

Sermon for Sunday, January 26, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

WHEN LIFE HAS YOU UP A TREE  
St. Luke 19:1-10

Text: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." St. Luke 19:10

Life had Zacchaeus up a tree in more ways than one. When he climbed up the sycamore tree to see Jesus, he was desperately searching for some answers to life. It isn't difficult to draw a personality pattern for Zacchaeus. First, the Bible tells us he was short. And any amateur psychologist can tell you that being too anything - too tall, too short, too thin, too fat - can do terrible things to a person. In an effort to compensate, to prove himself, Zacchaeus had worked hard to achieve. The Bible tells us he was a tax collector. This put him in the employment of the Roman government, but more important, it put him in a position of superiority and authority over his fellow Jews. His ego needed that. Always he had felt so inferior and had felt that everyone looked down on him because he was too short. It must have made him feel important to have a sense of authority over others so that he was willing to work for the Romans in order to achieve that status.

But even being tax collector was not enough. His ego needs were such that he was a driven man. And because his ambition, his need to achieve, his need to be important drove him relentlessly, the Bible tells us that he was a chief tax collector. So, not only did he achieve status over his fellow citizens, he even achieved status over his fellow tax collectors and became a part of what we today would call top management.

But position in his occupation still did not satisfy Zacchaeus. His needs still were not met. I think we can learn a lesson about our needs right here. If a person is driven by a need, no matter how much he achieves, it still will not satisfy. I know that some of you business men this morning are driven by the need to succeed. Some of you have already succeeded and you can tell those struggling behind you that it has not satisfied all of your needs. No, when a man is driven by some inner emotional need, no matter what success he attains, it will not be enough. The insatiable appetite of that inner emotional need demands more and more.

So, the Bible not only tells us that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector it goes on to tell us that he was rich. Yes, Zacchaeus had accumulated an amount of earthly, material goods that he could be described as rich. He had achieved financial security, he moved at the top financial levels in his community, and he sat on the board of directors of the First National Bank of Jericho. Yet Zacchaeus was not satisfied. Still he had that inner hunger in his heart; still he sought for something that gave meaning and purpose and direction to life. And no matter how much his bank account grew, still there was something missing in his life, still there was that dreadful longing for he knew not what in his heart.

And because he was driven by some inner need that nothing seemed to satisfy, the Bible tells us something else about Zacchaeus. It tells us that his fellow townsmen called him a sinner. What did that mean? We are not told, but is it hard to guess? What kinds of things do men with money and needs do? What sort of trouble do wealthy men who are driven by inner compulsions get into? No, it is not hard to guess. It isn't hard to guess because we know people who have been just that way and we know some of the things they have done. Worse still, some of us here this morning know what sorts of things we have done, the things we have gotten into, because we had some desperate inner needs that somehow were not being met.

But inspite of all he had achieved, inspite of all the things he had done, Zacchaeus had not found satisfaction. He was still a driven man, deeply troubled by those inner needs, and he longed to find peace and fulfillment. Yes, life had Zaccheus up a tree and he was a desperate man.

Did you ever wonder why a man in top management, a man in authority, a man of wealth and substance, would do something so ignominious as climb a tree? Well, the truth is there comes a time when a man becomes so desperate, when his needs are so intense, that he no longer cares what others think. Zacchaeus had come to that point in his life. Everybody had been talking about this man Jesus. Wild stories had been circulating about him. Some were even whispering that he was the Messiah and others told how their lives had been changed by him. And Zaccheus, who was emotionally up a tree and at the end of his rope, was grasping at straws. His desperation was so intense that the Bible tells us that "He sought to see who Jesus was." And when his shortness kept him from seeing over the shoulders of the crowd as Jesus passed by, he climbed up a tree so that he could see this man.

This brings me to the first point I want to make about Zacchaeus. He had a desire in his heart - he had a desire for something in his life that neither authority, nor leadership, nor money, nor sin had been able to meet. Life may have you up a tree this morning. You may be so driven by inner needs and inner emotions that you don't understand that you feel life has you treed. And it may very well be that some of us are here this morning because there is a desperate desire, a desperate need in us, a desperate longing for something better, something of God that might meet our needs and satisfy our longings.

Are you up a tree in some way this morning? Most of us are in one way or another. The Bible tells us that when Jesus came to the place where Zacchaeus had climbed the tree, he looked up. Jesus was the Son of God and he knew all about Zacchaeus when he saw him. If you are up a tree in some way this morning, Jesus knows you are there. He already knows about your inner needs, your inner drives, the things that impel and compel you. Have you got problems this morning - are you having troubles you can't quite handle? Jesus knows about them.

The second thing I want you to notice about Zacchaeus is this: he made a decision about Jesus. First the Bible tells us that when Jesus offered to come into his home, Zacchaeus came down from the tree in a hurry and he received Jesus joyfully. Second, the Bible tells us that he made some changes in his life-style. He said to Jesus, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."

Most of us, when life has us up a tree, have a burning desire for things to be different. But it is one thing to desire something and it is quite another thing to make a decision, a life-changing decision about it. That's what Zacchaeus did - he made a decision for Jesus.

I don't know anyone who doesn't have problems of one sort or another. I don't know anyone who doesn't have needs of one kind or another. And I suppose all of us long and yearn for solutions to those needs. Somehow we want something to come along and change everything so those inner drives, those inner appetites, those inner compulsions will be met and filled. Unfortunately life doesn't work that way. You see, Jesus wouldn't override the freedom of Zaccheus - he couldn't and wouldn't make the decision about life for Zacchaeus. No, that was something Zacchaeus had to do for himself. You have to do it for yourself, too. If you have burdens and problems and needs, Jesus knows you are up a tree. He is eager and willing to help you. But, you see, you and I have to make the decision. We

have to decide if we will receive him joyfully and change our life-style.

Isn't that where many of us are this morning? Nothing we have done has met our real needs. We see Jesus and he offers us fulfillment, peace, contentment, satisfaction - but we have to make that decision. There is a fundamental principle they teach us in counseling and it is this: a person will not change his life-style, his habit patterns, his responses to life that are inadequate, until the pain of being like he is is greater than the pain of changing. You may be hurting this morning, you may be in such inner pain that you want to be different. But you will never change until the pain of being as you are is greater than the pain, the effort, the sacrifice of being different, of being what in your heart you know Jesus wants you to be. Up there in that tree, the pain Zacchaeus was experiencing was so great that he was willing to change and he received Jesus joyfully. That's the only way it can ever happen to you.

There is a third thing I would call to your attention about Zacchaeus, and it is his deliverance. Jesus said, "today salvation has come to this house...for the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." If you are up a tree this morning and want to get down, I have some good news for you. You see, once you make that decision for Jesus, once you receive him joyfully and decide to change your life-style, a wonderful thing happens. Jesus enters into your life to give you the power to make those changes you so desperately wanted and needed. He delivers you from yourself.

You see, that's the business of Jesus. As our text for this morning puts it, he came to seek and to save the lost. And if you are up a tree this morning, Jesus not only came to find you, he came to save you and to get you down out of that tree. But be careful! Don't get the sequence out of order! First comes the desire to change, the recognition that the ways you have responded to life and to your needs have been inadequate. Then comes the decision on your part, the decisive decision to make some changes and to become what Jesus wants you to be. It is only then that deliverance comes. It is only then that Jesus will enter into your life to help you and to get you down out of that tree.