tree to climb up on. He stood up on a limb of one of those beautiful sycamore-fig trees in Jericho. You can still see them today. Tour guides will sometimes tell you one of the trees is the one that Zacchaeus hid out in, but we don’t know which tree it was.

He’s resourceful. You can be a possibility thinker. You can have an M.A. and a Ph.D. and still not be happy and still have an inner-emptiness.

#### **VII. His name was Zacchaeus.**

What a name he had! It was a great name. It means, in the Hebrew, “pure, righteous.” The one thing he wasn’t. He was neither pure nor was he righteous. Yet he had this great name. I think the reason why there was discontent in his life is that, somehow, his life had never matched up to what his mom and dad had called him.

He never matched up to what God had in mind for him. God has in mind for each one of us that we be a “Zacchaeus”—pure and righteous, all clean with God and all clean with one another.

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So he came to Jesus. Some things happened which broke him free to a new life. I want to look at five changes he made—five things he did that are striking.

#### **I. He went to Jesus.**

He had to get to Him. Jesus in the days of His flesh was limited to being in one place at one time. Now, because He's ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit has come, He is everywhere, available to us. We must begin by looking at what our relationship is with Jesus when we consider making changes in life. The great majority, perhaps the overwhelming majority, of people in this room today have already had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. You know the profound difference Jesus makes in life. Sometimes, we've had an initial meeting with Him. We need to meet Him again and again. It's like the blind man who was healed in progressive steps. At first, he could only see partially. Then his whole sight was restored. When we're going through turbulence in our life, we're looking around and saying, "Am I experiencing all there is to experience? Is this the way my life is going to go?" I think before we go off and do anything, we need to get to Jesus.

How do I get to Jesus? We get to Him through His Word and we get to Him in prayer. We come and say, "Lord Jesus, I need to meet You."

#### **II. Jesus went to Zacchaeus.**

When we come to Jesus, what if nothing happens? What if Jesus is not there? What if He's not interested? Then we'd just go back to other alternatives that don't satisfy, back to the old life. But when we come to Jesus, He is there. So He notices Zacchaeus as He notices us. He says, "It is necessary. I must." The Greek word is three letters—*dei*: "It is necessary" I come to your house. I've got to do it. It's an imperative.

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Jesus is going to turn Zacchaeus around in his home that day. I don't know what they talked about. The Scriptures don't tell. I would guess that Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "What's going on in your life? Tell me about your wife. Tell me about your family. Tell me about your relationships. What's happening?" Zacchaeus began to empty out his life to Jesus, telling Him what he needed. You'll find that, when Jesus comes to you, there are two things that are going to happen. First thing, I think, is simply this: Jesus is going to say something to you like, "All the changes that need to take place in your life are changes that must begin on the inside." That is such a reverse to the way that we think. "If I only had a better house...if I had a washer and a dryer...If I had a different husband/child/parent...if I lived in Seattle instead of Costa Mesa...If I could just win the lottery..." (And, by the way, we expect tithes on the lottery, folks!—just kidding!!! What they said would happen is happening. We're getting a massive PR job on how it's helping education and, meanwhile, people who can't afford to be losing their shirt are losing it. We get to this great deal and, every once in a while, someone wins a hunk. We aren't told the story of misery at the bottom of the line. For personal choices, I've chosen not to participate in the lottery. I think it's a biblical position. But that wasn't in my sermon. How did I get off on that?) We want to make changes in our lives. "If I could just rearrange things..." Jesus is saying to us, "All the changes that need to take place are inside of you—your attitudes, your heart disposition and your relationship with God and your relationship with other people. It's your perspective, your heart, that needs to change." That's the first thing Jesus tells us when He comes to us. The second thing is that Jesus will tell us what to change. The fact is, if I told you right now to take out a piece of paper and a pen or a pencil and write down the areas of your life that Jesus would like to see changed in you, I think every one of us could make out a list. We know it intuitively and innately. Especially when I get in prayer, if I don't know it, when I start praying,

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the Holy Spirit is very quick to tell me where I need to change. It's not mystical either. It's a combination of the Word working in me and my conscience and what the Spirit is saying.

I took a long walk. I felt the Lord saying to me, "Three things I want you to do. You've been putting them off. Three immediate changes I want you to make." It was there! Jesus, you see, is living. When I talk about meeting with Jesus, I'm talking about a Savior who has risen from the dead and who talks and communicates. I'm not talking about someone who's in a mausoleum somewhere. We're talking about the living Lord who speaks to His Church today because He's alive. He speaks to us through us through His Word. He speaks to us in prayer. He speaks to us when we're together. He lays His finger on our life.

So you come to Jesus—the first step. Then Jesus comes to you and tells you what to do.

### **III. Zacchaeus stood up.**

I think there's something very symbolic about that. People were calling him a sinner. They were putting him down and you have to get through all these putdowns people give you. Bartimaeus experienced that. We talked about that a couple of weeks ago. But he stood up. In standing up, he's saying, "I am making a decisive change and I'm ready to announce it."

There's really no such thing as a secret commitment to the Lord. Someone has said, "There's no such thing as secret discipleship. For, either discipleship will kill the secrecy or the secrecy will kill the discipleship." When you're committed, you're committed. There are times at school in which we have to say, "I'm a Christian." There are times at work in which we have to say, "I'm a Christian." We have to take our stand. There are times in life we just can't keep on acting indefinitely, as if we weren't God's people. Zacchaeus stands up. He says, "I'm committed." There's no effective Christian living without that.

### **IV. The fourth thing Zacchaeus did to break through to a new life was get rid of excess.**

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If you've been following the Gospel of Luke with me closely in these months, you've noticed Jesus, in the Gospel of Luke has an awful lot to say about money. This is the fourth time in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus has either met with somebody very wealthy or told a story about a wealthy person. The first time was with the rich fool who was living totally for himself and gets up and says, "I've got to build more to hold what I've already got." He has all kinds of excess, and the Lord says, "This night your soul is required of you." The next rich person was the rich man and Lazarus. His problem was that he didn't notice the beggar at his gate. He thought it was perfectly natural they should live in two different worlds and his heart would never be moved in compassion for another. The third person was the rich young ruler to whom Jesus says, "Sell all you have," and he went away with great sorrow, for he had great possessions.

And now here's this man. Interestingly enough, Jesus didn't tell him to sell it all. In fact, he doesn't sell it all. He gives away half because Jesus doesn't tell each person to do the same thing. Different requirements are laid upon different lives. Zacchaeus looks at his life and says, "Half of what I've got I don't need. Give it away. Get rid of it. I'll save the last half to live on myself and to provide a contingency fund for people I've defrauded." When you come to Christ, you'll make restitution. If you've defrauded people financially, you'll make it right. That's part of the test, I think, of being a Christian. You own up to your financial responsibilities in life. He says, "I'll return it. I'll not only return it, I'll give back fourfold." This was probably way beyond what he had to do.

Excess. I got to thinking about that. The Christian life is stronger when it's lived leaner. I began thinking of the stuff in my closet. Half of it is excess. I should give it to Goodwill, to someone who needs it. Besides, I've outgrown half of it anyway. That's why it's excess. What are we doing with so many things? We pile them in drawers. We're going to save it and use it someday.

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That day never comes. It sits there a lifetime and it could do somebody some good, but it's just sitting there. I think one of the things God does in our hearts when we make a clean commitment to Him is help us inventory our life and just chuck the stuff we don't need, give it away. Then we take care of people we've wronged. It's a marvelous way to live life—live it on the cutting edge. We're not told Zacchaeus quit his job or went out and did anything stupid that would have cut off his source of income at the moment. But at least he's going to hold that job and be honest as he holds it.

### **V. The fifth thing I like about Zacchaeus, the last step in his breaking free to a new life, is he does not rationalize when the Lord calls him to make a decision.**

He does not rationalize. Every time Christ calls us to make some kind of decision in our life, we can think of reasons why we shouldn't do it. There are always good reasons. We can even match Scripture verses to them at times. I remember the tremendous tussle I had with the Lord when He was calling us here over fifteen years ago now. Just back and forth, back and forth. It seemed like such a wild thing to do. I could have rationalized away what the Spirit was laying upon my heart. Zacchaeus could have done that. He could have said, "The poor are poor because they just don't know how to make money or keep money. So what difference is my little half going to make? It'll provide a few more stuff for their table for a few days. Then it will be frittered away. I might as well keep it and use it for something good—at least set up a scholarship fund for my children."

But he doesn't rationalize. When the Lord called him to do something—when it was upon his heart—he followed his heart.

I would suggest that, if you're not a Christian, you learn to follow, first of all, your head. Your emotions could get you in trouble. Emotions are not a true guide of what is right and wrong in

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the moral sense. A lot of people today are following their emotions and they fall in love or fall into dope or fall into alcohol. They're going with their sensations. But when you're a Christian, Christ transforms the heart. He does transform the life. He gives you compassion and He'll put things in your life that He'll be saying to you that He won't be saying to anyone else. He'll just say to you, "Go for it!"

I don't know how the Holy Spirit is wrestling with each one of us in this room. I kind of have an idea of what He's saying to me about my life. I think He's saying things like, "This is what I want you to do. Go for it! Are you going to hold back? Are you going to rationalize this decision forever and ever? Are you going to talk yourself out of it? Or are you going to do what I ask you to do?" Zacchaeus overcame the rationalization and he acted decisively, which is what we need to do with the Spirit who's tugging in our life. We need to be responsive.

What I just said may touch 5 percent of the people here today. But I suspect that the Holy Spirit said it to some in a special way today. The Holy Spirit has already revealed to you something He wants you to do, some steps He wants you to take, and you're sitting back and saying, "I don't see how that's all going to add up!" If the Lord's in it, He'll confirm it to your heart and life.

"Zacchaeus," Jesus said, "son of Abraham." Nobody ever called him that before. It was always "Sinner! Tax collector!" But Jesus said "No, he's a Jew. He's a son of Abraham. He's a true son of Abraham because he has faith, not because he keeps the law, not because he looks religious, but because his heart has been changed. He's a son of Abraham. And that which was lost is now found. I came to seek and to save the lost."

When we read the word "lost" in the New Testament, we immediately are thinking of someone who is damned. I'm not sure that, in this instance, that's what the word means; although ultimately it could mean that. But initially, to be lost is to be misplaced—to be in the wrong

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place. When you lose something, you can't find it. It's not where it belongs. It's lost. And Zacchaeus was not in the right place of life. He was in the right town. He was a mover and a shaker. He was wealthy. But he was in the wrong place. Why? He was in the wrong place because he wasn't pure and righteous; because his life consisted of getting rather than giving; because he hadn't met the Lord. The Lord says, "I've gathered him in. He's now in the place where he belongs, because I came to put you in the right place.

God has a place for each one of us: a place within family; a place within community; a place within the church; a place that only we can fill. He wants us and our heart in the right place, in that place. Break through to freedom. If you're not free, if you need to make changes, quit looking at all the external things that need to change and ask the Lord to help the change to begin from the inside out.

### **Closing Prayer**

Father, we come to You today and we thank You for Jesus, who just like He passed through Jericho, is passing right now through this sanctuary. He's passing through our hearts. Lord, I pray that as You pass us by in these moments, that all of the friends here who are going through moments in their life when they feel, "Is this all there is? Isn't there anything more? I sure don't like what I'm having to put up with and go through. Lord, it would be so great to make a change!" You're saying to us difficult words, "I want to change you where you are. I want to change you without you ever having to move your residence. I want to change you without you ever moving out of your family. I want to change you without you moving out of your job. I want to find you, even though you're lost. You'll still be in the same house. You're lost but now you're found." Lord, that word is not only good for those here who have never made a commitment to You, but it's good for all of us who have strained sometimes at the leashes of life

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and have the escapist mentality, because of the stress of the day that we live under. If only we could just go somewhere else. If only we could just go live in Hawaii. You're saying, "No, I've called you where you are. I set My love upon you. I want you to belong to Me—there. Be pure. Be righteous." How good it is, Lord, that You talk to us. You name the things that we need to do. You bring to mind, Lord, the changes each of us need to make in our heart and life. Give us, Lord, the strength to act, to stand up and be counted. Help us, Lord, to inventory our life and our possessions and to get rid of the excess. Thank You, Lord, that today salvation has come to our house. Because we, too, have been found by You. In Jesus' name. Amen.