

**+ Luke 19:1-10 + Today Salvation Has Come! + 16th Sunday after Pentecost + 4 September 2016 +**

The man was short—so short he couldn't see over the growing crowd, so short that tall children could look him in the eye, but that wasn't his problem. Surely there were others on that warm spring day in Jericho who had trouble seeing over the crowds. They probably asked for help or a better view, but you don't get the impression that anyone was willing to help this short man or improve his view of the One who was drawing such a crowd.

The man was wealthy—obnoxiously wealthy, so wealthy that he probably had access to a personally-paid team of specially-trained Roman mercenaries to clear the way for him, but you don't see that. No, you see a short, wealthy, lonely, helpless man scurrying up a sycamore-fig tree dressed in all his finery...and nobody cares. Why does nobody care? Why does no one pay him any attention or offer him any assistance? The Gospel writer Luke gives us a clue. **"He was a chief tax collector."**

Now that may mean nothing to your 21st century ears, but in Jesus' time, someone might spit in your face if you had the title **"chief tax collector."** The Jewish people hated tax collectors because they were Jews who basically sold their souls to Rome—their bitter enemy who controlled the region. Rome taxed everything and they used locals to carry out the taxation. There were several levels of tax collectors. Rome set the tax, but everyone in the middle inflated the prices to take their share. It was a very lucrative, very corrupt business. Tax collectors usually had no moral qualms about siding with the enemy while ripping off their own people. So rabbis threw tax collectors out of their synagogues, and most folks considered them to be the scum of society. Their rank in society was right about where hardened criminals and pedophiles seem to rank in our own.

A **"chief tax collector"** was even worse because he was in charge of all those tax collectors and took his own cut from everyone else's. He handled the hard cases when someone refused to pay their taxes, and it wasn't pretty. He used whatever means necessary—blackmail, extortion, threats, and harassment. In Jericho, the name Zacchaeus likely dredged up memories of corruption that could make a Mafioso blush. Contrary to children's pictures of "wee little Zacchaeus" perched on his tree branch, the real Zacchaeus was probably known as a cruel, nasty, corrupt man, who was so self-centered that he didn't care what it took to get your money.

So what caused this short, wealthy "godfather" of Jericho to ignore all convention and willingly scramble up into the low branches of a tree? Why was he so focused, so determined to see who was causing such a big crowd in Jericho that spring day? **"He wanted to see who Jesus was..."** Jesus had been in Jericho before, even healed a couple blind men. Many said this Jesus taught with authority like no other rabbi, that he proclaimed not a forgiveness of sins that had to be earned like the Pharisees taught, but free and full forgiveness for even the worst sinners...even tax collectors.

Somewhere along the way Zacchaeus heard about this Jesus and **"he wanted to see who Jesus was..."** It was more than mere curiosity. His was a life of corruption and graft and ill-gotten wealth victimizing his countrymen for his own benefit, a life focused solely on himself silencing guilt with worldly wealth and pleasure, a life of guilt grown so crushing that he desperately sought relief. So Zacchaeus **"ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way."**

As the crowd swelled in size with Jesus' approach, there in that tree sat a lonely, lost sinner. A strange sight, but even stranger was what happened next. Jesus reached the tree and the procession stopped. There stood the Savior of the world on his way to suffer and die in Jerusalem. Up in the tree sat one who was a "chief sinner," but it wasn't an accident. Jesus didn't stop to gawk at the "little sinner" in the tree. No, he was there to save one more sinner on his way to the cross. **"Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."** Every jaw in Jericho dropped. "Zacchaeus, get down here as fast as you can. I have to stay at your house today. Nothing is more important for me right now than staying with you."

Was it all a dream? Next thing you know Zacchaeus was on the road looking up at Jesus, who looked at Zacchaeus with a compassion the tax collector had never seen before. Zacchaeus was so filled with joy that he knew he had to throw a party for Jesus right then and there. Pretty soon countless mouths stopped gaping long enough to start muttering. "Him? Of all people in Jericho...him? That good-for-nothing? That...at his home?" A cloud of bitterness, jealousy, and self-righteousness stirred up among the people as they muttered and complained to each other, **"He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."**

In their eyes, Zacchaeus was a worthless waste of time for Jesus, but in Jesus' eyes, time with Zacchaeus was worth every moment. Imagine the conversation Jesus had with Zacchaeus on his way home. Jesus knew

everything that Zacchaeus had done, yet Jesus still forgave him! Their conversation continued as the party started.

The good news of Jesus—of what he had already done for Zacchaeus in living a perfect life, of what he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem in a couple weeks—transformed Zacchaeus forever. The tax collector repented of all his sins, even the shameful, secret ones, and still Jesus forgave him. Life would be different now, and Zacchaeus wanted to make sure that his Savior knew what he was planning to do for him. His joy overflowed!

***“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have extorted/cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*** Jesus had changed everything in the tax collector’s life forever. No longer would he blackmail and harass and victimize people for their money. No longer would his focus be on himself and what he could squeeze out of others for himself. Now his focus would be on Jesus, who became his life, his wealth, his hope, his peace, his treasure. Now his earthly wealth would be used to serve others. Instead of being the selfish tightening fist grasping at more and more money, Zacchaeus would now serve as God’s hand of blessing bringing support to countless people in need with his tremendous wealth. He would go back to those whom he had defrauded, whom he had threatened and extorted, and pay them back not just the amount he took, not even twice or thrice as much, but four times as much! Zacchaeus’ life was all about Jesus now and nothing more.

Now if you’re wondering about the sincerity of Zacchaeus’ promise, check out Jesus’ response. Jesus recognized what his good news of forgiveness had done. ***“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”*** All that gossipy muttering in the streets about that ***“sinner”*** was meaningless to the Son of God dining with Zacchaeus in his home. By grace through the good news of God’s forgiveness, this cruel and nasty ***“sinner”*** became a beloved ***“son of Abraham”*** with a faith like Abraham’s trusting in the Savior as a true child of God and heir of eternal life. ***“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*** Salvation had most certainly come to that sinner’s house that day!

The Son of Man ***“came to seek and to save”*** you too. Now you may not be as public a sinner as Zacchaeus, but deep down in your heart of hearts you know how nasty and cruel and awful you are by nature. You know how desperately you need forgiveness. Maybe you have trouble relating to Zacchaeus, but perhaps you relate better to those who sneered with bitter jealousy and self-righteousness condemning their own Savior.

At times in your life, you need the sweet relief that Zacchaeus so desperately sought because the burden of a life of guilt is just too great. At times in your life, you may look down your nose at “those sinners” who in your mind’s eye don’t deserve such unbridled compassion from the Savior, but do you? You and I are just sinful and just as undeserving as anyone else! Yet salvation still comes and Jesus still seeks you out and saves you from a lifetime lost in unbelief and guilt and death. So often your life is all about you and what you want and what you get, but where does all that lead when guilt becomes too much to bear? Where does it lead when you need relief? It leaves you desperately looking for a tree to climb.

Thankfully you already have One who climbed a tree for you—not Zacchaeus, but your own Savior. Remember that’s where Jesus was headed when he stopped beneath that lost sinner sitting up in a tree. Jesus was on his way to the cross to do what you couldn’t possibly do to pay what you couldn’t possibly pay to give you forgiveness you won’t find anywhere else.

If you ever forget how great Jesus’ full and free forgiveness really is, if you ever get so wrapped up in yourself that you think that life is all about you, look back at this account and see the Savior gazing up at you with a compassion you’ve seen nowhere else and don’t deserve. Jesus tells you, ***“I must come to your house today”*** and salvation comes to you again.

Jesus reminds you why he needs to not only be part of your life, but really your whole life. When you realize that, then you realize it’s not about you anymore. Suddenly the stuff you have, the treasures you possess, the worldly things that seemed so important yesterday take on a whole new meaning today and you see why you want to use them to serve him.

I know it sounds strange, but when your life is focused on Jesus, then you actually want to put your gifts into your Savior’s service. Jesus knows what you’ve been through. He knows what garbage you’ve had to handle in your life and the troubles you have right now. Jesus forgives that awful decision you made years ago or the foolish, hurtful thing you said yesterday. Yes, Jesus even forgives that sin too—forgiveness guaranteed on a

bloody cross and in an empty tomb. He died that you might live. He rose that you might live forever. Soon you're Zacchaeus staring up at him.

**“Look, Lord....!”** Soon the treasures, the time, the talents that God has graciously given you need to be used for a completely different purpose—not yours, but his, because **“the Son of Man came to seek and to save”** you. Jesus didn't come to make better people. He didn't come to make the good better and the better best. No, he came to seek and to save the lost, starting with you. Now he uses you and the special gifts he's given you to keep seeking every Zacchaeus in the trees and beside the roads and in your homes. Soon you realize it's not so hard to give to your Lord, but actually an unparalleled joy, even a privilege because salvation has come to you through Jesus. May the Savior richly bless your service. Amen.