

The Life of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Friend of Sinners: Grace That Seeks the Lost

Luke 19:1–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson presents Jesus as the friend of sinners through the account of Zacchaeus, and it gathers up the great theme of seeking grace in the single sentence: “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Doctrinally, the heart of the lesson is the nature of saving grace, and it requires careful handling so that the class grasps both halves of the truth. On one side, salvation is entirely of grace. Zacchaeus did nothing to summon Jesus; Jesus sought him, called him by name, and came to his house before Zacchaeus had changed a thing. Grace takes the initiative; the lost are found because the Shepherd comes after them.

On the other side, the grace that seeks the lost draws them to a real, obedient faith and heartfelt repentance. It does not leave them as it found them. Zacchaeus’ faith expressed itself at once in repentance, in restitution to those he had cheated, and in costly generosity to the poor. This is the consistent New Testament pattern, and your aim is to help the class see it clearly. We are saved by grace through faith, not by works that put God in our debt (Ephesians 2:8–9); yet that same grace creates us for good works (Ephesians 2:10) and trains us to renounce ungodliness (Titus 2:11–14), and a faith that produces no such fruit is dead (James 2:17). This guards against the error of salvation by faith only, the idea that bare belief, with no turning and no transformation, is enough.

Hold these together without collapsing either. Against any notion that we earn our way to God, insist on the priority of seeking grace. Against any notion that grace leaves us unchanged, insist on the repentance and obedience that genuine grace produces. Formationally, this passage confronts two errors of the heart at once: the despair that thinks itself too far gone for grace, and the self-righteousness that grumbles when grace reaches others. Help your class receive the seeking love of Christ personally, rejoice in it for others, and let it bear concrete fruit in their lives.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Luke 19:1–5, Jesus takes the initiative, stopping beneath the tree, looking up, and calling Zacchaeus by name, and He sums it up in verse 10: “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” What does this account teach us about the nature of God’s grace and how a lost person comes to be found?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Trace the initiative of Jesus through the scene. Zacchaeus climbs the tree merely hoping to see Jesus pass by, but Jesus stops, looks up, calls him by name, and invites Himself to stay. Zacchaeus is found not because his searching was adequate but because Jesus came looking for him. Grace took the first step.

Anchor this in verse 10, the key to the whole passage. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." This is why Jesus came: not to wait for the worthy to find their way to Him, but to go after the lost. The whole of His ministry, and supremely His cross, is the seeking love of God in action. Heaven did not wait for us; heaven came down.

Show how a lost person comes to be found. The pattern here is grace initiating and the sinner responding. Zacchaeus does respond; he hurries down and receives Jesus joyfully. But his response is to grace already extended, to a Lord who sought him first. This is the right order, and it humbles us: we love because He first loved us, and we seek Him because He first sought us.

Personalize it gently. Every Christian in the room was sought before they sought. The same Jesus who spotted a tax collector in a tree has called each of them by name. Let the wonder of being sought settle on the class before moving to the harder edges of the lesson.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seeking initiative of God's grace toward the lost
- Christ's mission summed up: to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10)
- Grace taking the first step, with the sinner responding to it
- The cross as the seeking love of God in action
- Being found by Christ before we ever truly sought Him

Discussion Prompts

- Who took the initiative in this encounter, and why does that order matter?
- How does verse 10 explain the whole reason Jesus came?
- How does it change you to know that Christ sought you before you sought Him?

Question 2

Student Question:

Zacchaeus was the kind of man others had written off as beyond hope. Where are you tempted to believe that you, or someone you know, is too far gone, too sinful, or too set in their ways for the grace of Christ to reach?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question addresses the despair that says grace cannot reach this far. Zacchaeus was, by every social and religious measure, a lost cause: a traitor, a cheat, a

collaborator. Yet he was exactly the sort of person Jesus came to seek. No one is beyond the reach of seeking grace.

Apply it in two directions. First, toward ourselves: some carry a private conviction that their particular sin, or the long entrenchment of it, has placed them outside grace. The account of Zacchaeus declares otherwise. Second, toward others: we quietly write people off, deciding that this relative, that coworker, this hardened person could never change. Jesus refuses such conclusions.

Encourage hope grounded in the character of Christ. The question is not whether a person is too sinful for grace, but whether grace is great enough to reach them, and the answer of the gospel is always yes. Invite each person to name where they have given up, on themselves or on someone else, and to let the seeking love of Christ rekindle hope. Hope for the lost is one of the surest marks of a heart that has understood grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- No one beyond the reach of Christ's seeking grace
- The despair that believes oneself too far gone for grace
- The temptation to write others off as hopeless
- Hope for the lost as a mark of a heart shaped by grace

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to believe you are too far gone for grace?
- Whom have you quietly written off as beyond change?
- How does Zacchaeus challenge both of those conclusions?

Question 3

Student Question:

When Jesus invited Himself to Zacchaeus' house, the crowd grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (v. 7). What does their reaction reveal about self-righteousness, and how does it contrast with the heart of Jesus, the friend of sinners?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Examine the grumbling. The crowd is scandalized that Jesus would associate with a sinner. Their objection assumes that holiness means keeping a careful distance from the unclean, and that a truly godly man would never enter such a house. This was a common assumption among the religious of Jesus' day, and it lives on in every age.

Expose the self-righteousness beneath it. The grumblers place themselves on the acceptable side of a line, with Zacchaeus on the other. They do not see themselves as needing what Jesus

offers; they only resent that He offers it to someone unworthy. Self-righteousness is often most clearly revealed not in how we treat our own sin but in how we resent grace shown to others.

Contrast the heart of Jesus. Far from keeping His distance, Jesus draws near. He is called, elsewhere, a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Luke 7:34), and He wears the title without shame. His holiness does not flee from sinners; it seeks them in order to heal them. The friend of sinners is precisely the Savior sinners need.

Apply it to the church. Congregations can drift toward the spirit of the grumbling crowd, more comfortable keeping a respectable distance than seeking the lost. The heart of Jesus calls us to the opposite: to befriend sinners as He did, for their salvation. This sets up the personal question that follows.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-righteousness revealed in resentment of grace shown to others
- The assumption that holiness means distance from sinners
- Jesus as the friend of sinners who draws near to heal (Luke 7:34)
- The call of the church to seek the lost rather than keep a respectable distance

Discussion Prompts

- What assumption about holiness lay behind the crowd's grumbling?
- How does the heart of Jesus contrast with that assumption?
- How can a church drift toward the spirit of the grumbling crowd?

Question 4

Student Question:

It is easy to grumble, like the crowd, when grace is extended to people we think do not deserve it. Where do you notice self-righteousness or resentment in your own heart toward the grace God shows to others, and what would it take to rejoice instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the crowd's grumbling into a mirror. It is a sobering truth that those who have received grace can become resentful when grace is shown to others, much like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Help the class look honestly for this tendency in themselves.

Name the forms it takes. We may feel that someone's repentance came too easily, or that a person who hurt us does not deserve forgiveness, or that newcomers receive a welcome we worked years to earn. Beneath such feelings is a forgetfulness of our own unworthiness and of the sheer gift we have received.

Point the way to rejoicing. The cure for resentment is remembering that we, too, were sought and saved by grace we did not deserve. When we recover the wonder of our own rescue, we are freed to rejoice over the rescue of others, as heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7). Invite each person to name where they have grumbled rather than rejoiced, and to ask God to restore their wonder at grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation of the forgiven to resent grace shown to others
- Forgetfulness of our own unworthiness as the root of resentment
- Remembering our own rescue as the cure for self-righteousness
- Rejoicing with heaven over every sinner who repents (Luke 15:7)

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you notice resentment toward grace God shows to others?
- What does that resentment reveal about how you view your own standing before God?
- What would help you rejoice over others' rescue rather than grumble?

Question 5

Student Question:

Zacchaeus responded to grace by giving half his goods to the poor and restoring fourfold what he had taken wrongly (v. 8). What does his response teach us about the kind of repentance and transformation that genuine grace produces?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Look closely at the shape of Zacchaeus' response. It is concrete, costly, and aimed precisely at the area of his sin. He had grown rich by defrauding people, so his repentance takes the form of giving to the poor and making fourfold restitution to those he had cheated. Grace did not leave him with warm feelings; it turned his life around at the very point of his guilt.

Define genuine repentance from this example. Repentance is not mere regret or a vague resolve to do better. It is a turning that bears fruit, often including the hard work of making things right where we have wronged others. Zacchaeus shows that real repentance touches our wallets, our relationships, and our practices, not just our emotions.

Guard against misreading his works. Zacchaeus is not buying his salvation; he is responding to a grace that has already reached him. His generosity is the fruit, not the root. The order matters: Jesus sought him, came to his house, and met him with grace, and out of that encounter the transformation flowed. We will sharpen this further at Question 9.

Apply it to the class. Where grace is truly received, lives change in concrete ways. A repentance that costs nothing and changes nothing should make us wonder whether grace has truly landed.

Prepare the class for the personal question that follows by holding up Zacchaeus as a picture of grace bearing visible fruit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Repentance as a turning that bears concrete, costly fruit
- Genuine repentance touching money, relationships, and practices
- Restitution and generosity as the fruit of grace, not its purchase price
- Transformation as the evidence that grace has truly been received

Discussion Prompts

- How was Zacchaeus' repentance aimed precisely at the area of his sin?
- What is the difference between regret and the repentance Zacchaeus shows?
- Why is it important that his works are the fruit of grace, not the price of it?

Question 6

Student Question:

Real repentance shows itself in concrete change, not merely good intentions. If grace were truly at work in you the way it was in Zacchaeus, where might it lead you to make restitution, to change a practice, or to give in a way that costs you something?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses Zacchaeus' example into the student's own life. The aim is to move repentance from the realm of feeling and intention into concrete action. Many of us repent in general terms while leaving specific wrongs unaddressed.

Help the class consider the concrete forms repentance might take. Is there restitution to be made, a debt to repay, an apology to offer, something taken to be returned? Is there a practice to change, a habit, a way of treating people, a pattern in how they handle money or time? Is there a costly act of generosity that would loosen the grip of possessions? Grace, when it lands, tends to produce such specifics.

Encourage one concrete step rather than an overwhelming list. The goal is not to crush the class with everything at once but to identify one area where genuine repentance would show itself this week. Remind them that such steps are not attempts to earn God's favor but glad responses to a grace already received, the natural overflow of a heart that grace has turned.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving repentance from intention into concrete action
- Restitution, changed practices, and costly generosity as fruits of repentance
- Identifying one specific step rather than a vague resolve

- Concrete obedience as the glad response to grace received

Discussion Prompts

- Is there restitution or an apology you have left undone?
- What practice or pattern might grace be calling you to change?
- What is one concrete fruit of repentance you could offer this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus declared, "Today salvation has come to this house" (v. 9), to a man whose faith immediately expressed itself in repentance and changed living. How does this account help us understand that the grace of Christ saves us through a faith that turns from sin and obeys, rather than through a bare "faith only" that never changes the life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Center on Jesus' pronouncement: "Today salvation has come to this house." Salvation came as a gift, brought by the seeking Christ, not earned by Zacchaeus. Yet notice when Jesus says it, after Zacchaeus' faith has expressed itself in repentance and concrete change. The faith that received salvation was a faith that turned and obeyed.

Use this to clarify the nature of saving faith. The grace of Christ does not save through bare belief that leaves the life untouched. It saves through a living faith that responds to grace by turning from sin and following Christ. Zacchaeus believed, and his belief immediately reordered his money and his relationships. That is what real faith does.

Address the error of faith only directly but carefully. Some teach that a person is saved by belief alone, with no necessary repentance or obedience. The account of Zacchaeus, like the whole New Testament, points elsewhere. The same Jesus who freely sought and received this sinner called him to a faith that bears fruit. Salvation by grace and a faith that obeys are not rivals; they are the two sides of the gospel. (We will set the full framework in the next question.)

Bring it home. Encourage the class to examine whether their faith is the kind that has actually turned them toward Christ and away from sin, or merely an agreement that has left their lives unchanged. The grace that saved Zacchaeus is the grace that transforms, and a faith that has received it will show.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation as the gift of the seeking Christ, not earned by works
- Saving faith as a faith that turns from sin and obeys
- The error of "faith only" that leaves the life unchanged
- Grace and obedient faith as two sides of the one gospel

Discussion Prompts

- When does Jesus declare that salvation has come, and what had just happened?
- How does Zacchaeus help us understand what saving faith looks like?
- How would you respond to the claim that bare belief, with no change, is enough?

Question 8

Student Question:

Christ has sought you with the same grace He showed Zacchaeus. Have you received that grace with a faith that genuinely turns and follows Him, or have you kept it at a comfortable distance, admiring it without letting it change you? Where do you sense Him calling you down out of the tree today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question makes the seeking grace of Christ personal. Just as Jesus called Zacchaeus down from the tree and into a transforming encounter, He calls each person to come down from the safe distance of mere observation into a real, life-changing relationship with Him.

Draw out the image of the tree. Zacchaeus could have stayed in the branches, content to watch Jesus pass by. Many of us do exactly that with grace: we admire it, study it, even teach it, while keeping it at arm's length from the parts of our lives it would change. To come down out of the tree is to let grace become personal and costly.

Invite a definite response. Ask each person to consider honestly whether they have received Christ's grace with a faith that has actually turned and followed Him, or whether they have kept it comfortably distant. Then ask where He is calling them down today, into deeper surrender, into a long-delayed repentance, or, for some, into receiving Christ in obedient faith for the first time. The same seeking voice that called Zacchaeus by name calls them now.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Receiving grace personally rather than admiring it from a distance
- The call to come down from observation into transforming relationship
- Examining whether our faith has truly turned and followed Christ
- Responding to the seeking voice of Christ today

Discussion Prompts

- Have you received Christ's grace with a faith that turns and follows, or kept it at a distance?
- What would it mean to come down out of the tree in your life right now?
- Where do you sense Christ calling you by name today?

Question 9

Student Question:

The grace of Christ that seeks the lost draws sinners to an obedient faith and heartfelt repentance, never to a salvation by “faith only” that leaves the life unchanged (compare Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 2:11–14; James 2:17). How does Zacchaeus illustrate the right relationship between God’s grace, our faith, repentance, and the good works that follow, without turning those works into a way of earning salvation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it draws together the whole biblical picture of grace, faith, repentance, and works. Take it carefully and in order, letting Zacchaeus serve as the illustration throughout. The aim is to keep the class from two opposite errors: salvation by faith only on one side, and salvation by earning on the other.

Begin with grace as the source. Salvation came to Zacchaeus’ house because Christ sought him; it was a gift, not a wage. Paul states the principle: by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8–9). The foundation is grace, freely given. No one earns the seeking love of Christ.

Then show that this grace works through a living faith that repents and obeys. Zacchaeus’ faith expressed itself at once in repentance and changed living. This is exactly the pattern Scripture describes. The same passage in Ephesians continues: we are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand (Ephesians 2:10). The grace of God trains us to renounce ungodliness and to live godly lives (Titus 2:11–14). And faith without works is dead (James 2:17). So a faith that genuinely receives grace will turn from sin and bear fruit. This rules out salvation by faith only, the idea that bare belief with no repentance and no obedience saves.

Now hold the balance with precision, because this is where people stumble. The good works of repentance are the fruit of grace, never the purchase price of it. Zacchaeus did not give to the poor in order to make Jesus come to his house; Jesus came first, and the giving flowed from grace received. So it is with us. We do not obey in order to earn salvation; we obey because grace has saved us and is at work in us. Picture grace as a spring and obedience as the stream that flows from it: no spring, no stream; but the stream does not create the spring. Repentance, confession, baptism, and a life of faithful obedience are the God-appointed way that a living faith responds to and lays hold of grace, not a ladder by which we climb to God. Help the class rest in grace and walk in obedience, refusing both the error that obedience is optional and the error that obedience earns.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation grounded in grace as a gift, not a wage (Ephesians 2:8–9)

- Grace working through a living faith that repents and obeys
- Good works as the fruit of grace, created in Christ (Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:11–14)
- The error of “faith only” that leaves the life unchanged (James 2:17)
- The error of trying to earn salvation by works
- Repentance, confession, baptism, and obedience as faith’s response to grace, not a ladder to God

Discussion Prompts

- How does Zacchaeus show both that salvation is a gift and that faith bears fruit?
- How would you guard against the error that bare belief, with no change, is enough?
- How would you guard against the opposite error, that we earn salvation by our works?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over the seeking grace of Christ and the transformation of Zacchaeus, name one specific way you will receive and respond to that grace this week, including one concrete fruit of repentance that would show grace is truly at work in you.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson into a personal response that holds grace and fruit together. The whole account moves from Christ seeking, to grace received, to a life transformed. Help the class name both a way to receive grace more deeply and a concrete fruit of repentance, so that neither half is lost.

Guide them toward specifics. Receiving grace might mean resting in the truth that Christ sought them, releasing despair over themselves or a loved one, or coming down from the safe distance of mere admiration. The fruit of repentance might be a restitution, an apology, a changed practice, or a costly act of generosity, aimed, like Zacchaeus’, at the actual area of their need.

Close by returning to the heart of the lesson. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost, and He has sought each person in the room. Encourage the class to write down their one way of receiving grace and one fruit of repentance, and to take the step this week, not to earn the grace that found them, but to walk in it. The same seeking Lord who transformed a tax collector in Jericho is at work in them still.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holding together receiving grace and bearing its fruit
- Specific response over vague intention
- Fruit of repentance aimed at the actual area of need
- Walking in grace already received, not earning it

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way you will receive Christ's seeking grace more deeply this week?
- What concrete fruit of repentance would show grace is at work in you?
- How will you remember that this fruit is a response to grace, not a way to earn it?