

## Our True Stature

Sunday 2 October  
Luke 19:1-10

Today we begin a new series of messages on studies in 'character'. So, what is character?

According to the dictionary, character is the sum of the features and traits that define our personality, that is, who we are and how we live as a person.

Read: the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10.

The story of Zacchaeus is a well loved story, because it appeals to our Australian sense of justice for the loner or under-dog. Did you know, however, that this story is only found in the Gospel of Luke? None of the other gospels record it!

Does this mean that the record can't be trusted? No! It only means that the other gospel writers had so much other good material to use in their gospels, and maybe didn't think this story was as significant when writing about the life and ministry of Jesus.

Zacchaeus was a very interesting character, to say the least. He lived in the town of Jericho and was a rather wealthy man (vs.2). His job was as a tax collector for the Romans (vs.2). This meant, to do this job, you had to be prepared to have very few friends and to be despised by the general population. Zacchaeus was no different. This was his life.

To do this job, Zacchaeus was obviously a man of intelligence and education: able to read, write and manage the finance books, as well as probably able to speak in a few different languages in order to communicate with travelling traders.

To compensate himself for this lonely and hated job there were some rather attractive perks. He was able to overcharge people, in the taxes levied on them, and rake a little 'off the top' for himself.

Over many years, Zacchaeus was able to amass for himself quite a tidy superannuation fund. In fact, the record tells us that Zacchaeus was rich (vs.2).

It would seem however that, despite his obvious wealth and power in the community, Zacchaeus was not a fulfilled man. When he heard of the coming of Jesus into his town he decided to go out to see him for himself.

Obviously he had heard of Jesus as a mighty teacher and miracle worker. Maybe he had heard how Jesus debated with the Jewish authorities and embarrassed them with his answers. Maybe he had heard that Jesus was a prophet like John the Baptist.

Whatever he had heard about Jesus prompted him to want to see him.

Zacchaeus had another problem - he was short (vs.3). When it came to standing in a crowd, Zacchaeus was head and shoulders below everyone else.

I can just imagine how the crowd would have taken pleasure and delight in pushing and nudging him to prevent him from getting into the front row of the crowd. He then resolved to get ahead of the crowd and climb a tree to get a good look when Jesus came by (vs.4). Obviously Zacchaeus was also a man of initiative, ingenuity and determination.

When Jesus finally reached the place where Zacchaeus was perched in the tree, the record tells us that Jesus stopped and looked up and said: *'Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.'* (vs.5).

Can you imagine the shock for Zacchaeus? How did Jesus know his name? Zacchaeus was delighted and hurriedly came down and welcomed him (vs.6).

The record however tells us that the rest of the crowd were not so pleased. They obviously saw themselves as good, honest, decent living people and why would Jesus want to associate themselves with such a man as Zacchaeus. Obviously Jesus did not know who this man was and the work he did.

I mean to say, how many of you would be happy to be seen talking in the supermarket with a known criminal, prostitute or drug dealer. Can you imagine what the community would think about that?

They were horrified and disgusted. Not only did Jesus talk to Zacchaeus, but even invited himself to eat with him and stay at his home. How could such a good man as Jesus associate with such a low-life as 'that man'? (vs.10)

Now, we do not know the exact time at which Zacchaeus' life was transformed. It may have been early on when Jesus had entered his home; it may have been during the meal; or it may have been after a time of deep discussion following the meal.

What we do know is that the presence and words of Jesus had such a profound transforming impact on Zacchaeus. So much so that Zacchaeus no longer cared for money as he once had. In front of Jesus, he pledged one half of his fortune to help the poor and less fortunate, and pledged to generously recompense anyone he had deceived. (vs.8)

Did Zacchaeus make this declaration to win God's favour and blessing? Did he do it to earn his salvation? No! We know from the teachings of Jesus that it is not the outward acts of man that impress God, but the attitudes of ones heart.

In vs.9 Jesus is recorded to have said, *'Today salvation has come to this house ..'* It was not what Zacchaeus did that caused Jesus to say this. Jesus saw into the heart of Zacchaeus and knew that he had been utterly turned around. His old nature and character for greed and self had now given way to a new nature and character of seeking to live in a right relationship with God. This was true repentance.

Though Zacchaeus was a man of short physical stature, he had now become a giant for God.

Can you imagine the impact for God that he could now have on the community of Jericho.

Did this mean that Zacchaeus had to change his job?

Not necessarily! He just now had to find ways to do it ethically, honestly and compassionately.

Sometimes, it only takes one person, like Zacchaeus, to bring sweeping changes for God into any workplace or community.

His life and witness would be seen by everyone and no-one could deny that this man had been touched and changed by his encounter with the Lord Jesus.

As Jesus himself summed up his ministry in Jericho:

*'the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.'* (vs.10)

You know, I wonder how many people today, in this community, are just like Zacchaeus.

They are intelligent and educated people, who have both initiative and determination. They have been successful in accumulating wealth, financial security, and positions of importance and influence; and yet their lives, though busy, are strangely unfulfilled, and they don't know why. They are spiritually lost.

Their nature and character is one that has been conditioned and informed by the world. They have taken on board all the teachings, theories and psychological tools of the day, and are vehement in their defense that their choices in life have been right for them, evidenced by their obvious successes.

I believe that what the world needs more than anything else today is to encounter the Lord Jesus Christ, just like Zacchaeus.

In the world of today, with its instant access to information and multimedia, the accumulation of knowledge to better order our lives has not heralded in 'utopia', as many thought it would.

We are not better people, nor living more fulfilled lives, because of the amount of knowledge we can now resource. If anything, today, people are more divided, more stressed, more uncertain of their future, more alone and lost.

The answer for Zacchaeus came as a result of his meeting with the Lord Jesus. In some very special way the words of the Lord spoke to him and touched him at the core of his being. In some very special way the presence of the Lord brought a new peace, a new clarity, a new assurance of the man God wanted him to be.

Today, in many places around the world, people are encountering the presence of the Lord Jesus for the very first time. Sometimes this is taking place through dreams, visions or angels.

Sometimes it is through reading the Bible, or talking with a friend or neighbour.

Sometimes it is hearing songs of praise to God or seeing a church family that is active and loving. Their lives, like Zacchaeus, are being transformed.

What is needed in this community around us is for people to meet, or encounter, the risen Lord Jesus. It is not just a matter of us telling people, or giving information and knowledge about Jesus, and the Bible. It is a matter of people coming to that point in their lives of opening their hearts and minds to the presence of the Lord.

In vs.3 we read a very important part of the story, '*.. he (Zacchaeus) sought to see who Jesus was ..*'

The seed, for the transformation of Zacchaeus, had been sown in his heart **before** he met Jesus.

All that was required was another part of Zacchaeus' character to come to the fore. All Zacchaeus needed was:

- 1] the courage to admit that his life needed changing - that this was not as good as it gets;
- 2] the courage to admit his past mistakes - to himself, to others and to God; and
- 3] the courage to trust someone, other than himself, with his future - the Lord Jesus.

The example of Zacchaeus is one of encouragement for all of us. No matter what our nature or character is in this world, God can turn it (us) around for His glory and our blessing. In this story, we discover yet again that we can trust the Lord Jesus with our lives.

We can trust him to not only deal with our past, but also to secure our future.

No more are we lost, because, in him we are now complete and have our fulfilment. As Jesus himself said, '*.. the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost*' (vs.10).

From now on, though we may live in this world, we are not of it (cf. John 17:16). Our life and future is now vested in the Lord Jesus Christ who died for us and rose to give us a new and eternal life with God.

Let us not forget to pray that others will come to know Him, just like Zacchaeus.