

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Luke 19:1-10

Sermon Title: "Salvation Comes to This House" (Need for Repentance Lenten Series)

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{SLIDE 1} Zacchaeus was a wee little man; a wee little man was he.

Zacchaeus was also a wee little rich man, rich beyond belief. He had more money than he knew what to do with. He had money to finance the entire city of Jericho if he wanted. All this money came from being a chief tax collector. This is the only place in the entire Bible in which we will hear the words *chief tax collector*.¹ We may read about tax collectors who were not chiefs, top bosses. We may read about chief priests, especially in the Gospels as we get closer to the death and resurrection of Jesus. But only in Luke 19:2 do we ever read about one man being a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus himself.

{SLIDE 2} Let me explain the situation. Rome is the nation that rules over all peoples. They have great armies, great buildings, and great monuments to all their heroes. In order to finance all these expenses

¹ Zondervan Publishers, *The NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, cf. 1705.

they need to collect taxes, and they need certain people to be collectors of that tax. In our society today, taxes are automatically removed from our paychecks, and then at the beginning of next year we have to put together tax forms to see how much more we owe (or how much the government owes us). In Jesus' time, somebody came knocking on people's doors and demanded that they pay taxes without delay. The Roman government "hired" tax collectors to achieve this job.

{SLIDE 3} Now, the Roman government would make its people pay all sorts of taxes on a variety of things. The numbers could be different for individuals, depending on where they lived and what work they did. Let us say, for example, that the Roman government demanded \$100 of taxes from individuals in a certain region. The tax collectors would knock on a person's door and demand \$100. The tax collectors would be allowed to earn an income, too. They are doing some sort of work and should be compensated for it, but it would not be the Roman government to pay them. The tax collectors would receive their pay from the individuals paying tax. So, instead of demanding \$100 in taxes, collectors would demand \$150 and keep \$50 for themselves. This was a standard practice in Jesus' time, which people quarreled about but could not change.

{SLIDE 4} Now let us throw in the chief tax collectors, namely Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was in charge of a district surrounding the city of Jericho. He had a number of tax collectors working under him. They would collect the tax, hand it all to Zacchaeus, and he would hand it all to the Roman government. Now, Zacchaeus had to receive compensation for what he did. He wasn't going to work for free. So, he would demand money from the tax collectors, and they would have to pay up. Let's say that Zacchaeus demanded \$50 from them. Well, the tax collectors are already demanding an extra \$50 from individuals. The tax collectors don't want to give all their profit away to the chief tax collector, so they would demand a little extra more from individuals. Individuals might owe the government \$100 in taxes, but they would have to give up, let's say, \$200. People normally paid a lot more for "taxes" than what they accurately owed. In our simple example, the tax collectors gave \$100 in Roman taxes to Zacchaeus, plus \$50 for Zacchaeus' income, and they kept \$50 for themselves.

{SLIDE 5} As we probably know already, tax collectors were not welcomed people. They were seen as traitors who worked for a pagan Roman government. They were also viewed as great sinners for robbing people of their hard-earned profits. If tax

collectors had a bad reputation, chief tax collectors were even worse. When people grumble in Luke 19, saying that Jesus is going to be the guest of a sinner, they mean to say that Zacchaeus is the worst of the worst. He is evil personified, sitting on his throne of gold, eating lavish meals while others try to scratch together a living.

{SLIDE 6} Zacchaeus is also a great sinner to the other tax collectors under him, because he probably doesn't collect any tax himself. He gets the underlings to do the dirty work for him. They rob people of their profits, while Zacchaeus dwells comfortably from all the drama. He makes those tax collectors gather the tax, and then Zacchaeus doesn't pay them for their work. If we found a job at Publix or Walmart, the boss over us would pay us a certain salary. We get our check from him or her. In the world of tax collection, however, the tax collectors worked for their chiefs, and the chiefs pay them nothing. The underlings of Zacchaeus pay him for doing no legwork.

Zacchaeus was quite rich during his lifetime, because the district around Jericho was booming.² The area was quite prosperous in agriculture and commerce, so Zacchaeus increased his wealth exponentially. And his vile reputation increased as he

² Ibid.

got richer and richer with high taxes. And the people in and around Jericho hated him even more and more. He truly was the greatest sinner to live during that time.

{SLIDE 7} And then Jesus comes to town, and the wee little, sinfully rich Zacchaeus needs to see him.³ So he climbs a sycamore tree, which doesn't hold any spiritual significance. It is an easy tree to climb, so Zacchaeus scales it for a loftier view of this Man whom people call the Son of God. He gets a glimpse; in fact, Jesus walks right under the tree and notices him. Of all the people that Jesus could have chosen to be a guest at their house, he selects Zacchaeus. Jesus has been a guest in many households. Some of them were Pharisees and some of them were ordinary people. Some were rich and some not so rich. But not Zacchaeus. He is the greatest sinner in the land at that time. He has surrounded himself with so much conceitedness and greed, crushing people as he goes, that he has lost his soul entirely. Jesus cannot mixed himself up with such a character.

Yet, who else needs a Savior more desperately than Zacchaeus? Who is in need of repentance here but Zacchaeus himself? In Mark 2:17, Jesus says, "Those

³ Cf. Luke 19:1-4.

who are well have no need for a physicians, but those who are sick [do]; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Zacchaeus doesn't invite Jesus to his home. Jesus invites himself. Or more to the point, Jesus invites Zacchaeus to much more than a bountiful dinner around a large table. Jesus invites Zacchaeus to be healed of his sin. He invites him to be transformed and to live a different life according to God's hope for humanity. Zacchaeus might be the vilest of all people, but even the vilest offender can be saved. He or she can repent of sin and find resurrection in Christ.

{SLIDE 8} Zacchaeus is transformed. Jesus is a guest in his lavish estate, and now Jesus is a guest in his humble heart. He repents of his sin and is restored to new life. He will never be the same. He is beside himself with joy and thanksgiving. He cannot contain himself. He is invited to follow Jesus to his death and resurrection, and be made whole.

He doesn't see the need to make all the money he can from others. He doesn't have the desire to hold power over others, even if it is political power when it comes to taxes. He does see Jesus, and he has the desire to help those in need. He has the yearning to ease the pain of others, even the pain he himself caused once.

He is so ecstatic that he make a bold declaration: “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”⁴ I went to a preaching conference several years ago, and during one of them a Presbyterian pastor preached on Luke 19. He quoted Zacchaeus’s bold statement, and said that it was practically a lie. There is no way Zacchaeus could live up to those standards. Using our example from before, if Zacchaeus demanded \$50 from every tax collector for every tax they collected, that means he would owe \$200 to every taxpayer for every tax they paid. Zacchaeus’s pay originally came from the taxpayer, so he would owe the person the money he took times four, or \$200.

{SLIDE 9} If Zacchaeus kept to that bargain alone, he would be totally bankrupt. He would have to somehow borrow or work for the extra money he still owes. On top of that, Zacchaeus says that he will give half of his estate away, which again would put him so far in the hole that he couldn’t fulfill it. “There is no way that Zacchaeus will carry out what he says,” this preacher said years ago at a preaching conference. “Even Jesus realizes that his declaration is undoable. When Jesus leaves his home, and he starts to consider

⁴ Luke 19:8.

what he declared, Zacchaeus will think twice and begin to give back a little here and a little there. He will still be somewhat rich.”

We don't know what Zacchaeus did after Jesus left his home. Did he really keep his promises? We don't know what kind of chief tax collector he became. However, we can say that, although his bold declaration was nearly impossible, Zacchaeus was still a transformed man. He was still a man who repented of his sin, knew the depth of his wrongdoing to others and wanted to make every amends he could.

According to Fred Craddock, “Zacchaeus’ offer of half of his possessions to the poor and a generous restitution to anyone he may have cheated can be seen as itself [as] evidence of [how radical the] grace and the power of Jesus’ good news [impacted] him.”⁵ Whether Zacchaeus fulfills his promise or not, he is still a transformed man. Whether Jesus believes he will keep his promise or not, Jesus still declares that a man has been made whole. Salvation/Healing has still come to his house, and he is free to walk with Jesus toward the cross and beyond the resurrection. He is no longer lost. The Son of Man has found him.

{SLIDE 10} Who know if Zacchaeus continues to be tax collector, let alone a chief tax collector? After

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke*, cf. 219.

Jesus leaves Jericho, we do not hear about Zacchaeus anymore. If he chooses to remain a chief tax collector, he would have to endure a corrupt system that makes taxpayers poor and tax collectors rich, and chief tax collectors filthy rich. He would have to reconcile being an agent of the Roman government and an enemy to the people. We would hope that Zacchaeus did well after Jesus left his town. We know that after Jesus leaves, he is still a child of God. He still commits his life to the Savior.

We would hope that he longs after the Lord as a deer pants for water, as Psalm 42 puts it.⁶ We can imagine Zacchaeus thirsting for God, trying to learn what is right and wrong, and do the right for the sake of his God and Savior. We can picture him shedding tears for his God, trying to be a friend to others while they may push him away, trying to be a benefactor who wants to ease the pain of others but is called an enemy, a vile person, or something worse.

There are times that Zacchaeus may cry, “Where are you, God?” His spirit might be downcast, as he wrestles with his old life as a corrupt person and his new life as a rescued child of God. We can guess, though, that his spirit wasn’t downcast for long. He could remember that one encounter with Jesus, and

⁶ See verses 1-5.

how it change his life complete around. He could remember the face of God smiling on him, and giving him another chance to make things right, another chance to live a freer life in God. He may celebrate the One who not only save him from sin and death, but also died for others to save them from sin and death, so that we all may not remain in our destruction but would be raised up to eternal peace.

“Salvation has come to this house,” Jesus said.⁷ When salvation comes to our houses, we cannot help but be transformed forever.

⁷ Luke 19:9.

The Assurance of Pardon:

The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 40 the theme of redemption: “I waited patiently for the Lord, who inclined his ear and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the muck and mire.” Through Christ, God the Father sets our feet on solid ground. Through Christ, the Holy Spirit puts a new song of love and peace in our mouths. Through Christ, we see and fear God, for we are all forgiven. Thanks be to God! Amen.