

Series: *Jesus the Master Evangelist*

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Title: "A Traitor Comes to Christ" (Luke 19:1-10, 18:9-14)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 5/10/2009

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In our last two messages we considered the account of Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler in Luke chapter 18. One of the most important things that we saw there is that the Gospel calls for a response. And there will always be a response to the Gospel. And we saw that there are only two kinds of responses. There are two kinds of outcomes when people are confronted with the claims of Jesus Christ.

There are two kinds of people – those who believe, and those who do not. On the one hand, there are those who come to Jesus as lost sinners, but do not stay in that condition. And on the other hand, there are those who come before the claims of Christ as lost sinners, but remain as lost sinners. And we saw in Luke chapter 18 that the rich young ruler was in that second category. He came to Jesus as a lost sinner. But having come face to face with the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ, the rich young ruler would not remain in His presence. He went away from Jesus, still a lost sinner.

But today we'll look at an encounter with Jesus Christ that produced an entirely different outcome. This is the account of Zacchaeus in the next chapter of the book of Luke, chapter 19. Zacchaeus comes to Jesus as a sinner, but He doesn't go away in the same condition. In fact, He remains with Jesus. And as He remains with Jesus, a great change takes place.

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Two Men – Much the Same, Yet Also Very Different

The rich young ruler and Zacchaeus are similar in ways. Both of them are rich men. Both of them are men of power and prominence in Israel.

But these two men are also very different. The rich young ruler is a respected man in Israel. Zacchaeus, on the other hand, is a despised man in Israel, as we shall see. And as we shall see, the rich young ruler and Zacchaeus approach Jesus in two entirely different ways. For the rich young ruler, there is one result – a sad result. But for Zacchaeus, there is an entirely different result – a joyful result.

We saw that the rich young ruler refused to understand who Jesus really was. He saw Jesus as just another one of the Jewish rabbis, and not the Son of God. And the rich young ruler approached Jesus on the basis of his own self-righteousness. He thought that he was so good that if he added just one more thing to the pile of merit that he thought he had accumulated with God, then he would have eternal life by right of inheritance. He refused to admit that he needed a Savior. He refused to admit that he could not save himself.

We saw that Jesus responded to the rich young ruler in a way that showed him his lost condition, showed him his need of a Savior, a way that would lead him to repentance. But the young man refused to face the facts about himself, and more importantly, he refused to face the facts about Christ. And so he went away from Jesus, still in his lost condition.

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Lessons for Our Own Gospel Proclamation

We also saw how the account of Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler instructs us about our own witness for Christ.

We saw that Biblical evangelism presents the Gospel from Scripture. We should always do that, because Jesus Christ, God Himself, the Master Evangelist, always did that. We saw that we need to proclaim a full-orbed Gospel. We need to proclaim the bad news of man's lost condition first, so that the Gospel of salvation in Christ does indeed become "good news." We also saw that Biblical evangelism then draws man's attention to Jesus Christ as the only answer to his sin problem.

We also saw that we need to proclaim the truth to the lost with love, as Jesus did. And we need to proclaim the truth to the lost with respect, as Jesus did.

And finally we saw that Biblical evangelism demands a response, in Christ's name. And in that connection we read 2nd Corinthians chapter 5, verses 20 and 21: "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Zacchaeus' Encounter With Jesus

And with these lessons in mind, let's turn now to the account of Zacchaeus, in Luke chapter 19 beginning at verse 1. Luke chapter 19 beginning at verse 1:

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Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich.

And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully.

But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner."

Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold."

And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Luke 19:1-10)

The Scene Before Us

As we look at the account of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus, I would like for us to approach it in the same way as we did the account of the rich young ruler. We need to take note of several things in the account itself, and then we also need to

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consider what this account tells us about how we should bear witness for Christ ourselves.

When the rich young ruler had come to Jesus, Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. Jesus was on the east side of the Jordan River, in the regions called Decapolis and Perea, which were about 60 miles from Jerusalem. But some time has passed, and Jesus and the disciples have now journeyed westward across the Jordan River, and they have come to the city of Jericho, which was less than 20 miles from Jerusalem. Jesus and His disciples are on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. And not only that, Jesus is going up to Jerusalem for the last time. He is not only going up to partake of the Passover. He is going up to Jerusalem to be the Passover. He is going to Jerusalem to fulfill all that the Passover feast foreshadowed, by giving His own life on the cross as a ransom for many.

But as Jesus is going up to Jerusalem, He is ministering along the way. Preaching, teaching, healing people, calling sinners to repentance. Jesus and His disciples are going up to Jerusalem as part of the crowds of people who made that pilgrimage every year. And on His way to Jerusalem, Jesus enters and passes through the city of Jericho, and there we find Zacchaeus.

One of Israel's Most Hated Men

Once again, as with the rich young ruler, Luke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit only tells us a few things about Zacchaeus in this passage. God tells us four

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things in particular. We read that Zacchaeus was “a chief tax collector” – that is, he was a publican. And we read that Zacchaeus was rich. We also read that Zacchaeus was a short man – small of stature. And we also come to understand that Jericho was the city where Zacchaeus lived.

Zacchaeus was “a chief tax collector.” In the King James Version it is translated, “the chief among the publicans.” The publicans were the tax collectors in Israel. Now this doesn’t just mean that Zacchaeus was that hated man from the Internal Revenue Service. It was far worse than that. In Israel, the tax collectors were viewed as traitors and thieves.

Why was that? The publicans in Israel collected the taxes for the hated Roman Empire, the empire that ruled Palestine at the time. This is the time of the Caesars. Publicans were Jews who bought tax collection franchises from the Roman government. And any amount they collected over and above what Rome required, they could keep for themselves. So if you really owed the Roman government a thousand dollars, the publican might tell you that you owed fifteen hundred. And so the publican would send the thousand you really owed on to Rome, and keep the extra five hundred for himself. And so in this way many publicans became wealthy at the expense of their own people. They gained their income by treachery and theft.

And Zacchaeus would have been the most hated of this hated profession, because he was the chief tax collector. To put it in modern terms, tax collection in Israel was

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sort of a cross between a pyramid scheme and a protection racket. As the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus had other tax collectors working for him. And as those men collected money for the Roman government, they would take a cut off the top for themselves. And the men who worked for Zacchaeus would also have to pay Zacchaeus a part of the money that they cheated out of the people, in addition to the dishonest money that Zacchaeus collected directly from the people himself.

No wonder the publicans were hated men. That is why the Jewish leaders criticized Jesus for going into the homes of the tax collectors and eating with them. And remember that Matthew, one of Jesus disciples, had been a tax collector before he left everything to follow the Lord.

But with some of the Jews, their hatred of the publicans was a self-righteous hatred. Turn back just a page or two in your Bibles to Luke chapter 18, beginning at verse 9. Just before the rich young ruler came to Jesus, we read in Luke chapter 18 beginning at verse 9 that Jesus spoke a parable. And that parable foreshadows Jesus' impending encounters with the rich young ruler, and with Zacchaeus.

Notice, chapter 18, verse 9, that Jesus "spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." And this is what He said:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers,

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or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

Jesus speaks of two men – one a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, the other a despised tax collector. Jesus speaks of two approaches to God – one man thoroughly caught up in his own self-righteous pride, the other man so convicted of his sin that he comes to God in humility, begging mercy. And Jesus speaks of two entirely different results. Notice Luke chapter 18, verse 14 – "I tell you, this man" – the publican, the tax collector, the despised sinner – he "went down to his house justified rather than the [the self-righteous Pharisee], for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

No doubt, Jesus' disciples were listening as He spoke this parable. And Jesus was not only speaking a parable against His immediate hearers; He was also foretelling what the disciples were about to see within the next few days, as they encountered first the rich young ruler who trusted in his own righteousness, and then, a few days later, the publican Zacchaeus.

Seeking the Authentic Jesus

So now let's turn back over to chapter 19 and see what happens with Zacchaeus. Notice, in verses 3 and 4, that Zacchaeus approaches Jesus in an entirely different

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way from the rich young ruler. The rich young ruler assumed that he understood who Jesus was, but he was wrong. But Zacchaeus wants to truly understand who Jesus is. Obviously, Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus. But now that Jesus has come to Jericho, Zacchaeus wants to see and understand exactly who He is.

It is interesting that the word for "see" in this verse is not the Greek word that means "to see with the eyes." The word that is used here is a different word that means, "to possess information about something or someone." The idea in the original language is that Zacchaeus kept on asking, he kept on trying to get information about Jesus – not just his physical identity, but more than that. In the original language, the literal rendering is like this: "he kept on seeking to obtain information and understanding about the Jesus." He wanted to identify this person who was the Jesus, the authentic Jesus.

And unlike the rich young ruler, Zacchaeus approaches Jesus in humility. Because Zacchaeus was a short man, and because there was a crowd around Jesus as he walked along, we're told in verse 4 that Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a tree.

Now in Israel both of the things that Zacchaeus did were considered to be undignified things for a man of wealth and power to do. A man of wealth and power didn't run anywhere. He proceeded with dignity. And a man of wealth and power didn't climb a tree to gain a vantage point. A man of wealth and power made other people get out of his way.

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But Zacchaeus wasn't going to stand on his pride. Even if it meant that he had to run ahead of the crowd and climb a tree, Zacchaeus was determined to see who Jesus was.

The Saving Plan of God Unfolds

And notice how Jesus responds to Zacchaeus. As Jesus is coming along, He looks up and sees Zacchaeus up in the sycamore tree, and He says to him, verse 5 – "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must abide in your house." The force of the original language is that Jesus is saying, "Zacchaeus, it is necessary for me to stay in your house today." This is necessary in the plan of God. So make haste, hurry, get down out of that tree, because we are going to your house.

And notice also how Zacchaeus responds to Jesus. We read in verse 6 that Zacchaeus made haste, came down, and received Jesus into his home joyfully. The idea in the original is that Zacchaeus receives Jesus into his home with delight.

You would think a man who was such a hated sinner might have feared to have the Lord come into his home. You would think such a man might have been embarrassed. But not Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus receives the Lord Jesus Christ with humility and joy. Zacchaeus genuinely receives Christ. And here we see another contrast with the pride of the rich young ruler. With the rich young ruler, you

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almost get the idea that he thinks that Jesus should be especially pleased that the rich young ruler has come to Him.

But not so with Zacchaeus. Just the opposite. Zacchaeus is pleased – he is delighted – that the Lord Jesus is willing to come to him. Clearly, the Spirit of God is already at work in his heart. [To be continued on our next broadcast.]

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