

## **Zacchaeus: Out on a Limb**

Psalm 119:137-144; Luke 19:1-10

November 3, 2019

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Did you see what happened to former Vice President Joe Biden last Sunday? Biden is a lifelong Catholic. He's been described as "devout." He was campaigning in South Carolina and attended St. Anthony Catholic Church in Florence. The priest, Father Robert Morey, denied Biden Holy Communion, arguing that Biden's position on abortion places him outside of official Church teaching. This is what Father Morey said:

*Any public figure who advocates for abortion places himself or herself outside of Church teaching. As a priest, it is my responsibility to minister to those souls entrusted to my care, and I must do so even in the most difficult situations. I will keep Mr. Biden in my prayers.* (South Carolina Priest Denied Joe Biden Communion, abcnews.go.com, October 30, 2019)

I know I'm just a Baptist and probably should say nothing about this, but that really troubled me. I know our Baptist beliefs and practices are much different than the Roman Catholic Church. We place a tremendous amount of emphasis on individual freedom, the priesthood of every believer, working out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Frankly, I'm glad I don't have to make the decision of whether or not you are worthy to receive the Lord's Supper. I know how it would go in the Baptist church. I would say, "I'm so sorry, Sue, but I have to deny you Lord's Supper today because your belief about abortion doesn't match the official position of the Baptist church."

I can hear Baptist Sue responding, "Well, let me tell you something, buster. You can take your official position and... ." Well, I better stop there. But that's the Baptist spirit.

I think what troubled me about what happened to Biden is that created a category of outcast. You get Communion. You get Communion. You do. But not you. You stand down. You are the outcast.

New Testament scholars say that the story about the wee little man named Zacchaeus should be paired with the story immediately before it in chapter 18. Both, they say, are stories about outcasts. As Jesus approached the city of Jericho, he met a blind man who was sitting beside the road begging. He was a poor outcast. Upon entering Jericho, he met a chief tax collector who was out on a limb. He was a rich outcast. Both men wanted to see Jesus. The crowd got in the way of both men. And in the end, both of these outcasts experienced welcome from Jesus and healing.

While these two men were on opposite ends of the economic spectrum, they still shared a common lot. Their circumstances—poverty and blindness for one and wealth and a despised profession for the other—resulted in them being rejected by others. They were outcasts. These two stories, scholars argue, work in tandem to tell us something important about Jesus: “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Zacchaeus has been described as a “prototypical outcast.” (Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 356) That means he was a classic, the perfect example of an outcast. It all had to do with his profession as a chief tax collector. I’ve mentioned before how their tax system worked, but I’ve not said anything about the role of the chief tax collector. The chief tax collector was the one who had to pay up front all the tax that was due from his region. Let’s say the tax bill for his region was \$250,000. He had to pay that to the Roman government up front. Then he hired tax collectors to collect taxes from the citizens, hoping they would collect enough for him to make a profit. And guess what? They always did. Using heavy-handed tactics and manipulation, they always seemed to bring in a handsome profit for the chief tax collector.

Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was “short in stature.” The crowd was in his way so that Zacchaeus, like the blind beggar, could not see Jesus. We all remember the story. He ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree along the path where Jesus was traveling. We may not know this though.

In their culture, running was considered undignified for a grown man. And a man of his wealth and status . . . up a tree?

Was Zacchaeus desperate?

Luke says that Jesus looked up into the tree and saw Zacchaeus—out on a limb. That’s the picture Luke has given us. Zacchaeus was out on a limb physically, socially, and spiritually. He was a prototypical outcast.

Now, we are hampered here because we know this story so well. We know what Jesus said to Zacchaeus, and we’ve even memorized the little song about him. So try to detach yourself from that familiarity for a moment. Try to imagine what the people in the crowd might have expected Jesus to say to Zacchaeus.

Jesus could have said, “Zacchaeus, you are a traitor to your people. Just stay in that tree and never come down.”

He could have said, “Zacchaeus, you are a thief and a crook. You deserve to fall out of that tree on your head.”

Remember, in the minds of the crowd, Zacchaeus was the bad guy. It would have been perfectly acceptable to them if Jesus had expressed harsh words of condemnation. But note this. Jesus never expressed words of condemnation to an outcast. No, he always reserved those words for the religious leaders.

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down,” Jesus told him, “for I must stay at your house today.”

Zacchaeus, like the blind beggar, found welcome in Jesus. That welcome of the outcast—“You’re mine, I’m going to your house today”—touched something so deep in Zacchaeus that his whole life was transformed:

*Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.*

Jesus' words to Zacchaeus are equally profound:

*Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham (not an outcast). For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.*

Many of you have read Richard Foster. He is a Quaker theologian. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, he writes this,

*Love, not anger, brought Jesus to the cross. Golgotha came as a result of God's great desire to forgive, not his reluctance. Jesus knew that by his vicarious suffering he could actually absorb all the evil of humanity and so heal it, forgive it, redeem it.*

Jesus came to seek out poor outcasts, like the blind beggar. He came to save rich outcasts, like Zacchaeus. He had a keen eye for people who were out on a limb, people who were desperate. The story of Zacchaeus is about more than a wee little man who climbed up in a sycamore tree. It is about the welcome of God. It is about the blessing of God that touches us in a very deep place. It is validation, God saying, "You're mine, and I'm going to your house today."

How about you? Are you out on a limb too? Probably not physically. How about socially? Or maybe spiritually? There's a good word for you today: "Hurry and come down," Jesus says, "for I must stay at your house today."

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, we all know what it is like to be an outcast because so much of our world is unwelcoming. Thank you for your welcome. Amen.