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## Reading in Context: Zacchaeus and the Economics of Salvation

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## Reading in Context: Zacchaeus and the Economics of Salvation

### **Abstract**

"One way to go about shaking ourselves from the interpretive grooves (ruts!) formed by our Western assumptions is to encounter a reading of a well-known text that seems shocking at first, until the 'new' reading focuses our eyes upon the biblical words themselves."

Posting about Zacchaeus' salvation story from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/zacchaeus-and-the-economics-of-salvation/>

### **Keywords**

In All Things, reading, context, Zacchaeus, salvation

### **Disciplines**

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### **Comments**

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# Reading in Context: Zacchaeus and the Economics of Salvation

 [inallthings.org/zacchaeus-and-the-economics-of-salvation/](http://inallthings.org/zacchaeus-and-the-economics-of-salvation/)

Benjamin Lappenga

April 24, 2018

# in things

One way to go about shaking ourselves from the interpretive grooves (ruts!) formed by our Western assumptions is to encounter a reading of a well-known text that seems shocking at first, until the “new” reading focuses our eyes upon the biblical words themselves. This has happened to me in varied ways, such as the first time I realized just how inaccurate the traditional nativity scene is (the Magi were never present at Jesus’s birth, the text never says there were three, it was probably a house and not a “stable,” etc.). Or, the first time I was exposed to non-Western readings of the story of the “prodigal son,” which pay much more attention to the fact that there was a *famine* than to the son’s supposedly “wasteful” living (that detail is exaggerated by American capitalistic priorities). For the Zacchaeus story, told only in Luke 19:1–10, the shock came while reading Luke with one of my former professors (biblical scholar Joel B. Green). While not all interpreters agree with every detail I consider below, what’s most important to notice is the way this reading calls us back to the Gospel of Luke itself, rather than to the simplified or distorted version of the story in our minds that often overrides what is actually on the page.

Let me first lay out the provocative reading, before nuancing and defending it: Zacchaeus wasn’t short, and he never repents: according to Jesus, Zacchaeus has nothing to repent of.

What?!

First, his height. I know, I know, “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.” Except, the phrase Luke uses is “small in *hēlikia*.” There are a few obscure instances in Greek literature where *hēlikia* could be used to indicate height, but look at how Luke has already used the word: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in *years* [*hēlikia*]” (2:52); and, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your *span of life* [*hēlikia*]?” (12:25). This draws our attention, then, to what Luke is indicating when he reports, “He was seeking to see who Jesus is, and could not on account of the crowd” (19:3). A wealthy ruler who is short presumably wouldn’t have trouble securing a view of Jesus. But, if Zacchaeus is *young* (“small

in years”), this, together with Zacchaeus’s lowly status as a tax collector, helps make sense of why *the crowd itself* opposes him, considering him unworthy of being present at the arrival of an honored visitor. This makes even more sense when we consider what has just happened in Luke 18: a widow overcomes marginalization by her persistence (18:4–5), a tax collector prays “standing far off” from the center of action in the temple (18:13), *children* are refused access to Jesus by the disciples (18:15), and a blind man finds himself at the margins of the crowd following Jesus (18:35–36).

In fact, this is all a rather brilliant set-up, given that Zacchaeus is four things: a tax collector, a ruler, rich, and a “sinner” (19:2, 7). Up to this point in Luke’s Gospel, if we meet someone who is *rich* and/or a *ruler*, it doesn’t turn out well (see 1:51, 53; 6:24; 12:13–21; 13:14; 14:1, 12–14; 16:19–31; and especially 18:24–25: “How difficult it is for those having wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”). Yet, Zacchaeus is also a *tax collector* and a *sinner*, and so far in Luke’s Gospel, those in this category have consistently been welcomed by Jesus: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him” (15:1; cf. 3:12; 5:27–32; 7:29; 18:9–14). So, this is a fascinating moment in Luke’s presentation of Jesus’ ministry: what will become of someone who is *all* of these things?

The answer comes when Zacchaeus is given a chance to present Jesus with his economic practices, which Jesus evaluates according to whether a person acts consistently as a *child of Abraham*. John the Baptist announces that “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (3:8), and then tells the people that what it means to be a true child of Abraham is to promote social and economic justice: “‘The one having two coats must share with anyone who has none, and the one having food must do likewise.’ Even *tax collectors* came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount arranged for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Extort and *defraud* no one, and be content with your wages’” (3:11–14).

This brings us to my second claim: Zacchaeus has nothing to repent of! Many of us are inclined to see in every New Testament text the story of forgiveness bestowed upon a “wretch like me” who repents with dramatic conviction. Luke shows interest in forgiveness and repentance, of course (see 3:3, 8; 5:32; 15:7; and 24:47), but in the vast majority of encounters with Jesus, whatever repentance is involved is left outside of the narrative (even the woman whose sins are “many” receives forgiveness on account of her trust in Jesus, not because she “repents” [7:47–50]). With this in mind, we are free to notice what the text really says about Zacchaeus.

Admittedly, most English translations rob us of the opportunity here because they translate the verbs *didōmi* (“I give”) and *apodidōmi* (“I give back”) in 19:8 as if they were in the future tense. They are *not* future verbs, though, but unambiguously *present* tense! This makes sense, because Zacchaeus has been *seeking* Jesus (19:3), eager to present his practices to Jesus for evaluation. Zacchaeus trusts that Jesus will look past the stereotypes and scorn of the crowds (tax collectors were widely despised as fraudulent conspirators with the Romans) to recognize

that Zacchaeus has conducted himself as a true child of Abraham. And, this is precisely what happens: “‘Look! Half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor, and if I defraud anyone of anything, I give back fourfold.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a *son of Abraham*’” (19:8–9).

In a beautiful conclusion, it turns out that though Zacchaeus thought he was seeking Jesus, it is Jesus who has been seeking him all along: “For the Son of Man came to *seek* and to *save* the lost” (19:10). Zacchaeus, like the “lost” son and all the real live lost ones in the narrative, is *restored to community* by Jesus’s visit. This is precisely what “salvation” means in case after case in Luke: if one examines all the instances of the root word for save/salvation/savior in Luke, at least half of them refer to physical and social “healing” (also a translation of the Greek word for “salvation”) that result in wholeness and restoration to community (e.g., 6:9; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). In addition, this is another way this text pushes back on Western (or, at least, American evangelical) assumptions about salvation and “seeking”: in the Zacchaeus story we have a *God* who seeks, not a people who seek. We have a Savior who wants a meal in our kitchen (19:5, 7), not an emotional experience of repentance and conversion.

To conclude, perhaps I may be permitted a revision of a Sunday school classic:

Zacchaeus was a toll-taking man,  
And a rich young hotshot was he.  
He climbed up in a sycamore tree  
For the Lord he wanted to see.

And when the Savior passed that way  
He looked up in the tree.  
He said, “Zacchaeus you come down,  
For I’m going to your house today!  
For I’m going to your house today!”

Zacchaeus was an outcast man,  
But Abraham’s son was he.  
He gave to the poor and worked for justice,  
For found and loved was he,  
For found and loved was he.