

If The Worst, Then You Too  
May 22, 2016

I want to start this morning by asking you a question about professions or occupations. There are professions in American that have a reputation for being untrustworthy and have become the butt of jokes. Name a profession in American that has a bad reputation. (politicians, used car salesmen, lawyers, TV evangelists)

The Good News of Jesus states that any of these people can be saved from their sins. They can be saved, NOT because of who they are, but because of who Jesus is. They can be saved, NOT because of what they might do, but because of what Jesus did. And if they can be saved, then you can too.

The worst profession in first century Israel was a tax collector. In the days of the New Testament Israel was being ruled by the Romans. But Israel did not want to be ruled by the Romans. They considered themselves to be an oppressed people, under military domination and longed to be free. Life was hard for most of them under Roman rule.

Now, the Romans in Palestine collected regular taxes, such as census taxes and land taxes. But the right to collect taxes on commerce was sold to private contractors who bid in order to win the right to collect these taxes. The taxes on commerce were collected from those who transported property or merchandise of all kinds. If a farmer was bringing his crops into town to sell at the market, he would have to pay a tax on what he was bringing to sell. There were also sales taxes when things were bought or sold in the market.

These private contractor tax collectors often had Roman soldiers backing them up. Using this power, they commonly collected more than they needed to and kept the extra.

On a social level there was no Jew lower than these tax collectors. Those near the bottom of the social scale were those who were almost always ritually unclean, and thus unable to enter the temple. Touching a dead animal made a person unclean. These included butchers and those who preserved animals skins. Below these were criminals and prostitutes. And at the very bottom were the tax collectors. Tax collectors and their families were not allowed to hold any kind of office in Jewish society or synagogue and they could not give testimony in a Jewish court. They were completely ostracized by the community.

With that background, let's read today's passage, which is about a Jewish tax collector.

**Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)** Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'"

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of

my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Zacchaeus, had somehow risen to a CHIEF tax collector position, which normally only a Roman would be in. All the Jewish tax collectors were hated by the other Jews. They were considered traitors to Israel. You can well imagine that this man, being a chief tax collector, was hated even more. We also assume, since he was wealthy, that he was dishonest in his collections, moving him even more an outcast.

He was the lowest of the low in Jewish society. Yet, we see a great change come over him.

Now Jesus was a stranger to him. Likely he had heard of Jesus, but had never seen Him. So he is trying to get a look at Jesus. And being a short man, that is why he climbed the tree. Since he has never seen Jesus, we can safely assume that Jesus has never seen him, even, if possibly, Jesus has heard of him, this Jew who became a chief tax collector.

So how did Jesus know who the man in the tree was? Well, the Holy Spirit of God knew who he was and also knew what was in his heart. The Holy Spirit communicated that to Jesus.

The Holy Spirit knows every person. **The Holy Spirit knows you.** The Holy Spirit knows your heart, your mind. The Spirit knows your feelings. And The Spirit can rightly interpret those feelings even if you cannot. Your thoughts and feelings may be a mixed jumble that you cannot make sense of. You cannot rightly figure out what it is you are feeling. It is all so confusing and unclear to you. You may not be able to make sense of your own heart right now. You can't figure yourself out. But the Spirit does not have that problem. The Spirit has made a correct diagnosis of the state of your heart and a right course of action and can communicate that to you when the time is right.

The Spirit of God knew the heart of Zacchaeus. Eventually, we see his heart as well. The Spirit knew that this man wanted out of the life he was living. He was ashamed of the life he had been leading and wanted an opportunity to turn from his sin. He wanted to get right with God, and with his people.

There are times that we get caught in a habit or pattern of sin. Eventually it brings consequences that we did not think would happen to us and we wish there was some way to get out. I believe Zacchaeus was wishing for a way out of his current life.

Sure, he had money. He had other tax collecting friends. But society had no regard for him at all, nor for his family. His wife and children were ignored when they went out in public. It was a very hard life to be so distanced from the rest of the community. In addition, he knew he wasn't right with God. But he saw no way out.

Are you in a sin situation today that you would like to be free from? How long have you struggled with your sin? At times you make a mighty commitment to God that you are going to change. You are sure you will never commit the same sin again. But then sometime later, you do. And then you feel awful. You feel lower than dirt. You are more disappointed in yourself than ever. You wonder, "What is wrong with me?"

You might be thinking that God is done with you, finished with you, doesn't care what happens to you. You are wrong. And our text today shows that.

The Holy Spirit knew what was in the heart of Zacchaeus and told Jesus. Jesus used this knowledge to give Zacchaeus the opportunity he wanted.

So Zacchaeus saw Jesus and invited him to lunch at his house. No, that's not what it says. Zacchaeus probably was afraid to even speak to Jesus. He certainly never considered that Jesus might want to come to his house.

No, he did not invite Jesus. Jesus invited Himself. He looked up in that tree and said, "Hey Zac, come on down from there, for I'm coming over to your place for lunch." Said like that, it seems a bit presumptuous of Jesus to our ears. But what you may not catch is that Jesus was making an offer of acceptance to Zacchaeus. **Jesus was giving Zacchaeus an opening to pursue a right relationship with God.** And Zacchaeus grabbed it.

If you are wanting a fresh start with God today, please know that you can have it. Jesus wants to come over to your place, into your heart, and stay.

We see that Zacchaeus makes a statement of repentance to Jesus. Jesus hasn't said anything about Zacchaeus' heart, about his sin, about him repenting of his sin. He does not need to. Zacchaeus knows what he needs to do.

He may not have been in touch with any of his other sins. But he was well aware of this one, of cheating people, of forcing people to pay more than they had to. Zacchaeus figured out on his own what he ought to do if he was going to accept what Jesus was teaching. And he makes the commitment voluntarily.

Years ago, when one of our members became a Christian, she tore down the posters of secular rock musicians from her bedroom walls. She took them down, tore them up, and tossed them in the trash. No one told her to do this. Her parents did not tell her to do this. I did not tell her to do this. She just knew, in her heart, that now that she was a follower of Jesus, that this interest was no longer something SHE should pursue.

Zacchaeus knew how HE needed to repent. He comes and tells Jesus what he is going to do. He recognizes in Jesus the presence of God. So he tells Jesus what he is going to do. He lets Jesus hold him accountable to what he says he will do.

You need to do that this morning too. You need to address your repentance to Jesus, because Jesus is giving you an opportunity this morning, to get right with God.

Zacchaeus was the worst sinner in Israel. If Zacchaeus can be saved, you can be saved too.

It doesn't matter what you have done or haven't done. It doesn't matter what others think of you or what you think of yourself. If you want to get right with God, you can.

It won't take years of working your way into God's grace. Jesus has already done the work to put you into God's grace.

He is offering you a right relationship. Accept it. Believe in, and receive, Jesus as your Savior and your Lord. And repent of your sin.

If the lowest of Israel can be saved, so can you. Jesus accepts you and invites you to believe in His sacrifice for you.

**Today is your opportunity to repent.** You don't know that you will ever have another opportunity. Life is truly uncertain. Every day people die who did not think they would die. People die in car accidents or from undiagnosed heart problems. My brother had a stroke from a heart problem no one knew he had. We hear of athletes who were competing in high school and college at a high level with no symptoms, who suddenly died from an undiagnosed problem.

Have you seen the commercial of the man who has shingles on his face. He says, "I never thought this would happen to me." Of course not. Almost none of us do such thinking. I certainly don't. I don't sit around, in good health, thinking, "I'll probably get shingles someday. I'll probably get cancer. I'll probably get high blood pressure."

Maybe if such a condition runs in your family, you might, at some very aware moment think, "Yeah, I'll probably get that some day." But most people don't focus on dying. We focus on living.

But we should think about dying. Anyone in this room could die this week. You who are young, think, "Oh, I'm young. I have decades of time." You don't know that. No one knows how much time they have left to make a decision that will affect eternity for them. Sam's 21 year old cousin died a few months ago in a car wreck. There was nothing she could do. She was not at fault. Someone else made the mistake. It happens every day. You cannot count on being here next Sunday, next month, next year.

People die every day. And they are not all elderly people. They are not all middle aged people. It would be wise of us to remember that.

We should remember regularly that we are going to die. **We ought to get up every day and remind ourselves that this COULD be my last living day on earth. Therefore, how should I live it?**

Well if you know there is sin that needs to be repented of, do it today.

If you know you are not right with God, get right today, because if Zacchaeus could be saved, so can you.

Today, won't you receive Jesus? Trust in Him as your savior. Turn your life over to Him as your Lord, repenting of your sins.

Today, won't you say yes to Jesus' offer?