

KNOWN

Fully Known. Fully Loved.

Week 3 — Zacchaeus | *Above the Crowd*

Luke 19:1–10

Luke 19:5 *When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."*

Luke 19:9–10 *Jesus said to him, "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 the lost."*

From One Tree to Another

Last week Nathanael was under the fig tree. Shade, study, safety — a man rooted in his tradition, waiting with his theology in his lap.

This week Zacchaeus is up the sycamore-fig. A ladder out of reach, a perch above the crowd, a position of safety. Same tree family. Completely opposite posture.

One man waiting for what his tradition promises. The other hiding in plain sight from everyone who despises him.

Jesus finds both of them.

A Man of Small Stature

Physical smallness sets up the mechanics of the story — he can't see over the crowd, he runs ahead, he climbs. But the smallness this sermon is about is not his height.

Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector in Jericho — a wealthy trade city, a major customs hub. He is rich. By every external measure he is not small at all. So why is a powerful, wealthy man in a tree?

What Zacchaeus Actually Was

Tax collectors in first-century Judea were not merely unpopular. They were covenant traitors.

The Roman system: tax collection rights were auctioned. The collector paid Rome up front and recouped his money — plus his profit — from his own people. Legally. Zacchaeus is not just a tax collector but an *architelōnēs* — chief tax collector, the only use of this word in the entire New Testament. He ran the operation.

In the social imagination of first-century Judaism this placed him outside the covenant people. Not lost the way a wandering sheep is lost. Lost the way a man who burned his own house down is lost. He chose Rome. He chose money. He extracted from the people God called him to belong to.

The crowd's muttering in verse 7 is not mild social disapproval. It is covenant outrage.

Luke 19:7 *"He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."*

See also: Luke 15:1–2 — the same crowd, the same muttering, the same tax collectors gathering around Jesus

For further study: Kenneth Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes (IVP Academic) — the definitive cultural treatment of what tax collection meant in first-century Jewish Palestine. Essential background for this passage.

The Tree

He runs ahead and climbs a sycamore-fig tree. Dignified men did not run in a first-century honor culture. Wealthy men did not climb trees in public. Zacchaeus does both. Something is already broken open before Jesus speaks.

The tree is his escape hatch. Up here he can see without being seen. Observe without being observed. Be interested without being vulnerable. He is above the crowd that despises him — the same strategy he's used his whole life. Get above. Stay out of reach. Protect yourself from what people will say.

The sycamore-fig is the same tree family as the fig tree Nathanael was sitting under. Same genus, different posture. Nathanael was rooted. Zacchaeus is perched. And Jesus is about to do what God has always done — set the boundary back in its right place, speak the new creation into existence.

See also: Genesis 1 — creation by boundary-setting; God separates, names, orders

For further study: The sycamoras (Ficus sycomorus) is common in Jericho and the Jordan valley, with low spreading branches that make it genuinely easy to climb. The shame-honor dimensions of a wealthy man climbing a tree in public should not be underestimated.

Jesus Initiates

Jesus comes to the tree and looks up. He doesn't wait for Zacchaeus to come down. He doesn't ask who that is up there.

He looks up and uses his name.

Luke 19:5 "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

Dei — must. Divine compulsion, not preference. The same word Luke uses throughout Jesus's 'must' language — the Son of Man must suffer, I must preach the Kingdom. This visit was always going to happen. The one person in Jericho the crowd would least expect. That is the house he chooses.

Zacchaeus came down immediately and welcomed him gladly. No hesitation. No performance of reluctance. He has been waiting for exactly this without knowing it.

The Greek word for stay here is menō — abide, dwell. Jesus doesn't visit Zacchaeus's house. He stays. The presence that resets the boundary is not a brief call. It is a dwelling.

See also: John 15:4 — abide in me and I in you / John 1:38–39 — come and see where I am staying

Repentance or Vindication — An Open Question

Zacchaeus stood and said:

Luke 19:8 "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."

The Greek verbs are present tense. Not I will give. I give. Not I will repay. I repay. Luke is a careful writer who knew exactly what tense he was using. He did not resolve the question and neither should we.

The traditional reading: this is conversion. Repentance as result of grace. Transformation happening in real time. Defensible and carries real weight.

The alternative reading: Zacchaeus is not announcing a new intention — he is defending his existing practice against the crowd's false verdict. This is who I already am. Your verdict about me is wrong.

Either way something about his wealth has been unsettled in him for a long time. The fourfold repayment references the Torah restitution law for theft (Exodus 22:1). He knows the law. He has been measuring himself against it. The encounter with Jesus doesn't create the conscience. It releases it.

Note: Joel Green (NICNT, Luke) reads the present tense as habitual practice — vindication not conversion. N.T. Wright reads it as public reinstatement. Fitzmyer (Anchor Bible) leans toward future intent. The ambiguity is almost certainly intentional. Luke serves both the person who needs vindication and the person who needs to change.

Child of Abraham

Today salvation has come to this house — because he too is a son of Abraham.

The word is kai. He also. He too. The crowd used covenant language to exclude him. Jesus uses it to reinstate him.

Son of Abraham is not a compliment. It is a declaration. A boundary being redrawn. The God who separated light from darkness, who named things into their true nature, who has always created by speaking the right order into existence — that God is standing in the street outside Zacchaeus's house and saying: the crowd got this wrong.

Luke 19:10 *"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*

The lost thing that needed seeking was not Zacchaeus's soul in the abstract. It was the Zacchaeus that Zacchaeus had almost stopped believing in. The one who knew the Torah. The one who was already giving. The one who climbed a tree in public because something in him was still reaching toward God after everything.

See also: Luke 3:8 — do not say 'we have Abraham as our father' / Isaiah 61:1–2 — Jesus's mission statement, enacted here

For further study: Darrell Bock, Luke (BECNT) — on 'son of Abraham' as covenant reinstatement, not ethnic designation. Victor Hugo, Les Misérables — the Valjean/bishop scene is the closest literary analog to this moment in Western literature.

He Doesn't See the Verdict. He Sees You.

Some of you have a crowd. Maybe it's actual people — the community, the family, the institution that drew the boundary and put you outside it. Maybe the crowd is entirely internal — the verdict you've delivered on yourself, the version of you that you've almost stopped believing exists.

Zacchaeus climbed a tree to watch from a safe distance. To see without being seen. To be interested without being vulnerable. You know that posture. Some of you have been in that tree for years.

Jesus walks to the tree and looks up. He already knows your name. He already knows what it's been carrying. Come down. I'm staying at your house today.

He doesn't see the verdict. He sees you.

What is the tree you climb to stay safe — the position, the distance, the strategy that keeps you above the crowd that might hurt you?

Is there a version of yourself — the person you've been struggling to be past the verdict that's been delivered on you — that you've almost stopped believing exists?

KEY WORDS

architelōnēs (ar-kee-teh-LOH-nays)

Greek: chief tax collector. The only use of this word in the entire New Testament is here. Luke flags Zacchaeus's significance — and his exclusion — from the opening line.

sōtēria (so-tay-REE-ah)

dei (DAY)

Greek: must, divine compulsion. 'I must stay at your house today.' Not a preference or a request. The visit was always going to happen.

kai (Kye)

menō (MEH-no)

Greek: abide, stay, dwell. Jesus doesn't visit Zacchaeus's house — he stays. The same word John uses for the deepest covenant presence.

didōmi / apodidōmi

Greek: salvation, wholeness, shalom. 'Today salvation has come to this house.' Full covenant restoration — not just forgiveness but new creation, boundary redrawn.

Greek: and, also, too. 'He too is a son of Abraham.' The word that puts Zacchaeus back inside the line the crowd drew him outside of. One small word carrying the whole sermon.

Greek: I give / I repay. Present active tense — ongoing action. The verb tense Luke used deliberately. Repentance or vindication? He left it open. So do we.

REFLECTION & RESPONSE

1. Zacchaeus had made himself untouchable — successful, above the crowd, out of reach. Where in your life have you found a tree to stay safe in?

2. The verb tense is deliberately ambiguous — repentance or vindication, both readings are real. Which one do you need to hear today, and why?

3. Jesus says 'I must stay at your house today.' Not 'I'd like to.' Must. What would it mean for your home — your actual life, the private version — to be the place Jesus insists on dwelling?

4. 'He too is a son of Abraham.' What verdict has been delivered on you — by others or by yourself — that Jesus might be redrawing right now?

He doesn't see the crowd's verdict, or your own. He sees you.
