

Zacchaeus

DAVE BAST

When I was a kid in Sunday School we used to sing a song that went 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. The high point of the song came when we all repeated Jesus' command to the wee, little man. Wagging our fingers at an imaginary sycamore tree, we shouted in unison: Zacchaeus, you come down; for I am going to your house today. And Zacchaeus always did.

Today on *Groundwork*, we are looking at an encounter with Jesus that turned an obscure tax collector into a memorable figure. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, I was really tempted to sing this song. I had to hold myself back. This is the story that we are digging into today, and it comes in Luke Chapter 19. We have actually been working our way through the middle chapters of Luke in a series that we call something like a journey to Jerusalem. It is the context of Jesus' last great journey going up to the city of Jerusalem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we have noted all along, Dave, starting at Luke 9:51, when Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, this whole segment – about 10 or 11 chapters in length – contains most of the material in Luke's Gospel that is unique to Luke. These are stories and parables – most of them – that you do not find in Matthew, Mark, or John, and Zacchaeus is one of them. If it were not for Luke, we never would have heard of this wee, little man. It is an interesting story for Luke to take time to include. It is a wee, little man; Zacchaeus was a short, little fellow; this is a short, little story; and yet, Luke wanted to be sure to include it.

DAVE BAST

In the context of the journey of Jesus and his disciples – they started out in Galilee following the normal pilgrimage route. According to the Old Testament, devout Jews would go to Jerusalem three times a year for the three great festivals of the Jewish faith; beginning with Passover – and this is a Passover journey – but, the ones who lived up in the north, in Galilee, would often detour around Samaria; the land that they did not like, where their enemies lived; so, they would go down the east side of the Jordan River, and then they would re-cross at Jericho to take the road up to Jerusalem. Interestingly, that is the point at which Joshua had crossed the Jordan River to take possession of the Promised Land all those centuries before. Of course, Joshua is the same name as Jesus. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua. So, here is the new Joshua going up on a very different kind of mission to the city of Jerusalem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Whereas, the first Joshua and his troops marched around the city to get the walls of Jericho to come a-tumbling down – as another old Sunday School song has it – Jesus goes right into Jericho. This is where, or course, he is going to run into this person. We will read the story of Zacchaeus in just a moment. This is following the previous program in this series, which was about the rich, young ruler; this all-together man;

this spiritually earnest, grade-A spiritual student; he had it all together, and he comes right up to Jesus' face and expects Jesus to reward him and say: Wow, you are my kind of guy. You are getting right into the kingdom. But, of course, the rich, young ruler goes away sad after Jesus points out some of the things he was not able to do.

Now, I think Luke is being very clever; very, very soon after that we have Zacchaeus, who does not come right up to Jesus' face; quite the opposite.

DAVE BAST

Yes. This is Luke 19:1-10: ¹Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ²A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man, he could not because of the crowd. ⁴So, he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today," ⁶So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner," ⁸But 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." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is. There is the story. When we were preparing for this program, Dave, you pointed out something that I think a lot of us know if we think about it, and that is the fact that of all of the people Jesus met in the Gospels, almost none of them are named. Very seldom out of all of the people Jesus ever healed, there is only one person, I think, that was named: Blind Bartimaeus – and of all the people....

DAVE BAST

Which happened, incidentally, just before this, if you piece the Gospels together, that was on his way to Jerusalem, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And now we run into this man who could have just been called a tax collector. A lot of the people Jesus ran into are not named, but this name is preserved. You were saying when we were preparing for this, Dave, something interesting about a theory – I think it is Richard Bauckham.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. The great British scholar Richard Bauckham has a book called *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, and one of the things that he points out there is that whenever there is a named character – a minor character, let's say, in the Gospels – it undoubtedly is because that person became a disciple – became a Christian, in fact – after Jesus' death and resurrection. So, you think about Nicodemus, who is named in the fourth Gospel; Joseph of Arimathea, who is named; and they clearly came and were part of the company of Jesus' followers. Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus – why do we know their names? The only reason, logically, that their names would have been remembered were if they were members of the Church.

You can imagine Luke saying: Hey, I am looking for stories about Jesus, and somebody says, go ask Zacchaeus, there. He usually sits in that pew. He will tell you how he met Jesus. And that is how we know the story.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is, indeed, as you just read it, Dave, a conversion story. This man does become a follower of Jesus; may have become a leader of the early Church, for all we know; which is maybe how Luke connected with him to learn this story that Matthew and Mark and John did not seem to know about; but, in any event, how interesting – I was thinking, even as you were reading it, we were talking about Joshua and Jericho; Joshua went into Jericho to destroy the city. Only Rahab was saved. The rest of Jericho was put to death. It was a terrible story. Jesus, as the new Joshua, now comes into Jericho and immediately saves somebody.

Salvation comes to the house of this man, Zacchaeus. So, what a wonderful story that shows the trajectory of God's salvation; that, indeed, the days of death and destruction are over. All of that is going to fall on Jesus, and from Jesus is going to come life.

DAVE BAST

Let's look more closely at Zacchaeus and his encounter with Jesus in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are talking about Zacchaeus, Scott. We read the story of his encounter with Jesus in the town of Jericho as Jesus is passing through. It is kind of a parade atmosphere. It says, if you unpack some of the details, Jesus is surrounded by this crowd and it is like a procession going through the streets, which would have been narrow and crowded anyway, and Zacchaeus ran ahead to find a spot. It is like going down the parade route and getting up high so you can see down into it.

What do we know about him? Luke gives some very telling information. He sketches his character in just a few details.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, he tells us he was a tax collector, which in Jesus' day would have been one huge negative; and then he throws in a very short, little line: And he was rich. Which, again, to the people who heard this and read this and who knew Zacchaeus, that is a bad combination, because a rich tax collector is a tax collector on the take. This is someone who is overcharging people for taxes; but worse than that in Jewish circles in the first century, if you were a tax collector, you were working for Rome, which meant you were working for the enemy. Rome was occupying Palestine. They were occupying the Promised Land; the homeland of the Jewish people; of God's covenant people. It was occupied territory. Tax collectors were seen as collaborators. It would be like in Germany, a Jew who collaborated with the Nazis, or somebody who works with the Mafia in our present world.

So, being a tax collector was already a negative; being a wealthy tax collector probably made you even more unpopular because you were enriching yourself at the expense of your fellow countrymen.

DAVE BAST

Right. In fact, that is exactly how it worked. The Romans had a policy called tax farming, where they would find somebody and give that person the concession for taxation for a given district, and all they told them was: We want x-amount every quarter or every year or whatever it was; and we do not care how and what you do to get it, and we do not actually care how much you get. You can keep whatever is left over. So, you can imagine the opportunities for corruption, and how hated a guy like Zacchaeus would have been.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, if you are a short person – and Luke tells us he was short in stature, Zacchaeus was – a parade is a tough thing, but if you are a short tax collector who is despised, nobody is going to help you. Nobody was going to say to Zacchaeus: You know what? We know you would like to see Jesus, so here; you stand on the curb. You stand in front of us. You take a prominent spot so you can see him. Nobody was going to help Zacchaeus. Nobody was going to give him a box to stand on. Nobody was going to let him stand in front of them. He is on his own. If he wants to see Jesus, he is going to have to take care of it himself; and so, he climbs up a tree.

Dave, when I preached on this a while back, I thought: It goes without saying – we do not always think about it – but, it goes without saying, Zacchaeus did not want to be seen in that tree. How undignified for one of Jericho's leading, most wealthy citizens to be up a tree. I thought, can you imagine in New York City today a parade going down Fifth Avenue and all of a sudden you see the billionaire, Donald Trump, climbing up a

light pole on Fifth Avenue so he can see? What an undignified position for a prestigious person to be in. Zacchaeus is hiding in that sycamore tree, and you almost have to wonder, was there a moment before Jesus called his name when he looked around and said: Now, how did I end up here? How am I so alone in life that I am in this undignified position? You wonder if spiritually something was going through his head already then to say: Man, how did I end up in this position? I think I might be kind of lost. Nobody likes me. It is sad.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think that is true. I think you can read that into the details of this story because clearly this guy is a loner; he is the loneliest man in town. First of all, if you are a rich person in a community where everyone else is poor, you are not likely to have very many friends anyway, unless they are playmates with whom you grew up, and you all started out the same, because people just relate differently to that sort of figure; and then you get the sense that he is hiding and he is curious; he wants to see Jesus and see what all the excitement is about. He has no doubt heard a lot about him, but he does not actually want to meet Jesus. We mentioned the rich, young ruler – the story that happens just before this. There are so many contrasts here; he is like a mirror image. The rich, young ruler comes strolling up to Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He gets right in Jesus' face.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; because he is confident – self-confident – he is respected; he is admired. He also was wealthy, but no doubt, his money was inherited. He got it the right way; he was not this little money-grubbing tax collector. Zacchaeus, in contrast, is shrinking from Jesus; he is torn with the desire to see him, but yet not be seen; and he does not dare approach him; and then, a totally different reaction that Jesus has with the two, also.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes. The rich, young ruler was convinced he was Jesus' kind of guy. Zacchaeus was convinced he was not Jesus' kind of guy; if Jesus was at all a religious, holy figure, Zacchaeus as a tax collector on the take knew: No, I am not his kind of person, but I am curious; I still want to see him; and so, he climbs up in the tree. Again, I wonder if he – we all get into situations like that, where we say: Now, how did I end up here? Why am I having dinner alone? How did I end up in this bar by myself? Why am I going to the movies by myself to escape my troubles? How did I end up here, and is there anybody who cares? I wonder if Zacchaeus thought that?

DAVE BAST

I cannot help but feel like he is thinking to himself: All right, I will just stay up here until everyone passes by...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, he did not want to be seen...

DAVE BAST

And then, when they are all gone – when they all follow Jesus out of town – I will climb down and go back to my office and everything will be okay. Nobody will know... And then comes this terrible moment when Jesus stops right underneath the tree and looks up, and of course, the whole crowd would have to stop, too; and no doubt, they all looked up; and I do not know if he shook his finger at him or not...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, like the song...

DAVE BAST

But, he called him out, didn't he?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a wonderful example – another example – particularly in Luke’s Gospel – that Jesus had this uncanny knack for spotting the invisible people. Jesus was always able to see through to the people on the margins; the people everybody else was passing by; the blind beggars or the lonely prostitute, or whoever it was – Jesus somehow was always able to pick them out of the crowd; or in this case, pick him out from among the sycamore leaves; he looks right up at him and calls his name. That is startling, too. How did Jesus know his name?

DAVE BAST

Right. Maybe he was a famous character in that area; maybe somebody had told him about Zacchaeus; maybe they had been complaining about Zacchaeus’ predations; but again, the rich, young ruler comes to Jesus and goes away sorrowful; Jesus comes to Zacchaeus and invites him down. When Jesus looks at Zacchaeus, he does not see a little man or a rich man or a tax collector; he just sees somebody who is lost and who needs him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A lost child of Abraham.

DAVE BAST

Right; and down he comes, and that is where we are headed next – home with Jesus and Zacchaeus to dinner.
Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in the story, Dave, that we are in from Luke 19 – the first part of Luke 19 – we have seen this little man; this little cheat of a tax collector named Zacchaeus; a lonely figure, in a way. He wanted to see Jesus; he climbed into a tree to hide there and spy on Jesus because he maybe did not feel worthy of trying to meet Jesus, and yet, Jesus meets him. He looks straight up, sees this poor guy, this lost soul, and calls him down by name and says: I have to come to your house today.

We are told in the text, and you read it earlier in the first segment, Dave, that Zacchaeus comes and welcomes Jesus gladly, and that is how most translations have it, but thanks to my colleague at Calvin Seminary, something very interesting was pointed out to me just recently. My colleague, Dean Deppe, who teaches New Testament, pointed out that the Greek word there is the word *kairon*, which is the word *to rejoice*, to be full of joy, and in Luke, that is always the word that signals salvation. So, salvation comes to Zacchaeus right here. As soon as he comes down the tree rejoicing, that is the sign that salvation has come; which in this story is important, because otherwise you could conclude that Jesus saves him only later at dinner...

DAVE BAST

After he shapes up and reforms his life, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but it turns out, this is the fruit of his salvation...

DAVE BAST

It is an act of grace. This is a wonderful parable of... we called it conversion earlier; we could also just say grace, salvation – anybody who hears Jesus’ voice calling and inviting, who responds gladly – that is the moment...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the moment of salvation.

DAVE BAST

At which it happens; but, there is a very different reaction, isn't there, from the onlookers.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, everything flips here, doesn't it? So, Zacchaeus is hiding because he does not feel worthy. The crowds must feel worthy because they are jostling with Jesus. Then as soon as Jesus calls Zacchaeus, the crowds turn on Jesus; and now they are saying: Well, once again, he is hanging out with all the wrong people. Doesn't he know who this guy is? Doesn't he know how many of us he has scammed? He is going to the house of this tax scammer? What is going on?! They criticize Jesus once again for the company he keeps.

DAVE BAST

Yes, what does it say? They began to mutter, is the way it is translated in the NIV, which we read earlier in the program. They began to mutter: ^{7b} "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner;" and that carries strong overtones of Luke Chapter 15, which is perhaps the most famous chapter in this whole middle section – the whole journey to Jerusalem section – because it is the chapter of the three great parables that describe the searching, seeking, saving God, and that chapter is introduced with exactly the same reaction from the crowd. The crowd is murmuring, is angry, is criticizing Jesus because he hangs around and eats with tax collectors and sinners, it says in Luke* 15:1, 2. In response to that, Jesus tells them the story about the shepherd going out to seek the lost sheep; the woman sweeping her house to find the lost coin; and the father welcoming his lost son, and then the elder brother of the prodigal, who also looks very complainingly, very censoriously, on this gracious God who in Jesus reaches out to the Zacchaeus's of the world; the people on the margin, as you said.

SCOTT HOEZEE

By the way, another connection to Luke 15, Dave – that just reminded me – all three of those parables of lost and found in Luke 15 – the sheep, the coin, the son – the prodigal son, as we often call him – all three of them end with *kairon* – they all end with rejoicing, which is another reason why we know...

DAVE BAST

Same word.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; when Zacchaeus comes down the sycamore tree rejoicing, that is the signal in Luke that this is a salvation moment; so now, Zacchaeus is like Ebenezer Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol*; he wakes up Christmas Day a different man; he gladly has Jesus into his house; whips together whatever food he has around, and then makes this grand announcement that he is going to pay back multifold anybody he has cheated. He is not interested in money anymore; he is not interested in just feathering his own nest; now he is interested in repairing the damage and in being a servant.

DAVE BAST

Right. Incidentally, another point of contrast with the rich, young ruler – Jesus told him: You know what? Money has a hold on you; you have to sell what you have and give it to the poor and come follow me. Zacchaeus jumps up immediately, without Jesus telling him to do anything, and says: All right; here and now, half of what I have right now goes to the poor and I will save the rest to pay restitution four times anybody that I have cheated. So, he actually does what the rich, young ruler failed to do in voluntarily divesting himself for the sake of others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jesus then turns to the crowd – to all of those mutterers – and Luke turns to us as readers of this story, actually – and Jesus basically says: There now; this is what the Son of Man came to do; to bring this kind of new life, where before there had only been spiritual death and loneliness; this is what I came to do; to seek and save the lost and to make them found, and in the finding, new life bursts out all over.

I think this story – like so many stories in Luke that we have seen before, Dave – this story, I think, is a challenge to all of us who maybe are prone to mutter about the bad people in our world; the people on the margins; the people we do not much reach out to; the Church does not always reach out to them, or when they show up in the church sometimes we hope they will just go away again. Do we have the eyes of Jesus, to spy the lonely and the marginalized? The people who are literally up a tree in life, right? Do we have the ability to see them the way Jesus saw them and hope for new life for them, and then see all of the joy and all of the new life that bursts out? It is a challenge to us to always be on the lookout for just those people.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think, too, we should ask ourselves, not only how we see other people, but how do we see Jesus? Do we see our need of him? Do we hear him call our name? Are we willing to receive him gladly? And then, will we turn and extend that to others? The point is, Zacchaeus did not deserve what happened to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Absolutely not.

DAVE BAST

He was a bad person. He had done – regularly done – terrible things, and he deserved, in a sense, to be ostracized; but Jesus is the great changer of people like that.

I like what you said about how we turn and view others. Are we always constantly muttering and criticizing and thinking, “Well, they do not deserve this, that, or the other.” Well, neither do I. That is the beautiful thing about grace. It comes to those who do not deserve it, but if you will receive it gladly; if you will rejoice in him; you, too, will be saved.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always like to know how we can help you dig into the scriptures. So, visit groundworkonline.com; tell us topics or passages that you would like us to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

***Correction:** The audio of this program misstates the reference for this passage as Matthew 15:1,2. The correct reference is Luke 15:1,2.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/zacchaeus>

Printed on August 1, 2025