

[Luke 19:1-10](#)

This week we have seen a short, wealthy man find his way into 10 Downing Street. How fitting that our Gospel reading today is one where a short, wealthy man wants to find his way into God's kingdom.

Most of us have known the story of Zaccheus since childhood. We heard it at Sunday School. We sang songs based on it where Jesus invited himself for tea at Zaccheus' house. All this despite there being no evidence whatsoever of tea-drinking anywhere in the Bible.

I want to ask a simple question of this story. It's a question we could regularly deploy in our reflection on Bible passages. Here it is:

What is the Good News for Zaccheus?

I want to reflect on two areas where we see that Jesus is Good News for Zaccheus.

Firstly, I want to speak about **Good News for the Rich**.

Just to say those words will wind up some people. Good news for the rich? Really? It's the poor who need good news.

And besides, Jesus said in Luke 4 he came to bring good news to the poor, not the rich. Not only that, Jesus told the rich in Luke's version of the Beatitudes (Luke 6:20-26) that the rich have already received their comfort.

Furthermore, this was prophesied while Jesus was still in the womb. At that point she sang the song we know so well as The Magnificat. It includes the line, 'He has sent the rich away empty' (Luke 1:53).

So how can there be good news for the rich? The good news is for the poor and there is only bad news for the rich.

The answer is this. You have to define what you mean by good news. The Good News which is the Gospel is not a good news that tells someone everything about the way they live is fine. In fact, it's rather different.

'Good news' for a citizen of the Roman Empire meant hearing a herald come to their town or village with a proclamation either that there was a new Emperor on the throne or that Rome's armies had won a great victory.

The Good News of the Gospel Christianises that. It is the proclamation that there is a new king on the throne of the universe, and that his name is Jesus.

And furthermore, he has won the greatest of all battles by conquering sin, suffering, and death at the Cross.

That is Good News for everyone, including the rich. However, I will concede that it is challenging good News for the wealthy. If the rich are going to acknowledge that Jesus is on the throne of the universe then the good news for them will include some rethinking of financial habits.

And if you had gained your wealth by morally dubious means as Zaccheus had, then the Good News of Jesus' reign was more challenging.

We know Zaccheus was corrupt, and there was little way out of being corrupt if you are a tax collector, due to the way the Romans managed the system. The tax collectors were given a target by Rome of how much tax they had to raise in their district. But the tax collectors had to gather their own income from the taxation, too, and so they charged residents over and above the amount Rome had set for them, otherwise they and their family would starve. So you can imagine that those tax collectors who wanted, shall we say, a somewhat comfortable life charged a higher taxation than those who were content with a more modest lifestyle.

But regardless of income, tax collectors would have been treated as 'sinners' because their very work meant they were collaborators with the occupying Roman armies. Indeed, that's the scandal of what Jesus does for the crowd here:

'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.' (Verse 7)

Somehow Jesus knew that just railing against Zaccheus for his sin wouldn't melt his heart. The tax collector already knew he was a sinner, not only in the sight of the crowd, but of God. He knew what he was doing was wrong. It's rather like going into a prison with the Christian message: you don't need to tell the prisoners they are guilty, they are only too conscious of that fact. It is Jesus' act of grace in seeking out hospitality from such an unpopular man that makes the difference.

Now Zaccheus can address his sin and show that his repentance is real by matching it with transformed actions. He offers half of his possessions and to repay what he has cheated fourfold – and fourfold was

the penalty for those who have stolen animals¹.

In addition, Zaccheus addresses Jesus as 'Lord.' He is a changed man.

This helps us with how we proclaim the good news to the wealthy today. How will they respond to the Good News that Jesus is on the throne and that he has conquered evil? Can we model to them the grace that leads to their conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit?

And it also challenges us, as it did Zaccheus. Do we own money or possessions that are not rightfully ours? What would Jesus, the king of the kingdom, say to us about those things?

Secondly, this story is about **Good News for the Shamed**.

Zaccheus has to climb a sycamore-fig tree in order to see Jesus (verse 4) and we assume the only reason he did that is the one Luke tells us about, namely that he was 'short' (verse 3).

All that is true, but here is something I discovered this week about sycamore-fig trees. The nature of their leaves is such that if a man climbed up into them, he would most likely be well-hidden. Jesus *literally* had 'to seek and save the lost' (verse 10).

Combine this with the way that Zaccheus runs ahead of the crowd on the route out of Jericho, anticipating Jesus' route, where he is surely trying to put some distance between himself and the crowd who will hate him, then we can see an important truth. Zaccheus wanted to stay hidden.

And why was that? Surely it was an issue of shame – the shame he felt for his way of life.

But Jesus can see the man whose shame hides him and puts him at a distance from others. He sees through and brings the word of grace:

'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.' (Verse 5)

Shame makes us run away from others. It makes us hide from them. Like Adam and Eve hiding in the Garden of Eden, shame even makes us want to hide from God. But for those who are shamed by their lives Jesus reaches out to restore them.

From my experience as a minister, there are stories I could tell you about the shameful things people have confessed to me. Often, they have been people who were among the most loved and respected church members in a congregation, but they held a dark secret.

Now of course I cannot share any specific stories with you, because they were shared with me in confidence. I'll just say, think of the sins the church routinely says are very bad, and I've probably heard them confessed by Christians. But it has been my privilege to tell these people that there is indeed a God who forgives them, restores them, and welcomes that back to the heart of his family.

That is what Zaccheus found with Jesus, who calls him 'a son of Abraham' (verse 9) – a member of the family, the people of God, not an outcast.

So from this let me offer a couple of encouragements to you. One is to emphasise this word of hope to any of you who are carrying the burden of shame. If there is something from your past that means you are secretly weighed down by shame, I want to encourage you to talk to someone like a minister, so that you can hear the reassurance of God's forgiving love in Jesus Christ for you. The only reason I say a minister is not because we have special powers but because in all but the most exceptional circumstances we are required to keep confidential what you share with us.

Shame, however, is not just for those who carry guilt. Some of us carry shame for things that have been done to us. This is particularly true of abused people, of whom there are many in our churches and society. Let someone like a pastor reassure you in confidence that Jesus wipes away the false shame of being sinned against.

My other encouragement is to say that this is good news for the world. People may not talk about sin as much as they did, but they certainly talk about shame. That Jesus offers a way home to God for those who experience shame would be good news for many in our world.

Sadly, sometimes these people think the church is the last body to help them because they expect to hear little more than condemnation from us. But what if in our friendships with people outside the church we can speak and demonstrate a message where Jesus says to people today, 'I must stay at your house today'?

So this wonderful story gives us both a challenge and an encouragement. The Good News that Jesus is on the throne of the universe is a challenge for us to respond and put our lives in harmony with his kingdom ways.

And the Good News that this King Jesus wipes away all the effects of shame through his victory over all sin and suffering at the Cross means liberation for us and for all who will hear and embrace it.

All that remains is for us to put these things into practice, both in our own lives and in our witness to others.

¹ <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-calls-zacchaeus-in-luke-19/>; also see Exodus 22:1 and 2 Samuel 12:6.