

## Reflection for November 2, 2025 on Luke 19:1-19 by Jennifer Irving

I know there are many who have a soft spot in their hearts for the main character in our gospel reading for this morning. This story about the wee little man, Zacchaeus. Can I ask for a show of hands of those for whom this is a favourite story?

At Bible Study on Tuesday morning, it was the same. This is a story that sticks with us and one that honestly, has been preached on probably about a million times. It's intimidating really. I was tempted to just find a great sermon about Zacchaeus and read it to you. I'm pretty sure I even have a sermon by Fred Craddock (a famous preacher from Georgia who I absolutely love). It was tempting.

But I kept thinking about our conversation in Bible Study and felt like maybe I had something to say after all. You see, we got into a conversation about whether or not Zacchaeus was actually a good person. Like, maybe poor Zacchaeus has gotten a bad wrap over the course of biblical interpretation and scholarship. It was argued that Zacchaeus (and all tax collectors) weren't actually "bad" people—even though they are despised by the people in the crowds following Jesus. They were just people trying to make a living who were allowed to collect a little extra when they collected the taxes because that was the only way they got paid. So, if that was the case, Zacchaeus, even as chief tax collector, didn't deserve all the bad press and everyone hating him. After all, he was seeking Jesus and a real jerk with all the power that Zacchaeus had could have just pushed their way to the front of the crowd couldn't he? But he doesn't do that at all, instead, he climbs a tree. Last week, when we were pumpkin carving we had several of our kids ask if they should climb the tree on our front lawn and one Grandma said "Don't tempt him!" quite sure her grandson would scramble up quick.

But, a chief tax collector climbing a tree? That seems like it would be quite a bit more difficult and less glamorous indeed. I mean, after you reach a certain age, do you even try to climb a tree? That in and of itself shows Zacchaeus was not above humbling himself so he can't be that bad right? Anybody else always thought that Zacchaeus gets a bad wrap as an evil villain?

But, I didn't like it. Even though I was in agreement that not everyone is all bad or all good—and don't get me started on how much it bothers me when books, movies or tv shows ignore the complexities of every human being and just paint them as good or evil. In fact, I mentioned a show *Neelah* and I am watching where the main character was repeating over and over "I'm a good person" as she beat someone to death with a crow bar. Don't get me wrong—I did not like that. I'm not promoting it but it does speak to how complex human emotions are. The fourth inning fight where everyone ran onto the field after Hermenez was hit by a pitch and warnings were given to both teams and "the whole vibe in the ballpark has changed" the announcer commented. People, you just never know.

But for some reason, I found myself resisting this idea that Zacchaeus wasn't really that bad of a guy. I've been thinking about it all week. Why was it so important to me that Zacchaeus epitomizes the absolute worst in humanity?

And then, I opened up "The Message" which is not a direct translation of the original Greek but rather an interpretation (just so you know) and it went even further with this idea that Zacchaeus was actually good. In that version, when the crowd "grumps" about Jesus "getting cozy with this crook" (Luke 19:7 the Message):

“Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, “Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I’m caught cheating, I pay four times the damages.” That definitely supports the idea that Zacchaeus was a good man with a bad rep as a tax collector doesn’t it? He’s apologetic, and even hurt by the response of the crowd’s opinion of him as a cheat and a crook. You really do feel sorry for poor Zacchaeus when you read it like this.

And when I read that I was even more shook. I needed Zacchaeus to be inspired by Jesus’ love to give away half his income to the poor and repay four times as much to those he had cheated. And I mean “needed”. What was that about?

I tried to get the Bible Study back on track—why does Luke include this story about Zacchaeus in his gospel? What is he trying to tell us?

And they came through for me—“that everyone is included” and even came up with the hymn that we are going to be singing next “Draw the Circle Wide”. There isn’t anyone that is outside with Jesus. You don’t have to earn it. It’s a story about grace.

And here’s the thing that came to me as I reflected on this story the rest of this week. The grace of God shown through Jesus loses its power for me if Zacchaeus isn’t all that bad. I need Zacchaeus to be the worst of the worst and still get called on to open his house to Jesus. He needs to be completely lost. Because, if he’s not... if he’s actually a good person just seeking Jesus and trying to be the best he can be... then, of course, Jesus is going to see the good in him and seek him out for a meal and salvation. He deserves that after all.

But the thing about grace is, you can’t earn it.

I think grace is honestly the hardest thing for us, as Christians, maybe I’d even go so far to say, as humans, to wrap our heads around. It is so hard for us not to start thinking that there must be something we need to do to earn it. Like, give away half we earn maybe? I say things like “They will know we are Christians by our love.” and how hard it is to remember that our actions are not earning us God’s love but rather in response to God’s love?

Even though it maybe seems like Zacchaeus is earning his salvation but responding to Jesus the way he does—giving away half his income and paying back 4 times what he’s cheated, I don’t think Jesus is talking about earning your way into “Heaven” or anything like that—he says “today, salvation has come to this house”. Today. And not “Today, Zacchaeus earned his salvation”. Salvation “comes”—unearned—through the grace of God—not to Zacchaeus even—but to “this house”—this house of Israel?—to all those who are lost? That’s what I believe. That is what I believe the entire bible is trying to tell us—from beginning to end—that God has love for each and every one of us—and in Jesus this message is of love and grace is proclaimed. Unearned and eternally.

If you believe that as I do, then there is nothing we can do that will put us outside of God’s circle of love. And there is nothing anyone else can do either. So, let us love as God loves and draw the circle wide, draw it wider still! Until everyone feels God’s saving grace.