

Sunday August 2
Lesson 9: A Life-Changing Encounter
Scripture: Luke 19: 1-10

Context:

We jump to the New Testament for our next lesson and look at a very different character from Nehemiah and the figures of Daniel. Today we look at Jesus and the infamous tax collector Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus becomes one of the most fascinating people Jesus converts and provides hope for how lives can be changed today.

The story of Zacchaeus comes right after Jesus has healed a blind beggar outside of Jericho. As if to complement the inclusive nature of Christ, both the poor and rich are blessed with salvation within two encounters in one town.¹ This is not the first time Jesus addresses a rich man about matters of salvation, but it is one of the more fulfilling accounts as the reader will discover.

The text states Zacchaeus was a “tax collector and was rich.”² Another translation of the word would be “publican,” an implication of Zacchaeus’s role being tied deeply to the corrupt tax system of the Roman government.³ If he was rich, this means Zacchaeus was deeply tied to the system and benefited in programs robbing and crushing other people.⁴ Even though there is nothing about the personal life of Zacchaeus mentioned, the terms used here and the attitudes of those who see him talking to Jesus are enough to deduce he was not a respected member of the community.

The story reveals as much when people begin to grumble when they see he has Jesus coming over to his house at Jesus’s request. At this point of Zacchaeus providing hospitality to Jesus, he also makes some promises about his behavior. He promises to give half of his possessions to the poor and then vows to return any money defrauded by going beyond the prescribed restitution of original plus twenty to increasing it to double what is owed.⁵ Zacchaeus is making big promises, which would change his world as well

¹ Craddock, Fred C. “Luke,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for First and Second Kings*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 218.

² Per Luke 19:2, NRSV.

³ Craddock, “Luke”, 218.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

as those in his household.

This is very much a conversion story with a happy conclusion. However, Zacchaeus's "being saved" is not just a private event. His salvation has personal, domestic, social, and economic dimensions.⁶ Jesus's visit to Zacchaeus will save him and an entire community as all feel the effects of the Son of Man seeking to save the lost.

Application

Zacchaeus is often not known as much as the rich man who was saved by Jesus as he is for the children's song focusing on the "wee little man who climbed up high in the sycamore tree." The song is cute and focuses on how Jesus is coming over so he better get ready. You never see a sycamore tree again and not think about Zacchaeus and Jesus.

Yet the older I get, the more intrigued I am at the interest Jesus had in this man. Here was a wealthy man who had benefitted from the hard work and sweat of others. To a degree he betrayed his own people by working in collusion with the Romans. Even though his bank account was full, he was not the person you invited to dinner or wanted as a friend due to his backstabbing vocation. He was a traitor, one of the worst kinds as he benefitted at the expense of others.

Although I imagine there is something we might secretly like about Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was rich. He had the money in the bank and he was known for it. Who needs friends when you have more than enough for yourself and your household? We all know money does indeed talk and Americans as a whole love the idea of not only having money, but being rich. It's why we have knock off brands that look like designer brands so we can appear to be better off.

Yet these are the very people who are held in contempt in the biblical world, especially as what is revealed in this text. Everyone in the biblical world knew the rich were the ones who misunderstand what it means to be in community with one another. Because of the publicans' greed and desire for wealth, they had isolated themselves making it clear they care more about themselves than they do others.

Go through the Bible and note how many times Jesus talks about wealth. I often chuckle when I've heard people say Jesus didn't really talk about money or tithing. Jesus spent a lot of time talking about money and stewardship. And he made it pretty clear that while wealth is not inherently bad, it certainly gets in our way of following him.

The story of Zacchaeus is one of the more hopeful stories of how Jesus grabs ahold of the rich and helps them to see the way. When Zacchaeus sees and hears Jesus, he is truly transformed. If he does what he says he does by agreeing to give away his possessions and being fair with people, then the whole community of Jericho benefits as people are treated fairly and Zacchaeus learns wealth does not necessarily bring someone happiness. And all are saved and made part of the Lord's household.

Perhaps today we need Jesus to "save" us in this way again. Instead of being focused on how much wealth we can display or accumulate, now may be the season to realize we might have more in common with Zacchaeus than we realize. Perhaps it's time

⁶ Ibid., 220.

to look through our houses and see if we have hoarded instead of shared. Or maybe it's time to examine our money and ask what we are using it for and if it brings glory to God and goodness to our church and our community. When Zacchaeus did these things, he discovered something more promising than an allegiance to Caesar or a lucrative career in benefitting at the expense of others. Zachhaeus learned about the Lord and Savior who promises something even better than fat bank accounts and a cluttered house. He leaned about the Lord who gives true life.

Why do you think we, especially Americans, are so fascinated with money and wealth? What do you think about the Lord seeking out Zacchaeus? How does wealth and money control your life? What do you do with your financial blessings to bless others and honor God?

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009