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SALVATION HAS COME

The

TRANSFORMATION

Of Zacchaeus

Dean Smith

“Today salvation has come to this house.” What does it mean for someone to be saved? Is it only a matter of one’s eternal destiny or does it have practical implications for this life as well? We would all agree that since repentance is an essential part of salvation, it is reasonable to expect that “salvation” would bring a change to an individual’s life. However, we are increasingly aware of the trend in the church to regard our individual lives and faith as private (“nobody’s business”) and therefore not subject to the more penetrating and personal demands of the gospel. Pointed, specific admonitions of Jesus about the lifestyle, priorities and concerns of a disciple are often relegated to a Sunday morning class on Christian ethics or the Sermon on the Mount where such teachings can be safely domesticated and made suitable for everyday use (which too often means they will be interpreted according to each individual’s needs). Thus, the more radical demands of the gospel, while interesting to contemplate, seem to have very little impact upon our environment because we find them too impractical for “real life.” Is it any wonder that some question whether “salvation has come”?

For a long time this debate over the social implications of salvation has raged in the church. Traditionally, it has been expressed by a dichotomy between a “spiritual” and “social” gospel. Some hold that the gospel’s message primarily addresses the spiritual needs of individuals (their “souls”) and not the broader concerns of society. Others, claiming a “social gospel,” believe that salvation is for the redemption of the whole person as well as the whole world and should speak to the physical and emotional needs of people as

well as the spiritual ones. (Unfortunately, often those emphasizing the “social gospel” have succumbed to the temptation of de-emphasizing or ignoring its spiritual implications.) Such a simple dichotomy is actually misleading because it fragments both the individual and the message.

Conservative Christians have traditionally held that you change the world by changing the hearts of people. We observe this in the counseling principle which notes that, since human beings are social creatures, if individuals are transformed their environment will automatically undergo change. Thus, if the message of salvation that we preach fails to have an impact upon society, our failure is not in choosing a “spiritual” gospel over a “social” one, but in opting for a gospel that is not transformative (which is, by its very nature, not the gospel at all). The gospel story itself provides numerous examples of this principle. Let’s examine one.

The story of Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus in chapter 19 of Luke’s gospel is an excellent example of the social implications of the gospel. Traditionally, this story has been interpreted as the reformation of a short, unsavory character who makes an unbelievably generous offer in response to Jesus’ gracious demonstration of acceptance. In fact, it is so unbelievable that we usually focus upon it as an example of the abstract, “spiritual” principle of liberality and ignore the concrete, practical implications inherent in his pledge. Digging deeper into the historical background to this story will reveal these implications more clearly. To do so we must first know something of the poor in the ancient world and of the Roman system of tax collection.

The gospels are unanimous in using a specific Greek word to refer to the poor. It is the word *ptochos*. This word is used in distinction from another word for the poor — *penes*. *Penes* is the word used to describe the working poor, or the lower class of society. The

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ptochoi, by contrast, were the beggars — those living a marginal existence. In his famous play *Plutus* (553), the Greek poet Aristophanes gives an excellent description of the difference between these two terms: “The life of a poor person (ptochos) is to live, having nothing at all, whereas the life of a needy person (penes) is to live sparingly and dependent on toil. The “needy person” was the one who worked hard to secure the daily necessities of life without any luxuries or accumulated wealth, but the “poor person” was the one who was forced either to beg or accept some unpleasant or disreputable employment in order to survive. Thus, the “poor person” was generally regarded as a social outcast, vulnerable to most of society’s abuse and scorn. Luke, in particular, makes many references to the poor in his gospel and almost exclusively uses this word.¹

The plight of the poor in Israel was accelerated dramatically by the Roman conquest in the first century B.C. During this time many were driven from their farms and homes by the armies of Herod and Rome. Later, other properties and homes were seized for the payment of taxes, either by the Romans or, more often, by the Jewish aristocracy (usually associated with the Temple where the records of debt were kept).² Those so affected became the slaves, tenant farmers and homeless of Israel. But the ranks of the desperately poor included many other groups as well. Among them were the diseased and disabled. The sick were usually regarded as cursed by God and a burden upon society. Consequently, they were often dumped or gathered in various locations throughout the empire, many in temples like the renowned Asclepius or lesser known sites like the Bethesda pool (John 5). Unable to work and often suffering from disgusting diseases, the sick were reduced to begging for survival (Luke 16).

There were other groups that, because of their desperate situation, were forced into demeaning and exploitive occupations. Many a girl from poverty in the ancient world was forced or sold into prostitution to keep herself or her family from starvation. Josephus, in his *Antiquities* (19), describes some of the bordelloes that existed even in Palestine. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian, in his *Institutio*, writes of many poor parents throughout the empire who sold their children into prostitution. The wealthy often hired a trusted slave who, in turn, purchased slaves or poor children to be prostitutes and houses to serve as broth-

els. He would then manage this sordid business at a respectable distance from his master whose only involvement would be to collect the profits.³

Another profession similar to prostitution in its reputation and exploitive nature was the business of tax collection. Initiated by the Romans, it was a very effective system for the government to execute such an onerous task. Although some taxes were collected directly by the Romans, most commercial taxes were collected indirectly by tax-collectors under the supervision of a local entrepreneur, known as the chief tax-collector (like Zacchaeus). Palestine was divided into tax districts and the authority to collect taxes was sold to local citizens in much the same way one might purchase a franchise business today. An individual would put up enough money to ensure prompt and adequate payment of revenue to Rome and then employ a staff of collectors to actually discharge this unenviable assignment. Thus, Luke is correct when he identifies Zacchaeus as a chief tax-collector in proper distinction from one of his employees, the ordinary tax-collector.

Who were these tax-collectors that worked for men like Zacchaeus? Traditionally, we have portrayed them as opportunistic “fat cats” who fleeced their fellow citizens. Indeed, many tax-collectors did cheat, but very few would have ever become wealthy as a result. Actually, most tax-collectors were drawn from the ranks of the ptochoi or slaves (runaway slaves were particularly susceptible). These were rootless people desperately in need of any job, even one as despised as tax-collecting. They were continually at the mercy of their employers, who were demanding greater profits, and subject to the constant derision and abuse of their fellow Jews.⁴ The parable of Jesus in Luke 1:9-14 conveys the general perception of tax-collectors who are identified in the ranks of the “extortioners, unjust and adulterers” with whom no morally upright person would ever associate. In the various lists that circulated in the ancient world to categorize groups of people, tax-collectors were listed with slaves, pimps and swine-herders. It is clear that only the most calloused or desperate of people would ever have chosen this occupation.

Part of the reason for the contempt directed at tax-collectors was the reality of widespread fraud in their industry. For centuries the Romans attempted to deal with the problem, but the very structure of the

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system made fraud tempting and prosecution difficult. Luke makes us aware of this problem when, in chapter 3, he relates the counsel of John the Baptist to tax-collectors to exact no more than what was prescribed by law as evidence of their repentance. The penalties of tax fraud were apparently quite severe. According to the Digest of Civil Law, under the emperor Justinian, the penalty for fraud by a tax-collector was a four-fold repayment. In spite of such strict sanctions, however, tax fraud was apparently quite common. (Often when an official complaint was lodged the accused fled to avoid prosecution. Years later the chief tax-collector would be held accountable for the fines when the accused could not be found). Thus, the average tax-collector felt the pressure from both sides. Threatened with unemployment if he did not satisfy his employer's demands for greater revenue, he felt the pressure to

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defraud, in order to meet those expectations. Equally intimidating was the realization that getting caught for fraud would likely force him either to become a fugitive or be sold in payment of the penalties imposed, perhaps even to the resentful citizen whom he had defrauded.

This brings us now to the story of Zacchaeus. Specifically identified by Luke as a "chief tax-collector," Zacchaeus has also become quite wealthy from the efforts of his employees. In spite of his distance from the daily routine, he had also earned himself the reputation of being a "sinner" (the designation of a truly wicked man) from the upstanding citizens of Jericho. Indeed, the mere possibility that a rabbi like Jesus would give any attention to a man like this even surprised Zacchaeus. Staring down through the branches of that sycamore-fig tree, how amazed he must have been to see Jesus looking up at him and inviting himself to dine! And yet, as we are reminded at the conclusion of this story, Zacchaeus represents the very people that Jesus came to "seek and to save." Perhaps everyone who has ever read this marvelous

story has tried to imagine what Jesus might have said to Zacchaeus to prompt such a generous offer. But the absence of that conversation actually serves to focus upon the encounter and invitation of Jesus, rather than any specific words spoken by Jesus, as the real turning-point in this story. The words that follow are ample evidence of the effect of that transforming encounter.

"Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I give to the poor (ptochois) and whatever I have defrauded anyone, I restore it four-fold." Initially, this magnanimous declaration appears to arise from the inexpressible joy that Zacchaeus felt from being loved and accepted by Jesus. Some might even speculate that Zacchaeus also experienced the exhilarating freedom of being released from the shackles of wealth. Zacchaeus had found the resolve to do what the rich young ruler (Luke 18) could not and thus we marvel at this story with its incredible offer in much the same way as the parables of the pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13). Although much of this is not illegitimate, beneath the exterior of these idealistic, almost giddy, interpretations are some very concrete, practical concerns. Let's take them in reverse order.

The pledge of Zacchaeus to repay four-fold those whom he has defrauded is not a recklessly generous offer (mysteriously, Jewish law is usually cited here to draw this conclusion), but simply his pledge to pay the full extent of the penalties prescribed by Roman law. It is no less than his admission of guilt. That is sufficient enough, but how could he be held legally accountable if it was his employees who were actually assessing and collecting the taxes on a daily basis? Could it be that he was accepting the responsibility of being an accessory to their fraud? Almost certainly there were times when Zacchaeus was directly involved in the daily activities of tax-collecting and therefore faced with direct opportunities to defraud. But even if he were not accepting responsibility for the fraudulent activities of his employees, how could he ever again put them in a position where they would be pressured to cheat in order to meet his profit expectations? This brings us to the first part of his offer.

Given what we have discovered about some of the people who made up the ranks of the poor, I cannot help but wonder who the particular recipients of his generosity would have been. Is it possible that his employees, driven by their desperate poverty to accept such employment and similarly motivated to defraud, would have been among the first beneficiaries of his liberal gift? It is as if Luke is telling us that this generous gift was motivated by true repentance whereby the gift is consistent with the change wrought in his life. This was more than charity. This was the

outworking of his salvation. If this is so, what would it have done to the tax-collecting business around Jericho? Did Zacchaeus stay in business or did the consequences of his radical decision (perhaps the reaction of other chief tax-collectors) force him to quit? Like so many other stories in the gospels, we have no idea what happened to Zacchaeus, but there is substantial evidence to indicate that his decision had a significant impact upon those with whom he lived and worked. It is in this context that we note Jesus' concluding words.

"He is also a son of Abraham." The figure of Abraham is a familiar one in Luke's gospel. In chapter 3 we hear John the Baptist warning the people who come to hear him that inclusion in the family of God is not a matter of heredity — you don't "grow up in" it. We hear Jesus reinforcing that message in chapter 13 when he speaks of a time when those who have presumed upon their familiarity with Jesus to secure them a place in the house of God with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be horrified to discover that they have been excluded much like those they excluded in life. Or like the rich man in Jesus' parable (Luke 16), they will find that the gulf they refused to bridge in life between themselves and those too easily overlooked, but not forgotten by God, will become permanent in eternity only with a shocking reversal. Poor, forgotten Lazarus will rest in the bosom of Abraham.

"Today salvation has come to this house." Perhaps Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus will prompt us to re-examine our view of salvation. It might help us broaden our perspective of the "good news" and its demands upon us. To remember in our preaching that "It is not good enough to acknowledge that the Christian faith has social implications. What is needed in the pulpit today is the insistence that it has inescapable and inherent social dimensions." (William Muehl, *Why Preach, Why Listen*, p. 92).

I am reminded of an encounter in the 1920's between Reinhold Niebuhr, the prominent theologian and author (then a minister in Detroit) and Henry Ford, who was making Model-T Fords in Detroit. Ford's booming business had attracted good workers from all over the Midwest who had left jobs and farms to come to Detroit and build automobiles. In the 1920's Henry Ford decided to change over from building the Model-T to the Model-A, a move which necessitated a

complete re-tooling in his factories. This process would take approximately two years, during which time Ford simply laid off the majority of his work force without any pay or financial assistance of any kind. Niebuhr approached Ford to inquire as to how the Ford Motor Company might work together with the community to ease the hardships caused by this extended lay-off. Ford was surprised by Niebuhr's inquiry, particularly with Niebuhr's assumption that the Ford Motor Company was in any way responsible for easing his employees' distress. When asked how he was willing to help in this crisis, Ford replied that he intended to donate a

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few dollars extra to his church. In other words, the appropriate response here was charity which could be indirect and carefully controlled to avoid any implications of personal responsibility. God's salvation transforms the priorities of our lives. The story of Zacchaeus, along with other central stories of the gospel of Luke, would insist that salvation include the way we approach wealth. To be saved is to live out justice for the poor, changing those aspects of our lives that contribute to their plight. It might help us to remember that the same gospel that calls us to cross land and sea to care for the poor, the sick, the dying and the lost also compels us to go to those downtown and down the street, to our schools and businesses — to those whom we may even have ignored or exploited in our selfish quest for happiness or fulfillment. To go to these familiar places and there proclaim, by our changed lives, the true gospel that "all may see the salvation of God" (Luke 3.6).