

# Explore the Bible: April 11

*Sinners? • Luke 19:1-10*

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As fast as you can, name five things you know about Zacchaeus! Are you singing the traditional song, “Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man,” to help you remember? I wish I knew how many times I have sung this song to my children and grandchildren, and also as a Sunday School and Vacation Bible School teacher. Oh – and don’t forget the motions!

Set aside the song and ask yourself, “How often have I heard a sermon on this biblical character?” You won’t find him listed in the top ten men of Bible if you do an internet search, yet there is much to learn from this man and his encounter with Jesus.

**Desperate (Luke 19:1-4).** On your list, did you have the following? Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, wealthy, short in height, climbed into a sycamore tree to see Jesus, and considered the worst of sinners because of his occupation. In the eyes of the religious leaders of the day, he was a lost cause.

Jesus and his followers are traveling through Jericho, which is also the residence of Zacchaeus. Jericho, located in Judea, became the second-largest city in the region and was lucrative for tax collectors because of land, poll, income,

and personal property taxes. Also, tax collectors were infamous for extorting money from the citizens.

From the Greek language, the phrase, “was trying to see” (v. 3), indicates Zacchaeus had been trying to see Jesus for a while. Luke does not specify the exact reason. Did he have a guilty conscience for cheating his fellow citizens? Perhaps it was curiosity or maybe he was seeking help from Jesus – or was it the Holy Spirit drawing him (Eph. 1:4)? Whatever the reason, he was determined not to miss this opportunity to see Jesus.

Have you heard the phrase, “Desperate people do desperate things?” Zacchaeus, a short man, ran ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree, which is a cross between a fig and mulberry tree with stout branches (see Amos 7:14). There he waited.

**Friended (Luke 19:5-7).** Imagine Zacchaeus sitting in the tree waiting to get a glimpse of Jesus. Jesus doesn’t just walk by. He stops, looks up, speaks directly to Zacchaeus, and commands him to come down from the tree. Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus’s house. Visiting in the home of a tax collector would be very unusual in that day, and it’s the only occasion in any of the Gospels where we read Jesus invited himself into someone’s home.

Also, note the phrase, “it is necessary,” which indicates this self-invite was about fulfilling God’s purposes. Zacchaeus couldn’t descend the tree fast enough, and he welcomed Jesus joyfully as if he had extended the invitation (v. 6) of hospitality himself.

The LifeWay commentary states, “Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus was a God-ordained appointment in which grace and forgiveness would be shown to an undeserving and notorious ‘sinner.’”

In verse seven, notice the word, “all,” which probably is an exaggeration. Perhaps the purpose was to show the hardness and

the attitude of everyone in the crowd, especially the Jewish religious leaders. Remember, the Pharisees thought they were above the tax collectors. They didn't apply the label sinner to everyone; sinners were "those who opposed the Mosaic law, failed to observe the law's religious ceremonies, or participated in immoral behavior (LifeWay)."

Righteousness doesn't come by keeping the law but through the grace Jesus offers.

**Repentant (Luke 19:8-10).** Jesus is a guest of "one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus's encounter with Jesus brought him face to face with his sin and his need to repent. Then he told Jesus he would give half of his possessions to the poor. Additionally, "if I have extorted anything from anyone, I'll pay back four times as much."

His actions showed a change of mind and heart, and his faith was evident through the promises he made to Jesus. Jesus replied by stating, "Today salvation has come to this house because he too is a son of Abraham" (v. 9). Jesus is not referring to Zacchaeus's heritage. He was now a spiritual son of Abraham. He had become a child of God through faith.

Furthermore, in verse ten Jesus says, "for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost," the most important truth revealed in Scripture: salvation by grace through faith. Remember the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin (also see Genesis 3:8-9, Ezekiel 34:11-16).

Looking at the song's lyrics once again, I realize I did not learn the third verse: "But a happy man was he, for he had seen the Lord that day; And a happy man was he; And a very happy man was he!" There is no greater joy!

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