

## Encounter with Jesus – Zacchaeus

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus, in the Old Testament, the New Testament, in history or the present day, and the effect the encounter had on them. We've looked at Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Samaritan Woman at the well and tonight we are going to look at another outcast of society, Zacchaeus. Hilary is going to read us the story.

[Reading Luke 19:1-10]

### Who was Zacchaeus?

He is recorded as being a Chief Tax Collector, wealthy and a short man. What does this tell us about him and his position in society? Jericho was a border city between Perea east of the Jordan, which was in the Tetrarchy of Herod Antipas, and Judea which was under direct Roman rule. It therefore had a customs station for goods coming into or out of Judea. It was also one of the wealthiest cities of Palestine, in the most fertile part of Judea and boasting a Herodian palace, so other tax income would also be extensive. It was not regulated in the way HMRC is today, there would have been pressure from the Romans to raise the amount of taxes they wanted and it would have been more like the Sheriff of Nottingham raising taxes for King John in the Robin Hood films. The "chief" tax collector would be the one who set customs duties and taxes and hired collectors to work for him. Given this role, Zacchaeus could have become rich without cheating; but it seems from the story that he had cheated people anyway. Tax collectors in general were despised among the Jews, but particularly those who worked for the Roman authorities. This was not only due to people's natural dislike of taxes, but also because the tax collector made his profit on whatever *extra* he could get away with charging people. A tax collector was therefore highly motivated to make the taxes as high as possible. When the tax collectors came to John the Baptist, asking how they could get right with God, he told them "Don't collect any more than you are required to." ([Luk 3:13](#)). If you were a tax collector, and you were rich, you were a rogue and an outcast from society.

The story also tells us that Zacchaeus was a short man, by ancient Mediterranean standards this probably means he was less than five feet tall. We can imagine how through his life he might make up for his small size by being specially "tough" on those whom he had to collect taxes from. If so, this would have made him all the more an outcast.

### How did he encounter Jesus?

New Testament Jericho is about seventeen miles from Jerusalem and about a mile south of the site of Old Testament Jericho. Jesus was on his last journey to Jerusalem and was travelling down the Jordan valley on the eastern side through the region of Perea, which was an easier route than the one through Samaria, where we looked at his encounter with the Samaritan Woman last time. He crossed the Jordan opposite Jericho as it was one of the major trading routes.

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, not necessarily to ask him anything, he was probably curious about a "celebrity" passing through, however because he was short and disliked by the people of Jericho he couldn't get through the crowds. But because he wanted to see Jesus so badly, he didn't mind doing something very odd, that many would have thought was beneath the dignity of a grown, wealthy man - he climbed up a sycamore tree, which is related to the fig tree and was easy to climb. This was probably easier for him than getting access to a house in the town to get on the roof.

Like the Samaritan Woman Jesus initiates the encounter. He looks up at Zacchaeus and calls him by name and says he must stay at his house that day. Jesus knew the importance of a person's name. In some ways, the most important thing a person has is their name, it identifies them, OT Jewish names indicated something about the character of the person. Jesus said in

the parable of the Good Shepherd that He calls His followers by name: “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” ([Joh 10:3](#)). In Revelation, we are promised a new name that only God and we know. When we get to heaven, there will be someone there who knows our name.

### What happened during the encounter?

Jewish people normally considered the ability to call someone they had never met by their name - as Jesus does here with Zacchaeus - to be the sort of thing that only a prophet could do. So Jesus starts the encounter by demonstrating his credentials as a prophet. However, no matter how high their status, people did not normally invite themselves to someone else’s home. Pious Jews would also be loath to enter the home of a tax collector or to eat of his food (which Jesus’ also implies); because someone unreligious enough to collect taxes would not be careful about tithing his foodstuffs or preparing them “correctly”. Pharisees would not trust what he offered was “clean”, hence the reaction that Jesus had “gone to be the guest of a sinner”. Jesus was willing to reach out His hand in friendship to this man who was universally despised. In our lives we can reject outcasts; but Jesus never did. The early church was despised for its acceptance of outcasts ([1Co 1:26-31](#)), but the early Christians regarded this as something glorious, not shameful.

We have no other details of the encounter, unlike the Samaritan Woman where the conversation is recorded, but we can assume that Jesus and Zacchaeus had a reasonably long conversation over a large meal as this would be the custom when a guest came to your home.

### What effect did the encounter have on Zacchaeus?

We do know what effect the encounter had on Zacchaeus however. It was after spending time with Jesus that Zacchaeus wanted to get right with God. Often people come to Jesus, and only see things that need to get right after they spend some time with Him. The law required someone who had stolen to restore the amount, plus 20%. Zacchaeus cheerfully offers to do far more than the law demands, giving back 400% and also giving half of his possessions to the poor. Restoring money to **anyone** he has wronged would be remarkable; “Considering the way he had made his money it was unlikely that this would be a short list.” (Morris).

“Today salvation has come to this house”: Jesus did not command Zacchaeus to do what He commanded the rich young ruler to do (give all he had to the poor), because Zacchaeus did not *need* to. His giving heart was the way that this rich man could receive salvation. In [Luk 18:24-27](#), Jesus said that it was impossible in earthly terms for the rich to enter into heaven; but it is possible with God. This is a fulfillment of that promise. Zacchaeus became a joyful giver, thus showing God’s *impossible* work in him, but the young ruler went away sorry, holding on to his riches because he was trying to do it in his own strength. It is how we use our possessions that counts, not how much we have. The priests of Jericho had probably often condemned Zacchaeus and called on him to give to the poor. But after meeting Jesus, it was done joyfully. Love for Jesus can motivate us to do greater things than legalism, guilt, or manipulation can ever do. In ancient accounts of discipleship, a radical response with possessions was a certain sign of newly acquired devotion to the teacher.

Jesus then explains why He extended friendship to a notorious sinner like Zacchaeus: “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost”. Jesus came precisely to save people like Zacchaeus, who responded to him and his message, rather than the Pharisees who thought they were already alright with God and didn’t need Jesus’ help. Zacchaeus *really* believed in Jesus. A true “son of Abraham” was not only descended from Abraham genetically, but also had the *faith* in God Abraham had.

### Discussion –

There are two challenges for us here which I would like you to discuss in your groups and we’ll then have a short feedback from each group:

Zacchaeus responded to salvation by committing himself and his possessions to the work of the Kingdom. How much of our time and finances should we be prepared to give to it?

Who are we taking the message of the gospel to – those who think they already know it, or those who think it is irrelevant to them?