Sermon on Luke 19:1-10
St. Matthew's Ev. Lutheran
Oconomowoc, WI
November 8–9, 2025

Jesus Pays Us a Visit
1) Not to see a structure
2) But to save our souls

JESUS!

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ!

I was blessed to pastor churches just like St. Matthew's for 23 years before moving on to teach at the seminary. One of the things I miss most about my work as a pastor is making home visits. There were the shut-in visits I made to brothers and sisters who had been sick since Clinton was president. Bodily health alluded them, but the body and blood of Christ sustained them. I loved the visits to the hospital when I was called to perform a baptism, giving exhausted parents and a little child the comfort of the Comforter. Then there were the social visits where I was privileged to share in my members' joy at weddings, confirmations, and graduations. I ate well at those events. Not a chance that I can fit into the robe I wore as a rookie pastor!

How amazing, how wonderful it is that throughout history, our Lord has lovingly visited sinful men and women as he works out his saving plans! The Lord visits the tent of a wandering Aramean named Abraham to assure him that a son would be born to him and that through his offspring, the entire world would be blessed. Through a bush that wouldn't burn up, the Lord visits a sheep rancher on the lamb named Moses. It was finally time to **let his people go!** The angel Gabriel pays a visit to a young lady named Mary. She would have a son, and the name–Jesus!–had already been picked out. And today, we see our Lord pay a visit to a wee little man named Zacchaeus. And as we see our Savior in action in the palatial home of Zacchaeus, we will gain a deeper understanding of the visit Jesus pays to us this morning. **JESUS PAYS US A VISIT 1) NOT TO SEE A STRUCTURE 2) BUT TO SAVE A SOUL**

Jesus was traveling along the road to Jerusalem, a route that wound through the ancient and wealthy city of Jericho. (This is the same Jericho where the walls had come 'a tumb'in down' back in the days of Joshua.) Jericho was a fertile oasis – known as the "Eden of Palestine." Needless to say, the Romans loved Jericho. And they really loved the tax revenue it generated for them.

Speaking of taxes… There was a man named Zacchaeus who lived in Jericho. Every preschool graduate knows that Zacchaeus was vertically challenged, but don't let that little wrapper fool you. Zacchaeus was a giant in Jericho. Luke says he was a "CHIEF TAX

COLLECTOR" – the only time that title appears in all of Greek literature. Not only was Zacchaeus a chief tax collector, but he was the chief tax collector in a district that flowed with milk and honey. And Zacchaeus made sure that plenty of that milk and honey flowed into his pockets. (In typical tax collector fashion, Zacchaeus lined his pockets while the Romans looked the other way.) Ironically, the name Zacchaeus means "pure." "Dirty Rotten Scoundrel" would probably be more accurate.

But now look at him! What is this powerful, wealthy leader of the Roman IRS doing scampering up a tree like some caffeinated kid? You can almost imagine some of the off-color comments that Zacchaeus heard as Jericho's unpopular arch-tax collector scooted up that sycamore tree. Yet up and up he went. Why? Because Jesus was coming his way. His dignity could take the hit. The taxes could wait. For a moment, his money could count itself. Jesus was coming!

And it is at this point that Jesus did exactly what we wouldn't expect! "When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "**Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."**

What was Jesus thinking? He MUST stay at the house of Jericho's little arch-crook? He MUST spend precious hours at the home of a man who had only fleeced the flock? He MUST visit the house of a man who built that house on the backs of Jericho's citizens? And now, I want you to add this to everything else: Do you know when Jesus was walking through Jericho toward Jerusalem? It was only one week before he had an appointment scheduled with a lynch mob, a crown of thorns, and a cross! Time is short! Jesus has just one week left to preach and teach! Yet he whittles away an entire day with a short, big-time sinner named Zacchaeus.

"Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." Jesus wasn't interested in seeing a better homes and gardens tour of what was probably one of Israel's finest homes. He wasn't interested in talking about the master bath, the granite countertops, or the designer drapes! Jesus wasn't really all that interested in seeing a structure itself. Isn't that a sobering truth when you think about all the building that St. Matthew's has been blessed to do over the last several years? Or all the beautiful homes here in Oconomowoc – one of the higher rent districts in our state? Isn't it a sobering truth that the Lord might, just maybe, be underwhelmed by the structures that mankind builds? That our churches, schools, houses, or stadiums don't necessarily bedazzle the One who sits in heaven's throne room?

It is true that our Lord sees the beautiful campus that St. Matthew's has built over the last several years – a campus built to his glory. BUT what the Lord is infinitely more interested in is you! How is the structure of your heart and soul doing? If we scratch behind the paint of our faces, and look behind the walls of our hearts, and kick the foundation of our souls, every one of us must confess that all is not well. As we read through the Bible, we find ourselves in a long line of the anything-but-lovely. In our family tree, you find the violence of Cain, the drunkenness of Noah, the lies of Abraham, the deceit of Jacob, the adultery of David, the materialism of

Solomon, the despair of Elijah, the theft of Judas, the denial of Peter – all part of our moral genetic pool! If Zacchaeus was an arch-tax collector, then every one of us is an arch–something!

But now, my friends, I invite you to tell Jesus something he doesn't know! He who walked down the Jericho road knew full well the sinful baggage that Zacchaeus dragged up that tree with him. He also saw the fire of faith taking root in Zacchaeus' heart! Jesus would not let the urgency of his mission in Jerusalem nor the snide remarks of the self-righteous Pharisees deter him from seeking and saving this lost son of Abraham! Jesus MUST stay at Zacchaeus' house. Jesus MUST share his forgiveness. Jesus must proclaim himself as the way, the truth, and the life to Zacchaeus before continuing on to Jerusalem. The Pharisees – so very full of themselves – could wait. The crowds – so eager to catch sight of something sensational – could wait. A chief tax collector, a chief sinner, could not wait! So too, Jesus **MUST pay us a visit to SAVE OUR SOULS!** He is, after all, the one who came to earth to seek and to save what was lost!

And that mission to seek and save the lost led the Lord to the last places on earth where you would expect to find him! That dedication brought him down to a manger, where the One who made the stars looked up at them while he spit up on himself and messed his diapers. The dedication of Jesus to your salvation drove him out into the desert to square off with the devil's temptations and win. The absolute commitment to your salvation moved Jesus to leave the luxury of Zacchaeus' house and continue on to Jerusalem. He knew full well that no ivory couches were waiting for him in Jerusalem. He knew about every spit, slap, slug, every single thorn and nail. He knew all about the whip and the cross. Jesus was so dedicated to your salvation that the One who fills heaven and earth allowed himself to be stuffed into a cold, stony tomb—completely identifying himself with the death that is the wages of our sin. Jesus was so craving for your saving, that he would not, could not let death keep him down. He rose in victory. He lives in glory at his Father's right hand to seek and save the lost until he comes again. And this evening/morning, right here, right now, where 200-300 are gathered in his name around his Word, Jesus pays us a visit to bring us his salvation! What a God you have!

Zacchaeus knew that too. That's why he was so eager to serve his Savior with the fruits that overflowed from a forgiven heart. Listen as Zacchaeus guilt melts away into pure joy: "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. Zacchaeus didn't need to be poked or prodded into giving his money to the poor and make restitution to those he had cheated. His stunning generosity glorified his Savior. What a stark contrast to the bean-counting Pharisees who threw around their shekels like they were manhole covers. (Lk. 16:14)

No one had to poke or prod you to build your beautiful church, school, and childcare center. The Wisconsin Synod stewardship police didn't do a single patrol in your congregation. Your church council didn't send out a single goon to make collection calls in the middle of the night. Not a single bill was sent out. I am confident that my brother pastors avoided guilt-driven motivation like the plague. Instead, the Savior has sought and saved the lost in this place. And

those the Savior has found have found amazing ways to serve him: All of the building structures at St. Matthew's are dedicated not to the glory of man, but to the salvation of man; not to bring notoriety to a church, but to grow the Church!

And the devil hates it. He hated it when the poor received dinner through Zacchaeus' offering. He hated that Zacchaeus settled accounts with those he had previously cheated. He despises everything you do out of thankfulness to Christ. He despises everything you have built for God's glory. And barring God's permission, he won't be able to knock any of these buildings down. So what he will try to do is knock them down in your own estimation. He'll slither up to you and whisper, "*What's the big deal about offices and classrooms, bathrooms and broom closets, pews and parking? Sure did cost enough!*" Bosh! Don't you dare let the devil steal your joy that is yours in Jesus!

Just an office? People come to be counseled in those offices. And Jesus himself shows up for a visit as sin is forgiven. Souls are saved.

Just a classroom? Children come. The Word of Life is taught. And Jesus himself comes to that classroom for a visit. Little ones to him belong! Souls are saved.

Just a sanctuary filled with pews? People sit in those pews! And when they do, through a word of forgiveness, a sermon about the Savior, a meal of Christ's body and blood, Jesus himself shows up once again - all over again - for a visit. And souls are saved.

Brothers and sisters, run. Get up that tree. Don't you dare sit in the dirt, wondering why Zacchaeus is so excited up there! It simply won't do to oooh and aaaah at a structure when the Savior comes to save! Jesus has come to visit each and every one of you. Praise God! He brought salvation to you and your house. In joy, go back to your tax booth - your bank or business, your teaching or trade, your restaurant or your roofing, whatever it is you do, do it with joy in the name of Jesus! The Savior is pleased to visit you today. And through you, the Savior will visit others today to seek and to save. And we are glad for it! Amen.

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