

Curious Zacchaeus

By Scott Runyon

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Luke 19:1-10

CHILDREN'S TIME

Basketball is a popular sport for both boys and girls. Right now we are at the end of the college basketball season and heading to the playoffs and both Michigan and Michigan State are doing well.

Several things are really helpful for basketball players. First, they need good hands to can catch, pass, and dribble the ball behind their back, between their legs and with both hands. It also helps to have quick feet, and to be a good shooter. Good players practice these things all the time.

Something else is really helpful but it isn't something they can practice, no matter how hard they work. It is very helpful to be really tall! Most professional basketball players today are close to seven feet tall. But some players are really good without being tall.

Back in the 1960s there was a basketball player named Nate Archibald. He was about a foot shorter than all of the other players.

When Nate finished college, most of the professional teams ignored him because they thought he was too short. In fact, his nickname was "Tiny."

One team decided to take a chance on Nate and signed him to play on their team. Well, Nate made it big because he was lightning fast, had good hands, and he was a great shooter. He played professional basketball for 14 years and became known as the player who proved that a "little man" could play with the tall guys. He won lots of awards and was even elected to the Hall of Fame.

That's not too bad for a man that most people thought was too short to play basketball.

The Bible tells us about another man who became great even though he was not very tall. His name was Zacchaeus. He was not only short, he was also hated by almost everyone because he cheated people out of their money.

One day Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was coming to town and he wanted to see him, but he was so short that he couldn't see over the crowd. So, he climbed up in a tree so that he could see. As Jesus passed by, he called to Zacchaeus, "Come on down. I am going to your house today."

Zacchaeus climbed down and took Jesus to his house. Zacchaeus told Jesus that he was sorry for the wrong things he had done and that he would give half of all his money to the poor. He also said that he would repay anyone he had cheated four times that amount. He may not have been very tall, but Zacchaeus became a giant in God's kingdom that day because he decided to follow Jesus.

SERMON

Hello. I was invited to be here today to share with you about my life and what Jesus means to me.

First of all, I have to say that most people are afraid of me. I hope that you will give me a chance, because the people who judge me by my job would be wrong.

You see, I have an unusual amount of power in this world, especially in Jericho. I command and have demanded respect, because I work for the Roman government. People can't mess with me and get away with it— they will get their due. They know what the Romans are capable of. So, I am protected ... sort of ...

It is a pretty lonely life though — as a Tax Collector — even more so

because I am Zacchaeus, the Chief Tax Collector in Jericho.

That was hard at first. My whole family disowned me when I chose the path of a Tax Collector. Pretty quickly I realized I was going to have to move — too many people knew where I lived — so I found a cave out in Gilgal toward the mountains, north east from Jericho. It works pretty well for me because nobody in Jericho knows where I live and it is close enough to get to town whenever I want.

I was promoted two years ago when the last Chief Tax Collector disappeared. Everyone is pretty sure that he was killed, but the soldiers never could track down who or where. I'm curious about that. I wonder if he might have fled to another city and is laying low, but the soldiers burned down four houses in Jericho to set an example. So, nobody will mess with me.

But I don't like to take chances, so I always make sure that when I am collecting the big taxes on property, imports and exports, and for any sort of emergency, I always take an armed soldier with me to ensure my safety. I always have my ledger to keep track of all the details, but I

also have these little cards that describe what people owe.

1% for annual income tax
8% for import and export taxes
(10% of grain crop and 20% of wine, fruit, and olive oil)
15% sales tax
15% property tax
30% emergency tax
10% travel tax - for each wheel on a cart and animals pulling it
Up to 100% carry tax (whatever someone was carrying)

Of course there is an amount that Caesar wants, and I always collect more. It isn't so hard to get filthy rich in about three months, especially in Jericho with the kind of trade that goes through here and with so many wealthy people. People give me what I demand because I can easily have them thrown in jail. I've done that a time or two. It isn't so hard to manipulate people with fear.

Since I am now the Chief Tax Collector, I have eleven people who work for me, so I don't have to go farm to farm and house to house so much any more unless there are problems, or for the big accounts. All of my collectors do that work at the rates I set, with the typical up-charge from what Caesar needs. I have all of them bring me the

money, then I take it to Caesar and keep all the profits.

In this business, you can't get too concerned what other people think of you. In fact, you have to have thick skin to listen to all kinds of pleading from people about how you are taking too much, and how they won't have enough to live on. I hear that line every day. To get by, I just have to ignore them and stick to the plan. So, I have to keep to myself.

I have found that I enjoy it there, because my favorite thing is to be out in nature, especially up in trees. I might look tall, but it's this shirt that creates an optical illusion. I'm only 4'8". Being a short guy, I like it up in trees where I can see far away and be with the birds and feel the breeze. It is so peaceful.

Right in town, I found one of those big sycamore trees along the road. I call it "my sycamore." Sometimes I climb up there when nobody is looking and go way up high. I found a spot where nobody can see me from the ground and several branches come together where I can comfortably rest, and even sleep. I can hear people on the ground talking but they can't see me. I stay up there sometimes for hours and even take naps.

It was up there in “my sycamore” that I first heard Jesus teaching. His teaching was so different than anything I had heard and it got me really curious. You see, I am curious about all sorts of things, always have been. That’s what got me into this business of collecting taxes. I was curious how much money I could make.

Anyhow, I am curious about Jesus, so, I go up in that tree whenever I hear he is coming to town because he always stops to teach his disciples right under that tree — and I can listen in. One time I thought he might have looked up and saw me, but he didn’t say anything.

Jesus teaches about being generous and helping those in need. One time he rebuked one of his disciples who got real concerned about not having enough money. Jesus told him that the amount of money wasn’t so important as the condition of their heart and how they treated the least of these. What Jesus says makes a lot of sense, and recently it has me really curious about what I am doing as a tax collector.

It might sound strange, but I miss going to synagogue. I grew up going all the time, and maybe never

really appreciated the community there. Seeing Jesus with his disciples reminds me of the closeness of synagogue community. But tax collectors are banned from the temple and all synagogues. We can’t worship with our fellow Jews even if we wanted to. I’m not sure I would want to though. It would be too awkward — they all know me and I have stolen from most of them, and they wouldn’t want my money even if I wanted to support the temple. They say it is dirty money. Well, they are right. It is.

Jesus’ words have been getting to me lately.

And then there was that collection I made about six months ago. That was a turning point for me. I was covering for one of my collectors and was out at a farm, a BIG farm on the north side of Jericho. I was feeling particularly greedy that day. Before I even left home, I set my agenda and was determined to double all of their taxes.

So, I go to the farm and meet this man in his field. As I am walking up to him, I am thinking of how I can tax the ox and the cart he is using to plow the field. I also made up a new tax just for him — a fence tax, because I see that he has lots of

fences for his animals. So, I start right in on him about who I am and that he needs to stop plowing and sit down with me so I can let him know how much tax he owes. I didn't even notice that his head was hanging low as I was talking at him.

He ties off the ox and leaves the cart and walks slowly with me to his house where I see his wife and five kids. They all look so upset. But my way was always to ignore how people feel. This man's wife starts sobbing and tells me about how they just lost all of their crops in their largest field to some kind of bug, and that morning their little daughter was seriously injured when she was kicked by a horse. They expect to use what little they have saved to help her get better, but she is in really rough shape.

I ignore their story and go into how all of that isn't my problem and that Caesar still needs to be paid, even on the field of crops that were lost. I add everything up and figure that they need to give me all of the years/ harvest and half again what they expected for the coming year, as well as a substantial amount of money, which they say they didn't have.

So, I told them that I was a compassionate man and instead of

leaving them with a debt, I would take the ox and cart the man had been plowing with when I arrived.

So, I load everything up, including all of their money, crops and their ox and head home. All of the way home, I couldn't stop thinking about what I had just done — and Jesus' words about giving to the poor kept ringing in my head. What was going to happen to that little girl. How would they support themselves without any money or crops. When I looked at my life, I realized then and there that I had been living as a fraud. I had been living as a con artist. My work was worse than cruel, it was heartless.

I got home and wept into the night. I couldn't take this any longer. So, I got up in the middle of the night, took the man's ox and cart, loaded it with as much grain as I could, put all of their money in a sack in the cart, road over to their house, tied up the ox and dropped off the cart by their barn, then I slowly walked home. I didn't care what Caesar might think about me doing that. I resolved to pay the tax that family owed out of my own pocket.

Something changed in me on that walk home. I felt a lot lighter. I think I have a better idea what Jesus meant when he told his

disciples that it is better to give than receive. I have never lived that way, but I am getting curious about what that might be like.

Since that day, I have scaled back how much tax I collect and I think that I need to do more. I am curious — what would my life look like if I left being a tax collector, or maybe did the job different than everyone else — with compassion.

Passover is almost here and I heard that Jesus is coming through Jericho soon. I know it will be crowded, but this time I want to see if I can talk with him. I don't care if others see me. Maybe I can get his attention from my sycamore.

Well, that is my story. I know that you all have your own story about the difference Jesus has made for you. I encourage you to get curious about what your life might be like if you share your story more.