

Adult Sunday School Lesson
Nassau Bay Baptist Church
April 11, 2021

Read Luke 19:1-10

*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.*



Figure 1: Sycamore Tree in Jericho

*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.
I'm going to your house today!"*

Zacchaeus

Zacchaeus was a Jewish Chief Tax Collector. This is the only Chief Tax Collector we hear about in the New Testament.

Roman Tax Collecting

Roman tax collecting was big business, and since Jericho was near a major trade route and was a major city of trade, tax collecting in the Jericho region was very big business. All we have is the title, but we know how tax collecting worked in the Roman Empire.

The Roman Government would set the rules and the rates and then would contract the collecting out to private enterprise, selling regions to the enterprises. That private enterprise was most often owned by the very rich and the very powerful in Rome, such as Roman Senators or wealthy Romans or their children. Then Rome commissioned the Roman army to assist in the tax collecting as needed, or the enterprise would hire soldiers to assist. Whatever amount the tax enterprise collected above the required amount could be kept by the business. But the enterprise had to pay the tax whether they collected it all or not.

These taxing businesses then would contract with locals to do the bulk of the collecting. So the tax collecting business was quite capitalistic, in every sense of the word. The wealthy Romans made money, their workers who ran the region made money, and the local collectors, in this case mostly Jews, made money. And Zacchaeus evidently made a lot of money. It could be that he reported directly to Rome. We are not sure.

As a *Chief Tax Collector*, Zacchaeus would be at the top of the pyramid, and every collector under him would pass on the inflated taxes, of which he could keep part. Certainly, he had accountants and other employees to pay, so this was big business, but he had no product to make or to sell. He just transferred cash.

Now, all of this was legal. The enterprise was supposed to make money. It was a cash cow that sent money, both taxes and profits, back to Rome. But even 2,000 years ago, the Romans realized that they could make more money when the locals joined in the profits.

Curiosity

We do not know why Zacchaeus was so eager to see Jesus. But he made special effort just to see His face. The crowds prevented him from seeing the Lord, so he ran ahead of the path and climbed a sycamore tree. See the photo above (Credit: Exploretraveler.com).

Now usually we think of Zacchaeus alone in the tree, but that was not necessarily the case. He could have been standing or sitting on a branch with others who were watching the “show.” Again, we do not know.

Any reason we might give for his curiosity would be speculation, and the Holy Spirit did not think it relevant. So we will move on.

Jesus

Jesus always is more interesting and more important than anyone else in any story. Jesus looked up into the tree, saw Zacchaeus, and called him by name. Remember that throughout the Bible, God is the God of the first name. Imagine Jesus stopping, looking at you, and calling you by your first name.

And Jesus told Zacchaeus that He *must* go home with him that day and stay with him. And he told Zacchaeus to hurry down. He did not ask permission, he told Zacchaeus what they would do.

Zacchaeus did hurry, and he received Jesus joyfully. He was happy.

Jews

The crowd of Jews were not happy. Jesus ruined all of their understanding of what it meant to be righteous. So they complained about Jesus. The Jews in the Bible always were excellent complainers. We might say that Adam technically was not a Jew, but he started the complaining, talking to God about the problem that was called Eve. The Jews “inherited that gene” and never stopped throughout the Bible.

Jesus was going to honor the home of a sinner, someone who was a traitor, who worked for the Romans and profited from their own misfortune. How does it get much worse than that? (See Revelation 3:20.)

But we have no record that Jesus said anything about His complaining relatives.

House

In fact, we have no record of His going to Zacchaeus's house. We assume it from what He said. (We will get to that in a moment.)

Zacchaeus's Declaration

Zacchaeus declared that he would give half of his goods to the poor and that if he had defrauded anyone by false accusation, he would return it fourfold. (Remember Ebenezer Scrooge?)

Likely, Zacchaeus had not defrauded anyone, or at least not many. Profit was built into the law. He may well have been an honest Chief Tax Collector. He could get rich just off the law.

Jesus's Declaration

Remember the rich, young ruler. This one thing you lack. Go and sell all you have, give it to the poor, and follow me.

Zacchaeus did not go that far. But he also apparently did not ask to follow Jesus.

But the evident fact is that Jesus knew his heart, and his heart had changed voluntarily when he came face to face with Jesus.

But Jesus said that salvation had come to this house. In the New Testament, we always are interested in the connection between the head of the house and the house itself. Even today we find that connection strong in terms of the spiritual activity of the home.

Son of Abraham

Jesus said that salvation had come to Zacchaeus's house "because he also is a son of Abraham." So what did Jesus mean? Let's look at a couple of other passages.

Read Luke 13:16

Note the reference to the woman being a daughter of Abraham.

Read Matthew 15:21-28

A non-Jew came to Jesus seeking relief for her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus first said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and then told her "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." Then she asked for crumbs, and Jesus "healed" her daughter; the demons departed.

Jesus was focused on His mission, to seek and to save the lost children of Abraham. He was sent to Israel. Ultimately, Israel rejected Him and rejects Him to this day, with exceptions. This woman was not a Jewess, but she accepted and submitted to Him.

Jesus commended her great faith, shown by submission, humility, and her confidence in Jesus to meet her need.

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Read Luke 7:1-10

Jesus went to the centurion. He made no statements about the fact that he was not a Jew. What was the difference?

The leaders of the Jews asked him to go because of how he had loved and blessed the Jews. This still was a Jewish mission. He was ministering to and on behalf of and for the good of the Jews.

Notice again the reference to “great faith.” The centurion’s faith was built of submission, humility, confidence in Jesus, and an understanding of authority and Jesus’ place in the chain of authority.

Jesus only used *great* and *faith* together in reference to this woman and to this centurion, both non-Jews. (See Matthew 8:23-27.) He was pointing to the salvation by faith that would come to the Gentiles, that actually always was available to the Gentiles, after His resurrection.

Jesus’ Mission

We can get into trouble understanding the New Testament, election, and the relationship of Israel to the Gentiles when we look at everything through black and white lens of eternal salvation. Gentiles have been saved throughout the Old Testament. In fact, neither Able nor Seth nor Noah were Jews. The covenant with Israel had a beginning long after the world was created and was not an eternal salvation covenant. Not all Jews are going to Heaven.

The covenant with Israel was a missionary covenant. Abraham’s descendants would bless the world, not by being eternally saved, but by hosting God as a witness to the world. This is why, once He was rejected by the Jews, Jesus gave the Great Commission to all of His followers, to the Jewish followers personally and to Gentile followers through Paul and ultimately also through Peter and through others, such as Stephen.

God chose Jacob (Israel) and not Esau. This choice was not for eternal salvation, but to establish a missionary witness, a people who worshipped Him that others, such as the Queen of Sheba, could see and know.

Jesus’ mission was to call the Jews back to their mission, to rally around Him, around God Himself, to be the missionary witness they had been called and blessed to be. Most Jews and Jewish leaders gave one, final “No.” That “no” will be changed in the end, but for the time-being, the Jews (at large) have lost their privilege as God’s missionary people. That privilege has been given during this age to you and to me.