

Or, don't we even know there is a problem?

Theology that is popular and widely accepted often has its problems. The idea that one must "do something" in order to gain eternal life and salvation is probably the most damaging false idea there is. The man who came to Jesus asking what he must do to have eternal life did not even receive a direct answer from the Lord Jesus, because it was a foolish question in the first place. Jesus simply told him to sell off his wealth and give it to the poor - not that this would gain for himself eternal life, but rather that such an act would begin to point him in the right direction about how eternal life is given - which is totally as an act of God and not of man. The generally accepted idea about Zacchaeus' encounter with Christ Jesus is that he was eternally "lost" before the encounter and afterward was "saved". After all, Jesus did say that salvation had come to his house.

Publicans

Zacchaeus was the short publican (a tax gatherer) who climbed up in a tree so he could see Jesus as he was passing by (Luke 19). Much written commentary has been given to the subject of publicans. They were Jewish tax gatherers who mostly collected local taxes for local governments. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE) presents a lot of research that has been done about public officials.

In the gospel scriptures they are often grouped with "sinners" and were very unpopular people. In the Jewish culture that was saturated with the belief that acceptance with God was dependent upon how well one kept the law of Moses (or appeared to keep it), people who were low on that performance scale were considered to be "sinners" - and the hated tax gatherers were some of the worst. The payment of taxes to publicans was generally considered to be a religious wrong as well as an inconvenience.

In this strict Jewish culture it was common for people of questionable righteousness to be excluded from synagogue worship. You may remember that the man who was born blind and who gave credit to Jesus for his healing was cast out of the synagogue. Obviously those who were self-righteous were the ones who were totally in charge of the temple worship and Jewish government of that day. And the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus was called a sinner. That was the highly religious world that Zacchaeus and other publicans lived in. The publicans were considered to be extortionists, and many of them no doubt were. So they were all living outside the pale of religious acceptance.

So as Jesus and his followers passed by, the Lord Jesus supernaturally knew who this man was and surprised everyone by inviting himself and his followers to his house for lunch. After all, he was rich and could afford it. As they ate and visited together, Zacchaeus felt inclined to share his testimony with the Lord Jesus. He said, "Half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have taken anything from any man I restore him fourfold" (old King James Version). Notice that he spoke in the present tense, not in the future tense as if this were something he was going to do. Now here, the various translations of the Bible differ, but I trust the old King James version in this matter as I do in about every other case, as being the most accurate one.

What difference does the tense of his testimony make? There is no evidence that Zacchaeus experienced a conversion on that occasion, although he was certainly stirred and impressed by his encounter with the Lord. He only stated that which was his ongoing practice to do: he claimed that was not an extortionist (and was probably an exception) and was financially considerate to the poor and to the oppressed. He was a man of compassion and no doubt the fear of God. How did he come to get that way, having never met Jesus before? The same way Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were like that, having never physically met Jesus either. Zacchaeus had been born again previous to their encounter - born again by the sovereign grace of God, just as Nicodemus had already been born again before his nighttime encounter with the Lord.

So, what's the point?

This brings us to Christ's response to Zacchaeus' testimony about himself. Jesus said, "This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham." The popular idea among Christians today is that this tax gatherer was on that occasion "born again" along with his whole household. But we have already seen that he had a spiritual heart and nature even before this, so had obviously been born again at some point earlier in his life.

The fact is that the Bible does not designate a particular time or occasion when the new birth takes place in the life of a person. We can see evidence in the lives of people that show us that they are indeed regenerated (born again), but the timing of that happening is never pointed out in scripture.

So what is this salvation that Jesus said came to his household on that day? Salvation in God's Word is much broader than being born again and going to heaven. Besides the eternal aspect of salvation, the Bible tells us that we are saved by obedience (James 5:20), by baptism (I Peter 1:21), by separation from sinners headed for judgement (Acts: 2:40), by hope (Romans 8:24), and on and on the list goes.

In this case Zacchaeus and his household were outcasts from the Jews' religion. They were good people who strove to keep God's law and please God, but they were excluded from the Jewish "church" by self-righteous hypocrites who "...trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others" (Luke 18:9). Jesus exposed their hypocrisy with great gusto in Matthew 23. It is sad to note that some of this practice exists even today in some "Christian" churches.

This is very much a real part of the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that the despised and rejected people of this world are received by a gracious and merciful God, cleaned up and sanctified by his Holy Spirit and given a precious home in the church with others like them who are redeemed from their sins. What a blessing this is, and it is a vital part of our salvation in Christ.

This is the salvation that Zacchaeus began to find on the day he met Jesus. It was God's purpose that his holy temple in Old Testament times should be a place of gathering for sinners who needed forgiveness, and for fellowship among them. But, on an occasion when Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem of the money changers, he said, "Is it not written, my house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? But you have made it a den of thieves." (Mark 11:17)

I believe that it is likely that Zacchaeus found what he was looking for when he was up in that tree, and that he became in close affiliation with those who followed Christ - and that he may even have been among those 120 disciples in the upper room when the Holy Spirit fell upon them with power on the Day of Pentecost. I believe it is also likely that others whose lives Jesus touched were there as well, such as the woman he met at the well, and the ones he healed of diseases. This also is real salvation, and goes along with belief, repentance and sanctification of heart and mind.

- Loren Wilson (*This article may be copied freely.*)