**The Teacher: Through the Eye of a Needle**

Luke 19:1-10

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Dan Hoffman

It was August 17th, 1994, and I was strangely excited to be waking up early on a weekday in the middle of summer. But today was big – the Queen was coming, and I was going to see her.

And so the Hoffmans got dolled up, drove downtown, parked 8 blocks away, and hiked to join the hugest crowd I’d ever seen on 15th Ave. We weren’t early so we weren’t at the front. And, as the shortest 14-year-old going into grade 9, this meant if I wanted to see I could climb the sign outside the JW church - which seemed a little heretical – or push my way through the crowd until I could finally see over the really short kids at the front. And that’s what I did. And then I waited. And waited. And it was hot.

But finally it started. There were cops on motorbikes with lights flashing. And then a string of cars followed by a big black one with the queen in the back seat in her bright yellow dress and bright yellow hat.

And as she drove by, I caught a glimpse of her for about two seconds. She was waving while talking to the person beside her in the back seat – I didn’t even see her face... And then she was gone and there were just piles of people standing around on 15th Ave looking at each other. We were all still the same. The next day I slept in.

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Today we are going to see a man fight his way through a crowd just to get a glimpse of Jesus – but to a much different end. If you’ve got a Bible, go ahead and open it to Luke 19. This is the last week of our Luke series, and we are finishing up with a big story about a wee little man. This one really touches my heart. Would you stand as we come before God’s word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Luke 19:1-10]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

This story sums up what happens when people encounter Jesus the teacher. And what we find is that when information about Jesus changes into an encounter with Him people start really living – and this can happen to anyone.

Now some context: last week we mentioned the Rich Young Ruler who comes to Jesus asking, “what must I do to inherit abundant life?” His story comes just before this, but it ends badly because he can’t do what Jesus asks. Jesus says, “sell everything” and the cost is too big. And Jesus concludes saying, “It’s harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” This is a rough story if happen to be in the middle of a room full of rich people like we are today.

But then we get today’s story which is the other side of the same coin. It’s another rich young ruler coming to Jesus, but his story ends well. This is how a camel gets through the eye of a needle. What is impossible for man is possible with God. And what we see is that everyone needs to get through the needle, then how it happens and finally the evidence it’s done.[[1]](#footnote-1) That’s where we’re going.

First, everyone needs to get through the needle. So the story starts with Jesus entering Jericho which was the wealthiest town in the area. And Luke tells us:

There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich.He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree (Luke 19:2-4)

So a couple things: first - and this feels important - this text exposes a great injustice short people. Like Luke calls Zacchaeus a wee little man – that’s basically a direct translation of the Greek – and just imagine how fun it is to have a hit single written in your honour with that tag line? Some of us don’t have to imagine I’ve got a brother who is 6 feet and a sister who is 5,11. Some people get the genes, and I got the shorts. I’m just putting my cards on the table. But hey, short guys, this is a good story. We win!

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Okay that’s one thing, but there is a second thing just below the surface. See Zacchaeus doesn’t climb the tree because he is short. One of the perks of being short is people don’t mind when you stand in front of them. There is always a spot in the front of pictures or crowds for us because you tall people like to feel all magnanimous about letting us through while it doesn’t actually inconvenience you at all. We know! But the crowd won’t let Zacchaeus through even though he is short. Their elbows are up.

See Zacchaeus isn’t just short; he’s a tax collector. Actually he’s the chief tax collector and he is loaded. Now last week we unpacked how Rome collaborated with locals to abuse their subjects. And the tax collectors were all wrapped up in this – they were stealing from their own people in order to get rich. Tax collectors were so despised that they were thought of as human.

So, in the Jewish Mishnah, which is an ancient commentary on Jewish law, it says that if someone is trying to murder you, you’re allowed to lie to them – that kind of makes sense. But then it says you are also allowed to lie to tax collectors. Lying to a tax collector isn’t a sin because they aren’t really human, they were like animals.[[2]](#footnote-2)

So lying is bad – right? But lying to animals is okay. Like you can definitely lie to your cat because they are lying to you. Your cat will rub your leg and look like they love you, but when you sleep, they give you the side-eye hoping for your early demise. And cats are as bad as tax collectors.

And that’s why Zacchaeus can’t push through to the front of the crowd even though he is short – keep that thing outside. But he wants to see Jesus and so his only option is to climb a tree. Now what a sight that must have been.

Like Zacchaeus is a wealthy man. He’s used to rolling up in a Chariot Cyanne. He’s the big businessman wherever he goes, but here he looks like a schoolboy climbing a cult sign to get a look at the queen. This isn’t something rich men do! So people would have been laughing. And yet Zacchaeus climbs. Why?

Well Luke doesn’t say. But obviously Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus bad. He is willing to do whatever it takes. He knows he needs to get through the needle.

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Now there is another side to this. See the rest of this crowd is excited to see Jesus too. They have come early and staked their spots. These are Jesus’ people. They know Jesus heals broken people. And yet they are keeping Zacchaeus from getting to Jesus. Now think about this. This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be – God’s people aren’t supposed to be gatekeepers who protect Jesus from the riffraff – who make sure the hole of the needle stays small – but it often turns out this way. Remember the disciples rebuking the kids last week? Same thing.

It’s not a great look, but it happens here too. Like this is a respectable place and we are respectable people. And if someone comes in here who isn’t wearing the right clothes or doesn’t smell right, we don’t really go out of our way to make them feel welcome. “Sit over there and we’ll keep our eyes on you – or rather we will try hard to not notice you at all.” And we slap ourselves on the back for letting you get in, but we hope you don’t come back. Anyone done that?

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It's weird that often the people crowding in to see the most inclusive and accepting person who ever lived will exclude the wrong people from joining the crowd. God have mercy on His church.

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And there’s one more side to this that I can see. Maybe you’re someone who has been crowded out or hurt by the Jesus crowd. You’re Zacchaeus in this story, and you’re standing at the back today just getting ready to peace out.

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Two weeks ago I told you about the time my family was kicked out of a splitting church. Well this didn’t just happen once to my family, it happened twice. And the second time we suffered casualties. Hearts were hurt. People were let down. And faith was lost. Why? Well my family members looked out at a crowd of Jesus-people who looked like Satan and said, if this is what happens when you hang out with Jesus I’m not interested.

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And maybe you’re close to that today. And if you are then it’s easy to say “wow, it’s just too hard to keep doing this. If Jesus really cared He’d make a way for me to get close. And He’s not doing it. There’s no break in the crowd. So maybe I’ll just take my wounds and slip away. Probably no one is even going to notice.”

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If you are in that spot, this is your story. But there is a hard call. What you might need to do is climb above Jesus’ people, who have hurt you and are pushing you out, just so you can get a glimpse of Jesus. Don’t let Him pass you by. It will be worth it.

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Okay, the fact is everyone in the crowd that day had the need to get through the needle. Most of them didn’t realize it. They actually thought they were already through because they were there cheering Jesus on. But just days later this same crowd would be chanting “crucify Him.” So most of them are still on the outside. And Zacchaeus is on the outside too. But he doesn’t let the crowd, or his pride, get in the way. He recognizes he needs to see Jesus. And so up the tree he goes.

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But this isn’t a story about Zacchaeus the hero, who overcomes opposition to get the abundant life he lacks, look how he gets through the needle. We get it in verse 5:

When Jesus came by, He looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. “Zacchaeus!” He said. “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.” Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. (Luke 19:5-6)

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There is a scandalous order to this story that everyone in the first century noticed immediately.

So hospitality is huge. Like if you open your home up and invite people to eat with you, then you are sharing your life with them. And some people are gifted at this; you’re good at creating a welcoming space and inviting people in. Others of us can do it but it’s hard; the house has to be deep cleaned before anyone shows up so we can appear to be better than we actually are. And others of us never have people in our home at all. The thought of letting someone see us in our natural habitat is too scary to imagine.

Well hospitality in the first century was huge too. To eat with someone meant that you were accepting them; you were committing yourself to be in a relationship with them. And so the kind of people you invited to your home was really important. They had to be your equals - or slightly better if you could trick them into coming - and this way your social status would be maintained or increased.

Now look what Rabbi Jesus does while surrounded by a sea of fans. He very publicly invites Himself to Zacchaeus’ house while Zacchaeus is still a treasonous, cheating cat lover. And everyone saw this and disapproved. Verse 7 says:

But the people were displeased. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled. (Luke 19:7)

A holy man like Jesus can’t associate with a scumbag. He represents God, and surly God doesn’t approve of what Zacchaeus is up to. People will think Jesus is endorsing sin. Actually that’s exactly what people thought.

Now nobody would have had a problem if Jesus said, “Hey Zacchaeus, you’re a sinner. Why don’t you give back what you’ve stollen, and then I’ll come to your house for lunch.” And if Zacchaeus repented right there on the branch, cursed Rome and started raining money everyone would have been fine with Jesus going for lunch. “Wow, Jesus even changes tax collectors.” But that’s not what happens. Jesus goes and has lunch with the most despicable sinner in town while he is despicable. Jesus is clearly saying, “I’m with Zacchaeus, I love him.”

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Okay, I’m just about to offend you… Did you ever notice how concerned Christians are with making sure other people don’t think they are endorsing sin? Like if someone saw me standing with a sinner they would think I think the sin they are known for is okay. And Christians are really concerned about possibly making people stumble.

But did you ever notice how little Jesus cared if people thought He was endorsing sin? Jesus surrounded Himself with prostitutes and tax collectors; He became friends with them. He loved them. And they loved Him. So let me just carefully push a button… do you think Jesus would go to a Pride parade? Do you think Jesus would be worried that people would think He was endorsing a sinful lifestyle? What about you? Do you love people like Jesus, or are you holier than He was?

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Can I confess something? I care deeply about what people think about me. I care about this more than Jesus cared what people thought about Him. This is a problem.

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Alright, this is a charged moment, but the text isn’t done. Are you interested to find out what happens next, or are you done? If you are that might be okay. Just try to take those conflicted thoughts to Him. But if you aren’t done there is more. We find out how transformation happens. We find it happens in a scandalous order.

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Now this is the heart of the gospel – here it is: salvation comes to your house before you change. Salvation is what brings the change. An encounter with Jesus is what brings the change you need.

Now every other religion would have told Zacchaeus, “If you want to find God, what you need to do is clean up; clean your house, quit your job and make amends. And if you do this well enough then you’ve got a chance.” Every religion in the world is built on this idea. And actually a lot of Christians think this way too. But Jesus flips it on its head.

Jesus invites Himself for dinner at your house while you are a wreck. And it’s dinner with Jesus that changes you. This is how you get through the needle.

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So what’s the needle in your life? Where do you need salvation? Some of us here have never allowed Jesus to come to our house for lunch at all. You’ve heard about Him. You know He’s neat. But there is something that has kept you from letting Him in.

Maybe you are afraid that if He comes in He wouldn’t like anything He’d see and you’d have to change everything. And it’s just too hard to imagine. If this is you then you’re in the spot the Rich young Ruler was last week. You think what Jesus asks is too much.

And… you’re right. If you let Jesus in everything ***is*** going to change. But just a word on this: Jesus won’t make you give up all the things you love so you’re left miserable and called to missions in Mozambique. He might call you on missions, but not to misery. What He will do is change the things you love so you actually want to get rid of all the things you’ve built your life around that you thought were going to bring you abundance but have actually enslaved you. He doesn’t change what you do, He changes what you want to do.

And so ask yourself, “Am I winning right now, or am I hungry that there must be something more?” If it’s the latter, then climb the tree.

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But most of us have already opened the door and let Jesus invite Himself in for lunch. But we’ve kept Him in the living room. And as we sit and eat, we keep noticing Him look around. And at first we think He is just admiring the digs, but then we notice that He keeps looking down the hall at the back bedroom. But He’s not invited back there. That’s where we piled all the crap we took out of the living room before He arrived.

And here’s the problem with Jesus, He invites Himself into our lives. He’s not respectful of our space, He wants all the way in. Now He won’t barge in, but He keeps looking at the door in the hall and hinting. He wants an invitation to look in your closet and under your bed. So what’s the needle in your life?

Now here’s the thing, you’ve probably worked really hard on the dirt in that closet. You’ve tried everything, and you can’t get it out of the house. But guess what, that’s you religioning your wreck. You’re attempting to clean up your life in order to be good enough for God. But that’s not how it happens. The order is everything. To get what God has for you requires that it starts with supper – Jesus invites Himself in – and you accept what He wants to do, and then the miracle happens. The camel goes through the needle. And that’s what you need. You need the miracle. Where do you need it?

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Now last thing, how do you know it’s happened?

This is actually a bit of a joke. You don’t need this part if it’s happened to you because you know. I mean it actually happens between verse 7 and 8 in the text. It’s something so small it gets zero words, and yet so big that Zacchaeus, who isn’t particularly spiritually sensitive has no doubt it’s happened. Look at the text.

The people were displeased. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled.

Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, “I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!” (Luke 19:7-8)

There are no words between the displeasure of the people and the transformation of the tax collector. It happens instantaneously. But all of a sudden someone who’s thing was money – he lived for money. He had no relationships. His own family hated him. And he did it all for the money, and now he’s just giving it all away. Something changed.

And he’s so excited about it. He’s just throwing it out the window. “Look Lord, money doesn’t matter!” That’s the evidence. You know the miracle has happened when you don’t even need the thing that yesterday had you trapped. And that’s when Jesus says:

“Salvation has come to this home” (Luke 19:9)

Now salvation didn’t come because Zacchaeus gave some money, Jesus came and the thing that had the hold on Zacchaeus had no hold no longer. And this is what Jesus wants to do in you. That thing that has the hold; that needle that is impossible to squeeze through. That’s what Jesus wants to open wide. So will you let Him?

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Jesus ends saying:

 “The Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.” (Luke 19:10)

This is what He offers. Jesus is seeking to be seen with you. You might look rich on the outside but you’re a wreck. And Jesus knows. And Jesus He gave up all the glory of heaven to be associated with you. He was willing to be thought a wreck to relate with you. And He wasn’t just scorned, He was scourged and crucified. And He did all this in order to offer you the miracle of becoming what He created you to be.

See you really need to go through the needle. And you’ve found that it’s impossible. You really have tried everything. But Jesus confidently responds, “what is impossible for you is possible with Me.”

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We are going to do something a little different today. Worship Team, would you come now. As they lead us in the final set I want to offer us the chance to climb the tree and see if Jesus might be inviting Himself into your house or into your back bedroom today.

So if you need a miracle – if you need to get through the eye of a needle – then I want to invite you to the back for prayer. I’ll be there with \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_. And if you come, what you are going to do is confess that you need Him, and speak the word about what’s hiding behind the door.

Maybe it’s an attitude. You hate someone Jesus would love. Maybe you are someone who pushes people out; you are probably doing this for a reason – probably because you feel that being in makes you important. Lay that down.

Or maybe it’s a hurt. Someone did something to you and now bitterness is creeping in. Let Him into the back room of your heart so the miracle can happen. Or maybe it’s a fault, it’s your drug of choice: you can’t stop looking at porn or eating too much or too little or drinking or smoking or whatever it is you do. I’m sure it’s terrible, but I’m also sure Jesus isn’t shocked. He’s seen it before; He sees you. So climb the tree and let Him invite Himself over.

And maybe this is extra hard for you because the people beside you think you are perfect, but you know there is crap in the closet. Don’t let your pride keep you out. Zacchaeus, climb the tree.

1. Outline adapted from a combination of Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/generosity-and-power/> and JD Greear <https://summitchurch.com/message/whatever-it-takes-to-possess-jesus> (Accessed July 29, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://torahinmotion.org/articles/thoughts-from-the-daf/nedarim-28-the-murderer-and-the-tax-collector> (Accessed August 1, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)