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Series: *A First Century Physician Introduces the Cure*

Title: *The Little Big Man*

Text: Luke 19:1-10

Preacher: Mark Adams

When I was in High School our drama group performed the musical, *Oliver*. I didn't have a big part, but I did have two little parts. I played an old man and a young man---each with a line or two---and the coolest part is it required me to make a fast costume and make-up change.

In case you've never seen *Oliver*, it's the story of a lost boy who ends up in a gang of boys who steal things and then bring their haul to their evil master---a man named Fagin. In exchange for providing them with a "home" Fagin teaches them to be pick-pockets. He is not a good person. Towards the end of the musical, Fagin asks an important question: "*Can somebody change? It's possible---maybe it's strange, but it's possible.*"

What about it? Is Fagin correct? Is it possible for people to change?

- Can a touchy, critical spouse become a patient affirming spouse?
- Can an alcoholic become sober?
- Can a taker become a giver?
- Can a selfish person become selfless?

Can a person change? Or to put it another way, DOES THE CURE WORK? Can knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord counteract the effects of sin disease and truly change a person?

Today we come to a chapter in the book of Luke that shows us that the answer to this question is "YES!" It tells of our Lord's encounter with a man that proves change like this is possible. The Cure does indeed work. Take your Bibles and turn to Luke 19. I'll be reading the first ten verses. And if able, I would ask that you stand in respect for God's Word as it's read.

Luke 19:1-10

**1 - Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.**

**2 - A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.**

**3 - He wanted to see Who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.**

**4 - So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see Him, since Jesus was coming that way.**

**5 - When Jesus reached the spot, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."**

**6 - So he came down at once and welcomed Him gladly.**

**7 - All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."**

**8 - But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "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."**

**9 - Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.**

**10 - For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."**

As I told you a few weeks back, I have visited the Holy Land twice. I'd love to go again---because they are always finding and digging up Biblical sites---I mean, there's always something new to see---something that brings the Bible to life. One thing different about my two trips is that on the first one we were able to go to the tel---the ruins---of Biblical Jericho---where after following God's plan, Joshua and the Hebrews watched as the walls of that pagan city came crashing down. We couldn't go there on the second trip because it was too dangerous. Sadly, Jericho is often not a safe place for tourists because of the rivalry between Jews and Palestinians.

Even on that first trip we couldn't go into MODERN Jericho---but from the tel we look down and could see it in the distance. And to me it looked to be kind of barren---desert-like. In fact, I could see only one tree poking up above the houses. I asked our tour guide about it and she said that was the tree Zacchaeus had climbed 2,000 years ago---then she

laughed at her own joke---because of course Zach's tree is long gone---as are pretty much all the trees in that region of the world now.

I know I've told you that story before---but I mention it again because in Jesus' day it was different. Back then, there were apparently trees everywhere. That's how Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, described Jericho. He wrote of it as,

*"...the most fruitful country of Judea, which bears a vast number of palm trees, beside the balsam tree, whose sprouts they cut with sharp stones, and at the incisions they gather the juice which drops down like tears. This country produces honey from bees: it also bears that balsam which is the most precious of all the fruits in that place, cypress trees also, and [other trees] so that he who should pronounce this place to be divine would not be mistaken, wherein is such plenty of trees produced as are very rare, and of the most excellent sort."*

I guess an arborist could make a good living in Biblical Jericho!

Here's something else we should know about this town. In New Testament times, its climate was very temperate which made it an ideal retreat for the rich—government officials and royalty—who built enormous palaces there---complete with swimming pools, gardens, bathhouses, a hippodrome, and a theater. In fact, King Herod had a palace in Jericho. In 37BC, Marc Antony gave this resort city to Cleopatra as a present.

Another thing—this city sat on one of the busiest trade routes in the ancient world with connections to important coastal cities in northern Israel and to Egypt to the south. And, as Charles Swindoll reminds us in his commentary, *"Wherever you find vast amounts of wealth and large numbers of politicians you inevitably find a funnel for TAXES."* That was certainly true of Jericho. In fact, taxes were collected at three main places in this part of the world: Capernaum, Jerusalem—and Jericho. So this tree-filled city was one of the "big three."

Well, as we just read, in Jericho there lived a man who was not only a tax collector—he was a CHIEF tax collector. In other words, he was in charge of the men who managed this "tax funnel." His name was Zacchaeus and his position not only gave him immense power over the daily lives of ordinary citizens; he also enjoyed direct ACCESS to the powers that be. He undoubtedly dined with the richest and most influential residents of Jericho. He was probably a frequent guest at banquets that were held at Herod's palace.

Now---to say that tax collectors---especially CHIEF ones---were hated would be an understatement. To show you what I mean, in Israel there were four occupations that were considered immoral.

1. One was a gambler.
2. The second was a loan shark---someone who lent money at an exorbitant interest rate to other people.
3. A third occupation considered immoral was to be a pigeon trainer. Nothing against the pigeons, it's just that they were used in gambling.
4. The fourth and the lowest and least-esteemed occupation, the one considered the most immoral, was to be a tax collector.

In fact, one Roman writer tells us that the idea of an honest tax collector was so rare that when one city in the empire actually had a tax collector who was somewhat honest---they erected a statue to memorialize him. I don't believe I have ever heard of a statue being built to a person who does audits for the IRS.

Well, as part of his job, Zacchaeus counseled with Roman dignitaries on a regular basis---telling them which Jewish families were the wealthiest and who could pay the most taxes! As a Jew he would know which Jewish families pretended to be poor. He would know who was hiding his flocks in the hills to avoid taxing. He would know who had a vacation house up in the mountains---things like that.

Many tax collectors took bribes from their fellow Jews. In other words they said, *"If you give me some money under the table, I won't tell the Romans about your new Cadillac."* Then they would renege on the deal, tell the Romans and collect the tax anyway. I imagine as CHIEF tax collector Zacchaeus had done this many times. So Zacchaeus was not a popular guy. He was hated.

Plus, his deceitful job made it possible for him to enjoy a lifestyle few could imagine. I mean, to say that he was rich would be a vast understatement. He was FILTHY rich. Zacchaeus was rolling in money. I get the image of Scrooge McDuck swimming in a pool filled with cash. Zacchaeus got that way by doing what all tax collectors did. He abused the power of his office. He lied. He cheated. Let me put it this way: he was the “kingpin” of the Jericho “tax cartel” and had the scruples of a modern-day crack dealer. I find it ironic that the name, “Zacchaeus” means “innocent” —because Zacchaeus was anything but.

So, to summarize Zacchaeus was enormously WEALTHY—and enormously HATED by the city’s Jewish residents. He was despised because everyone knew his business was nothing more than legalized extortion. In fact, as Zacchaeus tried to push his way through the crowd to see Jesus that day, I’m sure the people enjoyed boxing the little guy out. I imagine they said things like, *“Sorry about the elbow in the eye Zacchaeus, you’re hard to see! Oh—was that your foot? Oh---was that your OTHER food?”*

Let me put it this way, in the eyes of his countrymen his littleness was more than physical. To them he was a detested nobody. C.S. Lewis described Zacchaeus in this way, *“Some of the locals would have liked to see if they could put this wealth-loving man through the eye of a needle literally—squeezed out in one long bloody thread from tail to snout.”*

Now I want us to be sure and get the full picture of what Luke means in verse 1 when he tells us that Jesus ***“...entered Jericho and was passing through.”*** This was toward the end of our Lord’s earthly ministry—and by this time He had a large following indeed. Jesus’ entourage that day probably contained hundreds—perhaps thousands—of people, so the commotion would have been considerable, not unlike an unorganized parade. Luke says that Zacchaeus wanted to ***“...see Who Jesus was...”*** which tells us that the tax collector had heard rumors about Jesus and wanted to check them out. But he didn’t approach Jesus as a dignitary---which he COULD have done. As one of the most important men in the city, Zacchaeus could have tried to arrange an official meeting. Instead in a very undignified manner, he pulled up his robes and ran to see Jesus—but because of his short stature and the size of the vast crowd, he couldn’t see or hear our Lord---so, he ran ahead of the “parade” and climbed one of the many trees that lined the route.

Luke tells us it was a sycamore-fig — and unlike a balsam that would have been short or a palm tree that would only have palm branches only at the top---a sycamore was tall and had lots of branches even near the ground which made it easy to climb quickly. Plus, it had lots of leaves which made it possible for Zacchaeus to see but not to be seen. Understand, Zacchaeus’ actions would be like Governor Hogan climbing a pole on the parade route of an arriving celebrity like---Beyonce or Justin Bieber or Kevin Freeman.

It shows us that Zacchaeus was so eager to hear and see Jesus that he didn’t care about dignity. But while Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed that tree, he didn’t initiate contact. Jesus did. As the popular little children’s song lyric goes, *“And when the Savior passed that way He looked up in that tree and He said, ‘Zacchaeus, you come down—for I’m going to your house today...for I’m going to your house today.’”*

Now, I love that song, but the lyric doesn’t quite capture what Jesus said. In verse 5 Luke gives us the exact quote. Jesus said, ***“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I MUST stay at your house today.”*** In other words, it was essential that Jesus stop in for a visit. This was a pre-ordained part of our Lord’s earthly ministry. This rich man who had entertained royalty and heads of state—had a literal DIVINE appointment.

By the way, this was Jesus’ last personal encounter before the cross. It highlights the fact that Jesus came, ***“...to seek and to save the lost.”*** —and that’s what Zacchaeus was—lost.

Years ago, I read the story told by a pastor about his sister Barbie and her favorite doll when she was growing up, a doll named Pandy. Here’s what he says:

*“When Pandy was young and a looker, Barbie loved her. She loved her with a love that was too strong for Pandy’s own good. When Barbie went to bed at night, Pandy lay next to her. When Barbie had lunch, Pandy ate beside her at the table. When Barbie could get away with it, Pandy took a bath with her. Barbie’s love for that doll, from Pandy’s point of*

*view, was nearly a fatal attraction. By the time I knew Pandy she was not a particularly attractive doll. In fact, to tell the truth, she was a mess. She was no longer a valuable doll. I'm not sure we could have given her away.*

*But for reasons that no one could ever quite figure out, in the way that kids sometimes do, my sister Barbie loved that little rag doll still. She loved her as strongly in the days of Pandy's raggedness as she ever had in her days of great beauty. Other dolls came and went; Pandy was family. Love Barbie; love her rag doll. It was a package deal.*

*Once we took a vacation from our home in Illinois to Canada. We had returned almost all the way home when we realized at the Illinois border that Pandy had not come back with us. She had remained behind at the hotel in Canada. No other option was thinkable. My father turned the car around, and we drove from Illinois all the way back to Canada. We were a devoted family, not a particularly bright family, perhaps, but devoted. We rushed into the hotel and checked with the desk clerk in the lobby. No Pandy. We ran back up to our room. No Pandy. We downstairs and found the laundry room. Pandy was there wrapped up in the sheets about to be washed to death. The measure of my sister's love for that doll was that she would travel all the way to a distant country to save her."*

I love that story because it reminds us that Jesus traveled all the way from the distant country of Heaven down to earth to save sinners like you and me---sinners like Zacchaeus. As Kevin said last week all Heaven REJOICES when a lost sinner comes to faith in Jesus---and we should too.

Now, in our Western culture it is considered poor etiquette to just drop by someone's house uninvited---and to invite yourself for a meal---unheard of. I mean, what would you think if Sue and I knocked on your door at dinner time with all five of our grandkids in tow and said, *"We're here for dinner! I like my steak medium. Nathan wants a hot dog---no bun. Emma wants applesauce in those pouches, Lydia would like vanilla yogurt with trail mix on top. Joel will have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and Nathan only eats grilled cheese. Don't over-toast his bread."*

We just don't do that kind of thing---especially in Montgomery County, Maryland---but that's not the way they thought of this in the ancient near Eastern culture of Jericho. No---they considered it a privilege to provide food, shelter, protection, and comfort for travelers at the last minute---especially if the person had high social rank. So, far from being rude---Jesus was paying Zacchaeus a high compliment indeed. I imagine every homeowner in Jericho hoped to host the man that many believed to be the Messiah on His journey through town.

I'm also sure they were all shocked when Jesus gave this distinction to the city's most notorious sinner. It would be like Tim Keller accepting the hospitality of Bernie Madoff---endorsing his evil lifestyle with his presence. I'm saying Jesus' statement as to whose home He was going to, shocked the "good" citizens of Jericho. This is what Luke is describing in verse 7 when he says, *"All the people saw this and began to mutter, '[Jesus] has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'"* In any case, Zacchaeus didn't care about the crowd's mutterings. He was thrilled. He gladly received Jesus as his guest. I bet he JUMPED down out of that tree, gave Jesus directions to his house and then hurried off to make preparations.

At one point in the evening's festivities---perhaps after the meal, Jesus taught as only Jesus can teach. We don't know the content of His message but in my mind He talked about His reason for coming into the world. He talked about God's great love and His eagerness to forgive sinners. Maybe our Lord shared the stories Kevin talked about last week---the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin or the prodigal son---I don't know---but I do know that His teaching hit home for Zacchaeus because he responded by putting his faith in our Lord.

He even gave evidence of the sincerity of his commitment with a shocking vow. As Swindoll puts it in his commentary, *"Standing taller than ever before in his life, the city's most public sinner repented, promising to give half of everything he owned to the poor---a vast sum of money. He also pledged to repay anyone he had defrauded four times what he had taken."*

Can you imagine how shocked Zacchaeus' other guests must have been? Think of how the rest of the town's residents felt as news of Zacchaeus' conversion and pledge spread---not to mention when he showed up on their doorstep to help the poor or to pay them a quadruple tax refund! It would make our stimulus checks seem like chicken feed!

Well, in response to Zacchaeus' statement, Jesus said that salvation had come to the house and He affirmed Zacchaeus as a **"son of Abraham."** In other words, by putting his faith in Jesus, Zacchaeus had become a true son of Abraham---an heir to God's promise---part of God's kingdom. And to be clear, Zacchaeus was not saved because he gave all that money away. No---he gave all that money away BECAUSE he was saved. The CURE obviously worked!

You may remember that earlier John the Baptist had called all Jews and the religious leaders in particular to repent, saying,

***"Bear fruits in keeping with repentance...and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones, God is able to raise up children to Abraham."*** (Luke 3:8)

Zacchaeus definitely bore fruit in keeping with repentance. He did what the Rich Young Ruler had refused to do. His example proves that a "camel" can indeed pass through the eye of a "needle." People can change. Even takers---people who have loved wealth and hoarded it all their lives---even they can become givers. The things that are impossible with people are possible with God (Luke 18:27).

Before I finish, I want us to address a question. Namely: what motivated Zacchaeus to come to Jesus in the first place? What made this little man who was a big sinner run and climb a tree to get a glimpse our Lord? I think the answer to this question will help us become better at leading others to decide to follow Jesus---so---why did Zacchaeus do what he did the day Jesus came to town?

Maybe he had heard of the conversion of a colleague named Matthew. I mean, Palestine was a small place and I'm sure tax collectors hung out together. Perhaps hearing of Matthew's conversion---made him curious. But I think the main reason is because Zacchaeus was a rich man who had come to see that he was actually poor. In spite of his vast wealth there was nothing in his life of lasting value. Plus---his wealth isolated him from people. He had no real friends---no companions that he didn't buy. So, he was both hated---and lonely. But it was more than that. He had power and all the pleasures this world could provide but still there was something else missing in his life. There was a vacancy in his life that gold could not fill. Oh---I'm sure he tried to fill the vacuum---but any joy his wealth bought was temporary and left this rich man feeling even poorer---emptier.

I'm reminded of something G. K. Chesterton once said---something that may shock you. He said, *"Every man who visits a prostitute is looking for God."* And---as hard as that is to hear---I think Chesterton was on to something---because everyone who commits sin---is looking for something to fill the emptiness---the poverty of a life lived without God.

Blaise Pascal, that 17th century French philosopher and mathematician said that people have a trace of happiness---but only a trace---a trace of the original happiness that the first humans had. He said that because of sin, we've lost true and full happiness. Pascal describes this unhappiness as the *"infinite abyss,"* a giant hole that only God can fill.

From time to time, we all buy into the myth that Zacchaeus did---we think that the pleasures of this world will satisfy our longings---but they don't. So---I think this is why Zacchaeus ran. It's why he climbed that tree. He was desperate to see Jesus because he thought that Jesus might be able to fill the hole in his life that wealth could not. We don't know what led him to think this---but to borrow an idea from E. K. Bailey---let's review our study of Luke over the last few weeks---by looking at some of the people Jesus encountered.

Let's imagine that in the months prior to Jesus' visit, as Zacchaeus made his rounds in various towns nearby, collecting taxes he encountered people who had met Jesus---people whose longing for God had been filled. One day he knocks on a door and it is answered by a woman who is obviously in very poor health. Her face is white as a sheet---as if there is no blood in her veins. Her hair is matted and her face wet with tears. When he asks for her taxes she says, *"I don't have any way of paying now. You see, for 12 years I have had a blood disorder. I've had to spend all my income on doctors. I need 30 days. Then maybe I can pay."*

Zacchaeus was caught between greed and grace but said, *"For some reason I feel benevolent today. I'll give you 30 days. But I'm writing your name in my book. I'll be back."*

On Zacchaeus goes. He comes around the bend to a second house and when he knocks a woman answers and it's obvious to Zacchaeus what she does for a living. First, he notes he has woken her up. This tells him she does her work at night---and sleeps in the day. Then he sees she wears a lot of make-up and it's smeared all over her face---the smell that reaches his nose tells him she also uses a lot of perfume in her line of work. He tells her he has come to collect her taxes and she says, *"Business has not been good lately. Oh---I used to make a lot of money. I had lots of customers. But these past weeks I haven't felt like 'working' because, I have felt empty---lonely. No one loves me---not really. I can't pay."* Zacchaeus is a bit shocked by what she says---and replies, *"Okay---I'll give you a month to get the funds. But I'm writing your name in my book. I'll be back."*

At his next stop there's a woman standing in the front yard staring off into the distance. Suddenly a blood-curdling scream comes from the direction of her gaze. Zacchaeus looks and there's a nude man running through a graveyard cutting himself with stones. He looks like a cross between a man and a wild animal. The woman turns to Zacchaeus and says, *"That's my husband. He was a good man. I'm praying he will come back home. I know I ought to move on but I love him. He's the father of our children. I don't know if he'll ever be right again. No man can bind him. He calls himself 'Legion' because he's possessed by many demons."* Not wanting to dialogue with demons, Zacchaeus says, *"I'll be back in your area in 30 days."*

Well 30 days pass and Zacchaeus sees on his calendar that it's time for him to return to those same homes---houses that represented the most nonproductive day in his tax collecting career.

He decides not to be swayed by any more sob stories. This time they will pay or be thrown into prison.

When he knocks on the door of the first house, a woman in perfect health answers. The change in her is stark---she was so sick but now she literally glows with vitality. She tells him that she had gone to see Jesus. She had reached out to touch the hem of His robe and power---healing power---had flooded her body. She says, *"Zacchaeus, I didn't have to pay the doctors this month so here's your tax money."*

The shocked chief tax collector moves on to the second house and when he knocks on the door a woman of great beauty responds. But---it's not just physical beauty. She's a woman with INNER beauty---inner peace. He says, *"I must be at the wrong house. I was looking for a harlot. She owes me taxes."* The woman says, *"That's me---but since you were here I went to a banquet at the home of one of my former customers---a pharisee named Simon. While there I heard a man named Jesus teach. He talked about how He came to forgive sinners like me. I broke down in tears and washed His feet. I used all my perfume to anoint Him. He forgave me and I have turned from my life of sin. I got a job working in the local bakery and am making a great income. Here's your taxes."*

Zacchaeus is dumbfounded but takes the money and heads to the third house. When he knocks the wife he had met in the yard a month earlier answers the door but a handsome young man comes to stand behind her. She says, *"Zacchaeus, I want you to meet my husband. 30 days ago his home was in the graveyard but look at him now. I told you no man could tame him but Jesus did. When Jesus walked in the demons walked out. Look at him! He's a new man! He's been able to work again. Here's your tax money."* The husband interjects, *"Zacchaeus, if you meet Jesus, he'll make a new man of you too. I know because Jesus changed my life."*

Well, Zacchaeus begins to think, *"Maybe this Jesus can satisfy MY longings...maybe He is the Messiah of God. Maybe He can change me like He has these people. Maybe this Jesus can fill the emptiness in my soul."*

So, when this rich---poor---man heard Jesus was coming to Jericho---he forgot his dignity and RAN to see Him. And poor lost people have been running to JESUS ever since. They've learned the truth of the words George Beverly Shea used to sing:

*"I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold. I rather be His than have riches untold.  
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands; I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hand"*

*Than to be the king of a vast domain and be held in sin's dread sway;  
I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today."*

So back to our question...can a person change? Zacchaeus' story says yes---it doesn't matter what you are like now---  
Jesus can change you. The heart of the gospel message is the CURE WORKS. Anyone can be changed.

LET'S PRAY