

Dinner with a Sinner



By Ben Godwin

There's an old saying I like, "Don't be afraid to go out on a limb—that's where the fruit is." That is precisely what Zacchaeus did when Jesus traveled through his hometown of Jericho. The Bible explains, "He sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature" (Luke 19:3). So he did what any logical person would do, he ran ahead and climbed a tree to get a better vantage point—he went out on a limb. That's when his whole life began to change and become fruitful.

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus but he faced two obstacles: other people got in his way, and he had a physical limitation—he was short. One Bible commentary suggests, "For Zacchaeus to be 'short' by ancient Mediterranean standards probably means he was less than five feet tall." (Can't you hear people calling him nicknames like shorty, shrimp, or runt behind his back?) Instead of seeing Jesus' face, he saw the backs of taller people. It's the same today. When you determine to seek after God, other people will inadvertently hinder you and you will often hinder yourself. We have to get our eyes off of people in order to see Jesus and overcome any personal limitations we have. Zacchaeus rose above his obstacles to get a clearer view of the Master.

Remarkably, Jesus stopped dead in His tracks, looked up at him in the tree, told him to come down, and invited Himself to Zacchaeus' house. You see, faith and sincerity get God's attention. Jesus knew this man's heart was longing for a dramatic change. Zacchaeus was a chief over the publicans, a superintendent over customs. Publicans usually set up booths at city gates, bridges, ports, and borders. These tax collectors were considered traitors who sold out to the Romans to collect taxes from their fellow Jews. They were despised, considered leeches, parasites, the scum of society—lower than a snake's belly. Due to their constant contact with Gentiles, publicans were considered ceremonially unclean and, consequently, not allowed in synagogues and the Temple. They were shunned and placed in the same shameful class as harlots.

Luke adds this little detail about Zacchaeus in his record, "He was rich." There is certainly nothing wrong with being rich if you legitimately earn or inherit your wealth. God honors hard work and blesses wise money management and good stewardship. The problem was Zacchaeus got rich scamming other people. He was the Bernie Madoff of

his day. Publicans routinely overtaxed people in order to feather their own nests. They were notorious for bullying, intimidating, threatening, and extorting people in order to maximize their profits. That's why they were viewed and treated with such disdain. The Bible soundly condemns dishonest gain, fraud, and taking advantage of other people. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Timothy 6:10).

Zacchaeus must have been shell-shocked when the Jewish Rabbi he'd heard so much about wanted to come to his house. "So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:6-7). What a horrible crime—having dinner with a sinner! Suddenly, the crowd's displeasure shifted from the publican to the preacher. They were appalled that Jesus would dare associate with a known swindler. They reacted the same way when Jesus called Matthew from his tax collection booth and made him one of His trusted twelve disciples. His response was, "People who are well don't need a doctor! It's the sick people who do!" (Matthew 9:12 TLB)

One encounter with Jesus forever changed this con man's life. Notice that Jesus never mentioned Zacchaeus' shady business dealings. Just His mere presence in the publican's home brought heavy conviction on this crooked man. When the taker met the Giver, generosity replaced greed. He voluntarily offered to repay those he defrauded and give away half his possessions to help the poor. That, my friend, was true repentance and restitution.

A clever sign reads, "Church is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints." It would help us all to remember that Jesus came to seek and to save those who are lost. Church is supposed to be a place where people like Zacchaeus can find spiritual help and hope. Incidentally, his name means "justified" or "pure." How ironic. This man who was unjust and impure was transformed by the power of Christ. I believe after his encounter with Christ, he lived up to his name. To be justified means, "To be reckoned righteous in the sight of God, just as if you never sinned." After seeing Zacchaeus' repentant heart, Jesus declared, "This day is salvation come to this house...." Heaven will be full of former sinners like Zacchaeus, the man who dared to go out on a limb. Bible commentators note that as many as 12,000 priests lived in or near Jericho at this time which commuted to and from Jerusalem to serve in the Temple. Strangely, there is no record that Jesus went to visit any of their houses. Instead, he preferred to have dinner with a sinner with whom nobody else wanted to associate.

John Newton authored the classic hymn of the church *Amazing Grace*. When he was old and dying he said, "Although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly. First, I am a great sinner. Secondly, Christ is a great Savior!" When was the last time you had dinner with a sinner? Don't be afraid to go out on a limb. You just might find the next Zacchaeus there.

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This article was featured in his column for the Daily Mountain Eagle newspaper in Jasper, Alabama.