

Selected Sermons #10

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

LUKE 19:1-10 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

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.”

Fellow redeemed and friends in Christ the Savior –

We know that the world is filled with dissatisfied people who cannot be content with what they have – and such restlessness has come to be looked upon as a weakness of human nature, but that is only half of the truth. The real fact is that there is no position and no situation in this world that can ever fully satisfy any human being. “Beneath it the heart is still fretting and striving – no true, lasting happiness ever deriving.” No truer example of this could be shown than the man whom we come to know in our Gospel text as the man who got rich on taxes.

Could there be any situation nicer than the one occupied by this Zacchaeus? If there is, I would to know of it. Most people wail and cry about taxes. To hear them talk, one would think taxes were making them poor, although that is most unlikely – yet very few indeed ever dream of feathering their nest with taxes a Zacchaeus did. As the chief publican (revenue officer) of Jericho, his was the power to exact tribute on the rich trade in balsam, honey, and spices for which Jericho was famous. His was also the power to put these taxes as high as he wished and pocket the difference after remitting to the Roman government a certain fixed charge. Government can assess whatever it needs; Zacchaeus stood right at the faucet, and he did not have to turn off the faucet until he

had as much as he wanted. You can hardly imagine a more ideal arrangement. Every word of the second verse describes a perfect picture of earthly happiness.

But was Zacchaeus satisfied? Our story reveals that he was not, even as you and I cannot be unless and until his great experience has repeated itself in our lives. Since we are not strangers to complaint and dissatisfaction, it will be well for us to investigate.

The great desire of a man who got rich by taxes

We shall see

I. How his desire made itself known

II. How it was satisfied.

I. If on such short acquaintance we venture to say that Zacchaeus was not satisfied in life, we are not guessing but judging from the evidence, for **his great, unsatisfied desire** made itself known on the one hand by his efforts to see Jesus. If you give due consideration to the behavior of the publican as described by Luke, you will agree that these are not the actions of a satisfied man, of one who seeks nothing more of life than what he has.

For one thing, he left his work flat in order to see a man who did not know him, as far as he was aware. This was not a time for Zacchaeus to be running around, but rather

to be at his post. Huge crowds were coming through Jericho on their way to Jerusalem, and taxes of various kinds were to be collected. It was a golden hour of profit, but Zacchaeus celebrated it by running around wildly in the heat and finally climbing a tree – to see a Man.

On the other hand, no one will want to lay such behavior to idle curiosity. Can you imagine the richest man in town climbing a tree with the boys and perching on a limb out of curiosity? Would Zacchaeus give his neighbors and his enemies (of which he had many) occasion to make and ridicule him? Such a man values his dignity and his rank; he cannot afford to make himself a laughingstock. What a **terrible, driving urge** must have inflamed the heart of this man to make him thus risk his reputation and neglect his business!

It seems certain that Zacchaeus himself did not fully understand **his own longings**. He did not honestly pause to ask himself, “Just why am I doing these foolish things?” His thoughts are faithfully reflected by St. Luke when he writes, “*He sought to see who Jesus was.*” Obviously, that was as far as the publican himself understood the restless feeling that possessed him, for the human heart is ever a deceitful thing, and who can know it? The heart tries to hide its unhappiness even from itself. It is like a festering wound which tries to grow a thin layer of skin over the

opening to hide its sickness. When you think it is healed, suddenly it breaks open again.

The human heart refuses to admit and acknowledge its real need. It pretends to be looking for something it really does not want, in order not to come right out and confess to the truth – that it is unhappy in its sin and its slavery to Satan, unhappy because of fear and uncertainty. Zacchaeus did not even dream that he needed Jesus above all else; his heart would not admit it, even to himself. But **his great desire nevertheless became open and bare** by his frantic response to the call of the Lord.

The gracious Christ called Zacchaeus down from up there in the sycamore. It was a sensational development; Jesus had walked all the way through the city in order to do this thing. As deceitful as Zacchaeus' heart was, it did not deceive the Savior. Christ heard this damaged heart before it called; he knew what Zacchaeus did not even dream of. Because of this, he said, "*Zacchaeus, make hast and come down, for today I must stay at your house.*"

It would have been impossible, at the moment, for that man to tell you why he did what he did at that time. He had not dared to dream that Jesus would even see him, much less know him. He did not know he wanted it to be

that way, but when the voice of his Savior called; it **made the great desire visible.**

Then Zacchaeus obeyed the call to the letter, and nothing could have stopped him. It must have been almost laughable to anyone who did not understand the seriousness of that moment, to see the rich publican scrambling out of that tree. He acted like a child, and people must have stared to see this hard, worldly tax-gatherer risk broken bones to answer a gentle call. It is not a shame for anyone to be so filled with **desire for such a serious need.**

Alas! How sad it is to see such desires suppressed until the time of death! We need not go far to find those who are dissatisfied, restless – and have good reason to be. If it was so in Zacchaeus, it must be in many, many others. Life had offered the publican a place of unmatched advantage in earthly things, but he could not find contentment. What must it be in millions who are far from enjoying their favorable situation? Indeed, **we see the restlessness everywhere.** It is a discontented world – discontent with the highest wages, the highest prices, and the greatest luxuries. The strange desires that still exist, plainly to be seen in the strikes and quarrels and wars – are not fully understood by those who thus exert

themselves. Many explanations are given – seldom the right ones.

But that does not matter. Souls are sin-sick and sin-blind. You cannot expect them to understand their blind groping, but the Savior knows. He realizes fully **the hunger** for the Bread of Life and **the thirst** for saving Water. People are sin-sick and starved for the love of God; that is no secret to him who came to bring these things! Our Savior comes to the aching heart and issues his blessed call, “Come down from your high perch, so that I can enter your house!”

And here is where **the tragedy begins**. Not that hearts do not leap at that call – not that the invitation is without power, but **that so many resist the call and refuse to come down**. They see Jesus, and that is all. They are so small that they have to climb the tree of education and learning even to see Jesus, but when he offers to fill the deep longing in their souls, they refuse – and thus gradually the desire dies. The urge to take hold of the Lord leaves, and only **that helpless restlessness remains unto the dismal end**.

II. If only we all might profit by the experience of Zacchaeus, who found every desire satisfied, even when he sought it not, for he listened only to Jesus! Luke passes

over this portion very briefly, telling us nothing of the events following Zacchaeus' hasty scramble out of the tree: the walk back into the city with the publican at Jesus' side, surrounded by a murmuring crowd that could not understand what Zacchaeus and Jesus could have found in each other, their entering into Zacchaeus' house, and the Word of Life spoken there.

The **first evidence** we are given to assure us that Zacchaeus had found something lies in Luke's peculiar statement that "*Zacchaeus stood*" and spoke to the Lord. He stood, why mention that? Because it means everything. The publican had found the strength to take a stand in one place. **His restlessness was gone** - his need for something, he knew not what. As we saw him chasing and running away from his work to find a thing he did not understand, so now we see him fixed in one new position - and in it he is happy.

We are further told where he stood. This rich man began to renounce his fortune. This is his declaration and promise, "*I give half of my goods to the poor.*" It is already as good as done! In his mind, only half of his money was left to him - and not even that much, for he goes on, "*and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.*" You will notice that the publican was ridding himself of that in which until now he had tried to

find happiness. He was getting rid of it not because he could no longer use money or because he could spare it; rather, he had found what he really needed.

This is the more apparent when we catch the confession in his words. Zacchaeus admits he has been a thief, for if he is returning fourfold to those from whom he took by false charges, he admits to a practice of cheating and overcharging. Here was a load he had been carrying in his heart for years. Oh, what a relief to get rid of it!

Is that the way to find rest and contentment? Is that the fulfillment of a great desire, when a man gives to the poor and admits that he is a sinner? Some would have us believe so. They tell us that if we want to be happy, we should practice charity and right the wrongs we have done; then we shall find peace.

But if Zacchaeus had been able to quiet his longings by giving away some of his money and returning stolen goods, would he have needed Jesus for that? Even a person's conscience tells one these things. What foolishness to believe that righting wrongs and doing good works is the recipe for happiness! Who can ever right the wrongs one has done against God? Who will redeem themselves from the curse of sin? Why can people not see that in the dread of these lies the real unhappiness? Zacchaeus did not find

peace in doing good; he did good because he had found peace.

The real event of that day is framed in the words of the Lord, *“Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”* Salvation came to Zacchaeus. The man had been promised heaven by the One who has heaven to give away, by the Son of Man who has power on Earth to forgive sin. **Jesus had found Zacchaeus’ heart and he had healed it**, taking away the ache and pain and fear of the sinner who dreaded God’s wrath but did not admit it.

The greatest advantage in the world is nothing compared with this, when salvation comes. No one is only built for this life; rather they have been created for the life of eternity. That is why nothing in this Earth can ever truly satisfy. The great purpose of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is and always was to **satisfy the deep need of people for the hope and assurance of eternal life** and for escape from the horrid fear of eternal death. Let us seek the evidence of this fear and that need in ourselves for something more worthwhile. If we are human, we will have fear, no matter what our position or condition in life.

Then – oh, then accept what Jesus came to offer! Do not pretend! And if, to gain what your heart desires, you must climb a sycamore tree – if you must leave what you have and humble yourself because you are small – remember that Jesus, too, climbed a tree. To obtain the salvation he offers, he climbed the tree of the Cross, and stayed there until the Father himself took him down.

Our Father bids you come down from your tree, for he will walk with you to your house today and renew in you the joy of your salvation! Amen!

Love divine, all love excelling #341

One thing's needful; Lord, this treasure #366

I heard the voice of Jesus say #277