

**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • July 25, 2021**



**The Scripture**  
**Luke 19:1-10**

*He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 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.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”*

**The Message**  
**“11 Indispensable Relationships: You Need an Outcast”**  
**Mark Briley**

Sometimes the easiest part my week is writing a sermon. The words just come together. The earth is crammed with heaven after all. And it all seems so clear! God’s message of love and grace just makes sense. Those moments make for great weeks and easy-to-write sermons.

And then there is this week...lots of extra things on the schedule and some unexpected turns. There were extra calls, longer meetings, trips to the hospital, activities for the kids going every which direction, letters to write, and unexpected interruptions. You know how these weeks can be... you live them, too. And so, when I knew I had a small break in my schedule, I holed up in my office, shut the door, muted my phone, and turned out the light to see if I could see the kingdom of heaven anywhere glowing in my office in order to write a sermon.

I closed my eyes and had a friendly competition between inhale and exhale to clear my mind... exhale always wins. I opened my Bible to the selected passage for the weekend. We're in the middle of our sermon series entitled, "11" ... looking at the indispensable relationships you need in your life to help you live your best life.<sup>1</sup>

This week's *withness* is an Outcast. You need an outcast in your life. That seemed an odd relationship to foster. Really? An outcast? I had to go back to the original notes for the series and see if that was even true. Is that what we said? Huh. An outcast. Len Sweet says this *withness* may be fulfilled by someone who is often misunderstood, unaccepted in most social circles, or isolated from the mainstream culture for one reason or another.

He names Zacchaeus as a biblical withness who climbs into this role today. Yes. Of course. Zacchaeus. I smiled and may have even sung out loud a little, the song about this wee little man we sang as kids in Sunday School. Probably not a song he would have appreciated all that much... so I stopped singing it. I got out my study commentaries and some of my favorite books that I thought might relate and spread them out across my office.

I was ready to make some movement on the message, but then... a man peered into the darkness of my office window, and even though the lights were off he could see me. He knocked on the door, and I had to answer it, right? He was dressed in a nice suit and slipped into my office when I opened the door. He introduced himself by saying, "*My name is Zach, and I'm from the IRS.*" When people introduce themselves and immediately tell you what they do in the same sentence, you know you're in trouble. "*What can I do for you, Zach?*"

His response was strange and not what I had expected. His car had broken down outside of the church, and he was running some very important errands that couldn't wait for him to get transportation on his own. "*Can you drive me around for a bit?*" he

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<sup>1</sup> References in support of this message stem from Leonard Sweet's "*11 Indispensable Relationships You Can't be Without*" which inspired this summer series. David C. Cook Publishing. Colorado Springs. 2008.

asked. There was more to the story but that was the gist of it. My first thought was, “*Uber, man!*” Looking around my office at my books and the kingdom of heaven that was served as a cubicle-sized commodity in my office, I knew I wasn’t going to get anything written so, against my better judgment, I hesitantly agreed. I grabbed my pile of books assuming I could read up and get prepped for the sermon while I waited for him wherever we had to stop. If seminary taught me anything, it was to expect the unexpected and make the best of it.

So, Zach and I load into my Hyundai Sonata in the church parking lot. My favorite throwback lunch-hour tunes were blaring on the radio and while the volume startled us, we both agreed Jodeci is arguably the best R&B group of the ’90s. I kicked a left-over football out of the way and a half-downed Gatorade my son had left in the car from the night before... but we were moving.

Zach gave me general directions to our first destination. I asked him if we should go through this construction zone or the other construction zone as going through construction zones is part of Columbia’s charm, really. We chose construction zone number two, and then Zach and I began exchanging pleasantries. I felt a little awkward about driving this stranger around and don’t recommend the general practice, but here we are.

He was carrying a Bible, his checkbook, and a small paper with a list of some sort on it. As we drove toward our first stop, I was telling him about the sermon series we are in the middle of and the sermon I needed to write. He seemed interested and he asked me what passage I was using for this “*Outcast witness*,” which I could tell intrigued him as he said it slowly with great emphasis. He thumbed through the pages of his worn Bible to Luke and began reading it aloud.

We both chuckled a little once we made the connection that Zach the IRS agent was reading about Zacchaeus a tax collector. Zach went on to ask, “*Why is it that whenever Jesus sits down to eat with someone, the biblical writer always has Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners as if tax collectors and sinners were always paired together. How would you like it if it always said, “Jesus was always hanging with the riff raff, you know, ministers and sinners.”*

“*I see your point*,” I said. Tax collectors got the rap of being among the greatest thieves and traitors, because they collaborated with the super-power... the Roman Empire... they could set their own tax rate above that which they were required to pay to the government for their own profit. Because many tax collectors took advantage of this unfair system, they were often very wealthy. Zacchaeus was the *chief* tax collector which made him, in this context, the king of thieves and perhaps seen as the captain of the all-star sinners. I could tell this made Zach feel better.

We pulled up to a house. It was kind of rough looking outside. A handful of kids were yelling back and forth at each other from the porch. They were speaking Spanish. (*I quickly resorted to Mrs. Lennon's sophomore Spanish class to see if I could pick up any of what they were saying*). It was sweltering outside, but they didn't seem bothered by it. There was an old El Camino sitting out front with the classic dice hanging from the rearview mirror. I thought it was strange that Zach needed to stop here. The connection wasn't immediately obvious and certainly seemed like a stop he could have made another time when his own car was fixed instead of blowing up my afternoon.

You know how this works. You likely feel that some people are more deserving of your immediate attention than others, and it's usually because of what that person can do for you instead of what the true need happens to be. We tend to rank people in terms of their value to us, and this didn't seem like a place that could offer Zach anything; but he got out and went in. He asked me to come with him, but I opted to stay out of whatever he was doing and opted to stay in the car and read some commentary about the story of Zacchaeus.

It was a fascinating part of the story line in Luke's Gospel. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he would ultimately find his death on a cross. But on the way, we see him reaching out to people that are unassuming, people in need. There was the story of the good Samaritan, the rich young ruler, the dishonest steward, the prodigal son... all along Jesus sharing stories about the kingdom of heaven and about his fate of the cross and yet none could see. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem takes him through Jericho, a place he did not intend to visit but simply pass by. Crowds had begun to travel with him and around him. Learning of this, Zacchaeus went out to see Jesus for himself if for no other reason than to catch a glimpse of what the hype was all about. Jesus was the top trending topic on Twitter at the time so, you know, worth a peek if even to get to brag to your buddies saying, "*Yeah, I saw Jesus when he came through town.*"

This is where Zacchaeus gained his wee little man status – perhaps not a fair designation to have for all of history. The crowd is pressing through the streets... Jesus swarmed and buried in the middle of them. The text says that Zacchaeus "*was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.*" If you've ever stood behind the tall person at the concert or tried to get the best view of the fireworks but elevation isn't your ally, it can be frustration. Zacchaeus couldn't get a conducive spot to see Jesus on his way through town.

Some English majors, given the structure of the sentence have actually questioned whether the shortness belonged to Zacchaeus or Jesus. "*He couldn't see him because he was short in stature...*" Which one was short? You could easily make the argument but...

About that time Zach returned to the car. He was smiling as he got in, and we pulled out to go to the next stop. He crossed something from the list. I didn't ask any questions. As I put my book down in the back seat, Zach asked me what I was reading. I told him I was just getting to the point in the biblical account where Zacchaeus was scurrying up the Sycamore tree. "*Pretty demoralizing, don't you think?*" I said to Zach thinking of this grown man, wealthy as could be, climbing a tree to see another man pass by.

How many of us would humble ourselves to the point of crawling up a tree in our best suit in front of our coworkers or employees in hopes of catching a glimpse of another man. We aren't that comfortable talking about our faith to those we work with let alone going to this extreme. It may be that we're too proud to admit that we need Jesus. Maybe in our context, it wouldn't be climbing a tree but getting on our knees in a three-piece suit in front of a crowd... we couldn't fathom that could we? Because we are not that desperate or so we tell ourselves. We get along just fine on our own. All of our relationships are great, our wit and smarts are more than enough, our killer instinct gets us by without needing any Savior to help us. Our egos are bigger than we might like to admit.

"*Speaking of egos,*" Zach said, "*did you ever see that Volkswagen commercial with the Ego Emissions ratings?*" (*I hadn't seen it*). Essentially, the ad suggests that everything exudes some level of ego. One (1) is the lowest emission and 100 the highest. Low ego-emitting things included dirt, paper clips, and ear hair. Things rating high in ego emissions include celebrities, saber-tooth tigers, and your boss. The pitch was that you'll love your high-end German engineering but emit low ego at the same time. The tag line, "*You buy this car, you won't be bragging, but you'll love it.*" It was a cute idea, I suppose, and we decided to give Zacchaeus an ego emission rating. We slightly disagreed but came to settle on 93, guessing that this man, apparently short in stature, just totally exudes ego. We started picking different actors that might play Zacchaeus in a movie. He picked Joe Pecci. I picked Danny DeVito.

About this time, we pull up in front of a Columbia agency I had not been to before. It was a place providing social services for persons with HIV/AIDS. Zach popped out of the car while I stayed, worrying a little that I would never get around to writing a sermon. As I sat there, I wondered more about this whole ego thing.

I wondered if Zacchaeus climbed the tree, not as a desperate act of humility, but instead to distance himself from Jesus. Maybe he wanted to see Jesus but not be too close to him. The tree allowed for a good view, but he also didn't have to worry about running into Jesus or confronting him head on. That's something we all probably feel sometimes. We like the "*Jesus thing*" from a distance, but we don't want to get too

close. We want to see what's happening, but we don't want to have to come face to face with Jesus. Doing so might mean we have to do something about our state of living, and we really don't have time for those sorts of changes. We've got enough problems to worry about anybody else. Having a Come-to-Jesus meeting with, well, Jesus, might ask me to change the way I treat my spouse, my kids, my coworkers, and my in-laws. It might require an attitude modification or make me pray more or reconcile with a friend I betrayed. What if it made me more generous or want to start a new outreach project or help with the youth group? I don't have time for that! Sometimes, it's easier to blend in; slip into worship, or climb up a tree, to see what Jesus is up to but not get too close. And I get it. Sometimes we're in a fragile state, and that's all we can muster.

Zach hops back into the car, grinning again like he was when we left the last stop. I still decided it was not my business, so I didn't ask what that stop was all about. I saw him mark off another thing on the list as we pulled away from the curb and headed on to the next destination. I shared with Zach my idea about Zacchaeus trying to separate himself from Jesus, and that notion didn't fly with him. He suggested that Zacchaeus just wanted to get a different perspective on this man, Jesus. *"It's like the movie Dead Poets Society with Robin Williams,"* he said.

Have you seen this movie? In one of Mr. Keating's unconventional lessons to his students in this New England prep school that had been practicing the same old techniques for decades, he jumps up on his desk at the front of the class and explains that he's standing on top of his desk to remind himself that we must constantly look at things in a different way. *"You see,"* he explains, *"the world looks very different from up here."*

He invites the boys to come up and stand on his desk, one at a time, and look at the room from a different perspective than they've ever seen it before. They were hesitant but one by one they did, and their faces told the tale of the value of getting a different perspective on things. Zach said, *"I think that's what Zacchaeus was doing in the tree. Might be a good idea for us, too."* Sometimes a different perspective is what it takes for you to see Jesus for who he truly is.

As we journeyed back through the construction zones towards the church, Zach and I talked about this, we talked about that, and then we talked about *"it."* *"What's the list all about, Zach?"*

*"I'm surprised you're just now asking,"* he said. *"I created this list of people and organizations that I had taken advantage of when it came time for them to pay their taxes. I'm more like Zacchaeus than you thought, right? The first house... a single mother with three kids who is struggling to get by. That social agency... I didn't do*

*anything to really help them and in fact neglected much of their needs, because I was just doing the minimum and that's all I cared about. I'm making things right now." So, this is like a My Name is Earl episode or something, I said. "Something like that," he said. Just then I got a glimpse at the list and wondered if my name was on it. My property taxes did seem to blow up this past year, so maybe I made the list.*

Before I had time to say anything else, we had pulled up into our church parking lot again. I thought my job was done, and I could get back to sermon writing. But as I tried to say goodbye to Zach, he said he actually wanted to come into the church for a minute to make sure things were ready. "Ready for what?" I asked. "Ready for company," he said. "You see I convinced that single mother of three and the families I saw at the clinic that they should come to church here next Sunday."

And I said, "Oh, well, that was nice of you but I'm not sure they would feel comfortable here...I haven't seen dice in the mirrors of the cars in our lot and our people may know people living with HIV and AIDS, but they don't really talk about it. I'm not sure if all those people would fit in."

"Fit in?" he asked. "Your church follows Jesus, right?" "Well of course we do," I replied. "How would Jesus fit into your congregation? He was kind of a scandalous misfit. That's why he climbed a tree himself and was crucified... because he didn't do all the right things. He lived what was true but not what was deemed right by the culture. And look who followed him... people who didn't fit in. Fisherman, tax collectors (there I am again), lepers, outcasts... misfits. He transformed the world with a bunch of misfits. What about Zacchaeus? He was a misfit, too. People hated him... he was a fraud, a liar, a selfish, cutthroat businessman but he sought Jesus and Jesus sought him."

"Is it too hard to believe that you don't have a Zacchaeus or two or three or many sitting in your congregation right now? Just waiting to have an eye-to-eye meeting with Jesus and be transformed too? Is it impossible to think that one who is worshipping in your midst, who has failed and cheated and lied might be redeemed and just might come to know forgiveness and go about changing the world they touch because they climbed a Sycamore and saw the Savoir calling to them? Who is beyond redemption? The guy who struggles with pornography? The alcoholic housewife who hides her secret? The kid who stopped believing God cared after years of watching his parents fight with each other? The man who doesn't know who he is any more and is living on the edge of a breakdown." I sat there in silence. "Too messy to consider" he went on. "Not if 'the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost' (v. 10).

*Remember, Zacchaeus was the biggest train wreck Jesus could find in town that day. Jesus is messy when it comes to loving people and if that is the Christ we follow, then it will be messy for us sometimes too. The real stories behind the suits and dresses in*

*the pews would shock you. But a living God is just that kind of God...one that can still shock you. One that calls to any and all to come follow him. Is that the kind of God you follow?"* I was stunned still. Zach went on, *"If it is that Jesus you follow, then sometimes you go against conventional wisdom. Sometimes you eat with the wrong crowd, you advocate for the wrong crowd, you pray with and love the wrong crowd, and sometimes you **are** the wrong crowd. Mark, you're emoting a significant amount of ego right now. Let your ego go and realize that you too are just a beggar of grace and when at your best, you are one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread."*

We chatted some more, and I led Zach out to his car that had been repaired while we were away. My side-tracked time with Zach was time consuming, but he reminded me of who I am... just a man lucky enough to have an encounter with grace, with Jesus the Christ, and some people like this congregation to love me along the way. As I turned to walk back inside, another car passed by and began honking at me repeatedly... a constant beep. All of a sudden, I rubbed my eyes enough to see that it was not a car but the blaring beep of my alarm clock next to my bed.

My encounter and car ride with Zach was all just a dream... but dreams aren't all that bad. They can speak truth to us, and this dream reminded me of my place in the kingdom. Perhaps it's a dream for us all... one that checks egos at the door, that expects a face-to-face reckoning with Christ, which discovers the wee little man inside us all that finds salvation and in turn offers back our best in humble service. It raised the question, *"Who is my wee little withness?"*

On my nightstand lies open a book I was reading before I went to sleep. I had highlighted these words. *"In exchange for our humility and willingness to accept the charity [grace] of God, we are given a kingdom. And a beggar's kingdom is better than a proud man's delusion."*<sup>2</sup>

You are given a kingdom. What will you do with it?

May it be so.

Song of Response on the next page.

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<sup>2</sup> Blue Like Jazz. Donald Miller. Thomas Nelson Publishers. Nashville, TN. 2003. Pg. 86.

**Song of Response**  
**“Hey Up There, Zacchaeus!”**  
**Ed Varnum**

WORDS BY ED VARNUM; MUSIC: “THE GAMBLER” BY DON SCHLITZ,  
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*Refrain:*

Hey up there, Zacchaeus! Won't you come down and see us?  
We'd like to get together and share a meal today.  
Just want to get to know you. (We all have stuff we go through.)  
To let you know God loves you, and love will find a way.

1. He climbed up in a sycamore to get a look at Jesus.  
That was just fine with the crowd, they didn't like him much.  
Tax collector, scoundrel; “He's a crook,” said all the people.  
But soon his life would be transformed as grace reached out in love.

*Refrain:*

Hey up there, Zacchaeus! Won't you come down and see us?  
We'd like to get together and share a meal today.  
Just want to get to know you. (We all have stuff we go through.)  
To let you know God loves you, and love will find a way.

2. Disciples of Christ Jesus, who is your Zacchaeus?  
Who is the outcast in your life, despised and no one's friend,  
who stands apart (or in a tree!), unloved and unwanted?  
Will you be like Jesus and invite that outcast in?

*Refrain:*

Hey up there, Zacchaeus! Won't you come down and see us?  
We'd like to get together and share a meal today.  
Just want to get to know you. (We all have stuff we go through.)  
To let you know God loves you, and love will find a way.

**BROAD HEARTS   BROAD MINDS   BROAD REACH**