

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 19:1-10

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I strongly suggest that you begin your exploration of this parable by listening to Tracy's telling of it on www.gotell.org because she has captured major dimensions of its character as a story.

The first episode is fast-moving to give a sense of Zacchaeus' internal excitement at the prospect of seeing Jesus which culminates in his running ahead and climbing a tree. Zacchaeus being "short of stature" invites a smile. All the short people in the audience, including all the children, will immediately identify with Zacchaeus.

In episode two, Jesus' words to Zacchaeus are invitational. There is no sense of judgment or critique, only surprise by the storyteller. "Zacchaeus, come on down!" is a reversal of expectations. It should be spoken with lots of energy. When you tell the story, locate Zacchaeus up in the tree and say Jesus' words as addressed to him, and then motion as Zacchaeus comes down from the tree. All is happy and surprising in the first two episodes of the story.

The crowd, however, rightly grumbles. The assumption is that there will have been many in the audiences of those who first heard the story who would also be grumbling. They probably responded sympathetically to the crowd's negative response.

As you tell the story you will have to decide where Zacchaeus is located when he makes his speech to Jesus. Is it in front of the crowd as a response to their critique, and a kind of defense? Or is it at his house? The issue is whether or not you tell this as Zacchaeus reporting on his prior practice, or whether this is a vow that he is taking in his house to indicate what he's going to do in the future. Your decision will also impact the tone you use for Zacchaeus' speech.

My own conclusion is that they went to Zacchaeus' house. When Zacchaeus comes down from the tree, he is glad to welcome Jesus. Where does he welcome him? He welcomes him into his house as a guest. The NRSV translation implies that Zacchaeus is standing there in the place where he met Jesus under the tree, where people were starting to grumble. But "there" is not in the Greek. It's simply that Zacchaeus stood. Therefore I recommend that you not say "there" because it wrongly implies that Zacchaeus is standing in the place where he met Jesus under the tree rather than in his house during the dinner that he gave for Jesus.

Another sign that this is what Luke was picturing is that the crowd says, "He has gone to stay in the house of a sinner." Well, where has he gone? They were watching him go and that's what they're talking about as they grumble. The words of Zacchaeus are not addressed to the crowd. In fact, the Greek says that quite clearly, that Zacchaeus said to

"him"—meaning Jesus. These words are not addressed to the crowd as a defense of Jesus going in to be with him, but rather they are addressed to Jesus.

Zacchaeus' speech is a vow. It needs to be said in a humble tone, rather than one exalting himself or boasting about what he has done before or will do in the future. This is consistent with Jesus' teaching in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The one who is justified is the one who humbles himself. This is a further development of that motif of Jesus' relationship with tax collectors. I have modified the NRSV to indicate what is in the Greek text.

Zacchaeus' salvation is based both on his seeking Jesus and his vow to redistribute his wealth. He looks for Jesus and justice is served because of his new behavior. Jesus' statement is the conclusion. Once again we must ask about who is being addressed: is Jesus declaring salvation to the crowd or to Zacchaeus? You have to decide. "Because he, too, is a son of Abraham" implies that Jesus is talking about Zacchaeus to the crowd, rather than "*you* are a son of Abraham." The Greek is explicitly third person.

"He received him joyfully" implies that Zacchaeus hurried down from the tree and received Jesus joyfully into his house. Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house—where we are now standing—because he, too, is a son of Abraham." The implication is that there were others present at the dinner (as was often the case) to whom Jesus is speaking about Zacchaeus. Of course, in telling the story, Jesus' words are addressed to the audience hearing the story.

So what has Zacchaeus done? He hasn't believed in Jesus. He hasn't asked for and received healing. He hasn't followed Jesus and made any sacrifices for him, but he has shown great interest in seeing him and has responded to Jesus' acceptance with a vow of a different way of life with extraordinary good works. For a tax collector to repent in this way was extraordinary. This is a classic story of grace—grace that is offered to Zacchaeus because he was seeking Jesus, and Jesus' acceptance generated his repentance and good works. It is a story of being made righteous by faith as well as by works.

This is not a fully developed theology in the way of Paul, but it is a theme that is consistent with the parable of the Pharisee and the publican and with the entire motif of Jesus' offering of grace free to everyone who humbles themselves and accepts both the recognition of their own sinfulness and the possibility of living a different life. The identification with Zacchaeus is fully appropriate as well as the recognition that this was the chief of crooks before he changed his ways. Jesus responds to Zacchaeus with extraordinary recognition and acceptance.