

=CONVERSIONS=

Lesson 4

The Conversion of a Tax Collector

AIM: to teach my pupils the importance of the story of the conversion of Zacchæus

POINT OF CONTACT: Discuss with the class tree climbing. Ask them how many climb trees or have climbed trees. Discuss the many ways that children can and have played in trees. For example, many just climb trees to see how far to the top they can get. Others have built houses in trees so they could play. Have the class share experiences of tree climbing. Then lead into the story of Zacchæus, the tax collector who was saved because he climbed into a sycamore tree to see Jesus pass by.

INTRODUCTION: We now study about another publican. As Jesus was passing through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem for the last time, He won a man to Himself whose name was Zacchæus. Zacchæus was small and could not see Jesus as He passed by. Because of this he climbed up into a sycamore tree. As our Lord came by, He looked up where Zacchæus was. Zacchæus received Him as Saviour. Jesus went to his house to share a meal. Here is a beautiful story of conversion. Let us notice some of the outstanding points.

- I. THE WORD "JERICHO" MEANS A PLACE OF CURSING. Jericho had long been an accursed city. When the Jews entered the Promised Land, God placed a curse upon the city and its contents. There is a spiritual truth here. Jesus planned to go through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. In other words, He was willing to become accursed that people might be saved. Or, better still, shall we say, He went where the sinners were. Not one place in the Bible are sinners commanded to go to church, but over and over again the church is commanded to go to sinners. (Teacher, stress the importance here of our going where sinners are in order to reach them for Jesus Christ. Ask the class and pupils what they are doing to go where the sinners are to bring them to Christ. Bear in mind that this does not say to do what the sinner does, but go where the sinner is.)
- II. ZACCHÆUS WAS A PUBLICAN. This means he was a tax collector. The publicans were taxed so much money by the Roman empire. Whatever they could get over and above the requirements of the Roman empire was their own. This means they would levy the people with heavy burdens of taxation so they themselves could become very wealthy. This means that the wealthiest people were the tax collectors. Also, the most hated people were the tax collectors. This leads us to the fact that Jesus loves the wealthy; He also loves those who are loved by no one else.
- III. ZACCHÆUS WAS A MAN OF CHARACTER AND DETERMINATION. Notice Luke 19:3. This is not to say that Zacchæus was of perfect character. Certainly his vocation and his habits were undesirable. On the other hand, he did, however, have a great deal of doggedness and determination. He was little, and he could not see because of the press. No doubt he got up early in the morning and came down to see Jesus walk by. The street was already lined with people. Perhaps he went into a house and tried to look out a window, but the windows were filled. No doubt he then went to the top of the house and tried to find some place on a flat roof where he could observe the Saviour as He went by, but everywhere he went, people were there. He was not to be denied, however. He would not give up. He climbed up into a sycamore tree in order that he might get a glimpse of the passing Saviour. Not only does this show determination, but it also shows a lack of pride. Can you feature the Director of Internal Revenue climbing a tree to see a parade? This didn't matter to Zacchæus. He wanted to see Jesus, and see Jesus he did.
- IV. SOME STOOD IN HIS WAY. See Luke 19:3. There are many standing in the way of sinners. You might ask the class to share with you the different ways that we can stand in the way of sinners and keep them from Jesus.

V. THE REAL INFLUENCE BEHIND ZACCHÆUS' CONVERSION. Read Luke 5:27-29. Here is the conversion of another tax collector. No doubt his conversion had a great influence on Zacchæus. Let us imagine for a few minutes, as we border between fact and fiction. One day Matthew (Levi), who was a tax collector at Capernaum, was sitting at his tax booth when Jesus walked by. This was nothing unusual as Jesus, no doubt, had walked by many times. Had He not been reared in nearby Nazareth? This time, however, it was different. Jesus had been to Jordan to be baptized. He had been in the wilderness of temptation for forty days and forty nights. He had performed many miracles. Now He comes back to His own home area, and it would not be unusual for Him to stop by and see His old friend, Matthew. Bear in mind, that to Matthew, Jesus was just another hometown boy. Well, perhaps Matthew had looked upon Him as being a bit unusual, but he certainly had no idea that He was the Messiah. This day, however, Jesus comes in to talk to Matthew about something special. He speaks to him concerning the Messiah and then no doubt shocks Matthew by presenting His claims as being that Messiah and that Saviour. Matthew believed Him and received Him as Saviour. He immediately rose up and left all and followed Jesus.

Soon Matthew did a very strange thing. He had a feast (or a meal or a banquet) and invited all the publicans and sinners to come. There is no doubt that he wanted to tell them about resigning his position as publican of Capernaum. He also doubtless wanted to tell them why he did so and introduce them to the Lord Jesus Christ. Already he wanted the old crowd to be saved. Already he wanted to witness. Already he wanted to tell somebody about his newly found salvation. Doubtless in that crowd could be found all the tax collectors in Palestine. One of them was a short little fellow from Jericho whose name was Zacchæus. One reason I know he was there is the fact that he was chief among the publicans, and certainly when all the publicans got together, the chief wanted to be there. He heard Matthew tell a story. He saw Matthew present Jesus to them. He heard the words of Jesus, and no doubt his heart began to beat faster. Could we imagine that conviction gripped him, and he almost received the Saviour then? One's imagination would not have to run wild to picture him going back home and telling Mrs. Zacchæus that he almost became a Christian. Then, one day, he hears that Jesus is coming through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. He vows that he will see Him, and see Him he does. He receives Him as Saviour, and he, too, is born again.

Every person knows someone in the world that needs the Saviour. Those who are saved from lives of drunkenness should not forget the people that are back in the taverns. New converts should not forget the people that are back at work, and those in their families and others who need the Saviour. Matthew's first thought was to tell the old crowd about his newly found joy. He did, and this we ought to do.

VI. HE PROVED HE WAS SINCERE. See Luke 19:8.

1. He proved his sincerity by helping the poor, verse 8a. Here is always a good proof of salvation. James tells us in his epistle that the love of God cannot dwell in the person who sees his brother in need and does not help him.
2. He restored fourfold anything he had stolen from others, verse 8b. Obviously Zacchæus had some knowledge of the Scripture in that he restored fourfold. In Exodus 22:1, the Jews were admonished and reminded that if one were to steal a sheep and sell or kill it, he had to restore four sheep in its place. Zacchæus said, "I have stolen money, and I will restore fourfold that money." Again, we have proof of the genuineness of Zacchæus' conversion.

VII. SALVATION IS INSTANTANEOUS. Read Luke 19:9. Jesus said, "This day is salvation come to this house." There are those who make light of and even make fun of churches and preachers who preach instantaneous salvation. People often ridicule soul winners who would dare believe that a person can be saved during a 15-or 20-minute conversation with a soul winner. The truth is, however, that many thousands of people are saved on the very first contact. Certainly salvation is instantaneous when a person's faith is placed in Jesus Christ as his hope for Heaven. (Teacher, be sure to lead the class here to discuss the importance of the assurance of salvation. In a church the size of ours, Satan will certainly

plant tares throughout the entire church. Let us always be on the alert to stress the importance of knowing one is saved.)

VIII. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RIGHT VOCATION. For this point we go back to the conversion of Matthew, the other tax collector. Notice Luke 5:28.

1. Youth choosing a profession. Here's a very important point. A profession should be chosen on the basis of what it will do for humanity and for God. No one should choose a profession because he enjoys doing certain tasks. No one should choose a profession because of financial remuneration or social standing. In choosing a profession, one should consider service for God and man. This means that professions, such as carpentry, plumbing, working in the steel mills, garbage collecting, etc. are surely honorable ones, for they help provide for the needs of others.
2. The adult choosing a profession. Matthew was an adult. He left his profession because it was not a worthy one. So many times a man will move his entire family across the country, change their entire lives and destiny for more money, for promotion, or, more ridiculous than all, just because his company transfers him. None of these are worthy motives. All that should be considered is the will of God and service for others. (Teacher, have the class consider for awhile what professions would be honorable and what professions would not be honorable. Be very practical here. This is a very vital point with our children and young people.)