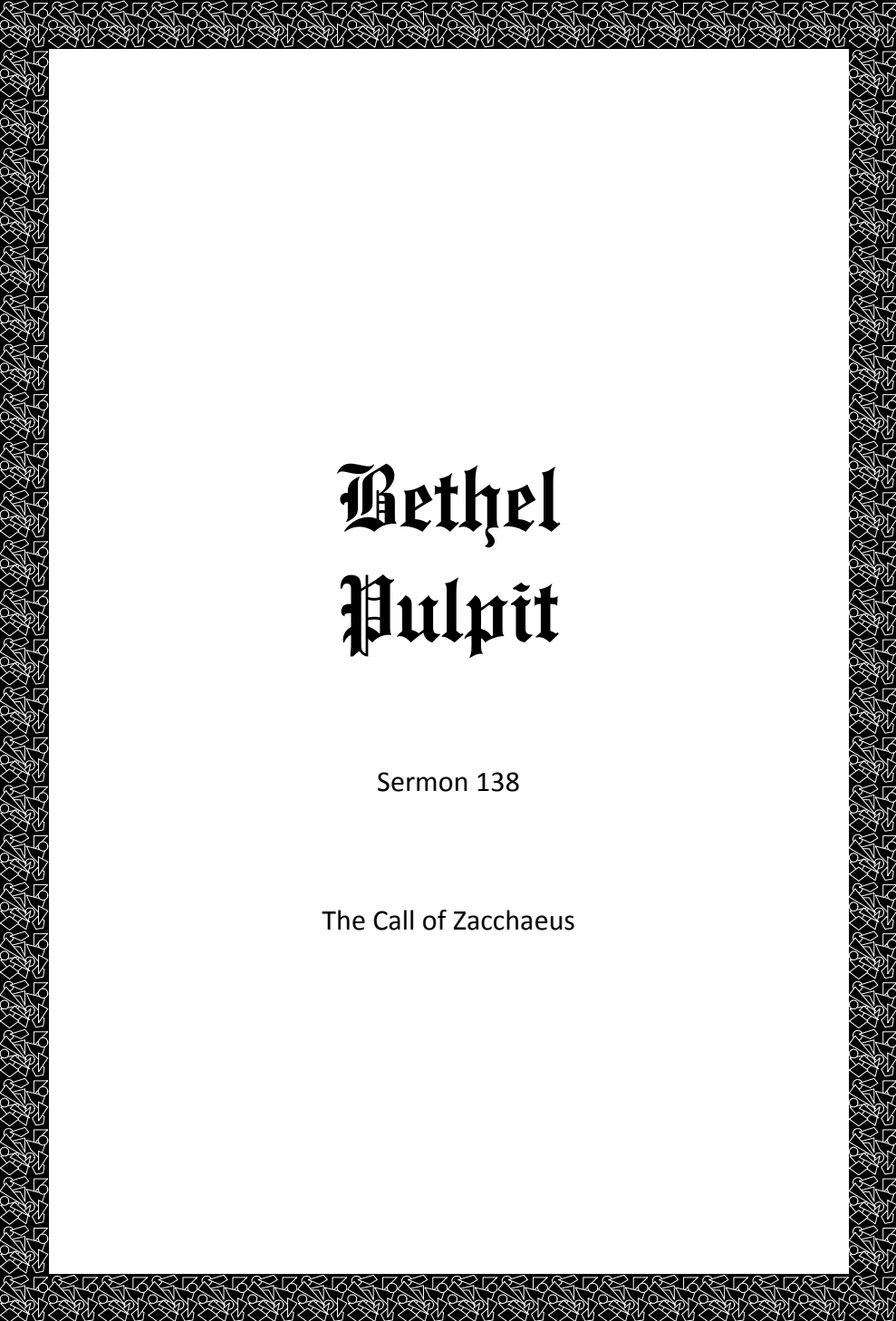




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 138

The Call of Zacchaeus

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 8th December, 1996**

Text: *“And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house” (Luke 19. 5).*

Here we have a miracle of love and mercy: the meeting of the Lord Jesus and Zacchaeus, an almighty Saviour and a wretched sinner. And Zacchaeus' life was never the same again. His life was utterly, completely transformed. If you and I are ever going to reach heaven at last, then there must be a meeting between us and the Saviour, just as real, just as gracious as this meeting. And your life will be transformed; your life will never be the same again. And the comment of the Lord Jesus on this wonderful transaction: “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

Well, beloved friends, during the next week or two you will be contemplating this (I hope you will): “The Son of man is come.” This is the reason why He came: “To seek and to save that which was lost.” Our hymnwriter says,

“On Jesus call, though wretched be your case;
He came the lost to seek and save by grace.”

This is the Lord Jesus' own comment on this gracious transaction: “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” And this work has been going on ever since. It is still going on today, the Good Shepherd seeking and saving that which was lost. So this is where Zacchaeus was, lost, and this is where you and I are by nature, lost. “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” Perhaps also during the next weeks you will be singing this:

“Lost souls to recover, and form them afresh,
Our wonderful Lover took flesh of our flesh.”

Now this is the Lord's own comment: “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

“This day is salvation come to this house.” It was salvation, and that is your greatest need, that is my greatest need, to be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation. We want a religion that will save us. We want a religion that will take us to heaven at last. And it can only come in this same way, through a gracious, personal, vital knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. “This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham.” You say, What does He mean? He always was a son of Abraham. He was still a Jew; he was born a Jew; he died a Jew. Well, if you come to the epistles we are told very clearly what a son of Abraham is: not according to the flesh, a Jew, an Arab, but a sinner who is blessed with faith like faithful Abraham. And the Epistle to the Galatians makes it abundantly clear: “If ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” That is a son of Abraham, a son who in bonds of mercy and love belongs to Christ. “If ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Now this is the Lord’s own comment concerning His gracious dealings with Zacchaeus, His meeting with this man, Zacchaeus. “And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

Well then, let us seek with the Holy Spirit’s aid to look at this wonderful meeting, this wonderful transaction, the transformation which took place, and see if we know anything of it personally, or if even tonight we are seeking for it personally. “And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho.” The Man of sorrows. But He was passing through Jericho with two purposes of love and mercy: one toward poor, blind Bartimaeus, and the other toward poor, sinful Zacchaeus. “Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus.” A man whose name was in the book of life. A man who was loved with an everlasting love. A man for whom the Lord Jesus was going to lay down His life. But here he was, lost in the ruins of the Fall, as far from God as sheep can run, the chief of sinners. But the appointed moment had come when the Lord was going to save him by grace – not to suggest salvation or propose it, but that divine, almighty arm put forth in his salvation.

“Behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich.” His sin, his fault was not being rich. There was not anything wrong with that. Let me just explain it

briefly. When we read of the publicans in the New Testament, the suggestion is always of great sinners. So the chief among the publicans must have been the chief of sinners. I suppose we would call these publicans tax gatherers or tax collectors; it is a word that has radically changed its meaning. But dishonesty was prevalent among them. As I understand it, the Roman government, who had the authority at this time, appointed a tax collector. He paid a sum of money to be permitted to have this work, and in return he could extort just as much as he wished. So the more he extorted, the more he had himself. It all belonged to him. It led to rabid dishonesty, greed, covetousness and robbery. Also, it appears there was another great sin among them and that was they were especially cruel with the poor, and they were more lenient with the rich, so that they could gain favours from them. That is why this name of a publican was a distasteful name. They were despised, hated by the people. And this man Zacchaeus was not just a publican: he “was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich.” It is very clear from what you read afterwards that he was notorious for his sin and corruption. O we have to say, “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound”; that the vilest of sinners salvation have found through the Redeemer’s blood.

But now see a strange happening. “He sought to see Jesus who He was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him: for He was to pass that way.” This well-known figure, this despised figure, was a tiny man, and see him running and climbing a tree.

Of course, the question has often been asked: was there a real, longing, living desire in the heart of Zacchaeus, or was it just curiosity? It is very hard to answer questions like that. No-one can really discern the exact moment when the new birth takes place. You can see the effects of it, sometimes the powerful effects of it. Tell me, when was Saul of Tarsus born again? Was he not born again until he was on the road to Damascus? Or what did the Lord mean when He said, “It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks”? Had he been born again previously and there were those pricks of conscience? Was he born again when he saw the martyr Stephen die? Only the Lord knows when the new birth takes place. Whether Zacchaeus was quickened already, when he went running and climbed the tree, or whether it was only curiosity and he was born again afterwards, we do not know, but we do know this: it was according to the

mysterious providence of God and His powerful working that Zacchaeus was there at that time with the desire, whether curiosity or grace, and found in that tree looking for Jesus passing by. May we never seek to be wiser than is written.

In the history of the church of God, there have been many who have gone to hear the truth just out of curiosity, who have gone home changed characters. There were very many in the life of William Gadsby who went out of curiosity, I suppose because of his quaintness and the unusual things he said and did and the remarkable happenings in his chapel and the stories that went round about him, many of them grossly exaggerated; but many came out of curiosity, but the Lord overruled that and sanctified their curiosity. He used it to accomplish His purpose of love and mercy, and you can read of one and another, how the Lord most graciously dealt with them.

“He sought to see Jesus who He was; and could not for the press” – so many people in the way. I think all of you have proved this: if you are seeking after Jesus, it is hard to come to Him because of the press. John Berridge says,

“If unto Jesus thou art bound,
A crowd about Him will be found,
Attending day and night.”

“He sought to see Jesus who He was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him: for He was to pass that way.” Now there seems a weight and sacredness and solemnity in this sentence: “For He was to pass that way.” Isn’t it so this evening? Isn’t it so whenever we assemble for worship? Isn’t it so whenever we meet in the name of Jesus? “He was to pass that way.” O but are you like Zacchaeus? Do you go after Him? Or like Bartimaeus? He heard “that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by,” but he did not want Him to pass him by. “He ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him: for He was to pass that way.” And now we come to this wonder of wonders, the salvation, the everlasting salvation of Zacchaeus, this chief of sinners. And where is the merit of this man? Where is his desert? What had he done? We have to say, “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” Then grace is free indeed. Then there is hope for the chief of sinners.

“And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up, and saw him.” He came to the place; He came on purpose to the place. It was a place eternally appointed in the everlasting counsels of God in the covenant of grace. Have some of you got a place where the Lord found you? Do some of you tonight have to say from a full heart, “‘Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God,’ and He found me”? Can you go to your place where the Lord found you? “When Jesus came to the place, He looked up.” He knew all about Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus could not hide from Him among the leaves of the sycomore tree. But you think of that great crowd – it must have been a great crowd, because he could not get near Jesus for the press – but one person there for whom the Lord had a purpose of love and mercy. Do I hear someone say, “If it is only one this evening, Lord Jesus, let it be me; ‘Remember me with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O visit me with Thy salvation’”? For salvation is a personal thing, an individual thing. A crowd here; one person graciously dealt with. And so in our sacred assemblies a crowd, but one here dealt with and one there dealt with, and faith says, “Let it be me, Lord. O let it be me. Do not pass me by. ‘Visit me with Thy salvation.’”

“And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up, and saw him.” It was the first time Zacchaeus had ever seen Jesus. It was not the first time Jesus had seen Zacchaeus. What do we sing? “He saw me ruined in the Fall, yet loved me notwithstanding all.” Why, the Lord Jesus saw His people long before they were born, long before they had any being, long before the foundations of the world. “He looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus.” Now according to the flesh the Lord had never met Zacchaeus before, but He knew who he was and He knew his name. I wonder if this was the thing that especially had a transforming effect on Zacchaeus. Does Jesus know my name? Does He know who I am? Then He must know all about me. He must know all my sins. He must know all my failures. Now I wonder if it was that word, Zacchaeus, in all its simplicity, but in all its divine, almighty power that brought the conviction. Also, that meeting of an unholy sinner with Him “who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.” “Jesus ... said unto him, Zacchaeus.” We read that the Good Shepherd calleth out His own sheep by name, and it is a powerful call; it is an effectual call; and the sheep follow Him. They “leave the hateful ways of sin, turn to the fold, and enter in.” That is just what Zacchaeus did.

If the Lord speaks one word to you tonight, that will do the deed. If the Lord says, Zacchaeus to you, that will do the deed. That is when the truth comes to you personally, as if you were the only person sitting in the chapel. He “said unto him, Zacchaeus.” And it will be a solemn word. There will be love and mercy and grace in it, but it will be a solemn word, because the Lord knows all about you, all your sins, all your past life, the inner recesses of your heart, all things naked and bare before Him with whom we have to do. He “said unto him, Zacchaeus.” It was a call, an effectual call, and Zacchaeus obeyed, and he obeyed immediately. There was the obedience of faith here. He “said unto him, Zacchaeus.”

On another occasion, to Mary Magdalene, He said unto her, “Mary.” There, of course, it was the sweet assurance that He who died now lived. It was the assurance of His love. He claimed her as His portion. He allowed her to lay claim to Him. “Mary.” “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by My name; thou art Mine.” And here, He “said unto him, Zacchaeus.” Perhaps some of you say, as people have done, “It would be a wonderful thing if my name were in the Word of God.” Well, in a sense it would not, because if your very name were in the Word of God, Satan would harass you and tempt you and so would your own unbelief, that there might be someone else of the same name. After all, there are going to be a few John Smiths in heaven. But it is something clearer than your name being written in the Bible. It is the character: a sinner feeling his need, hoping in Jesus; a sinner saying, “Thou, O Christ, art all I want”; a sinner saying, “Other refuge have I none”; a sinner saying, “I cannot do without Thee, Thou Saviour of the lost.”

He “said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down.” That is a gospel commandment. Zacchaeus had got to come down out of that tree into which he had climbed. And if the Lord effectually calls you and me, if He deals with us in love and mercy in salvation, He will say to us, “Come down,” because we have plenty of sycamore trees that we climb up. We have got to come down. There must be the bringing down, the humbling. And Zacchaeus could not get low enough at Jesus’ feet when he came down. Tell me, has grace ever brought you down? Has grace ever humbled you? “Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down.” You have to come down from that old life of sin and ignorance of God and covetousness and fulfilling the lusts of your flesh. “Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down. And, “Where the word of a king is, there is

power.” He did come down. You have to come down from that life of prayerlessness, that life of unconcern, that life lived only for the things of time and sense. “Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down.” You have to come down from all that self-righteousness, being satisfied with yourself and your own religion and your prayers, your chapel attendance, your supposed goodness. You have to come down from it all.

“Glad they renounce their former pride,
And wholly in His name confide;
Only in Him they make their boast,
Who came to seek and save the lost.”

“Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down.... For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” You have to come down from all that take-it-for-granted religion. You have to come down from all that plenty-of-time religion – that it will do tomorrow, next week, the coming weeks, when you come to die. You have to come down from all that, from resting on all the good opinion other people have of you. You have really got to come down from everyone and everything as a sinner to the Saviour’s feet. It is this:

“A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,
On Thy kind arms I fall,
Be Thou my strength and righteousness,
My Jesus, and my all.”

That is salvation – “This day is salvation come to this house” – when we can speak language like that at Jesus’ feet.

“Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down ... and he made haste.” There is the obedience of faith. “My soul obeys the almighty call, and runs to this relief.” “Where the word of a king is, there is power.” “Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down.” He was going in one direction only, out of the tree towards the Saviour. So will you. But in real religion there is haste. There will be a sense of urgency, if you know you are lost, if you know you are a sinner, if you know you are condemned, if you know you are to die, if you know there is a judgment day. “Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down.” We read of those who have fled for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before them. That is what Zacchaeus did here. There is haste in that. If you see a person fleeing for his life, there is haste there.

You will be stirred up from your halfheartedness and your lukewarmness and your slothfulness and you will make haste to the Saviour's feet. You know what happened when the angel appeared to the shepherds and said, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.... For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." "They came with haste." They did not linger. They did not wait. What about those flocks? Are they going to be destroyed by foxes and wolves and lions? They left their flocks. You will have to leave everything. "They came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger." And they worshipped Him.

"Let us with humble hearts repair
(Faith will point out the road)
To little Bethlehem, and there
Adore our infant God."

"Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house." When the Lord comes, He comes to abide. He comes to dwell with you for ever. And if the Lord comes to abide in your heart, He will also abide in your life and He will also abide in your house. "To day I must abide at thy house." There is a reality in religion. It is not just something that you leave behind in chapel. "To day I must abide at thy house." He is coming into Zacchaeus' life, not just today, but tomorrow and for ever, and He is going to abide at his house, where all the covetousness and deceitfulness had been taking place. It is not going to take place any more because the Lord is going to abide in your house. If the Lord is going to abide in your heart, He will come to abide in your life and in your house, and it will never be the same again. There will be the complete transformation.

"To day I must abide at thy house." This is one of the musts, the glorious musts of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. There are a few of them. "He must needs go through Samaria." "Even so must the Son of man be lifted up." The vital necessity of it. And this is one of them: "To day I must abide at thy house." Today. The religion of Jesus Christ is not a religion of tomorrow; it is a religion of today. "To day if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness."

I do not know whether any of you have read that remarkable life of Brownlow North, a most amazing person. He was the prime minister's nephew. He belonged to the nobility. He was one of the greatest rakes and rogues who were known until the Lord dealt with him. He was a well-known character because of his importance and also because of his wickedness. The Lord cut him down. He was in the presence of someone but so greatly he felt his need, he had to fall down before they left and beg for mercy. Knowing the man, they thought it was a joke, but such was his conviction, he could not leave it until he was alone. He had to fall down and cry for mercy.

“Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house.” And the deed was done. “He made haste, and came down, and received Him joyfully.” And the people murmured. They said, “He was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.” You do not know where the line of God's election will run. Do not murmur if the Lord deals with a person in a most unexpected place. “They all murmured, saying, That He was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.” There is one thing which stands out so clearly, and it is this: the Lord performed this wonderful work in one day. You find so often this was the pattern in Scripture. It does seem like that, but in these solemn, latter days, usually it is a slower work with the process of conviction and seeking and then at last, finding. But you must not limit the Holy One of Israel. He can still work like this in a moment, in an hour.

We have one of our dear, aged friends, still mercifully amongst us, and following a funeral she had been at, a funeral of a much-loved aunt, as she sought formally to say her prayers at night, her mouth was shut, feeling she was unfit to die, she was a sinner. And what did she do? She looked immediately to Jesus by faith and immediately received the blessing. It is no wonder the godly deacons at the chapel she attended were concerned whether it was right, but it has stood for years. We had one like that at Haslingden. She could not come to chapel because she was ill. As she lay in bed, she was most powerfully convicted of sin. She mourned over it and cried for mercy, and Jesus was revealed very powerfully and blessedly in all His preciousness. When she came before the church, she was asked, “Can you not remember any spiritual feeling or experience before that night in bed?” She thought a moment, and said, “No, I don't think I can remember anything ever affecting me before.” The Lord is sovereign.

I just say that here, because with Zacchaeus, the Lord dealt with him sovereignly and graciously and from that moment he was a saved character, “and received Him joyfully.” Perhaps at times we sin in laying down a pattern. J. C. Philpot said we must contend for a standard of experience, but it must never be a rigid one. He said it is as if some ministers take an oak leaf, and say no other leaf is a leaf; that if your religion is not identical with their standard, no other religion can be right. But he said the real mark of a leaf is not whether it has the shape of an oak leaf – it might be a different kind of leaf – but has it got life in it? Does it grow out of the bough?

There are two things the New Testament insists on as vital in salvation. Both of them are the work of the Holy Ghost. One is faith, and one is repentance. There can be no hope, no salvation, no heaven, without either of them. Faith and repentance. Now it is very clear that Zacchaeus possessed faith, real faith, saving faith, God-given faith. What is the mark of faith? It receives Christ. That is faith. “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him” – now that is faith – “as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.” Now that is saving faith. It receives Christ, receives Christ as our only hope, our only plea, all our salvation. By nature we do not want Christ. By nature we do not receive Christ. But when the Holy Spirit works in our hearts there is a place there that none but Christ can fill, and then a sinner can pray the hymn in a right, gracious sense: “Come to my heart, Lord Jesus; there is room in my heart today.” “As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.” This is real faith, a sinner on mercy’s ground receiving the Saviour. “And he made haste, and came down, and received Him.” Then there were all the evidences of faith. Faith works by love. See that in the life of Zacchaeus. Faith purifies the heart. See that in the life of Zacchaeus. Faith overcomes the world. See that in the life of Zacchaeus.

But then the second vital thing, repentance. How the Lord Jesus insisted on it, and John the Baptist, and the apostles. “Repent ye, and believe the gospel.” This is real repentance, not just a few tears, not just a little inward sorrow. “Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord; Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor.” In other words, his world was turned upside down. There was the utter transformation. You see, the

grace that saves always sanctifies. The grace that saves brings you to die to your past life. The grace that saves always makes a difference. Zacchaeus was never the same man again. There was that life of faith and repentance. He had once been covetous. Now there could not be anyone more generous. He was once so thoughtless and unkind. Now look at the kindness and compassion and tenderness. “Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord; Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor.” He was a wealthy man.

And I want you to notice one thing, and this is the nature of repentance. He did not say, “Lord, I promise to do it next week, or tomorrow.” It was now. He had a today religion. “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor.” It is not just a word of confession: it is that life of repentance. You will behave the opposite of how you used to. I think I have often told you of the Puritan, William Bridge, who knew one of the vilest of men, especially in the treatment of his aged mother. When the Lord dealt with him, from that moment when he met his aged mother he prostrated himself on the floor before her. His point was not that you should emulate or imitate the act, but grace made that man behave the very opposite of how he once acted.

“If I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.” This is where the gospel is a higher standard than the law. This is the point people condemn us on so much. They say, “You do not believe the law is the believer’s rule of conduct.” Well, we believe the gospel is a higher standard than the law. I do not think Zacchaeus believed the law was the believer’s rule of conduct. He could not do enough for Jesus’ sake. The law demanded that if you had taken anything by unjust accusation, you had to restore it and add a fifth. The law sets it out clearly, both in Leviticus and Numbers. But Zacchaeus was not going to pay back and just add a fifth. He said they were going to get it back fourfold. This is real religion, Christ everything, the sinner nothing, the sweet constrainings of the love of Christ, the sinner prostrate at Jesus’ feet. May this religion be yours. May this religion be mine.

“And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost.”