

# Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

## SIZING UP A SMALL MAN

Luke 19:1-10

## Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 26)

### Analysis by Paul Jaster

1[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." 6So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." 8Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." 9Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

---

## DIAGNOSIS: Seeking for One's Self (and Taxing!)

**Step 1: Initial diagnosis (External Problem)**k – *Up a Tree*

Zacchaeus has a slight momentary ailment. He is physically too short for a man of his social stature. And so, he must swallow his pride for ten minutes or so and climb up a tree in order to catch a glimpse of the much heralded Jesus. It is a bitter pill, but it's preferable to the alternative, which is getting lost behind the crowd out of view. While the situation is mildly embarrassing (only kids climb trees & he will get teased about it back at the office), to him it is actually a familiar and comfortable position; it puts him above the others. After all, Zacchaeus is upwardly mobile. He is a venture capitalist. He aggressively seeks out what is best for him. And he is very successful at it; he is the chief tax collector at Jericho.

Zacchaeus has learned to compensate for his physical handicap. He is a very good social climber. And he has done very well for himself. His balance sheet is robust. His stock portfolio is healthy. His retirement is secure. He can afford to swallow a little pride. Up in that sycamore tree, he is literally and figuratively "head and heels" over everybody else. And so, it is no wonder when a notable man like Jesus goes by that Zacchaeus should strive to get the best view for himself. Jesus sounds like a good thing. And so, he wants to get a "piece" of Jesus just like he might any other "piece of action." He's not lost—he's in control; he's looking out for #1. So he's where the action is.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Too Small**

However, Zacchaeus's condition is more acute than he thinks. He may be able to compensate for his height by climbing up trees (or the backs of others), but Zacchaeus is still short on trust in God and love towards neighbor. His excessive stockpiles of ready cash show that he trusts in ploutos (the Greek word group for "wealth" or "riches," which is related to the Greek god "Pluto") more than he trusts in the God of Abraham and the promise to Abraham and his children. He is part of the

plutocracy-a ruling class of rich men, a government of the wealthy. And despite his financial endowments and his ability to do much more, he has not been generous in response to God's provision. He has been looking out for himself and not his neighbor.

And yet, should we give this man some credit? For all his riches, does he sense that there is some asset he is lacking? Is there something about his future that is still bugging him? Why is Zacchaeus so proactive in "trying to see who Jesus is"? Has he already heard something about Jesus that touches a nerve? Is he a seeker? Does he have a longing in his heart that he senses Jesus might fill? Still, even if this is his motivation, something as noble as this, seeking in itself is not enough. His trust in God and love towards neighbor is still too small. It is not properly rooted and grounded in God's gift of grace, which can only be received by faith. And this is a hereditary disease afflicting all the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. It's called sin.

Although Zacchaeus might sense his sin, he cannot see it for himself since he is so well-to-do and self-absorbed. His neighbors, on the other hand, quickly pick it out! It is easy to see the sin in others. "He is a sinner!" they shout with an exclamation point. Zacchaeus is a "we-little man"; in fact, he has no sense of "we," only of "me." The community around him picks it up loud and clear. Jesus himself needs to do no verbal diagnosing in this situation. The symptoms are evident to everyone, except to Zacchaeus who thinks he is head and heels above everybody else according to the measure of his bankroll, power, and authority. [Many of us Americans are similarly deluded. To the vast majority of the world's population even our lower class citizens are "rich" beyond all measure; part of the plutocracy-government by the wealthy. And to them we are very, very taxing! The chief taxers on the global economy. The ones

who get the biggest slice right off the top.]

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *Headed for a Fall*

Worse still, Zacchaeus's condition is terminal. His lack of trust in the God of Life is fatal. Zacchaeus is out on a dead limb, and his position is precarious. Dead limbs snap in high winds. He has nothing to hold him up when he gets hit by the full force of the blasting winds of God's judgment. The god that Zacchaeus builds his world around has no LIFE in it, the way that God measures life eternally. The ploutos (wealth) that he trusts will rot and rust. In real life just as in Greek mythology Pluto is ultimately the god of the underworld, of the dead, of Hades. As Jesus once said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Zacchaeus is in deadly danger. He is headed for a fall. He cannot see who Jesus really is, because he is not in the right position-flat on his back looking up at the Great Physician. Left to himself, he is in mortal danger of missing out on who Jesus is and what this Jesus brings. Without Jesus he will not be a Son of Abraham, not live by the promise, not be saved. He will stay lost.

## **PROGNOSIS: Found by Christ (and at Peace!)**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *Called, Invited, Forgiven and Fed by the Christ Who Crossed Over and Crawled up a Tree Himself*

Jesus does not pass Zacchaeus by, despite the fact he is just "passing through." Jesus stops and makes his bid for Zacchaeus and ups the ante. His ultimate destination is the cross; and yet this very cross is for Zacchaeus, too. And so, Jesus stops to make specifically this point. He finds Zacchaeus, the worst sinner of them all (in the minds of the local crowd). And he says a "today" Word ("Today I must stay at your house") just

like he will say another “today” Word to another thief beside him on the cross (“Today, you will be with me in paradise”). It is Christ’s forgiving Word to us that makes paradise. As he explained to the grumbling crowd, “the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” And the way that Jesus does it is by trading places. He calls us lost sinners to come down, then he crawls upon a tree himself and trades places with us, losing his life. Although he is the divine Son of God and this act is humiliating and embarrassing, he accepts the dead limb, the cross. He takes God’s blast of judgment. He dies for us sinners. And for his obedience God raises him from the dead.

And raised from death, Jesus invites us to his table, and trades places with us again. No longer do we gaze upon him; instead he is in charge, inviting us, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Jesus becomes the welcoming host. He invites Zacchaeus to his own home; he invites Zacchaeus to dine with him as an expression of the kingdom feast to come. And there at that meal Zacchaeus’ future is secured as he is summoned away from his old securities and re-rooted in the well-grounded cross of the crucified Christ.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Made X-tra Large**

Zacchaeus’ whole life is radically changed. He is regenerated. He is still vertically challenged, but he has crossed paths with Christ now. Jesus does not just size up Zacchaeus like the crowd did. In fact, in this story Jesus does no verbal diagnosing at all. That’s done by followers of Moses, those focused on the Torah-the grumblers along the path. [The law can only evaluate us. It cannot cure us.] Rather, he sizes up Zacchaeus by making Zacchaeus bigger than he was before. Oddly, Jesus does it by assigning Zacchaeus to a place lower on the organizational chart than Zacchaeus had originally imagined as a big shot. But when Jesus is the host-the head, the brains, the heart-we are

connected to something bigger than we have ever known. We are connected to the source of all LIFE. Not just bios, but Zoe. And so, lower is bigger...and larger. Zacchaeus is healed. He see who Jesus is (his Lord, his Superior, his Doctor), and he also sees who his neighbors are (the objects of his compassionate concern).

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Rooted Well Into the Earth**

Zacchaeus finds his proper role in the community-which is not simply to treat others fairly (even Moses commanded that). But to do so generously, just the way that God does to us through the crucified Christ. No longer is Zacchaeus looking out for himself and climbing up on the backs of others. Rather, he is looking out for others. Zacchaeus takes risks and he uses his wealth and venture capital in another way. He uses it to help the poor and assist those who have been unfairly treated by the economic system. He changes allegiance. He leaves the plutocracy and becomes part of a Christ-ocracy. He redistributes the wealth that is under his own personal control. He dispenses with the wealth that kept him from trusting in God's promise. And in the process the kingdom gains. And so, everybody wins...except Pluto.

Back down on the ground, Zacchaeus is rooted well into the earth-he is still a sinner. He would be the first to admit it. No longer does he need the diagnosis and the criticism of the crowd to see his fault. But he is also healed from this fatal ailment and he is saved. Zacchaeus too is "a son of Abraham" (not of Moses, notice). He is a child of the promise, not the law. He is no longer captive to Pluto's realm or his former preoccupations. Being found by Christ, he is part of a new family now-the family of faith. No longer does he look down on people, he looks out for them. He is rooted "well" into the earth.