

Session 2

TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE

Luke 23:43 (Luke 19:1-10)

Memory Verse

And he said to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

– LUKE 23:43, CSB



Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Christ came to seek and save the lost.

There are few places that rival airports in the opportunities for people watching. Particularly in major international airports, a person can learn a great deal about other cultures and social norms if he or she is willing to carefully pay attention. It does not take a tremendous amount of time to realize that one of the things that transcends cultural boundaries is that the manner in which a person responds to someone has a lot to do with what they believe about that person. For instance, if they are addressing a peer or superior, generally body language and speech will be much more understanding, patient, and informed by etiquette. If they are addressing a minor or child, speech will generally be more terse, directive, and short-tempered. If it is a professional venture or sales trip, one would probably hear more accommodating language focused on building relational credibility. All of this is based on a person's understanding of what the person they are addressing needs to hear or experience from them in that moment.

When considering Jesus' sayings from the cross, each saying flowed out of His understanding of how His mission needed to move forward, even in the waning moments of His physical life. In the conversation with a thief that hung next to Him on his own cross, few words were exchanged because each one would have been in excruciating pain. What Jesus communicated in those few words, though, was a promise of eternal life because that was exactly what Jesus came to earth for—to seek and save the lost. Jesus could authoritatively say that the thief would be with Him in Paradise because Jesus had the divine power to make it so.

? Think about your interactions from the past 24 hours. Of the conversations you remember, how many different ways did you address people? How did what you knew of them shape those conversations?

? What do you think those who know you best would say are your top priorities based on the things you discuss with them most often?

? Read Luke 23:41-42. What did this thief's words indicate that he understood about Jesus?

Session Summary

In this week's session, Jesus' second saying from the cross was a promise to a criminal that was crucified next to Him. After defending Jesus from the mockery of the other criminal, the one to whom Jesus spoke asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Recognizing his need for Jesus, even moments before his death, the criminal pled for Jesus' help. In response, Jesus promised what He promises everyone who recognizes his or her need for Him—that he would join Jesus in Paradise.

1. The Least Likely Suspect in the Least Likely Place (Luke 19:1-2; Luke 23:43)

Immediately before the account of Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus, Luke recorded Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-23 and followed it with a pericope on wealth and the Kingdom of God in 18:24-30. The story of Zacchaeus stood in remarkable

contrast to the events of the previous chapter. In Luke 18, Luke described a man who would have been at the center of attention wherever he went. He was young, wealthy, and wielded tremendous influence. When confronted by Jesus regarding his idolatry of wealth, the young man chose to retain his possessions instead of following Jesus. Amazingly, though Luke spoke of His sadness, Jesus let the man walk away. The disciples were so dumb-founded by this that they asked Jesus, in effect, “If not this guy, who in the world can be saved? What about us?”

In Luke 19, Luke wrote of a completely different sort of person. Jesus was passing through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem, evidently not planning on staying. Jericho was approximately 15 miles from Jerusalem, so there was still significant traveling to be done. The brief and direct introduction of Zacchaeus made clear that he was a wealthy Jewish man. However, the means by which his wealth had been amassed would have meant he was universally despised. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus had so excelled at overtaxing people on behalf of the Roman government that subordinate tax collectors had been assigned to him.

? How have you noticed that you respond by default to people in less honorable professions? What occupations can you think of in our culture that would be equivalent to Zacchaeus’ profession?

? Application: Describe a time when you were surprised to learn that someone was a Christian. What was the most unexpected thing about their testimony? What did their testimony teach you about the breadth of God’s reach?

In considering the depiction of Zacchaeus in Luke 19, the reader is positioned to assume Zacchaeus would be opposed to Jesus. After all, Jesus had just finished teaching about how the attraction to wealth was a dangerous snare for those following Him. Additionally, Zacchaeus was a man of questionable integrity to say

the least, making his fortune defrauding his own people and teaching others to do the same. Bear in mind, he would have made his money not on the taxes collected; those went to the Roman government. He made his fortune on the extra he charged his fellow Jews as he collected the already exorbitant tax. It would not have been hard to begrudge a man like that.

From a certain perspective, the story of Zacchaeus prepares the reader for the interaction with the thief on the cross. Crucifixion, after all, was reserved for only the most heinous criminals in the eyes of the Roman government. The thief that mocked and hurled insults at Jesus would have actually been the one acting most consistently with the character of one who would be in line for crucifixion. Still, the thief that defended Jesus and then asked to be remembered by Him was promised that he would be in Paradise with Jesus. The breadth of God's grace and mercy was displayed in the most amazing way in these two least likely suspects.

2. Recognizing the Need for Jesus (Luke 19:3-6)

If Luke's initial depiction of Zacchaeus invited skepticism from the reader, his following characterization would have been gloriously illuminating. The reason for his entrance into Luke's narrative was that he wanted to see Jesus. That would not have been an alarming detail, given that everyone wanted to get a glimpse of Jesus. Even His greatest critics would not stop following Him, hoping to hear everything He said. According to Joel Green, the connotation of Luke's record, though, was not that Zacchaeus simply wanted to observe Jesus, "but wants to know 'who Jesus is.'"¹ Zacchaeus' curiosity about Jesus was not factual in nature, rather it was a quest for experiential knowledge. He was hungry for Jesus. Where the rich young ruler of Luke 18 was not willing to budge in the smallest way to follow Jesus, Zacchaeus was so determined that not even the resistance of the crowd would hinder him.

Given his wealth and influence (even if of a nefarious nature), the events of verse 4 were shocking. Jewish men did not run in public, as it was a sign of disgrace or lack of dignity. Climbing a tree would have been even more unthinkable for such a prominent member of society. The two actions being connected heavily emphasized Zacchaeus' dogged determination to see Jesus.

? How would you describe the degree of importance our culture places on dignity and appearing to have it all together? What do you think Zacchaeus' experience would have been like if he shared the same perspective?

? Application: What points of social expectation and cultural pressure are you willing to transgress in order to know Jesus more fully? What are some of those expectations and pressures that would seem to dampen one's ability to whole-heartedly follow Jesus?

Incredibly, Zacchaeus' determination to encounter Jesus paid off. It would be hard to determine who would have been more shocked by Jesus stopping where Zacchaeus was in the tree—Zacchaeus or the crowd. Zacchaeus, after all, surely knew that he was hated. He was aware of his dishonest gain and the treachery with which he had defrauded people. Imagining that Jesus would stop His journey in order to address a man making a fool of himself was beyond the realm of possibility. But that is exactly what happened. For the crowd's part, understanding that Jesus was a Jewish man who understood Jewish culture, it was embarrassing to think of Jesus taking time for someone so hated and behaving so inappropriately. The entire situation violated the highly valued social etiquette of the Jewish culture at seemingly every point. Still, it was happening right in front of everyone's eyes.


As if the encounter were not scandalous enough already, the brief address from Jesus bordered on outlandish. Not only did Jesus acknowledge the running Jewish man sitting in a tree, He also stated the necessity of going to Zacchaeus' home. The visit was culturally more significant than modern paradigms. Staying in someone's home, eating a meal with them, and generally accepting their hospitality communicated an acceptance of that person. The hated and outcast Zacchaeus could not get out of the tree fast enough!

3. From Desperation to Salvation (Luke 19:7-10)

The response from the crowd was predictable and tragic. All who saw it began to complain. This grumbling and complaining had become almost a trademark for the Jewish people in the Bible when God acted in a way that was contrary to their expectation. Moses dealt with it repeatedly and now the Prophet who was like Moses, only greater, was dealing with the same bitter resentment and jealousy. The grumbling of those who had been following Jesus highlighted how misunderstood His message was by the Jews, even the leaders in the Law.

The reaction of Zacchaeus could not have been a stronger contrast. While those that would have perceived themselves as having an inside track to Jesus' approval stood there and grumbled, this hated outcast of a tax collector repented. The rich young ruler from Luke 18 walked away from Jesus when told to give all his possessions to the poor; Zacchaeus came up with the idea on his own. What had previously been his only claim to social notoriety and personal significance—his wealth—Zacchaeus was now willingly parting with.

 What would you say the grumbling of the crowd revealed about their misunderstanding of Jesus' message?

 Application: How has encountering Jesus impacted your life in the last year? If you are a Christian, how does that change affirm that He is alive and still working in you for His glory? If you are not yet a follower of Christ, how is He calling you to respond?

Jesus' proclamation on the heels of Zacchaeus' pledge made clear that Zacchaeus had been saved. It is important to note that his salvation was not the response of doing all the things he promised and giving away his wealth. Rather, that incredible degree of life change resulting in the outward display of the characteristics of the kingdom of God verified that salvation had come to Zacchaeus.

Jesus closed the account with Zacchaeus by clearly defining why this encounter was such a necessity. The Son of Man came specifically to seek and to save the lost. Doing so meant that the lost would act like the lost. In other words, they would frequently not “get it” when it came to religious custom or social norms. Zacchaeus was, to put it colloquially, rough around the edges. His lifestyle was ethically compromised. He was outcast and unaccepted. In other words, he demonstrated in virtually every way that he was lost and adrift. However, he also acknowledged his desperation for Jesus and, precisely because of that, salvation came to his house.

Conclusion

Following are some key points that Jesus’ encounters with Zacchaeus and the thief on the cross offer to us.

First, Jesus pointedly declared that He came to seek and save the lost. Christians are to increasingly have the same priority. Discipleship, after all, is the process of gradually being made into the likeness of Christ through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

Second, Jesus extended grace and mercy to those that the religious elite would have turned away. The thief on the cross would have been reviled by the Jewish leaders—as Jesus was—as being cursed for hanging on a tree. Zacchaeus was not only roundly despised, but was actually combatted by the Jewish crowd as they tried to keep him from Jesus. A relationship with Christ begins with humbly acknowledging our own unworthiness and sinfulness. Sometimes, however, Christians can forget how badly in need of grace each of us was and is. Remembering one’s own need for the grace of Christ places the heart in a posture of humility that helps in seeing not-yet-Christians as those who need Jesus instead of those that don’t fit in with His people.

Third, the reality of salvation has outward signs of inner transformation. Zacchaeus was suddenly no longer defined by his wealth, but freely gave it to those in need and sought to right the wrongs of those he defrauded. Such life change is a natural outflow when a person’s identity and eternal destiny are changed through an encounter with Jesus.

❓ If you are following Jesus, how would you describe your life before Him? What aspects of that life were key to acknowledging your need for Him? How has that awareness of your need for His grace changed since?

❓ Think about the Christians that you consider yourself closest to. How familiar are you with their testimonies of coming to Christ? How have these impacted you personally?

❓ How has your desire to have gospel conversations with others changed in the last year? Has it grown or cooled? How would you like for that desire to change this year? What next steps do you believe you should take this week in order to move in that direction?

CHRIST CONNECTION: The entire purpose for the incarnation of Jesus was so that He could offer Himself as a ransom for many, sacrificing Himself so that humanity could be freed from the death sentence that sin brings.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: As followers of Christ, Christians must model the relentless pursuit of the lost that Jesus Himself demonstrated.



FOR NEXT WEEK

Woman, Behold Your Son

Main Passages

- John 19:26-27 (Matthew 15:1-9)

Session Outline

1. Family in the Fellowship of Christ (John 19:26-27)
2. The Foundational Command (Matthew 15:1-4)
3. Moving from Empty Acts to Real Caring (Matthew 15:5-9)

Memorize

And he said to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

- Luke 23:43, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - James 1:27
- Tuesday - Galatians 6:10
- Wednesday - Deuteronomy 15:11
- Thursday - 1 John 3:17-18
- Friday - Matthew 25:31-40
- Saturday - Isaiah 58:6-7

References

¹Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997.