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Meaningful Conversations

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This Sunday, we’ll hear a special message that focuses on the heart of Christ Fellowship’s vision to reduce loneliness, anxiety, and addiction by having meaningful conversations where people experience Christ through us. We’ll be talking about how to have meaningful conversations.

So this week in the Engage God Daily we’ll take a close look at a conversation Jesus had that changed the course of a man’s life. If you grew up in church, you may have sung a song about him (and done some hand motions). “Zacchaeus was a wee little man…”

# Day 1

We meet Zacchaeus in the pages of Luke’s Gospel. This account finds its significance not only in the encounter itself, but in its place in the Gospel. Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus occurs right before Christ makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, only to be crucified a few days later. Luke devotes a long section in the center of his book to chronicling this final journey — the people Christ encounters, the parables he tells, and Jesus’ insistence that his story was not going to climax in the victory his disciples expected. In this Gospel, the exchange between Zacchaeus and Christ is a peak in a long hike through the ministry of Jesus that provides a clear vista of who Jesus is and what he was accomplishing.

Nothing about Jesus’ time on earth was expected. He excelled at turning the world’s values upside down and giving people a glimpse into the values of his heavenly kingdom and his immanent reign. Zacchaeus learns this firsthand through a conversation that changed his life.

Today we’ll read through the entire story, and then break it down into smaller bits for the rest of the week.

## 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.

7All 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.”

## Think about

Among other things, Zacchaeus’s story helps us see the incredible difference an encounter with Jesus makes in a life. In our study this week we will see just how radical Jesus’ message is and how his gospel runs contrary to many of our assumptions about what we should cling to. Wealth and comfort, even status and respect pale in comparison to the love and acceptance of the One who has promised to transform us.

## Pray

What is it about Jesus? For two thousand years millions of people have called him their Lord and Savior. They have worshipped him, prayed in his name and spoken of him as a real presence in their lives. Why have so many people been willing to follow Christ, sacrifice for him, even lay down their lives for a Jewish carpenter who was executed as a criminal two centuries ago?

What about you? What has drawn you to Jesus? Whether you have followed him for a long time or are just interested enough to find out more, what makes Jesus compelling to you? Ask the Spirit to reveal Jesus to you more and more as you study his Word this week.

## Talk about

Have a meaningful conversation about this passage with one of your family, another CF Encourager, your small group, or a friend.

* Undoubtedly there were many accounts of Jesus’ interactions with people that Luke could have recorded. Why, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, do you think is this one is included in the Bible?

# Day 2

It’s interesting — the things that draw a crowd. Nowadays we can see the details of almost anything on video or through a photo, yet people still gather in mass to see certain things “in person.” Even blocked by barricades and security guards, crowds will press forward, hands and smart phones extended, for both Taylor Swift and the Mona Lisa.

Of course, in the ancient world, the only way to see something was to go in person and fight the crowds. That’s just what Zacchaeus did.

## Read

### Luke 19:1–4

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.

## Study

If such a publication had existed, the city of Jericho might have taken the top spot in Judean Weekly’s “Best Places to Live” ranking. Archaeologists tell us that Zacchaeus’s hometown was described as the “garden city” because it contained vast estates that acted as winter palaces for Judean Kings.[[1]](#footnote-2) Dates were harvested from large palm-date orchards and the city contained extensive balsam plantations for producing perfumes. Not only was the city beautiful to the eye, but every warm breeze filled the air with a sweet fragrance. Jericho was on a trade route so it could also boast a prosperous economy. [[2]](#footnote-3)

If there had been such a thing as a Chamber of Commerce back then, it surely would have advertised Jericho as a city that could provide you everything you needed for a comfortable and happy life.

In this place of wealth, royalty, and beauty lived Zacchaeus, a man who was taking advantage of what this city had to offer by amassing a fortune of his own. Unfortunately, the way he was making his money was not winning Zacchaeus any friends. His fellow Judeans would have labeled him a crook, and worse, a traitor to his people.

The Roman empire levied notoriously heavy taxes on occupied lands not only to fill its coffers, but to keep the inhabitants firmly under its thumb. Roman authorities chose tax collectors from among the local residents and in exchange for their service would turn a blind eye if these representatives collected extra “taxes” on the side.

As you can imagine, these activities would not make such a person popular with his kinsmen. Not only were these tax collectors cooperating with the occupying power in subjugating their home nation, they were also stealing from their fellow citizens. Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector.

## Think about

Zacchaeus “wanted to see who Jesus was” (Luke 19:10). That’s all the information we’re given that explains Zacchaeus’s motivation for being there that day. We know that word of Jesus of Nazareth had spread throughout the area and that crowds often gathered in large numbers to hear him teach and witness his miracles. It could have been curiosity that drew Zacchaeus.

Of course, it also could have been guilt. While we may empathize with Zacchaeus because of his outsider status, the man had probably acquired at least some of his wealth through dishonest means. Maybe that morning as he had eaten his ample breakfast and looked around his fine home, he had felt the stirrings of conscience. Jesus was known to be a forgiver of sins, and maybe Zacchaeus felt the need to unburden himself.

Despite his wealthy lifestyle in Judea’s “Best Place to Live” Zacchaeus was eager to seek out Jesus. Something stirred within him and he had to at least try to catch a glimpse of Jesus for himself. How do we know that it was more than just casual curiosity? Because of the lengths Zacchaeus took to see Jesus. He *really* wanted to see Jesus. Can you imagine the disapproving looks he must have gotten as he jostled his way through the crowd? The short man with the despised profession? Yet he found a tree and climbed up its branches, and at that moment he was standing tall for all the world to see.

Jesus is worth stepping out on a limb for. Somehow, deep down, Zacchaeus may have known this. Full of compassion and love, Jesus welcomes everyone who wants to know him.

## Pray

**“**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16–17). Maybe some hints of this message had made it to Zacchaeus and his heart responded with the keening cry of a soul who desperately wants to believe it’s true. Could it be that God loves *me*? A crook? A traitor? A sinner? Could it be that he has sent his Son to save *me*? I need to see this Jesus!

And suddenly even the tallest tree wouldn’t seem too high to climb. Let them grumble and stare. Because no matter how long or how well we’ve known him, we can always seek to know him better. Do you believe that? Do you live like that?

This week, pray about what next step you need to take to get to know Jesus more, and how you might invite others to climb up the tree with you.

## Talk about

* What do you notice so far about how Jesus is interacting with Zacchaeus in this story? Discuss what we could learn from this encounter about having meaningful conversations.

# Day 3

On his way to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die, Jesus took time to engage with a tax-collector who desperately wanted to see Jesus. This week we are walking through Jesus’ meaningful conversation with Zacchaeus.

## Read

### Luke 19:5–7

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.

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

## Study

Jesus stops and speaks to Zacchaeus. Not only that he knows his name. Can you imagine the man’s surprise? His excitement? To be known by Jesus is an amazing thing.

While Zacchaeus was basking in the acceptance of Jesus, the crowd was appalled. What was Jesus thinking going to the house of someone like Zacchaeus? Enjoying the hospitality of someone made a significant statement in Jesus’s day. To dine with someone in their house meant an acceptance of who they were. In the minds of many in the crowd, Jesus was once again doing something that flew in the face of what they thought a true representative of God would do — associate with “sinners.”

If you’d been one of Luke’s early readers working your way through his Gospel for the first time, you might have made a connection between the account of Zacchaeus and another mention of a tax collector. Just a few stories before, Jesus tells a parable to “some who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else” Read [Luke 18:9–14](https://biblia.com/books/niv2011/Lk18.9) with the story of Zacchaeus in mind:

**With whom does the Pharisee compare himself? Why does he think he will easily win the comparison? Of whom does Jesus approve? Why?**

## Think about

The crowd who ridiculed Jesus for befriending Zacchaeus must have failed to recognize that they too were sinners. Jesus’ kindness was not lost on Zacchaeus. When Jesus called up to the tax collector, he immediately responds and with great joy.

Of all the people in Jericho that day, Jesus was coming to his house. Zacchaeus probably didn’t even hear the crowd’s muttering. His focus was on the Savior who welcomed and accepted him. Who made him feel known and loved.

Throughout this encounter Zacchaeus shows a remarkable indifference to the opinions of the crowd, and perhaps there is a lesson to be learned there. We’ve considered what it would be like to be Zacchaeus in the tree, but what if we’d been among those on the ground?

It takes a certain amount determination and perseverance to look for Jesus. Not just in the first century, but in the 21st century as well. Whether it is people insisting that you are unworthy of Jesus or acting as if Christianity is somehow unworthy of you, anyone who wants to see Jesus is going to have to push through what others think. They should find encouragement from Christians who want to help them find and follow Christ.

**As believers we need to consider our response to the Zacchaeus’ of our world. Who are the “Zacchaeus’” of our day? As Christ’s church, are we welcoming no matter how people come to us. What can Christians do to reach out and welcome them?**

## Pray

The crowd probably would have been more satisfied if Jesus had stopped, given Zacchaeus a stern talking to, insisted that he mend his ways ,and asked to see evidence of personal growth before ever speaking to him again. But that’s not how our generous and merciful God works. He treats us with such love and compassion that we can’t help but respond with radical devotion. Spend some time praising God for his love and mercy for all sinners, including you.

## Talk about

* Sometimes, we timidly take a step toward Jesus and he overwhelms us with the generosity of his welcoming acceptance. Has that ever happened to you? Describe what it was like
* Think about people in your life who aren’t Christians. How can you encourage them to find and follow Jesus?

# Day 4

Have you given our [Pastors Pregame podcast](https://subsplash.com/christfellowship-tx/lb/ms/+hg732gk) a try? New episodes every Thursday on your favorite podcast app.

Zacchaeus was a wealthy man living in a beautiful city. We can imagine that for most of his life, the income he made in service to Rome meant more to him than the respect of his people. What would make a man like that part with his wealth?

## Read

### Luke 19:8–10

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.”

## Study

Christ came to rescue us and bring us back to the Father, lost sheep no more. The story of Zacchaeus shows us the power of Jesus to change a life.

But Zacchaeus was willing to be transformed. Unfortunately, not every rich man Jesus encountered responded in the same way. Luke undoubtedly expected us to contrast the story of Zacchaeus with one that he had shared just a few lines earlier. Read [Luke 18:18–27](https://biblia.com/books/niv2011/Lk18.18-27).

**Compare this rich man’s response to Jesus with Zacchaeus’s. What differences do you detect in their initial attitude toward Jesus? Why do you think Jesus compared a rich man’s entry into the kingdom with a camel going through the eye of a needle?**

## Think about

Out of his joy at being accepted by Jesus, Zacchaeus responds with generosity. Christ had given him acceptance and he answers with financial help to those in need. Like a prism, Zacchaeus receives the light of God’s grace and then immediately bends that grace outward to share it with others.

When offered the love and acceptance of Christ, Zacchaeus counts his riches as nothing. Unlike those mumbling in the crowd, Zacchaeus knows he is a sinner and that Christ’s offer of fellowship should be rightly met with gratitude and repentance. He loses a taste for Jericho’s good life and can now see his wealth as a tool to help others.

Zacchaeus actions are a sign of that his heart that was changed by Jesus. Struck by Christ’s righteousness, he desires to make things right with those he has wronged. The love of Christ allows him to not only freely admit that he may have defrauded people, but empowers him to go above and beyond to make amends.

## Pray

As you pray, ask the Spirit to reveal who you are more like when it comes to money and possessions, the unnamed rich man or Zacchaeus? The rich man didn’t recognize the surpassing worth of Jesus while Zacchaeus realized that Jesus could give him more than all the riches of Rome. Zacchaeus got through the eye of the needle because what is impossible with man is possible with God. Our Father can loosen the grip we have on our money and possessions and pull us into his arms. Pray that you will respond to the kindness and acceptance of Jesus with whole-hearted devotion.

## Talk about

* What have you been able to let go of in light of God’s love for you? What past wrongs were you motivated to right? How have you received God’s love and grace through Jesus and been able to share it with others?

# Day 5

It’s Friday! We reserve the fifth day of our study for a time of reflection and prayer. We want to digest what we’ve learned and prayerfully seek the Spirit’s guidance to help us apply his truth to our lives.

## Read

### Luke 19:1–10

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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.”

## Think about

In 2009 Bernie Madoff was sentenced to 150 years for investment fraud, money laundering, wire fraud and eight other federal felonies. In what amounted to a massive Ponzi scheme, Madoff lost *billions* of dollars of his investors’ money. From millionaires to middle class retirees, Madoffs crimes damaged the lives of people who had invested with him.

According to a March 2014 interview, Madoff himself has paid a huge personal price for his crimes.[[3]](#footnote-4) In addition to the prison sentence he will not outlive, one of his sons who was in business with him committed suicide, his wife divorced him, and none of his family will speak to him.

In the interview, when asked if his experience has changed him, Madoff says no. “There’s nothing for me to change from. It’s not like I ever considered myself a bad person. I made a horrible mistake and I’m sorry.”

Although we might suspect that a man who had caused so much harm to hundreds of people and suffered personally for his crimes might desire to change, in truth Madoff’s response is not atypical. Change requires us to admit that there is a problem with who we are now. In biblical language, we have to acknowledge we are a sinner and that we need saving from our sins. That’s not something everyone is willing to admit.

Recognizing our own sinfulness can be excruciating, so many people prefer to deny it. Acknowledging our capacity for selfishness, greed, cowardice, arrogance, and spite can feel unbearable. Unless you meet Jesus.

Our loving Savior knows everything about us, every shameful thought and wrongful action, and accepts us anyway. Jesus came for us — to find the lost and rescue them from sin and death. The forgiveness that he offers after the wrongs we’ve committed allows us to face the dark parts of ourselves.

Jesus willingly gives us his righteousness when we have none of our own so that we can stand before God, no longer sinners, but new creations, and adopted children of a loving Father. He will change us. When we accept this gift by faith, we are given his Spirit so that we can resist our old sinful temptations and live as free followers of Christ. But when we fail, he still loves and embraces us.

People need to know that in Christ they can find the same joy that Zacchaeus did when he scampered down that tree and took Jesus home for dinner. How will they know if Christ’s followers don’t tell them? Who can you have a meaningful conversation with about Jesus?

## Respond

* How can you respond to Jesus’ loving kindness? What step do you need to take to show your devotion to Christ? Pray to be forgiven, repent, and make amends.
* Zacchaeus was a rich man who was so moved by Jesus’ love that he joyfully embraced transformation. He didn’t give his money away to earn God’s love. He gave his money away because he was loved. Not all of us will feel convicted in the area of our finances, but living as we do in a privileged, materialistic culture, many of us will. Have you felt God’s prompting in this area during your study of Zacchaeus? If so, how will you respond?
* Jesus consistently reached out to the Zacchaeues’ of his day — those who society saw as unworthy. How can you reach out to someone who needs Jesus?

1. A Negev, *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Leon Morris, *Luke: an Introduction and Commentary* Vol. 3, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 288–289. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. M.J. Lee, “Bernie Madoff speaks: Politics, Remorse and Wall Street,” Politico, March 20, 2014 <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/bernie-madoff-interview-104838.html#ixzz3P01zZq9v> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)