

Fruit of the Sycamore Tree

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It happened as I was driving to an industrial plant here in Southern California where I was scheduled to speak to a large group of men at a noon service, and again as I was given a brief tour of the plant—the story of Zacchaeus kept recurring in my mind. Suddenly I realized something new had penetrated my heart, and it seemed that the Lord revealed to me the purpose of this wonderful incident in the ministry of Jesus. So under the inspiration of just having received a new truth, I scrapped the message I had prepared and spoke at that noonday service on Zacchaeus. The reaction to the message and the results from it clearly indicated to me that this had, indeed, been of the Lord!

The importance of the encounter with Zacchaeus in the life of our Lord is that it affords an illustration for one of the difficult texts of Scripture, James 2:20:

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

One of the problems of the church is reconciling the positions of Paul and James as to the place of good works in the plan of salvation. I had long felt that if a Bible illustration of this great truth was to be found, it would help identify the place of good works in the gospel of grace. The new truth which came to me that day was that Zacchaeus is the illustration for which I had been searching.

Those of us who belong to the school that emphasizes the grace of God in salvation are often reluctant to speak of good works for fear of complicating God's glorious grace. Not only does God save without the good works of man even entering into the picture, but God saves in spite of man's so-called good works. Yet we recognize that all too often the practical aspect of good works has not had its proper place.

There is a Movement...

Now let us consider this record of Zacchaeus.

Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. (Luke 19:1)

In the record of Luke there is a movement, beginning in chapter 9 when Jesus left Caesarea Philippi, which would take Him to Jerusalem and to the cross. In Luke 9:51 we read, "Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem." Our Lord moved out of that area, through Galilee and Samaria; then He apparently crossed the Jordan River and continued down the east side until He was over against Jericho. As He entered Jericho, there was a blind man. Actually there were two blind men, but here Luke gives us the record of only one of them. There was, however, according to Luke, one blind man who encountered Jesus as He entered the city and another blind man who met Him when He was leaving the city, as we shall see.

The movement here is *through* Jericho. He entered and passed through. He never spent a night in Jericho, for it was the accursed city. This was the first city that God had given to the people of Israel when they returned to enter the promised land after forty years in the wilderness. It was the city from which nothing personal was to be salvaged, and a curse was placed on any person who would attempt to rebuild it. If you want to read the record, in 1 Kings 16:34 a man rebuilt the city and reaped the curse in all its fullness—both he and his family. Though eventually the city was rebuilt, it remained an accursed city. It was a city where there was great

sin, a place where gangsters resorted. Our Lord, on the way to the cross, did not bypass Jericho but purposely went through it because there was a sinner there who needed Him, a tax collector called a publican.

This is the movement: Jesus entered and passed through. What a picture it is of His entire mission and ministry to this world! He puts it succinctly, as recorded in John 16:28: “I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father.” He came from heaven’s glory to this sin–cursed earth, not to just an accursed city but to a *world* on which the curse of sin rests. Anywhere you look today on this earth you see the evidences and the ravages of sin. He left heaven’s glory, and He came to this earth for the same purpose that He entered and passed through Jericho. He came not to get only one sinner but to get any sinner who would trust Him. At the time of this incident, Jesus was on His way to the cross to die for Zacchaeus and to die for a world of sinners. Such is the movement here.

The Man Zacchaeus

We are introduced to Zacchaeus, and the Spirit of God gives a total picture, an entire biography with one flourish of the pen. There are three things which are said about Zacchaeus. These three facts tell out his story, and what a story it is!

Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. (Luke 19:2)

His Name

The first statement concerning him is that he was named Zacchaeus. The name *Zacchaeus* is from *zaccai* and means “pure.” That is not a name for a publican to have! It is like saying black snow, white coal, and cold fire—the two terms are self–contradictory. A publican. Zacchaeus! But, after all, it was his parents who gave him this name. When they looked down in the crib and saw the little fellow, they said, “He is so sweet and pure there is only one name that fits him—Zacchaeus.” So they named him Pure. Believe me, friends, that was some name for a man to carry around, especially after he became a tax collector or publican! In Southern California there was a famous gangster who said when he was arrested some years ago that he was “as pure as snow.” The reporters for awhile tagged him “Snow White,” and when they called him that, I thought of Zacchaeus. You can well imagine what delight the other publicans had in calling this man, who was an obvious sinner, Pure! He was anything but that.

Chief Among Publicans

The second feature recorded about Zacchaeus is that he was chief among the publicans. There are in the New Testament two little men who are identified as great sinners: Saul of Tarsus and Zacchaeus. Saul of Tarsus took the name Paul, which means “small.” It was the name he evidently chose to speak of himself. When he was writing of his life prior to the Damascus Road experience, he said that he was “the chief of sinners.” That is not an oratorical gesture nor hyperbole; Paul meant it because it was true. Jesus Christ and the church never had an enemy any worse than Saul of Tarsus; he was the *chief* of sinners. And this man Zacchaeus was a little man, but he was called the “chief tax collector.” Throughout the Gospels there is the grouping

together of publicans and sinners, and the interesting thing is that the publicans are always mentioned first. It is not sinners and publicans, but publicans and sinners, because publicans were the worst kind of sinners; and Zacchaeus was *chief* among the publicans. Two little men in the New Testament were chief among sinners.

A publican was a Jew who had sold out his nation. In those days the people of Israel were governed by the empire of Rome, and the Roman government had a system whereby it turned over the dirty business of collecting taxes to the natives of the countries it had captured. Instead of using roughhouse methods of collecting taxes from a captive people, they found a traitor, a quisling, someone who was willing to betray his nation for a price—a good price, by the way. A publican could buy a certain territory at a certain rate; then he could go in and collect taxes in that section at whatever rate he chose.

Being a publican meant that at one time in his life he had been faced with a decision. A similar decision comes to every man and to every woman. Each of us has to decide whether we will be honest or dishonest in business. Everyone decides whether to be pure or impure. There is no alternative. Every person is faced with that decision in this life. This man Zacchaeus came to such a crossroad. Before him there were two ways he could go. One way was probably a continuation of his monotonous life which, though honorable, would bring him no riches. The other way was to become a publican. Now if he should become a publican, it would be a one-way street; he could never come back.

No publican could come back. He would cut himself loose from his nation; and the minute he cut himself loose from his nation, which was Israel, he cut himself loose from his religion—from the temple, from the place of sacrifice, from any mercy whatsoever. In fact, he would cut himself loose from his God. It was a dark night when Zacchaeus weighed his future. “Either I continue to be honest, serving God as I was brought up to do, or else I can become a publican. I can get rich ... it will pay me ... I will get the things I want. But if I do that, I will cut myself off from my nation.” I say it was a dark night because he made the wrong decision. He became a publican, and in time he became chief among the publicans. That means he was the biggest rascal in Jericho, and there were some big-time operators there.

A Rich Man

The third identifying word about Zacchaeus is this: “he was rich.” He made his position pay.

Perhaps you are a person who feels that if you were rich all your problems would be solved. Now I can’t speak from experience, but from observation I would say that the rich seem to be the most unhappy. From where do the majority of our suicides come? They come from among the upper class, the rich. Somehow they have not found satisfaction in this life. We talk of reaching the down-and-outer, but the up-and-outer is probably in worse condition because no one goes to him with the gospel. Zacchaeus was an up-and-outer.

Wanted—A Mercy Seat

Our Lord knew Zacchaeus. You will remember that He “... had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man” (John 2:25). He knew this man. In the chapter immediately preceding the record of His encounter with Zacchaeus, our Lord gave a parable which I believe was a true incident. I do not think that our Lord ever made up a story but that they were all based on true incidents taken from life.

Jesus told of two men who went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a publican. The publican stood afar off and beat on his breast saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Why did he beat on his breast? Because he did not have access to the mercy seat. He repudiated his nation and repudiated his God when he became a publican. He was an outcast, and all he could do was stand outside the temple and cry, “God, be merciful!” Actually, he did not say exactly that. The word in the Greek is not *mercy* but *mercy seat*, that place yonder in the temple where every instructed Israelite knew blood was sprinkled, giving him access to God. In our day, Christ is that mercy seat. “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:2). What this publican is saying is this: “O God, make for me, a publican, a mercy seat where I can go. I have no place to go. I am shut out. Show me mercy!”

Now let me make a suggestion: I think that publican was Zacchaeus. Our Lord did not manufacture the story; it was the experience of an actual publican. Jesus had already gotten the publican Matthew at the beginning of His ministry, and the only other publican whom we know He reached was this one here, Zacchaeus.

It is obvious that Zacchaeus is not satisfied, though he is rich. He is on a one-way street. He cannot stop; he has to keep going. But on the way he pauses and says, “O God, if there were only a mercy seat for me!”

Christ is moving now to Jerusalem, and on the way to the cross He stops to let that fellow know that there is a mercy seat for him and for all mankind.

And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. (Luke 19:3)

I said at the beginning that there was a blind man when Jesus entered the city and a blind man when He left the city. You may have thought I was wrong, but Zacchaeus was the other blind man. He had sight, but his eyes were too close to the ground. He could not get them up high enough so he could look over the heads of the crowd to see Jesus. He wanted to see Him. Why?

Well, I'll tell you why. There was one ray of hope that penetrated this publican's soul. One day in the city of Jericho the word was passed along that the new Prophet from Galilee had chosen a publican by the name of Matthew to be one of His disciples. Further word was brought that the Prophet was receiving publicans and sinners, and that gave Zacchaeus a hope that he never expected to have. Therefore, when it was known that Jesus was coming through Jericho, Zacchaeus resolved to see Him. Zacchaeus said, “If I can, I'm going to get to Him because I want a mercy seat, I want salvation, I want to get to God.”

Apparently, the Lord Jesus never did spend a night in Jericho, and He did not even linger there. He passed through hurriedly, and the crowds wanting to see Him lined the way. Now this little fellow Zacchaeus tried to penetrate the crowd but was unable to do so. He wanted to see Jesus. It was not idle curiosity, which is evident by the trouble he went to in order to see Him. It is obvious that this man was not satisfied with his life.

Zacchaeus was a success according to the world's standards. The standard of the world is that if a man gathers it all here and takes nothing with him after this life, he is successful; if he gathers it all for the next world and has nothing in this life, he is considered a failure. But wealth had not brought satisfaction to the soul of Zacchaeus. He wanted to go back to God. Could there be a way back for even a publican? What would this new Prophet say?

So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. (Luke 19:4)

There has been a question regarding precisely what kind of tree it was. Some believe that it was a type of fig tree that grew in that area below sea level and was similar to a sycamore tree. However, I have some photographs of sycamore trees in present-day Jericho, and they look very much like the sycamore that grows here in Southern California. A sycamore tree has slick bark, and it is always a long way to the first limb. Since Zacchaeus was a little, short fellow, how I would like to have a picture of him shinnying up that tree! There are folk who do not see any humor in the Bible at all, but many of us find the Bible sprinkled with humorous situations. Here is one of them. It must have been a very comical sight to watch this little fellow climbing up into the sycamore tree to get a spot on the fifty-yard line, so to speak, in order that he might see Jesus.

After Zacchaeus had finally managed to reach the limbs and had concealed himself in the leaves, the Lord Jesus came along. When He was directly beneath Zacchaeus, one of the most remarkable things happened. Jesus stopped, looked up, and I think He laughed. Then I think Zacchaeus laughed, and all the tenseness of the scene was broken. You must recall that the Lord Jesus was human—oh, how human He was in dealing with the human family! Jesus said to him,

... Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house. (Luke 19:5)

That was like cool spring water on parched lips. It was the best news Zacchaeus had ever heard. No prophet, no man of God, ever had been willing to stop and speak to Zacchaeus, much less enter his home. Who would be interested in the chief of publicans? Our Lord was.

If you think it was a struggle getting up in that tree, what do you think a little fellow coming down that slick trunk is going to do, especially when the Lord said, “Make haste”? He slid down the trunk and landed with a thud.

So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. (Luke 19:6)

Zacchaeus is rejoicing now. I think our Lord said to him, “Zacchaeus, I knew you all the time. I know what trouble you had getting up in that tree. And Zacchaeus, I knew when you went yonder to the temple where you had no right to go. I saw you stand afar off and beat your breast and cry, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’ Well, I have come to tell you that you, a publican, can have a mercy seat by which you can come back to God.”

As they walked away together, notice the comments of the crowd:

But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, “He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.” (Luke 19:7)

You always have that crowd around—the critical, the self-righteous. The neighbors of Zacchaeus said, “He is a sinner.” In that town he was known as a *sinner*—and Jesus had entered his home as a guest! They were shocked beyond words.

Our Lord and Zacchaeus enter the house together, and the door shuts in our faces. I would like to gain entrance somehow and see what takes place, but the door is shut. We are outside with

no keyhole reporter to get us any information. What does take place on the inside? I must confess that I do not know.

I do know this: After a lapse of time—perhaps an hour, two hours, three hours—the door opens.

Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.” (Luke 19:8)

Something happened on the inside. I do not know what was said, but the effect is revolutionary. Here is a man who has made his fortune by stealing, and that from his own people. His life has been devoted to one thing: getting all this world’s goods that he could by any method. Now he says, “Lord, I am going to give half my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything by false accusation, I’ll restore it fourfold.”

What happened? I am not sure exactly what took place, for the door was shut; but I want to make a suggestion. Our Lord in other interviews had allowed the conversations to be recorded, and in every recorded interview our Lord talked about man’s sin and God’s salvation. He talked about man’s inability and God’s ability. He talked about man’s unworthiness and God’s worthiness.

For instance, in the third chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus said to Nicodemus the Pharisee, “You must be born again.” Nicodemus was incredulous, but Jesus insisted, “You must be born again. You have a need.” Our Lord always mentioned man’s need. Then He always talked about God’s ability to meet that need. To Nicodemus He said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14–15).

Also, sin and salvation were the subject in the encounter with the woman at the well. The Lord Jesus talked to her about her need, and how tactful He was as He pinpointed her sin! Then He identified Himself as the Messiah, the One who could meet her need.

You will find that He used this same procedure as He dealt with the blind men. Also, it is the way He dealt with His own disciples. It was His method.

Do you think He broke this pattern when He went into the home of Zacchaeus? I do not think so. He spoke to Zacchaeus about the fact that he was a sinner, and surely with Zacchaeus He did not have to labor that point. It is not so easy with the average church member who thinks that having his name on a church membership roll is all that is necessary for salvation. But Zacchaeus recognized that he was a sinner, and Jesus talked to him about His ability to meet the need of a sinner, even an outcast publican. I know that our Lord talked about salvation because when He came out of the house of Zacchaeus, He said, “Today salvation has come to this house....”

We see a publican, a base sinner, this man Zacchaeus, step inside his house with the Lord Jesus Christ. The door shuts. The door opens, and this man steps out a new creation in Christ Jesus. He is not the same man who went in. We hear Zacchaeus say, “Lord [he calls Him *Lord!*], I’m going to give half my goods to the poor, and if I have taken anything by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.”

Fruit of Salvation

Someone says, "That is salvation by *works*." It is not. James writes, "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" (James 2:20). James and Paul wrote about the same thing: Faith. James' emphasis is on the *works* of faith. You see, when James wrote he was saying simply this, "Men are justified by works, not the works of the law but the works of faith." And he was writing from man's viewpoint. When God sees us, He sees our hearts, and He knows whether or not we have saving faith. But when men see us, they don't see our hearts; they see the works of faith. And James says, "If the works of faith are not there, brother, you are not saved." Paul would agree with him, for Paul said practically the same thing.

Now let me repeat, I do not have Zacchaeus' confession of faith; I merely see the fruit of it. A secret session took place inside the Zacchaeus home, and I know nothing about it because the Holy Spirit has drawn a veil of silence over this interview. Ordinarily, the personal interviews which Jesus had are recorded in the Gospel record. This one is not recorded, and the reason is obvious. It is to set before us an illustration of faith being demonstrated and exhibited by *works*.

It is interesting to note that Zacchaeus did not come to the door of his home and say, "I want to give my testimony: Jesus saves and keeps and satisfies." Do not misunderstand me, a testimony is a wonderful thing if it is backed up with a life. It is a tragic thing when the life does not give credibility to the words.

Zacchaeus comes to the door and says, "Half my goods I will give to the poor, and I am going to start the rounds, making right the things that have been wrong." By his works I know he has been converted.

And that is the only way the world will know that you are converted. They do not know it by your testimony; they know it only by what they see in your life. Faith without works is dead, and faith with works is alive.

Neither did Zacchaeus come to the door of his home and say that he was going to join your church or my church. Oh, how many people today base their assurance of salvation upon church membership instead of upon a personal relationship to Christ! Zacchaeus revealed by his life that he had a personal relationship with Christ. The Word of God says that a believer is "created unto good works ... adorned with good works ... careful to maintain good works ... zealous of good works ... a pattern of good works." My friend, if good works are not in your life, faith in Christ must not be there. If it had not been for Zacchaeus' changed life, I would never have known that this old publican got converted.

Another thing I notice is that when Zacchaeus opened the door of his home to Jesus, he did not adopt a particular label or declare himself to be a staunch defender of the faith. I'm not minimizing the importance of having our doctrine and our creed accurate, but the unforgiving spirit that is exhibited by many of our brethren today does not commend our position. The inability to confess our faults and to admit that there are occasions when we are wrong is certainly to be deplored. It is at this point that the great men of the past often make us look like spiritual pygmies. This was called to my attention some time ago in a rather peculiar experience.

The church I was serving at the time in Pasadena, California, had acquired a desk and a filing cabinet which formerly belonged to Dr. R. A. Torrey. The filing case was an old style one with envelopes—there must have been five hundred envelopes in this case. They were presumably empty, but one day I reached into it and took out an envelope by chance. There were two old letters in it. They were of a personal nature, and both were written by Frank DeWitt Talmage. I read them and discovered something of the bigness of these men of former days. Their bigness

was revealed by their willingness to confess and correct a wrong. Surely there were “giants” in the earth in those days. A brief excerpt will reveal this trait which is so lacking in present-day Christian circles. The letter is dated January 2, 1900, and begins like this:

Dear Dr. Torrey:

Today I am standing under the shadows of two griefs: first that of Mr. Moody’s death. Secondly, the fact that I may have done you a very great injustice...

[Then he confesses the wrong and names it, which we believe should not be done publicly even at this late date. We’ll omit this portion of the letter but quote two more excerpts near the end:]

If there is any way I can rectify the wrong, I will gladly do so... May the sweet spirit of him who has gone make me more and more preach the gospel of love.

Yours with sorrow,
Frank DeWitt Talmage

Tears came to my eyes when I read these words which had been hidden from light for nearly half a century. It was startling to realize how far we had fallen even by mid-century—and how much more so now! We retain the traditions of biblical Christianity, but when was the last time you have seen such a sweet, humble, and quiet confession of wrong? We in Bible-believing circles seem to have the idea that if a man’s head is screwed on right, his feet may go in any direction they want to go and he is still a child of God! My friend, when your head goes in one direction and your feet in another, something is radically wrong. Zacchaeus did not say that he was a Bible-believing Christian. He didn’t have to say it, for he proved it by his works.

Listen again to the publican, that hardened sinner. He said, “Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.” And the next morning you could tell where Christ had stopped, you could tell which publican was trusting Christ by his actions! Zacchaeus did not go down to the office the next morning to continue his nefarious business; he set out to restore and to make right the things that were wrong. I can see the fruits of faith in the life of Zacchaeus. Therefore, I know the root is there.

The Principles Involved

Now there are two great principles in this incident to which I should like to call your attention.

First of all, Christ must come into one’s heart and life. That is essential. When a person comes to God, he must come as a sinner, as a beggar, bringing nothing and receiving everything. Oh, how that humbles us! It wounds our pride because we want to bring something, even if it is just a cup of cold water. But no good work makes any contribution to man’s salvation!

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

The Lord Jesus Christ knows you. Your sin is open scandal to Him, and He is well-acquainted with your need. He is the Savior who passed through this world about two thousand years ago to pay the penalty for your sin by His death on the cross. He stands at your door, prepared to meet the deepest need in your life. He awaits your invitation to enter.

The second great principle is that when Christ does come into the heart, a transformation is wrought. Zacchaeus never said anything about giving half of his goods to the poor the day before he climbed into that sycamore tree. But,

... if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

My friend, you can tell where Christ has stopped. Until you let Him into your heart, there will be no real change in your life. Is your life a pattern of good works? If it is not, Christ is not there.

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? (James 2:20)