

The Poor Little Rich Man (Zacchaeus)

- I. What do we know about Zacchaeus?
 - Zacchaeus — could we call him "the poor little rich man"?
 - His name, Zacchaeus, was Jewish, and it means "pure."
 - Perhaps when Zacchaeus was presented by his parents in the temple, they gave him that name to express their hope for him.
 - If that was true, and if his parents were still living, I am quite sure they were heartbroken, for Zacchaeus had become any thing but pure in his manner of living.
 - He was a man whose short physical stature has come to symbolize "the littleness" that characterized him in other ways because of his profession.
 - He was a cheat, a traitor, a turncoat to his own people.
 - He was selfish and self-centered, greedy and totally uncaring toward others.
 - Yet, as has been true in so many other people (including us!), Jesus saw something in Zacchaeus.
 - Through all of those outside layers of ugliness and sin, Jesus saw potential — He saw what this man could become.
 - Everybody else had long since given up on Zacchaeus — but not Jesus.
 - Jesus told a story about a tax collector who went to the temple to pray. This tax collector acknowledged his sinfulness, saying, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner". Jesus said this repentant tax collector "went home justified before God".
 - Matthew (Levi) was also a tax collector and one of Jesus' twelve disciples. Jesus called Levi to be His follower.
 - This little man was one of the last persons Jesus gathered to Himself before He went to the cross. For when Jesus passed through Jericho this time, He was on His way to Jerusalem and to the cross.
 - In one verse we have Luke's description of Zacchaeus: "There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region ("chief publican" in other translations), and he had become very rich" (Luke 19:2 NLT).
 - Zacchaeus, as chief tax collector, tells us that he was appointed by the Roman government to supervise the collection of taxes from an entire district.
 - The tax rate was fixed by Rome, and then the schedule of taxes was given to the chief publican.
 - The chief would increase the amount of taxes he assessed, as much as he dared, to pay wages for the tax collectors working under him, and his "salary". This upcharge was routinely massive.
 - Thus Zacchaeus and his fellow tax collectors were hated by the Jews not only because they had betrayed their people by selling out to Rome, but also because the taxes they assessed were unbelievably high. (If they had charged a reasonable upcharge, Zacchaeus probably would not have been "rich.")
 - Being a border city, Jericho had a customs station.
 - Because it was also one of the wealthiest cities of Palestine, in the most fertile part of Judea and boasting a Herodian palace, the residence of many wealthy priestly families, tax income would have been extensive.
 - The chief tax collector would be the one who contracted for sales and customs taxes and hired collectors under him.
 - Being a tax collector in a large border city like Jericho with a customs station, and a wealthy population with extensive tax income, Zacchaeus held a significant position in the eyes of the Romans, but not his own people.
 - In Biblical times, publicans (tax collectors) were considered among the socially oppressed.
 - The socially oppressed were both those in despised trades (like tax collectors), and Jewish slaves, and those who were of seriously blemished descent (like the Samaritans).
 - Having called three Galilean fishermen to discipleship (certainly dubious selections in the eyes of the religious leaders), Jesus also calls a tax collector by the name of Levi, sitting at his tax booth, to follow Him, which he does without hesitation.
 - To include a tax collector among his intimate associates would be, in the minds of the religious leaders, beyond belief.
 - This makes us realize the enormity of Jesus' act in calling Matthew, a tax collector, and the fishermen, etc. to be His intimate disciples, and announcing the Good News to 'sinners' by sitting down to eat with them.

- Climbing that tree, Zacchaeus would have been viewed as undignified for a man of means.
- Consequently, in spite of his great wealth, Zacchaeus was banned from any social life with his people, and he was excommunicated from the temple and the synagogue. In a very real sense, he was a "man without a country."
- Fellow Jews despised him because they felt Zacchaeus was a sinner and not worthy to be called a 'son of Abraham'.
- But that was no reason for him to be cut off from salvation.
- On the contrary, sinners such as this were the people that Jesus came to save. And once Zacchaeus was saved, he was a true 'son of Abraham', a genuine believer (Luke 19:9-10).

II. The Curiosity of Zacchaeus

- Listen again to Luke: "He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see Him since Jesus was coming that way" (Luke 19:34 NIV).
- How wonderful that Zacchaeus was curious! A healthy curiosity is always a hopeful sign about a person.
 - Curiosity and the urge to investigate indicate that a person is in a state of good mental health.
- While the specific reason for Zacchaeus' interest is not detailed, it is noted that when Jesus was near, "all the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near in order to hear Him".
- This suggests a general attraction of this group towards Jesus.
 - We could ask, "Why? What is it about Jesus that attracts tax collectors and sinners to Him?"
 - We should avoid vain romanticism about Jesus' winsome personality and follow Luke's lead instead.
 - Luke provides a mixed message: Jesus seeks to bring sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32), but not once does Jesus actually scold or correct a sinner. Instead, He eats with them. Four times Luke reports meals in which Jesus receives criticism for His relationship with sinners, but Jesus never once comments on the sinners' behavior (Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 15:1-32; and 19:1-10).
- Zacchaeus "wanted to see Jesus."
 - Was Zacchaeus already convicted of his sin and was running to Jesus?
 - Was Zacchaeus waiting for Jesus to come to Jericho and saw this as his big opportunity for recognition from Jesus?
 - Both suggestions are not likely.
- He had heard about Jesus. Who hadn't at this point?
 - Jesus had been preaching and ministering to the people for three years now.
 - Everyone had heard of Him. Most were just curious at the miracles and signs He performed, others wanted to see if He really was the Messiah. (Remember His greeting when He first got to Jerusalem?)
- While Scripture does not say, it is more likely that since a great crowd of people surged down this Jericho street, Zacchaeus was hungry to see and hear Him.
- Zacchaeus, being a short man, could not see easily over the heads of the people. So he found a sycamore tree with low-hanging and possibly weak limbs and boosted himself up among the leaves of the tree, right over the roadway where Jesus was to pass.
 - The Holy Spirit often uses this hunger, this curiosity to bring people to an awareness of their lostness and their need for a Savior, and that is what He did with Zacchaeus.
- Jesus associated with tax collectors and other notorious sinners.
- Luke 15:7 In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are seemingly righteous.
- Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.
- This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that He was associating with such sinful people — even eating with them!

III. The encounter Zacchaeus had with Jesus.

- "When Jesus reached the spot, He looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.' So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly" (Luke 19:5-6 NIV) .
- Note the words "When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up."
 - Most of us, walking along that street with hundreds of people crowding around us, would easily have missed a man looking down from the limb of a tree overhead, especially if he was hidden among the

leaves!

- But Jesus looked up because He knew there was someone "lost" up in that tree, and, remember, He came to seek and save the lost.
- He called Zacchaeus by name.
- Jesus knew who Zacchaeus was before He ever saw him face-to-face!
- Jesus commanded Zacchaeus to come down and informed him that He would be a guest in his house that very day.
- Jesus's saying this was a sign of acceptance and hospitality, even though Zacchaeus was seen as an outcast.
 - Only one other time did Jesus ask for some gesture of hospitality — from the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well when He said to her, "Give me a drink of water."
 - Isn't it strange that both of these persons were "outcasts" from the perspective of their community?
- Zacchaeus welcomed Him gladly. This significantly contrasts with the rich young man whose wealth prevented him from following Jesus (Matthew 16:19-22).
- The people were aghast that Jesus would be seen in the company of Zacchaeus, eating with him!
- At dinner, Zacchaeus speaks directly to Jesus with his promise to give away a large part of his wealth.

IV. Transformation (Zacchaeus' and Ours)

- This encounter highlights Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost.
- After listening to Jesus's teaching, Zacchaeus knew he had to change.
- Zacchaeus' transformation is evident in his decision to give half of his possessions to the poor and to repay anyone he had cheated four times the amount. This is described as a formal act, like a solemn declaration.
- This demonstrates repentance and a change in his attitude towards wealth and others. But there is no indication that Zacchaeus actually made a confession of sin (as in the case of fellow tax collector in Luke 18:9–14).
- Jesus pronounced that "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." This signifies that despite his despised profession, Zacchaeus was recognized as a true child of God and a genuine believer because of his welcoming of Jesus and his actions demonstrating a sincere heart.
 - Here again we see Jesus in the role of champion of the outcast and of those who are maligned because of unwarranted assumptions and religious hypocrisy.
- The story illustrates that God wants people who seek His forgiveness
- God is then quick to hand out mercy to all who ask.
 - This magnifies the contrast between the truly righteous and the self-righteous who look down on others as if they were unworthy....
- Zacchaeus' life had been characterized by getting and receiving, he now believes in giving.
 - That is the way of Christianity. Before he met Jesus, he was mastered by greed; afterward he was mastered by grace.
- Much later, early Church father, Clement of Alexandria, claimed Zacchaeus became the bishop of Caesarea.

V. Significance of This Transformation to Us

- Here lies the cutting edge of this passage: Jesus embraces the very people the rest of religious society rejects.
- It highlights Jesus' acceptance of those whom society rejected.
 - Consider Matthew 8:1-4, the story of the man with leprosy.
 - This was the terrible situation of the man who came to Jesus, begging to be healed.
 - Jesus' response was compassion — and healing.
 - Chuck Swindoll: "[Jesus] reached out and literally touched the man society had rejected as untouchable. In other instances, Jesus merely spoke a word and the miracle took effect. In at least one case, He healed from a distance of twenty miles (John 4:46–54). But in this situation, He chose to touch the leper's diseased skin, as if to say, "Your disease doesn't prevent me from accepting you."
 - Consider these examples: a sick mother-in-law (4:38–39); frustrated fishermen (5:1–10); a grieving widow (7:11–15); an upset sister (10:38–42); a bent-over woman (13:10–13); a group of lepers (17:11–19); a curious tax collector (19:1–10); and a poor but generous widow (21:1–4).
 - ALL people have access to God's saving grace, but will they accept it?
- Jesus' actions demonstrate God's extravagant joy in welcoming sinners. This welcoming can be seen in the context of celebrations and meals.

- This encounter illustrates that no one is beyond hope.

VI. Broader Implications for All of Us

- What then was the glorious ending to this story? Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9 NIV). It's about forgiveness and salvation.
- Jesus' ministry involved correcting messianic expectations and misunderstandings. His interaction with someone like Zacchaeus likely challenged the prevailing notions of who the Messiah should associate with.
- Unlike many of His religious critics, Jesus does not condemn the lost, nor does He judge people according to outward appearances.
- This event aligns with Jesus' universal invitation to salvation, which is for everyone, everywhere, and without favoritism.
- Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus exemplified key aspects of His ministry: reaching out to the marginalized, emphasizing repentance, and demonstrating God's joy and grace towards sinners.
- It also demonstrates God's mercy in action.
 - Mercy: Kindness, leniency, tender compassion, pardon, pity in action.
- Despite Zacchaeus's sinful profession, Jesus offered him relationship and grace.
- Zacchaeus's experienced spiritual transformation as a result of encountering Jesus.
- This change put Zacchaeus on the road to getting things right with God and other people.
- When things lose their hold on us, we truly are free.
- The story contrasts with those who considered themselves righteous but are unwilling to show mercy.
 - Jesus told a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector that turned on its head what people thought was righteous and unrighteous (Luke 18:9-14).
 - Self-made righteousness blinds people to their need for God's forgiveness (Matthew 9:12).
 - It emphasizes that true righteousness involves recognizing one's need for God and extending compassion to others.
- The encounter serves as a reminder that God looks at the heart, not outward appearances or societal status.
- It offers hope and the possibility of transformation for all people, regardless of their past.
- This story illustrates that Jesus Christ is for everyone.
- The encounter with Jesus demonstrates that God honors and uplifts the humble.