

Isn't it interesting that the people in this passage from Luke grumbled because Jesus was willing to break bread with the likes of this tax collector Zacchaeus. (See Lk.19:7) During Jesus' day, there were tax collectors who could walk up to a man and tax him for whatever he was carrying, and much more. There were numerous taxes collected from the people of the provinces to fund the Roman Empire. Every Judean man was to pay 1% of his annual income for income tax. Not bad, you might say. But there were also import and export taxes, crop taxes (1/10 of a grain crop and 1/5 of wine, fruit, and olive oil), sales tax, property tax, emergency tax, and on and on. It was actually a Roman official (*censor*) who was ultimately responsible for sending to Rome the tax revenue of the province, but he sold the rights to extort tax to the highest bidders, these "publicans" or "Chief Tax Collectors". The tax collectors were usually Jewish, much hated by their own people, and were treated similarly to the worst kinds of sinners and prostitutes. When they collected their taxes for Rome they would turn over the required amount of money, and whatever they could add on for themselves they kept. So they were in fact extortionists of large sums of money. But Jesus showed much kindness to the Publicans, and he was even mentioned as having had dinner with them (See Luke 18, 19), which in Israel was a sign of fellowship. In fact one of his apostles named Matthew (Levi) was a tax collector, and became an Apostle, and the author of our first Gospel.<sup>1</sup>



Zacchaeus by Niels Larsen Stevens

Isn't it intriguing that the people in this passage from Luke grumbled because Jesus was willing to break bread with the likes of this tax collector Zacchaeus? Why, near the beginning of this same Gospel, Jesus was glorified by folks because of all his wonderful preaching and teaching and healing. Oh, how they praised and applauded him! (See Lk.4:15) But now that he's stepping on some of those tender toes of prescribed social convention, well suddenly their not to happy with Jesus. (See Lk.19:7) Hmm...Doesn't say much for the constancy and faithfulness of the folks in Jesus' day, does it? Now I wonder, are we any better??? Of the things I have learned in my first half-century on this planet, one is that it's much better to have an honest adversary than a dishonest supporter. If you watch people long enough, you'll find out which are the ones who actually practice what they preach, who remain true in their actions to what they profess with their words. And those are the people worth your time, even if they don't agree with you on some things. I've said it before and I'm sure you'll hear me say it again; show me a man's methods, and I'll show you his motives.

And look also at the contrast with Zacchaeus' emotions in verse 6. He's so excited that his Lord has come that he climbs a tree just to get a glimpse of him. Now when was the last time you saw somebody (an adult at least) do that? Why, little Zacchaeus didn't care who was laughing at him. He was just so overjoyed to see the Son of God that nothing else mattered – so the heck with the social niceties! I mean, this is the kind of guy who you might find standing on the street-corner, rejoicing in the Lord and inviting everybody that passed by to rejoice with him. So, when was the last time you made a fool of yourself for Jesus?? ☺

Zacchaeus has matched his methods to his new-found motives, proving that even the rich can come to God, and with God all things are possible. In the previous chapter of Luke, Jesus has just turned the Disciples' world upside down. You may remember the rich young ruler who asks Jesus what he must do to receive eternal life. And Jesus stands the whole world on its ear. Because he says, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" (Lk.18:24) And the disciples are speechless. And if that's not enough, Christ goes onto say, "It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (Mt.18:25) And now, the disciples are really confused! Because you see, in the Jewish culture of the day, wealth was a sign of God's blessing on the righteous. It was part of the Covenant with Abraham, and reconfirmed in the Commandments given to Moses. If you were faithful to the Covenant commandments of God, God would bless you and your family, and you would live long and richly in the land. (See Gen.12:2-3; Gen.22:17; Ex.30:24)

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.bible-history.com/sketches/ancient/tax-collector.html>

So wealth in the Jewish society of the day was a sign recognizing the piety and righteousness of a person. Wealth equaled Godliness for the practicing Jew of Jesus' day. But here was Jesus saying, "Nope. That's not the way it works. Because you see how downcast that rich young man is as he walks away from me? He's really attached to that wealth of his. And that kind of dependence, that sort of addiction to the wealth of this world can be a great impediment to reaching the riches of the next."

Jesus is saying, "If you want to come to me, if you really want to embrace me, you have to be at least willing to come empty-handed." And this for Peter, James, John and the rest, this view of earthly wealth was completely alien to their 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish worldview. So, they ask The Lord point blank "*Then who can be saved?*" And Jesus responds, "*What is impossible with men is possible with God.*" (Lk.18:27) And in Mark's Gospel Jesus goes onto add, "*For all things are possible with God.*" (Mk.10:27b) And little Zacchaeus has just proven it! With God even the most profound transformation of the hardest heart is possible, because nothing is impossible for God. Jesus further explodes the social norms of the day by proclaiming that today salvation has come to Zacchaeus and that he is a true son of Abraham. (See Lk.19:9) So, Zacchaeus' transformation of heart, rather than his ancestry as a Jew has made him a true child of God. Because his motives – what is now important in his universe – have dramatically shifted, as evidenced by his changed in behavior.

The Jews were fixated on their Abrahamic ancestry, supposing it gave them a spiritual entitlement in God's eyes. But they'd become blind to the responsibility of being faithful to the God of Abraham. (See Jn.8:31-47) It's easy to get obsessed with a concept and let it take over your life. The believers in Thessalonica had become obsessed about the next life, and had forgotten about holy living in this one (See 1Thes.4:3-8) And so they were allowing themselves to be side-tracked by these fears, and separated from the truth of God's word, as Paul had preached it. Now, separation from the presence of The Lord is a terrible thing for a child of God. In the Epistle passage for today, Paul warns of what will eventually happen to those who oppose the Gospel, and he specifically says, "*They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...*" (1Thes.1:9) In this statement, Paul encompasses for me what is a succinct definition of hell: it is that state of damnation which exists when we realize we are separated from the all-loving presence of The Lord. Those who realize that they are isolated from the infinite mercy of God suffer an unspeakable pain. And the sad truth is we human beings are so fallen that we are capable of creating exactly that kind of isolation in this present life. It's a sobering thought to realize that we can make even a hell of the very life that you and I have been given by choosing to reject the love of Jesus.

The path to the righteousness of which Jesus and Paul spoke was clear, even to the Jews of Jesus' day. In fact, it had been made clear to them for centuries. This morning, we heard their prophet Habakkuk proclaim "*But the righteous shall live by faith.*" (Hab.2:4b) This was the verse quoted by Paul in Romans (See Rom.1:17) that would eventually lead Martin Luther to kindle the fire of the Protestant Reformation. It is one of the most fundamental concepts for Paul as he is composing his letters. (See Gal. 3:11; Eph. 2:8; See also Heb. 10:38-39) Not only is this among the most important verses in Church history, it also points out that you can no more separate righteousness from faith, than you can separate a flame from burning – though of course, the modern world will try to convince you that you needn't have one in order to acquire the other! So, surely, as Christians our actions should match our professions! Our methods and our motives should be in accord.

Today the Psalmist proclaims that we have seen God's promises proven over and over again down through the centuries. (See Ps. 119:140) And it's true, you know. Jesus saved then, saves now, will save forever. In this shifting world there is a confusing array of solutions proposed by various parties and convictions. And down through the centuries, they have all been tried and found wanting, and there comes a point in life when we ask like Peter, "*Lord, to whom else shall we go?*" To whom indeed! Well I have found one, *the Holy One of God who has the words of eternal life.* (See Jn.6:68-69) So come with me on our journey that you too might proclaim with joy, "*Our hope is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.*" (Ps. 134:8)

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 10-20-16