

## **“JESUS AND ZACCHAEUS”**

Luke 19:1-10

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What child wouldn't like a story about a short man who likes to climb trees? And when you put the story to music and turn Zacchaeus into "a wee little man," you have a winner! I'll spare you my rendition of the song, but if you learned this story from Sunday School, I'm sure you know it.

I liked the story because it made me laugh, this idea of a short man climbing a tree to see Jesus. And those are the two details everyone remembers from the story. He was short and he climbed a tree. If we think a little further, we remember that Jesus liked him. As a child, the first surprise in the story is that no one else does. I remember going along with the reason given. He was a tax collector, but that's really an adult reason. Children haven't really learned about the evil of taxes yet. But they accept the reason and so begins their education in despising taxes.

So after giving the nod to the adults, we are happy to move along to his home with Jesus for dinner. What a nice meal that must have been! And in the middle of it, perhaps we remember the promise of Zacchaeus to be a better person. The details are probably forgotten: half his wealth to the poor and repaying fourfold the amount he has cheated out of people. I don't remember thinking much about the message I received from adults, something about Zacchaeus finding salvation through repentance. I think I just saw his generosity at the end of the story as evidence that in his heart Zacchaeus was really a good guy... like me. Sometimes I would do something "naughty" but in my heart, I was okay. Despite what the crowd thought, I liked Zacchaeus from beginning to end.

As it turns out, some biblical scholars think I was right. Present and future tense are a little tricky to figure out in the Greek language. Apparently you can also translate his promise to give to the poor as a mere statement of his current practice: half his earnings went to the poor and he had always repaid the required legal amount when he had "inadvertently" overcharged someone. His name does mean "righteous one." Maybe Jesus was eager to go to his house because here was a man whose position afforded many opportunities to sin, but who had resisted the temptation. But then if this is true, what's the point of the story?

As a child, it was enough to know that Jesus liked short people who climbed trees because though I was never really short for my age, I was a "little" person who liked to climb trees.

But now I'm an adult and I don't remember the last time I climbed a tree. Fortunately, there's a lot more to his story. Let's begin with a few things that I'm sure your Sunday School teacher didn't tell you.

Zacchaeus was not an IRS agent. His profession was the same as the publican in that parable Jesus told where a Pharisee and a publican go to the synagogue to pray. The Pharisee thanks God that he is not like that sinner over there, while the publican prostrates himself before God seeking mercy for his many sins. You may recall that the publican received his mercy while the Pharisee stood condemned. When Luke introduces us to Zacchaeus, he intends us to recall that publican.

But what is a publican? Well, one thing he does do is to collect taxes. He's a public official who handles certain financial arrangements for the government, that is, the Roman Empire. Jericho was a town that bordered two different Roman provinces and along the borders certain tariffs or taxes were imposed on various exports and imports. The opportunities for corruption, for taking bribes for instance, were numerous. And though he was a public official, his work was more or less as a businessman. He was an important part of the economic system.

So, you can see why he and the other "tax collectors" were despised, not because they collected taxes, but because their business practices were unethical. In short they gave breaks to the rich and placed heavy burdens on the poor. And who were these poor, but Jews whose territory the Romans had occupied. If Zacchaeus was typical of his profession, he was not a silly man. He was wicked. But again, maybe Jesus was eager to dine with him because he was not typical.

And yet, according to Luke, it was his practice to dine with sinners and "tax collectors." Zacchaeus was not an isolated incident. And the crowd doesn't like it. And if we were there, we wouldn't either. So why does Jesus do it? Because he came to save the lost! And apparently this includes not just the poor, but sinners as well.

Speaking of the poor, just before Jesus enters Jericho, "on the other side of the tracks," he encounters a blind man whom he heals. The blind man has the same difficulty getting to Jesus as Zacchaeus did for a different reason. The crowd stands in the way of both. When the blind man learns of Jesus' presence, he shouts until he is heard. When the short man encounters the crowd, he climbs a tree. In the end, salvation comes to both households.

You can't read these stories in isolation. Luke intends them to go together. In fact, there are a whole series of stories and sayings in this section of Luke about money. The story of Zacchaeus is Luke's answer to the question, "Can a rich man inherit eternal life? It's possible, if he gives away the portion he doesn't need. His story contrasts with the story of Lazarus and the rich man, where the poor Lazarus enjoys comfort in the bosom of Abraham while the rich man endures the torments of hellfire. The rich Zacchaeus is named a child of Abraham.

Jesus eats with tax collectors because he doesn't shy away from trouble. He seeks the lost wherever they may. And... he engages those within the economic system that make people rich or poor. He's not spiritual in a way that is anti-material. He doesn't offer escape from the world, but faces it head on. He's not opposed to taxes. He's opposed to the sort

of taxation that rewards the rich and punishes the poor. Whether Zacchaeus was corrupt before and repented of it or was righteous all along, the same truth applies. Salvation looks like this: the excess is given away to those with need and restitution is paid to those whom he caused harm. Salvation is not a place but a practice.

There's nothing wrong with taxes when the burden is equitably distributed. There's nothing wrong with an economy that allows people to make money. But when the poor bear the greatest part of the burden, something is wrong. And something was wrong in Jesus' day, but he doesn't run away from the problem or "spiritualize" it. He finds people or changes people who can make a difference, people who understand that salvation takes place within a community and through the ways we choose to relate to each other. It's never about our own personal gain, but about the health and welfare of us all.

Zacchaeus was not just a short man who climbed trees. We are not so different from the Roman Empire. We allow vast sums of money to pile up in the hands of a few. The rich and the powerful have rigged the system to do precisely that. Zacchaeus challenges us to find ways of moving excess to need. Zacchaeus challenges us to offer restitution when we do harm. The health of our communities and the earth itself depend on it. If we have to lose a little dignity to move in this direction, well, okay... all the children will be smiling. Amen.

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