

## IN THE SEARCH-LIGHT OF TRUTH

The Encounter with Zacchaeus

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If Zacchaeus' repentance announces that a tax collector met Jesus and became a follower of Christ, then this is a well-known conversion, and we hear it, year after year. On the other hand, if we want to understand the depth of this encounter, the event is complex, and it speaks of our own life when we are in the search-light of truth.

### *Christ is the Light*

The prologue of the Gospel of Saint John presents Jesus as the light that shines in the darkness (John 1:5). The words in Greek speak of “to phos en te skotia phainei” (the light in the darkness shines), a syntactical structure that has “light” and “darkness” so closely connected that the reader cannot possibly miss the vivid contrast. A light shining brightly in the darkness can be a discomfort. We experience that discomfort when we drive with the sun in our eyes. Notice also how that verse ends: “he skotia auto ou katelaben” (darkness did not overcome it). There is always a struggle between the light and the darkness, and darkness is unable to overcome the light.

The Evangelist John says that Christ is that beam of light, and his mission is to shine in the darkness that permeates the world. His teaching focuses the light on specific problems. At one time, for example, the light falls on the Pharisees and reveals what is ugly and ungodly in their values. Christ, then, as the divine light, proclaimed: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you devour widows' houses,” etc. (Matthew 23:14). In this light, nothing remains hidden.

### *Christ and Tax-Collectors*

Low though the Pharisees were on Christ's moral scale, they abhorred tax collectors, on account of their depravity in the manner in which they taxed people. Apart from the greedy acquisition of quick profits, they were unfair to their fellow Jews. They were notorious traitors, as they mercilessly collected enough taxes to satisfy their Roman employers and line their own pockets as well.

Such practices continue to thrive in our world, but we make allowances by saying “This is business” or by counting such practices as “perks” that come with the job. We grant that businesses are run for profit, and any complaint, in that direction, is perceived in terms of “sour grapes” – from people who are envious and would have been happy had they been the recipients of such “perks.”

Why would Zacchaeus be interested in what Christ looked like? Indeed, he was interested. For this reason he accepted the indignity of being seen climbing a sycamore tree. This was not the act of a successful businessman. He did it because his interest in Christ compelled him to do this drastic act.

Zacchaeus may also have heard that Jesus associated with tax collectors and had eaten with them, which no Pharisee would do. In Matthew 11:19, Jesus is called “a friend of publicans (tax collectors) and sinners.” This certainly would have heightened Zacchaeus' interest. Jesus becomes an enigmatic figure. If he is a holy man, why does he eat with sinners? If he is a real friend of crooks (how all society saw tax collectors), how is he also the Son of the living God?

Zacchaeus' first glimpse of Christ was from his perch in the sycamore tree. Jesus was then in his early 30s, young, agile, surrounded by admirers – the crowd that made it difficult for Zacchaeus to draw near. It was also clear that Jesus was able to draw a circle of admirers, answer questions, and inspire confidence, otherwise the crowd would have left him..

### *The Encounter*

Notice that Jesus did not ask: Who are you? What is your name? What do you seek? Or, what can I do for you? – the question he had posed to the blind man in Jericho. Neither did he ask: Do you have a house? Can you accept a guest? When would it be convenient for your household? Jesus said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down because I will be a guest in your house, today – and Zacchaeus was overjoyed to hear those words (Luke 19:6).

The reader forms the impression that Zacchaeus had liked what he saw – that Christ's words engaged a crowd of admirers, that he was providing answers to questions (otherwise why would there have been a crowd?), or the free discussion of spiritual matters.

Even today, there are men and women in lucrative positions whose money has not brought them answers to life's most vital questions. They wish they had the opportunity to receive answers, but they are so immersed in their enterprises that they are compelled to live only with dreams.

The eagerness of Zacchaeus for a new life is evident in the speed with which he acted. Man has a conscience which can be suppressed, even seared. Sooner or later, however, it comes alive and can no longer be constrained. It is like wine that ferments, bursts whatever constrains it, and starts to run freely wherever it can.

### *Money constrains*

The difference between Zacchaeus and the rich ruler is in the conscience. At some stage in life, conscience says, “Enough with evil”; it cannot continue. Evil makes the conscience rebel, and the notorious sinner sees a precious opportunity before him, which he is not going to sacrifice. Everything in his life changes. This becomes abundantly evident because he addresses Christ as “Lord” (Luke 19:8) and because he sees his opportunity to act correctly. “Half of what I own will go to the poor.” This is the action of a man who now feels free to live.

Notice how fast the values changed. This is something that the rich young ruler could not do. For Zacchaeus, money is no longer the guiding force in life. He had plenty of money, but found no happiness in it. Look at the verbs that are used. With respect to the distribution to the poor, the verb is “didomi” (I give) – it is Zacchaeus' gift to them. With respect to the people he “may” have defrauded, the verb is “apodidomi” (I give back).

True repentance is evident in action. If the thief of a bicycle repents, he must return the stolen property, and this tax collector wants to do that, and not reluctantly so. The law of God, in the Old Testament, required him to give back what he had taken plus one fifth. Zacchaeus offers four times what he “may” have unfairly taken.

The only hope that he had before his eyes was to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. This was a treasure that he had longed for, and he was not going to let the opportunity slip away.

### *Wisdom*

The wording in Luke 19:8 is “and if I have cheated anyone” – when obviously he had done so. We know this to be the case from the way the public reacted to Jesus' eating at Zacchaeus' home (Luke 19:7). Even so, the wording bespeaks wisdom, both for that time and for today.

For that time, anyone could have come forth and falsely claimed a sum of money, expecting to receive four times that amount. For our time, the news is replete with complex cases that need wise handling.

A young boy received pleasure from kicking his teachers in the shins, on a daily basis, men and women, leaving them with bruises. They reported him to the head teacher, but nothing could be done. They did their best to avoid him. Even so, he found ways to run up, deliver a kick, and run away. On one occasion, the teacher slapped him hard, he fell down, and had to be taken to the nurses office. During the inquiry, the boy did not want to reveal how many teachers he had kicked, and no teacher came forward to say "I hit him."

Had that teacher confessed, he would have lost his job. Had he apologized to the family, they could have appealed to the school board and demanded his resignation. Had he said that he had lost his cool, he would have lost his job and been sued. In the end, the school was sued, and some administrators lost their jobs because they were in office when the incident happened.

Should the teacher, then, have revealed himself, to take the unfair punishment and save the administrators' jobs or should he chalk it all up to stupidity in the school administration, which wrongs the teachers by expecting them to accept the kicks of a rebellious child? God loves and forgives. Men can be ugly in their conduct, greedy, and unbending. We live in a hard, unforgiving world, and this calls for wisdom in how daily problems are to be confronted.

### *The Lesson*

Christ continues to be the light that shines in the darkness. The world has not changed its values. The Pharisees continue to be what they were, and the same for businessmen and tax collectors. If we are in Christ, his light is shed abroad in our hearts, in the same way that it was in Zacchaeus. Once the treasure is found, nothing can stop us from being true disciples of Jesus Christ. We are not enslaved by the pursuits of the Pharisees or of the tax-collectors.

Clear though this lesson from Jericho may be, those present at the scene failed to notice the obvious. They could not see the vast change that had come over Zacchaeus and his household. All they knew was that Zacchaeus was a tax collector that had taken advantage of his fellow Jews and that this rabbi was willing to be the guest of this sinner. It did not enter their mind that genuine repentance is the beginning of a new life, that the new Zacchaeus was a totally different person from the one they knew, and that Jesus was the guest of an honorable son of Abraham.