

Luke 19:1-10 “Lessons From the Little Guy”

Good news. No difficult parable this week. After last week’s parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Luke goes straight back to his narrative which picks up with Jesus making his way towards Jerusalem. Here’s what we missed between last week and this week: He taught a rich man about what he must do to inherit eternal life. Then he pulled his twelve apostles aside and warned them about his inevitable death in Jerusalem. Then, on the outskirts of the city of Jericho he healed a blind man who, upon receiving his sight, became a part of Jesus’ entourage of disciples. Today’s lesson starts with Jesus and his entourage *entering* Jericho. This was his last stop before he set off for Jerusalem where he would be arrested by the corrupt religious leaders and then crucified by the Roman rulers. By this time, Jesus was equal parts popular and notorious. Whenever he’d enter a new city, there would often be large crowds of people waiting to see him. That’s what was happening here today in Jericho. There were so many people surrounding Jesus that some couldn’t even see him. Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who wanted to see what all the ruckus was about had to climb a tree because he was so short. Because *who* was so short Jesse? Good question. Let’s visit an old children’s Sunday School song to help figure this out. I learned this song from my Vacation Bible School teacher Eldora Flick, otherwise known as the “rice krispy treat

lady.” The song starts out like this - “Zacchaeus was a wee-little man. A wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.”

Oh. Well, there you go. *Zacchaeus* was the wee-little man. Or was he? Luke writes that, “He (Zacchaeus) was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.” The gospel writer is not at all clear about *who* was “short in stature.” We just assume Zacchaeus was the one who was short because we want our heroes to be more like Chris Hemsworth than Danny Devito. Anyway, *none* of that has to do with our lesson this morning. Zacchaeus is way too interesting to waste time debating about whether he was shorter or taller than Jesus. I want to bring your attention to Zacchaeus’ vocation.

Last week we talked about what it meant to be a tax collector in a Roman province. The Roman government set each individual citizen’s tax bill which, like ours today, was calculated by what a person produced and how much they earned. It was a tax collector’s job to make sure the people paid their tax bill. The tax collector’s income was based on whatever commission they thought they could get out of the taxpayer who already considered Rome’s standard tax bill excessive. Most tax collectors tried to get as much out of a person as they could according to the vulnerability of the taxpayer. If a person

didn't have much power or status to push back or challenge the bill, they were targeted as an "easy mark" and ended up paying an even more burdensome amount than those who *could* push back. Thus, tax collectors were considered the worst people vocationally speaking, and many times for good reason.

Zacchaeus wasn't just any old tax collector. He was a *chief* tax collector. He was the one who the other tax collectors reported to. He was the one who had direct contact with the government officials and would provide supervision and resources for the other tax collectors so they could do their jobs. It was bad enough to wear the label "tax collector," but "*chief* tax collector?" That's much worse as far as people's perception goes. But in the same way that not every Pharisee in the New Testament was a "bad guy" we've got to consider that not every tax collector was a bad guy either. Remember when I quoted Fred Craddock a few months ago when he said, "Bible scholars take all the fun out of everything?" That is nowhere near the case this week. In fact, it's the complete opposite. Please remain seated and keep your hands, feet, arms and legs inside the ride at all times, okay?

Most people think the story of Zacchaeus is a conversion story. That's what we teach our kids in Sunday School. It's what the Zacchaeus song is all about.

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

Zacchaeus was a wee little man
But a happy wee man was he
For he had seen the Lord that day
And a happy wee man was he;
And a very happy man was he

But then when those Sunday School kids grow up, we add a few more details that only adults would understand. We point out that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, which by default makes him a bad guy, and that when Jesus acknowledged him, Zacchaeus was so happy that he came down out of the tree and made a promise to give half of his possessions to the poor and to repay anyone he defrauded four times more than he took. Thus, Zacchaeus turned away from his life of sin and thievery to become a benevolent saint like Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. And that interpretation would be just fine and

dandy *if* Greek verbs weren't so daggone messy and hard to interpret. You think Luke's vague use of *pronouns* makes it difficult to determine who's tall or who's short? The *verbs* he uses makes it difficult to determine whether Zacchaeus was a sleazy and disreputable tax collector or a good and honest tax collector! Here's why.

Jesus caused a stir in the crowds when he invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house. Luke writes, "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' 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.'" You want to start a good argument among Bible scholars, bring up the fact that it could *also* be interpreted as, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I *have* given to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I *have* paid them back four times as much.'" This becomes a problem because Zacchaeus goes from being a bad tax collector who is converted, to a benevolent tax collector who has been misunderstood and stereotyped by the crowds who were mad at him and mad at Jesus for inviting himself to stay at Zach's house. Most scholars stick with the traditional interpretation because they buy into the idea that Zacchaeus was a bad guy because ... well ... he was a chief tax collector! And *everyone* knows *they're* the bad guys, so *obviously* this is a conversion story.

Let's look at the other side of the argument. First, we'll start out with Zacchaeus' name. His name is derived from the Hebrew word for "righteous" or "pure." So right out of the gate we've got a character whose very name lends the listener to believe that maybe he's *not* a bad guy! The next thing to consider is how undignified it was for someone in that culture to climb a tree. Why would a "bad guy" who routinely defrauds people be so excited to see Jesus that he would do something that shameful in front of a crowd of people? If you're a "bad guy" you're either going to stay in the shadows or you're going to try to give the appearance that you're a dangerous person who is not to be messed with. The third thing to consider is the reaction of the crowd. "*All* who saw" this interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus "began to grumble." Since we started this series back in September, who are the ones who've been grumbling at Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners? Pharisees! The morally upright religious people who defend the Law of Moses. But now you've got a *crowd* of people who are either followers of Jesus or who may be interested in becoming followers of Jesus. They're the ones who are grumbling and saying, "Oh, look who just invited himself to go to a *sinner's* house!" Then Zacchaeus, who was happy to have Jesus over for dinner, *stood* in front of Jesus to make his case. Here's what the Wesley Study Bible commentary notes say:

“Those who defend themselves stand; those who repent kneel. Zacchaeus’s words are not future, but present tense in the Greek. Zacchaeus is not laying out a plan for *future* action, but is presenting his *customary* practices of generosity. Jesus vindicates Zacchaeus and rejects the grumbling accusation that Zacchaeus is a sinner.”

Whoa, wait a minute. If that’s the case, what’s going on here and what does it mean for *us*? What it means is that we have to place ourselves in *the crowd*. If Zacchaeus is indeed a benevolent chief tax collector who is misunderstood and hated by the crowds because of his vocation, we’ve got to ask, “Then what are we always grumbling about?” Are we upset that Jesus would offer the chance for a “sleazy tax collector” to hang out with him? Are we upset that Jesus offered this call, and Zacchaeus accepted? Who do *we* grumble over when they respond to Jesus’ call? Who do we think are “the wrong people” who don’t deserve to be in Jesus’ company? Especially when we think there are so many “good people” who Jesus could or *should* have invited?

Or maybe we can put ourselves in Zacchaeus’ shoes. Maybe we should be thinking, “You know, I’m not the most popular person in the world and people misunderstand me and make judgements about me for

whatever reason. How would I feel about Jesus' invitation? I'd probably feel pretty good about Jesus recognizing someone like me. How would I feel about the crowd's reaction to me ... and to Jesus?" Maybe this story is about our tendency to jump to conclusions and judge others. Over the last two months we've seen two examples of rich and powerful men who *didn't* get it, but here we have an exchange with one who *did*. Zacchaeus was rich *and* a tax collector *and* a child of Abraham which means he was one of God's chosen. As I've said before, Jesus was *not* anti-wealth. In fact, Jesus came to Zacchaeus' house so that he could be a part of Zach's hospitality. For sure Jesus is anti-greed and anti-taking-advantage-of-the-poor, but he extends his invitation to participate in God's Kingdom to anyone who hears.

Here's the good thing about this passage. However you want to look at it – whether this is a conversion story or a redemption story or a story about someone whose righteous works are validated by Jesus, it all boils down to what Jesus said in the end, “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” whoever the lost may be.