

# THE CONVERSION OF ZACCHAEUS: THE MEANING OF CONVERSION Luke 19:01–10

## ***Introduction***

The meaning of conversion is clearly illustrated in the experience of Zacchaeus. The fact that man can be converted should stir hope within every heart that truly senses need and wants to meet God as though face to face.

- I. Zacchaeus, the chief tax-collector — a man who was very rich (vv. 1-2).
- II. First, being desperate to see Jesus: who He is (vv. 3-4).
- III. Second, receiving the invitation of Jesus (vv. 5-6).
- IV. Third, repenting, that is, changing one's whole way of life (vv. 7-8).
- V. Fourth, looking to Jesus as the Saviour (vv. 9-10).

## **I. *Luke 19:01–02 Tax Collector***

Zacchaeus, the chief tax-collector, was a very rich man. This is the only time the title “chief” is used with a tax-collector. Its meaning is not known. It probably refers to the head of the local taxation office; therefore, Zacchaeus would be responsible to the Roman government for the employment and management of the local tax-collectors and their monies. Note two things about Zacchaeus.

1. He had all the pleasures and comforts of life which money could buy.
2. He was a man who would find it very difficult to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. His money was a serious threat to his salvation, as it is with all rich men. It was going to be difficult to give up all he had to follow Christ. A man tends to love his money and the things it does for him.

It is extremely difficult, almost impossible, for a rich person to enter heaven. It is as difficult as a camel's going through the eye of a needle (see Lk.18: 24-27). Why? Because the rich man has kept his wealth, hoarded and stored it up. He has not served God by *loving his neighbour as himself*. The rich man has used his talents to make money so that he could buy the *latest styles and be called rich* by other men. He failed to use his talents to make money to meet the desperate needs of children (and men and women). The world desperately needs food, shelter, clothes, medicine and above all, the gospel. It is no wonder a rich man will not enter heaven when most of the world is in such desperate need. Why would God accept a man who has wealth when that man would not take the time to seek and reach out to the child who was starving and dying both physically and spiritually?

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## II. *Luke 19:03–04 Seeking Jesus and Conversion*

First, conversion is being desperate to see Jesus, just who He is. Note three facts.

1. Zacchaeus showed a desperation in trying to see Jesus. Despite his wealth and the pleasures and comfort enjoyed by wealth, he was apparently empty and lonely within his heart. This can be imagined because tax-collectors were bitterly hated by the people. (See *Tax-Collector*, Lk. 5:27) Zacchaeus was also small of stature, which means that he was probably self-conscious and felt inferior and had a low self-image. Being so little in stature, it was dangerous for him to be out in the midst of a crowd that despised him. From all indications he was denied passage through the crowd, probably being shoved back and abused. Therefore, his desperate determination and persistence is even more evident.

*Deu 4:29* But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all our heart and with all our soul.

*Isa 55:6* Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

*Jer 29:13* You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

*Hosea 10:12* Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.

2. Zacchaeus persevered in his attempt to see Jesus, and he had to humble himself to do it. Imagine Zacchaeus, a man of position and wealth, climbing a tree just to see an important person pass by. He wanted to see Jesus so badly he forgot everyone around and humbled himself to climb a tree. He was determined to see the Lord, and nothing was going to stop him.
3. Zacchaeus had most likely experienced the stirring of faith within his heart for some time. He had heard reports about, Jesus' being the Messiah and perhaps had heard about Jesus' saving and calling Mathew, another tax-collector, to be one of His apostles. Zacchaeus had begun to believe the reports or at least to wonder and hope that the reports were true. His efforts to see Jesus and what follows are evidence of some stirring, of some hope that drove him to seek Jesus.

*Isa 55:1* "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."

*Mat 11:28* "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

*Heb 4:15-16* For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

### LUKE 05:27 TAX COLLECTOR

A tax collector was bitterly hated by the people. There were three reasons.

1. Tax collectors served the Roman conquerors. Most tax collectors were Jews, but in the people's eyes they had denied their Jewish heritage and betrayed their country. They were thus ostracized, completely cut off from Jewish society and excommunicated from Jewish religion and privileges.
2. They were cheats, dishonest and unjust men. Most tax collectors were extremely wealthy. The Roman government compensated tax collectors by allowing them to collect more than the percentage required for taxes. Tax collectors greedily abused their right, adding whatever percent they wished and felt could be collected (see *Revenue, taxes*, Rom. 13:6). They took bribes from the wealthy who wished to avoid taxes, fleeced the average citizen, and swindled the government when they could.
3. They were assuming rights that belonged only to God. God alone was King in the eyes of the Jews. This was a strong conviction of the Jews; therefore, God and the ruler appointed by God were considered to be the head of Jewish government. God was their God, and they were His people. Taxes were to be paid only to Him and His government, which was centred only in the temple of Judaism. To pay taxes to earthly rulers was an abuse and a denial of God's rights. Therefore, tax collectors were excommunicated from Jewish religion and privileges. They were accursed, anathema. □

### ROMANS 13:06 REVENUE, TAXES

This was a difficult command. For most believers, the command caused anything but pleasure, for the taxes levied by the Roman government against its conquered nations were heavy to bear (see Mt. 9:9).

1. There was the income tax: one percent of a man's income.
2. There was the ground tax: a man had to pay one-tenth or one-fifth of the crops produced by his ground. He could make payment in money or in the actual crops harvested.
3. There was a poll tax: paid by everyone between the ages of twelve or fourteen and sixty-five. It amounted to about one day's wage. (See *Tax, Tribute*, Mt. 22:17.)

There were also local taxes that had to be paid. There were import and export taxes, and there were custom duties including taxes for using main roads, crossing bridges, entering markets and harbours, transferring animals, and driving carts or wagons. □

### III. *Luke 19:05–06 Conversion and Receiving the Invitation of Jesus*

Second, conversion is receiving the invitation of Jesus. Note several points.

1. Jesus “looked up, and said to him.” Jesus sees every man, no matter where he is: in the dark places of his sin and shame, in his home and work and play, in his seeking to know the truth. Jesus sees everything about a man, but there is one person in particular whom he sees. He sees the man who is seeking Him. Jesus sees him in the sense of knowing about his need and reaching out to meet that need.

Zacchaeus is an example. He was desperate to see Jesus, so he had struggled against the odds and found a place where he could see Jesus. Even though the place he chose meant humiliating himself and exposing himself to people who were bitterly opposed to him, he was willing to suffer whatever it took to get a look at the Saviour. And, because Zacchaeus sought so diligently to see Jesus, Jesus saw him.

2. Jesus knew and called him by name. This was bound to strike Zacchaeus and be very meaningful to him. When anyone, especially a stranger, calls us by name, our ears perk up and our senses become more alert. Jesus knows every man’s name (cp. Jn. 1:48; Isa. 43:1). He wants to address every one of us by name, but we must let Him. We have to do as Zacchaeus did: seek to find the place and vantage point where we can see Jesus, then Jesus will see us and call us by name.

*John 1:42* And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).

*Jn 10:3* “The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

*Jn 10:14* “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”

*1 Cor 8:3* But the man who loves God is known by God.

*Gal 4:9* But now that you know God — or rather are known by God — how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?

*2 Tim 2:19* Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.”

*Isa 43:1* But now, this is what the LORD says he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”

3. Jesus asked to be received and to be received with haste. He was set for Jerusalem and must not delay too long. There was no time to waste. Jesus wanted to be welcomed,

received, and entertained by Zacchaeus; but Zacchaeus had to act then and there. Jesus had only a couple of hours before He had to move on to fulfill His purpose. The moment of opportunity was then and there, that day. The next day it would be gone. There would be no pull, no struggle, no spirit of seeking within Zacchaeus' heart.

**Mat 11:28** *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”*

**Rev 3:20** *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*

**1 John 1:3** *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*

**1 Cor 1:9** *God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*

**Rev 22:17** *The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.*

**Isa 1:18** *“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”*

**Isa 55:1** *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”*

4. Zacchaeus obeyed; he made haste and received Christ joyfully.

**John 1:12** *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

**2 Cor 6:2** *For he says, “In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.*

#### **IV. Luke 19:07–08 Conversion and Repentance, Restitution**

Third, conversion is repenting, that is, changing one's whole way of life.

1. Zacchaeus was a sinner. Note “the people began to mutter.” Everyone knew that Zacchaeus was a betrayer of his country, serving the alien power of Rome. And Zacchaeus himself knew that he was a sinner, both a betrayer and a thief, having stolen much from many. The point is twofold.
  - a. Zacchaeus knew he was a sinner and readily confessed his need for the Saviour.

**Mat 10:32** *“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.”*

**Rom 10:9** *That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

**1 John 2:23** *No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*

**1 John 4:15** *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.*

- b. The crowd, that is, the general populace, demonstrated self-righteousness. They did not like Jesus’ eating and associating with a known and confessed sinner. Note: their sin was murmuring and grumbling and complaining — the great sins of Israel in the wilderness. They just misunderstood Jesus’ purpose for coming to earth, that of saving sinners.

**Luke 5:31-32** *Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”*

**Rom 5:8** *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

**1 Tim 1:15** *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst.*

2. Zacchaeus repented and changed his whole life; he completely turned around from his sinful life to God and His way of righteousness.
  - a. He gave half his possessions to the poor. He did exactly what Jesus had said time after time, and he did exactly what the rich young ruler had refused to do (Lk.18:18-24).

**Luke 9:23-25** *Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?”*

**Luke 11:41** *“But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.”*

**Luke 12:33** *“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.”*

**Luke 18:22** *When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*

**Eph 4:28** *He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.*

**1 Tim 6:17-18** *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.*

- b. He gave back to those whom he had cheated; he gave four times what he had taken. Restitution became the thrust of his life for the next while. Think of the people he had cheated, stealing everything he could from them. Imagine the list of people and how long it would take to track them down.

**Lev 6:4** *When he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found.*

**Prov 6:31** *Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house.*

**Ezek 34:16** *I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. (cp. 1 Kng 20:34; 2 Kng 8:6; Neh 5:12)*

The point is that this sinner, Zacchaeus, truly repented. He was serious about following Christ and living righteously. (See *Repentance*, Acts 17:29-30.)

**Luke 13:3** *“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”*

**Acts 3:19** *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.*

**Acts 8:22** *Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.*

**Isa 55:7** *Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.*

**Ezek 18:21** *“But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die.”*

## **V. Luke 19:09–10 Mission of Jesus Christ**

Fourth, conversion is yoking to Jesus as the Saviour.

1. Jesus is the One who proclaims salvation. He proclaimed two things:
  - a. That repentance saved Zacchaeus, and that Zacchaeus would bring the message of salvation to his whole household.

**Mark 16:16** *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”*

**Acts 16:30-31** *He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.”*

- b. That Zacchaeus was a true son of Abraham, spiritual son.

**Rom 4:11** *And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.*

**Rom 3:28** *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.*

2. Jesus is the One who seeks and saves the lost.

- a. The lost are the ones who are perishing, being destroyed, losing eternal life, and being cut off from God. The lost are spiritually destitute.
- b. Jesus, the One who seeks and saves the lost, is the One who sought Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus put himself in a position to see Jesus, but Jesus did the speaking to Zacchaeus’ heart, asking Zacchaeus to receive him. Note: only after Zacchaeus received Jesus did Jesus save him. (notes, Rom 10: 16-17; See *Salvation and Perishing*, 1 Cor. 1:18.)

**Luke 15:4** *“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?”*

**John 9:35-37** *Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”*

**Rom 10:16-17** *But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. ■*



### ACTS 17:29–30 REPENTANCE

*“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” Acts 17:29-30*

Repentance means to change; to turn; to change one’s mind; to turn one’s life. It is a turning away from sin and turning toward God. It is a change of mind, a forsaking of sin. It is putting sin out of one’s thoughts and behaviour. It is resolving never to think or do a thing again. (See Mt. 3:2; Lk. 13:2-3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 26:20.) The change is turning away from lying, stealing, cheating, immorality, cursing, drunkenness, and the other so-called glaring *sins of the sinful nature*. But the change is also turning away from *the silent sins of the spirit* such as self-centeredness, selfishness, envy, bitterness, pride, anger, covetousness, evil thoughts, hopelessness, laziness, jealousy, lust.

1. Repentance involves two turns. There is a negative turn away from sin and a positive turn toward God. It is a turning to God and away from sin, whether sins of thought or action.
2. Repentance is more than sorrow. Sorrow may or may not be involved in repentance. A person may repent simply because he wills and acts to change; or a person may repent because he senses an agonizing sorrow within. But the sense or feeling of sorrow is not repentance. Repentance is both the change of mind and the actual turning of one’s life away from sin and toward God. □