

"The Hardest Conversion of All"

Dr. Rich Knight

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Luke 19:1-10

This is the beautiful story of Zacchaeus the Tax Collector. Tax collectors, in the First Century, as you probably know, were despised by the people. Most folks viewed tax collectors as nothing less than traitors, for they were fellow Jews collecting taxes for Rome. In addition, the way tax collectors made their money was to collect more than they were supposed to and keep the excess for themselves. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector in Jericho, which was a very wealthy city at the time. Thus Zacchaeus would have been a very wealthy man, and as unpopular as he was wealthy. Let's take a look:

Luke 19:1-10

"He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 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." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 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." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Let me just briefly highlight some of the spiritual truths in this story.

I The first truth I see in this story is this: Sometimes you have to go out on a limb to find the truth! Zacchaeus literally went out on a limb to see Jesus.

Zacchaeus took several risks in order to see Jesus. Just going out in public was a risk. As a despised tax collector he was at risk for getting roughed up in the crowd, with people taking a shot at him as he moved through the crowded streets. But Zacchaeus really wants to see Jesus; so it's worth the risk.

It's also worth a good deal of extra effort. He runs ahead of the crowd, guessing Jesus' route correctly. He then climbs up a tree so he can get a good look. He's risking public embarrassment by doing this, but he doesn't care. You have to go out on a limb to get to the fruit.

Sometimes a little extra effort goes a long, long way. Spiritually, just deciding to pray daily, through grace at mealtimes and conversational prayer throughout the day, can go a long, long way to drawing you close to God each day. Deciding to read a book of the Bible, or reading the Bible daily has great spiritual rewards. Doing acts of service to others does the same thing. A little extra effort goes a long, long way. Last Sunday we made an extra effort in being Christ-followers. And it went a long way in making us feel more like a church!

II. The second truth I see in the story is this: An Invitation from Jesus is a powerful thing. Most First Century Rabbis shunned "sinners" in public. Jesus sought them out. "Zacchaeus, I must stay at your house today." One can't overestimate the power and impact of those words and that invitation. In ancient times sharing a meal with someone was a very special thing. To eat with someone was a sign of mutual friendship and acceptance. Jesus made it a point to "eat and drink with sinners," as he was correctly accused of. In doing so Jesus brought those on the outskirts of life into the inner circle of God's love.

There's a story from W.W.II about some soldiers in France who lost one of their friends on the battlefield. There was a church in a nearby village that had a cemetery. After the skirmish ended, the soldiers carried their friend to the church and asked the priest if they could bury him there. The priest asked if the young man was Catholic. When they replied, "No," the priest regrettably told them that the fallen soldier could not be buried inside the gates of the cemetery, but he could be buried just outside the fence. And so they buried him there. The next morning the soldiers went to the cemetery again to pay their final respects. But much to their surprise they couldn't find the grave. They looked all over for it, certain they knew where it was. Finally they spotted their friend's grave. It was inside the cemetery. Then they knew what the priest had done. He had gone out late at night and moved the fence.

Christ did that for the sinners and outcasts of his day. He brought those on the outside in. He offered them the gift of his friendship. God makes

that same offer to us today. It's an invitation to faith, friendship and spirituality.

III. There's one other truth in this passage. It's an uncomfortable truth. You might call it an "inconvenient truth." It's this: what was the sign that Zacchaeus was touched by the love of Christ? What evidence was there that he was becoming a sincere follower of God? What made Jesus say, "Truly, today salvation has come to this house." The answer: *by how Zacchaeus decided to handle his money.* He says, "I'll give half of my money to the poor. And if I've defrauded anyone I'll pay them back fourfold."

You know the Biblical word for salvation means wholeness, wellness. Zacchaeus was now whole and well, because he was honest with his money and he was generous with his money. Remember, he was a very wealthy man. So giving half of his money to the poor involved a large sum of money. And repaying people he had defrauded four times over what he had taken from them was also an act of generous repentance. Hebrew law required a person to simply repay what they owed, not four times over the amount. Zacchaeus had become a generous person.

That's my favorite word when it comes to money. Generous. Don't we all want to be known as generous people? Generous with our time, our talents and our money?

Let me close by telling you a story. Several years ago the church I was serving held a "Catch Up Sunday." It was a day for everyone to catch up on their financial pledge to the church and help the church catch up on its budget. For the weeks leading up to the day we asked people to consider giving an extra gift to the church to help us catch up. I thought many times about the size of the gift I would make. Well, the day before "Catch Up Sunday" I received a phone call from a friend offering me two free tickets for the Patriots game the next day. I thought for a split second about my calendar for Sunday and said, "Absolutely! Thank you very, very much!" After I hung up the phone I realized that even though the tickets were free, the game would cost me some money. Parking would be \$40-\$50. Food would be at least another \$20.00. Bringing back something for the boys would probably be another \$30.00. So the game was still going to cost me about \$100.00. It was then that I realized how much I had to put in the offering plate for "Catch Up Sunday." Yup. You guessed it: \$100.00. For if I only splurge on myself, I am not well. I am not whole. I am not truly generous.

Think about it.

(By the way, I went to the Patriots game, which when considering the game day expenses and the gift to the church, ended up costing me \$200!!)