

Zacchaeus

I am Zacchaeus of Jericho. I thought I would never be happy but I am now filled with genuine deep joy. I had a miserable childhood. While other children grew, I stayed short. Oh, I walked and talked at the proper ages but never lengthened in stature. When I first became aware of myself, I longed to be like everyone else. But instead, I was teased and bullied. I could not keep up in their games and was excluded from their conversations.

I grew up anyway and vowed that I would never be at the mercy of anyone again. I was highly motivated to succeed and recognized that becoming a tax collector for the Roman Imperial Government was just the ticket. As a tax collector, cheating was possible – over charging or extracting bribes in exchange for silence on possible smuggling – but the practice itself was lucrative enough. You see, I paid a fee to the government for the franchise and then kept all that I collected.

I was a shrewd negotiator with the Romans and got my territory for a bargain price. Then I determined to work as hard as humanly possible, driven by my deep-seated anger at my peers and my desire to be a “big man” in something more important than stature.

Did it make me happy? Did it compensate for my miserable life? No and No! Being hated by my peers was not a big deal. I had experienced that all my life. And being excluded from the Temple and called the worst of sinners just bounced off me like a falling fig – oh, it hurt a little but was of no consequence. For I had determined that I was damned anyway and just wanted to go down as a rich and powerful man.

But I knew something was missing and the stories about the wandering Rabbi, Jesus, intrigued me. He was an outcast, too, at least as far as the priests and Pharisees were concerned. But people who heard him teach said there was something very special about him. He was coming through town and I decided to at least watch him go by. Well, there was a big crowd and I arrived too late to get in the front row. I had not climbed a tree since I was a child but up I went. It was a sycamore fig that had just enough low branches to let me get to a good vantage point.

I was a little bit embarrassed but well hidden in the leaves. My plan was that after he had passed by and the crowd disbursed, I would come down and get back to business. To my surprise, Jesus saw me. I tried to hide my face and look the other way. Then, to my horror, he called me by name!

I went through the full range of emotions in a few heartbeats as he said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." He knew me. And by coming to my house, he valued me. All this despite the fact that I was a social outcast.

My heart melted. I knew what I was, not just a short man but a sinner. And this good man loved me. I repented and said, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." He said to me, in the hearing of the whole crowd, "Today salvation has come to this house...."

And I was as good as my word. I was indeed a changed man. I gave to the poor. I told everyone I met what had happened to me. Instead of seeing people cringe when I approached, I found the thrill of being appreciated and welcomed. Do you have something you need to release? Give it to Jesus.