

The Call of Zacchaeus

Background Passage: Luke 19:1-10

Adult Sunday School Lesson

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Bible Background

The biblical story of Zacchaeus is one of the earliest faith stories that children learn. Many a child has grown up singing, “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. He climbed up in the sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.” I love to hear the enthusiasm of children when they shout the command of the Lord that follows, saying, “Zacchaeus, you come down, for I’m going to your house today!” The song gets at the essence of the biblical story. Each of us is small. Each of us wants to see. And when the Lord passes by, we pray that we will have the faith to invite him into our home. But there is so much more. The story is about an outcast who struggles with selfishness and being good and, most importantly, the story equates the moment of salvation with the calling of transformation.

The context for the story is Jericho. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Soon he will face the culminating points of his life, including his judgment by the authorities, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. As Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, Luke tells three stories. The first of these is the story of the blind man who pleads for the Lord to let him see again (Luke 18:35-43). The third story is that of the parable of the ten pounds, which testifies to the consequences of wasting one’s gifts (Luke 19:11-27). In between is the story of Zacchaeus and his struggle—and ours—to see and follow Jesus.

19:1

Jesus ... “was passing through.” The reader should observe that Jesus is passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem in fulfillment of his calling as the Son of God. The Jericho of New Testament times was founded by Herod the Great and was located about 17 miles and 3300 feet below Jerusalem. The city was on the border of Judea and served as a checkpoint for goods coming from the East. The ancient historian Josephus notes that the road from Jericho to Jerusalem was very dangerous (remember the parable of the Good Samaritan). The road itself is a warning of the danger that awaits Jesus as he seeks to be faithful to his calling. [Craig A. Evans, *Luke: New International Biblical Commentary*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990, pp. 178, 282.]

19:2

The introduction of Zacchaeus is succinct. His name means “righteous” or “pure one.” He is the chief tax collector and is wealthy. In essence, Zacchaeus managed the city tollbooth. He was obligated to pay Rome a tax based on anticipated revenue. He then had to recoup his expenses through charging a toll tax on commerce goods passing through his tollbooth. As chief tax collector, Zacchaeus had every opportunity to assess whatever tax he determined, which meant he was able to pay Rome its due and keep whatever overhead he desired, making the system ripe for abuse. [Craig A. Evans, *Luke: New International Biblical Commentary*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990, p. 282.] Know too that in the ancient world there was an understanding of finite resources. To be wealthy meant that someone else had little. The Jews despised tax collectors like Zacchaeus because they believed that their plight was often the result of those who

had taken more than their share. [See David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000.]

19:4

The sycamore-fig tree, as the NIV refers to it, was a tree that produced a fruit that provided food for the poor. How ironic that Zacchaeus would use the source of food for the poor as a pedestal from which to see Jesus!

19:5

How is it that Jesus knew Zacchaeus' name and why is it that Jesus sought him out? The significance of Zacchaeus' name should not be lost upon the reader. Jesus, who truly is the righteous and pure one, sought out Zacchaeus who is these things in name only. Of importance too is Jesus' willingness to associate with Zacchaeus. He does so unconditionally. Zacchaeus would have been considered unclean and, therefore, untouchable by the Jews. Yet Jesus calls him by name and goes to his home. The one the crowd would have least expected to be called is the one to whom Jesus goes. There is much in this verse to be learned about how Jesus comes to each of us even when we consider ourselves unworthy and how Jesus also calls us to seek out those whom we believe to be less than pure or deserving.

19:6-7

In response, Zacchaeus receives Jesus gladly, but the crowd "grumbled" (NRSV). Evans compares the response of the wealthy Zacchaeus to the rich young man in 18:23 who became sad when he realized what it would take to follow Jesus. There are lessons Zacchaeus teaches us about wealth in the presence of Jesus. Moreover, there are lessons the crowd teaches as well. They cannot believe that Jesus has identified with one they consider to be a sinner. But in doing so, Jesus speaks volumes about the nature of God in light of the covenant of love that has fulfilled the covenant of the law. [Craig A. Evans, *Luke: New International Biblical Commentary*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990, pp. 94-95].

19:8

Does Zacchaeus immediately repent or does he try to justify his actions? The NIV adds the words "here and now" to emphasize the immediate repentance of Zacchaeus. Certainly, this addition is consistent with the larger narrative, as Jesus will announce shortly that "salvation has come to this house" (v. 9). But the Darby translation more accurately translates the passage to read: "But Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I return [him] fourfold." In other words, it would appear that rather than confessing his sin, Zacchaeus chooses to justify his actions over against a crowd that is outside grumbling against him. Observe that the text does not contain a confession of sin. Zacchaeus only welcomes Jesus. A literal reading of the verse would suggest that Zacchaeus stands at the crossroads. We assume in light of the text that follows that Zacchaeus does in fact repent. But this verse dangles us a bit with anticipation. Luke seems to want the reader to ask, "Will he hear the call? Will he follow?" These questions, by the way, loom over each of us as well. [For a fuller discussion, see Craig A. Evans, *Luke: New International Biblical Commentary*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990, p. 280].

19:9

"... he too is a son of Abraham." To have one's life opened to the presence of God is the means by which one becomes a true child of God. One's place in society does not a son of Abraham make!

19:10

That Zacchaeus is the son of Abraham must be seen in light of Jesus, who is the Son of Man. Just as the widow seeks after the lost coin, or the shepherd pursues the lost sheep, or the father receives his lost son (Luke 15), so too the Son of Man seeks out those who are lost and wants to save them. Important here is that there is no condemnation; only the call to gladly accept the one who seeks to reside in our home.

Introduction: "Seeking the Sacred Love of Jesus" (10 minutes)

In his book *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others*, Scot McKnight asks what happens when people permit the sacred love of Jesus Christ to enter their lives? We cannot know what curiosity or what stirring of the Spirit caused Zacchaeus to venture out into the crowd to see Jesus. What we do know is what happens when Jesus comes into his midst. Zacchaeus is suddenly changed. Like the blind man in the narrative that precedes this story of Zacchaeus, he receives new sight and a new heart for added measure. The text does not tell us what happens to Zacchaeus, but in the passage that follows we learn of our Lord's demand that we not waste the gifts of which we have been bestowed. That Luke does

not tell us about what follows in Zacchaeus' life suggests that he wants to underscore the spiritual insight about the need for each of us to seek out Jesus, to welcome him gladly, to invite him into the most private recesses of our lives, and to repent and follow him completely. You see, it's not just enough to repent. There is so much more in store for those whom God seeks and saves. The question the text demands of us is what do we do when Jesus comes into our midst? How do we follow or do we follow him at all?

Divide members into groups and ask them to reflect on the ways they have sought Jesus and on the moments when Jesus has come to them. Ask members to think about the relationship between the confession of sin, the moment of salvation, and the larger calling of one's faith.

Read the Text: Luke 19:1-10 (5 minutes)

Read the passage slowly. Ask members of the class to think of themselves as Zacchaeus. Then have someone else read the passage again asking members to see themselves as someone in the crowd. Emphasize the important role Jericho played in the commerce routes of the New Testament world and observe too that Jesus is passing through with a different set of goods that cannot be valued in human terms.

Engage the Text (25 minutes)

Encourage members to listen to the deeper nuances of the text and to contemplate its meaning for their lives from the perspectives of Jesus, Zacchaeus, and the crowd. Encourage members to ask questions and share insights. The following questions might help with discussion.

1. What is the relationship among the narrative of the blind beggar, the story of Zacchaeus, and the parable of the ten among pounds?
2. Ask members to share stories about how they first learned about Zacchaeus as a child.
3. What is the importance of passing through Jericho?
4. In his profession as a tax collector, how did Zacchaeus fail the two commands of Jesus to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and body and to love your neighbor as you love yourself?
5. What is the significance of the story of Zacchaeus in light of the larger journey of Jesus toward Jerusalem?

Applying the Text (20 minutes)

After members have been encouraged to read the text from the different perspectives of Jesus, Zacchaeus, and the crowd, ask members to reflect on the nature of their own salvation and calling.

1. What can Zacchaeus teach us about following God in our own professions?
2. What was Jesus' attitude toward the outcasts? Why did he seek Zacchaeus out and what does this teach us about how we are to relate to those that society deems undesirable?
3. Beyond our confession of sin, what does it mean to be a "son of Abraham," i.e., a child of God?
4. What are appropriate attitudes toward wealth in light of Jesus Christ? How can our wealth be used to serve our calling or serve as a detriment to it?
5. How should faith be lived when the crowd "grumbles"?

Scenarios for Reflection

1. You have an opportunity to receive a significant amount of money. It will require time away from your spouse and children as well as your church. The deal requires shady ethics that will challenge your own principles and integrity. How will you respond?
2. An individual comes to you and acknowledges that he is HIV positive. You can tell from the smell of his clothes that he has been smoking. He comes in need of not just a helping hand but also a hug. He needs a place to worship, although you know most of the folks in your congregation are "different" in their demeanor. How will you respond?

3. You know Jesus comes to seek out and save the lost. And you know you are saved, but sometimes you feel a bit lost along the way. You feel that there is a larger purpose to your life. You enjoy what you do most days, but want desperately to understand how your activities can better honor God. You sense the Spirit of God speaking to you and calling you to a more holy way of living. How will you respond?

Special Follow-Up Opportunity for Each Individual

1. In terms of one's calling, the Christian life can be thought of as a journey into a deeper awareness of God's presence. The Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggeman speaks of the journey as a movement from being oriented to becoming disoriented to being surprisingly reoriented again (Walter Brueggeman, *Praying the Psalms*, Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1982, p. 17). This was true of Zacchaeus as well. He went from being perfectly situated in his profession to being disoriented in the presence of Jesus to becoming surprisingly reoriented in his new calling. In this way, how is Zacchaeus like each of us?

2. Read Psalm 27. Reflect on meanings for you in each phrase; for example, "The Lord," "is my light," "and my salvation."

Respond to the question, "Of whom shall I be afraid?" Tell the Lord the fears that control you. Personalize each verse as a way to talk with God; then listen.

Finally, rest in God's light with an affirmation such as verse 14: "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage."