



## Zacchaeus

*Jesus came to conquer evil, but not in  
the way the Jews expected.*

by Earl Palmer

Remember the account of Zacchaeus, the short-of-stature tax collector? I've always had a soft spot for this man, because he was short, and I'm not so tall either.

Here's the way Luke began this story in his gospel: "[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich" (Luke 19:1, 2, *RSV*). That's a loaded phrase—because apparently, the little man was loaded.

"And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way" (vv. 3, 4, *RSV*).

Notice that Zacchaeus was a smart man. He figured which way Christ was going and then Zacchaeus went on ahead and got up in that tree.

Maybe he even said to himself, “Maybe Jesus will stop nearby and argue with the Pharisees. I understand he’s always arguing with Pharisees, and maybe a group of those laymen down from Jerusalem will argue with him. And maybe I could get it all on my recorder and take it to the tax collector meeting.” Think of all the things that might have gone through Zacchaeus’ mind as he saw Jesus coming.

Luke specified that Zacchaeus climbed into a sycamore tree. Unlike an olive tree—which has tiny leaves—the sycamore tree is full and leafy. Zacchaeus could sit in this tree and see Jesus if he came, but at the same time be pretty well hidden.

As I said, I’ve always had a soft spot for Zacchaeus. He’s a man after my heart. One thing about short people is they tend to think ahead. I remember that Nehru came to UC-Berkeley when I was an undergraduate. I was taking a course on the politics of Pakistan and India, and I was excited to see him. I saw a huge limousine outside the Greek Theater with some Secret Service men around it, and like Zacchaeus, I figured, that must be where he’s going after he speaks. And so, the moment the event was over, while people were still applauding, I ran down to get next to that limousine so that I could see Nehru up close. It worked. I stood just a few yards from Nehru as he walked by.

## JESUS RESTORED ZACCHAEUS

Of course, from his perch in the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus got a little more than he bargained for. “When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’ So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured, ‘He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner’” (vv. 5-7, *RSV*).

“They all murmured.” I think this is the only place in the New Testament where everyone in the crowd reacted the same way. We read in some places that scribes and Pharisees murmured or that the Sadducees murmured. But here, “They all murmured.” The scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, zealots, disciples—everyone was murmuring: “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.”

We must appreciate the vicious institution that tax collecting was in the first century. The Romans used the same practice as the Persians when they conquered. They didn’t take the conquered people back to Rome and show them off as hostages, because then they’d have to feed all those prisoners. They learned not to take prisoners, but to set up defeated nations in their own economies and then tax them. But in order to tax people, especially when they didn’t have bank accounts, the tax collectors needed people on the inside who knew where the wealth was. So they got collaborators. They found a man like Zacchaeus and elevated him to become a chief tax collector. They protected these people with Roman garrisons so no one dared tamper with them, and yet gave these citizens the right to point out where the wealth was. They said to the Roman officials, “Now that person has 90 sheep up in Bethlehem. I’ve known this family for years. You’d never know it to look at his house, but that man’s loaded.” So the Romans could tax him all the more.

Notice how the tax collector got it both ways. Of course, to some extent they deserved what they got, because there was corruption in the institution. People would come up to a tax collector and say, “Hey, don’t tell them I’ve got 90 sheep up in Bethlehem. It will ruin me.”

So the tax collector would say, “Okay, I won’t tell them. But **what do I get for it?**” Then a little bribe would pass under the **table**. But **then the tax collector would tell the Romans anyway. The citizens despised**

institution because tax collectors used a privileged relationship to exploit their own people.

Next, Luke records: “Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold’” (v. 8, *RSV*). I don’t know what happened between Zacchaeus and Jesus Christ, but this was a man who repented immediately and in a concrete way! He didn’t say a lot of drivel about how sorry he was. He just said, “Fourfold I will restore to those I’ve defrauded” (this was a nice way of admitting that he had done something wrong), “and half of my goods I give to the poor.”

Repentance in the biblical sense (*metanoia*) means to turn around, and—whether or not you say you’re sorry—change and do something. You head a different direction. That’s what Zacchaeus did here.

Then Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus, and these last two sentences are incredible sentences: “And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house’” (v. 9, *RSV*). Salvation is the Greek word *soteria*. In the Septuagint, it’s one of the words used to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*. This word salvation expresses the peace of the Old Testament, meaning health, restoration, and wholeness. So when Jesus says, “salvation has come,” he means “shalom has come—salvation has come—to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.”

Notice that Jesus then restored Zacchaeus as a son of Abraham. The very thing that Zacchaeus had thrown away in his profession was the dignity of being a Jew. At the expense of his own people, he exploited his nationality for the benefit of the Romans. But Jesus restored his sonship in front of everyone. The last sentence is important: “For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost” (v. 10, *RSV*).

This whole event includes a series of surprises, and I want to reflect on the four of them.

The first surprise is that Jesus noticed one person in a great crowd. We don't expect that from famous people. If you've ever met a famous person, you don't expect that person to take time to talk to you. If you've ever been in a line where you have had a chance to shake the hand of the President of the United States, protocol people stand right next to the President, get your name, and say your name to the President. Then, while he's shaking your hand, he's looking to the next person. That's how they move the line along. You'd be rather surprised if he stopped and said, "How's it going in your church? How's that problem with the carpet?" Yet Jesus, throughout his entire ministry, gave everyone his full attention. It's one of the marks of Christ's ministry.

You see it here. Jesus was sensitive to everybody he met. You never get the feeling in the New Testament that Jesus was talking to someone and juggling oranges at the same time. He gave that person his full attention.

The second surprise is that Jesus accepted the hospitality of a person so hated by the people (and for good cause).

The third surprise was that a man like Zacchaeus, who made his whole fortune by being hardhearted, became so repentant and generous.

The final surprise is that a man who did so much real harm in his life should be restored publicly by Jesus as a son of Abraham.

All of these surprises come together in one interesting and intense sentence: "They all murmured, 'He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.'" If you can understand why the crowd was so upset, then you'll be able to understand the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The people were upset because they expected a Messiah who would conquer evil. Many of them were hoping that Jesus would be that Messiah. Make no mistake, our Lord was famous at this point. He was in the very territory where John the Baptist had said so many things about him. Even Zacchaeus was so impressed by the faith of Jesus that he'd gone ahead of the great

crowds and climbed up a tree to make sure he could see Jesus. The people were expecting the Messiah—but they were seeking a political savior who would conquer the evil of the oppressive Roman empire. Jesus disappointed that expectation.

I've often said one of the most elegant and most incredible proofs of our Lord's messiahship is how wonderfully he both fulfills and disappoints every expectation we have.

Take a look at Luke 3. Luke was very interested in John the Baptist, and he provided a long narration of John the Baptist's speeches. The people were "in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ" (Luke 3:15, *RSV*). Think about how famous John the Baptist was. Did you know in some ways he was more famous in many parts of the Holy Land than Jesus was? Even after Jesus's resurrection, followers of John the Baptist still worked in North Africa. In fact, one of them was Apollos, who came up to Corinth and had never heard about Christ. He was still looking for the Messiah. He was a follower of John the Baptist. Because of his fame and even some of his rhetoric, some people wondered if John was the Messiah.

"John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'" That one line appears in all four gospels and also the Book of Acts. "'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'" (v. 16, *RSV*). (By the way John didn't mean fire to warm your heart; he meant fire to burn up the evil-doers.) "His winnowing fork [a huge fork used to clear and to slice away] is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary [that will be the good people, the sons of righteousness and God's beloved] but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (v. 17, *RSV*). That's what John the Baptist expected of the Messiah.

As you know, a few days after John spoke these words, Jesus appeared and John said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” ( John 1 :29, *RSV*). In his commentary on John’s gospel, Raymond Brown says it’s probably not correct for us to think when John spoke these words that he was thinking of Isaiah 53, the suffering servant lamb, because all Jews by the time of the first century thought of Isaiah 53 as referring to Israel, not to the Messiah. The Messiah would be the ensign who would startle the nations.

Look at Malachi 3, 4, which provides a great clue to John the Baptist’s preaching. Note where chapter 3 starts: “Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me” (Malachi 3:1, *RSV*). And then chapter 4: “For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evil doers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘so that it will leave them neither root nor branch’” (Malachi 4:1, *RSV*). Notice how similar this is to what John the Baptist spoke. ““But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act,’ says the LORD of hosts. . . . ‘Behold, I will send on Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes’” vv. 2, 3, 5, *RSV*).

So we realize now that the Jews were looking for a Messiah who would conquer evil. He would reach his hand into the horrible wheel of Roman injustice, take hold of that wheel, and right it. He would destroy the evildoers.

#### ZACCHAEUS GAINED GROUND, BUT JESUS LOST IT

When Jesus called Zacchaeus down from the tree and announced he was spending the night at Zacchaeus’ house, you can understand why

everyone was shocked and “they all murmured.” But look what Jesus did. He healed Zacchaeus. Notice he used the word salvation, the word for healing. Jesus saved Zacchaeus. And then he restored the identity of Zacchaeus.

As a result, Zacchaeus gained ground. I’ve been in ministry long enough to tell when the grace of God has gotten hold of somebody’s life. Their hands loosen up. They become generous. They want to give half of their goods away. They want to restore all those they’ve defrauded. They don’t just say they’re sorry or play games. They do something, because Christ has come into their hearts. Zacchaeus gained ground. And then Luke writes that Zacchaeus “received [Jesus] joyfully” (Luke 19:6, *RSV*). Zacchaeus became generous and expansive.

However, Jesus lost ground. Make no mistake about it, the shadow of the Cross was over this event. . . . The people were expecting a Messiah who would conquer evil. They expected the defeat of evil. But no one in the first century expected that Jesus would defeat evil in the way he chose. Listen closely to the way Jesus chose to defeat evil. This passage provides an important clue: Jesus would defeat evil by taking it upon himself, by absorbing its anger, its power. Then he, himself, would disarm that power. And Jesus would defeat evil by identifying with the sinner. Notice, “the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost” (v. 10, *RSV*). He identified with you and me, and then he went to the Cross for us.

Notice, too, that Jesus found Zacchaeus. And this was surprising, because instead of blasting this sinner, Jesus Christ knew he would die and take Zacchaeus’ place. He showed that he would be the lamb of Isaiah 53. Jesus would conquer evil by absorbing it, by taking it to himself, by identifying with the sinners. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21, *RSV*).



Jesus never intended to be the Messiah who would defeat evil with brute force. He knew he would conquer evil with his own sacrifice. Have you ever noticed that after his resurrection, Jesus didn't come back to Pilate or Caiaphas and defeat them? Caiaphas went right on as high priest for another seven or eight years. Pilate went right on as procurator. Life went on as usual in a way. However, what Jesus did defeat were the weapons they had: death and fear.

He conquered those and the power of the Devil. Jesus Christ fulfilled Elijah's prophecy. He fulfilled John the Baptist's prophecy, but in a way that no one expected. He identified with Zacchaeus, and now Zacchaeus gained ground because of that identification.

That's the love of God! This isn't a parable or a sermon illustration about love. It's the very existence of love itself. And we have love that comes alongside us in many ways—love that's an event, love that's powerful and able to give new life, a love that totally surprises all of our expectations. Even Jesus' own disciples were totally surprised by what Jesus does.

Love was Jesus spending the night with Zacchaeus—identifying with the repentant tax collector and absorbing in himself all the tragedy of Zacchaeus' life. That was how he set Zacchaeus free.

Jesus offers the same to us—he's willing to absorb all the tragedy and trials of our lives in order to set us free.