

Jesus and Zacchaeus

19 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” ⁸ 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.” ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” ¹

Today we continue our lessons from the Gospel of Luke on “Kingdom Living.” Our question for today is who can and will be saved? What did Jesus mean in Luke 18 that unless people become like little children they cannot enter the kingdom of God? And what did he mean when he taught that with God all things are possible? And what does it mean to have “A Change in Priorities?”

First we must remember that Jesus is still journeying toward Jerusalem, and he continues to heal the sick, teach His disciples important lessons to live by, and now he stops to have dinner at the home of a most unlikely candidate for salvation.

Jericho was a very wealthy and a very important town, and lay in the Jordan valley at a crossroads. To the one side was the approach to Jerusalem and to other side were the crossings of the river which gave access to the lands east of the Jordan. It had a great palm forest and world-famous balsam groves which perfumed the air for miles around. Its gardens of roses were known far and wide. Men called it “The City of Palms.” Josephus, the Jewish historian of the time, called it “a divine region,” “the fattest in Palestine.” The Romans carried its dates and balsam to world-wide trade and fame. It reminds me of the rich farm land on which we live. All this produce combined to make Jericho one of the greatest

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Lk 19:1-10

taxation centers in Palestine. We can imagine that the Romans needed many tax collectors to cover such a bustling center.

Zacchaeus, a Jew whose name means “righteous one.” He was wealthy but had not achieved happiness. He had chosen an occupation that made him an outcast, traitor and renegade. Certainly the Jewish religious community in Jericho would not have considered him righteous, because he not only collected taxes from his own people but also worked for the unclean Roman Gentiles! And tax collectors were notorious for collecting more taxes than required; the more money they collected, the more income they enjoyed. (As today, we don’t like the people from the Internal Revenue Service....no one likes to pay taxes. Taxes are mostly what our elections are about. No matter what our political affiliation, none of us want to pay more taxes.) But this hated man had heard of Jesus who welcomed tax-collectors and sinners, and he wanted to see Jesus for himself.

When Zacchaeus decided that he would see Jesus he let nothing stop him. This was easier said than done. In order for Zacchaeus to mingle with the crowd at all was a courageous thing to do, because many would take the chance to get a nudge, or kick, or push at the little tax-collector. Zacchaeus could have easily been black and blue with bruises that day. As a short man he could not see over the crowd. So this wealthy tax collector ran ahead of the crowd, like a child, and climbed a fig-mulberry tree. It is very easy for a boy to climb, with its short trunk and its wide lateral branches forking out in all directions.” I can imagine this was not easy for Zacchaeus but the little man had the courage of determination.

In the East, it is unusual for a man to run, especially a wealthy government official; yet Zacchaeus ran down the street like a little boy following a parade. And he even climbed a tree! Curiosity is certainly characteristic of most children, and Zacchaeus was motivated by curiosity that day. John Calvin wrote, “Curiosity and simplicity are a sort of preparation for faith.” This is often the case, and it was

certainly true of Zacchaeus. He would have asked himself: Why the big crowd? Who is this Jesus of Nazareth they are following? What am I missing?

This reminds us that Jesus said, “Whosoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:17). Perhaps more than anything else, it is pride that keeps many “successful” people from trusting Jesus Christ, after all we already have money and power.

Zacchaeus thought he was seeking Jesus, but Jesus was seeking him! By nature, the lost sinner does not seek the Savior. When our first parents, Adam and Eve, sinned, they hid from God, but God came and sought them (Gen. 3:1–10). When Jesus was ministering on earth, He sought out the lost; and today the Holy Spirit, through the church, is searching for lost sinners. We do not know how God had worked in the heart of Zacchaeus to prepare him for this meeting with Jesus. Was Levi, the former tax collector (Luke 5:27–39), one of his friends? Had he told Zacchaeus about Jesus? Was he praying for Zacchaeus? Had Zacchaeus become weary of wealth and started yearning for something better? We cannot answer these questions. But thanks be to God, though Zacchaeus was a renegade in the eyes of the Jews, he was a precious lost sinner in the eyes of Jesus. Zacchaeus trusted Jesus Christ and became a true “son of Abraham,” meaning, of course, a child of faith. That is as big as you can get! It was not the wealth that had been his priorities, but his new relationship with God.

The people thought Zacchaeus was a wealthy man, but actually he was only a bankrupt sinner who needed to receive God’s gift of eternal life, the most expensive gift in the world. Having trusted the Savior, he then gave evidence of his faith, thus showing the community that he was a changed man and his priorities had changed. He promised to make restitution to those he had wronged. Saving faith is more than pious words and devout feelings. It creates a living union with Christ that results in a changed life.

Under the Mosaic Law, if a thief voluntarily confessed his crime, he had to restore what he took, add one fifth to it, and bring a trespass offering to the Lord (Lev. 6:1–7). If he stole something he could not restore, he had to repay fourfold (Ex. 22:1); and if he was caught with the goods, he had to repay double (Ex. 22:4). Zacchaeus did not quibble over the terms of the Law; he offered to pay the highest price because his heart had truly been changed. His priorities had changed!

Zacchaeus was determined to do far more than the law demanded. He showed by his deeds that he was a changed man.

The story teaches us:

1. In a spiritual sense, all of us are “little of stature,” for “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). No one measures up to God’s high standards; we are all “too little” to enter into heaven. But we can rejoice that a seeking Savior will always find a sinner who is looking for a new beginning.

2. We must humble ourselves to experience Jesus. The tragedy is, many lost sinners think they are “big.” They measure themselves by man’s standards—money, position, authority, popularity—things that are an “abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). They think they have everything when really they have nothing (Rev. 3:17).

3. Zacchaeus was not saved because he promised to do good works. He was saved because he responded by faith to Christ’s gracious word to him.

4. Zacchaeus became the guest in his own house, because Jesus became his Master. He was ready to obey the Lord and do whatever was necessary to establish a genuine testimony before the people. We must be willing to do the same.

5. The story ends with the great words, the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost. In the New Testament a person is lost when they have

wandered away from God; and they are found when once again they takes their rightful place as an obedient child in the household and the family of their Father.²

6. When a day begins, you never know how it will end. For Zacchaeus, that day ended in joyful fellowship with the Son of God, for he was now a changed man with a new life. Jesus is still seeking the lost and yearning to save them. The question is: Has He found you?³

7. The child of God is born rich, for he shares “every spiritual blessing” in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3). We have the riches of God’s mercy and grace (Eph. 1:7; 2:4) as well as the riches of His glory (Phil. 4:19) and wisdom (Rom. 11:33). These are “unsearchable riches” that can never be fully understood or completely exhausted (Eph. 3:8).

This account is also a commentary on Jesus’ words that with God all things are possible (18:25-27), we are rich by the world’s standards. Maybe we are trying to be successful and think that money and power are the answer. A visit with Jesus can change our priorities and makes us whole in him.^{4 5}

² Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 233

³Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Lk 19:1

⁴Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:251

⁵Jamieson, Robert ; Fausset, A. R. ; Fausset, A. R. ; Brown, David ; Brown, David: *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. Lk 19:1