

SERIES: The Ministry of the Market Place

SERMON: **Zaccheus: Can You Change Your Reputation at Work?**

SCRIPTURE: Luke 19:1-10

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Introduction: The question posed in my sermon title today is one that may not seem relevant to everyone here, because some of you don't have a problem with your reputation at work. But some of you *may*. And all of you know people who *do*. It is my hope that this message will give you hope that people can change. Of course, it works both ways. We need to be aware also that one bad decision, one careless act can also destroy a reputation that we have worked for years to establish.

Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 19:1-10:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he (Zacchaeus) came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He (Jesus) has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' "

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."

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

In a few days I will be in Jericho where this account took place. It is a desert town between the rugged Judean mountains and the northern end of the Dead Sea, about 20 miles from Jerusalem. Much of the town even today looks like something out of a time warp. Archeological digs on the outskirts have uncovered buildings and walls that were standing when Jesus was there. He apparently traveled through Jericho many times, but this particular time was just prior to His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, perhaps less than a week before His crucifixion.

The text of Luke 19:1 indicates that Jesus was just "passing through." In other words, He had no business scheduled, no meetings to attend, no particular friends to visit. But in another sense Jesus never just "passed through." He was constantly looking for divine appointments. This time the appointment was with a man named Zacchaeus. What we gather about Zacchaeus can be summed up as follows:

Zacchaeus is a hated man in a hated profession. (1, 2)

Luke tells us that Zacchaeus had become wealthy as a tax collector; in fact he was the chief tax

collector for the region. He didn't collect taxes himself; he employed others to do the dirty work. Most of us don't know any tax collectors personally, because the job is so automated today, but in Zacchaeus' day tax collectors were well-known (one might say notorious). They were contract employees of the despised Roman government. Judea was in the grip of a foreign power, and the taxes Zacchaeus collected went into the foreign treasury to pay the army that kept his fellow Jews in bondage! No principled person would do such a job.

Tax collectors were given a quota of taxes to raise, and anything they raised beyond the quota was theirs to keep. So it was an ideal profession for a greedy, antisocial person. Jericho was an excellent spot for a good tax man, for an important trade-route from Jerusalem to the East passed by it. My suspicion is that Zacchaeus was really good at his job (meaning he collected lots of taxes for Rome and plenty for himself), and that no doubt explains his wealth. But as a result he must also have been quite unpopular and would have had a miserable social life.

I am strongly tempted to try to psychoanalyze Zacchaeus. I wonder if he wasn't hurting from nasty childhood comments about his size and thus sought to find a profession where he could get back at the people who treated him like a runt. Very often people compensate for their perceived physical defects (and the inevitable poor self-images that result from focusing on those defects) by becoming social pariahs of one sort or another. I wonder if a combination of over-achievement and anger at other people might have driven him into a career as a tax-collector. He had nothing to lose, for he was looked down on anyway. At least he could get rich this way, and if people wouldn't respect him for who he was, at least he would demand respect for what he owned.

But despite all these liabilities, in verse 3 we are told that . . .

Zacchaeus seeks out Jesus and welcomes Him gladly. (3-6)

Hearing that Jesus was in town, Zacchaeus went to check things out. Because he was vertically challenged, and the crowd was large, he had to climb a tree to be able to catch a glimpse of Jesus. There's something comical about this picture—the affluent bureaucrat shinnying up a tree to see over the crowd. At the very least he was inviting ridicule from those in the crowd who might recognize him as the evil tax collector.

So what motivated him to do such a thing? Curiosity certainly had something to do with it. It says in verse 3 that Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was. He apparently had heard something about Him, but He wanted to know more. All of us are fascinated to see famous people in person. They always look different than we expect. Perhaps Zacchaeus was aware that one of Jesus' inner circle of disciples was himself a tax collector (Matthew), and he wanted to know why one of his own would be attracted to Jesus. Or maybe he had failed to find fulfillment and satisfaction in his wealth and he was looking for more to life. That shouldn't surprise us, for friends are a much better barometer of happiness than is wealth, and Zacchaeus had few friends. But frankly, I'm not as interested in why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus as in why Jesus wanted to see Zacchaeus. After all, if you were six days from the end of your life, don't you think you'd

be concerned with more important things than detours to the home of someone like Zacchaeus? But it says in verse 5, "When Jesus reached the spot, He looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'"

There is one thing about Jesus that you must know. He has the disturbing knack of turning our curiosity into encounter. Most of us have experienced at one time or another sitting in church minding our own business and trying to remain anonymous when suddenly we found ourselves the entire focus of the message being delivered. Many times over the years I have actually been accused of preaching *at* someone, when as a matter of fact I was totally ignorant of what they were going through. But the Holy Spirit was not.

I wonder how many of us might have responded to Jesus' bold demand: "Oh, I'm just here to observe, Jesus, just checking things out. Leave your business card and I may call you in a few weeks." But Zacchaeus doesn't hesitate. Verse 6 says, "So he came down *at once* and welcomed him *gladly*." There are many in the Gospels who showed curiosity about Jesus, but not all of them welcomed Him gladly. Some, like the rich young ruler in the previous chapter, went away sorrowful. Others stopped believing in Him when they learned that He wasn't just about feeding their stomachs. In fact, right here in this story everyone except Zacchaeus refuses to welcome Him.

Zacchaeus experiences radical change. (8-10)

Some years ago the recently divorced Mrs. Pete Rose was asked about the accusations she had made about her husband being an addicted gambler, drinker, and womanizer. She said, "When we got married, I had hope that he would become different. But now I know he can't. I've learned through experience that when men reach a certain age, they cannot change. Men can't change." Is that true? Let's leave gender out of it and ask simply, "Can *people* change?" If not, there's no reason for us to be here this morning, is there? Friends, if I can't change, and if I didn't think you could change, I wouldn't be wasting my time studying, preaching, and teaching. The point of all we do here at First Free is not just to increase our knowledge or give us encouragement; it is that, but the biggest point is to bring about change, to help us all become more like Jesus.

Well, I want to tell you today that there is hope for change, and Exhibit One is this man Zacchaeus. Look again at verse 8, where Zacchaeus says, "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." This, friends, is a miracle, pure and simple. The greedy has become generous. The extortionist has become repentant. And it happens immediately. He doesn't say, "I'm going to make a pledge to the poor," or "I'm going to leave them something in my will." He says, "Here and now I give . . ."

Furthermore, what he chooses to give is astounding. Without any request from Jesus, he gives half his possessions to the poor. You don't think that's huge? Oh, you say, Zacchaeus was so wealthy he wouldn't miss it. Let me tell you something, the wealthier the individual, the more

such an offer would hurt, because a guy like Zacchaeus has spent his whole life building his wealth!

But then he goes further yet. Out of what he has left he offers to refund anything he has stolen and add a 300% penalty to it! I doubt if the “if” there in verse 8 expresses doubt—he’s not saying, “I may have cheated some but I’m not sure.” Rather he’s saying, “Since I have cheated many, they will receive four times what I took.” The Law required no more than the original amount plus 20% for extortion (check Lev. 6:5, Num. 5:7). Only for rustlers was fourfold restitution required (Exodus 22:1). Zacchaeus considers himself as bad as a rustler (and that’s as bad as it gets in an agrarian society) and cheerfully agrees to do far more than required.

He realizes something a lot of people seem to miss today—that faith and repentance go together. Did you notice that Jesus doesn’t tell Zacchaeus he is a sinner? He doesn’t have to. Zacchaeus knows it well. I find it very interesting that the only people Jesus condemned with hellfire and brimstone were the elite religious people of his day. The strongest words He ever spoke about damnation for sin were to the scribes, the Pharisees, and the doctors of the law—those who believed they were good and morally upright. But the publicans and sinners knew intrinsically they were sinful, and Jesus was usually very gentle with them in calling them to repentance.

In my LBI class we’ve been talking about the place of repentance in salvation. In evangelicalism today there is quite a debate over what is sometimes called “Lordship salvation.” Some take such a radical position on salvation “by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone” (which, by the way, I believe) that they end up denying that repentance is necessary for salvation (which I don’t believe). On the other side, the argument is sometimes made that if Christ is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all (which I don’t believe either).

The debate is exacerbated by the fact that some Scriptures on salvation mention only faith, while others mention only repentance. For example, John 1:12 says simply, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” But Peter preached the Gospel in Acts 3:19 this way: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord . . .” I think we need to see faith and repentance as two sides of the same coin. That’s why Paul puts them together when he speaks to the Ephesian elders and says, “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21). Carl Johnson shared this illustration with me the other night. He asked, “Did you realize that these two objects are identical?” (Put up a circle and a rectangle). Now Carl’s an engineer, so who am I to argue with him? But I discovered he’s correct. Want me to prove it? OK, look at them in full color (Show a can of soup from the top and the side).

Well, Zacchaeus seems to be more perceptive than many today in recognizing that repentance is the horizontal view and faith the vertical view of conversion. He also recognizes that repentance is more than just changing his mind—it demands a change of heart that results in a change of behavior. Our instincts tell us to cover up our sin; repentance tells us to acknowledge it. Years ago there was a popular saying that came from the novel, *Love Story*: “Love means never having

to say you're sorry." As sweet as this sounds, it denies a fundamental truth—the admission of wrong is the prerequisite to forgiveness. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Well, what brought about this radical change on Zacchaeus' part? I will tell you that nothing less than the power of God can explain it. But that's the very kind of power He makes available. He who made human nature can remake it. He has done it many times and He can do it again. I thank God for the many Zacchaeuses in this church—people who have experienced transformation of their character by the power of God and aren't afraid to tell about it.

Notice Jesus' response to Zacchaeus' repentance:

Zacchaeus receives the promise of salvation from Jesus. In verse 9 Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. " Please don't conclude that Zacchaeus is earning his salvation because of his decisions to give to the poor and make restitution for his thievery. These are merely evidences of something major that has occurred in his heart; it's the heart work that is key. Nor is Zacchaeus pronounced saved because he is Jewish, a son of Abraham, though on the surface the text seems to say that. Not every physical son of Abraham is a spiritual son of Abraham. Zacchaeus has shown himself to be a son of Abraham by faith. Abraham believed God, Paul tells us in Romans 4, and his faith was credited to his account as righteousness. So, too, for Zacchaeus.

Those who turn in faith to Jesus are saved not because of their heritage but in spite of their heritage; they are saved not because of their good deeds but in spite of their evil deeds. The kingdom is not a reward for the perfect; it's a gift for the repentant.

I would like to ask two challenging questions¹ this morning as we seek to drive home this fascinating story to our own hearts:

Challenging questions:

What do you do *now* if you have already ruined your reputation in the market place? I doubt if there are many here this morning who are hated individuals in a hated profession (and I'm not going to tell any lawyer jokes this morning). But I would be surprised if there aren't a number here who have made some major mistakes that have created major problems for you in the market place. Has bankruptcy made it almost impossible for you to get credit? Have you been fired for lack of performance? Is there criminal behavior in your past, like drug charges or a DWI that make it hard for you to get employment in your chosen field?

I have a friend from St. Louis who was a high school teacher and made the horrendous mistake of getting involved with one of his students—a 17-year-old sexually active girl in a state where the age of consent was 18. He confessed, pleaded guilty, lost his teaching license, of course, but received probation. Sounds like he got off pretty easy, doesn't it? No, he was put on the permanent sex offender list, which is posted on the internet. You cannot imagine how that

mistake continues to haunt him years after the fact. He has moved to a different state, but the internet follows him and identifies him, along with all the predators and pedophiles. As soon as he moves to a new place a neighbor finds his name on the list and circulates the news to all the other neighbors. His wife and children are shunned. He's great at his new job and his employer wants to promote him, but his past prevents that.

What do you do if you've blown it big-time? How do you recover? Is it hopeless? I would like to suggest that the most important thing to consider is that Jesus calls us to radical repentance. If you have experienced bankruptcy, the best possible way to recover your reputation is to pay off the creditors who were left holding the bag. I'm aware that's not required by law, and perhaps it's not even possible in some cases, but if it's possible, I think that's the kind of radical repentance Jesus would want us to pursue.

If your resume is screwed up because of your work history, do everything in your power to succeed in the job you're in now. Work extra hours, go the extra mile, study your field so you can improve yourself, etc. If you have criminal behavior in your background, don't try to hide it. Acknowledge it up front, but then demonstrate in every way that it is part of your past, not part of your present or future. (And whatever you do, don't run for public office, because if you've ever stolen a paper clip it will be on the evening news!). For the person with a DWI that might mean never, under any circumstances, taking another drink. If someone offers you a drink, say, "No thanks, I can't drink; I have an alcohol problem." That shows radical repentance, and they will respect you for it.

I've tried to imagine the impact Zacchaeus' actions must have had upon his own market place in Jericho! Imagine what people thought when they read the ad in the paper that they could go to Zacchaeus' mansion, which is now up for sale, and receive four times as much as he stole from them! Do you not think people would sit up and take notice of such repentance? Do you not suspect people began to ask, "If Jesus can turn a tax collector into a philanthropist, then maybe He can help me, too."?

I wish we had more information about what happened to Zacchaeus. Did he retire? Did he become a full-time disciple? In the absence of any information I want to suggest to you that he probably kept right on being a tax collector for Rome. Only now he no longer ripped people off, no longer gouged them and pocketed the difference; now he actually advised them on how they could save on their taxes. If you have blown it badly, I think God's first choice for you, more often than not, would be to stay in your chosen market place. If possible, go back to the people you worked with and for, and demonstrate that Christ has changed you to the point that you are now trustworthy, responsible, and a person of integrity.

A second question I would like to challenge us with is this:

How do you deal with others who have destroyed their reputations? There's a verse in this story we skipped over earlier—verse 7: "All the people saw this (Zacchaeus' welcome of Jesus into his house) and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a "sinner".'" They

condemn him as a sinner (a better translation might be “scumbag”), and they criticize Jesus for being his guest. Their complaint about Zacchaeus is both right and wrong. He is indeed a sinner, as his own words show, but he is not beyond the touch of Jesus. But the people of Jericho had long ago written Zacchaeus off. He had stolen and so he was a thief. Period. End of story.

In Luke 7:36-39 we read this brief story:

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

What I want you to notice here is the difference between how Luke refers to the woman and how Simon refers to her? Luke says that she is “one who *had lived* a sinful life.” Simon says, “She *is* a sinner.” Do you see the difference? Luke honestly faces the facts of her past, but he clearly states that it is her *past*. Simon either doesn’t know or doesn’t care that a change has taken place in this woman’s life. As far as he is concerned, she *is* what she has *done*. He sees only a prostitute, not a woman, only a sinner, not a person, only a history, not a present.

How often we label people by referring to something we know about them.

“He’s a liar.”

“She’s a divorcee.”

“He’s an alcoholic.”

You know something? I would sure hate to be known by the worst thing I have ever done. That’s not who I am. I am a child of God. Yes, I am a child of God who sins. Yes, I am a child of God who has made some big mistakes. But my mistakes are not my identity. Zacchaeus’s were not his identity. Nor do your mistakes have to be your identity.

The story of Zacchaeus ends with this statement from the mouth of Jesus: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Friends, if Jesus came to seek and save lost people, then we must not give up on them either. Don’t quit praying for them. Don’t write them off.

Conclusion: I appreciated my friend Gary Bugg’s testimony this morning. His story is like Zacchaeus’ in several respects. They both became poor financially but rich spiritually. They both learned the importance of surrendering not just their heart to Jesus, but their careers as well.

We will never impact the market place in which we work until we discover how to change people. And Jesus alone knows how to do that. Jesus rescues us by accepting us, taking our

punishment on Himself, giving us new life, and then changing us.

Are you here today looking on as a mere spectator? Are you curious but have no intention of going beyond the surface with Jesus? Could it just be that He is calling you down from your tree? Could it be that Jesus is offering you this transforming power even now?

Do you hear the urgency in His voice? “Today,” he says, “Today, I must stay at your house.” Why today? Because in less than a week he would go to the cross. He would never pass through Jericho again.

i. A third question I would ask if I had time this morning is this: What should you do to protect yourself from failure in the future? Everyone one of us is one foolish, sinful decision away from disaster—financial disaster, moral disaster, relational disaster. Would you look back one page in the book of Luke to chapter 18, verses 9-14, where we find a brief parable about another tax collector.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus urges us to humble ourselves before God. That is our only hope for protection. If we are proud of our own righteousness or contemptuous of others' mistakes, that is a recipe for disaster.