

So He told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

(Luke 15:3-7)



It was a lucrative, if vulgar, occupation, and Zacchaeus softened his feelings, bruised by the scorn of his countrymen, with the extravagant lifestyle his profession bought.

In a word, he was rich, and his wealth provided the means by which he and his family could insulate themselves from the hatred of their fellow Jews. Their opulent home, with its thick walls and cool, shaded courtyard, afforded them a life which, if socially restricted, was at least pleasantly comfortable.

Zacchaeus was the *chief* tax collector—the one in charge of all the tax gatherers in the Jericho area. As such, he enjoyed not only his own personal profit system, but received a percentage from every other collector in the area. Geographically he was in a prime spot; Jericho was a trading and customs hub, where there were more than the usual taxes required. Yes, he could put up with a lot of unpleasantness from his fellow Jews with the heavy counterbalance of his wealth.

Word had come to Zacchaeus, through one of the few citizens who would still speak to him, that the popular new rabbi was passing through the area. Much like he had collected his wealth, Zacchaeus had little by little gleaned bits of information about this prophet who healed the sick and spoke such marvelous new wisdom. He was both interested in learning more about Him, and in finding a way to make His acquaintance. For it never hurt to have influential friends.

The day of the rabbi's arrival dawned bright in the ancient city, but no amount of clear sunlight would help the tax collector see His arrival. The crowd was overwhelming—more than he could remember ever seeing turn out for even the most important dignitaries—and Zacchaeus knew that he would never be able to see over the heads of those lining the road. One thing his wealth could never purchase was physical stature; Zacchaeus may have been mighty in mind, but he was small in body. Put plainly, he was short, and no amount of bribery would buy him a place in the front.

Knowing this, he had devised a simple plan. He knew there was a stout sycamore—a tree almost as ancient as the city itself—near the road by which the rabbi would enter the city. Zacchaeus would use the extra height of the tree to peer over the heads of his unfriendly countrymen.

Perched in the branches of the tree, Zacchaeus was one of the first to see Him approach. Even though he had been told what to expect, he was still a little disappointed to see that Jesus



was such an ordinary-looking man. There were no trappings of fame or advantage; He had not yet learned how to cash in on His notoriety, and the tax collector thought he might have some counsel to offer in that area. If only he could catch the young rabbi's attention, have a word in private with Him, it might work to their mutual benefit. With the hundreds of people in attendance, however, he realized his chances were slim.

"Zacchaeus! Come down from there!"

Lost in his intellectual machinations, the diminutive tax collector at first thought someone from his city was ordering him to the ground. He glanced at the people immediately below, but none were looking up at him.

"Zacchaeus!" The voice repeated. "I will stay at your house today."

To his astonishment, he suddenly realized that the one addressing him was the rabbi Himself. He had stopped before the sycamore tree and was looking directly at him! But embarrassment quickly turned to joy, and Zacchaeus clambered down, eager to speak to this stranger who, curiously, had chosen to stay with him, of all people.

The evening had passed too quickly for Zacchaeus. He would have wished for Jesus to stay forever. But in the morning He was gone, and the tax collector's life had been changed forever. Over and over Zacchaeus replayed the speech he had delivered to his guests at the close of their meal...

"My friends and guests. You bring honor to this house by your presence. Most of us go back many years. Ephraim, my brother, it was you who brought me into this lucrative business—and I am grateful.

"We have shared times of pleasure, opulence, prosperity. We have drunk old wine and squandered new money. Tonight we have all shared good company, but now I must tell you—and believe me, no one is more surprised than I—I tell you that this part of my life is to be drawn closed.

"You see, this day—tonight—I have made a new friend. This afternoon I met Him and He has brought me wealth far surpassing what I have already. The riches He brings are difficult to bank—but, oh, so easy to spend. My friend's treasure is not in a currency recognized by our leaders, or even our gracious Roman benefactors. No, He has bestowed upon me, well, *light*, where once there was only darkness. He has opened my mind to truth where before was only greed and deceit.

"My friends, we are a close fraternity and tonight the gates are shut against our detractors. Tonight let us be honest with each other—just as my new friend has taught me to be honest with myself. We have taken freely from our countrymen! Under pretense of tax-increase we have systematically stolen—yes, *stolen* from our brothers. And it is to our shame that we get away with it.

"Let me tell you something my new friend told me: 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store your treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal.'

"As you might imagine, His words puzzled me at first. When I found my tongue, I told Him I was a man of reason and logic. I told Him what I understood best were figures on a balance sheet—not poetry. Would He kindly explain the procedure for storing one's treasures in heaven?

"There was kindness in His eyes when He answered: 'What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?' It was then I realized—for the first time—how I had sold my soul for these worthless baubles! Thieves could clean me out and I would be left with nothing. Nothing! But Jesus offered me something far more valuable—priceless, really: eternal life—with Him. My friends, I chose *His* riches over mine. I have transferred all my precious possessions to *His* storehouse: my spirit, my devotion—my love.

"The rest I leave to you! Now I belong to Jesus. I don't know why, but He wants me. He has decided to include me on His balance sheet. But, my friends, *I* will be the one to profit."

## Personalized Attention

The affection and compassion Jesus displays toward us is not always of the warm and mushy kind. He need not always weep with us to express His understanding concern. The world has tricked us into thinking that love and compassion should only be expressed with soft huggies and tender, "There, there, you poor thing."

But Jesus is a personal Savior, which means that He deals with each of us individually, in the appropriate way for each person and situation. Jesus does not modify His standards of integrity just so we can feel better about ourselves. He knew that the most loving thing He could do for Zacchaeus was to point out the error of his ways, and He did this by pointing to Himself as a superior alternative.

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

(Matthew 11:28-30)

Sometimes I need His strong arms about my shoulders, drawing me tightly into His protective warmth.

Sometimes I need His trusty 2x4 up side my head.

Both are expressions of His love for me.

