



15TH SUNDAY OF LUKE

January 22

THE GOSPEL READING

Luke 19:1-10

[Zacchaeus is Restored]

At that time, Jesus was passing through Jericho. And there was a man named Zacchaios; he was a chief collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaios, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it they all murmured, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zacchaios stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."

THE SERMON

The Lord Jesus has created all things through His power and love. He has designed us individually and calls us by name because we are His people, His Body. As the Lord continues His traveling ministry in the Holy Land, on the way to Jerusalem, He passes through the ancient city of Jericho, where, in the Old Testament, Joshua first entered the Promised Land. The city of Jericho can still be visited today, and there we find the Mount where the Lord was tempted. There in Jericho, the Lord encounters Zaccheus, a rich tax collector.



GREEK ORTHODOX
ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In the previous chapter of the Gospel of Luke, two teachings of the Lord provide a background to the story of His encounter with Zacchaeus. The Lord had told the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. In that parable, it is the tax collector who, in humility, repents his sins and is accepted by God. In this encounter, Zacchaeus is the tax collector. Secondly, in that chapter, we read about the Rich Young Ruler who comes to Christ and becomes sad when the Lord asks him to leave everything and follow Him. Then, the Lord Jesus says it is hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but all things are possible with God.

Before He encountered Christ, Zacchaeus was wealthy and a chief tax collector. He was also corrupt like other tax collectors of that time. The land of Israel was under Roman occupation. And the Romans would hire Jewish civil officers to collect taxes from their people in their respective areas, allowing them to keep whatever they collected above their required quota for themselves. With the Roman authority behind them, tax collectors would dishonestly collect from the people more than they were required to. After paying the Roman authorities, they would become rich with their profit. As a result, the Jewish people despised them.

However, Jesus came to Jericho, where Zacchaeus lived. His heart experienced a change simply by learning that the Messiah was there. The Lord was approaching and passing by, but Zacchaeus was a short man. Like other elements of the story, his stature is a symbol (in other words, an allegory). He was physically short, a picture of his small *spiritual* stature. Because he was dishonest and greedy, he was tied to the ground, as it were, because his love for the things of this world weighed him down.

And yet, God was already stirring Zacchaeus' heart. Unable to see Jesus because of the crowd, he ran and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him. (The sycamore is known for its large size, and this particular tree he climbed can still be seen today in Jericho.) When Zacchaeus climbs the tree, he begins his journey away from the ground and up to the Kingdom. The tree becomes a symbol of the Cross since it is by seeking Christ above all things and taking up our cross that we draw close to Christ and join ourselves to Him.

When the Lord Jesus sees him, He says, Zacchaeus, come quickly down, for I must stay at your house today. Zacchaeus did so and received the Lord joyfully. The Son of God came to a sinful man and called him by name. The Lord did not spare His kindness and love because even a sinful man could repent, turn around, take up his cross, and learn how to love. Therefore, the Lord desires to fellowship with him, even to enter his house, because He was *entering his heart*.

Zacchaeus' repentance was not merely by words. His works proved it. He said to the Lord that he would give half of his possessions to the poor, and if he had defrauded anyone of anything, he would restore it fourfold. In the Law of Moses, it was written that if one had stolen, he would have to restore four times, and in some cases, five times, what he had stolen. Zacchaeus shows his true repentance because he tells the Lord publicly

that he will restore four times what was stolen, and even more, he would give half of his money to the poor. In this way, he restored all things above and beyond as a sign of his genuine repentance.

When Zacchaeus finds Christ, or rather is *found by Christ*, he ceases to be a small man. In his former life, his spiritual eyes were looking only at the low things of this world. Before encountering Christ, Zacchaeus was captive to his sin and desire for riches, even at the expense of others. Because of this, he was following the example of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, who became destined to be on the ground and eat dust. Now, however, the tax collector, in humility, is asking for forgiveness and as a result, the rich man is entering the Kingdom of God. What is impossible with men is *possible with God*.

The personal encounter with Christ changes *everything*. It is a new beginning for him, and now he desires only Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven. His change of heart is proven and made evident by his works. The Lord responds and says that on that day, salvation had come to Zacchaeus' house because he had also become the son of Abraham. That is to say, Zacchaeus had joined Abraham, the Father of Faith, because, by his works, he had proved his faith and had become a friend of God.

The Lord Jesus says, "the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." Saint Gregory of Nyssa says, "He Who came that He might seek and save that which was lost . . . desires to make the man of God complete, united to the Deity in body and in soul. He Who was in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin, left no part of our nature which He did not take on Himself."

Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise because of their disobedience by a tree. Zacchaeus discovered paradise by climbing a tree and was given the opportunity to see Christ and sit and eat with Him. Through his example, we too seek to climb the trees that lead us to things above. This story is celebrated as an example of the Lord Jesus' mission to seek out and save people who were considered outcasts or lost, and also of the power of repentance and forgiveness.

Jesus came to Zacchaeus, and he responded in faith. He climbed the tree of the Cross and longed for Jesus. The Son of God called him by name, as He calls us by name. Zacchaeus truly opened his heart to the Lord, proving his repentance and faith through his works.

The Lord loves each one of us even when we fail, even when we love things of this world more than God and neighbor. He still comes to us and calls us to be with Him. He does not want us to remain in a life separated from Him. If we respond to His call and repent – if we turn from that which separates us from Him and make the appropriate restitution – He comes to dwell with us and in us. He came to seek that which was lost. That is, He came to save us. When we respond, we become His home, and the Light enters our hearts. We become spiritually tall and begin climbing up the ladder that leads to heaven.