

Zacchaeus, the Repentant Tax Collector

Devotional Reading: Luke 6:31–38

Background Scripture: Luke 19:1–10

Today's Scripture: Luke 19:1–10

I. Viewing from a Distance

Luke 19:1–4

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.

1. Jesus and His disciples are traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem for the Passover. While outside *Jericho*, Jesus heals a blind beggar (Luke 18:35–43). Then they move into the city, presumably walking along the main thoroughfare.

2. Luke uses the word *behold* to capture his audience's attention and introduce a new character. Unlike the encounter with the rich young ruler, Luke introduces *Zacchaeus* by name. His name is the Greek form of a Hebrew word that means "innocent," "pure," or "clean." Luke also names Zacchaeus's occupation. He is *the chief* tax collector in Jericho.

Luke highlights Zacchaeus's wealth. In doing so, Luke connects Zacchaeus's story with the rich ruler Jesus and His disciples met before arriving in Jericho.

3. The Greek word translated here as *he sought* is essential to Luke's Gospel, appearing more than two dozen times in various forms.

Zacchaeus wants *to see* Jesus. He has no problem with his eyes but is struggling in another way—he is short in *stature*, and the crowd (*the press*) is dense. A growing multitude now fills the narrow streets of Jericho and prevents Zacchaeus from catching a glimpse of Jesus.

Luke implies that Zacchaeus wants to learn about this well-known prophet so that he can evaluate Him, but Zacchaeus's height is a barrier to reaching his goal. He can't see over the crowd. Therefore, he is forced to use other means to achieve his objective.

4. Zacchaeus sets aside his dignity with two actions: running and climbing. He is eager to beat the crowd to the next likely spot that Jesus will be. Powerful men do not run; they have other people do it for them—running errands, sending messages, and securing invitations. It is significant that Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus for himself and is willing to risk looking undignified in the process. His actions indicate that his interest is more than idle curiosity. He positions himself ahead of Jesus and prepares for the approach.

The *sycamore* tree is a species of fig native to the Middle East and Africa. It

has a wide, short trunk and low branches. We may imagine Zacchaeus climbing it quickly. Grown men typically do not climb trees, and Zacchaeus's action may have been humbling. His posture in this moment is neither haughty nor concerned with outward appearance.

II. Interacting Up Close

Luke 19:5–10

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.

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.

5. This is one of many examples in Luke's Gospel where Jesus exhibits supernatural knowledge, which can be rightly expected of God alone. Astonishingly, Jesus stops and calls *Zacchaeus* by name.

Jesus does not compare schedules or ask if today is convenient for guests—He tells Zacchaeus to hurry *down* and invites Himself over. Jesus presents His stay with Zacchaeus as something that *must* happen. The Greek expression translated “must” regularly signifies something that has to take place to fulfill God's purpose. Jesus' visit to the man's *house* is a divine necessity.

Jesus initiates the invitation as if He

is the host. He is authoritative in the exchange and dignifies Zacchaeus by designating the man's home as the place where He and His disciples will receive refreshment. Jesus is not afraid to associate with this unpopular man. His words are urgent—it will happen *to day*.

6. Zacchaeus obeys Jesus immediately. He doesn't act flustered or annoyed at having an unexpected houseguest (or 13!). Instead, he responds to Jesus' message with joy.

Zacchaeus's eagerness to catch a glimpse of Jesus from up in the tree has paid off, so he climbs back *down* to ground level and meets Jesus, face to face. This is no longer a momentary encounter; Jesus likely will remain in his company for the length of a meal and travel respite.

7. The crowd continues to be an obstacle. *They* are not happy with Jesus' choice to stay with Zacchaeus. Therefore, they grumble. The onlookers' condemnation is clear; they consider Zacchaeus a *sinner*. Zacchaeus holds no respect within his community. As a notorious tax collector, the crowd regards Zacchaeus as disloyal to God and His people. They are shocked to think Jesus would associate with him.

Throughout Luke's Gospel Jesus receives criticism for His affiliation with “publicans and sinners” (Luke 5:30; 7:34; 15:1–2). In going home with Zacchaeus, Jesus is doing the right thing, not the popular thing.

8. By standing to speak, *Zacchaeus* emphasizes the importance of his pronouncement. He begins by calling Jesus to attention and then attributes to Him the respectful title of *Lord*. Zacchaeus affirms an attitude of humility and reverence toward Jesus. Then he declares an intention toward restitution.

Zacchaeus announces to Jesus (and the city of Jericho) the actions he will take to fix the damage he has caused. He begins

by halving his wealth and pledging it to *the poor*. In doing so, he aligns with the wisdom and goodness taught through Jewish Scripture: “He that hath a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he giveth of his bread to the poor” (Proverbs 22:9).

He promises to restore monies *taken* by false accusation. Since the tax collection system was not standardized, extortion ran rampant, and bribery was common. Zacchaeus says he will pay four times the amount (*fourfold*) of anything he took unfairly. This amount echoes the restitution required by the Law of Moses for stealing livestock (Exodus 22:1). By stating his intentions in this way, Zacchaeus acknowledges that he gained his wealth unethically. He openly confesses that he has done wrong and is ready to make reparations.

Zacchaeus acknowledges his wrongs and declares a shift in priorities. He will turn to generosity, offering alms instead of being greedy, as is typical of his profession. Zacchaeus chooses righteousness over wealth, one of the significant obstacles to inheriting God’s kingdom.

9a. Jesus responds to Zacchaeus’s speech with profound blessing. A physical miracle is not needed, but a spiritual one has occurred as *this day* Zacchaeus receives *salvation*. Zacchaeus does not need to wait for some far-off time to experience the justice and mercy of God’s kingdom. He participates in it immediately.

Jesus includes *this house*, the entirety of Zacchaeus’s household, in the receipt of saving grace. In the first century, a household’s faith hinged on the beliefs and lifestyle of its leader. In the same way that everyone in Zacchaeus’s household would have been affected by his reputation and dishonest behavior, tainted in the eyes of the community, they are also restored through his repentance.

9b. Jesus’ words continue, reinstating Zacchaeus’s place within the family of

faith. The Jews in Jericho see Zacchaeus as someone cut off from God’s people, a traitor because he collaborated with the Romans. Jesus’ words offer Zacchaeus restoration, belonging, and forgiveness. As a *son of Abraham*, the inheritance of God’s kingdom is his. God’s promise is to bless all nations through Abraham’s seed. Zacchaeus is now reclaimed as a part of God’s people according to God’s promise. With Jesus’ pronouncement, the meaning of Zacchaeus’s name, “clean,” regains its accuracy. Jesus makes a way for Zacchaeus to return to his true self: a son of God, pure and forgiven.

10. The phrase *Son of man* appears more than 80 times across all four Gospels. It also shows up frequently in the Old Testament. In Hebrew, “Son of man” literally reads “son of Adam,” meaning “human being.” In the Old Testament, the phrase often highlights the difference between humans and God. In Daniel, there is a heavenly figure seen and described “like the Son of man” (Daniel 7:13). This figure receives authority from God to rule the world forever, served by all people, nations, and languages (7:14).

By Jesus’ time, “Son of man” carried connotations of judgment and deliverance. The Son of man was considered a servant of God and sometimes the Messiah. Jesus uses the title for Himself and, in so doing, pairs His humanity and divinity. In this passage, Jesus uses the title to claim the authority to *seek* and *save*.

Seeking and saving are strong themes throughout Luke. The parables of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7), the lost coin (15:8–10), and the prodigal son (15:11–32) illustrate these themes exceptionally. Jesus welcomes Zacchaeus back into the fold, for He came “not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (5:32). Jesus’ choice to become Zacchaeus’s guest reveals the nature of His ministry.

Involvement Learning

Zacchaeus, the Repentant Tax Collector

Into the Lesson

Describe a time you were close to a celebrity. What was your proximity? What might happen if that person showed up at your house at dinnertime?

It means so much when we are acknowledged by someone important to us. In today's lesson, we will consider the intentional ways Jesus interacted with Zacchaeus.

Into the Word

Read Luke 19:1–3. Identify five things you know about Zacchaeus from these verses.

Read Luke 5:17–25; 5:27–32; 6:6–11; 7:36–39; and 15:1–7. Who or what are the Pharisees criticizing?

What is scandalous about Jesus' behavior?

What do these passages have in common with Luke 19:7–10?

Key Text

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

Into Life

List the people and circumstances Jesus has used to “seek and save” you.

Make a list of personal attitudes and behaviors that Jesus' love has compelled you to change.

Write down at least one transformed attitude or behavior that is a personal testimony of God's faithfulness.

Thought to Remember

Jesus still seeks and saves the lost.