

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 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.

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. Unlike the encounter with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18–25), 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 a *chief tax collector* in Jericho.

Additionally, 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 wanted to see* is essential to Luke’s Gospel. In older English translations it reads

“he sought.” The underlying Greek word appears more than two dozen times in various forms in Luke’s Gospel.

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 is dense. A growing multitude now fills the narrow streets of Jericho and prevents Zacchaeus from catching a glimpse of Jesus.

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.

II. Interacting Up Close

Luke 19:5-10

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.

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.”

5. This is one of many examples in Luke's Gospel where Jesus exhibits supernatural knowledge, which can be rightly expected of God alone (compare Luke 5:22; 6:8; 7:36-50; 8:46; 19:29-34; 22:7-13). 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. In fact, Jesus presents his *stay* 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 *today*.

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 (*mutter*). 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 “tax collectors 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: “The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor” (Proverbs 22:9).

He promises to restore monies taken by false accusation or cheating. Since the tax collection system was not standardized, extortion ran rampant, and bribery was common. Zacchaeus says he will pay *four times the amount*. This sum 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.

Perhaps Zacchaeus’s desire to see Jesus with his own eyes has opened and healed his sight in ways beyond the physical. 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 *today* 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. 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. God addresses the prophet Ezekiel as “Son of man” 93 times (examples: Ezekiel 2:1; 3:17; 33:2)! In Daniel, there is a heavenly figure seen and described “like a 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).

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 reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."
—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.