

TEXT: Luke 19:1-10

THEME: The disposition of the heart is symbolized
by the disposition of possessions

SUBJECT: Salvation

TITLE: Salvation

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In the conclusion of our reading from Isaiah (1:18) God says to the people of Israel, “Come now, let us argue it out . . .” Other translations have, “Let us reason together . . .” “Let us set things right . . .” “Let us talk this over . . .” “Let us come to terms . . .” This is a court scene, a trial. Israel is the defendant and God is the prosecuting attorney.

Zacchaeus is on trial. The people of Jericho are the plaintiff and Jesus is the attorney for the defense. The people claim Zacchaeus is a sinner. Jesus argues that Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham.

The case hangs on the meaning of salvation. In this story we have Luke’s only use of the word “salvation” after the infancy narrative, where it occurs three times in reference to John the Baptist. John is born, Luke says, to give his people the *knowledge* of salvation (Luke 1:77).

What does salvation look like? When the people heard John preach, they asked, “What should we do?” John replied, “Whoever has two coats should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.”

The tax collectors asked John, “What should we do?” He replied, “Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.” Soldiers asked “What are we to do?” John told them, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.”

When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he should do to gain eternal life, Jesus responded, “You know the commandments. Keep them.” The rich man replies, “All these I have observed from my youth.” When Jesus heard this he said there is still one thing left for you: “sell all you have and distribute it to the poor. The man became very *sad*, for he was very *rich*.”

Luke contrasts the story of Zacchaeus with the story of the sad rich man. Both men were powerful, both wealthy. The first keeps all the commandments, and could be considered righteous. But he could not do the “one thing remaining,” which was to hand over his life to the prophet, and to signal that commitment by selling his possessions and giving them to the poor.

Zacchaeus, in contrast, was regarded as a “sinner” by the residents of Jericho because of his occupation as a chief tax-agent. While the rich, young ruler went away sad, Zacchaeus is eager to receive the prophet “with joy.”

Zacchaeus declares . . . what? Scholars debate the translation of the verb *didōmai* in verse eight: some read “I *will* give away;” others read “I give away.” On this second reading, giving his money to the poor is not something Zacchaeus commits to do in the near future; it is his customary action. His regular practice is sharing what he has with the poor, unlike the rich young ruler who can’t part with his wealth.

The disposition of the heart is symbolized by the disposition of possessions. The one who clings to his wealth is equally closed to the prophet's call to follow him. The one who shares generously with the poor can welcome the prophet gladly.

The most obvious moral lesson taught by the juxtaposition of these stories is that appearances can deceive. Everything about the ruler suggested piety, but he was closed to the call of the prophet. Everything about the tax-agent suggested corruption, but he is righteous in his *deeds*

Within Luke's larger narrative more is at stake than morality. Jesus has just told his disciples for the third time that he will be mocked, insulted and killed in Jerusalem. But on the way, the good news continues to reach the poor and the outcast. Jesus welcomes little children, heals the blind, feeds the hungry, advocates for justice for widows.

What does God want, the prophet Isaiah asks? Stop covering your blood-thirsty ways with grand displays of piety. I cannot endure your hypocrisy. Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

What is at stake for Luke is the meaning of salvation. Salvation entails more than personal and private virtue. The rich young ruler was perfect by that measure. Salvation entails economic and public practice as well.

Jesus makes no reference to Zacchaeus' faith, no reference to his repentance, no reference to his conversion, no reference to his discipleship. Zacchaeus doesn't leave everything to follow Jesus and Jesus doesn't ask him to do so.

Rather, Jesus pronounces, not forgiveness, but Zacchaeus' vindication.

The name "Zacchaeus" occurs only here in the New Testament. The name is Semitic. Etymologically it means "the pure one," "the innocent one."

Tax collectors have been stock characters in Luke's narrative. They represent the outsider, the outcast. Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector (this term appears nowhere else in Greek literature), seeks to see Jesus by climbing a sycamore tree and Jesus sees him and invites himself to Zacchaeus' house.

Zacchaeus joyfully welcomes Jesus into his home. Hospitality is his practice. Jesus declares Zacchaeus a son of Abraham. Abraham is the patron saint of hospitality. Genesis 18 reads "The Lord appeared to Abraham." How? The text reads, "Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby."

In Christian tradition and iconography these three men have come to represent the Trinity. As Abraham welcomed the Lord into his tent, so Zacchaeus welcomed the Son of Man into his home.

In response to the grumbling of the crowd, Zacchaeus declares his generosity. I give half my possessions to the poor and *if* I have taken more than I should from anyone, I pay it back fourfold. Jesus responds (listen carefully) "Salvation has come to this house *because* Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham."

Hospitality and generosity reveal the disposition of Zacchaeus' heart, reveal his status as a *son of Abraham*. Where hospitality and generosity are practiced, salvation happens.