

THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT  
everything [in] between righteousness & mercy

# Righteousness & Mercy

As children, we were taught to tell the teacher.

(Justice was dealt when we spoke up.)

As children, we were taught to always be kind.

(Friends were made when we spoke with love.)

As children, we were taught that Zaccheaus climbed  
a tree.

(But we cut that tree down a long time ago.)

So what are the rules for this day and age?

Can we turn black and white into shades of gray?

Do we call each other out, for righteousness' sake?

Do we call each other in? Do we grab something to eat?

As always, love is somewhere in between.

*Poem by  
Rev. Sarah Speed*

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**Read** Luke 19:1-10  
**Commentary** | Rev. Jeff Chu

***A love so attentive—and so offensive—that it healed***

“God has a really bad habit of using people we don’t approve of,” Rachel Held Evans<sup>15</sup> once said. “What makes the gospel offensive is not who it keeps out, but who it lets in.”

I might tweak Evans’s formulation and put it this way: God has a really bad habit of loving people we don’t approve of. Or maybe this: God has a really bad habit of showing mercy to people we don’t approve of. Or maybe: God has a really bad habit of extending grace to people we don’t approve of.

All are true, as is evident in Jesus’s encounter with Zacchaeus.

In those times, tax collectors were loathed. The phrase “tax collectors and sinners” appears multiple times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in one testy exchange with the chief priests and elders, Jesus tosses a rhetorical grenade into their midst, saying, “The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”<sup>16</sup>

Tax collectors were stooges of the Roman Empire. They betrayed their own people and enriched themselves in service to the oppressor. And Zacchaeus was no average corrupt bureaucrat. He’d amassed immense wealth, climbing on others’ backs to the rank of chief tax collector. In other words, he was a senior deplorable.

So it especially galled the gathered crowds that, of everyone clamoring for Jesus’s attention that day in Jericho, he would choose to stay with that man. Can you believe it?

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<sup>15</sup> Rachel Held Evans was an American Christian blogger and *New York Times* bestselling author. She died suddenly in 2019. The commentary author, Jeff Chu, was a close friend.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 21:31

The good teacher would want to be in the home of that despicable, unrepentant sinner? I say “unrepentant” because, before Jesus invites himself over, the vertically challenged Zacchaeus has done nothing except climb a tree to get a better view, again setting himself apart from his people. He hasn’t admitted wrongdoing, resigned his position, or confessed his sin. Still, Jesus says, I will abide with you.

It’s striking that Jesus never called Zacchaeus out—no loud shaming, no public humiliation. Rather, this seems like the gentlest calling-in. Faced with Jesus’ tender warmth, Zacchaeus descends from the tree, rejoins the people, and immediately pledges restitution—a two-pronged act of reconciliation with both God and neighbor.

Confirmation of this remarkable turnabout comes in Jesus’s declaration: “Today salvation has come to this house.”<sup>17</sup> Our ears might be tempted to hear an absolution of individual sin. But Jesus says “to this house,” not “to this man,” which hints at something broader. The Greek word *σωτηρία* (*soteria*), translated here as “salvation,” also means “deliverance.” Woven into *σωτηρία* is a suggestion not just of cleansing but also of wholeness. In the communal culture of Jesus’ day, salvation meant the wholeness derived from belonging. By repenting, Zacchaeus had been delivered from broken relationship with his people back into the wholeness of community.

We can’t know how Zacchaeus would have responded if Jesus had instead tried loud condemnation. We do know that what worked was winsome grace, gentle mercy, and a love so attentive—and so offensive—that it healed.

## Reflect

When have you witnessed or experienced someone being “called in” instead of “called out”?

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<sup>17</sup> Luke 19:9



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## Zacchaeus

by Lauren Wright Pittman

Inspired by Luke 19:1-10

Digital painting

I had a lot of fun discovering new layers to this familiar story. I learned that Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore fig tree, which was a food source for poor people because the fruit was bitter and generally undesirable.<sup>9</sup> I had always imagined a fruitless tree, but the presence of fruit opened up interesting avenues to explore. The root word for sycamore tree is *συκον*, meaning “fig,” and as I did a study of other key words in the text, I noticed this same root word in *συκοφαντεω*, or “defrauded,” which was used to describe what Zacchaeus did to his community. It was curious to me that the root word for “defrauded” was “fig,” so I dug deeper to find that the Greek word was from the phrase “fig-informer” or a person who would notify authorities if one was exporting figs from Greece without paying a tax. It seemed that these “fig-informers” would use the threat of exposure to extort money from fig farmers. This is where the word “sycophant”

comes from, which evolved to more generally describe a “malignant accuser from love of gain,” which perfectly describes Zacchaeus.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus calls Zacchaeus out of his identity as “sycophant” into his new identity as “repentant host” who invites Jesus into his home and redistributes his ill-gotten wealth. Zacchaeus’s clothing holds a repeated pattern of four figs and halves of coins, referencing the fruits of his transformation.

The area where Zacchaeus sat in the tree is fruitless and dying. His actions were destructive and oppressive to his own community. The crowd is correct in grumbling about him; their anger is righteous, but Jesus offers mercy. In this visual metaphor, Jesus removes him from the tree so it has a chance to heal and nourish the whole community. Jesus’ clothing is patterned with suns, representing righteousness, and water, representing mercy, because it is through his merciful actions that righteousness for the community is achieved.

—Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

<sup>9</sup> *Fauna and Flora of the Bible*, by United Bible Societies. (United Bible Societies, 1980). 179-181.

<sup>10</sup> For discussion of the word “sycophant” (Strong’s G4811), please see: [blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4811/kjv/tr/D-1/](http://blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4811/kjv/tr/D-1/)