Zacchaeus and the New Year
Luke 19:1-10

Last Sunday was Christmas Eve and today it is New Year’s Eve. So IF I didn’t personally say it to any of you, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year – or as I like to say, “Have a meaningful Christmas and make a positive change for the future.” We do have a New Year’s party tonight that everyone is invited to and it is for all ages.

Our American culture treats the New Year as a time of new beginnings. Last year may have been one of severe trials, great disappointments, deep griefs, or unfulfilled goals, but now we can start this year anew. Traditionally, that meant taking a time to review the last year and make new goals for the days ahead. Those new goals are called “New Year’s resolutions”.

“My brother’s New Year’s resolution is to move out of my parents’ house. You’d think after 49 years he’d try another one.” After all, “A new years resolution is something that goes in one year and out the other.”

Going on a diet seems to be a big theme of New Year’s resolutions, at least the last 3 decades. “Every New Years I resolve to lose 20 pounds, and I do. The problem is that I gain 30.” To be realistic we could say, “This New Years I’m going to make a resolution I can keep: no dieting all year long.”

So we can get cynical about New Year’s resolutions and just try for the smallest of things like, “My grandparents had resolutions like donating more time & money to charities. I’ve decided to make my own coffee once a week.” Or, “My New Year’s resolution is to take all the Christmas lights down by Easter.”

The reason we get cynical is because so many New Year’s resolutions are broken so quickly. “This New Years I made a resolution never to be late again then I slept in and was late to work the next day.” Or, “May all your troubles last as long as your New Year's resolutions.”

Because I am in an encouraging mood today, I want to remind you that this isn’t the only “New Year”. “Remember you can reset your resolutions on January 14th, which is the Orthodox New Year and on February 16th which is the Chinese New Year. After that, even I can’t help you.” 😊

I actually believe that the concept behind New Year’s resolutions is a good one even though our culture is not any good at keeping them. Too often, we just make major changes in our lives when problems or negative consequences hit us. It would be most helpful to also see clearly how to better initiate change in a more positive, intentional way – a way that cooperates with God’s working in our lives. We see one of those times in the life of Zacchaeus. There is nothing special about New Year’s resolutions, but it is an example of bringing in intentional change in a positive way.
PROPOSITION: Don’t rely on just pain and problems (or even willpower) to make changes in your life – cooperate with Jesus in encouraging something good you do and taking a step away from something harmful.

I. Recognizing our ‘lostness’, ‘excuses’ and ‘shortcomings’

So who is Zacchaeus?

A. Sinner despised by the people

Zacchaeus was not in line for Jericho’s “citizen of the year.” READ v 5-7. Clearly the average person of Jericho despised Zacchaeus so much that they become critical of Jesus for having to do anything positive to do with him – especially going as a guest to his home. In their mind, this is encouraging wrong behavior and not standing against injustice and bullying. So what made Zacchaeus such a despised man that the crowd reacted so negatively to Jesus?

B. Chief tax collector

READ v 1-2a. Zacchaeus is the “chief tax collector” in that area – that means he would be higher up in the tax franchise than a normal tax collector like Levi. Tax collectors had a very bad reputation in those days for good reasons. First, tax collectors were seen as traitors. Israel was an occupied country in Jesus’ day. The people didn’t have the rights we have in America. The foreign power of Rome controlled them by cruel force and took as much from the people as they could so they could enjoy a comfortable life back home. They were helping cruel and unfair oppressors. Second, tax collectors were known for swindling, cheating, bulling and harassing people. It was built into the system. Today our tax officials are paid a set income and simply administer the law so it is applied equally to all. But in those days, the tax system was more like a franchise owner. They would “lease” the rights to assess customs in a particular district with the full power of the occupying army behind them. Their pay came from the extra they extorted for themselves or the higher amount they promised to get the job. Everyone would have known of some relative or friend who lost their home, animals, savings, or possessions to a zealous tax collector trying to get as much as they could. There was no mercy.

C. Wealthy

Continuing on in v 2, we find that Zacchaeus was very successful in this role. READ v 2. Zacchaeus had amassed great wealth, overcharging the Jewish people and taking a cut from the taxes gathered by other tax collectors who were also extorting people and were under his leadership. Being wealthy & powerful meant he could buy whatever he wanted, pay people to serve him and force people to do what he demanded. But that could not gain true respect, friendship, or admiration. In Luke, Jesus has a lot to say about the danger of wealth and money – not that it is wrong, but it poses a danger to discipleship that cannot be minimized. Compared to the world, almost all Americans are wealthy.
D. Short  
To top all this off, Zacchaeus was physically short. READ v 3. He is small physically and small in their estimation. Even though he was feared, there was no way an unpopular person like this (traitor, cheat, and bully) would dare try to walk through a crowd alone that the Roman government regularly mistreated. There would be so many hidden kicks and thrown elbows that he would have come out more black and blue than a Baltimore Ravens football jersey.

II. Zacchaeus’ transformation

A. Wanted to see who Jesus was  
But Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. READ v 3a. Zacchaeus wanted “to see” Jesus – not as a curiosity or celebrity sighting but who Jesus actually is. At this point, we aren’t told more specifically what Zacchaeus was seeking but clearly it was something that neither his massive amount of power or money could provide. The word “wanted” in v 3 is the same root word as “seek” in v 10. Zacchaeus was seeking to see who Jesus was, only to later find out that Jesus was actually seeking to him!

B. Didn’t let hindrances keep him from Jesus  
But there was a problem – the crowd. READ v 3. Zacchaeus is too short physically to see over them and too disliked (little in character & reputation) to try to wade through them. Just like the blind man on the outskirts of Jericho at the end of chapter 18, the crowd bars this man’s way to Jesus. There wasn’t a lot of time as v 1 told us Jesus was just “passing through” Jericho. So like the blind man, Zacchaeus tries to overcome the hindrances keeping him from Jesus. READ v 4. It actually helps to see the ridiculousness here. It wasn’t dignified for grown men to be climbing trees – that was something kids did. Just looking down on Jesus from above wasn’t going to get to know Jesus. But then didn’t Jesus just say in the previous chapter – Luke 18:17 – that if we don’t receive the Kingdom of God like a little child, then we can’t enter it. This simply shows us how strongly Zacchaeus was seeking a change in his own life and knew he needed Jesus to accomplish that.

C. Responded immediately & sacrificially to Jesus’ call  
Jesus doesn’t pass by – He stops. READ v 5-6. We aren’t told how Jesus knew Zacchaeus’ name or that Zacchaeus was up in that tree because he was seeking Jesus. What we are shown is Jesus’ call to Zacchaeus. (1) Come down immediately. (2) I must stay at your house – not “may I come over”. The one seeking Jesus, finds that Jesus is actually seeking him!

For any real change, Jesus always requires an immediate and costly action on our part. But that effort is no longer just for ourselves, but a response to God’s work and plan. Jesus is seeking Zacchaeus’ salvation and transformation – and here it is in the context of relationship. Zacchaeus not only responds immediately, but joyfully and sacrificially. You can be sure Zacchaeus didn’t hold back anything or worry about the
cost of this hospitality. Do you realize this is the only place in the gospels I know of where Jesus invites himself into another person’s presence or premises. What is important for us to see here is that Zacchaeus heard Jesus’ unusual invitation not as a judgment but as an occasion of joy—a very unusual response for a tax collector meeting a Jewish rabbi!

D. Changed some actions in his life


That leads to some amazing changes in his life later that day. READ Luke 19:8-9. We don’t know what they talked about, but Zacchaeus was so transformed through his time with Jesus that he now wants to give ½ of all his possessions away to the poor—not ½ of his money but ½ of his possessions which would be much more. He is transformed from just getting for himself to caring about others.

AND Zacchaeus also wants to repay any person he swindled—he wants to make restitution—to do something to counter the wrong he has done. He doesn’t just propose returning their money, but giving them 4 times what he wrongly took—and the line will probably not be short. To put that into the context of the day—Zacchaeus is taking the highest penalty for theft on himself. Now I have listed these verses in your bulletin so you can go back and see them if you are interested, but in Exodus 22:1 (also 2 Samuel 12:6), a person who deliberately steals something and either destroys or sells it, must pay back 4 times what was stolen. This was still a standard in Jesus’ day as Josephus speaks critically of King Herod for selling thieves abroad as slaves because ‘the laws’ require no more than a fourfold fine (Antiquities xvi.1–3). Continuing on in Exodus 22:4 & 7 tell us if something is stolen (and the person still has it) then the thief must pay back double. But what happens if you cheat or steal something from someone and your conscience starts bothering you. You can confess and make things right without being caught, you voluntarily come forward. Leviticus 6:1-5 & Numbers 5:7 tell us if a person voluntarily confesses and wants to make things right, then they are to return what was stolen plus 20%. Clearly that is what Zacchaeus is doing here. The law would say, “Give back what you took plus 20%”, but Zacchaeus is determined to do far more than what the law demanded—he wants to show fruit, or evidence, of the change happening inside him.

Now this vow was not a pre-condition of Jesus’ acceptance of him, but a result of it! This is a positive change Zacchaeus wants to make in his life and now can joyfully do that because of Jesus’ help, relationship and new way of looking at things. What a contrast to the rich young ruler in the previous chapter (Luke 18:18-23) who was unwilling to give up his physical things for Jesus and went away sad. And what a powerful answer Zacchaeus is to the disciple’s question, how can the rich be saved since it is impossible for a camel to go through an eye of a needle? (Some of you may have heard there was a small gate in Jerusalem called the ‘eye of the needle’ that camels had to get down on their knees to get through—that is totally false—you have been deceived. The first mention of that in history wasn’t until around 1100 AD—you
won’t find it mentioned in any document before that meaning there was no such a gate in Jesus’ day. The disciples’ reactions show they knew Jesus was saying it is impossible.) It is only by the grace of God that any of us is saved. “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” Prime example – Zacchaeus!

E. Jesus is seeking and saving the lost

Luke 18:10

Jesus is seeking and saving the lost. A number call this the “key verse” in the whole book of Luke. READ v 10. This is the heart of Jesus. He doesn’t wait for us to see our need, but He seeks us. This is not just true of salvation, but also our growth spiritually and in character. Jesus’ goal is not to make our lives safer, easier, richer, physically healthier or more comfortable on this earth – it is to seek and rescue us – first eternally and then from our own harmful actions and attitudes. Sanctification (or growing in Christlikeness) is just as much a “saving” as justification is – that is being forgiven and having a place in heaven.

III. Making positive changes today

So what does Zacchaeus have to do with the New Year and making positive changes in one’s life? When you look back at your life you will see that a number of the major lessons and changes in your life have come the hard way – discipline from parents or bosses, problems got bad enough you had to change, relational conflicts forced changes, pain deepened you, worry got so bad, you finally let go & trusted Jesus. These are all positive changes that came through the negative. Those are great, because God alone can always bring good out of the bad. But the Lord actually wants us to learn & grow first through the positive. Jesus didn’t start by condemning Zacchaeus for all his sins, something the crowd wanted. Instead Jesus talked with him, giving Zacchaeus the opportunity to recognize his errors and desire to go a different direction in life. Isn’t this what happens each time we take a step to make a positive change in our lives as Christians – whether that challenge came from a retreat, a worship service, Bible Study, personal devotions, reading a book or even considering a change for the New Year!

A. Be actively learning about Jesus

It starts with actively learning about Jesus, not just coming up with something we want to change. God did not design the local church so He could check on our attendance or give us something to do – the local church is a key place where we can actively learn about Jesus – through the teaching, through the example of others and through our interactions with believers.

B. Encourage a positive area you are currently doing

A second step that helps change is to identify a positive area you are currently doing and encourage that – give yourself a reward, feel the pleasure of God, receive the appreciation of others. Zacchaeus ended up using 2 of his “strengths” to help in carrying out his positive desire. First was his notoriety – by stating publicly what he was going to do you know all his detractors would not let him forget! Second was his leadership and planning. Before he used these for himself, now he directs them to
God’s purposes. I think a special thing each New Year is to take some area God is using positively for His Kingdom, thank Him for that and reward it! While that can turn to sinful pride over time, it is more likely you will want to give up what you are doing well for the glory of God because there is always opposition to that in a broken world with a genuine spiritual enemy. We want to work out of joy, thankfulness, and hope as much as we can.

C. Take a realistic step towards a change

Now we come to identifying an area we want to make a positive change in. This isn’t just for New Years, it is for anytime we are excited about Jesus. JUST pick ONE you want to work on this new year—yes when we are excited in Jesus we have many (write those down, but just pick one). Once you have a SINGLE area you want to positive change in, then identify a REALISTIC step YOU can do towards that change. That involves confession to Jesus of any sin, any past short-comings, any sense of sinful pride. Take the REALISTIC step you can do – for Zacchaeus that step was in immediately come down and open his house to Jesus & His traveling crew of 25. I can’t prove this, but I can easily see Zacchaeus being one of those people who is always having to prove himself and doesn’t let anyone tell him what to do or when to do it. Which is probably why Jesus said things the way He did. Be REALISTIC—make it a doable step at this point! If you have tried to control your eating 30 times before & failed, don’t try to do it by willpower alone – do something different. My Grandfather tried to quit smoking by his willpower but kept failing. Then he told his friends if they caught him smoking he would give them $100 - $2,000 in today’s terms. Few of us have that sitting around – he definitely didn’t have $100, but unlike today, if they caught him, he would have sold all he had to carry out what he promised to do – because his integrity was strong, much stronger than his willpower. Use a strength and a smaller, realistic action towards your goal, then let God empower and inspire a step of faith for God’s higher purpose.

D. Take a step of faith for God’s higher purpose

When Zacchaeus publicly said he was going to give half of his possessions to the poor and repay any he swindled 4 times the amount – that was an incredible step of faith that came out of his small obedience action and inspiration from his time with Jesus. You don’t just want to lose weight to feel better, you want to do it for the glory of Jesus. You don’t just want to reign in your workaholic schedule to make life easier for you, you want to do it to bring more joy to your family, friends and the lonely. You don’t just want to bring your spending under control, you want to unleash more resources to be generous. When we do seek Jesus first, honestly see our weaknesses and strengths, take a realistic action and then listen for the step of faith God wants us to do and will keep encouraging us in – then the whole New Year’s resolution thing looks different and it proceeds different! And it doesn’t matter if “we” fail, because God is going to come back around at a later time and encourage that change again!

IV. Four areas you may face which God may encourage you to change this year
A. Regret (do a positive opposite action)
Because our chosen actions will look different depending on the area God is positively wanting to change in our lives, let me just briefly mention 4 areas God may encourage people in this next year. The first is regret. Regret is an area many Christians allow to make them ineffective — like in the beginning of a certain popular movie now playing. You are NOT going to overcome regret by trying to forget it, rationalizing it, going into self-pity or running from it. You have probably confessed it many times. With regret you can’t take back the past, but you can positively add to the future. Pick a positive opposite action that will help someone else today. If you regret an abortion — volunteer some hours at the Crisis Pregnancy Center. If you regret treating parents or authority badly, do something positive for your parents or other authority today. If you regret not being dedicated to Jesus, do an action of dedication now. Do this as a positive thing for the glory of Jesus, not an effort to punish yourself. Zacchaeus was excited to help the poor and they hated him.

B. Laziness/sloth (form a habit)
A common New Year’s desire is to go on a diet, get more exercise, eat healthier food, be more consistent with a local church or spend more time in prayer. In other words, you want to overcome some area of laziness or sloth in your life. Here you want a different focus because you have probably tried to do these positive things in the past and failed. Just take a step towards forming a habit instead of trying to do your big plan. We just did that with memorizing. Many didn’t believe they could do it, but those who simply reviewed their verses one time a day, not prime time, not only have done that but have developed a habit they can continue. I am not going to keep up one verse a week, but my resolution is to memorize 3 verses in Proverbs I often refer to and should have learned 10 years ago.

C. Self/worldly-focus (do selfless acts of generosity)
A third area Jesus may be giving you the positive opportunity to make a change in involves those areas where you are currently selfish or worldly-focus. It is all about you. How delighted Jesus is when we recognize that selfishness and confess it — but much more powerful is when we actually carry out some acts of selfless generosity — not so we can get something back, but simply to help someone else.

D. Complaining (practice thankfulness)
A fourth area that some may be led to make a New Year’s resolution in involves complaining — you don’t want to complain so much to God, family or others around you. The opposite action would be to practice thankfulness.

Make New Years resolutions just a reminder of how Jesus wants to work with you to start transforming areas by taking doable steps that He then inspires greater change.