

“Zacchaeus was a wee, little man, And a wee, little man was he.” You may think you know about me because you may have been singing a song about me since you were a child. Those first two lines have had such an influence on what you think about me; much more influence than the Bible has had.

Seriously, you have to admit that song makes me sound like a Jewish leprechaun. At a time when the average Jewish man was only about five feet and three inches tall, almost all men were short. The misconception about me happens because the Bible says I was short and could not see over the crowd. Think about it. How short would I have to be not to see over a crowd? Five foot two would probably do that, five feet even? But I didn’t have to be a leprechaun. And I certainly didn’t need to be...wide like so many illustrations show.

Now that we’ve had the altitude discussion, let’s move on to more important matters. When I first met Jesus, I lived in Jericho. Jericho was one of the oldest cities to exist, and is the oldest known city that had a protective wall. It was thousands of years old when Joshua came and destroyed it. In fact, the city has been destroyed and rebuilt many times. It was completely rebuilt by the time of Jesus. In fact, Herod the Great had built a fabulous palace complex nearby to use as his winter retreat. Jericho would again be destroyed by the Romans just before they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Jericho was located just west of the Jordan River, and several miles north of where the Jordan River entered the Dead Sea. Jericho was surrounded by the wilderness, so it sits like a jewel in a beige, rocky desert. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem is only about 15 miles, but it rises 3400 feet in elevation, and took a full day to walk. It was on this road that Jesus placed his parable of the Good Samaritan.

My occupation was as a tax collector. In fact, I was the chief tax collector for the city. One afternoon, I was sitting in my booth and people started running by in extreme excitement. A rumor raced around town that the prophet Jesus was nearing and had healed a blind man outside of the city. In fact, things were so confused that I couldn’t tell whether Jesus had healed one blind man or two.¹ Stories swirling like a desert sandstorm! The only thing that seemed to agree was that a blind man had been immediately healed, and people were praising God for his deliverance.

¹ Mat. 9:27-31

I was intrigued by a few of the details. The blind man had called the prophet “The Son of David.” This was a messianic title, and the prophet had not rebuked him. Could this man possibly be the messiah? After all, he had done an undeniable miracle.

Jesus had asked the man the question, “What do you want?” He had not asked the question, “Do you want to be healed?” What else could the man have asked for and received instead? Deliverance of Israel from Rome? The right to see the messiah come in his lifetime? I don’t know, wish for more wishes?

Lastly, Jesus had said the man’s faith had healed him. Jesus did not take credit for the miracle. The people praised God instead of Jesus. What kind of a man could this be, I thought?

I was as confused as everybody else about the miracle, but there was one thing that was crystal clear. I had to see this man, Jesus. I knew he was approaching the city, so I had to hurry to beat the crowds. I gathered up my expensive robe, and began running. I was too late. The crowd had gathered, and I was too short to see over their heads. Since I was a tax collector, a “hated” tax collector, there was no way the crowd would let me come through without an encounter with someone’s dagger.

I was frantic. There wasn’t any way I would let this opportunity go by. I thought about bribing someone to let me through, but quickly realized that was a bad strategy. I saw a nearby balcony and ran to the house and knocked on the door. Nobody answered, I felt like kicking in the door. But it was obviously very stout, and I didn’t want to look even more foolish by being unable to kick it in. There had to be another solution! Down the road, I saw a huge sycamore-fig tree, and I came up with the most brilliant idea I ever had in my life. I started running for the tree like someone avoiding me at tax time.

Almost an hour later, Jesus worked his way through the crowds and walked on the road directly beneath the tree. I thought I was hidden by the leaves, but he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down now. I must stay at your house tonight.” Without stopping to ponder how he knew my name or why he possibly needed to stay at my house, I came down so fast that it probably looked like I jumped. Hoping to sound important, I welcomed him to my house as loudly as I could.

The crowd started muttering. Loudly. “Jesus has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” I wasn’t embarrassed because tax collectors were often called much worse names than that, but I didn’t want my new guest to be embarrassed. Drawing myself up to my full height, I exclaimed, loudly, “Here and now, I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Have you ever said anything, and then wanted to physically grab the words back? How could a greedy tax collector ever say such a silly, stupid, foolish, idiotic, stupid, brainless, stupid thing? I

felt like Herod must have felt when he offered Salome half his kingdom just for dancing.² Jesus smiled at me, and I knew I had not offered enough.

He said, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Wow, what a great deal for me. I just gave up some stuff, and I was given salvation from the Messiah who could make salvation come true.

Before I could run to my house to start preparing dinner plans, Jesus motioned for me to sit on a nearby log with him. I didn't know it at the time, but he needed to prepare the crowds and his disciples for what was coming when he arrived at Jerusalem – not an immediate overthrow of the Roman government, but a slow conquering by the kingdom of God. I also didn't know he was about to mix two stories together for dramatic effect.

Jesus started, "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return." At this one dangerous sentence, the crowd collectively held their breath. Jesus was treading on deadly ground and they all knew it. It had to do with an event that had happened about twenty-five years prior.

Archelaus, the son of Herod, had been involved with a dispute over Herod's will. In order to resolve the dispute, which was hotly contested by his brother Herod Antipas, Archelaus had traveled to Rome to take his case before Caesar Augustus. Archelaus was also opposed by the Jews, because they were afraid of him due to his previous slaughter of 3,000 of them. Archelaus did receive the kingship of much of Israel that he wanted, but he was quickly deposed, and the Romans took over the areas he had ruled. It was not a subject that any of the Jews wanted to discuss openly, because the agents of Rome and Herod Antipas were everywhere.

Jesus started a second story to weave with the first story, as the crowd exhaled. He told about how the man of noble birth had chosen three slaves to leave money with while he traveled, with the clear expectation that he would return. Especially when mixed with the first story, the crowd assumed that the master had power of life or death over his three slaves based on his evaluation of their performance. He wasn't going to just put a note in their employee evaluation files.

As everyone in the crowd knew, the master did return home after being made king. He was more powerful than ever, but in a foul mood because of the opposition he had faced. His three slaves must have been trembling when he called for them to give account of his money.

The first came and said, "Sir, your mina has earned ten more." Did you notice that the slave didn't say, "I have earned ten more?" The slave knew he was just an instrument and needed to stay humble. The master replied, "Well done, my good slave. Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities."

² Mark 6:17-29

At this, Jesus winked at me and paused for the crowd to absorb his outrageous story. A faithful slave just received a shockingly large increase in responsibility for having done what was expected. They were so appalled by this, that they could not process what might be coming.

Jesus continued with his story. The master beckoned to the second slave and he said, "Sir, your mina has earned five more." "You take charge of five cities." Now, the crowd was lulled into a rhythm.

The third slave said, "Sir, here is your mina. I hid it away safely to give to you on your return. I know you are a hard man. You take what you did not put in and reap where you did not sow." You could have heard a pin drop into the dust at my feet. The crowd winced as Jesus changed his voice into that of a harsh master.

"You wicked servant, I will judge you by your own words. Why didn't you at least put my money at interest so I could have that when I returned? Take away his mina and give it to the one who has ten. To everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

The crowd sat dumbfounded, what on earth would the king say next? "But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and kill them in front of me."

Jesus stood, and started walking toward Jerusalem. He had no intention of eating at my house any more. He had accomplished with my heart what he wanted. Now he was waiting for his parable to take effect, even while knowing it would be two more months before people could even begin to understand it fully.

How did we understand the parable that day? God must have been the king, and our religious leaders must have been the slaves. But which leaders would get rewarded and why? And would the rest of the leaders really be killed by God himself? And how did any of that relate to those of us in the crowd. Surely this man Jesus was like the prophet Isaiah – almost impossible to understand!!

Did you ever wonder what happened to me after that day in Jericho? Well, the Sunday School song is definitely no help. Did I really give the money to the poor? Did I really pay back four times the amount I had cheated others? Did I stay a tax collector? The Bible doesn't give you any of those answers but use your imagination for a minute.

If you were me, wouldn't you have followed Jesus to Jerusalem that very day? I knew that my possessions were worthless, and my heart had been changed. Wouldn't you have stood in wonder as Jesus entered Jerusalem, and then taught in the Temple for the next few days? Wouldn't you have been in shock when Jesus was crucified and died? Wouldn't you have been incredulous that Jesus was resurrected and appeared to so many of us believers?

As you think back on that day when Jesus walked through Jericho, think of the parable and understand it in a different way. Jesus was the king who went away and came back. His enemies were the Jewish leaders who would either repent or be punished with eternal death. The slaves in the parable were his followers who were waiting for his return. What about the minas and the cities, what were they? And then you hear Jesus whisper, "Go and make disciples."