# Jesus met a Chief Tax Collector

Luke 19:1-10 # 193

There was a tax collector named Zacchaeus. He was at the top of his career the day Jesus passed through his town of Jericho. He was a chief tax collector and He was wealthy. But He met Jesus that day and, by the time He left town, everything had changed for him.

He was always the short kid. He survived by cunning. He could beat the bullies at one thing, making money. It made him unpopular but that was the price of survival. He was too small for most trades. So, he began collecting taxes for the Roman rulers. This job made him money and enemies. Other Jews hated him. His job came with armed Roman soldiers at his side to enforce his demands. No more bullying Zaccheus. He brought shame to his family, and the label ‘traitor’ to himself. He extracted hard earned cash from hard working men. They snarled and complained, but hand over the cash they did.

His town of Jericho was wealthy and fertile with a lucrative customs station where traders passed. Tax collectors assessed the value of their goods, demanded a percentage and collected the cash. The correct rate was never clear, so they took a bonus for themselves and made a good profit.

In time, Zaccheus took a promotion to chief tax collector.

There were three kinds of taxes demanded by the Romans.

First was a land tax at a fixed rate set in advance.

Second was a head tax on each person set at one day’s wage per year.

Third was an indirect goods and services tax. This was his big opportunity. They called it “tax farming”. A chief tax collector put in a bid to Rome for a region. The highest bidder was registered to collect those indirect taxes. Once the amount of the bid was reached and commissions paid to his tax collectors, any extra could be kept by the chief tax collector. They exploited the system. Rome didn’t care, as long as they got their contracted amount.

In this way Zaccheus became very wealthy. He built a big house. The richer He became the more He was hated. He was working for the enemy – those pagan Romans. He was a sinner. In fact, he was the yardstick for measuring how low someone can go on the scale of sinning. If anyone was concerned how good or bad he was, he could measure himself up against a chief tax collector and feel good by comparison. He was public enemy number one. ‘Tax collectors and sinners!’ The terms came to mean the same thing. Did He care? You wouldn’t think so looking at him. But even money loses its appeal after a while, especially when your whole hometown hates you. Deep down He was hurting – badly.

Zaccheus heard about Jesus as He was making His way from town to town in Galilee and Judea. He was now on his way to Jerusalem – 25km south west of Jericho and was due to pass through there. He was curious about Him. Who was he? Some said he was the promised Messiah. He was, they said, like our great ancestor, King David who conquered all our enemies. They thought He would lead an uprising against Rome and against anyone who collaborated with Rome. If that was correct Zacchaeus is history.

But He also heard other stories. Jesus had recruited a tax collector named Levi, gave him a new name, Matthew, meaning ‘gift of the Lord’, and joined him to his close-knit gang of 12 – along with some rough fishermen. Could a tax collector, one of us ‘sinners’, become a gift of the Lord? He didn’t think so. But he was curious.

One day, his whole town was buzzing with the anticipated arrival of Jesus. He was curious like everyone else. But He was short. He figured Jesus will walk along the main street. So, if he climbed a Sycamore tree he will be removed from the crowd and he will get a good view as Jesus goes past. Without his usual bodyguards this plan seemed safe. So, he climbed a tree and waited. It was Passover season and being in Winter, Sycamore fig trees have no leaves, so he will be sure to get a clear view. He perched up there and waited. A big crowd was creeping along collecting more locals as it went.

All eyes are on Jesus who seemed very calm and relaxed, smiling at this one and that, but looking very sharp – scanning the crowd as if looking for someone. He is getting closer to his tree. Zaccheus is curious at what He sees. Jesus doesn’t look like a rebel. He wonders which one is Levi. He comes near his tree, and – oh no – He stops right at the base of his tree. He looks up and finds Zaccheus. Horrors! Everyone else stops too. They follow Jesus gaze and next thing the whole town is staring up at him. There are no leaves to hide behind – it’s Winter. He is exposed. Time stands still. He looks down in horror to a crowd of individuals he has cheated. Each face tells a story of his crooked dealings. It all flashes back. His whole shady life-history staring at him in the faces of all those He conned. One by one they realise who they have caught up a tree. He can read their faces – hatred, revenge, jealousy, anger – all against him. He had climbed up to hide, but in the presence of Jesus He is completely exposed. All his sins are laid bare. A signal from Jesus and the stones on the road will be hurled towards him at speed. He will be dead at the base of his tree. Only one person can save him – Jesus.

But, why would He? If Jesus defends him, He will lose His popularity. Crowds are fickle. He is a very good man. If He didn’t know what a rotten sinner he has caught up a tree, He will know by now. The crowd give Jesus some local knowledge about him. Jesus raises His hand; the crowd goes quiet. This is it. ‘I’m finished.’ Jesus speaks.

**“Zacchaeus, come down immediately.**

He is in shock. He knows his name – his personal name, ‘Zacchaeus’. How does He know that? Someone has told Him. What else have they told? Everything. That’s me, up a tree, ‘come down’. No, he can’t. Yes, He must. It’s a command from Messiah. He had been disobeying God all his life. But he meekly comes down. The whole town follows his every move. He has spent his working life as a government bureaucrat hiding behind wealth and military protection. Now here he is up a tree being ordered down, down, down, to face reality, to face his victims, to face up, to own up. If they have their way with him he is lost. Only one person can stand in the way of their revenge. Jesus. But if He does, and saves him, He would have to identify with him, a rotten sinner, and risk becoming a reject like him. Jesus speaks.

**“I must stay at your house today”.**

That is exactly what Jesus has chosen to do. His house is gang headquarters for the local bad men. Down he comes and lands at the feet of Jesus, terrified. He looks up to see His face – smiling - at him.

‘Let’s go, lead the way’. A weird scene follows. Zaccheus in front, Jesus at heel, his gang behind Him and the crowd, all heading to his house. He is in shock. His life is in the hands of Jesus. Step for step Jesus follows. The crowd are murmuring as they follow. Jesus’ approval ratings are dropping as they head towards his house.

He arrived home, opened the door, turned around and there He was still, Jesus. ‘Come inside’. The crowd keep back, allowing some of his tax collecting gang to filter forward and come inside as well. He closes the door and there they all were. Zaccheus, his wife and kids, servants, some tax collectors, Jesus, and some of His gang. Everyone else is outside. Servants wash all their feet and bring in the wine, the fish, and the bread.

Sandals off, they recline on cushions in the main room. He treats Him as He would treat any special guest. Jesus starts enjoying Himself. He seems to like their company. Zaccheus can hardly believe it. Jesus likes his mates. But we are all ‘sinners’. We have labels. We are traitors, outcasts. Jesus is not concerned. His heart is bursting. Jesus exposed him, then He saved him and now He is his guest and friend.

Outside the murmuring develops into some heavy opinions**. “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner’”.** The tide is turning against Jesus – all because of his host. He didn’t ask Jesus to identify with him. He invited Himself to his house. He doesn’t have a category for what is happening. He has never been loved before –not like this. He has only known put downs, teasing, mocking, and even death threats against him. This is love, sacrificial love. This love Jesus is having for him could cost Him His life, to save me! He is amazed. Before this perfect man, He was fully exposed as one rotten sinner from head to toe. In the presence of such love He can’t stay that way. He decides to put things right. He knows what He must do. His sins are glaring at him through the shutters of his living room.

He stands up, raises his hand and everyone goes quiet.

**“Look Lord! Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”**

*Pause………..*

There is silence – mouths open in unbelief. He looks straight at his Lord, eye to eye. He is totally exposed towards God and towards his community. But this time all the guilt is gone. All the layers of hiding and scheming and pretending are gone. He has just faced his sins to his God. And announced his plan to put them right to the community. He senses that deep inside he is free for the first time in his life. Why did He say what he has just announced? Jesus loved him, so He could do no less.

Jesus breaks the silence, and announces in a loud clear voice:

**“Today salvation has come to this house because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost”.**

Zaccheus is thrilled. Something has happened in his heart. Jesus has announced what it is. He is saved, not just from the anger of men outside, but also from the anger of God above. A long life of sin, forgiven. He has become a true “Son of Abraham”. Jesus announces in public that He is a true Israelite. No more labels for Zaccheus.

Word of his announcement went outside through the shutters of his house. ‘Divide up half to the poor and four times to everyone He cheated’! Amazing. At this point, wealth had completely lost its appeal. There and then He is enjoying a much better deposit. A deep-down peace and freedom. He is experiencing love from Jesus, at great personal sacrifice to Him. This is priceless. This is way more valuable that money.

And what became of the crowd’s hopes of Jesus being their hero, leading an uprising against Rome? They got dashed. He claimed to be Messiah all right. Calling Himself, ‘Son of Man’, was a clear claim to be Messiah. But Messiah of the lost – to seek them out and save them. People like Zaccheus, a lost soul, up a tree. Jesus was looking out for lost, hiding, hurting sinners like him. He found him and He saved him.

Jesus continued His journey out of Jericho and on to Jerusalem. He was on a precise time schedule to the day, to ride into Jerusalem on a colt in exact fulfilment of a prophecy of Daniel. The side-track Zaccheus caused was apparently factored into His schedule hundreds of years before when the prophesy was written. And what became of His popularity? Just as the best possible outcome happened for Zaccheus, the worst happened for Jesus – on behalf of him and all repentant sinners like him. He Himself became the victim of the sacrifice of the Passover. He became the Lamb that was killed to take away the sins of the world. The crowds called for his crucifixion, the religious leaders did the dirty politics and the Roman soldiers did the deed. They crucified Him, nailed Him to a cross and left Him to bleed and die in agony and shame. Despised, and rejected by men, He took the entire penalty he deserved for his sin. The day that Jesus stood with him and came home – He knew what it would cost Him, but He loved him anyway and gladly went on to Jerusalem to face His fate.

But His story didn’t end there – it only just began and so did Zaccheus story. They laid Him in a grave but on the third day after His death He came alive again. He lives on today inside people like Zaccheus. He made the distributions that He promised, and He got restored to dignity in his community. Life has never been the same for Zaccheus since that day when He met Jesus.

# Jesus met a Chief Tax-collector “Get real” Questions

1. Where did Zacchaeus live?
2. What was his job?
3. What was his stature?
4. Who did he work for?
5. Who were his customers?
6. How did he become so wealthy?
7. Who provided his protection?
8. Who were his friends?
9. What was his reputation?

10 How did Jesus describe his condition?

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|  | **Questions of the story** | **Personal questions** |
| 2. | What may have been his steps up the ladder of his career? | What were the important steps leading to where you are today? |
| 3. | Why did the pursuit of wealth lose its appeal to him? | How important to you is the pursuit of wealth? |
| 4. | Why was he successful on the outside but hurting inside? | Where do you hurt inside? |
| 5. | What risk was Jesus taking identifying with Zacchaeus? | What risk would you face identifying with Jesus? |
| 6. | What was he forced to face as everyone stared at him up the tree? | What are you hiding that you need to face up to? |
| 7. | What was so surprising about Jesus wanting to go to his home? | What may surprise you about Jesus when you face what you have been hiding? |
| 8. | What did he decide to do to put matters right? | What must you do to put matters right? |
| 9. | What attitude of Jesus compelled him to put matters right? | What is Jesus’ attitude towards you? |
| 10. | Jesus announced that He is saved. What did that mean for Zacchaeus? | What does salvation mean for you? |

Chief Tax Collector cheating Jericho Jews lost

Romans short soldiers Tax collectors traitor