

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **When Salvation Arrives**

Luke 19:1-10

After hearing last Sunday's text about Levi, combined with today's text about Zacchaeus, you may be thinking it's not only tax season in our country but also tax season in the pulpit of Grace Baptist Church. Here we have back to back stories about Jesus' encounters with revenue collectors.

Speaking of revenue collection, our church recently received its copy of Richard Hammar's *2017 Church & Clergy Tax Guide*, which I have here with me. On the cover, it bills itself as "The Most Comprehensive and Authoritative Tax Guide Available." Comprehensive means thorough. And thorough, as you can see, means thick. This volume is larger than the Bible that most of you brought with you today. Though it doesn't rise to the level of Scripture, Hammar's book is the one that many people turn to for authoritative guidance on United States tax law as it relates to churches. The bottom line: This volume can't save your soul, but it can definitely save you some trouble with the IRS.

When Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was passing through town, he raced out of his collection office, hoping to get a good view of the entourage. But by that point, a large crowd had already gathered. Being vertically challenged, Zacchaeus's first instinct was to pull out his copy of the *2017 Church & Clergy Tax Guide* and stand on it. But that still wouldn't give him enough elevation to get a glimpse of Jesus. So instead, Zacchaeus set aside his pride and started running, something that was considered very undignified for a grown man to do. So was climbing a tree, but Zacchaeus did that too. As preacher Walter Rauschenbusch once described it, this is like a corporate executive shinnying up a telephone pole.<sup>1</sup>

But for Zacchaeus, it was worth all the humiliation and effort. For one thing, he got a better view of Jesus. Yet more importantly, and probably unintentionally, Jesus got a better look at him. Jesus spotted Zacchaeus perched on the sycamore branch, and turned what could have been just a passing encounter into a full blown house call. "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

Notice that Zacchaeus doesn't think twice about Jesus' command. Zacchaeus doesn't say, "My house? Today? Right now? Okay, but can we schedule it for later this afternoon or in the evening? I just need a little time to grab some groceries for that tasty meal I want to prepare. Nothing but the best for you, Jesus. Plus it will take a while to tidy up the place. You know, clear all those stacks of 1040s off the kitchen table, take care of those piles of laundry, vacuum up all the pet hair, spray some Febreze. Just give me some extra time to get things ready, and I'll treat you to the best home visit that a member of the clergy ever had." Instead, Zacchaeus says to Jesus, "My house? Today? Right this minute? Sure, come on over! I wouldn't miss this opportunity for anything!"

Audrey West says, "That is how salvation works. We do not have to put things in order first, because salvation is not about being neat and orderly. It is not about making things look good, not about what we do, not about fitting into the world's stereotypes; it's not

about the good or bad labels by which we are known to ourselves or others.”<sup>2</sup> On the day that Jesus spotted him in the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus was known to others by many labels. Rich. Short. Successful. Shrewd. Greedy. Corrupt. Collaborator. Outcast. Sinner. You could hear many of these labels on the lips of the muttering crowd that spotted Jesus going home with Zacchaeus. As one translation renders it, they’re asking, “What business does he [Jesus] have getting cozy with this crook?”<sup>3</sup>

The same business Jesus has getting involved with any of us. Namely, our lostness and our need for salvation. The story of Jesus and Zacchaeus culminates with our Lord restating his mission: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (v. 10). “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, / and a wee little man was he. / He climbed up in a sycamore tree. / For the Lord he wanted to see.” But not nearly as much as the Lord wanted to see him. Remember that Jesus is doing some seeking of his own. And now, praise God, the one who was lost has been found.

This familiar story is a testimony to what’s possible when salvation arrives on the scene in Jesus. When salvation shows up in Jericho and pays a visit to Zacchaeus’s address, things happen. Things that many people thought would never happen, in that house, in that man, in that family. After all, lots of folks had already written off Zacchaeus. In their minds he was beyond the reach of redemption. Once a sinner, always a sinner. Maybe thinking that way gave them an inflated sense of security about their own status as children of Abraham. And yet, the mission of Jesus clearly shows that Abraham’s family is still a work in progress. Through Jesus’ ministry, spiritual kin are being added from all ranks of society, including the rich. Not that that’s easy to accomplish. As Jesus has already said, getting those with wealth into the reign of God is even harder than squeezing a camel through a needle’s eye. But what is humanly impossible is possible for God (Luke 18:27).

Shane Claiborne tells about an experience that once happened to a friend who is an urban youth pastor. He took a group of inner city kids to a Christian camp where they had bands, recreational activities, Bible teaching, and worship. These urban youth had been involved in gangs and drugs, so the pastor wasn’t sure if they would connect with the Christian camp setting. On the way to the retreat, the van had a flat tire. The pastor went to change the tire but the spare didn’t fit. Then it started raining. As things went from bad to worse, the pastor finally snapped. He lost it, and started punching the van and cussing at it, with all the kids looking on. Finally, a roadside service came to help and everything got sorted out.

That evening, one of the youth gave his life to Christ, so the pastor asked him to tell him what it was like and what was going on in his heart. Was it the band? Was it the message? But the young man answered, “Oh no man, it was on the way up there when I saw you lose it and start punching and cussing at the van. Then I thought if Jesus can save you he can save me.”<sup>4</sup>

“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham” (v. 9). Jesus can save Zacchaeus. He can save you. He can save me. No one is beyond the reach of his grace. That’s why Jesus is still claiming children for Abraham’s family. He’s still adding to the people of God. He’s still bringing people into the kingdom. No need for us to go stand on the edge of the church property and see if Jesus comes down Highway 210 on his way through Bryans Road, so we can at least catch a glimpse of him. No, he’s already on the scene in our community, and among us here today, seeking and saving what’s lost.

If you wonder what it means for what’s lost to be found, and what salvation looks like, look at Zacchaeus. Look at what begins taking shape in his life. And I stress that word “begins,” because the transformation of Zacchaeus’s heart and mind, the remaking of his

relationships with others, the reshaping of his economic practices, happens not just in a moment but over the course of time. The pledge Zacchaeus makes in the story is in the present tense, but with future implications. He promises greater giving to the poor and restitution for anyone he has cheated. Whomever he may have wronged, he wants to make it right.

That sounds sort of like Wells Fargo, where our family does its banking. You may recall revelations that bankers met unrealistic sales goals by opening as many as two million bogus accounts for existing customers and noncustomers. With those fake accounts came fees that added to the company's bottom line. Wells Fargo's CEO was called to testify before Congress. The company paid huge fines to federal regulators. I suppose there's still the possibility of civil or criminal charges. No wonder that late last year, Wells Fargo launched an advertising campaign as part of a push to repair its brand and restore customer confidence. At the heart of the company's contrition is their statement, "We're making changes to make things right."

What if Zacchaeus hung a sign bearing that message on the door to his Jericho tax office. "I'm making changes to make things right." Or imagine his victims receiving an official letter in the mail. They assume it's one of those letters notifying them of penalties and fees for underpaying what they actually owed, coupled with threats of enforcement by Roman soldiers coming to collect. But instead the letter notifies them that the error is on the government's side, and now they're due a huge refund. Signed, Zacchaeus. "Zacchaeus?" the local residents say to themselves. "This can't be the Zacchaeus we know, unless he's had a change of heart. What's gotten into him?"

Actually, Jesus has gotten into him, and according to today's text, into Zacchaeus's household as well. That's because when Jesus arrives and is welcomed by faith, and what's lost starts getting saved, repentance starts to show up too, taking visible form in the here and now. Remember that conversion to Christ isn't just about securing an eternal place in the reign of God. Salvation involves not only your final destiny in the hereafter, either in the kingdom of God or excluded from the kingdom of God, but the shape of your life in the here and now as well. In other words, not just life after death but life before death. A reign of God kind of life that evidences the saving presence of Christ in you.

And it all begins by seeking after the one who has already been seeking after you, and seeing the one who already sees you. He has come here today, revealed to us in the story of Zacchaeus, a story about the scope and reach of God's saving power.

There's no town where Jesus can't go and no door, or heart, that he can't open. He can bring outsiders in and send insiders out, with greater compassion for the lost. Jesus can transform greed into generosity, and fraud into restitution. He can repair damaged relationships and heal divided communities. He can bring down barriers and build up common purpose. He can make things right between you and God, and between you and others. Jesus has come to bring God's saving power to bear on every dimension of your life—personal, social, domestic, economic. He can summon someone to come down from a tree or to get up from a pew, recognizing that it's time to start following him. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

<sup>1</sup> Referenced by Paul D. Duke, "A Festive Repentance." *The Christian Century* (October 18, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Audrey West, "House Calls." *The Christian Century* (October 16, 2007) 23.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 166.

<sup>4</sup> Shane Claiborne, "Dirty Theology." A sermon at Duke University Chapel. April 3, 2011.