

# From Riches to Rags

Luke 19:1-10

A certain poor European immigrant, upon arriving in America, proceeded to build a small sidewalk fruit stand into a national chain of grocery stores. A young reporter sent to interview him asked, "How did you amass your fortune?"

"It was really quite simple," the mogul explained. "I bought an apple for 5 cents, spent the evening polishing it, and sold it the next day for 10 cents. With this I bought two apples, spent the evening polishing them, and sold them for 20 cents. I kept this up until I had made \$1.60. Then, my wife's father died and left us a million dollars."

As inspiring as a good "rags to riches" story is, Jesus calls us to something completely backwards, to go from "riches to rags," at least, that's how the world sees it. Jesus calls a man to exchange a life governed by prideful self-interest for one that is "poor in spirit." From heaven's vantage point, it is still a "rags to riches" story, for all of a man's accomplishments, possessions and good deeds are mere rags when placed alongside his need to be restored to God. Only when those rags are laid at Jesus' feet can he be clothed in the robes of His righteousness. Still, that which is a step up in God's eyes is seen as a step down in men's eyes. To go from "rags to riches" in Christ, we must go from "riches to rags" now.

Jesus and His disciples were heading to Jerusalem. As they came to Jericho, twenty miles east of Jerusalem, a large crowd gathered. Jesus healed a blind man sitting beside the road, and the crowd grew larger. Word had spread that Jesus, a popular teacher from up north in Galilee, was coming to town, but when He healed the neighborhood blind guy, he piqued an interest in many who were not previously disposed to come out that day. The crowd became so dense that a man had to elbow his way to the front in order to just catch a glimpse of Jesus. Indeed, the healing of a blind man was something special. But, perhaps, even more amazing would be the craftsmanship of Jesus upon one particular broken human soul.

Jesus said in *John 6:44*, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." We don't always know how that works, but clearly, something out of the ordinary drew a man named Zacchaeus to Jesus on this day. Was it mild curiosity about Jesus' ministry? Was it the news of the healing of a blind man? Or, was Zacchaeus driven by the emptiness of what appeared on the surface to be a life of great advantage? The story of Zacchaeus, the Bible's most famous short person, is a heavenly story of "rags to riches" even though to the onlookers that day, it looked more like a case of "riches to rags."

## I. A Story of a Long-shot Encounter (1-7)

### A. Life Was Looking Good for Zacchaeus verses 1, 2

<sup>1</sup>Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup>A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy ...

Jericho was a low-lying, tropical region rich in dates and balsam, a sweet aromatic substance used in making perfumes and healing ointments. It was the major gateway for trade between all points east and west of the Jordan River. The aroma from the roses cultivated there could be detected from miles away.

Because Jericho was close to Jerusalem, many priests (who were among the wealthiest of Jews) lived there. It was a pleasant and luxurious place to live. If some major news magazine did an annual issue on Judah's best cities to live in, Jericho would come out on top year in and year out. And, if a fellow could land a gig of running the local tax bureau on this important trade route, he would be set for life.

Zacchaeus was not just any tax collector. He was the "chief tax collector" of lush Jericho. Rome would have commissioned him to collect a specific amount of revenue for the region, and he would have built his own fortune by keeping everything he collected over and above that sum. Jesus had a former tax collector named Matthew in his group of disciples. Zacchaeus would have had guys like Matthew working for him and he would have kept a cut of everything they collected. To be a tax collector was to be rich. To be a "chief tax collector" in a place like Jericho was to be "nasty rich."

Of course, since a tax collector made his money by extorting from merchants everything he could over and above what Rome required, the occupation lent itself to significant corruption. A "chief tax collector" might be the richest man in town, but he was also among the most despised.

## **B. It Seems that a Good Living Does Not Guarantee a Good Life** verses 3, 4

... <sup>3</sup>He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. <sup>4</sup>So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

By his choice to serve Rome in this way, Zacchaeus had embraced the life of a social pariah in his own land. The Jews bitterly resented the Roman occupation in their land. They despised anyone who openly consorted with Roman authorities. How much more would they despise someone who got rich by gouging his fellow-Jews on behalf of Rome? To most Jews, Zacchaeus and his ilk were traitors to the motherland. He was morally, socially, and ceremonially unclean in their eyes.

Zacchaeus' occupation was a strike against him in Jewish circles. His wealth was a barrier between him and God. In the preceding chapter, when a rich ruler asked Jesus about how a person could attain eternal life, Jesus told him to disperse everything he owned to the poor. When the man walked away, Jesus said:

... "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." - Luke 18:24, 25

I always breathed a big sigh of relief when the Sunday School teacher assured me that giving away all one's stuff was a test for that ruler and not a universal requirement for discipleship. But, he could never explain away Luke 14:33: "In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple." That term "give up" means to release, to say "bye-bye." So, even though we have not all been told to dispose of all our things, we have been commanded to surrender our attitude of ownership over our things. Jesus introduces us to the idea of stewardship, that we merely manage that which God alone possesses. It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, because it is hard a man identified by what he owns to surrender his rights of ownership to God.

Small stature had not proven to be a barrier holding Zacchaeus back from becoming a man of wealth and power, but on this day it kept him away from getting the view of Jesus he desired. The last thing the most hated man in town would want to do was elbow his way through this crowd. He might not emerge in one piece. The branches of a nearby sycamore-fig tree remedied that minor setback.

If Zacchaeus had followed the ministry of Jesus at all, he knew that Jesus might challenge him about his wealth, but he wanted to see Jesus so he took the risk. Perhaps, he knew that Jesus had a reputation for extending warmth to outcasts like himself who only received the cold shoulder from most religious types. Perhaps, he had heard that this man Jesus had brought fullness to lives that were inwardly empty. Any man in Zacchaeus' situation would be starving for social acceptance. Wealth could never buy that.

### **C. Jesus Did the Worst Thing a Rabbi Could Do verses 5-7**

<sup>5</sup>When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." <sup>6</sup>So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

<sup>7</sup>All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." "

The people hated tax collectors. They expected Jesus to hate them too. The priests must have felt snubbed by Jesus. If this itinerant preacher really wanted to forge a reputation as a rabbi, would He not have sought an audience with them? To share a meal with this man was tantamount to accepting him. The only thing Jesus could have done that was any worse was to become a tax collector Himself.

Zacchaeus opened his home to Jesus. That was the easy part. We are not privy to the exchange between Zacchaeus and the Lord, but evidently, Zacchaeus learned that it would cost him dearly to follow Jesus. He must now trust Jesus more than any item of wealth he had ever procured. Jesus told would-be disciples that they must deny themselves and bear their crosses daily in order to follow Him. Upon finding Jesus, Zacchaeus became a real-life portrait of two characters Jesus used in two parables:

<sup>44</sup>"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

<sup>45</sup>"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. <sup>46</sup>When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. – Matthew 13:44-46

With his eyes wide open, Zacchaeus loosened his grip on his earthly things so that he could take hold of Jesus. People can talk about finding religion. Zacchaeus shows us what that actually looks like.

## **II. A Story of a Lavish Repentance verse 8**

<sup>8</sup>But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "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."

### **A. Encountering Jesus Can Reshape One's Attitude towards People**

A young man applied for a job as an usher at a movie theater. The manager asked, "What would you do in the event of a fire?" The young guy answered, "Don't worry about me. I'd get out!"

Without a marked change of direction, we are innately quite selfish. We don't really care that much about those who exist outside of our immediate family or circle. That is not to say that we go out of our way to be heartless or mean. On the contrary, we just tend to float through the day blindly unaware of the profound need that surrounds us on every side. We go our own way and do our own thing.

In a moment, Zacchaeus became deeply concerned about the plight of the poor, many of whom he had no doubt stepped over on his way to the customs house he managed. But, he no longer saw them as mere parts of the landscape. He now saw them as opportunities for him to gratefully respond to Jesus for the forgiveness he had received. The poor were now opportunities to minister to the glory of God.

## **B. Encountering Jesus Can Reshape One's Attitude towards Wealth**

A young man was driving his new BMW around a curve when he realized the car was out of control. He managed to jump out just before the car plummeted over a cliff. As he stood there looking down at his burning car, he said, "Oh, no! My Beemer! My beautiful BMW," not even noticing that his left arm had been tragically severed.

A man who had stopped to help, said, "Get some perspective! You just lost your left arm, and you're crying about a stupid car?"

The young man looked down at the bloody stump and said, "Oh no, my Rolex!"

Money is a value-neutral commodity of exchange, neither inherently good nor bad. Money can be used to the glory of God and the benefit of others or it can be used solely for selfish benefits. Money can be used to exploit people or it can be used to serve them. The Bible does not condemn money but, rather, "the love of money." It is when a man bases the direction of his life and equates the worth of his life on the acquisition of money that he places himself in grave spiritual peril.

... <sup>10</sup>For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. – 1 Timothy 6:10

For Zacchaeus, money was no longer the "end" toward which his life was aimed. It was his newfound tool in the work of God's Kingdom. Zacchaeus was responding out of gratitude to Jesus. He now saw his money as an instrument God had provided to extend the beauty of Jesus to the lives of others.

## **C. Encountering Jesus Can Reshape One's Attitude towards Rules**

Zacchaeus offered to reimburse four-fold anything that he had dishonestly taken from anyone else. According to Moses, if a man cheated another man or extorted something from him, he was to return what he had acquired plus twenty percent. Zacchaeus was not required by law to make four-fold restitution, but his heart burned to do more than the law demanded. We are not saved by keeping the law. That's the easy part to grasp. We must also learn that we cannot hide behind the limitations of law to avoid doing what is right - all that is right. When you have destroyed a relationship, no price is too high to set things right and to bring about restoration. Jesus paid far more to restore you to Himself.

Repentance bears fruit. Heart change yields outer change. Seeing human need more clearly and the conversion of our wallets are valuable measures of true repentance. Acts of repentance are not coerced by rules. They spring from hearts that have been broken and mended by God. God desires a people after His own heart who will sacrifice that His will might be done and His healing might be known.

## **III. A Story of a Loving Savior and Shepherd (9, 10)**

<sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

### **A. What Does It Mean to Be Lost and Found?**

Many think of the state of being lost simply as being a nonbeliever marching down a highway that leads straight into Hell. He is doomed, condemned ... not looking at all good. And, if Jesus is spurned long enough, ultimately, that will be the result. But, that is not the sole emphasis that Jesus places on this idea of being lost, particularly in Luke. If it were, what did He come to seek and to save?

In *Luke*, to be lost is to be missing and, especially, to be missing in the eyes of someone who cares deeply about that lost thing's whereabouts. It is *Luke* that records Jesus' story about a woman's lost coin, one of ten, probably a precious keepsake from her wedding day. It is *Luke* that records Jesus' story of a lost sheep, one of ninety-nine. It is *Luke* that tells the story of a lost son. None of these losses are simply written off. Rather, these stories also tell of the tender angst of a housewife, a shepherd and a father who search and wait for that which is lost to be restored to its rightful place. Is there any less tenderness in Jesus' words now as He tells of His life's mission "to seek and to save what was lost"?

Salvation came to Zacchaeus because he was a "son of Abraham." You can be sure that his fellow-Jews did not think of him in this light. No synagogue would admit him. He was powerful and successful, but he was God's child and he was out of place with his Father until Jesus found him.

### **B. The Urgency of "Today"**

The urgency of the present moment is another important theme in *Luke*. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but of far more consequence was the fact that Jesus wanted to see Zacchaeus. In verse 5, Jesus spotted a tax man up a tree and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." God had orchestrated this divine encounter, and Zacchaeus took advantage of it.

Giving gift cards in lieu of a gift has become a popular trend. People enjoy being able to choose whatever they want from a particular store. But, some gift cards have expiration dates. You might stuff one in a drawer and forget about it. A gift card worth \$100 one day might be worthless tomorrow because the opportunity to spend it has passed. God's gift of forgiveness is something like that. Today, it is the most precious gift in the world, but a person can mess around too long.

Often in the Bible, the idea of "today" is significant for it speaks of a moment of opportunity when God makes Himself known, and a man is invited to respond. "Today" was Zacchaeus' moment of personal confrontation with the divine. In the same way, "today," if God is speaking to your heart, is the only proper moment of opportunity to follow Jesus in obedience.

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