



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “KNOW THEM BY THEIR FRUITS”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 7:15-20

*This sermon was preached by Sarah McLean on Youth Sunday, February 7, 2021  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

### **Matthew 7:15-20**

‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

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I have always loved trees. Now, that might sound bizarre, but I assure you, there is a reason why. My brother, Sam, and I are very woodsy people. We love nature, and we can trace this back to the beginning of our first adventures in Atlanta, a place you might not suspect to be so-woody. In reality, Atlanta was like a forest to us. In our huge back yard, there were, around fifty tall oak and pine trees. Though I’m not sure how this began, and if you know my mother, I’m not sure how on earth she let us continue, but one day, Sam and I went outside and started to climb the tallest tree we could find.

Now, I do not condone doing this at the young age of five with no prior knowledge of how to climb, but it was my favorite thing to do. After trial and error, a lot of practice, and of course an injury, I became quite adept at climbing. Every day, I would run out to the yard and climb THE tree, later coined, “The Climbing Tree.” Supervised or not, I would sit in the tree and just think. Though I’m sure I wasn’t drafting the “next big thing,” I was independent and thinking for myself at a very young age. When we moved, EVERY house we considered purchasing, I searched the backyard to find a climbing tree. Throughout my life, I have always found the beauty of nature, especially trees, fulfilling... and a source of solitude (from my rowdy brother.)

Trees are essential to our overall existence, they provide oxygen to sustain life, much like how interaction with other people is essential to aid our mental health on this journey of life. While experiencing the ramifications of COVID-19 on my family and community, I have come to the realization, that no one should choose to be alone for very long. No one seeks out perpetual solitude, nor should they. We all benefit from human interaction, and similarly from Christian fellowship.

As we grow, we seek out friends/people to help us live our best lives. Though it is not always easy to find, we hope to find trustworthy, devoted friends. Yet, we are never alone on this journey,

there is always God. However, finding friends with similar interests and dreams makes life more enjoyable, someone with whom you can share the journey. Some individuals wear a disguise and mask their true personality. This makes it a challenge for us to tell who is sincere, and who is not. While we are told to love everyone, we still must be cautious. Like trees, individuals have varied appearances. They might appear beautiful, adorned with flowers and bright colors, or weathered, or weeping. Some are beautiful on the outside and hollow on the inside. One benefit of being human is that we can distinguish the good and bad apples from their actions, or, the fruit they bear.

Have you ever experienced having a friend you assumed to be kind who turned out different? They might have been a wolf in sheep's clothing. Like the fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood", people are not always who they appear to be. Sometimes, it is too late before we realize who they truly are. There are those signs we can look out for. Before fully committing to a friendship with someone, observe their interactions with their other friends, family, community, and/or school. See how they have treated other people. Always keep your eyes open, because as many of you know, it's never good to be led awry by something that could have been prevented.

Each youth giving a sermon this morning is a senior in high school. We have experienced struggles through the teenage years at school and with our various friends. God has a plan for each of us. And, whether we agree with it, everything happens for a reason. We are all on a path. God is strengthening us constantly through the people we meet and is leading us to be the best version of ourselves. Sometimes, God is using US as an example to help those who have gone astray. So, **let your light shine! Bear good fruit!** Your path is being led by the Holy Spirit. Encourage others through their trials and hardships through a personal connection. As seniors, we are still trying to discover our paths, as we prepare to break away from home this Fall and traverse down a new road, navigating COVID-19, but also filled with adventure, and new friends waiting for us. While our paths might turn, fold, reverse, or complicate, know that there is ALWAYS a plan. As we venture forth remember, You will **know them by their fruits.**



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “NUTURING THE SAPLING”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 13:6-9

*This sermon was preached by Manning Unger on Youth Sunday, February 7, 2021  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

### **Luke 13:6-9**

Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” ’

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What, exactly, is the first word that comes to mind when you try to describe me? For many of my friends, that word is uncoordinated. To say the least, I struggled to survive gym class. On the first day of that class, my poor coach attempted to teach me how to hit a volleyball. She tells me to put my arms like \*this\* and to swing upwards. What she forgot to tell me was how hard I should hit it. So, when Coach tossed me the ball and told me to hit it, I swung upwards with the force of Sampson, only to watch the ball launch into the ceiling and get stuck in the rafters, never to come down again. No matter how hard I tried to tell her it was an honest mistake, she wouldn’t believe me. She saw me as the tall kid with the crazy hair that was begging for the attention of his friends, making a fool of her class on purpose. “Hey, funny man!” she told me, “you think you’re so cool!” I was then offered an ultimatum: either run five laps around the gym right away, or get kicked out of the class.

Jesus, when confronting a crowd in Jerusalem, explains what they should do if they are in a similar situation to my coach. He devises a parable in which he compares the rotten apples like me to a fig tree that wasn’t growing any fruit. According to Jesus, even if the tree is not bearing any fruit, we should not cut it down but rather give it time, wait another year, fertilize it, and nurture it. And, fortunately for me, Coach decided that she would nurture me and be patient with me.

Over time, Coach began to realize that I wasn’t just a “funny man.” Yes, to her shock, I was, in fact, that uncoordinated, and she finally saw some good in me, realizing that I didn’t mean any harm to her. At the end of the year, we even became close. The yelling and the five-lap punishments turned into affectionate teasing, teasing when I would miss a pass in football or teasing when I was too slow. Coach nurtured me, and I bore fruit.

It takes a strong person to forgive someone the way Christ calls us to do and the way Coach did to me, and I, like everyone else, struggle with that from time to time. I remember one night in particular when someone that I barely knew - we only had one loose mutual friend – sent me a

text letting me know he was in my neighborhood and wanted to hang out. Given that I had no plans, I thought I couldn't really say no, so I went. I hopped in their car as they yelled slurs out the window at random passersby, expecting me to join in. I quickly left. At the time, I struggled to find forgiveness in my heart, as I felt as though they were trying to make me do something that I thought was wrong.

Recently, James gave me some advice on what I should do in situations similar to that one. He told me that as Christians, our forgiveness is unconditional, but our trust is not necessarily. The point is that, while we must forgive those that don't bear fruit and show them our love and support, it is important that we do so in a way that doesn't compromise our own faith to God.

With that in mind, I let the grudge I had held against those friends go away. I needed to forgive them in the same way that God forgives me. While at first I thought that I couldn't be friendly towards them without listening to everything they told me to do, I now understood that I didn't always have to follow their example, as doing so may have led me away from God. I made sure to always greet them with a smile from then on out and not to shy away from a conversation with them. In the same way, Coach became kind and tolerant of my lack of athletic talent while still remaining honest. She didn't have to give me any special treatment in order to be kind, tolerant, and nurturing. Jesus means to say that we can love others and give them a second chance without sacrificing our moral duties to God.

With that in mind, if any of you feel as though someone in your life is going down a bad path, I challenge you not to abandon them but rather to nurture them. Even if somebody does you wrong, it is so important as Christians that we give second chances and forgiveness. Remember that God will forgive our sins as well, and will always give us another chance at redemption. God calls us to do the same.



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “COME DOWN FROM THAT TREE”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 19:1-20

*This sermon was preached by Mills Jordan on Youth Sunday, February 7, 2021  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

### **Luke 19:1-10**

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, ‘Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’

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As a middle schooler at Mason Prep, we all knew what the 11:32 bell meant...recess! Instantly, we would all sprint out for a daily game of tag. In our own variant of the game, we put a unique handicap on the tagger, he had to play with his eyes closed. Because this lightless tagger moved so slowly along the play set, this gave everyone else plenty of time to sprint up the ladder to the third story. As the blind attacker gradually worked up the ladder, he faced an entourage of slaps to the back and kicks to the shoulder coming from everyone on the top. Needless to say, our games of tag could be fun for those on the top, but that fun came at the expense of the tagger struggling to climb up from the bottom.

Like those of us on the top of the playground at Mason Prep, imposing our power on the tagger below us, Zacchaeus similarly found himself at the top of the social ladder in Jericho. As a Roman tax collector, Zacchaeus used his power at the top to enrich himself and to cheat the hardworking Israelites. With this power dynamic underlying the city of Jericho, it surprised and even angered many of the Israelites when Jesus moves straight towards Zacchaeus out of everyone else in the crowd. Why would Jesus reward the most greedy man in the entire city? Isn't this guy the opposite of how Jesus taught people to act?

To understand why Jesus broke the crowd's expectations and reached out to Zacchaeus, we need to take in a larger meaning of what it really meant for Zacchaeus to be up in that tree. On the practical level, we know that Zacchaeus, who was a very short man, climbed into the tree so that he could see over the tall crowd. However, looking on the symbolic level, Zacchaeus' position, high in the tree, physically over the crowd, was not very different from his place at the top of the

social ladder. His height above the crowd in many ways was really a manifestation of Zacchaeus' own personal notion of superiority over the others in society.

From this viewpoint, we can understand that Jesus' call for Zacchaeus to come down from that tree takes on a whole new meaning. This is a call for Zacchaeus to come down from that personal notion of superiority, to bring himself down from his oppressive, abusive power, and importantly, when Jesus called for Zacchaeus to come down, Zacchaeus listened. Repenting for his sins, Zacchaeus promised to give half his possessions to those in need, and to repay everyone he cheated four times what he took from them. By heeding Jesus' call, Zacchaeus humbled himself and came to understand and appreciate the equal and welcoming nature of God's love.

As with Zacchaeus, sometimes Jesus calls us to come down from our tree. Whether we're being prideful, condescending or self-centered, we sometimes find ourselves feeling like we're at the top, feeling that our beliefs, character or abilities somehow make us above others around us. In the case of Zacchaeus, his physical position in a tree above the crowd represented this, but in our own lives it can be much more difficult to notice when Jesus is calling us down from our tree. Sometimes this call might come through honest conversations with friends or family. Maybe it comes through our own prayer or personal reflection, but identifying Jesus' call can be difficult. Even more difficult is accepting this call to come down and being willing to confess our mistakes and to actively work to fix them.

In my own life, I felt Jesus calling me down from my tree. A few summers ago, our family took our annual trip to Montreal. While there, I spent the bulk of my time with a group of friends I had made the summer before. I'd be out of the house early in the morning, back briefly for lunch, before going out again only to return just before bedtime. What was intended to be our family trip had digressed into my own personal social scene. My self-centeredness reached its peak on the final night of our trip, when I was so consumed in my own popularity and my own time with my friends, that I completely missed my grandfather's birthday celebration. When praying the next night, I realized how my selfishness had caused me to let down my family, and I finally heard Jesus' call to come down from my tree. I was reminded that how I spend my time and how I treat others should not simply resemble my personal interest, but instead it should resemble the broader teachings from Jesus of the importance of neighborly love, selflessness, and unity.

Sometimes, the periods of time when we personally feel strongest within our faith, can even be times where we unknowingly are up in our tree. For example, during his presidency, despite being a devout Christian himself, President Jimmy Carter once demonstrated his belief in the separation of church and state by refusing to host Prayer Breakfast in the White House, breaking with the past tradition. Upset with this decision, the leader of one prominent Christian group called Jimmy Carter a secular humanist, implying that he was not even a true Christian. Reflecting on this hurtful label, President Carter in his words noted, "That one of the worst sins is pride, and the belief that we are good enough to look down on others." Essentially, he was saying that some Christians, even with good intentions of attempting to spread God's word, can find themselves in their own tree of self-righteousness, sowing division by reprimanding or judging other Christians. Instead, Jimmy Carter said that Jesus espoused humility and breaking down walls between people. Our faith in God should play such a unifying role among believers. This may seem obvious, but all too often, we forget or ignore it. Taking in these words of Jimmy Carter we are reminded that even in our times of strong faith and closeness with God, we still must be ready

to listen for Jesus' call to come down from our tree, for we sometimes allow the strength of our own faith to justify unnecessary judgement towards others, which unintentionally works opposite to the love and forgiveness that Jesus taught us to show.

As we leave the sanctuary today and reflect on times when we might have been up in our tree, it is important that we understand the nature by which Jesus called Zacchaeus down from that tree. This was not a punitive or forceful action for Jesus, rather it was really a welcoming down from the tree, as Zacchaeus was met with forgiveness and support from Jesus. And by coming down from his tree, Zacchaeus could finally embrace the true riches and abundances of life which came in the form of unity with other followers of Christ and the love of Jesus, and Zacchaeus could leave the false and temporary riches of dishonest wealth behind. Additionally, it is also important to remember that coming down from our tree should not be viewed as a burden or a stingy rule to obey. Instead, it is the gateway to the common humanity and equality that we can enjoy thanks to the love and sacrifice of Christ. Bringing ourselves down from the tree is one of the first steps in truly embracing the endless opportunities for fulfillment and happiness that we have been blessed with through Christ.