

## Crowd Conversion (*Zacchaeus*)

by Donald Schmidt

Scripture reference: Luke 19:1–10

*10 min.*

*Donald: As a child, the story of the tax collector, Zacchaeus always intrigued me. Perhaps part of it was the image of this short person climbing up a tree to see Jesus—I think children can relate to that part. There was also the moral we were readily given at the end of it, that a “bad” person became “good” after meeting Jesus.*

*But is that what the story is really about? The Greek text can be read differently. The word “if” in verse 8 suggests that perhaps Zacchaeus wasn’t the bad guy that everyone thought he was. Instead, an equally valid translation allows for the interpretation that Zacchaeus is not a cheat at all, but someone of much higher moral character than he’s even been given credit for. Maybe the people who get converted in this story are the people who have their perceptions challenged...*

Allison: OK, Donald. Pretend you are Zacchaeus. Put yourself in his shoes. Pretend you are Zacchaeus. Tell us the story from his point of view.

Donald: You likely already know who I am—my reputation always seems to precede me, and that's generally not been a good thing.

L: Hey Zacchaeus! Does your long name make up for being so short?

D: (FORCING A LAUGH) I used to laugh along with them over that. But over time, people stopped saying much directly to me at all.

It seems the only times I heard my name spoken, it was in someone else's conversation with some unprintable adjective placed in front of it.

Ralph: There's that (\*&^%\*& Zacchaeus

D: Occasionally someone spat it out to me directly, again usually in the midst of a string of insults.

L: (SPITTING IT OUT) Zacchaeus!

D: Most of the time, though, people who saw me in the streets or in the marketplace didn't quite know what to do with me. It seems they could never quite look me in the eye. Instead,

they'd give me a weary, pitiful glance and a tepid, half smile.

R: (PITTYINGLY) Hello, Zacchaeus.

D: And then they'd avert their eyes, praying that no one had actually seen them looking at this sorry excuse for a human being.

If anyone did talk to me, it was business-like and to the point, never any conversation. Oh how I longed for someone to simply ask me how I was doing! Even some banal small talk—how wonderful it would be just to have someone say “Beautiful day, isn't it?” or “Do you think the grain harvest will be good this year?”

But it never happened.

Not even my family wanted to admit that they knew me.

You have to understand, it wasn't always this way. I started out well-liked; I used to be a people pleaser. My sister used to say it was on account of being short that I tried so hard to please others, to get them to notice me. Perhaps she's right. Only it never really worked for very long.

As a teenager I got a job running errands for the Romans—a few coins to carry messages around town, that sort of thing. The other kids would

take their time, but I always hurried. It's not that I liked the Romans, you understand, I simply loved to get praise for doing a good job.

Some years later an opening came up in the tax department and—if you'll pardon the joke—I leapt at the opportunity. You see, tax collectors were paid by commission, and could charge as much overhead as they wanted. It was a great way to make a living. But on the other hand, people despised tax collectors—called them dirt. And I wanted to be liked.

So an idea came to me: become a tax collector, and be fair. That would be a switch.

I would pay the Romans the percentage they demanded, but I wouldn't charge as much commission as the others, and that way everybody would like me.

A: Fat chance.

R: What? Like a tax collector?

D: Oh the Romans liked me, all right. Because my rates were lower, people always paid me on time, and so I turned in a nice hefty bundle to the administrator every month. But all my fellow Jews hated me assuming I was as corrupt as all the others.

L: Cheat.

R: Traitor.

A: Snake.

D: Those were some of the nicer things they called me.

Just when I was ready to pack it in, I got promoted to chief tax collector for the whole district. More prestige with the Romans, I thought, but more contempt from my own people. Was it worth it?

One day, there was a big commotion in town. Seems this Jesus fellow, from Nazareth, was coming. I'd heard about him, he had quite a following. Apparently he talked about justice and fairness, and reclaiming our heritage as God's chosen people. Jesus also talked about tolerance and acceptance, which interested me. I thought he might be worth checking out.

It was hot, dusty, and heavy in town that day. The crowd started gathering early and by the time Jesus arrived you couldn't get anywhere near the road. Wanting to at least catch a glimpse of him, I climbed up the nearest tree.

I was rather disappointed, to be honest: Jesus looked quite, well, normal.

People were crowding around him, waving, grasping at his clothes. He smiled and held first one hand, then another.

And then Jesus noticed me up in the tree. I waved—didn't know what else to do, really—and he looked straight at me.

R: You're Zacchaeus, aren't you? I've heard about you."

D: If I could have melted away I would have, but you can't really do that when you're up in a tree and there's a huge crowd around. So I decided to climb down and speak my piece. If Jesus wanted to dress me down in front of all these people, it was time to set the record straight.

"I don't care what you've heard," I said, "it's nothing but a pack of lies."

The crowd went silent.

"I've always charged less commission than the other tax collectors, and always given one half of my earnings to care for the poor."

Jesus didn't say a word so I just kept right on talking.

“What’s more, on the rare occasions when I have accidentally cheated somebody, I’ve paid them back, four times over. But does anybody care about that? Nooo! They say that because I work for the Romans I’m a cheat, and a good-for-nothing, and if you’ve come here to tell me the same thing, you can save your breath—I’ve heard it all before.”

Jesus smiled a gentle, little smile, reached out, and placed a hand on my shoulder. I was shaking.

R: Zacchaeus, I know how kind and fair you are. I’ve also heard that you make a wonderful fish stew, and I’m very hungry. Could you give my friends and me a little lunch and a place to sit down? We could use a rest.”

D: I blushed, and tried to get my shocked face to cooperate for a smile.

R: And as for your reputation, all I know is that you are a child of Abraham who tries to live a good life. I’d be proud to call you my friend.”

D: Now, I would never brag about my fish stew, but I will tell you that Jesus and his crew finished all I could make. *And* they ate my bread and cheese, and drank my wine, and we all had a few

laughs. That evening in the market square a crowd gathered to hear Jesus tell stories. It was the most wonderful night of my life.

From that day on, people treated me with a new respect.

A: That's Zacchaeus, you know, the one that Jesus visited."

D: I even managed to convince a couple of others who worked for the Romans to plan strategy with me so we could do our jobs and satisfy the government without ripping people off; it's amazing how easy it is sometimes to be just and fair if you only put your mind to it.

I've come to realize what people mean when they say that they're saved. It's that sense of knowing that you belong, that God loves you and accepts you, and cares about you—despite what other people might think.

Salvation came to *me*, that day, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It came in the form of friendship.