

“The Greatest Motivational Speech Ever Delivered”

Luke 19:1-10

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If Zacchaeus was trying to be inconspicuous, he picked the wrong tree. He positioned himself in clear sight of Jesus the day Jesus and his disciples walked through Jericho on their way to Jerusalem to observe Passover.

When Jesus looked up and saw Zacchaeus sitting on that low hanging limb, he called Zacchaeus by name and invited himself to his home. This man who merely wanted to catch a glimpse of Jesus and hear his voice ended up spending the afternoon alone with Jesus in the privacy of his own home.

Who was Zacchaeus and why was he up in a tree?

Zacchaeus was probably the most despised man in Jericho. This was because he was a part of the burdensome and corrupt Roman tax system.

In spite of the fact Zacchaeus was a Jew, he was the town’s chief tax collector. The Romans often chose someone from every town or village for this duty, and those who collaborated with them knew they would be looked upon as a turncoat or traitor.

This system of collecting taxes offered many opportunities for exploitation and fraud. Rome expected a certain amount of taxes from an area. All that could be collected over that figure was retained by the tax collector.

It appears Zacchaeus was overcharging people and pocketing exorbitant profits, which was of no concern to the Roman officials. As long as they received the taxes they were promised, they were content to let Zacchaeus run this business however he chose.

It is obvious Zacchaeus did not live up to his name, which meant pure and righteous one. He appeared to be everything but a model of integrity and compassion.

And yet, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus that day and went to great lengths to make this happen.

We are not exactly sure why Zacchaeus was so determined to see Jesus. He may have merely been curious. By this time, Jesus was a celebrity who attracted great crowds everywhere he went. News of Jesus' teaching and miracles had spread throughout all of Palestine. Zacchaeus wanted to be able to say that he, along with most of his neighbors, caught a glimpse of this famous man.

Zacchaeus may have also been interested in seeing Levi, one of Jesus' disciples. Levi, too, was a tax collector, which no doubt intrigued Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus' motive could have been more personal, though. A yearning in his heart may have drawn him that day to the main thoroughfare going through Jericho.

All his wealth and financial security were not satisfying the deepest longings of his heart, and he was searching for more. Zacchaeus knew that people traveled in caravans to Passover, picking up other pilgrims along their journey.

Rabbis who joined them would often teach as they walked, creating a mobile classroom. May, just maybe, Jesus would be teaching as he passed through Jericho and Zacchaeus could hear what he had to say.

It was worth a try.

Whatever the reason, Zacchaeus knew it would be difficult for him to see Jesus since he was a short man. He would be unable to see over the shoulders of those surrounding Jesus.

As a result, Zacchaeus devised a plan and worked it to perfection. He ran ahead of the crowd and climbed onto one of the low hanging branches of a sycamore tree.

There is a bit of irony and humor in the way Luke tells the story. In all likelihood, Zacchaeus was surrounded by poor people in that tree because they commonly ate the figs which grew on Sycamore trees. It was not a high quality fig, so rich people avoided it. You can imagine many people looked twice when they saw one of the wealthiest men in town sitting at a poor man's lunch counter.

When Jesus approached the tree where Zacchaeus sat, he paused and looked up. “Zacchaeus, come down immediately,” Jesus said. “I must stay at your house today.” (Luke 19:5b)

Surprisingly, Zacchaeus offered no resistance. He promptly and gladly descended that tree and escorted Jesus to his home.

I can only imagine the reaction of the people as they watched Zacchaeus and Jesus walking shoulder to shoulder to Zacchaeus’ home. They had to be shocked, dismayed and irritated. Instead of publically rebuking Zacchaeus, Jesus bestowed a degree of honor upon Zacchaeus that none felt he deserved.

This was not the first time Jesus disappointed people by being nice to the neighbors they despised. He was repeatedly criticized by some of the religious leaders for associating with undesirable people, the ones they shunned and condemned.

Jesus continued this practice, though, because he was far more concerned about transforming lives than shoring up his reputation. He was always looking for ways to bring outcasts back into community, as opposed to religious authorities who valued ritual purity over redeeming people.

Luke does not tell us about the dinner conversation that occurred between Jesus and Zacchaeus, but he does share the results of it. As their time together ended, Zacchaeus stood up and said, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” (Luke 19:8)

Four times? By law, someone who confessed to stealing was required to pay back the amount they stole plus 20%. A four-fold reimbursement was reserved for those who used violence to take what was not theirs. Zacchaeus’ self-imposed penalty was meant to send a clear message to his neighbors that he was a changed man!

To Zacchaeus’ delight, Jesus responded by saying, “Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost.” (Luke 19:9-10)

Luke is the only writer to include this story in the gospels. **What was it about this encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus that appealed to Luke?**

It was the changes Zacchaeus made after conversing with Jesus. They were sudden, dramatic, emphatic and radical.

This man who had a reputation for being selfish, greedy and corrupt became a man of integrity, compassion and generosity.

From Luke's perspective, this was rare. As a matter of fact, this was probably the only time Luke had heard of a sweeping transformation like this. It was the equivalent of a moth becoming a butterfly.

You need to know that Luke had no affinity for rich, powerful people. His gospel rarely portrays them positively.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," Jesus told the rich young ruler who rejected his invitation to follow him. (Luke 18:25) Luke wanted to make sure his readers heard these words from Jesus. It is obvious he felt the same way.

But then, there was Zacchaeus. He was an exception, and Luke told his story.

Luke placed Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus immediately after the story of the Rich Young Ruler. When this young man met with Jesus, he turned down Jesus' advice to make changes in his life and refused to follow him.

This is why Zacchaeus' story was so remarkable. He made changes in his life and squeezed through the eye of that needle.

Zacchaeus changed his outlook on life. He changed his attitude. He changed his values and priorities. He changed his business principles. He changed his lifestyle.

He did not merely tweak around the edges.

He changed everything! He rearranged the price tags and placed the highest value on those things he had previously discounted.

This man whose life had been characterized by taking from others was now going to give over half his wealth away.

This man who did not hesitate to exploit and defraud his own neighbors was now passionate about paying back those he cheated.

This man who seemed to have no concern for the poorest of those around him now felt responsible to make sure they had life's necessities.

"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

What a contrast. What a miracle. What a transformation.

This may be the quickest and most radical reorganization of values, priorities and business principles recorded in scripture. It appears a man whose highest priority had been figuring out how to fleece people became the chief agent of justice and mercy in Jericho.

Sounds like an ancient version of Ebenezer Scrooge.

Luke was so surprised that he decided to include Zacchaeus' radical transformation in his account of Jesus' life and ministry. Zacchaeus' testimony was too powerful to ignore.

If the call to follow Jesus was a call to give back what was taken fraudulently or to give to those who were struggling to survive, then there was no better example than Zacchaeus. His story had to be told.

Why do you think Zacchaeus made these dramatic changes? He gave Jesus a chance. He put down his defenses and listened to him with an open heart and mind. In the end, he trusted Jesus and said yes to a new way of thinking, believing and living.

This is so rare. This is so refreshing. This is so hopeful.

I wish I knew what Jesus and Zacchaeus talked about in the privacy of Zacchaeus' home, a safe place where both of them could be candid and speak their mind. Those details will forever remain confidential, as they should.

What do you think, though? How do you think that conversation went?

Maybe Jesus began by asking Zacchaeus several questions.

Why were you so eager to see me today that you climbed into a sycamore tree?

How did you feel when I stopped, called your name and invited myself to your home?

What did you think my motive was?

Are you proud of the way you do your job and conduct your business?

Does it bother you that you have no friends?

Do you ever wonder if there is a better way to do what you do?

Sounds like Dr. Phil, doesn't it? Dr. Jesus...it is a shame they didn't have television then.

As Zacchaeus and Jesus talked, I want to believe Zacchaeus asked Jesus to articulate a better way to do his job. Based upon the outcome, it appears he did, and Jesus was ready with an answer.

Evidently, what Jesus said was quite convincing, which doesn't surprise me. Jesus really did have a better vision for Zacchaeus' life and work, and he was a master motivator.

Instead of being selfish, greedy and corrupt, I believe Jesus challenged Zacchaeus to be honest, fair, compassionate and generous.

I am certain he strongly encouraged Zacchaeus to choose good over evil, right over wrong, community over corruption, people over possessions, generosity over greed, honesty over deceit, others over self, sacrifice over self-indulgence, justice over injustice, the Golden Rule over gold, God's way over his way, love over hate and life over death.

On that pivotal day, Jesus connected the yearnings of Zacchaeus' restless heart to the hopes and dreams that God had for him, and it clicked. For the first time in his life, Zacchaeus saw God's way of ordering his life as better than his own, and he embraced it wholeheartedly. Zacchaeus became a changed man who followed in the footsteps of Jesus.

"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

No wonder Jesus responded to Zacchaeus' bold announcement to become a generous person of integrity and compassion by declaring, "Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost."

What could I say or do today that would lead you to make the kind of changes in your life that Zacchaeus made? I gave that much thought last week. I am not sure what I would say if we had a private conversation like Jesus and Zacchaeus did, but I believe this is how I would start.

I would ask you to bring pictures of your family—spouse, parents, children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, siblings—everyone you love and those who love you. Then, I would begin our time together by asking how you want them to remember you.

Maybe you can begin without me this afternoon.

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