

WPC
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An Intimate Encounter With Jesus
Luke 18: 18-27; Luke 19:1-10

Last week, we looked at Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, where the person who went home from the temple justified by God was not the decent yet self-righteous Pharisee but rather the reprehensible yet humble tax collector. Do you ever wonder if being justified by God made any difference in the tax collector's life? Did his life change at all after going home from the temple? Today, we'll take a look at what happens when Jesus meets a real tax collector named Zacchaeus.

Jesus encounters Zacchaeus as he travels to Jerusalem. This is one of the final incidents recorded before the beginning of Holy Week. While on his way, he stops in the city of Jericho before entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. So this encounter with Zacchaeus takes place just a few days before Palm Sunday. Let's take a closer look at this incident.

What do we know about Zacchaeus? First, we know that he's a tax collector. Remember from last week that the tax collector is considered to be a crook, a traitor, a very, very bad man. Tax collecting under Roman rule was an evil practice. The Romans were smart and ruthless; they would

allow people they had conquered to survive, be economically viable, and then tax them. They chose people from the general population who knew where the wealth was hiding to collect taxes, and protected these collectors with Roman power. Tax collectors also accepted bribes from the people. So you can see how they were hated by their own people and were considered to be traitors.

Zacchaeus is not only a tax collector, but notice in v. 2 that he's a *chief* tax collector, and *rich* - this is a loaded sentence. We meet many tax collectors in the Bible, but the term "chief tax collector" appears nowhere else in Greek literature. That Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and rich implicates him more deeply in the corrupt tax system of the Roman government. In a corrupt system the loftier one's position, the greater one's complicity in that system. (Craddock, 218).

The second thing we know about Zacchaeus is that he's short. We know that, right? We've just sung the song during Children's Time that says, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he." Back when flannel graphs were in vogue, Zacchaeus was a favorite character, the short guy who climbs a tree to see Jesus passing by. Illustrated Bibles always portray him as being the shortest person in the crowd. Vacation Bible

School portrayals of this text have been very popular down through the years.

But here's an interesting point: let's take another look at v. 3, which says, "He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature." Now it's certainly appropriate to interpret that phrase as Zacchaeus not being able to see Jesus because he was too short to see over the crowd. However, when we look more closely at this sentence, we see that it could also be interpreted another way. He (Zacchaeus) was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because *he was short in stature*. In both the Greek and English languages, it's really unclear which "he" is short, Zacchaeus or Jesus; perhaps Zacchaeus couldn't see Jesus over the crowd because *Jesus* was the one who was short. We just don't know.

Another thing we know about Zacchaeus is that he is very unpopular. It's interesting that Luke mentions what kind of tree Zacchaeus climbed. The sycamore tree is a large leafy tree; perhaps Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus but not be seen by him or the crowd. Or perhaps he climbs the tree because the crowd sees him and is trying to keep him from seeing Jesus. And here Jesus surprises everyone by first noticing him, then calling Zacchaeus by name, and finally, to Zacchaeus' complete amazement, treats

him like a long-lost friend instead of giving him the scolding everyone is expecting." You've got to realize that in the first century world, to spend the night in someone's home has far more meaning than would appear to us today; it shows that you have an obligation to them and you feel a bond to them. And so it's a surprise that he would spend the night with the person who has done so much harm. That does not sit well with everyone else.

Notice, v. 7 says they *all* grumbled. Why did the people grumble? Why are they so upset? What's going on that they're so angry and disappointed with Jesus? And notice, they ALL grumbled. There are numerous accounts in the Bible when either the Pharisees grumbled, or the Sadducees grumbled, or the scribes grumbled, or the disciples of John the Baptist grumbled, but now we have a text where they *all* grumbled, even Jesus' disciples. Why are the disciples upset? The Pharisees, the disciples, the townspeople - what expectations did they have that Jesus dashed? We'll get to that in a minute, but here's an interesting thought: is this where Jesus finally lost Judas Iscariot? Is this the point where Judas has had enough of this kind of Messiah?

In any case, what expectations did Jesus dash? The people who witnessed the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus felt oppressed by the Romans. Most of them were anxiously awaiting the Messiah, and many

were hoping that Jesus would be the Messiah. And they yearned for a Messiah who would conquer evil, who would take someone like Zacchaeus, someone that everyone despised and who so obviously was their evil enemy, and destroy him. But instead of destroying Zacchaeus, Jesus restored him as a son of Abraham. No wonder they ALL grumbled!

As a result of this action, Zacchaeus gains ground, while Jesus loses ground in public opinion – he wins no friends this day. That’s why it says, “They all grumbled,” probably including the disciples. They’re all baffled. Why is he doing this? Zacchaeus though gains ground. Zacchaeus is honored by Jesus and restored by him. So, Jesus identifies with Zacchaeus by taking his place and directing the crowd’s displeasure to himself. And so already we can see the shadow of the cross hovering over this incident. Within one week Jesus will do this very same thing at the cross.

Zacchaeus' response shows true repentance; repentance is when we do something, to change, to turn our lives around. In the laws of Leviticus and Numbers, voluntary restitution called for a return of the original amount plus 20% (Lev. 6:5; Num. 5:7). But Zacchaeus goes beyond the law's requirement for restitution and gives back four times to anyone he has defrauded, as well as half of his possessions to the poor. Repentance is not solely a transaction of the heart. Repentance also bears fruit. When a

person has experienced God's love, they tend to become more generous, like Zacchaeus became. We loosen up, we learn how to forgive, to ask for forgiveness, to be generous.

In v. 9 Jesus restores Zacchaeus' identity (similar to the father putting the ring back on the prodigal son); I like the way Frederick Buechner puts it - "'Today salvation has come to this house,' Jesus said, and since salvation was his specialty after all, you assume he was right."

What we find in v. 10 is a Messianic sentence ('Son of Man' is a messianic title from the book of Daniel); pointing toward what will happen during Holy Week. Fred Craddock notes that v. 10 makes it clear: Jesus' visit in Zacchaeus' house was not a delay or a detour on his journey to Jerusalem; this was and is the very purpose of the journey. "The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." Jesus had set his face towards Jerusalem for this very reason. The interruption along the way was at one and the same time the whole point of the journey.

The story of Zacchaeus recalls our first reading this morning of the encounter of Jesus and the rich ruler, although that one ended differently, with Jesus saying, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." The

question which followed from the bystanders is a proper one: How then can anyone be saved, since all of us participate to a lesser or a greater extent in the love of money which afflicts this ruler? The answer is the same one given to Abraham and Sarah when they were told that they would have a child, the same one given to the Virgin Mary as she stood in awe and bewilderment: nothing is impossible with God. Only God can save, whatever one's condition (Craddock, 214).

That's good news for the rich ruler, for Zacchaeus, and for all of us. In his retelling of the Zacchaeus story, Ken Giles emphasizes this good news of Zacchaeus responding to God's amazing grace (from *Intimate Encounters with the Savior*): "From behind the barriers Zacchaeus has erected around his heart, a flood of repentant feelings bursts forth. Feelings that had been dammed up for years. Zacchaeus goes out on still another limb. What took a lifetime to accumulate, one sentence of devotion liquidates. And not by a token ten percent. Half to the poor. Fourfold to the defrauded.

Look closely. Witness the miracle - a camel passing through the eye of a needle."