

Is Anyone Too Small or Too Bad for Jesus?

Luke 19:1-10

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When we are kids, the one thing we remember about Zacchaeus is that he is small, because we are small. We know what it's like to be in a crowd and not be able to see over the grownups. So as kids, we pull for Zacchaeus in the story—the little guy who gets recognized by Jesus.

It's possible, though, that in Luke's telling of the story he means Zacchaeus' physical stature to be a reflection of his moral stature. Maybe he's like the Grinch, whose heart was too small. Certainly, short people are rarely the heroes in stories. Think Danny DeVito. Or remember Randy Newman's ironic song: "Short people got no reason to live. They got little hands and little eyes and they walk around telling great big lies....I don't want no short people round here." So perhaps some of that prejudice was working against Zacchaeus.

My guess, though, is that for Luke the shortness is incidental—just a way to explain why he was in a tree. When Luke introduces Zacchaeus in verse 2, there are two things he wants us to know about him: he was a tax collector and he was rich.

When I lived in Covington, Kentucky, several church members worked at the IRS facility there—but they didn't advertise the fact. Even today, tax collectors aren't too popular. George Harrison wrote a mean song about the tax man for the Beatles: "Let me tell you how it will be: There's one for you, nineteen for me...Should five percent appear too small, Be thankful I don't take it all, 'cause I'm the taxman."

But tax men in Jesus' day were hated for two reasons: (1) they were Jews who worked for the Romans as collaborators, and (2) they collected more than they needed to, and made themselves rich. The Romans had privatized tax collection in the provinces. Rather than hire civil servants to do the job, they put a territory out to bid, and whoever promised the most revenue from an area like Jericho got the job. What would it be like if the IRS privatized its collection of taxes? One person on Block Island would be responsible for getting the federal taxes from you. He could search your house or look over your business records. And he could charge you several percentage points extra for his trouble. That fellow wouldn't be too popular on the island. But now imagine that the IRS privatized the collection of taxes from Afghanistan. Some Afghan citizen would bid on a contract to collect taxes from his fellow citizens and send half the revenue to Kabul and half to Washington. How popular would that guy be analogous to the job Zacchaeus had.

So it's no wonder that the tax collectors were spoken of in the same breath with "sinners," by which they meant "notorious sinners" like prostitutes and robbers. In Luke 7 Jesus is called "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." In Luke 5 he is asked "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" In Luke 15 the Pharisees and scribes grumble, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"—which is the reason Jesus tells the stories of the joy at finding a lost sheep, a lost coin, or a lost son.

One of the major themes in Luke is Jesus reaching out to the outcasts of society, especially those rejected by the religious establishment. The story of Zacchaeus is the last of Jesus' encounters with outcasts before Palm Sunday and the events that lead to the cross. He has blessed not only tax collectors but lepers and the handicapped and children and Samaritans and prostitutes and Roman soldiers and the severely mentally ill. Now he is blessing Zacchaeus who is not only an outcast but a rich man.

What we have in this story is the convergence of two streams running through Luke's gospel—Jesus' attitude toward outcasts, and his attitude toward the rich. Up to this point there has been a steady stream of bad news for the rich. Even before Jesus is born, Mary sings that God has "sent the rich away empty-handed" (1:53). In Jesus' one long sermon in Luke, Jesus says "Blessed are you who are poor" and "Woe to you who are rich" (6:24). Jesus tells a parable about a rich man who builds bigger and bigger barns, growing his business, and God says to him "You fool! You're going to die tonight, and who will get your possessions?" (12:20). He tells another parable about a rich man who ignored the poor man lying in front of his house; the rich man goes to the fires of Hades and the poor man goes to the bosom of Abraham in heaven (16:19-31).

Finally you have the story of the synagogue ruler who comes to Jesus and says that he has obeyed all the commandments but he wants to know how to be a part of the life of the kingdom to come. Jesus tells him that he must sell what he has and give to the poor, and the man turns away sorrowful because (and this is the first time we hear it) he was very rich (18:23). Then Jesus exclaims, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." The disciples are dumbfounded by that, because they thought that the rich were the people who had been blessed by God. If that were the end of the story we would have no hope for the rich, but Jesus adds a postscript: "What is impossible for humans is possible for God"—suggesting, I think, that God can even pull a camel through a needle's eye. It is not beyond God's power to bring a rich man into the kingdom.

Almost on the heels of that episode, Luke takes us into Jericho where we meet Zacchaeus who is both the kind of person Jesus blesses—an outcast, a tax collector seen by everyone as a sinner—and also the kind of person Jesus condemns—a rich man. The *last* word Luke uses in introducing Zacchaeus is that he was rich, and the emphasis falls on that last word. The fact that a man gets rich off of taking money from fellow Jews for the Romans is definitely a problem. So on the one hand we are prepared for Jesus to eat with this guy as a tax collector, but we are prepared for him to tell Zacchaeus off as an unjust rich man.

What is surprising is how eager Zacchaeus was to see Jesus. Luke says "He was trying to see who Jesus was." He wasn't trying to see what Jesus looked like; he was trying to see *what Jesus was*—just as we are, when we read the gospel. But Zacchaeus can't see over the crowd because he is short, so he runs down the street to get ahead of the parade and climbs up a tree. Scholars remind us that it was considered extremely undignified for a grown man to run—much less to climb a tree. We don't need that explained to us. If we saw the head of the local IRS office in his business suit running down the street and climbing a tree in order to see the Red Sox go by, we'd think that was a little extreme. Maybe *just* a little. But Luke means for us

to notice that Zacchaeus doesn't give a darn what people think of him. He is single-minded about getting to see who Jesus is. Listen, if you are that determined to see who Jesus is, you will.

When Jesus looks up at this little old man in a tree, he calls him by name—whether he knew it supernaturally or he'd been briefed on this rascal—and said “Hurry and come down, because I must (it is God's will that I) receive hospitality from you and bless your house.” This would have been a great honor for Zacchaeus, that the famous preacher and miracle worker would choose his home out of all the homes in Jericho as a place to have dinner and perhaps spend the night. Zacchaeus scrambles down the tree rejoicing, elated. Of course, true to form, everybody in the crowd—everybody—murmurs against Jesus as the people murmured against Moses in the wilderness: “He's gone to be the guest of a sinner. He's making himself unclean. He's giving his stamp of approval to the unrighteous.”

I wonder why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so badly. You know, we just never know what is going on inside somebody else. There might be someone on the island we think is just terrible, a real jerk, but in his heart he is desperately seeking to know who God is. Inside this shell of a guy who lived for money Zacchaeus was wondering perhaps what he was really living for. Maybe he wondered about the holy, the mysterious, the miraculous. Maybe he'd heard that this religious teacher did not stay away from tax collectors like all the others. Lloyd C. Douglas, who wrote *The Robe*, imagined the conversation Jesus had with Zacchaeus over dinner:

“Zacchaeus,” said the carpenter gently, “What did you see that made you desire this peace?” “Good master—I saw mirrored in your eyes—the face of the Zacchaeus I was meant to be.”

Jesus represents a new way to be human. He is the image of who we were really meant to be. Maybe that's why we want to see him: to see what we could be.

Is there anybody on Block Island Jesus wouldn't go home with? Is there anybody too small for him to notice? Is there anybody so wicked that Jesus wouldn't want to spend time with them? Is there anybody so rich that Jesus would assume they have no interest in him? I think you know the answer to those questions.

The very people that we assume are selfish and unpatriotic and uncaring are people that Jesus is going after. For all my tirades about God being on the side of the poor—however biblically based they may be—here we see Jesus going after a member of the 1%, not because he wants his money but because Jesus knows the one-percenter is lost and needs to be rescued.

Is there anyone beyond hope? You could, ask someone like Charlie Burns, who leads a Bible study at ACI. Murderers and drug dealers can change. I've thought of Will Campbell, the outlaw Baptist preacher who died recently. He was one of the first to take a stand for civil rights in the South in the 50's and lost a couple of Baptist jobs. He wound up with Martin Luther King Jr. as the only white guy at the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He stood with them and marched with them. But here's what I want you to know: he became convicted that he needed to reach out to the Ku Klux Klan. He became a chaplain to them, too. He knew that the redneck needed the gospel as much as anyone, and the educated and progressive couldn't look down their nose at segregationists as if they were sinners but the civil rights advocates were not.

Is anyone beyond hope? I wonder if we don't treat people with severe mental illnesses or personality disorders as if they are beyond hope. We just throw up our hands sometimes, not knowing if anything can be done for people we know who are paranoid or narcissistic or delusional. I wonder if they aren't as "unclean" in our eyes as demoniacs and tax collectors were in Jesus' time—but Jesus did not give up on them.

The one category of people it seems everyone agrees is beyond hope—and the one category of people everyone seems to think it is OK to hate—is convicted sex offenders. They get no second chances. Most people want them to burn in hell, whether they are priests or coaches or neighbors who can't find work. They cannot live in most neighborhoods. They cannot find places to do community service. And you know what? I'm creeped out by them, too, but I have no doubt that Jesus would go to their homes and bring a message of rescue and hope.

After the notorious Zacchaeus has dinner with Jesus, as I read the story, he and Jesus emerge from the house to say a word to the crowd that is still waiting outside—the paparazzi, the press, and the Pharisees. Zacchaeus stands there and makes a public commitment: half of my possessions I am giving to the poor, and wherever I've taken too much in taxes from someone, I will repay them 400%. The crowd's jaws must have dropped. Is this the same guy who went into the house for dinner? What happened to him?

Jesus gives the explanation to the crowd: "Today salvation has come to this house." This man is as much a child of Abraham as any of you. He has the faith of Abraham and his faith is seen in the way this rich man has changed his view of money. For Luke, this is nothing other than a *miracle* story, as much as a story about a child being raised from the dead or a man born blind getting his sight. A rich man has been saved! A camel has been pulled through the eye of a needle! What was impossible for humans was not impossible for God.

Then, Luke says, Jesus explained *himself*. This may be the central sentence of the whole gospel: "I came to seek and to save the lost." When Zacchaeus went running down the street and climbed that tree, he thought that he was seeking Jesus. But the truth was that all the time Jesus was seeking him.

Look, here is another table set for Jesus. I swear I can hear him saying, "Get down off your high horse, because I'm going to have supper with you." You know, it's a miracle that Jesus ever showed up and invited himself into our lives. How can you explain it? It's just that nothing we ever did put us beyond the reach of his love.