

ZACCHAEUS SUNDAY ~ Luke 19:1-10

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During the earthly sojourn of our Savior, He gave His attention to people from all walks of life. Social status, personal wealth, education, whether a person was a homeless beggar or a wealthy dignitary who wore the finest clothes, none of these things meant anything to our Savior, for He treated all diverse people with the same love, respect, care, concern and kindness. If anything, He was most drawn to the poor, the downtrodden, the ill, and those who were ostracized or abused by society. He was especially drawn to sinners, because it was His ministry to lead men and women from sin to repentance and salvation, for the Lord "came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk. 19:10). We see an example of this illustrated today in the encounter between our Savior and an obscure tax collector named Zacchaeus.

Our Savior had become well known and drew large crowds wherever He went. In today's Gospel, many people are following the Lord as He passed through Jericho. In the crowd was a tax collector named Zacchaeus. He was short of stature and it would be impossible for him to be able to see over everyone as the Lord was about to pass by. Therefore, Zacchaeus climbs up into the branches of a sycamore tree so that he can have a good view. As the Lord passed by the tree, He looked up at Zacchaeus and beckoned for him to come down, stating that He desired to dine at Zacchaeus' home that evening. One can only imagine how surprised and ecstatic Zacchaeus must have felt with this turn of events. At best, he had only hoped to catch a glimpse of our Savior. Not only did the Lord personally recognize and acknowledge Zacchaeus, but He even expressed His desire to visit with him in his home! The tax collectors were notorious for cheating the people. No one supervised or audited their activities. As long as the Roman civil authority received the share that was due them, the tax collectors could cheat and rob the people as much as they liked without any repercussions. That night at dinner, filled with joy because of the Lord's presence, and no doubt also inspired by whatever words were spoken by our Savior at the dinner, Zacchaeus stood up and stated with firm and resolute heartfelt repentance, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Lk. 19:8). Having achieved His mission to save the soul of Zacchaeus, the Lord responded to Zacchaeus' exclamation by saying, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Lk. 19:9).

In Semitic culture, as compared to Western culture, it is much more significant and culturally important to be invited as a guest to share a meal with a family in their home. There are moral implications involved. The Jews in the times of Jesus would never sit at table with Gentiles or those who were considered to be sinners, such as tax collectors. Jesus, as a practicing Jew, violated the contemporary social taboos and had no problem sitting at dinner with Gentiles and people reputed to be sinners. Therefore, the Jews were scandalized when Jesus had dinner with Zaccheus, because as I said, the tax collectors had a bad reputation and were considered to be sinners by the hypocritical pharisaical Jews, who, full of pride and having big egos, considered themselves to be "holy" and better than the rest. They felt that by associating with sinners they would diminish their own "holiness," that the sinfulness of others would rub off on them and take away from their self-proclaimed high opinion of themselves. They practiced a type of "holiness" that required strict separation from people whom they deemed as sinners or inferior human beings. Jesus did not follow the line of thinking of these pharisaical Jews. Therefore, He regularly associated Himself with tax collectors and sinners. The Jews condemned Jesus for this.

The story of Zaccheus teaches us that the first step to salvation is *desire*, that we must truly want salvation. In seeking to find our way to repentance, no obstacles are too great for us. Zacchaeus overcomes his inability to view our Savior by climbing into the branches of a tree. Whether it is climbing up into the branches of a tree, or whatever it is in our own lives and our

own personal situations that we must do, the path is always available to us if we are willing to “scale the walls” and overcome any obstacles in our lives that prevent us from seeing the Lord with our hearts, minds, and souls. Just as the Lord acknowledged Zaccheus and his efforts, the Lord promises us that He will likewise acknowledge and recognize our efforts as well ~ as long as our efforts are attempted with sincerity, honesty, humility and with good intentions. Our struggles will not be in vain, but the Lord will surely respond and help us to find the road to our own repentance and our own salvation, just like He did for Zaccheus. This Sunday of Zacchaeus always reminds us that we are approaching the holy season of repentance ~ Great Lent. As the Lord passes by at this time, the Church will offer us many different trees that we may choose to ascend ~ *if we desire* ~ in order to see and to experience our Savior: the tree of fasting, the tree of prayer, the tree of Holy Confession, the tree of almsgiving, to name a few. It is entirely up to us whether or not we *choose* to ascend these trees. Zaccheus resolutely and with firm conviction made up his mind to see our Savior, and we must do likewise. Zacchaeus considered his shortness of stature to be a minor obstacle which he quickly and readily overcame. He could have just thrown up his arms and said “What can I do? I’m too short,” and given up. He could have used his shortness of stature as an excuse and just walked away. Then he never would have seen the Lord, and worst of all, the Lord never would have visited him and brought salvation to him and his household. It is easy to make excuses and just walk away, and God forbid that any of us should succumb to such an attitude. When we see the tasks of fasting, prayer, humility, repentance and almsgiving before us, will we just throw up our arms and say, “This is too difficult for me,” make excuses, and just walk away? I certainly hope not. The lesson today is that if Zaccheus could climb that sycamore tree, then we can also surely climb our sycamore trees and fulfill the required tasks which are necessary for our salvation. The key is that we must *desire* and truly want it. This is the first lesson for us as we approach Great Lent and the season of preparation for Pascha. If we imitate Zaccheus in this way, the Lord will also say to each and every one of us, “I must stay at your house today.” And having successfully completed the course of the Fast, on the glorious day of Pascha, the Lord will also tell us that “salvation has come” to our house! Amen.

