

ZACCHAEUS, REPENTANT TAX COLLECTOR

Antonio seemed to have the perfect life: a decent job, a nice house, a reliable car. But he focused so much on climbing the corporate ladder and golfing with friends that he didn't make time for family. He hadn't spoken with his parents in months when his brother reached out to him.

"Hey man, you should come visit. The parents miss you."

"They'll be fine," Antonio had said. "Besides, I have a golf outing next weekend." His response became a pattern.

Antonio knew about Christianity, but he was never close to anyone who claimed to be a Christian. His new coworker talked about faith in a way Antonio had never heard. He talked about Jesus' love for the poor, the hurting, and the people who had messed up.

Antonio was a curious for the first time. Maybe the Bible had more to it than he had assumed. So one day after work, Antonio picked up a Bible from a bookstore. He had no idea where to start or what to expect, so he started from the beginning. He was shocked when Cain killed Abel, outraged when Judas betrayed Jesus. Somehow through it all, he saw God's involvement in every detail. But Antonio still had so many questions.

It took some time to build up the courage, but eventually Antonio decided to ask his coworker some of his questions. He fumbled through it, not really sure what he was asking.

1 What makes you curious about other people's faith?

2 What behaviors, habits, or words invite others to know Jesus?

¹ And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. ² And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. ³ And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. ⁴ And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. ⁵ And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house. ⁶ And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully.

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

A Lost Man in a Tree

Jericho is the last stop before Christ’s entry into Jerusalem. In this stunning chapter of Luke, Jesus saves a man steeped in the corrosive power of the enemy.

In worldly terms, Zacchaeus has it all. He is the wealthy and influential chief tax collector of an important city and hub of commerce. Fellow Jews may hate him, but they are under his thumb. He can extort others—steal from them—without consequence. Why is it any concern what Rome does with these great levies he collects? Doesn’t he have a right to make a living like everyone else?

It is surprising that Jesus involved Himself with a tax collector, but it’s equally surprising that Zacchaeus is drawn to Jesus in the first place. Jesus taught, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort” (Luke 6:24). In a parable, He warned about a rich fool who hoards wealth (Luke 12:13–21). And Jesus said, “Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples” (Luke 14:33). The way that Jesus speaks about wealth makes even His disciples uncomfortable, and they ask, “Who then can be saved?” (Luke 18:26). What happens soon after as they encounter

Zacchaeus helps to give an answer to the question. It is a testimony to the power of the kingdom that even a man at the top is *curious*.

The image of an adult who climbs trees is undignified, or perhaps even comical. Unlike the wealthy ruler who came right up to Jesus in Luke 18:18; Zacchaeus keeps his distance. Luke explains that he wanted to “see who Jesus was” (19:3). Zacchaeus shows the childlike humility that works like an antidote to the temptations of pride. Since curiosity and humility prepare us to be open to God, it is no surprise that Jesus encourages us to “receive the kingdom of God like a little child” (18:17).

The scene is set, the characters all in place. When Jesus looks into the tree, He spots not only a lost man, but a man willing to look foolish just to catch a glimpse. Jesus knows the name of Zacchaeus without any introduction, and He calls out to honor him with a visit to his home (19:5). Luke doesn’t say how much this curious man knows about Jesus yet, but we see an immediate effect Jesus has upon him. He is eager to open his house and to share a table with this Jewish teacher: “[Zacchaeus] welcomed him gladly” (19:6).

Like Jesus called to Zacchaeus, He calls to us by name, asking us to examine our attachments to wealth, status, and comfort. And, like Zacchaeus, we are invited to respond with humility as we seek Jesus—even before we know the answers to all of our questions.

1 Can you picture yourself in the crowds in Jericho? What would you have felt as you watched this scene?

2 What temptations do we face to take advantage of others?

3 If Jesus were coming to your house without any time to prepare for Him, how would you react?

⁷ And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.

⁸ And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.

⁹ And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forso-much as he also is a son of Abraham.

¹⁰ For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

A Lost Man is Found

It is only human to feel anger or jealousy when those who have wronged us receive attention. The crowds who are observing Jesus while He interacts with Zacchaeus are some of the same people who have been cheated by this man. Luke says the people “mutter” when they refer to Jesus’ association with sinners (19:7). *Surely*, they must think, *Jesus could have found another place to share a supper*. As a respected Jewish teacher, Jesus is honoring the wrong person with His presence.

But appearances can be deceiving. And what appeared to be an unlikely person to welcome Jesus turns out to be someone highly receptive to Jesus’ kingdom message. Notice that Luke actually skips mention of the meal and its conversation. Luke is focused on the transformation, rather than the process.

Zacchaeus does an about-face in his entire pattern of life. Whereas he had supervised the extortion of taxes and amassed great wealth, he now wants to return his hoarded wealth to the poor people whom he harmed. He boldly promises, “I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount” (Luke 19:8). Compare that to the rich man who became sorrowful and gave up the invitation to follow Jesus

(Luke 18:22–23). Zacchaeus is responding the way that Jesus desires, by relinquishing his wealth.

For Zacchaeus, it is not as simple as transferring the contents of a bank account. He has to reverse-engineer the system that has profited him. He pledges to support those he exploited, offering more than repayment: extravagant restitution. When he promises to pay back four times as much, he is calculating high interest on the debts he now considers himself to owe. It helps to understand that, during this time, those who cannot pay taxes often borrow at terrible rates—much like predatory payday loans work today. Zacchaeus’s promise reveals a repentant heart seeking the benefit of others. He is determined to repair the injustices he caused.

Jesus welcomes sincere repentance and announces that, “Salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham” (19:9). It means, although Zacchaeus looked like a traitor to the Jewish people, he was actually a member of the “lost” Jesus has come to save (v. 10). It wasn’t Zacchaeus’s ancestry that made Jesus say this; it was his response of faith. Zacchaeus has enough faith to realize that any ill-gotten wealth he has accumulated will mean nothing under Christ’s rule. Abraham was counted righteous for his faith—an active and radical trust in God that drove a life of sacrifice. Because of his faith in God, Zacchaeus becomes a true child of Abraham by laying aside wealth and privilege.

Everyone except Jesus sees Zacchaeus as a treacherous ingrate who should not receive any grace. Jesus doesn’t deny his past (calling him “lost” in v. 10). But Jesus’ mission is to find the lost and to restore them to a close relationship with God. We can never be too lost to be found by Him.

1 When might we be tempted to “mutter” about the love Jesus lavishes on certain people?

2 Is God calling you to offer restitution or extravagant kindness to anyone you have wronged?

3 Where in our lives do we need to hear Jesus say that He saves the lost?

Seeking the Lost

Last week we discussed the restoration of Simon Peter as a leader of the early church. You might think to yourself that, of course, Jesus was going to find a way to restore one of His closest friends, an *insider* and a disciple who had stumbled. Today's lesson about Zacchaeus is on an entirely different level. Zacchaeus's starting point is as an *outsider* to Jesus' movement. He and people like him are the direct targets of criticism for being too bound up in the ways of the world—where might makes right and taking from the weak is normal.

But appearances can be deceiving. Sometimes we impose rigid formulas when we look at people like Zacchaeus or the thief on the cross (whose entry into paradise depended on a simple plea and confession of faith). We might have a rigid understanding of how people need to meet God to have their salvation approved. We like to hear specific phrases, or we want them to have an experience that mirrors our own. Luke doesn't even share with readers the conversation that Jesus must have had with Zacchaeus over a meal. We only get the result, and we see that Jesus was pleased.

Jesus came to lead lost people back to repentance and salvation. And the change that came over Zacchaeus was profound and life-altering. Instead of tracking people down to extract payment, he would be tracking people down to make restitution. The same skills of calculating interest that he had learned from his trade he could apply to himself—his was the largest of debts. Zacchaeus's change shows us the remarkable insight of Jesus, who knew that a curious man in a tree was ready to hear the message of the kingdom. As we turn and look around (and up into the trees), may we also find that “the harvest is plentiful” (Luke 10:2).

1 Are there Christians with conversion narratives that you're tempted to doubt? Who?

2 How can we remember to trust Jesus for salvation?

3 Where do you have to look to find the plentiful harvest of people curious about Jesus?

Salvation Potential

Although Zacchaeus was written off by his peers as a hopeless sinner, Jesus saw salvation potential when He looked up into the sycamore tree. Who have you written off as an irredeemable sinner? It may be someone who has deeply hurt you, offended your faith, or acted in an especially selfish manner. Ask Jesus to bring that person to mind as you pray.

I once was lost, but now am found. It was Jesus who found me.

God, I need help seeing the salvation potential in . . .

Key Text

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house. —Luke 19:5 KJV

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” —Luke 19:5 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of July 20 through July 25

Mon. Genesis 3:14–20—Consequences for Sin.

Tue. Mark 3:31–35; Luke 11:27–28—Spiritual Family.

Wed. Psalm 119:97–104—Meditating on God’s Law.

Thu. Luke 1:26–38—Mary: the Lord’s Servant.

Fri. Luke 2:15–19—Keepsakes and Treasures.

Sat. Isaiah 9:3–7—To Us a Child is Born.

Next Week: Luke 2:15–19; John 2:1–5; 19:25–27

We will talk about Jesus’ own mother and the transformation in her perspective. How did your relationship with parents change as you grew?