

SESSION 3

PREACHING GUIDE

OVERVIEW AND GOAL

The goal of this session is to identify some core values and activities that are integral to becoming an authentic and sincere follower of Jesus Christ. If you are already a follower of Jesus, this session can serve to deepen or sharpen an earlier commitment. Like the Apostle Peter, many of us have multiple times in life when our faith journey needs correction, renewing, or deepening. What's more, the values explored in this session are intended to focus your commitment to global discipleship. Following Jesus means being committed to loving God and your neighbour as yourself, and to do so in both words and actions.

KEY BIBLICAL PASSAGES

Mark 1:16-20; Romans 10:9; Acts 10; Luke 19:1-10

BACKGROUND

When Jesus called his disciples, he invited them to “take up your cross and follow me.” Some years later the Apostle Paul instructed that if you “confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Clearly both words and actions are involved in beginning and living the Christian life. However, the primary motive or driving force is love – love for God and your neighbour. We are able to love because God first loved us.

BRIEF THEME SUMMARY

How does a person begin or deepen the Christian journey and life in God's Kingdom? Taking the journey requires ongoing change or transformation, both inwardly and outwardly. That change is inspired by God's love for us and affected by our commitment in words and actions.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, speaks of how in a time of personal crisis, certain key events sparked a change from a life of self-described greed to following Christ. One of them was realizing how the pursuit of wealth had damaged his closest relationships. Another was the horror he felt while observing living conditions in poor neighbourhoods. Millard and his wife Linda both became followers of Jesus Christ, began to give generously to the poor, and started Habitat for Humanity in 1976. Built from the idea of partnership housing and relying on volunteer support, Habitat for Humanity has constructed, rehabilitated, repaired or improved close to half a million houses worldwide – providing shelter and homes for more than two million people. Millard Fuller’s vision of Habitat for Humanity was derived from the call of Christ on his life, and his willingness to shift his priorities in a new direction.
2. Michelle Miller first heard Christ calling her through Saturday Night Church, a weekly service for hippies held in her backyard in the early 1970’s. Her most lasting memory was how people were accepted exactly as they were: “Coming down off of a bad acid trip? Come on in and we’ll sit with you, praying while the drug runs its course. Single and pregnant? We’ll be family for you.”

Unfortunately, her own life took a different turn and she rejected the Christian faith and struggled with addiction until she was 25 years old. “When using drugs I lived for myself, pleased myself, and hated myself. I was in captivity,” she writes.

Michelle’s sobriety launched a new search for God that included goddess worship, Buddhist meditation and “some syncretistic New Age weirdness.” Bottoming out spiritually, she decided to spend time at L’Abri in Switzerland, describing the God of the Bible as “the last house on the block.” At Pentecost 1996 she decided to follow Jesus. Her words of conversion were a grudging, “God, you had better show up.”

After nurturing her faith for a few years, she moved to Vancouver in 2000 to study theology at Regent College, all the while discerning her vocation. She volunteered at WISH, a drop-in centre for prostitutes in Vancouver’s downtown eastside. The women there were most often HIV+, had hepatitis and/or tuberculosis and were deeply addicted to crack, heroine and alcohol – not unlike some of Michelle’s old friends from Saturday Night Church, many years before.

Michelle writes: “One evening as I was working the food line my eyes were inexorably drawn to a woman’s dirty hands, stained from cooking up drugs and scrabbling around for half-smoked cigarettes on the street. They were ordinary, nothing special, but something strange happened. I saw Jesus’ hands. Here I was in this hellish place with half-dead women all around me and I saw Jesus’ hands. A mystery. A gift. This experience began working a change in me. I was given the insanely precious and counter-intuitive taste of Jesus in the poor. And not just a little bit. He was RIGHT THERE. Her hands. His hands. God was answering my prayer of showing up, but man was it ever in an unlikely place.”

Since that moment, Michelle’s life has involved an ongoing dialogue between her theology and the “street” which has involved waiting on God and working to bridge the gap between praising God and confronting poverty. In 2005, she founded an organization called Resist Exploitation, Embrace Dignity (REED) that cares for women who have been trafficked into the sex industry, and works to address the root causes of gender-based violence. She writes: “It’s an honour to stand in solidarity with women who are marginalized, many of whom are First Nations... God has given me the desire of my heart: to live with and for those beautiful people whom society has overlooked or thrown away. My prayer is that all of us will be freed from captivity and live fully into the freedom of the Kingdom of God.”

SERMON SUGGESTION

Zacchaeus' Risky and Public Salvation

Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

It can sometimes be difficult to agree on what is required for a person to become a Christian. What people cannot argue, however, is the power and authenticity of a changed life.

The Zacchaeus passage teaches the following truths:

1. Zacchaeus was already part of God's people (as a Jewish man he was a "son of Abraham" – v. 10) yet his faith was dormant and his life not aligned with God's priorities. In this sense, he was "lost" – he was not living out his full potential as a child of God. Similarly today, it is possible for many people to claim commitment to the Christian faith or membership in the church, but their values and lifestyles do not reflect God's Kingdom priorities in the wider world. As a result they are missing the joy and fulfillment that Christ intends for his followers.
2. Zacchaeus was looking for something more in life. Jericho was a beautiful place to live and Zacchaeus was a successful man, but something was missing. At the risk of being ridiculed in public, his thirst for more prompted him to climb a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus.
3. Jesus approaches Zacchaeus with generosity and optimism. Even before Zacchaeus makes his public commitment to a renewed life, Jesus is already offering friendship and hospitality. Meanwhile, the biased disciples are grumbling about Jesus' invitation to Zacchaeus. This speaks to God's amazing grace and startling love for sinners and is a warning to those who might be tempted to write people off for "spiritual" reasons. Zacchaeus is overjoyed by Jesus' offer.
4. Zacchaeus makes a mind-boggling public confession in the form of repentance. He does not simply admit to stinginess and fraud; he also repents, offering to repay those he has robbed, and making a commitment to give to the poor. The phrase "if I have defrauded anyone," should not be read as a loophole in his confession – rather, Zacchaeus probably forgot all the people he had defrauded over time and would need to have people approach him with their grievance.
5. The guidelines for restoration of funds stolen was clearly commanded for God's people, laid out in Leviticus 6:4-5, Numbers 5:7 and Exodus 22. Perhaps as a young Jewish boy, Zacchaeus had been taught these scriptures and they sat deeply in his heart, calling out to him. He knew what God had wanted all along. When we compare these passages with Zacchaeus' pledge of repentance, we see that this tax collector is actually offering more than was required of him.
6. Jesus goes to Zacchaeus' house for a meal. In the Mediterranean world, table fellowship reflected social and spiritual preferences – in other words, you "belonged" with the people you ate with. This explains the reaction (v. 7): all who saw (Jesus) said he had gone to be a guest of a sinner. Jesus, however, is now eating with Zacchaeus because the man has found full salvation. His faith is no longer nominal or superficial – he is being transformed into a child of God. His faith is informing his use of money and his concern for people who are poor and victims of injustice. Jesus has invited him to the earthly "banqueting table" that anticipates the great celebration in the new heaven and earth.
7. Zacchaeus is an example of what it means to take the journey to follow Jesus in global discipleship. His life illustrates inner and outer change, salvation in words and actions, linking confession and repentance. It also takes seriously commitment to those who are victims of injustice and in need of support from those who have more than enough. To use the words of the Apostle Paul, this man is a "new creation!"
8. The story of Zacchaeus can illustrate the "losing" and "finding" experience of what it means to follow Jesus or be saved. It brings to mind the parable discussed in Session One, where Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to

a pearl of great price, or a treasure found in a field. When the pearl or treasure is found, it brings joy to the finder, and prompts the person to sell all he had to purchase it. Upon stumbling upon this great treasure of Jesus Christ and God's Kingdom, Zacchaeus is overjoyed and surrenders his old lifestyle to follow Jesus in obedience and generosity.

ADDITIONAL PREACHING AND TEACHING POINTS

Prior to preaching on "entering the Kingdom," have two or three people in your congregation briefly share their story of becoming followers of Jesus. Then consider having one or two others talk about how they needed to deepen or refine their commitment to Jesus. Celebrate the diverse means by which God calls and welcomes people into the Kingdom journey and how it can have multiple starting points and new experiences of grace and transformation.

Acknowledge that the topic of becoming a Christian is complex and multi-sided and that the Bible uses many words to describe this change. The Apostle Paul's teaching that "if anyone is in Christ that person is a new creation" clearly illustrates this point.

Speak to how the idea of salvation or being "born again" has also been trivialized in North American culture to the point where many churches and pastors are shy or hesitant about the old language and methods of evangelism. Consider how evangelism has shifted from being a huge public event a generation or two ago – featuring open-air crusades and emotional altar calls – to what was popularized more recently as friendship evangelism, to a present season where evangelism is often linked to belonging to a Christian community and experiencing authentic loving relationships.

Some of the reasons for a move away from dramatic portrayals of evangelism are:

- Stories of born-again people who ended up being frauds or embarrassments
- Our pluralistic culture, which champions and embraces many religious viewpoints, makes it difficult for many to talk about the exclusive truth of Christianity
- The division and demise of many of our churches across Canada can erode confidence in the Christian message

Discuss with your congregation what your thoughts are regarding the style shifts in how evangelism is described and conducted.

Connect the story of Zacchaeus to the testimonies given earlier by the people in your congregation and these trends in evangelism and draw out what is the heart of becoming a follower of Jesus.

APPLICATION TOOLS

As a pastor, ask people to consider if they need to deepen their commitment to follow Jesus. Plan a "Zacchaeus" meal in the church to which all those people will be invited and where they can talk about what they plan to "lose" or give away in order to follow Jesus. Things they might "give away" include:

- money and possessions
- time for service
- expertise directed to help others

At the mealtime, speak of how Christ's table fellowship reflected an invitation to intimacy with him and symbolized the great banquet in the new heaven and earth.

Church leadership could also establish a "Zacchaeus" fund that people could contribute to and that would be directed toward people who are victims of injustice, a global ministry, or some other charity.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

John Stackhouse. **Humble Apologetics**. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Millard Fuller. **The Theology of the Hammer**. Smyth & Helwys, 1994.

Donald Posterski. **Reinventing Evangelism**. IVP, 1989.

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Lesslie Newbigin. **Foolishness to the Greeks: Gospel and Western Culture**, Eerdmans/SPCK, 1986