

## Through the Needle's Eye

### [Luke 19:1-10](#)

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When I was little, my family had all these old vinyl records by the Medical Mission Sisters, a group of singing catholic nuns who performed songs based on biblical texts accompanied by guitar, including one very peppy tune about Zacchaeus. The chorus went like this: “there was a man in Jericho called Zacchaeus, there was a man in Jericho called Zacchaeus, Now the Hebrews, they were tall, and Zacchaeus, he was small, yet the Lord loved Zacchaeus better than them all.”

Now, I love the Medical Mission Sisters, but I can't understand how this song made it past the Mother Superior's quality control. First, it makes Zacchaeus' most important characteristic his height. This is the only thing everyone remembers about Zacchaeus – he's short, he was a wee little man and a wee little man was he. If you focus on his height, then Zacchaeus becomes kind of endearing, a jolly wee little man with rosy cheeks and twinkling eyes, and you start thinking you're reading a story about Bilbo Baggins instead of about Zacchaeus, because the first thing Luke tells us about Zacchaeus is not his physical standing, it is his social standing: he is a chief tax collector, and he is *filthy* rich.

And this brings us to the second problem with the Medical Mission Sisters' Song: “The Lord loved Zacchaeus ... better than them all?” The idea that Jesus loved Zacchaeus more than he loved the other people in

Jericho doesn't fit with our understanding of Jesus, but it also doesn't fit with Luke's understanding of Zacchaeus. This guy is a chief tax collector, and he is *filthy* rich! Now, we have all heard so many stories in the gospels about Jesus and tax collectors that we automatically assume that tax collectors are the good guys in the story, but anyone reading this or hearing this at the time it was written would have had a very different view. The Roman Empire didn't directly tax its subjects –they sold the rights to tax a certain area to the highest bidder. That person would then tax the people in his district to recoup the amount that had been paid to the Romans, and then tax them a little, or usually a lot more, to fill their own pockets. The Romans had no problem with tax collectors gouging their district for a huge profit margin, so long as they got their cut. Cheating your fellow Jews to fill your own pockets is bad enough, but doing it in the service of the Roman Empire is far worse – it is treason against your country, your people and your faith. So Zacchaeus is no cuddly, friendly character – he is a traitor, he is a tyrant, he is a villain of the first class, Benedict Arnold and Ebenezer Scrooge and Napoleon all rolled into one.

And Zacchaeus isn't just a chief tax collector – Luke also specifies that he is Rich, and while Luke's gospel does have some positive stories about tax collectors, it has been completely consistent about what Jesus thinks about the rich. In Luke 6:24, Jesus says “Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.” In Luke 12, Jesus tells the

parable of the rich fool, who spends all his time accumulating earthly wealth only to die without enjoying it, and Jesus says “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” In Luke 16, Jesus says “You cannot serve both God and money,” and then tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, where the rich man dies and is sent to Hell where he is told, “remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, but now you are in agony.” And in Luke 18, just a few verses before we meet Zacchaeus, Jesus encounters the rich ruler, a man who has followed the commandments all his life, but when Jesus tells him to sell everything he has and give it to the poor, he can’t do it, and Jesus says “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” All throughout the gospel of Luke, Jesus hammers home the message that there is no greater obstacle to your salvation than being rich, and then the first thing that Luke tells us about Zacchaeus is that he is a chief tax collector, and he is *filthy* rich.

So, if we have read all these stories in Luke’s gospel, and we know what Jesus thinks of the rich, we should have a pretty good idea of what Zacchaeus has coming to him, as he sits up in that tree, waiting for Jesus. He can see Jesus coming down the road, surrounded by the people of Jericho, people Zacchaeus has cheated, people Zacchaeus has betrayed, people Zacchaeus has gouged and impoverished and sold out to their most hated oppressors, and when Jesus stops at the foot of that tree and looks

up at Zacchaeus, we already know what Jesus is going to say to that rich, traitorous old villain, he is going to say the same things he's been saying to the rich all throughout Luke. "Zacchaeus, Woe to You! For you have received your comfort!" Or "Zacchaeus, you cannot serve both God and Money, and we all know which one you've chosen to serve." Or "Zacchaeus, you've got less chance of getting into the kingdom than this camel here has of getting through the eye of a needle." But Jesus doesn't say any of those things. He doesn't say anything of the sort. He looks up, and he sees Zacchaeus, and he says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down here, because I am going to stay at your house today." To that rich tax-collecting villain, Jesus speaks words, not of judgment, not of woe, but of love, love that is completely unexpected, love that is completely undeserved. And here we come to the point of this story, the point that those singing nuns missed – not that the "Lord loved Zacchaeus better than them all". The *point* is that "the Lord loved Zacchaeus," PERIOD. Full Stop. The Lord *loved* Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a rich, traitorous villain, Zacchaeus was a tax collector in the employ of the Roman Empire, Zacchaeus was a completely unlovable man, and yet the Lord loved Zacchaeus.

And when the Lord loved Zacchaeus, the miracle happened. Zacchaeus comes scooting out of his tree, ignoring the outraged cries of the crowds around him, and basking in the love of Jesus, he makes a promise, a promise to give half of his belongings to the poor, and use the

rest to pay back four times over anyone he has cheated, a promise that will bankrupt him. And if you've been following Luke this far, that promise should remind you of something. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus told another rich man, the rich ruler, this very upstanding non-villainous man, to give all his belongings to the poor and follow Jesus, and he couldn't do it, and Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. And yet here is Zacchaeus, a rich villain, giving up all his riches and his wealth and following Jesus, and a camel just went through the eye of a needle; a rich man just entered the kingdom of God. What was impossible for humans to accomplish, God has accomplished, and he did it with love. The Lord loved Zacchaeus, and the miracle happened.

So where does that leave us? After all, we're not villains – we're Presbyterians! We haven't cheated anyone, we haven't betrayed our homeland, we haven't done any of the villainous things that Zacchaeus was guilty of. But we are rich – maybe not rich in comparison with some people in our own society, but certainly richer than the vast majority of human beings on this planet. So maybe villain is too strong a word for us. But sinner will do. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that the talents we have, the advantages we have benefitted from in life, these are gifts from God, not virtues we have cultivated, that there is nothing we can ever do or say or be that would ever make us deserving of God's love. We are broken sinners, unworthy of being loved by the creator of the

universe, the God who holds everything in existence. If I am honest with myself, I can picture myself in that tree with Zacchaeus, looking down the road at Jesus coming towards me, surrounded by the people I have hurt, the people I have disappointed, the people I have betrayed, and I know in my heart that when Jesus reaches that tree and looks up at me, there are many things He could say, things that would delight the crowd and fill me with shame and despair. But he doesn't say any of those things. He says, "Hurry and come down here, because I am going to stay at your house today." To broken sinners like you and me and Zacchaeus, Jesus speaks words, not of judgment, not of woe, but of love, love that is completely unexpected, love that is completely undeserved, because the point of the story has nothing to do with me, or with you, or with any of the other broken sinners in this room today. The point of the story is that the Lord loved Zacchaeus, that the Lord loves us, all of us, and that's when the miracles happen, because when the Love of God takes hold, things start happening.

And we need things to start happening, in our lives, in our church, in our world, because the problems that face us seem so great and so tangled that they seem impossible. In our lives as we struggle with sin and despair and ill health and no jobs – we need a miracle. In our church we pray for bodies to fill the pews but even more for fire to fill our hearts – we need a miracle. In our world we see pain and tragedy everywhere, poverty and death on such a scale that it overwhelms the mind, from

Ukraine to Gaza to the people on our own city streets, our world is broken, and we need a miracle. Humanity is stuck up in that tree with Zacchaeus, and we can hear the loving voice of God calling us, calling us to hurry up and come down, let the love of God transform us, let the Lord of Love come into our lives and make himself at home. And as long as we stay up in that tree, surrounded by the despair and brokenness of our world and our lives, that kind of love seems impossible, But what is impossible for humans is possible for God, and if God can bring salvation to a lost tax collector named Zacchaeus, what more can he do for us, for our church, for our city, for our world? What impossible tasks of love can he accomplish in this place? What camels do we have for God to thread through the needle's eye?

We are God's beloved children, the children of the covenant, the adopted heirs of eternal life, not because of anything we have done to deserve such a rich privilege, not because of our own strength or wealth or purity or Love, but only because the LORD LOVES US, and that is all that it takes for the impossible to happen, for the lame to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lost to be found, the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The only part we need to play is just to hurry up, come down from our tree, and let ourselves be transformed. The Lord loved Zacchaeus, and the miracle happened. The Lord loves us. The miracles are waiting. Amen.