

“Jesus Came for Us, to Seek the Lost”

I Timothy 1:15 & Luke 19:1–10

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For the next couple of studies, I will be talking about the purpose of the Incarnation and this passage from Luke 19 describes Jesus’ statements about why He came. Why He came will be our theme for this study. Let’s listen to God’s Word. Paul said in I Timothy 1:15, *[15] The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*

Luke 19:1-10 says *[1] He entered Jericho and was passing through. [2] And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. [3] And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. [4] So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. [5] And 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.” [6] So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. [7] And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” [8] And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” [9] And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. [10] For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

I want to say a word about journeys. I’m still trying to figure out our communication, so I want to be solo now. Everything’s new to me. I want to talk about a man named Columbus from 1492. He sailed and rediscovered the Americas. Now, you may have heard when you were little that people were afraid that Columbus would sail off the edge of the earth and collapse, fall into the abyss. Truth is, almost every educated person in those days knew that the world was round. They thought it was 24, 25,000 miles in circumference, which is about right. Columbus came up with some numbers and said it was more like 15,000. They thought he was going to starve to death and run out of water as he set out on his journey. Columbus was lost. He was lost in more ways than one. He was a fantastically skilled sailor and communicator, but he was seeking to go to the spice areas to trade, to make a name, to become wealthy. He didn’t do that in God’s providence. He landed on the Americas. He did better than he knew, better than he could ever have planned, but he was lost when he set out going west.

Then there was another great journey by Magellan, 28 years later, and the year was 1520. He also wanted to become wealthy and reach the Spice Islands. He knew that you could go west now, and he thought that would be a great way, a better way to circumnavigate the globe – to make a name for himself to become wealthy. He also got lost. In fact, he died about halfway through the journey in a battle in the South Pacific. Not only did he die, but 253 of the 270 men that went with him perished as they circled the globe. The other 17 were wealthy and famous, but they also were largely lost.

Those are two great journeys that most of us learn about in school and the contrast between those journeys and the journey that Christ took to this world could not possibly be sharper because Jesus did not come to seek fame or fortune or reputation. He had all the fame, fortune and reputation that He could possibly need. They certainly didn’t need to persuade anyone to finance His journey because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit had agreed before time

began on the plan of Redemption that He fulfilled. He certainly wasn't moved by greed or fame or uncertainty. He knew exactly when and where He would land and what He would do. In fact, on seven occasions He said "the Son of Man (Jesus) came to... do something and He accomplished what He came to do.

We're going to look at a few of them in this study and one in the next study. At one point, He says, "the Son of Man came to fulfill the law." He came to call sinners and in Luke 19, He came to seek and to save those who are lost. Now, sometimes when we're out and about, when we're in the holiday celebrations, in secular culture, it seems almost that if Jesus is remembered at all, He's remembered as a beautiful baby, as if landing on Earth and becoming a baby were the goal – kind of like the moon landing. Can we get there? Let's see if we can do it but Jesus did take on flesh, that's beautiful and it ennobles our flesh henceforth, human flesh, flesh and blood. Our bodies are ennobled by the fact that Jesus took a body but He didn't simply want to take a body for He came to seek and to save those who were lost. I'm going to walk you through some of the statements.

The first one is in Matthew 5:17. It's when Jesus was teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, his new disciples, that at the beginning of it he said, 'Don't think that I came to abolish the law of the prophets'... for it's easy to challenge the way people understood them, 'but to fulfill them.' He came to fulfill them by pressing deep into the challenge, the difficulty, the depths of the commandments, how hard it is to keep them. For example, the first one He talks about is murder. He says, 'You've heard Me says thou shall not murder.' Now, I don't know about you, but when people read the Ten Commandments, most people think I like that one because it means no one's going to kill me and I'm too squeamish to kill anybody. "Give me some more commands like that," people often think. Jesus said, "If you're angry with your brother and don't seek reconciliation that's a form of murder and if you despise people and call them fools, idiots, morons, worthless and say unkind things in traffic like drivers who should have their license revoked because they have no brains in their head or don't know how to pay attention when that light is green, that's murder. In fact, if you even let it go when you know your brother or sister is upset with you and do nothing about it, that's a form of murder because you shouldn't have any anger or wrath in you."

This means that we can't keep the law. No one is capable of keeping the law with their hands, their heart, their emotions, their will, because it's too daunting. So, He says, "I came to fulfill the law." He came to fulfill the law two ways. First, is by teaching it accurately and fully, and second, by obeying it and giving us His righteousness when we trusted Him. Let me put it this way. If you get a sweater or socks for Christmas this year, you might just think to yourself as you put the sweater or socks on, as a believer, you have put on the righteousness of Christ. I'm clothed in the righteousness of Christ who came to fulfill the law. Now that's brief. I'll be a little bit longer with the later ones.

Second, Jesus said, 'I came to call sinners.' Now, He did this when He was a few months into His ministry after the Sermon on the Mount, and He had a habit of spending time with all sorts of people, including outcasts and unwelcome people, people who were pretty flagrant sinners. In fact, He had a habit of sharing meals with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors back then were people who betrayed their own nation and served the Romans as they collected money that was delivered over to Romans so they could pay the soldiers who oppressed the Israelites. Tax collectors were traitors, and other sinners were attracted to Jesus because somehow, they detected that He loved them and cared for them even as they are. One of those was named Matthew who became one of the 12.

Matthew invited some friends of his and when some Pharisees, religious teachers of the time saw what Jesus was doing, they became upset and they asked Him a question. It's a valid question; 'Why are you eating with tax collectors and sinners?' If you all found out that I or your next pastor was spotted at a pub where they serve alcohol, people are smoking and playing games that we don't quite approve of, you might think, 'he's hanging out with unbelievers. That's a good thing.' But what if you found out that a pastor, me or somebody else was in a casino day after day, maybe twice a week, as it's an unsavory place, you would probably think 'what's going on?' Jesus said, 'Fair question. Here's the answer to your question. I came to call sinners. Physicians don't hang out with healthy people, they spend their time with the sick and if you think you're healthy because you're so righteous, you don't need me. So of course I'm not hanging out with you but if you think about this, you will know that the God who desires mercy wants to spend time with sinners. That's why I'm doing this. Because I love sinners.' God loves sinners, which is a message this church has proclaimed for a long time now.

Not only does it say it, but it insists on it and the words of Paul will really help us with this. In the later stages of Paul's life, he has his own Jesus came statement and the statement is found in I Timothy 1:15 which says [15] *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*** If you know the Bible pretty well you would say 'I see why Paul would say I came into the world to save sinners because it's a great summary of the Gospel and he was a sinner.' Think about the words 'Christ came into the world.' Christ means Anointed One. God anointed and appointed Jesus to save. The name Jesus means God saves. Christ Jesus came, that is to say He was elsewhere, He preexisted and He entered our life to save sinners. He came specifically into the world. That means ordinary existence, ordinary life.

Question, if the apostles were around today, do you think they'd walk everywhere? Probably not, because we live in a culture where now, we drive around. Okay. Would you agree that the apostles would drive around with Jesus? Yes. What would they drive around in? They would drive around in a beat up 14 passenger van. Right? And Peter would be always yelling shotgun before anybody else could. They'd be saying, 'Peter got shot going again' and they try to push him out of there and so forth. He came into the world, the ordinary world of human life, of human existence, moving around, walking around. He came into this world to save sinners.

Here's the key; of whom I am the worst. Those who know the Bible, understand why Paul would say he's a sinner, because in his first appearance in the Bible, he was a persecutor of the church. He tried to get people to blaspheme. He tried to break up churches, tried to destroy the church, tried to threaten people into renouncing Christ. He thought he was serving God and then the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus and he came to faith. That's very important to notice that he does not say Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I *was* the worst but he says I am the worst. He was redeemed and the Lord appeared to him in probably around the year 30, 32, 33 A.D. By the time he's writing I Timothy, it's probably 59 to 60 A.D and he's about 60 years old. He's probably served the Lord for about 30 years, not taking a wife, although he had to write because it's so dangerous to be married to Paul. He is traveling all over the world having shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment, stonings, lashings for 30 years, and after 30 years of serving the Lord this way, he says, not Christ. Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I was the worst. He says 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am still chief' because our sins should loom large in our eyes.

We should not tell ourselves stories about how Jesus saved us once, long ago and we don't really need Him anymore because we're good people now. Of course, we all hope to make progress as Christians and the purpose is not that we should be down on ourselves for no particular reason, just kind of wallow in our sin. The point is that we continually exalt the grace of Christ whose favor and mercy we need every single day. That's what Paul's saying. We don't outgrow our need for the Gospel.

During the Christmas season, it is possible to lose track of what things are all about. In our culture, there are too many activities and too much gift giving and it's all very distracting. They don't quite tell you what we're being distracted from. It's not quite clear. They don't always know. Secular people can't always tell you what the real point is. A lot of secular celebrations have something to do with a man called Santa Claus. Now, I'll admit to you that my grandchildren view me as a Santa Claus-ish person. When I get home, Lord willing, I may stop by to see a couple of my grandchildren who live nearby. If I do, there's a pretty fair chance that my grandson especially, will say, 'Papa, did you bring a little something for us?' Because he kind of knows that when I fly around there may be a little something that might be in a hidden pocket or one hand and guess which hand and so forth.

When our children asked us questions about Santa Claus years ago, when they were little, we tended to point them to Saint Nicholas. You might have heard of him sometimes called Nicholas of Myra because he came from a town called Myra. Nicholas of Myra was a wealthy man who sold either all or most of his possessions, and gave to people who were in need as he found out about those needs and we could say that we give gifts as a kind of an imitation of Nicholas of Myra, but there's more to him than that. He was actually a leader, a bishop in the church. We don't have bishops here but we don't speak ill of bishops from 1700 years ago because Nicholas of Myra was a staunch defender of the deed of Christ in a day when that was attacked by parts of the church. He was fierce and forthright for the truth, and it was also a generous man. So we admire him and we think gift giving is good and kindness and love is good. In fact, not just because of Nicholas of Myra but because, God gave us His Son. That's the main Christmas gift. When we give gifts to each other, you might think I'm imitating the gift of God the Father in heaven.

All this gift giving is all fine but there's a danger, of course, of materialism, yet I think the bigger danger for us by that I mean America, is really deism. Deism means – holds that God exists, has moral standards and wants us to keep them and if we keep them, He will reward us. We sometimes call that salvation by works. God exists. He has standards. Please keep them. He may punish you if you don't, but certainly if you try hard and are a good person, then you'll be all right. Now, the truth of matter is, in some iterations, not all Santa Claus is a part of a deist system of a belief. You might have noticed that Santa Claus has some traits that are kind of quasi divine, right? I mean, he knows when you're sleeping or when you're awake, how does he know that? Then there's this whole business of him flying over the whole world and going down non-existent chimneys. Somebody discerned how much energy it would take to do that which is something like 132,000 giga joules, which is just a lot so he comes close to omnipotence.

In Santa Claus is coming to town it says 'You better watch out. Better not cry. You better not pout. I'm telling you why because Santa Claus is coming to town and he's making a list. He's checking it twice. He's finding out who's naughty and who's nice.' That's Deism and he's going to give gifts to people who are nice, but not gifts to people who are naughty. Therefore, be good for goodness sake. That's pop level deism. I'm not condemning everything that has to do with Santa Claus. He's fun but that's deism and it loses sight of the Gospel, which does not say Jesus

came into the world to see who's nice and who's not, and to reward good people and to punish bad people. That is not what Jesus came for. Jesus came to seek in to save the lost. (21:05)

That's what Luke 19 says, which is maybe my favorite Christmas passage. It tells the story of a man named Zacchaeus. He was a wee little man who had to climb up a sycamore tree because he wanted to see Jesus. This happens very near the end of Jesus' earthly life. Jesus is going through Jericho on the way to Jerusalem and those two cities are about 35 miles apart, as I recall. Jesus is going to enter the city for the last time in just a few days. There's a crowd. People know He's coming. People are excited. This is the period when throngs surround Jesus and swallow Him up. It's hard to get near and Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus but he can't because he's small and he has no friends to hold him a spot. He has no friends, not because he's a tax collector, but because he's a chief tax collector. That means he organizes the tax collectors. He is the master of the system that defrauds Israel, collects taxes, and pays it to Rome.

Zacchaeus is lost. When I read the story, I wonder what moved this man to this career. What makes a person think "I know what I'll do, I'm going to get rich at the cost of betraying my friends and my family, and I'll never have any friends. That's what I want." That's a person who's lost but God is finding him and something has stirred. God has stirred in him a desire to see Jesus. As he climbs up a tree he is exposing himself to public ridicule. We can imagine a wee chief tax collector, about 50 to 55 years old climbing up a tree. People laugh, children laugh, adults snicker, but he sees Jesus and that's good enough for him. Jesus also sees him and a small miracle is that Jesus knows his name for as far as we know they never met. Jesus says to him as He looks up in the tree, 'Zacchaeus, come down because I must go to your house today. We have an appointment.'

If you know the Bible well, this doesn't strike you as odd because you've heard the story. This is one of the oddest things you'll ever read because people do not walk up to total strangers and say, 'I'm coming to your house in a couple hours and you are going to give me a dinner.' In fact, so many of you have been so nice to me and have said things like, "we'd love to have you to dinner and let us know if we can help you in any way." No one has said to me, 'It's nice of you to come down to Birmingham and I'll be up in St Louis next week so I'll come to your house and bring a few friends. Put on a meal for us.' But Jesus says to Zacchaeus, 'I'm coming to your house. I have to come to your house right now' and the people grumble saying, "What's He doing going to the house of a sinner?"

Zacchaeus, whether he stood up that instant or a little bit later, defends Jesus and basically says, "I'm converting and repenting right now. I'm selling and giving half my possessions to the poor, and if I've defrauded anyone, I'll pay it back four times." The Bible says if you defraud, you pay back double but Zacchaeus says he will double that. 'I'm going to impoverish myself to show that I'm giving up my life that has heretofore been dedicated to enriching myself at the expense of others. I'm giving that up.' Jesus says, "This man's a son of Abraham, for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost." So, Zacchaeus, who hoped to see Jesus, gets something far beyond his wildest dreams; salvation has come to this house as this man was lost, and now he's found.

The theme is Jesus coming to seek the lost and that includes people like you and me. I hope, imagine and trust that the vast majority of you have been found by Christ at some point already in your life. That is to say, you're believers and you're a lost sheep. God came to seek His lost sheep and the Lord has found you. He's found you for a reason. The reason is that you have intrinsic worth in His sight, even if you're a great sinner, even if you committed terrible sins, even if, after becoming a believer, you've made major mistakes and committed major sins. Even

so, you always have worth because God created you in His image and therefore you have great worth. God loves you because you're His creature, not simply a creature, but a creature uniquely made in His image.

This foundational truth is essential to the Gospel to understand what God did. He didn't come to save us because we're good. He came to redeem us because we're worthwhile, because there's something substantial that God put in us and that's something that's been lost in our culture to a large extent. Maybe not in the Bible Belt, but overall in our nation we're drifting toward deism, atheist and agnosticism and when we do, then the Biblical teaching about humanity tends to fade away, doesn't it? No longer do people believe that everyone has dignity because they're made in God's image. If we're not in God's image who are we anyway? One answer is from the evolutionists. People are an accidental collocation of atoms. We happened to have evolved big brains, who knows why? And that means we can come up with great ideas and somehow we also got opposable thumbs so we can pull it off. We're the happiest accident ever known in the world, except we have the problem of self-consciousness and when things go badly, we dwell on it too much.

Then, there are the atheistic environmentalists who say humans are the villains of the earth. We're destroying all the salamanders and the slugs that don't have a shell that works quite right so they're liable to death. We're the destroyers of the planet. Then, we have the achievement oriented people who say you have to create your own life. The existentialists says you have no essence. There's no God given essence to humanity. You have an existence and you can sink to the level of a brute. You can rise to the level of the angels and the gods, but it's up to you. No wonder we live in the age of anxiety – we have to create ourselves. We look around and ask, 'Am I making a life that's good enough? Is my life as good as my neighbor, my classmate, my somebody? Oh my goodness, it's not turning out as planned. I'm so anxious.' No wonder if there's no floor to human identity no matter how low we go, we're always made in God's image, that's what the Bible says, but if there's no floor, of course we're anxious. Of course, we have imposter syndrome, because it all depends on what we achieve. That's the result of unbelief. It's a result of losing sight of God, the Creator making us in His image.

The Gospel says you have worth, not virtue, because you're made in My image and therefore, I come to seek and to save you. It's possible for a Christian to be lost too, I hope you know that. One of my friends, a pastor friend, had surgery some years ago and he got hooked on painkillers, opioids. He's open about it. I'm not going to say his name, but he talks about it because not only did it happen once, but he recovered and lapsed into opioid addiction again the second time. I have a friend that was a pastor who was a very good elder and the stress at work piled up, and he'd been an alcoholic before he was a believer and he started drinking again. He was lost.

I've been lost. It was a period of my life and I was a Christian but I was lost. I had a wonderful job description. I was working in a wonderful place, but I wasn't actually getting to do what was in my job description and I wondered when I would ever get in that spot I was supposed to be in. I felt lost. In fact, I've been lost a bunch of times. I got lost in New York City when I was four, because I didn't like to hold my mother's hand. I was born in New York City. I lived in New York City until I was seven, second grade, and we had gone to the store. I was so bad at holding my mother's hand that she gave up on me and I followed the wrong woman out of the store. I was pretty sure I knew which way I lived but I found a woman that looked like she might be a mom. I said, 'hold my hand as we cross these streets' and I made my way home. I was lost.

I got lost on a big mountain in Colorado one time. The main route was closed for some reason perhaps a rock slide and so I decided to go round the back because there was another route up the mountain but around the back it was kind of scrambling up a scree field, and there were nine of us. We couldn't find the trail. We started running in opposite directions. Now it's 11:30 and the clouds are coming in. That means the lightning will start to strike and we don't know where we are. We said, "Let's just get off the mountain before the storms come." I was lost.

I was lost spiritually when I was eight. For some reason, everybody in my church decided that third graders should join the church. At the age of eight, I was self-consciously not a Christian. I remember sitting outside the church trying to decide what I should do because I did not believe in Jesus and did not have the courage to tell anybody that. I played the hypocrite and said I believed in Jesus. It's possible that some of you are lost like that. You've been around Christians your whole life and you feel like you have to pretend you're a Christian and you're not. You're lost. Jesus wants to find you.

The Lord found me when I was in college. I was 18 years old. I still believe God existed but wasn't a believer but God surrounded me with beautiful Christian men who liked thinking about philosophy, playing basketball and being outrageous in various harmless sorts of ways. The Lord found Zacchaeus. I hope He's found you. If He hasn't don't think you stumbled upon this study by accident. The Lord would like to find you who came to seek and to save those were lost. My goodness, it's possible for a believer to be somewhat lost. To be lost because you don't really like your job, your work because you've been playing the hypocrite. You know it. You don't want to admit it because your child, whether three or 13 or 23 or 33 has wandered off. You don't know what to do. You don't know how to be a parent anymore. There are lots of ways to be somewhat lost and we never outgrow the need for God's grace to help us find Him and find ourselves.

There is the great finding of redemption when we believe in Jesus and gain eternal life. Then there are there are times because we get lost, because we remain sinful, where I am the chief of sinners. Because we remain sinful we need to be found again and again by the Lord. In other words, God needs to pour His grace into our lives multiple times when we're lost, even just a little bit lost. We make plans every year. You probably made some plans this year and you probably fulfilled some of them and some you didn't fulfill. God always fulfills His plans. When Jesus came to the Earth, He did not come saying, 'I'd just like to tour Planet Earth a while.' He came to seek and save the lost. He didn't come with plan one and flop over to plan two. The plans of the Lord stand.

He came to give us a gift. You may be doing your Christmas shopping. You may be done already. Maybe you're the plan ahead type but when we buy a gift for somebody, we always hope it'll be something that will last, right? Nobody wants to buy someone a cookbook that never gets any food stains, right? Nobody wants to buy a sweater that sits in the corner and never gets worn out at the elbows. The Lord Jesus came to give a gift and He succeeded at it. He came to seek and to save the lost. It's not a shameful thing to say 'I'm lost' because Paul, after 30 years of sterling ceaseless service, was able to say, 'I am still the chief of sinners' not I was. I am. I still need the grace of God. I still need Christ Jesus to save me a sinner so we humble ourselves before the Lord and keep on asking for His grace. We ask for it one by one.

When we're lost alone, we say, 'Lord, I'm lost, find me' but we also find ourselves and God finds us and puts us in community. If you're lost today, do business with God, but also do business with your friends here at the church. If you're lost and need to talk with someone call us

here at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 for we'd love to talk to you. You need to get with people who can help you get right. It could be the big get right – get right with God today, salvation. Or it could be those many subsequent times we want to get right because we've wandered a bit. In all circumstances we say the same thing. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. I was lost. He found me. I get lost a little bit even afterward. He keeps finding us and giving us His grace, loving us, calling us His beloved children made in His image and not just made in His image, but also now remade in the image of Christ our Lord. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I pray that we will love You, and love the Gospel, not as something that happened a long time ago in our lives, but something we need every day because we're still sinners, still the chief of sinners, still prone to wander as the hymn says. Lord, let us rejoice in who You are and what You've done over 2000 years ago and what You're doing today. We thank You, Lord Jesus. We praise You for seeking and saving the lost, and we rejoice with the angels, the shepherds, and Mary and Joseph for all that you've done for us. We praise You in Jesus' Name, Amen.