



WEEK 1 – THE NEED

CHECK-IN

How are you? Where have you seen God working in your life in the last week? And... what is your favorite thing about The Connection? I know, I know, it's tough to pick just one, but give it a shot.

OPENING PRAYER

Welcoming God, give us the courage to introduce others to you.

INTRODUCTION

I think we're pretty great. We're not a huge group, but we have a vibrant, vital little church. We gather together for worship, (which is pretty incredible. The music, that is. The preaching is marginal.) We build relationships through small groups and fellowship opportunities. We reach out to the world around through our engagement partners. And the best part of it all, anyone who walks through our doors is treated with love, respect, and affirmation. So, when you read about the early church in Acts, that feels like us. Which leads me to our

focus for 2026... *invitation*. If we've got something this good, why wouldn't we want to invite people to it? So, that's what we're going to do this year... focus on inviting others into this awesome little family of faith we've created. Sound good? Let's get after it!

Setup Question: When have you felt like an “insider”? Was there a club or organization or group that welcomed you in and made you feel like you were one of them? What did they do that made you feel like you belonged?

SCRIPTURE

Today, we're going to start with *why*. Why is invitation important? *Why* are we called to introduce others to the love of God through Jesus Christ? Well, when it comes to welcoming others into the family of faith, one story from the Bible stands out “head and shoulders” above the rest. (Come on, that's a good joke... if you know the story that's coming, anyway.) Let's take a look...

Read Luke, chapter 19, verses 1 through 10.

Zacchaeus. (If you grew up in the church and know the song, feel free to pause and sing it... it's a reflex. We'll wait.) This little dude is one of my favorite characters in the Bible. But, we often equate this passage with a children's song and therefore run the risk of not taking the story seriously. However, if that song is all you know about the story of Zacchaeus, you're missing out. Because this story, (apart from the absolute banger that is that song,) has so much depth and value for

our faith journeys, that it's worth a look with an adult, critical eye. It's not a kids' story... it's a beautiful tale of longing, of brokenness, of healing and redemption. And ultimately, it's a powerful reminder of our call to reach out and bring others in.

Question 1: Are you familiar with this story? (Maybe more than just the song?) What stands out to you about this scene? Would you have climbed the tree to see over the crowd? What catches your attention in this Scripture?

REFLECTION

Today, and for the next 3 weeks, we're going to live with the story of Zacchaeus, and hopefully by the end of this series, you'll have a new appreciation for his story, and a renewed passion for introducing others to the love of God through Jesus Christ. So, where do we start? Well, in this story, I think we need to start at the end, because Jesus concludes this story with the thesis. Take a look at verse 10...

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

This is the thesis, the premise, of this whole story, and for us, the beginning of the *why*. *Why* is it important for us to invite others to know Jesus? This is the answer... Jesus came to seek and save the lost. But here's the issue with that... see, when Zacchaeus was alive, Jesus was around and on Earth able to do the seeking and saving himself. When it comes to being sought and saved by Jesus, living *when* he did

and *where* he did... dramatically increases your odds of being found by Jesus.

But Jesus's personal mission statement, to seek and save the lost, is *still* Jesus's mission statement today. Jesus is still in the business of seeking and saving, but if Jesus isn't roaming the Earth today to do it himself, who does the responsibility fall to? Yeah, this isn't a trick question, nor is it rhetorical. Jesus will still do the saving... but it's up to us to do the seeking. It's up to us to introduce others to the love of God through Jesus, it's up to us to invite others to know the love and grace and acceptance we have found in Christ. Why is invitation important? Because it's up to us to help Jesus fulfill this mission...to seek and save the lost.

Question 2: It's often helpful to consider what someone did for us, in order to find the courage to do the same for someone else. So, who introduced you to Jesus Christ? Was there someone who was instrumental in helping you find your faith? Share the story.

The next obvious question here is... who are "the lost" Jesus is referring to? Who are these people we are to be seeking? Now, the obvious and easy answer is, everyone... and that's true. However, there's one category of people who Jesus seems to seek out more than any other, and the group we're going to focus on, as well. Because it's kinda the group we're geared toward, our target demographic, if you will. And that is...

THE OUTSIDERS

Zacchaeus was an outsider. We learn from verse 2 he was a tax collector in Israel in the 1st century Roman Empire, which means, he was a Jew, and therefore disliked by the Romans. But because he collected taxes for them, he was despised by his fellow Jews. It made him rich, which meant he was disliked by the poor. But tax collectors were notoriously corrupt, which made them suspect to the wealthy, too. He probably had few if any friends. And anyone close to Zacchaeus was likely only close to him for what they could get from him. He was probably lonely... dissatisfied with life... hurting inside, trying to patch this God-shaped hole with anything he could. Zacchaeus was an outsider.

And we see this over and over again. Jesus seeks out the Outsider. He hangs out with tax collectors, prostitutes, the demon possessed, the lepers and infirm, the lowest of society. Anyone on the fringe, cast out, rejected by society, that's where Jesus was... these are "the lost" who Jesus was seeking out. Ever felt like an outsider? Yeah, that's just kinda who we are as a faith community. We represent the folks who have been set aside, cast out, rejected and ignored. Many of us have been hurt or burnt by the traditional church. Many of us have felt lost or ostracized by society. Many of us have been rejected by the world around us. We're a church of outsiders, those who Jesus sought and saved.

But here's the thing, for every one of you, there's a 100 more out there. There are people you come across every day who feel that way. Outsiders who have been told they're not good enough, who have been told they don't fit in with society, who have been made to feel less than or unworthy. Why is invitation important? Because they need a place to belong, a place where they go from outsider to insider, a place where they are loved and accepted as a child of God, nothing less. That is what Jesus did for Zacchaeus, and what we must do for the Outsider in our lives... invite them to a place where they are no longer on the outside.

Question 3: When have you felt like an Outsider? This can be a sensitive subject, so leave space for people to talk about difficult experiences.

"But Mike, shouldn't we leave well enough alone? I mean, if they want to be a part of something, wouldn't they seek it out?" You might protest. Well, I think this is the last thing we learn from Zacchaeus for today. For this, we hop back to the beginning of the story. Zacchaeus *wanted* to see who Jesus was. We get the same thing, over and over again, from the Outsiders that Jesus seeks out. There is a longing within each of them for a relationship with Christ. And Zacchaeus is no different. He wants to meet Jesus so badly, he climbs a tree. A wealthy businessman, dignified tax collector, doesn't climb trees. But the yearning within him for Christ is so strong, dude goes all Tarzan, and scales a sycamore.

And why? Something inside Zacchaeus was broken. All the wealth and success didn't make him happy or satisfied. It didn't heal the loneliness or longing to be loved and accepted. There was still a hole, something missing, and something within him knew Jesus could fix it. Outsider after Outsider in the Bible come to Jesus out of their brokenness. And as we'll see as we move forward through this series, they find healing.

The Outsiders in *our* lives are no different. Each one has a longing within them for a relationship with Christ, a yearning for something that will heal the brokenness, and if Jesus isn't on Earth to do the seeking, it's up to us. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. There are so many lost folks in our lives, will you help them get found?

Question 4: The most important reason to invite others to know Christ is the difference it will make in their lives... so, what difference has your faith made in your life? Why is a relationship with Christ important to you?

CLOSING

Why is invitation important? Why are we going to make this our focus for 2026? We were all Outsiders once. We know what that feels like, and we know what it's like to be found. Jesus is still in the business of seeking and saving the lost, but it's up to us to make the introduction. Will you invite the Outsider in your life to a relationship with Christ? Will you help that lost individual find a faith community that will welcome them in and give them a place to belong, where they are no

longer on the outside? As we'll see in coming weeks, Jesus had an answer for Zacchaeus's brokenness, for his yearning for a relationship with Christ. You have the answer for the longing in the Outsiders in your life... will you invite them in?

**Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations
and close in prayer.**