DATE: **August 22, 2026**
SERIES: **Come In From the Crowd**
MESSAGE: **Taking Steps Toward Jesus**
PASSAGE: **Luke 19:1-10**
SPEAKER: **Lane Groene**

You know, I remember the fall that I turned sixteen and was first learning to drive. One Saturday afternoon, I made a pretty big mistake. I made the mistake of driving into downtown Lincoln about an hour before kickoff to a Husker football game. As a new driver, I had never been in so much traffic. Such large crowds of people surrounding me. I was still learning the one way streets in downtown Lincoln, and I was terrified.

I remember coming up to an intersection just as the light was about to turn red, so I stopped. But as soon as I stopped, I realized that there was a police officer in the middle of the intersection directing traffic, and he was waving me through. Unfortunately, in that moment, I felt like I was receiving conflicting information, and I just froze. So the officer started blowing his whistle. Then he started waving more emphatically, the car behind me, started laying on its horn, and a sea of 90,000 people were all staring at me. Or at least that's what it felt like.

Well, after what felt like several minutes, but was probably a matter of seconds, I finally got up the courage to put my foot on the gas, hands clutched tightly to the steering wheel, eyes locked straight ahead, just trying not to make eye contact with that officer, hoping I wasn't about to get pulled over. You know, I later learned that when a police officer's directing traffic, their instructions go before those of the traffic lights. But as a new driver, in a very crowded place, receiving different information, I froze.

You know, I think something kind of similar can happen in our spiritual walks. What God is wanting us to do, the next step he's wanting us to take, the direction he's wanting us to go in life, is right in front of us. But due to the chaos of the world around us, the busyness of life or the noises of the culture coming at us from every direction, we can just freeze. Well, this is what I want to talk about this evening. If you have your Bible, I would encourage you to open with me to Luke chapter 19.

Last weekend, we began looking at the crowds that constantly surrounded Jesus. You see, these crowds were ordinary people just like you and me. And these people, some of them were there with bad intentions, but for the most part, they

were around Jesus because they were curious. They'd heard about his miracles. They were drawn to his teachings and his compassion and his power in the way that he lived. And while Jesus always showed tremendous compassion for the crowd, he never invited people to remain at a comfortable distance. Again and again, if you look in the gospels, he challenged them to make a decision on if they believed who he was and how they were going to respond to him.

Last week we saw that invitation so clearly from Matthew 11, verse 28, where Jesus is speaking to the crowd, and he says to the crowd, come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. So as we continue unpacking this theme for the year of coming in from the crowd, the question for us isn't simply, am I around Jesus enough? Do I have enough spiritual activity in my life? The question that we each need to consider is: *am I taking intentional steps toward Jesus?* That's what we're going to see in the story that we'll look at tonight. Luke 19 actually gives us a picture, first and foremost, of Jesus seeking someone out and inviting them in from the crowd, but also of a man who took intentional steps towards Jesus. And I think there's so much that we can learn from his example.

So to give a little context for the passage here, at this point in Jesus' earthly ministry, he's actually nearing the end of his earthly ministry. He's about fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem in a town called Jericho, and this would have been a short time after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany. And so word was spreading about that event, and that was drawing in these crowds. And Jesus is now on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, and as we now know, ultimately on his way to the cross. So these were literally the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry before going to the cross. With that in mind, let's start reading from Luke 19, starting in verse 1. It says:

> *1 He entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 And there was a man called by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and he was rich.*

So this description of Zacchaeus tells us just enough to know that he wasn't just disliked by his fellow Jews, he would have been despised. You see, tax collectors worked for the oppressive Roman government, and they were known for exploiting their own people. They were known for collecting more taxes than the law required in order to build their own wealth. And so because of this, although they had wealth, they were on the outskirts of society, both socially and spiritually. So Zacchaeus had wealth, but he didn't have belonging. He had status, but no spiritual standing. He had worldly comforts, but no peace in his life. Verse 3:

> *3 Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature.*

So we're told that Zacchaeus was curious, okay? He wanted to see Jesus. And as Ryan mentioned last week, curiosity in life is such a good thing. But curiosity alone won't change your life. What matters is what you do with that curiosity. So let's keep reading and see what Zacchaeus did with his curiosity. Verse 4:

> *4 So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see him, for he was about to pass through that way.*

All right, so the first thing that we see from Zacchaeus was that he followed his curiosity and actually became like a child. You see, in that time and culture, distinguished men didn't run, and they definitely didn't climb trees. But Zacchaeus wasn't too worried about that. He had a question on his heart that mattered more than his image. You know, that's where faith often begins, bot with all the answers, not with certainty, but with curiosity.

It's interesting because one chapter earlier in Luke chapter 18, verse 17, Jesus said whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all. You see, childlike faith isn't weak. It's curious. It's honest. It's humble. It says, "I don't have life figured out. I don't have all the answers, but I want to see Jesus."

You know, some of you this evening might be in that place right now. You know you don't have all the answers in life, but you're curious. If that's the case, that's not weakness—that's not something you need to hide. That is a great starting point for spiritual growth.

We also noticed here that Zacchaeus wasn't worried about others' perceptions. If you imagine the scene, there's a huge crowd gathered and they knew Zaccheus, this rich, corrupt tax collector, and they see him running ahead of the crowd and scurrying up into this tree. I don't know if you've ever climbed a tree—there is no dignified way to climb a tree. And so the crowd was likely talking. But Zacchaeus had made a decision: I'd rather look foolish and see Jesus than look put together and miss him. You see, you will never follow Jesus fully while managing your image carefully. At some point, you have to choose the approval of the culture or the presence of Christ.

Also notice that Zacchaeus didn't let his limitations stop him, okay? The verse is very obvious: Zacchaeus was short, okay? I'll be honest, I feel for him, okay? Instead of using this limitation as an excuse, he found a way. You know, so many people today choose not to take next steps towards Jesus because of some limitation or perceived limitation. Maybe it's my past, my upbringing, my doubts, my personality, my busy schedule, my place in society. Or maybe it's even a physical limitation like Zacchaeus. But Zacchaeus shows us that our limitations don't have to define our direction. You may not approach Jesus the same as someone else, but we can all absolutely pursue him. Verse 5:

> *5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." 6 And he hurried and came down and received him gladly.*

You know, I love how we see Zacchaeus obey Jesus immediately. No questions asked. You see, Jesus stopped and, for whatever reason, in that crowd, he looked up and he saw Zaccheus, and he calls him by name. And then he gives him two commands: Hurry, and come down. And if you'll notice, it says Zacchaeus responded instantly, he hurried and he came down. No hesitation, no delay, no negotiation, no clarifying questions, just immediate obedience, okay? Some of you may know exactly what next step Jesus is calling you to take. And the question isn't clarity—it's willingness. It's obedience. It's intentionality.

Then at the end of verse 6, it says, "he received Jesus gladly." You know, I find that interesting. Zacchaeus didn't say, "give me a week to kind of clean things up first, then we'll get together" or "let me get my life together first, Jesus," or "let me go home and prepare my house, get my house ready before you come over." No, he welcomed Jesus just as he was. Then verse 7:

> *7 When they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, "he has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.*

Zacchaeus didn't let the voices of the crowd or the culture override Jesus' invitation. And this is so important for us to understand because Jesus doesn't wait for you to clean yourself up before he comes into your life. He comes just as you are. You see, the message of the gospel is not fix yourself or reach a certain moral standard and then invite Jesus into your life. No, the message of the gospel is come to Jesus all who are weary and heavy-laden and he will give you rest. Verse 8:

> *8 Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much."*

Okay, first, don't miss in this verse that Zacchaeus acknowledges Jesus as Lord. You know, that's really the turning point in Zacchaeus' life. Zacchaeus moves from curiosity at the beginning of the chapter to submission. He doesn't just want to see Jesus anymore, he surrenders his life to him. You know, even today, this is sadly where many people stop short. They're interested in Jesus, but not willing to surrender to him. Salvation isn't just about believing the right things about Jesus in your mind. It is about bowing your life to him. Zacchaeus calls him Lord, not teacher, not miracle worker, not prophet—Lord.

Next we see Zacchaeus repent and seek to make restitution. So interestingly, under the Mosaic law of that time, if a thief voluntarily confessed their crime, they had to restore what they had taken. And there were very specific details concerning how and how much it took to make restitution. But what we see from Zacchaeus is not minimal compliance in order to appease the law. In fact, according to the law, restitution may have required far less than what Zacchaeus did. Zaccheus goes above and beyond.

Why? Because real repentance isn't about doing the minimum to get by. It's about a changed heart that produces a changed life. Zacchaeus wasn't trying to earn his salvation. He was responding to it. His actions didn't save him, but they were the fruit of his salvation and his repentance. And we know this because in verse 9, Jesus speaks and he says:

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

I love that Jesus responds here and affirms Zacchaeus's conversion. But notice what Jesus didn't say. He didn't say today, "Zacchaeus has finally become a good person." He didn't say, "today Zacchaeus has earned his way back into the good graces of God." You see, the crowd looked at Zaccheus and they saw a tax collector, a traitor, a sinner, someone who didn't belong. But Jesus looked at him and said, "Zaccheus, you belong." Not because of his Jewish heritage or his good works, but because of God's covenant with Abraham that was being fulfilled through Jesus before their very eyes.

You see, this is why Jesus came to this earth and lived a perfect life and died on the cross. Not just to forgive your past, but also to give you a new identity as children of God. And that leads us to the final verse. This verse, some scholars would say, is the key verse in all of Luke's gospel. Verse 10:

> *10 For the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost.*

See, here's the truth. Zaccheus was seeking to see Jesus on that day. But Jesus was seeking him first. Every one of us is lost in our sin, but praise the Lord, Jesus came to seek and save that which was lost. So any desire that you or I have to move towards Jesus, to draw near to Jesus ,is because Jesus is already moving towards you. So Zacchaeus started in the crowd. His curiosity moved him up into the tree. His obedience took him to the table with Jesus. And finally, his submission to Jesus as Lord and Savior led him to action. And after that, everything changed in his life. Financially, Zacchaeus may have had a loss that day, but spiritually, he became rich.

Now, I don't want us to simply leave this evening admiring Zaccheus's story and his faith. I want us to ask what his story means for ours. You see, Zacchaeus on that day took a step toward Jesus. Then another and another. And eventually those steps led to a completely transformed life. And I think that's an important way to think about following Jesus. Sometimes we can make the Christian life so much more complicated than it needs to be. We want to know the whole plan, the whole journey, how everything's gonna end. But what if Jesus is simply asking you to take the next step towards him?

Maybe you've been curious about Jesus for a while. You've been around the crowd. You've listened, you've learned, you've watched, you've wondered, but you've never actually surrendered your life to him. Your next step is to submit your life to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Admit that you know you're a sinner, and your sins separate you from a perfect and holy God, and allow God to come into your life, to take control of your life and forgive your sins. If you'll take that step, it'll be the greatest step you could ever take in your life.

For many of you here this evening, though, I know you've already done that. Praise God. But we should never stop moving toward Jesus, taking steps toward Jesus. So for some of you, your next step, maybe a step into greater community. Like into a Life Group. It's time for you to stop trying to follow Jesus alone. Jesus never intended for us to follow him alone. For others, your next step is growth. To root your faith more deeply in God's word. Maybe through taking a Core Class or joining a Bible study or starting a Bible reading plan.

For others, your next step is healing. You're feeling beat down and defeated. You've been stuck in a cycle of addiction, and you need to reach out for help. We have an amazing spiritual care ministry and amazing recovery ministries here at our church that would love to help you in those ways. And still for others, your next step is a step into service—to use what God has given you and your story to help others draw near to Jesus.

You see, as a church, we want to continue doing a better job helping people find these connections and take these next steps. And so the leadership team has actually decided to hire a new role on the Care team, specifically focused on helping people identify and take their next steps toward Jesus. And I am honored and humbled and so excited to have the opportunity to start serving in that role in September.

If when you came in last week or this evening, you grabbed one of these Fall Supplements and have had the chance to flip through it a little bit, you'll notice that our church is blessed with so many opportunities to help people drawn near to Jesus. But sometimes there's so many opportunities available that you can kind of suffer from paralysis of analysis, thinking over and over about the next step. If

that's where you're at, I would love to talk with you, to pray with you, to help you identify what Jesus is calling you to next, and then to help you get connected into that ministry.

Another way that our church passionately pursues this is through our Belong gathering. The reason that we talk every single weekend about Belong is because we recognize that every weekend, we have people who come through our doors who are looking for a place to belong. People who are curious. People who have hurt and pain in their life. People who are searching for community. And that is exactly what the Church should be for—seeking to present every person complete in Christ.

But this isn't about me or our staff team or a program or a class at all. It's about Jesus and helping each and every one of us continually move towards him. I love what Ryan said last week: Don't overcomplicate the Christian life. It can really be boiled down to 2 steps. Step one, go to Jesus. Step two, repeat step one. That's what it's about. And as a church collectively and as individuals, we want to be about that as well. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for sending your son, Jesus to this earth. The ultimate act of love and sacrifice. God, I thank you for the example that Jesus was here on this earth. How every time he spoke to the crowd, he was calling them to believe who he was, to draw near to him. God, I pray that you would help each and every one of us to do the same, to continue drawing near to you, to continue taking steps of obedience, steps of faith, steps into community, into healing, steps toward you. Thank you that you are a God who has promised to never leave us or forsake us. We love you and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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