

Zacchaeus, the Repentant Tax Collector

Devotional Reading: Luke 6:31–38
Background Scripture: Luke 19:1–10

Luke 19:1–10

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”

⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”



Key Text

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” —Luke 19:5

Introduction

A. Favorite Story

“Zacchaeus was a wee little man . . .”. So begins a popular children’s Sunday school song about this Bible story. As a child, I loved the story of Zacchaeus. I remember the first time I heard it—I leaned in to catch every word. The anticipation! The drama! The tree climbing! When I was little, I loved to climb trees and was delighted that one of my favorite activities showed up in the Bible. Even better—Zacchaeus did it to see Jesus! I sympathized with Zacchaeus’s inability to see over the crowd. Most of all, I loved this story because Jesus knew Zacchaeus’s name.

As an adult, I climb fewer trees but still sit up straighter whenever I hear or read Zacchaeus’s story. I still marvel that Jesus knew Zacchaeus’s name—and also knows mine. However, these days, it is Zacchaeus’s response to Jesus that catches my attention. The story challenges me now: What kind of fruit is my faith bearing? To what lengths will I go to see and follow Jesus?

B. Lesson Context

Jesus and his disciples journeyed to Jerusalem for the final Passover that they would observe together (Luke 9:51; 18:31–33). Along the way, Jesus taught (17:22–37; 18:31–34), told parables (18:1–8; 18:9–14), handled questioning people (17:20–21; 18:18–30), and healed (17:11–19; 18:35–43). Jericho was their last stop before reaching the capital city. It was only about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem and situated in the Jordan River valley. It had a warm climate and freshwater springs; Jericho was an oasis for weary travelers.

Luke groups together three special encounters with Jesus—a “certain ruler” (Luke 18:18–30), a blind beggar (18:35–43), and Zacchaeus (19:1–10). Each of them sought out Jesus as he traveled. In the first scenario, the man was wealthy and privileged but went away unfulfilled. The crowd who witnessed the exchange questioned, “Who then can be saved?” (18:26). In the second, the man had nothing but audacity and perseverance. Jesus was moved on his behalf, and his faith healed him—he received his sight and fol-

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 2: Faithful Witnesses Say “Yes” to Jesus

Lessons 5–8

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Zacchaeus’s character development.
2. Explain the significance of Jesus’ willingness to stay at Zacchaeus’s house.
3. Make a list of personal attitudes and behaviors that Jesus’ love compels them to change.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Favorite Story
- B. Lesson Context

I. Viewing from a Distance (Luke 19:1–4)

- A. Entering and Passing (v. 1)
- B. Status and Wealth (v. 2)
- C. Stature and Curiosity (vv. 3–4)

Pining for a Clear View

II. Interacting Up Close (Luke 19:5–10)

- A. Unmerited Attention (vv. 5–7)
- B. Change of Heart (v. 8)
- C. Seeking of the Lost (vv. 9–10)

Met by Mercy

Conclusion

- A. “Yes” That Brings Change
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

lowed Jesus (18:43)! Zacchaeus's story is the third encounter in this sequence.

Zacchaeus was a "chief tax collector" in Jericho (Luke 19:2). As such, he led those who implemented taxes, collected tolls, and performed customs duties. Lead tax collectors hired other collectors and set collection policies. Tax collectors held a position of prominence or authority, but with this came hard feelings from the general populace. Tax collectors frequently overcharged to make a profit. They were despised and mistrusted, seen as collaborators with oppressive Rome, and considered dishonest (Mark 2:15–16). Roman authorities auctioned contracts to the highest bidders—groups or individuals—to collect local tolls and tariffs. Whoever won the contract was on the hook for the contracted amount. Therefore, collections officers often took bribes and passed overages onto ordinary citizens, protecting themselves while ensuring contracts were paid.

I. Viewing from a Distance

(Luke 19:1–4)

A. Entering and Passing (v. 1)

1. Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

This verse indicates a scene change. Jesus and his disciples are traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem for the Passover (see Lesson Context). While outside *Jericho*, Jesus heals a blind beggar (Luke 18:35–43). Then they move into the city, presumably walking along the main thoroughfare.

B. Status and Wealth (v. 2)

2. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.

Unlike the encounter with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18–25), Luke introduces *Zacchaeus* by name. His name is the Greek form of a Hebrew word that means "innocent," "pure," or "clean." Luke also names Zacchaeus's occupation. He is a *chief tax collector* in Jericho (see Lesson Context).

Additionally, Luke highlights Zacchaeus's wealth. In doing so, Luke connects Zacchaeus's story with the rich ruler Jesus and his disciples met before arriving in Jericho.

What Do You Think?

Why does Luke include the details of Zacchaeus's profession and socioeconomic status? What effect do these details have on the story?

Digging Deeper

In what ways might such information about someone bear on your work as a disciple-maker (Matthew 28:19–20)?

C. Stature and Curiosity (vv. 3–4)

3. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.

The Greek word translated here as *he wanted to see* is essential to Luke's Gospel. In older English translations it reads "he sought." The underlying Greek word appears more than two dozen times in various forms in Luke's Gospel (examples: 5:18; 12:31; 15:8; 17:33). Perhaps the most memorable of these instances is, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (11:9).

Zacchaeus wants *to see* Jesus. He has no problem with his eyes but is struggling in another way—he is *short* in stature and the crowd is dense (Luke 12:1; 14:25). A growing multitude now fills the narrow streets of Jericho and prevents Zacchaeus from catching a glimpse of Jesus.

Luke implies that Zacchaeus wants to learn about this well-known prophet so that he can evaluate him, but Zacchaeus's height is a barrier to reaching his goal. He can't see over the crowd. Therefore, he is forced to use other means to achieve his objective.

4. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

Zacchaeus sets aside his dignity with two actions: running and climbing. He is eager to beat the crowd to the next likely spot that Jesus will be. Powerful men do not run; they have other people do it for them—running errands, sending messages, and securing invitations. It is significant that Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus for himself and

is willing to risk looking undignified in the process. His actions indicate that his interest is more than idle curiosity. He positions himself ahead of Jesus and prepares for the approach.

The *sycamore* tree is a species of fig native to the Middle East and Africa. It has a wide, short trunk and low branches. We may imagine Zacchaeus climbing it quickly. Grown men typically do not climb trees, and Zacchaeus's action may have been humbling. His posture in this moment is neither haughty nor concerned with outward appearance (compare Luke 18:14).

What Do You Think?

Have you ever done anything undignified to "catch a glimpse" of Jesus? Why, or why not?

Digging Deeper

How do humility, enthusiasm, and child-likeness deepen the significance of Zacchaeus's actions?

Pining for a Clear View

Growing up, my friends and I were obsessed with a famous boy band. We followed them on every tour, watched all their online videos, knew all their song lyrics, and even researched their personal lives. Yes, it was a little strange and over-the-top, and I look back as a nearly 30-year-old with great relief that I eventually outgrew the fascination.

One afternoon we discovered that the band was recording at a studio only 10 miles from my parent's house. To say we were excited would be an understatement. So we traveled to the recording studio, and to our delight, only a small crowd was gathered outside. We didn't have a clear view, however, so a friend and I walked around the side of the property, climbed over a few walls, pushed through the bushes, and eventually found ourselves at a fence beside the garden. From there, our view was unhindered—one of the band members was only ten meters away! Mission complete!

I look back and admire the determination of my 15-year-old self. Like Zacchaeus, I went to great lengths to get a glimpse of a person I was

curious about. Have you ever gone to great lengths to see someone famous?
—N. V.

II. Interacting Up Close

(Luke 19:5–10)

A. Unmerited Attention (vv. 5–7)

5. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

This is one of many examples in Luke's Gospel where Jesus exhibits supernatural knowledge, which can be rightly expected of God alone (compare Luke 5:22; 6:8; 7:36–50; 8:46; 19:29–34; 22:7–13). Astonishingly, Jesus stops and calls *Zacchaeus* by name.

Jesus does not compare schedules or ask if today is convenient for guests—he tells Zacchaeus to hurry *down* and invites himself over. In fact, Jesus presents his *stay* with Zacchaeus as something that *must* happen. The Greek expression translated "must" regularly signifies something that has to take place to fulfill God's purpose (examples: Luke 2:49; 9:22; 17:25; 24:44). Jesus' visit to the man's *house* is a divine necessity.

Jesus initiates the invitation as if he is the host. He is authoritative in the exchange and dignifies Zacchaeus by designating the man's home as the place where he and his disciples will receive refreshment. Jesus is not afraid to associate with this unpopular man. His words are urgent—it will happen *today*.

6. So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

Zacchaeus obeys Jesus immediately. He doesn't act flustered or annoyed at having an unexpected houseguest (or 13!). Instead, he responds to Jesus' message with joy.

How to Say It

Galatians	Guh-lay-shunz.
Jericho	Jair-ih-co.
<i>Les Misérables</i>	Lay Mee-zher-abh.
sycamore	si-kuh-mor.
Valjean	Vahl-szohn.
Zacchaeus	Zack-key-us.

Zacchaeus's eagerness to catch a glimpse of Jesus from up in the tree has paid off, so he climbs back *down* to ground level and meets Jesus, face to face. This is no longer a momentary encounter; Jesus likely will remain in his company for the length of a meal and travel respite.

What Do You Think?

Being "hospitable" is one mark of a mature believer (Titus 1:8). What is your response to spur-of-the-moment invitations?

Digging Deeper

How might Romans 12:13 and 1 Peter 4:9 shift your response or encourage you toward change?

7. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

The crowd continues to be an obstacle. They are not happy with Jesus' choice to stay with Zacchaeus. Therefore, they grumble (*mutter*). The onlookers' condemnation is clear; they consider Zacchaeus a *sinner*. Zacchaeus holds no respect within his community. As a notorious tax collector, the crowd regards Zacchaeus as disloyal to God and his people (see Lesson Context). They are shocked to think Jesus would associate with him.

Throughout Luke's Gospel Jesus receives criticism for his affiliation with "tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 5:30; 7:34; 15:1–2). In going home with Zacchaeus, Jesus is doing the right thing, not the popular thing.

What Do You Think?

Why does Jesus' choice to be Zacchaeus's guest bother the crowd? What judgment do they make? Why?

Digging Deeper

How are you like the grumbling crowd? What judgments do you make against "sinners"?

B. Change of Heart (v. 8)

8. But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half

of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

By standing to speak, *Zacchaeus* emphasizes the importance of his pronouncement. He begins by calling Jesus to attention and then attributes to him the respectful title of *Lord*. Zacchaeus affirms an attitude of humility and reverence toward Jesus. Then he declares an intention toward restitution.

Zacchaeus announces to Jesus (and the city of Jericho) the actions he will take to fix the damage he has caused. He begins by halving his wealth and pledging it to *the poor*. In doing so, he aligns with the wisdom and goodness taught through Jewish Scripture: "The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor" (Proverbs 22:9).

He promises to restore monies taken by false accusation or *cheat[ing]*. Since the tax collection system was not standardized, extortion ran rampant, and bribery was common. Zacchaeus says he will pay *four times the amount*. This sum echoes the restitution required by the Law of Moses for stealing livestock (Exodus 22:1). By stating his intentions in this way, Zacchaeus acknowledges that he gained his wealth unethically. He openly confesses that he has done wrong and is ready to make reparations.

Perhaps Zacchaeus's desire to see Jesus with his own eyes has opened and healed his sight in ways beyond the physical (compare Mark 4:12). Zacchaeus acknowledges his wrongs and declares a shift in priorities. He will turn to generosity, offering alms instead of being greedy, as is typical of his profession. Zacchaeus chooses righteousness over wealth, one of the significant obstacles to inheriting God's kingdom (compare Luke 18:18–30).

C. Seeking of the Lost (vv. 9–10)

9a. Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house,

Jesus responds to Zacchaeus's speech with profound blessing. A physical miracle is not needed, but a spiritual one has occurred as *today* Zacchaeus receives *salvation*. Zacchaeus does not need to wait for some far-off time to experience the justice and mercy of God's kingdom. He participates in it immediately.

Jesus includes *this house*, the entirety of Zacchaeus's household, in the receipt of saving grace. In the first century, a household's faith hinged on the beliefs and lifestyle of its leader. In the same way that everyone in Zacchaeus's household would have been affected by his reputation and dishonest behavior, tainted in the eyes of the community, they are also restored through his repentance.

9b. "Because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."

Jesus' words continue, reinstating Zacchaeus's place within the family of faith. The Jews in Jericho see Zacchaeus as someone cut off from God's people, a traitor because he collaborated with the Romans. Jesus' words offer Zacchaeus restoration, belonging, and forgiveness. As a *son of Abraham*, the inheritance of God's kingdom is his. God's promise is to bless all nations through Abraham's seed (Genesis 22:18; compare Galatians 3:29). Zacchaeus is now reclaimed as a part of God's people according to God's promise. With Jesus' pronouncement, the meaning of Zacchaeus's name, "clean," regains its accuracy. Jesus makes a way for Zacchaeus to return to his true self: a son of God, pure and forgiven.

10. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

The phrase *Son of Man* appears more than 80 times across all four Gospels (see Matthew 8:20; Mark 10:45; Luke 11:30; John 1:51). It also shows up frequently in the Old Testament. In Hebrew, "Son of Man" literally reads "son of Adam," meaning "human being." In the Old Testament, the phrase often highlights the difference between humans and God. God addresses the prophet Ezekiel as "Son of man" 93 times (examples: Ezekiel 2:1; 3:17; 33:2)! In Daniel, there is a heavenly figure seen and described "like a son of man" (Daniel 7:13). This figure receives authority from God to rule the world forever, served by all people, nations, and languages (7:14).

By Jesus' time, "Son of Man" carried connotations of judgment and deliverance. The Son of Man was considered a servant of God and sometimes the Messiah. Jesus uses the title for himself and, in so doing, pairs his humanity and divinity.

In this passage, Jesus uses the title to claim the authority to *seek* and *save*.

Seeking and saving are strong themes throughout Luke. The parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal son illustrate these themes exceptionally (Luke 15:1–7; 8–10; 11–32). Jesus welcomes Zacchaeus back into the fold, for he came not to "call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:32). Jesus' choice to become Zacchaeus's guest reveals the nature of his ministry.

What Do You Think?

How does Zacchaeus's story enhance your concept of seeking and saving the lost?

Digging Deeper

How do Luke 15:3–7, 8–10, and 11–32 influence your answer? What is the church's role? Yours? God's? The lost's?

Met by Mercy

In my opinion, the best musical of all time is *Les Misérables*. It is roughly based on Victor Hugo's famous novel of the same name. The novel and musical masterfully tell the story of Jean Valjean, a troubled former prisoner in search of a better life during the struggle of the French Revolution.

An unforgettable scene early in the musical paints a profound picture of mercy and grace. Valjean, newly released from prison, meets a bishop who gives him a place to sleep. However, Valjean steals silverware from the bishop during the night and escapes. When the police discover him on the road laden with silverware that is evidently not his, they return him to the bishop. Expecting to be rearrested and condemned, Valjean instead meets mercy as the bishop insists that he gave the silverware as a gift. To add emphasis, the bishop also offers two silver candlesticks, saying, "Would you leave the best behind?" As Valjean leaves, the bishop sings, "You must use this precious silver to become an honest man."

Jean Valjean is so staggered by this display of

mercy and grace that he turns to a life of radical service and generosity toward others. The candlesticks become a precious and solemn reminder of lavish mercy.

Similarly, Zacchaeus is transformed by a merciful encounter with the Lord. Jesus' love touches his life and transforms him from lostness to one found in perfect, eternal love. How have you experienced mercy? How might you extend radical mercy to others? —N. V.

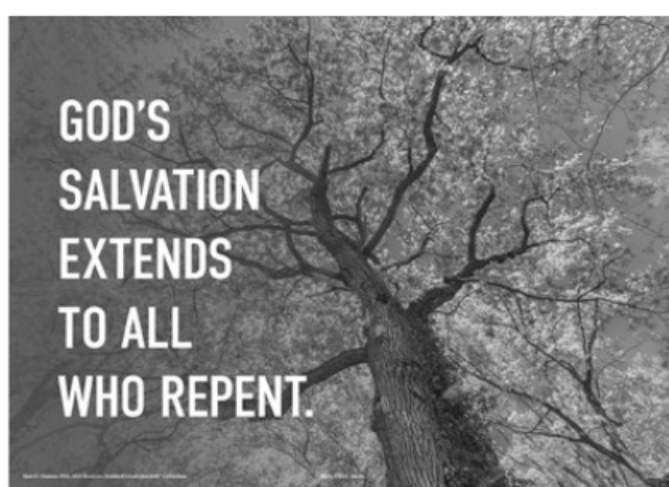
Conclusion

A. “Yes” That Brings Change

Saying “Yes!” to Jesus is not the same as liking a post or retweeting a comment on social media. It is not as simple as catching a glimpse of a passing hero. The “yes” we give to Jesus changes our lives. It requires obedience within a new way of life. Kingdom perspective shifts how we think and act, changes priorities, and helps us relate generously with our neighbors, communities, and the world. A “yes” to Jesus halts old habits that actively harm others.

As many new things are, Jesus' way may be initially uncomfortable. His way often requires significant lifestyle shifts and sacrifices. Like Jesus' response to the rich ruler in Luke 18, we must admit that following God is “hard” (Luke 18:24), especially for the wealthy. Jesus says it is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God,” but Zacchaeus models hope and possibility for all of us (18:25). Although the rich ruler presumably struggles to gain salvation or misses it altogether, Zacchaeus's story powerfully models Jesus' words, “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (18:27).

Jesus offers Zacchaeus and his household saving grace—but how difficult it must have been for Zacchaeus to face each person he had harmed! How difficult it must have been to return the money he previously considered his rightful possession! After all, Zacchaeus hadn't broken societal rules; he had worked within the cultural system surrounding him. And yet, after welcoming Jesus into his life, Zacchaeus is



Visual for Lesson 7. *Display the visual in a prominent place. Ask students to spend one minute offering God gratitude for his great mercy.*

called to something better and higher than the culture in which he lives. He is called to a new generosity and righteousness as a citizen of God's kingdom—as are we.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to repair, as best we can, the harm we have done to others. This restitution includes reversing course regarding the evil in which we passively participate. Is there someone in your circle whom you have not treated with generosity? Have you neglected to pay someone back or taken credit for another's effort, creativity, or work? What is necessary to repair that damage? And on a larger scale—is there a system in which you have participated that causes harm to others? What is Jesus calling you to do to restore righteousness within your community? Whom might you invite into the generous, hospitable, gospel welcome of Jesus?

B. Prayer

Lord, we come before you with contrite hearts. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have failed to act with generosity in the work of reconciliation and restoration. Help us, like Zacchaeus, to live out our faith in you with immediate boldness and resolve. When it is uncomfortable, empower us by your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus still seeks and saves the lost.