

**ZACCHAEUS SUNDAY - FEBRUARY 18, 2024**  
**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**

**St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY 12189, February 18, 2024**

In today's Gospel Jesus and His disciples are passing through Jericho. He is surrounded by a large throng of people. Amidst the crowd is a tax collector named Zacchaeus. The fame of Jesus had spread throughout Judea, and Zacchaeus has come in order to see Jesus pass by. Being short of stature, it is not possible for him to see Jesus over the heads of the crowd of people. Not giving up, he finds a way: he climbs up into the branches of a sycamore tree, and now having a bird's eye view, he patiently waits for Jesus to pass by. The tax collectors were hated by the people, not only because they were fellow Jews who were recruited by the hated Romans to collect taxes for the Roman Empire, but because they were notorious for cheating the people by overtaxing them and pocketing the difference.

Jesus stops under the sycamore tree, and to everyone's surprise, Jesus acknowledges Zacchaeus. The Lord tells Zacchaeus to come down, for today Jesus will visit Zacchaeus' home for dinner. Zacchaeus is amazed and bursting with joy. He was happy that he had figured out a way to see Jesus. He had expected to only catch a glimpse of Jesus as He passed by. Never in a million years did he expect that not only would Jesus acknowledge him, but that Jesus would want to visit his home and be his guest for dinner. The crowd of people, however, are scandalized. Out of all the people that Jesus could have chosen to dine with, he picks the most reviled and worst of sinners, Zacchaeus the chief tax collector. During His ministry, the Lord often paid attention to those people who were ignored by everyone else, and those whom the Jews were ready to kill with stones. Jesus often sought out and helped those who were ostracized, cast out, or reviled: the sinners, the downtrodden, the ill, the schismatics, and the Gentiles. The Lord noticed them, reached out to them, forgave them, and did not judge them. He loved them and wanted them all to be saved.

Jesus' *modus operandi* was often what is known as a "table ministry." Many times it was at the dinner table that the Lord would preach the words of eternal life. At one point, Zacchaeus is so stirred with emotion and repentance that he stands up and proclaims, "Lord, I will give the half of my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated any man, I will repay him fourfold" (Lk. 19:8). No person, whatever his sins may be, is beyond redemption if he will repent. The same way that Zacchaeus overcame the obstacle of his height in order to achieve his desire, there is nothing, with God's help, that we cannot overcome in order to fulfill our desire to follow Jesus and to be saved.

After the Lord ascended into Heaven, He passed the baton to His Apostles, so that they would continue His ministry. The Apostles and their successors spread the Gospel throughout the four corners of the globe, offering the words of eternal life, the same as Jesus had done, to the ostracized, the hated, the ill, the poor, as well as to the rich and those on the higher levels of society — to all mankind, at first to the Jews, and later to the pagans and the Gentiles as well. Just as the hearts of Zacchaeus and his household were stirred with the words of eternal life and brought to faith and repentance, so too were the hearts of thousands of diverse people throughout the world stirred by these same life-giving words which were spoken by the Lord, and now preached by His holy Apostles and disciples. This ministry to the world continues even to our own day, and will continue until the end of time. Next Sunday we will begin to hear a series of lessons from the holy Gospel, which will prepare us with the proper frame of mind to enter into Great Lent. However, before we begin these lessons, the first step is that we must all *want* to keep the fast, we must *want* to learn the lessons, we must *want* to be prepared, and we must *want* to keep a good Lent. Just as Zacchaeus had the desire, the volition to see the Lord, let us imitate him and also have the desire. And the same way that the Lord gave so much more back to Zacchaeus when all Zacchaeus expected was to only see the Lord as He passed by, so too will the Lord reach out to us, and so too will we have a significant encounter with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ — if we have *desire*. The Lord will far exceed our

expectations if we would only make the first step. What does it mean to have desire? When we have desire we don't just wait for Great Lent to fall upon us and just happen. Having desire means to start putting ourselves *now* into the spirit and the mood of Lent. It means to start planning now and thinking about how we will have a good Lent. It means to prepare our menu now, it means to look at the calendar now and see which additional services we will plan to attend. It means to start preparing ourselves now for Holy Confession, and decide now what day or week we will go to Confession. In a word, when the time comes, let us not enter into Lent grudgingly and unprepared. Let us all be prepared, but above all, let us first have the *desire*. Amen.

