



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
30 October 2022  
Sermon: Sought After  
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Luke 19:1-10

### **Luke 19:1-10 (NRSV)**

19:1 He entered Jericho and was passing through it.

19:2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.

19:3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

19:4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

19:5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

19:6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

19:7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

19:8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

19:9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.

19:10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

*Singing:*

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,  
 And a wee little man was he.  
 He climbed up in a sycamore tree  
 For the Lord he wanted to see.

And as the Savior passed that way  
 He looked up in the tree,  
 And he said, "Zacchaeus you come down, For I'm going to your house today!"  
 For I'm going to your house today!

This is now the second sermon in 4 months that I've begun with song, because Jesus says in Luke 14, that those who humble themselves will be exalted (laugh). This is how Shane and Wayne found out that one of the pastors of this church is tone deaf. They had to learn sometime.

It is a testament to my prejudice against Zacchaeus that I falsely remembered that song addressing his sinfulness. Maybe it is just the way society has taught me to suspect shorter people. He was, after all, a 'wee little man' – "short in stature," the NRSV puts it. Did you know that today, 90% of CEOs are above average height; only 3% are below 5'7"?<sup>1</sup> And if you happen to have been born, say in the early 80s, it's no surprise if you might equate height with character, growing up with the Gremlins, the Penguin, Boris, Vizzini, Chucky, the Leprechaun, Stewie, Lord Farquaard, Gru, I could go on. Happy Halloween, by the way.

There was no less – perhaps there was even more – height discrimination in the Hellenistic world of Zacchaeus. A well-known text of the time stated outright, "These are the marks of a small-minded person. He is small-limbed, small and round, dry, with small eyes and a small face."<sup>2</sup> In Jesus's day, and continuing on into our own time, outward appearances were supposed to tell us something of inward morality. People judged Zacchaeus by his height. They wouldn't let him through to see Jesus.

And, of course, he was a tax collector, a chief tax collector, no less. And tax collectors worked for Rome, not for the people of Israel. His job was an extension

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Feintzeig, "Want to Be CEO? Stand Tall," *The Wall Street Journal*. June 9, 2014. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-ATWORKB-1831>. Thanks to GCPC member Larry Stern for making this connection during Bible Study.

<sup>2</sup> Mikeal C. Parsons, "'Short in Stature': Luke's Physical Description of Zacchaeus," *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001): 53.

of Roman occupation. And tax collectors, everyone knew, had a reputation of taking more than was owed and skimming from the top.

And, finally, he was wealthy. His story in ch. 19 follows right on the heels of the one in chapter 18 with a rich young ruler, and Jesus's declaration: "Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

So, it is no wonder that the crowd grumbles at Jesus visiting his house: "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." In Luke, it's a common response of the crowds when Jesus reaches out to someone they have pushed to the margins:

- 5:30: "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"
- 7:39: "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner."

Zacchaeus was an outcast. He didn't belong. Everyone *knew* he was a bad guy.

But there's an interesting thing that happens next in the story. Our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible interprets Zacchaeus's response to Jesus as a moment of conversion. Jesus invites himself over and Zacchaeus, in response, says: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I *WILL* give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I *WILL* pay back four times as much." The NRSV interprets Zacchaeus as becoming a righteous man after meeting Jesus.

But that's not in the original Greek text. The NRSV puts these verbs in the future tense: "I *WILL* give to the poor," but in the Greek manuscripts that we have, overwhelmingly they are in the present tense. The NKJV is actually closer, "Look, Lord, I *GIVE* half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I *RESTORE* fourfold."

The difference is small, but it changes the meaning of the story. In the original text, Zacchaeus is responding to the crowd that just called him a sinner. 'No,' he says. 'You assume that of me, but look. I give away half my possessions, and if I ever make a mistake, I make restitution by 4x what I owe.' His is not like the conversion stories in Luke, when the convert specifically asks for forgiveness, expresses sorrow, or begs for mercy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 671-672.

That's not what Zacchaeus is doing here. Surprisingly, we find, he did not fit the stereotype of the short, evil tax collector. You have to read that *into* what is already in the text to judge Zacchaeus as a bad guy. In other words, you have to take the side of the crowd, who exclude him, who make him climb a tree to see Jesus, who scoff at Jesus staying at his house.

This is not a story about a bad guy who changed his life around at the sight of Jesus; it is a story where Jesus refuses to heed a crowd that ostracized a righteous Zacchaeus because he didn't belong. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

But it is easier, isn't it, to hear a conversion story about a man's personal encounter with Jesus, than to get into the messiness of complex systems of exclusion and privilege, to get into the murky waters about the prejudice of the community.

Robert P. Jones, in his book *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, which our congregation read over the summer in our racial justice book series, claims that, white Christians tend to overemphasize individual conversion stories as a way to avoid talking about sinful structures and systems. In other words, it's a lot easier to talk about the heart of one sinner than the history of racism, inequity, and exclusion in our country.

He tells a story about the importance of the alter call in his years as a young white evangelical. The alter call, for those who have not seen it, is the time at the end of a service, when the pastor comes down to the congregation and asks if there is someone present who would like to make a public profession of faith, giving their heart in a personal relationship with Jesus.

As a young seminary student, Jones was invited to preach at a 5-day revival at a church in southern Illinois:

"I knew the liturgical formula [of the alter call]" he writes, "but when I saw that the revival service was attended by only a dozen regular members, all seemingly over the age of seventy, I felt justified in skipping the invitation at the end of the service. As I greeted the members who filed out of the back door of the church after the service, several politely commented that they had missed the invitation and hoped I would consider issuing one the next night...For the next four nights, I dutifully issued the invitation to these same attendees to ask forgiveness for their sins and enter into a personal

relationship with Jesus. No one responded, but everyone was content that the familiar formula for individual repentance of sin and acceptance of salvation had been followed.”<sup>4</sup>

Jones’s point is that the hyperfocus on personal salvation has become synonymous with the entirety of Christian faith, and so we have neglected wider histories and social structures of sin.

In fact, focusing on personal conversion can work to maintain the status quo in church. It is often those already excluded, those already pushed to the margins by the church and the community who are told they must change and repent. It’s a lot easier to tell someone who doesn’t belong and troubles the status quo that they need to change. It’s much easier to make them the focus of an alter call than to ask why they don’t belong in the first place, in a community called in the name of love and grace. Instead of having that hard conversation, in these very same communities, Zacchaeus is pushed to the margins by the liturgy, the rhetoric, the alter calls of the church over and over.

Has an alter call ever made you feel like you didn’t belong?  
That you were not loved as the child of God that you are?

As Christians, our moral vision has to be bigger; our imagination of the church’s role in our lives and community needs to expand. Because we follow a savior who promised, at the beginning of this Gospel, “to bring good news to the poor,” “release to the captives,” and “to let the oppressed go free.”

Ours is not a guilt-inducing, shame-inducing, self-hate inducing gospel that singles out those who do not belong; it is the gospel of the one who always spoke truth to power, and proclaimed the inclusive Kingdom of God where all have a seat at the table.

"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today," our savior said to the outcast.

And in this way, Christ is our salvation, the one who is constantly making and remaking us into the people of God, always seeking out and saving the lost. And for that we say, thanks be to God.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 96.