

Zacchaeus Got a Raw Deal
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Luke 19:1-10 King James Version (KJV)

1 And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. 2 And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. 3 And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. 4 And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. 5 And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house. 6 And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. 7 And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. 8 And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold. 9 And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Zacchaeus, the wee little man.

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
And a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see.

And as the Savior passed that way
He looked up in the tree and he said,
'Zacchaeus you come down, For I'm going to your house today!'
For I'm going to your house today!

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
But a happy man was he,
For he had seen the Lord that day
And a happy man was he;
And a very happy man was he."

As Christians, what have taught our children about Zacchaeus?

- He was short
- Therefore, he climbed a tree, because Jesus was coming, and he wanted to see Jesus.

- Jesus, the Savior, passed his way and said, I'm going to your house.
- He was still short.
- But he was a happy short man, because he saw Jesus.

Is that what we get from this story? A short man climbs a tree, so that he can see Jesus. When he sees him and then when Jesus says I'm coming to your house, he's happy. That's great, but nothing else?

Now, I know that when it comes to telling children the stories of the Bible, depending upon the story, we will usually soften the rougher edges. They're kids after all. When they start getting a little older and are hopefully able to handle the darker details and more complex themes and metaphors of "real life" in many of the Bible's stories, we stop singing about Zacchaeus as the wee-little man and start talking about Zacchaeus, the sinner.

As adults, **that** is what we get or what we're presented in this story.

"As a crowd gathers around Jesus, Zacchaeus, simply identified as a short and rich chief tax collector, climbs up a tree so that he can survey the commotion down below undetected. Jesus beckons him down and invites Zacchaeus to host him as his houseguest. [Now-a-days, I'd say that Jesus **volun-told** Zacchaeus, you're hosting me tonight.] To this Zacchaeus happily assents, which leads to grumbling from the crowd."¹

The crowd grumbles.

Why?

This story appears only in the Gospel of Luke. Whether it's an historically accurate story or just a fictitious one, all of the details or facts of this story are right here. While the crowd likely knows nothing about Zacchaeus as a person, the things they do know is that he is a tax collector. And not just any tax collector, but the CHIEF tax collector. And – he's rich.

He is the 1%.

How do we see the 1%, the mega-rich, the most powerful of powerful people that have control of money, resources and people?

Well, let's look to our Bibles.

Preceding today's story in Luke, as Jesus journeys toward Jericho we read about...

- Jesus heals a blind, poor beggar, discarded and marginalized by society
- Jesus blessing the little children, who are pure and innocent

¹ Connections, pg. 458.

- Jesus tells a RICH RULER to give it all up to inherit eternal life and the RICH RULER becomes very sad at the thought of not having his money
- Jesus tells the story of the widow and the unjust, judge

We are taught and conditioned that children, orphans, widows, the poor and the oppressed are good (YAY!!!); rich, powerful rulers and those in authority are bad (BOO!!!).

Zacchaeus was vilified because he was rich. Because he worked for the Roman Empire, he was despised. Tax collectors were automatically seen as corrupt, well because a lot of them were. Rich, chief tax collector, Zacchaeus – Sinner! Villain! Boo!!

That is why the people grumble.

That is why we grumble.

A story:

There was once a bad and horrible man [for the moment, let's call him EVIL] who became the ruler of the kingdom when his father, FATHER EVIL, fell ill. Before and after he assumed his reign, EVIL was terrible like his father and had a reputation for anything but benevolence. He governed public affairs with an illegal and impure manner. He was unjust, lewd and oppressed his subjects, tyrannically. When he came into power, one of the many tasks set before him was dealing with the political prisoners that were held in his kingdom. One of the prisoners [let's call him GOOD] had been a rival king of his fathers, but was defeated, captured and then imprisoned – now going on 37 years. When EVIL became king, historians report that he believed his father imprisoned KING GOOD without cause. So, when his father died, KING EVIL released the rival KING GOOD. "He spoke kindly to him, and gave him a throne above those of other kings who were [also there]. He removed his prison garments and [KING GOOD] ate regularly in his presence the rest of his life. A regular allotment of food was given him by order of [KING EVIL], an allotment for each day, to the day of his death – all the days of his life."²

King Evil (Evil-Merodach) was the king of Babylon.

King Good (Jehoiachin) had been the king of Judah.

The story can be found in the Book of Jeremiah, chapter 52.

From the scriptures, and also from later Jewish and Christian texts and historians, we only hear of this one incident of goodness coming from such horrible person. Everyone thought, knew him to be a horrible and evil ruler – all except King Jehoiachin, I'm sure.

² Jeremiah 52:31-34

Another story for you...

Under the Milk Wood is a radio drama written in 1954 by Dylan Thomas. In the story, an omniscient narrator invites the audience to listen to the dreams and innermost thoughts of the inhabitants of the fictional small Welsh fishing village, Llareggub, as they go about their daily lives.

- Captain Cat, the blind sea captain, is tormented in his dreams by his drowned shipmates, who long to live again and enjoy the pleasures of the world.
- Mr. Waldo dreams of his childhood and also of his failed marriages.
- Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard dreams of her dead husbands.
- Lily Smalls wakes and bemoans her pitiful existence.
- Ladies at Mrs. Organ-Morgan's general shop, gossip about the townspeople.
- Willy Nilly and his wife steam open a love letter from Mog Edwards to Myfanwy Price.
- Mr. Pugh imagines poisoning Mrs. Pugh
- Mae Rose Cottage spends a lazy afternoon wishing for love
- As night begins to fall on this small village, and the story begins to end, the Rev. Eli Jenkins recites a poem:

*Every morning when I wake,
Dear Lord, a little prayer I make,
O please to keep Thy lovely eye
On all poor creatures born to die*

*And every evening at sun-down
I ask a blessing on the town,
For whether we last the night or no
I'm sure is always touch-and-go.*

*We are not wholly bad or good
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,
And Thou, I know, wilt be the first
To see our best side, not our worst.*

*O let us see another day!
Bless us all this night, I pray,
And to the sun we all will bow
And say, good-bye — but just for now!*

When asked about why he'd written **Under the Milk Wood**, Dylan Thomas said that it was, "developed in response to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, as a way of reasserting the

evidence of beauty in the world.”³ It is also thought that the play was a response by Thomas both to the Nazi concentration camps, and to the internment camps that had been created around Britain during World War II.⁴

Too often we want to see ONLY the bad within others.

OR we stereotype, generalize and pigeon-hole people into boxes or categories labeled “ONLY BAD” and once there, can’t see and don’t expect anything else.

Jesus sees the good in us, in all of us.

Our scripture tells us that Jesus was *passing through Jericho*. He was just passing through, but when he looked up, he saw Zacchaeus.

HE SAW ZACCHAEUS.

He saw what others could not - or would not.

He then apparently changed his plans, but Jesus said, “I MUST stay in your home today.”

Then the people, WE, start to grumble. Of all people, Jesus chooses to associate with this sinner. Ugh! Zacchaeus must have felt the pressure! He was a tax collector after all – people didn’t like tax collectors. They were evil. Boo! Hiss! So he responds to Jesus’ request.

What does he say?

LUKE 19:8

Good News Bible – Today’s English Version

King James Version

Original Greek

- DID-O-Mee (to give)
 - First person, singular, present, verb

We want to see Zacchaeus as a villain, a sinner – to do that we change the verb tense to the future so that when “confronted” by Jesus, Zacchaeus repents and says, I WILL GIVE ...

³ Snodgrass, Dorothy (21 December 2010). "[Review: Under Milk Wood at the Library](#)". *The Berkeley Daily Planet*. Retrieved 22 March 2016.

⁴ <https://sites.google.com/site/dylanthomasandnewquay/dylan-and-the-town-that-was-mad>

But when we keep the verb tense in its original Greek, it's hard to force Zacchaeus into the role of sinner. Zacchaeus stands before the Lord and says, "I GIVE HALF OF MY GOODS TO THE POOR and IF I have taken anything by false accusation, I will restore it FOURFOLD."

Listen to Zacchaeus' words.

I give half.
IF I've defrauded, I'll repay four times as much.

In those times, as well as ours, the laws dictated that tithing was 10% of one's earning. But Zacchaeus was giving 50%!!!

Similarly, in those times, the laws dictated that if someone was found to have defrauded another person, reparations were TWICE the amount, but Zacchaeus was offering FOUR TIMES.

Zacchaeus DEFENDS himself to Jesus (and the grumblers who are listening in).

And what does Jesus say in response?

"Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save the lost."

Zacchaeus is not only NOT a sinner, he's doing better than everyone who is calling him a sinner! And the crowds are grumbling. No wonder Jesus changes his plans and wants to stay at Zacchaeus's house. Zacchaeus HAD BEEN lost and is clearly saved. Zacchaeus heard the word of the Lord and lived those words.

As Dylan Thomas' words say,

*We are not wholly bad or good
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,
And Thou, I know, wilt be the first
To see our best side, not our worst.*

God knows our hearts.
God first sees our best side, not our worst.

Jesus is salvation. We are taught to LOVE God and ALL of creation, without judgement, without stereotyping, without generalizing others. God DOES see the good in everyone, EVERYONE. May we do the same.

AMEN