

# Harvest

## Part 4

### Luke 19:1-10

<sup>1</sup> Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup> A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. <sup>3</sup> He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." <sup>6</sup> So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. <sup>7</sup> All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Four weeks ago we were gearing up to begin a preaching series on the psalms when a member of the congregation mentioned the word harvest in a conversation and it rang like a bell in my spirit and I knew this was what God wanted to talk about. I love it when God is really up front about what He wants. Sometimes we preach what we hope God wants to say to people – so we give it our best shot, but when we kind of know this is what God wants us to say it makes the whole preaching thing pretty exciting.

We began this series with one of the key passages in Matthew's gospel:

### Matthew 9:35-38

<sup>35</sup> Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup> Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

This passage helps us to see that the church is not just a club, but is a movement of people called together by a great purpose for a great purpose. In our second week we were reminded that God's great purpose is not just to ensure our eternal destiny alone but to be about the business of building God's kingdom of love and Justice, there is also to be a harvest of love and Justice.

In week three we began a two part examination of the mission trip that Jesus set 72 of his followers in Luke 10. In the first part we recognised five mission principles spelled out by Jesus:

1. The harvest is a mission for all believers
2. The harvest is completed in Jesus
3. The harvest is plentiful
4. The harvest presents opportunities and dangers
5. The harvest is urgent

Then last Sunday we completed our examination of the mission trip of the 72 with the profound recognition that at the heart of the harvest, Jesus teaches this simple strategy:

*The most important and urgent thing that you can do with your life is to stop and build deep relationships.*

And to help build deep relationships Jesus taught his followers to:

1. Live to bless
2. Love to respect
3. Be authentic
4. Say yes
5. Know God is good

### 1. Intend

Not only did Jesus teach this strategy of building deep relationships, he lived this strategy. Which is remarkable because Jesus had a lot to do and not much time in which to do it. Yet somehow Jesus took time out from preparing people for the new era of the Kingdom in order to demonstrate how much he valued stopping and building deep relationships. Which is point number one I want to make today. I know that many of us live really busy and hectic lives – but none of us are as busy as Jesus. Not one of us has more balls in the air than Jesus, none of us have more pressing or weightier commitments than Jesus. If Jesus could take time out from being Messiah to make deep relationships a clear life priority so can we. I say this because I understand the way in which the “I am too busy” feeling stops us engaging with the mission of God. The truth is that we always have enough time do what we truly want to do, so followers of Jesus need to truly want to be intentional about building deep relationships.

Being intentional simply means that building deep relationships sits in the middle of our life plan. The story of Zacchaeus perfectly illustrates how building relationships was deeply embedded in the middle of Jesus life plan. You see Jesus meets Zacchaeus in the town of Jericho towards the end of his ministry and as you can see on the map, Jericho is almost the last stop before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, where he is going to die. Jerusalem, is the most urgent and important destination in Jesus earthly life yet the sight of a little man up a tree makes Jesus stop in his tracks.



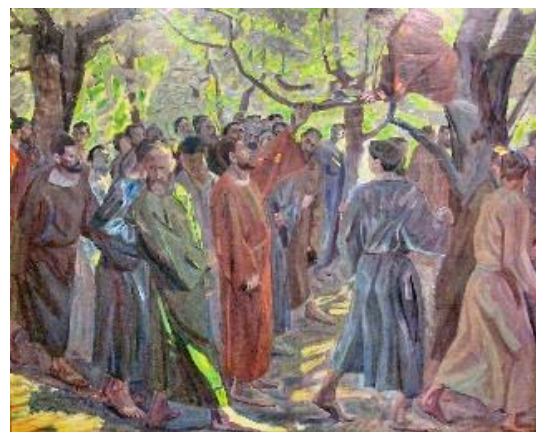
Now Jesus neither knows Zacchaeus nor does he know of him. No one has brought Zacchaeus to Jesus attention and Zacchaeus has said nothing to Jesus. What Luke is suggesting very strongly in the way that he tells this story is that this is a God moment. God moments are truly mysterious happenings when God brings two people into relationship so they can help each other.

I've had a few of these God moments over the years, the craziest was the time when I was holidaying in Bundeena and fishing off the ferry wharf at night, when this guy on a motorbike pulled up and walked up to me with his bike helmet still on and the motor bike still running. It was a little unnerving, I have to say. But the guy eventually pulls off his helmet and he asks me if I know anything about God? As it turns out his wife had left him and he was riding around the streets trying to work out what to do when he saw me fishing and felt prompted to go over and talk to me. God moments are crazy.

So Jesus is having a God moment. The Spirit of God is telling Jesus that the little guy up the tree is in a world of pain and because spending time with people in pain is intentionally hard wired into Jesus life plan, he has to stop and spend some time with Zacchaeus. There is something very important here. A whole lot of suffering goes on in secret in this world, particularly our world, the suburban world of Australia. Statistics tell us that two out of every ten people we pass in the street are probably having significant mental health struggles but few people will know about it, how could they? Depression, isolation and loneliness kills more people than cancer and ruins more lives than drugs and is impacting on more people than ever before. One very simple but powerful response is more people in our community building deeper relationships with more people. For that to happen there needs to be a whole bunch of people internally wired like Jesus.

Getting that kind of wiring is not that hard to understand it just requires inspiration and effort. A few years ago Deb and I decided to be chook owners. However the fact that five families of chickens under our care had been massacred by foxes tended to suggest we were not very good at it, but we wanted to be. So two things had to happen in order for us to grow as keepers of chooks. Firstly we had to become really clear about what we needed to do, and what we needed to do was to remember to lock the chooks up at night. The second thing that needed to happen, was that the locking up of chooks had to become incorporated into the very fabric of our life. We set alarms on all our phones and we worked at developing the "have you locked up the chooks' ritual until the coming of darkness began to automatically provoke some kind of chicken related anxiety. But do you get the point, if we want to be part of God's plan to seek and save lost people then we need to become crystal clear about the need to build deep relationships with people and that value has to become hard wired into our life such that we are constantly searching, constantly looking for opportunities to build relationships and respond to those crazy God moments.

## 2. Include



So the first point Luke is making in the story of Zacchaeus is the need to develop an intentional attitude towards building deep relationships. The second point is that our attitude must also be inclusive. Luke does this by drawing attention to Zacchaeus status as a tax collector, someone who took Jewish money and gave it to the gentile overlords while taking some of the money for himself as a commission. What Luke is telling us is that Jesus did not have a judgement filter when it came to building relationships with people.

Actually this is a point which is made throughout the four gospels who tell us that Jesus built deep relationships with an incredibly diverse range of people. The first and most obvious example is the 12 disciples that Jesus spent three years living and travelling with. They were drawn from every area of society, from tradies, to fishermen to politicians to bureaucrats, which is to say that Jesus made deep relationships irrespective of class. In his deep friendship with two women, Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38, John 11:19), Jesus built relationships irrespective of gender. In spending quite a bit of time with a Samaritan woman who he met at a well in one of those God moments (John 4), Jesus demonstrated that he built relationships irrespective of race and in growing a relationship with Nicodemus (John 3), a member of a religious group that was openly campaigning against Jesus, Jesus demonstrates he was more than happy to build relationships irrespective of religious differences. It seems that all you really needed to be, in order to have a relationship with Jesus, was willing.

What Jesus is saying to us today is really simple, just be willing and open to grow a deep relationship with anyone that God places in your life.

### 3. Inspire

Finally, the third point Luke is making, is that while the harvest strategy is to build deep relationships the vision is to make a difference in people's lives, to inspire. In organising a visit to Zacchaeus's place there is a lot more going on than just a visit. In this society hospitality has deep social implications. People gave dinner invitations to those they considered to be socially superior in order to raise their own social status. To have that invitation rejected would be considered a significant loss of face. This is the background of the Banquet parable Jesus tells in Luke 14, the story of a man who invites people to a banquet and they all send pitiful explanations about why they can't attend which scores them some social advantage.

Zacchaeus doesn't even get to play that game he is a social pariah. Not only would he not be invited to people's celebrations, no one would accept his invitation or come to his place. Which, we might conclude, is the price you pay when you collaborate with the enemy for money. But that is not the conclusion Jesus comes to, Jesus, asks to visit Zacchaeus and in so doing honours him and deeply touches his lonely heart. It is such a little thing that Jesus does, but it is profoundly kind and it inspires Zacchaeus to want to live a better life. *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.*" (Luke 19:10)

Pastor Carlos Rodriguez from Catch the Fire tells this wonderful story that brings together all the three pieces of this relationship puzzle; intend, include, inspire.

*Robert was always hanging out at the traffic light. And he always smelled like hell. He used to have a job and a family and access to a shower. But now he did not own a home or a car, or a credit card. An addiction to alcohol owned Robert, and like a cruel master it drove him to that light. His daily plan was to “earn” a living by begging on the streets of Camuy, Puerto Rico. To see if enough people felt the pity he never felt, when he used to stop at traffic lights, and the homeless would ask him for spare change.*

*Now, with the little money he earned, he could buy the alcohol that would help him forget. 80% proof was almost strong enough to erase the reality that he spends most days on the streets, homeless and drunk.*

*That specific traffic light was just two minutes from our church. It was the turn that would indicate proximity to the “house of God”. But to that house Robert never came. After months of people inviting Robert to join them for service on Sundays, one couple was successful. A man and his wife would actually take Robert out for meals and have him over to their house. They would get him groceries and take him to see the doctor. They were experts at not inviting him to church, but actually being the church to him. So it felt natural for Robert to join them where they went every Sunday. It was so close to his spot anyways and the air conditioner provided a welcomed break from the heat and the shame.*

*As soon as Robert entered I noticed he had arrived. I could see him from afar and everyone recognized him from the light. I wanted to be kind, to prove that I was a cool dude, a welcoming and loving Christian, but I could not handle the smell. I could only give him a short handshake and as soon as that was done, with half a smile on my face, and trying my best to be discrete, I began the desperate search for a hand sanitizer (because you never know).*

*I used to pride myself on caring for the poor. My parents raised me to feel compassion for others. They grew up in poverty so they made sure I understood how fortunate I was. And growing up, we experienced both abundance and lack. So I always felt a sense of duty to give to those in need. I felt connected somehow to Robert. An unconscious understanding that said, “That could be you one day” Because I know Robert did not plan to end up in the traffic light, addicted to alcohol, and smelling like death. No one does. No one should. That I know for sure.*

*He who gives to the poor will lack nothing. Proverbs 28:27*

*Robert kept visiting the church and he started to properly engage. He would greet people, close his eyes during worship and even respond to the preacher’s invitation. He prayed the sinner’s prayers and he repeated the words on multiple occasions. So according to our limited theology, salvation for his soul seemed guaranteed, but Robert was still lost on the streets.*

*After months of having Robert among us he was now behaving like a proper church member. And in our church that meant moving forward to the front during ministry time and being touched by the Holy Spirit. There he always was, smelly, broken, and expectant. And it was in that place that Robert encountered true love. You see, there was a British girl who would sit next to me (and she always smells amazing). She*

*could barely understand the songs or the sermons because she was still learning Spanish. She would ask me to translate for her and even though it was my duty as her husband to make it easy for her to come to church with me, I would quickly get tired and ask her just to pray. And pray she did.*

*While talking to Jesus that specific day she felt an invitation to go to Robert and give him a hug. She approached him confidently in a slow pace, wanting to be obedient to God without making the man feel uncomfortable. "Can I give you a hug?" she asked in her broken español. The tall six-foot six homeless man nodded yes, probably thinking it was another one of the courteous three second hugs these Christians kept giving him, while holding their breath.*

*Catherine then smiled, raised herself like a graceful ballerina and wrapped her arms around Robert's dirty neck. I saw what she was doing and felt pity. My poor wife, how could she handle that smell? Then I felt guilty for being concerned that her clothes could be ruined. Then I realized how much of a jerk I was for feeling disappointed that his odour might stick to her for the rest of the day. I was thinking of me, stupid selfish prideful thoughts, while God and his daughter thought of someone else. And what I saw that day, changed my life forever.*

*Catherine held on to Robert for more than 20 minutes. She squeezed him as if she was hugging me, or her dad, or Jesus himself. Her calf muscles worked very hard as she determined to stay in that position, tiptoeing for the hug. It was like she was convinced; that this one-act would make up for every unkind word Robert had ever heard. As if one embrace could convince Robert to stop drinking, sinning, begging, limping.*

*My wife held onto this man like it was her favourite thing to do. She breathed in his stench but she could only smell the fragrance of mercy. She wrapped her arms around his wounded body but she could feel herself being healed. And watching her doing it with such grace, convicted me.*

*Previously I had tried my best to convince Robert to change his lifestyle, I spoke to him on multiple occasions about improving his condition. I invested time in prayer with him asking God to lead his way into real freedom. My strategy was to use godly principles, human wisdom, and man-made religion. But he still looked the same, begged the same, drank the same. It wasn't until that warm embrace, when everything changed.*

*We never saw Robert again. Neither on the street or in the church. Because on that day he choose to go back to his family. To get into a rehabilitation program. To move to a different light. He sent us a message a few months later. He was clean, happy, connected. "It was the hug," he kept saying. "It was Catherine's hug."*

Let us pray