

Salvation – The Hope of Personal Transformation

The story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 is one of the most memorable in the New Testament, no doubt due in part to the children’s song that has etched in our minds the image of a “wee little man, who climbed up in a sycamore tree.” But the story contains a message that is sadly being neglected in some corners of the church world. It is the message that salvation in Christ brings not only the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life in heaven, but prospect of personal transformation. Our Sunday Schools teach 2 Corinthians 5:17 as a memory verse: “Therefore if any man is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” However, the reality of that verse is slow to penetrate our hearts, minds and experience. Too often Christians languish in a spiritual rut, spinning their wheels and going nowhere. No discernible progress or spiritual movement is evident in their lives. It is to this scenario that the story of Zacchaeus speaks so powerfully.

I. Enter the Villain

Luke introduces the main character of his story in the briefest fashion. “There was a man called by name Zaccheus.” English readers seldom catch the innuendo of the Greek sentence structure. Luke is undoubtedly calling attention to the man’s name, which is derived from the Hebrew root¹ meaning “pure” or “acquitted one.” The irony drips from Luke’s pen with the ensuing words, “and he was a chief tax collector”. Tax collectors were local Jews hired by cities and towns to collect taxes for the Romans. Zaccheus was a “chief” tax collector which meant he probably had supervision over a region and a

¹ If Frederick Danker is correct and *Zachaios* is derived from the Hebrew root זָכַח then his name points to the moral character of purity or uprightness. See F. Danker, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University Press, 2000), 214. Cf. R. L. Harris, G.L. Archer and B.K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 548.

number of tax collectors. Luke's words "and he was rich" would certainly not go unnoticed by Jews in Jesus' day. The privilege of collecting taxes was offered at a steep price and those who held that job set tax rates that often exceeded by far any quotas demanded by Rome. While having no authority to confiscate funds or property, they could exact severe penalties by reporting tax delinquency to the Romans. This they often did whether the charges were true or not.² Keep in mind also that "tax-collectors" were notorious for their corruption and the mere mention of their name aligned them with "sinners." (See Mt 9:11; Mk 2:15f; Lk 5:30). And so here Luke presents an arch villain who is ironically named. He was anything but pure or blameless in character; he was, in fact, the exact opposite.

II. The Action of Zaccheus

But this notorious sinner is soon found to be in a *seeking* mode. How and when he heard about Jesus we do not know. What kind of report sparked his desire to see Jesus is also unknown. However, what we read paints an ironic and even comical picture. Zaccheus was obviously well-known in the area (v.7) at least by reputation. His position and wealth would have placed him at the highest echelon of societal status. But this "big" man in society was woefully lacking in physical stature. He who often looked down at people from his pinnacle of societal power could not see Jesus over the crowd. Although left unstated, I cannot help but conclude that only an unseen and desperate spiritual need could have forced a man of his status to take up the humiliating posture of an adolescent "tree-climber."

² Everett Ferguson points out that the word translated "defrauded" in 19:8 (Gk. *sukophanteo*) actually means to "bring false charges." See E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 2nd ed., 1993), 88.

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III. The Call and Invitation of Jesus

The irony continues when Jesus stops under this sycamore tree and calls him to come down. With all eyes drawn to this despised tax-collector, the potential for a prophetic rebuke was possible and perhaps even anticipated by the crowd. But Jesus does not berate him or add to his obvious humiliating posture. Instead he honors him by calling him by name and declaring his desire to be a guest at his house.

IV. The Transforming Fellowship

What Luke omits from the cries out for completion. Except for the peoples’ complaint that Jesus was going as a guest to the home of a sinner,³ Luke says nothing about what happened next. Instead we find Zacchaeus stopping⁴ and saying to the Lord,

³ This undoubtedly they regarded as a gross social and religious indiscretion.

⁴ Whether this happened on the way to Zacchaeus’ house, or in the house some time during their visit is not certain, although the latter is more probable.

“Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded⁵ anyone of anything, I will give them back four times as much.” Embedded in these words are all the marks of true repentance: a recognition of sin, a willingness to make restitution, and a commitment to embark on a path of righteousness. Somehow, perhaps while fellowshiping with Jesus in his home, the *taker* was transformed into a *giver*. The greedy cheat who defrauded people was given a benevolent and just heart. Zacchaeus even adopts the spirit of the Law when he commits to making restitution for past sins (See Ex 22:1-4). Nothing can account for this dramatic change, except the grace of God that produces repentance.

Concluding Thoughts and Application:

Zacchaeus’ story while unique to Luke’s Gospel is not unique at all. It tells the story of personal transformation made possible by a faith-encounter with Jesus Christ. It illustrates the transforming effects of that encounter. Through the preaching of the Gospel people are called to a transforming fellowship with God and his Son, Jesus Christ (1Jn 1:3). At conversion sinners experience an inner transformation that reorients their entire lives. They become subjects and citizens of a new Kingdom (see Col 1:13; Phil 3:20), who are *in* the world but no longer *of* the world. In a very real sense, all things become new (cf. 2Cor 5:17). Regeneration (“being born again”) and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit initiates the process of becoming transformed into the image of Christ (Rm 8:28f; 2Cor 3:18; Tit 3:5).

To the Jews of Jesus’ day, Zacchaeus was unlikely candidate for spiritual transformation, but perhaps that is Luke’s reason for including the story. May we be

⁵ The Greek syntax indicates that what is described in the “if” clause of this conditional sentence is assumed to be “true.”

encouraged to see people not merely as they are, but with eyes of faith that images what they can be by the transforming grace of God.