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Zacchaeus and Jesus

a dialogue

inspired by Luke 19:1-10
by Ralph Milton

And then what happened? The story of Zacchaeus is a favorite, but I've often wondered what the conversation might have been like when Jesus went to his house. The Bible tells us nothing except that Zacchaeus was a changed man. While studying in Israel I heard the story of King Herod, and the rumour about how his children cooked him in his hot tub. Probably not true, but a good story. Out of all that, I wrote this dialogue that was first used as a sermon.

JESUS. Nice house, Zacchaeus. That's beautiful stone work. Who did it for you?

ZACCHEAUS. Oh, I don't remember. Such details – who can remember? An artisan. A stonemason. I paid him far too much.

J. I am a stonemason by trade. My father Joseph and I worked for several years on the theater at Sepphoris just four miles from Nazareth. Takes months of hard work and lots of bleeding fingers to do work like that.

Z. (CHANGING THE SUBJECT) Would you like to see the rest of the house? Over there, through this window – that's the winter palace of Herod the Great. I guess you're too young to remember him. He was quite the man. Built dozens of beautiful buildings around this country. You can just see some of the magnificent colonnades over there on the left. And over on the right are the bathhouses. That's where he died, you know.

J. So I've heard.

Z. His family. They cooked him. They got old Herod into the hot tub, and then kept gradually increasing the temperature until they cooked him. Like a chicken in a soup pot.

Then they carried him to his bed and they claimed he died there, but the rumor here in Jericho was that his children cooked him. You can't trust anyone, you know.

J. Poor man.

Z. Who?

J. Herod. He was a desperately, lonely, frightened man.

Z. Herod? Herod the Great? He was a despot. A killer. I'm accused of being ruthless sometimes, but that man wiped out anyone who stood in his way. All the babies in the town of Bethlehem once when somebody told him a king had been born there. Killed his wife and half his family. They say it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.

J. Ever wondered why he was that way?

Z. Power. He wanted power, that man. Power. They called him 'King of the Jews' you know.

J. So the King of the Jews wound up being cooked by his kids. Didn't he have any real friends? Was anyone sad to see him die? You were here then? A teenager maybe? Were you sorry to see him die? (Z. SNIFFS) Will anyone be sorry to see you die, Zacchaeus?

Z. (THE QUESTION CATCHES Z. OFF GUARD) Is that why you invited yourself to my house? To insult me?

J. I'm sorry the question was an insult, Zacchaeus. Would you like me to leave?

Z. You will go when I am ready for you to go, and then I may well have my guards toss you out on your keester. Of course there will be people sorry when I die. Do you know how many people I employ in this household? And my wife and my kids won't have their rich papa to get them everything they want. I get them everything they ask for, those kids. I had to struggle – I had to scratch for every penny I got. Nothing came easy. Not like for them. All they have to do is ask and papa gives. Me, I got nothing.

J. It was a hard struggle for you as a child?

Z. What is this? What is this? I bring you into the nicest house you've ever seen and give you good wine to drink and order in the best food, and you start asking questions nobody in this town has the nerve to ask. Who are you? Why did you invite yourself here for dinner – which was pretty nervy, if you don't mind my saying so.

J. To find out why you climbed that tree.

Z. I climbed that stupid tree so I could see you. Wasn't it obvious? (J. DOES NOT RESPOND BUT LOOKS AT HIM INTENTLY. PAUSE.) All right. It's not obvious. You think I don't know how idiotic I looked in that tree? Don't answer that. (HE TRIES TO BE LIGHT-HEARTED) So – there are rumors that you are the new King of the Jews. If you are, you must be wealthy and I should collect a lot of taxes from you. That's my job, right? I know how to spot hidden wealth, and Jesus, you hide it well.

J. Really? I thought I was flaunting my wealth all up and down the Jordan valley. Couldn't you see it? (GRINS)

Z. You are pulling my leg, Jesus. There isn't more than a few hundred dollars among all those friends of yours.

J. True. Absolutely true. Probably not that much. But they were my *friends*. They are my friends, Zaccheaus. We love each other. That is the kind of wealth old Herod longed for and never had. Herod experienced no love from his father Antipater, so how could he ever learn about it? He didn't know how to love, so he was never loved. He could control people – manipulate people, hate people, abuse people, but not love. Nobody loved him. And I can't think of a sadder thing to say about a person. If Herod had shown more warmth to his family, they might not have shown quite as much warmth to him in that hot tub.

Z. Is that why all those people crowd around you. Because you love them?

J. Is that why you climbed that tree? To find out why people crowd around me?

Z. Why do Jews always answer a question with a question?

J. Why are you interested in me, Zacchaeus?

Z. Ahh! (HE'S DISGUSTED)

J. I can't believe it's because you suddenly got religion. And you don't for a minute believe that stuff about me being King of the Jews. So why were you up that tree, Zacchaeus?

Z. (SHOUTING) Why did you invite yourself to my house?

J. JESUS DOESN'T ANSWER. HE STANDS THERE WITH A QUIET SMILE.

Z. GLARES AT JESUS. THEN FINALLY BREAKS INTO A GRIN. So all right already, Jesus of Nazareth. I understand King Herod a lot better than I understand dreamers like you. Herod had no love in his life and so he clawed his way up until he

could command or buy the respect and all the sex he wanted. And I've done the same thing.

J. Why?

Z. Why? Because...because I've got ducks disease, that's why. My arse is too close to my ankles. I'm a runt. In any crowd of ten people, I'm eleventh. I have spent my life trying to get noticed, and you know something? I did it. I was the shortest kid in town, but now I'm the biggest man in Jericho. I am chief tax collector in this area, and don't you forget that, dreamer. I can pin your ears back pretty quickly – you and all your lovey-dovey dreamer friends.

J. Of course you can. But why would you want to?

Z. To teach you some respect for authority.

J. If respect is all you want, you've got it. How would you like me to show my respect? Would bowing low to the ground help? I'll bet Herod's family was very respectful just before they made him into chicken soup. I'll bet they gave him a dandy funeral afterward and the whole country came to pay their respects.

Z. Come off it. You know what I mean.

J. Yes. I know exactly what you mean. And you don't want respect Zaccheaus. You've got it, and it's worth nothing. Everybody in this whole town respects you but there isn't anyone who loves you. And you are desperate for love, Zaccheaus, just as Herod was. Isn't that why you climbed that tree?

Z. Love! What good is it? Those friends of yours can't buy a loaf of bread with love. I'll bet you're the only one of your loving little group that gets a square meal tonight. It's a dog eat dog world, Jesus, and you know it. Or at least you would know it if you stopped dreaming long enough to see the starving people in the gutters or the lepers on the edge of town. Go talk about love to those Roman legionnaires and see where it gets you. Power and money is all they understand.

J. Is that all you understand, Zacchaeus?

Z. Yes, damn it. Because that's all there is to understand.

J. Then why did you climb that tree?

Z. I am a student of human nature and human interaction. I wanted to see what was going on. I wanted to observe and understand the dynamics of the interrelationships in your group.

J. Bull!

Z. So all right! Shut up, will you! So I wanted to know what makes people love. Is that so awful? So maybe I'm not all hard-nosed tax collector. All my life I wanted to have a friend who would love me. Just one friend. Is that so awful?

J. You've already got one.

Z. Who?

J. Zacchaeus, friendship begins with honesty. And just now, for a moment, you were honest with me. Really honest. So you and I have begun to be friends.

Z. You want to be friends with me? Jesus, you are a prophet – a rabbi. I'm a tax collector. Get real.

J. Yes, get real, Zacchaeus. Religious leaders can be as lonely and as corrupt as tax collectors. But that really has nothing to do with it. If you and I can keep on being real with each other, our friendship will grow. If not, it will die.

Z. You said you loved those friends of yours.

J. I do. And they love me.

Z. So explain love to me.

J. I can't. Love isn't something you explain or understand. It is something you live. You keep on doing loving and kind things to people, and eventually you find you love them. When you love them, some of them will love you. It is wonderfully profound but not very complicated. You're quite right that love doesn't buy bread, but love will feed the poor. Love gets you no respect and you never get to control anyone you love. But love brings you joy – and that's another word I can't explain.

Z. The price is too high, Jesus. Do I give up my position here with all the perks and benefits and a retirement package that's the best in the country. If I quit tomorrow, there are a hundred guys lined up to take my job and most of them would do a better job of gouging and screwing the people than I have. I'd love to have friends who didn't care about my money. I'd love to be wanted just for me. I really wish my family loved me, and not just all the fine marble, and the food and swimming pool and the hot tub...

J. You have choices.

Z. Such as?

J. Buy a very good thermometer for your hot tub. Or you could pack the whole thing in and join us on that dusty road to Jerusalem tomorrow.

Z. Such choices? You mean it's all or nothing?

J. Yes, Zacchaeus. You either live a life of love or you don't. But there is another option. Change the tax collecting business from the inside?

Z. What in blazes are you talking about, Jesus. Be real.

J. Taxes *will* be collected by the Romans. With our current politics, that's a given. And the Romans allow you a certain commission for your salary. Everything you take beyond that is your choice. Your option.

Z. Every tax collector in the whole country takes more than that measly commission. Every tax collector working under me skims off something for himself. What the hell are you suggesting, Jesus?

J. I'm suggesting Zacchaeus, that love begins with justice.

Z. Whoeee! Well, that's an idea that takes some getting used to. Love begins with justice! Well! We could talk about it over supper. It should be ready.

J. I can smell it. What are we having?

Z. Chicken soup.

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
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