

A man on vacation was strolling along outside his hotel in Acapulco, enjoying the sunny Mexican weather. He heard the screams of a woman kneeling in front of a child. The man knew enough Spanish to determine that the boy had swallowed a coin. Seizing the child by the heels, the man held him up, gave him a few shakes, and an American quarter dropped to the sidewalk. *“Oh, thank you sir!”* cried the woman. *“You seemed to know just how to get it out of him. Are you a doctor?”* *“No, ma’am,”* replied the man. *“I’m with the United States Internal Revenue Service.”* This was Zacchaeus: The chief tax collector - A man who could get the last quarter out of you.

Only Luke’s gospel tells the dramatic story about Zacchaeus that capsulizes for us what the mission of Jesus was all about, and in turn what the mission of the church is all about. Here’s the background. Nothing in first century Judea was quite so hated and despised as was the Roman tax. It not only reminded the Jews that they were a subjugated people, it also represented a theological affront. To the Jew there was only one King, and that was God, not Caesar. Paying tribute to an earthly non-Jewish monarch was something that the Hebrews had opposed throughout their long history.

But there was more. The dirty work of collecting the tax was done not by the Romans, but by collaborating Jews. To make matters worse, some of the money that they collected off the backs of their fellow countrymen stuck to their own fingers. We are told that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. It meant that he was over an entire district. Zacchaeus may have been short in stature, but he was big in local government and he was very rich.

On the other hand, the whole story hinges on what it really means to be rich. For in many ways Zacchaeus was as poor as any man in Jericho. For all of his money he was a lonely man, he was an empty man. In the world of the flesh he had everything; in the world of the spirit he had nothing.

The people looked upon him with complete contempt. He was cut off from communion with the community of God. There is symbolism in his title chief tax collector. It is another way of saying that he was chief among sinners. He was a social and religious outcast. And that is why this story is so important. This is not just a story of Zacchaeus; it is the story of what it means to be a lost person.

What do we mean when we say that a person is lost? Zacchaeus lost his self-respect, his dignity, his reverence, his character, his conscience, his conviction, his friends. His story reminds all of us that we can stand in danger of losing everything in life that is valuable and real to us. Man's biggest problem is that when he has lost his relationship with God, his relationship with all others will go wrong. He can be restored but only if that relationship with God is made right.

For this reason Zacchaeus sought to see Jesus. You can be sure it was not the excitement and thrill of a parade that captured his imagination. In fact, a large crowd filled with religious and nationalistic fervor was precisely not the place for him to be. He could easily become the focus of a mob scene. Yet, he went. Why?

He was drawn there. You see, a person does not seek acceptance and forgiveness from an individual, if he knows from the start that he will not receive it.

If someone wants forgiveness, he will not go to an individual who will just lecture him on his poor morality. People don't set themselves up for that kind of a situation. It is hard to know what had driven Zacchaeus to turn on his kinsmen: Desire for power, love of money, revenge upon Jewish leadership, or just plain greed. Whatever his path, it had left him lost and alone. A person is lost when he has wandered from God so far that you turn on everyone around you. You betray your very own. But Jesus came to seek and to save that which is lost. That is what his mission was all about – to rescue the lost. So Zacchaeus comes to Jesus because he had heard the stories of how the Master had received adulterers, other tax collectors, the crippled and the blind, the outcast of society - people just like him. Jesus called Zacchaeus by name and said he wanted to come to his house, to be part of his life. How unexpected was that!

This experience of being welcome, respected, valued changes everything for Zacchaeus. And now a most remarkable thing happened. Faith instantly transformed into works. "Half of all that I have I give to the poor," exclaimed Zacchaeus. He was a genuinely changed man. The gospels never mention him again but there are a couple interesting legends that I found. One tradition says that he became the first Bishop of Caesarea. Another says that he took the name Matthias and was the one chosen as an Apostle to replace Judas Iscariot. Clearly tradition sees this tiny sinner becoming a big man in the Christian Community.

And how did the crowd react to this life changing event in Zacchaeus' life?

The Scribes and the Pharisees were outraged that Jesus of going to eat at the house of an obvious sinner. Talking to a tax collector might be unavoidable but going to eat with one meant treating them as a close friend and signaled that you approved of their behavior. They conveniently forgot that lots of admired people had been sinners: Moses was a murderer; Jacob was a con man and David an adulterer. And they certainly didn't understand that Jesus mission was precisely to give hope to the lost and a new path for the sinner. Or maybe they did understand but couldn't tolerate the idea that even pious religious Pharisees need God's mercy. I think you have to wonder if the hypocrisy of all these religious leaders hadn't been part of what had shaped Zacchaeus path all along.

I tried to imagine what he might have been thinking as he climbed that tree. I wonder if it might have sounded something like this:

*I'm sick to death of picky little laws and unobtainable ideals. I have been fed so many lofty ideals and I've been so frustrated by them, I really don't care for any more. What I'm looking for is a savior--not someone who will just tell me what I ought to be, but someone who will forgive me for what I am, and then with his love will enable me to be more than I ever believed I could be.*

I think that might be close to what Zacchaeus was thinking because it's what I sometimes think and what I suspect many of us think. And the good news is that it's exactly that that Jesus does.