

ZACCHAEUS' SALVATION, AND OURS



BY DR. JOEL HOUSTON
NIPAWIN BIBLE COLLEGE

At first glance, it appears as though there is a mistake in the gospel according to St. Luke; multiple mistakes, actually. Luke's account of the delivery of the gospel—the “good news” is delivered to all the wrong people: Gentiles (that is, ethnic outsiders), Shepherds (hardly the most dignified of professions in the Ancient Near East), a doubting priest, and perhaps chiefly, a lowly virgin (two social strikes here: a woman, and an unmarried one at that). Yet, upon closer inspection, Luke is driving at an essential point that we do well not to miss. It is not simply that God, in his unfathomable wisdom chooses “what is foolish of the world to shame the wise” (1 Cor. 1:27), **Luke is suggesting that there is something essential to the social and economic stature of the recipients of the gospel that is necessary for understanding the very core of the gospel itself.** The values of the Kingdom of God are a direct inversion of the values of the world.

This notion ought to trouble those who are un-afflicted by the burdens of poverty and injustice. Paradoxically, there is something that money and freedom *cannot* obtain. The difficult truth is that for those of us who occupy positions of privilege and power, our boon can become our burden and our view of the gospel can become obfuscated by comfort and riches (Luke 8:14). Consequently, we *must* face a

challenging reality: if we are going to follow Jesus into this great reversal—this “upside-down kingdom”, it is essential to evaluate our own position with respect to the poor and the oppressed.¹ Do we view ourselves as “the ones with the gospel”? As the “rich” of the world, deigning to visit the lowly in their humble estate? Or, will we listen to the truth of the gospel and recognize that it is *us* that are the poor—spiritually disadvantaged, estranged from God? How we answer this question will have radical effects upon our understanding and transmission of the gospel.

The following series of quarterly articles is organized around themes present in Mary's “Magnificat” (Luke 1:46-55) and seeks to work towards answering the following question: if the poor are uniquely qualified to hear and receive the gospel, how might we, as modern-day readers across diverse social stratum align ourselves—indeed, truly *listen*, to the gospel? Alongside this central question, we also ask how best we are to go about *applying* these insights

¹ Admittedly, the term “poor” is a fraught one. Here it is used in the Lukan sense, specifically to denote an aspect of economic impoverishment, certainly, but as Joel Green notes, “for Luke, [a] wider meaning of diminished status honor is paramount.” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 211.

to our lives and ministries. We will no doubt observe commendable elements within our faith, yet we must also ask: “what are we required to change, or adjust, in order to be more fully in alignment with Jesus’ Kingdom values?”

Mercifully, in Luke’s Gospel, we are given an account of just such a “re-adjustment”, found in Luke 19:1-10. The reader encounters a diminutive tax collector, eager to “see who Jesus was.” Yet this account is clearly meant to be read in tandem with an earlier episode involving another wealthy man, the “rich ruler”, found in 18:18-30. Joel Green observes that in an important sense, “both are ‘rulers’”,² and we as a reader are given the further literary cue that we are to compare the two accounts by the repetition of the noun *plousios* which means “rich”, “wealthy” or even “abundance”, in 19:1; this same noun is heightened in 18:23 with the modifier *plousios sphodra*, or, “very rich”. The comparisons then flower as a lily on a summer’s day: the rich ruler has kept the law, Zacchaeus is a “chief tax collector”; the ruler a man of stature, Zacchaeus is “small in stature”; both men, in an important sense, are seeking Christ, yet to markedly different ends; finally, the rich ruler approaches Christ, yet Christ is the one to approach Zacchaeus.

Judged according to his inability to satisfy the demands of righteousness, the ruler departs “very sad, for he was extremely rich.” Contrast this with the case of Zacchaeus. His interaction with the Messiah is manifestly *not* instigated by a desire to justify himself, but rather, is occasioned at the initiative of Jesus. At the conclusion of the tale, Zacchaeus is identified as a “son of Abraham”—ultimately procuring what the rich ruler could not, ironically, by giving away the lion’s share of his unrighteous mammon. Indeed, Zacchaeus, *recognizes his poverty* and as a result joyfully divests himself of his riches. This action emulates the example set before him in the very person of Christ, who in the words of Paul “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). What has prompted this enthusiastic reform in the life of the erstwhile tax-collector? Luke is clear: it is the direct result of an intimate encounter with the living Christ. It is not through the repartee of righteousness (as in the case of the young ruler), but instead is a direct result of the transformative presence of God in Christ—table fellowship, in this case.

What are we to make of these provocative, parallel accounts? The first and most obvious inference is that the good news finds its genesis and power in the person of the merciful, triune, God. Building upon this clear teaching within Luke, however, is the notion that the reception of the good news involves a reversal of the values of the Kingdom of God and those of the world. While the culture of Jesus day may have felt that the rich ruler was the rightful recipient of salvation, Luke takes pains to demonstrate that the Kingdom of Christ does not operate by worldly standards and expectations. A final challenging, yet undeniable, element present in these pericopae is that it is through the elimination of worldly riches that we may truly become “gospel rich”—this transformation comes through a joyful encounter with Christ and it will animate us in our quest to see him more clearly.

Which leads us to ask some tough questions: who are we more like in this story? Are we like the “self-righteous”, respectable, put-together, “lucky to have me” rich ruler, well-equipped to join Jesus’ cause? Or are we like that scoundrel Zacchaeus, a “chief tax collector”—sorely aware of our spiritual poverty, scrambling over rock and tree just to catch a glimpse of salvation as it processes through town? Astonished that grace would condescend to our house—even for a meal? Indeed, *which personage does our ministry look more like?*

To sharpen the point further, what is it in our lives that is impairing our ability to see Jesus clearly? Is it our wealth, material or otherwise? Is it our belief in our own inherent righteousness? Put simply, has our involvement with the risen Christ caused us to inherit Kingdom values—a conviction to reach out to the poor, the marginalized, the outcast—in the name of Jesus? What do we need to take a hard look at, and change, in order to identify more closely with the poor, the marginalized, the outcast?

Are we, like the ruler, seeking to justify ourselves before Christ while retaining our earthly objects of affection? Or are we, like Zacchaeus, divesting *all* for the sake of the kingdom, rejoicing with Mary that God has exalted the humble and meek, and the rich, he hath sent empty away.

² Green, *Luke*, 666.

Dr. Joel Houston (PhD, University of Manchester) is an instructor in Biblical and Theological Studies at Nipawin Bible College, Saskatchewan. A committed believer that Evangelicalism remains, at its core, a justice-oriented expression of the faith, Joel’s research and writing seeks to serve the broader church by encouraging and resourcing Christians to consider the totality of Christ’s redemptive work in all areas of society.

