

Snapshots of Ruin and Rescue

Luke 19:1-10

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While you probably know the Sunday school song about Zacchaeus the tax collector, chances are you may not understand the extent of his sin and the miraculous nature of his restoration. Only Jesus Christ can deliver the kind of life-transforming grace that would cause the richest cheat in Israel to become a compassionate, benevolent, above-and-beyond kind of follower of Christ.

If you grew up in a typical Sunday school class, more than likely you learned the same little chorus like I did:

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
A wee little man was he;
He climbed up in the sycamore tree,
For the Lord he wanted to see;
And as the Savior passed that way,
He looked up in the tree;
And He said, "Zacchaeus, you come down;
For I'm going to your house today –
For I'm going to your house today.*

Frankly, that chorus might summarize just about all we know about Zacchaeus: he was short, he climbed a tree, and Jesus made a house call.

Maybe that's because Luke is the only Gospel writer who includes this encounter. And Luke presents it rather quickly. This event took several hours to complete, yet Luke compresses it down to a few minutes.

Luke shows it to us like he's taking quick snapshots—one after another, the kind your child takes when they get their hands on your smartphone!

Let's take a closer look at what I'd like to call, Snapshots of Ruin and Rescue.

We're in Luke chapter 19 now; let me tell you that the difference between your child's snapshots and Luke's is that every one of these snapshots here tell a story and add to the drama.

We'll call the first snapshot:

A Picture of Luxury

Just the opening verse:

He (Jesus) entered Jericho and was passing through.

Luke 19:1

If you were with us in our last study, Jesus is now heading toward Jerusalem; it's a matter of days now before He will die on a cross.

He's passing through Jericho, but it isn't a detour, it is deliberate.

As one author put it, God never does anything in passing, He does everything on purpose.

Adapted from J. Seth Davey, "Filthy Rich but Dirt Poor," *Heart to Heart Magazine*, October 12, 2023

Now Jesus arrives in what we know as New Jericho, a city expanded and refurbished by King Herod. Jericho was an oasis—the perfect spot for his vacation palace.

Wealthy people built vacation homes in Jericho. The politically well-connected would come for retreats and conferences in Jericho to enjoy the bathhouses of marble and palace receptions with members of the royal family.

The city had an elite, opulent population of entrepreneurs and executives of the trade industry.

It was nicknamed "The Little Paradise" in the first century. It became famous for its manicured landscapes, famous for its rose gardens that were said to perfume the air for miles around. It had become world-famous for balsam trees that were grown in this region.

Balsam was a main export from Jericho; it was turned into lotions and cleansing agents. Today it's an essential oil, used for relaxation and stress relief. Back in Jesus' Day it was considered to have healing properties.

History records that the streets of Jericho were lined with Palm trees, another nickname for this opulent city was "The City of Palms."

But history also records that some of the streets in Jericho were lined with sycamore trees, a type of tree in this region that looked more like an oak tree with large leaves and thick low branches.

Adapted from [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1](#) (Zondervan, 2002), p. 463

The perfect tree for climbing.

Well, this was a city of millionaires; it was the picture of luxury.

Now Luke gives us another snapshot, we'll caption this one:

A Picture of Misery

Now it might not seem like misery at first, Luke writes here in verse 2:

And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich.

Luke 19:2

This word for **“rich”** is used by Luke just a few paragraphs earlier, in **chapter 18** where it is translated **“extremely rich, incredibly rich.”** We might say today he was “filthy rich.”

There's nothing inherently filthy about being rich.

But in Zacchaeus' case, it was indeed ill-gotten gain.

Let me give you a little more backstory to this snapshot.

Jericho happened to be a major intersection for trade routes leading to other cities and other countries. Tariffs and tolls and customs on exports and imports brought cash flowing into Jericho and then into the coffers of the Roman Empire.

Jericho was one of the three largest taxation centers in this part of the world.

William Hendriksen, [New Testament Commentary: Luke](#) (Baker Book House, 1978), p. 855

The Roman government sold the right of taxation in these Jewish territories to Jewish men who were willing to do the unthinkable: to collect taxes from Jewish people which in turn financed their oppressors, the Roman empire.

Because of it, the Jewish people hated tax collectors as traitors and turncoats.

Two kinds of people were most despised during these days: lepers and tax collectors.

Tax collectors were barred from the synagogue, which was the center of Jewish society and family and festivals. A tax collector basically said goodbye to friends, extended family, their own people and even God.

They were considered perpetually unclean. Everybody would have avoided them like the plague.

They had everything, but knew they had nothing.

This is a snapshot of misery.

But it gets worse: Luke tells us here that Zacchaeus was a *chief tax collector*, a term used only here in Luke's Gospel.

For those of you who are new to our study, the Roman government gave tax collectors free reign to assess the value of goods moving through the region and then determine the tax.

An honest tax collector didn't get rich. But a dishonest one did; they inflated the value of the goods, charged more than was due, paid the Roman government their fair share, and then pocketed the rest.

So, Luke isn't just tossing words around when he writes here that ***Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and he was rich.***

Which is another way of saying, "And he was a criminal."

He was the godfather of a corrupt enterprise; he was the CEO of Extortion Incorporated. He was cold and shrewd.

He could look you in the eye and tell you the value of your goods and know he was lying and never even blink.

We also know by this phrase that Zacchaeus would have been one of the three most hated Jewish men in Israel because there were only three ***chief tax collectors*** in the land.

The other two lived in Capernaum and Caesarea.

Hendriksen, p. 855

All three men would have had dozens of busy subordinate tax collectors working for them, carrying out their unethical commands.

Now Zacchaeus was old enough to have risen through the ranks to become one of only three men who had this kind of power.

Which means for decades he had lived his life cheating one person, one business, one tradesman after another until he had become—outside of royalty—one of the richest men in Jericho.

But this isn't a snapshot of a satisfied man. By now, Zacchaeus was middle-aged, calloused, hardened by crime, opulent, but empty.

To add to the irony here is the fact that Zacchaeus was a Jewish name, derived from a Hebrew word that means, "innocent" or "pure."

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 436

Zacchaeus knew he was anything but innocent and pure. He was probably old enough to wonder what would happen to him after he died.

What we do know is that he's so unfulfilled that he becomes rather desperate to catch a glimpse of this traveling rabbi, a rabbi he'd heard about who was willing to be seen with tax collectors, even eat a meal with them—and that was stunning to him, perhaps it gave him hope.

Perhaps Zacchaeus had heard the news that Jesus had changed the life of, perhaps, one of Zacchaeus' former employees: a subordinate tax collector named Matthew.

We don't know.

What we do know is that God's Spirit is going to chase Zacchaeus down the street and up a tree.

Now let's caption the next snapshot this way:

A Picture of Curiosity

Now verse 3:

And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.

Luke 19:3-4

I love the implications of all the divine activity going on behind the scenes.

Jesus has timed everything perfectly. He has given Zacchaeus enough time to give up on seeing through this crowd. Jesus knows which street is lined with sycamore trees and He turns down that street. Jesus knows how much time Zacchaeus needs to run ahead of the parade. Jesus knows how much time Zacchaeus needs to climb that tree—a tree with

foliage thick enough to hide him from sight, but Jesus knows what tree it is and which limb.

Walking through Jericho and down Sycamore Tree Lane wasn't accidental; it was intentional.

Jesus will save a blind man who cries out for mercy; Jesus is about to save a tax collector who knows he's empty. Zacchaeus thinks he wants to see Jesus; he has no idea Jesus wants to see him.

Middle Eastern gentlemen of this day and age didn't run, and they didn't climb trees. You can imagine his expensive clothing snagging on branches, but Zacchaeus really doesn't care, his curiosity will not leave him alone.

John Calvin, the reformer wrote, "Curiosity and simplicity are a preparation for faith."

Quoted in Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Courageous* (Victor Books, 1989), p. 72

Now Luke shows us another snapshot, we'll call this one:

A Picture of Urgency

Verse 5:

*And 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."*

Luke 19:5

In other words, "I don't care if you haven't vacuumed the carpet; I don't care if you haven't cut your lawn; I'm coming to your house **today**. I'm not asking you for an appointment, I'm not talking about tomorrow, I'm not even talking about later on today, I'm talking about right now. I don't know if you caught it, Zacchaeus, but I knew your name without being introduced."

You can hear this sense of immediacy, urgency from the Lord: "***Hurry, I must stay at your house today.***"

And not just for a quick bite to eat. The word Jesus uses here for "stay, stay at your house" can be translated "to take up lodging."

Fritz Reinecker and Cleon Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency Publishers, 1976), p. 197

"I'm coming over and I'll be staying for a while!"

Verse 6:

So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully.

Luke 19:6

He's probably got splinters in his hands, leaves in his hair, Zacchaeus' mind must have been racing: "This rabbi is the first rabbi who hasn't spit in my direction. And how does He know my name?!"

Jesus will use this encounter as an illustration; **look down at verse 10:**

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

Luke 19:10

This is the theme verse of the Gospel of Luke, this is the purpose statement of His incarnation.

Jesus is like a heat-seeking missile, He had left heaven and come to planet earth **to seek and to save the lost.**

This word for **save** can be translated "rescued," the word for **lost** can be translated "ruined."

Ibid

Jesus came to rescue ruined lives.

And something's going on here in the heart of Zacchaeus; he knew he was lost; he knew he was living a ruined life, and he needed to be rescued.

Why doesn't Jesus save everybody in Jericho? Why only two men, a blind beggar and crooked tax collector?

I talk to people all the time who are not saved because they don't want to be.

Jesus doesn't need to rescue them; they're lives aren't ruined without Him; they don't need to be found, they're just fine. And they are certainly not lost sinners. Who do you think you are?

That's what's happening here: this is a picture of unrepentant, unredeemed humanity.

Verse 7 spells it out:

And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

Luke 19:7

We aren't—that's not who we are! We're not sinners, but he sure is!

Now granted, this development would have been a huge surprise.

One author wrote that Jesus staying in the home of Zacchaeus was like accepting the hospitality of Al Capone.

Swindoll, p. 436

This was beyond comprehension.

So now get this picture: you've got thousands of people camped around the opulent estate of the chief tax collector—the town's biggest crook—and just about everybody out there on the lawn has been swindled by this man.

But now for an even bigger surprise. **Between verse 7 and verse 8**, there's that little white space. You remember that little white space between chapters or verses can sometimes represent days, or weeks—in this case, several hours.

Now Luke gives us now a snapshot as Jesus and Zacchaeus stop out on the front porch. This is—**number 5**:

A Picture of Sincerity

Verse 8:

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."

Luke 19:8

Now at first glance, Zacchaeus sounds like he might have to give a lot of money back. And that would be correct.

The Greek language has Zacchaeus using a first-class condition here. He isn't saying, "If I have defrauded anyone, and I'm going to have to check." Oh no, you could render it, "**And if I have defrauded anyone of anything—and I certainly have—I restore it fourfold.**"

People probably fainted out there on the lawn. They couldn't believe what they'd just heard.

According to the Law of Moses, it was only outright stealing that required a fourfold restitution. By the time of Jesus, Jewish law required someone to pay back only the amount of what they had stolen.

Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, p. 463

So, Zacchaeus is holding himself to the original standard, the highest standard; and he's also admitting that he was a premeditated thief.

Because his crimes were financial, one author wrote, he had detailed records in his office files along with invoices and tax receipts.

Adapted from Swindoll, p. 437

He has just promised to give half of his money, property, wealth, to the poor; and with the other half, which still would have been worth millions today, he promises to go through his books and make restitution at four-times-the-amount of his original theft.

And don't miss this: when Zacchaeus is finished, he will have given just about everything away.

He's not doing this so that he can be saved, he's doing this to demonstrate that he has been saved.

Jesus makes that clear, here in verse 9:

And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham."

Luke 19:9

Note that: "Today, salvation has come," not tomorrow when he pays all that money back, not after he sells his estate and gives half of the sale price to the poor. No, today.

Why? Because Zacchaeus has become a child of God by faith, a true son of Abraham. The apostle Paul writes, for Abraham by faith believed God, apart from works, **and God counted his faith as righteousness (Romans 4:3).**

Zacchaeus didn't become a follower of Christ because he helped the poor, or because he became poor, or because he admitted his crimes.

Zacchaeus did all of that because he wanted to demonstrate his sincerity; he wanted everybody in that town to know that the town's leading crook had become a follower of Christ.

Jesus had rescued a ruined life.

If you're a follower of Christ, you don't try to be an honest employee, a faithful spouse, a good student so that you can go to heaven, you want to live that way because you are going to heaven and you want everybody in your world to see the difference Jesus has made in your life.

I was at Home Depot some time ago, I went in and asked for some help loading 10 bags of fertilizer onto my truck.

A young man in his mid-20s came out and began to help me. When we finished, he asked me, “Have you rung this stuff up yet?” I said, “Not yet.” He said, “Listen, I’ll tell them you only got 5 bags of fertilizer; that’ll save you \$20 dollars and if you’ll give me \$10 dollars, you’ll save \$10 on the deal.”

Now I had noticed that he was wearing a tee shirt with the name of a church in town printed on the front.

So rather than say, “No thanks” and leave, I decided to hang around do a little digging; I looked at him and said, “So let me get this straight; you’re going to lie and you want me to steal?” He wasn’t expecting that response, which told me other people had done it. He just laughed nervously and said, “Well, you know, this stuff is overpriced anyway ...”

I said, “Did you forget what shirt you put on this morning?” He looked down and said, “Oh man.” I said, “I’m a pastor of a church in town too and I know who your pastor is, should I call him?” He said, “God’s after me.”

I said, “I think He is.” He admitted he was not living the way he should; he had accepted Christ, but he had strayed away, and he knew it. We had a little revival service out there in the parking lot of Home Depot that day.

He’d been chased up a tree, confronted with the truth of what he was doing, and he responded sincerely.

For Zacchaeus, he began on this day, living up to his name for the first time in his life—innocent and pure, cleansed by the forgiveness of Christ.

So as Jesus walks through Jericho one last time, He saves a blind man, Bartimaeus, who will become a faithful member in the church at Jerusalem.

He saves a chief tax collector. According to one church leader writing 150 years after this event, Clement of Alexandria, informs us that Zacchaeus left Jericho and went on to become the pastor of a church in Caesarea.

Adapted from Ivor Powell, [Luke's Thrilling Gospel](#) (Kregel Publications, 1965), p.

That was one of the other major tax centers in the Roman Empire and I imagine Zacchaeus made his over to the home of that chief tax collector in Caesarea.

I imagine Zacchaeus’ congregation would have included many tax collectors who had heard his testimony of the gospel and about that day when he climbed a sycamore tree, the day his ruined life had been rescued by Christ.

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