

Luke 19:1-10 — Jesus and Zacchaeus

(Numbers 5:5-10)

1 Then Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 And there was a man named Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, who was very wealthy. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but could not see over the crowd because he was small in stature. 4 So he ran on ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Him, since Jesus was about to pass that way.

5 When Jesus came to that place, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down, for I must stay at your house today.”

6 So Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed Him joyfully. 7 And all who saw this began to grumble, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinful man!”

8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, half of my possessions I give to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will repay it fourfold.”

9 Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

The Lord was at Jericho, within 20 miles of Jerusalem and in the midst of a great crowd of pilgrims already in Passover festival mode. He had just healed a blind beggar, and no doubt both the curious and the faithful kept him from making much progress along the road. Lodging for the night might be in order, and the roadside was stacked with a horde of business-minded people whose pitches also slowed the procession.

The Herods had made Jericho their winter capital, planting it generously with sycamore, cypress, and balsam – so their new city was regarded as a “little paradise” and had become an important, wealthy trade center. Under Roman rule, an important trade center was, by default, a major tax-collection point. The head of Jericho’s tax operation was a Jew named Zacchaeus which, ironically, meant ‘pure’ – and Zacchaeus was anything but pure.

Roman tax collectors gained their income by extorting more money from the people than he had contracted to pay the Roman government. (Expositor's) So tax collectors in general were hated, the chief taxman would have been even more despised, and Zacchaeus perhaps doubly so because he was very short – and being extorted by a dwarf would grate horribly on “normal” people.

vv.1-2

Jesus had journeyed from the other side of the Jordan and was making his way through Jericho. He may have intended to reach Bethany, “with a view to be there eight or ten days before the Passover, intending to preach and work miracles in the most public manner, under the eye of all the people.” (Benson)

vv.3-4

The hubbub in Jericho intensified as word spread that the famous rabbi Jesus was in town. Zacchaeus, who always had his ear to the ground, heard the rumor. Consumed with determination, he began looking for a way to see the one who reportedly had been teaching profound truths and even working miracles. But when Zacchaeus ventured out toward the road, he saw that (as always) he wouldn't be able to see anything. So, his dignity overcome by curiosity, Zacchaeus resorted to practical measures: He ran ahead and climbed one of Jericho's many sycamore trees — a most undignified strategy for a man of his stature (in the city).

Think of it this way: The whole town has turned out for the annual Independence Day parade and your diminutive bank president arrived too late to plant his lawn chair on the curb. He wants a great view, but what to do? And there, in front of God and everybody, he climbs a lamppost!¹

vv.5-6

So Zacchaeus was well-situated, high above the crowd, fairly well hidden by the leafy boughs. He saw the rabbi, moving slowly up the road, stopping to touch or speak, but pushing ever forward. But suddenly he stopped – right below where Zacchaeus was sitting. And his eyes turned up from the pressing crowd to look straight at Zacchaeus, perched in the tree's branches.

Then Jesus not only spoke to Zacchaeus, but he spoke to him by name! You can imagine the guy practically fell out of his tree: “How does he know my name?! And what does he mean ‘I *must* stay at your house today? This city is overrun with religious bigshots – and he *must* come stay with me?”

vv.6-7

The bigshots were asking themselves the exact same question. “All who saw this began to grumble.” First, the pharisaical sorts grumbled – the priests and Levites, of which there were great numbers in Jericho. (Gill) And not just the religious rulers but everyone. No one strikes up a conversation with the most hated sinner in town, and you certainly don’t invite yourself over to share his dinner table. Priestly Jericho possessed a stern, sectarian spirit and no one could imagine a rabbi failing to see the wickedness of this traitor who served Rome. (Pulpit)

For his part, however, Zacchaeus couldn’t climb down fast enough. That he welcomed Jesus “joyfully” reveals that a yearning for salvation can stir in even the darkest heart. Plumptre wonders if Zacchaeus might have been the publican of Luke 18:10-14, who in the Temple “beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner!’” (Pulpit)

One might also see a connection to an earlier story Luke told (5:27-32) about Jesus accepting a dinner invitation at the home of another tax collector, Levi (Matthew). The religious elites had criticized that too, and Jesus slyly used their self-righteousness against them, saying “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

What’s a hypocrite to say in reply?

v.8

Luke doesn’t provide an account of the table conversation, but he does record Zacchaeus’ dramatic announcements:

(1) “Lord,” – not ‘rabbi’ – “half of my possessions I give to the poor.” Jesus taught that the use of possessions was a major indicator of one's spiritual condition. It was only back in 18:27 that Luke had recounted the story of the rich ruler, whose

attitude toward wealth kept him from the Lord. Zacchaeus' offer constituted the sort of "fruit in keeping with repentance" John the Baptist had demanded (3:8). (Expositor's)

(2) "If I have cheated anyone." I'm sure Jesus smiled and many in the room probably stifled outright laughter. Working as a tax collector was synonymous with cheating people! Restoring stolen funds by a factor of four, however, was far more than what the Old Covenant required. (Leviticus 5:16, Numbers 5:7) The Law only required the return of principal, plus 20%, but Zacchaeus proposed as much return as would have been mandated in the case of theft. (Gill)

Barnes notes that Zacchaeus' conscience told him true repentance required restitution – and that "the sincerity of Zacchaeus' repentance was manifest by his being willing to make restoration as great as if [theft] had been proved against him."

vv.9-10

"Today salvation has come to this house." Alistair Begg makes it clear: "The whole current of [Zacchaeus'] life has been turned. The robber has become the giver. And so Jesus says, 'If you want to know what has happened here today, salvation has come to this house.'"¹

"This man too is a son of Abraham" – By both blood and spirit. Gill observes that the truth of Jesus' statement was "confirmed by the silence of the Pharisees, who murmured at Christ's going along with [Zacchaeus]; who, had he been a Gentile, would not have failed to have mentioned it."

"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." One might consider this the Gospel of Luke's key verse, for it expresses the heart of Jesus' ministry as Luke presents it. (Expositor's) The Pulpit Commentary notes "a vein of sad irony running through these words of the Master. Between the lines we seem to read some such thoughts as these: 'You know, O priests and Pharisees, you do not want me. You think you are safe already. But these poor despised ones, they want, they welcome me, like this Zacchaeus.' This, too, was a lesson for all time."

1 With a nod to Alistair Begg, <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/man-tree/>