

WHO IS THIS MAN? or THE TREE INCIDENT

(George Ensworth, as edited by Tim Ensworth)

Luke 19:1-10

July 13, 2008

I live in a town about six hours on foot from Jerusalem. It is a thriving little commercial center, specializing in balsam. Most people call me "tax-collector" – sort of like they are saying, sinner. They don't understand ... Somebody has to do this. Better it be a Jew – one of their own – than some foreigner from Rome. So I am collecting money from my own people for an occupying country? So what have my own people ever done for me?

When I was a kid, they used to call me "shorty." I was always littler than my friends. Never could be better at anything, seems like. But I am better now! I decided I'd show them. I'd be the richest man in town – almost am too ... Funny, though. I kinda figured it would make people respect me, but they just seem to hate me all the more. There is no one I can really call a friend anymore. I have money – I can buy anything I want ... anything but a friend. I sometimes feel I would give it all away for one real friend. But that kind of thought doesn't come often. You can't get anywhere by getting emotional.

It seems like somehow I've gotten off on the wrong foot. The very thing I was after, I have lost. It reminds me of that woman who used to live next door. She smothered her kid so much with love, she finally drove him away from her. She can't understand it was her fault. Not like my old man – he used to make me toe the line but good. He was on my back constantly.

The only time I felt free was when I ran with a gang of kids from across town. You know, I wasn't really any more independent with them either – I used to do everything they told me to do. I was literally their slave. But I felt like a big guy when I was with them. At least they didn't run me down all the time like my old man.

You know, back then I never would have thought I'd be in the kind of business I am now. I didn't make some big decision to be crooked. It seems like I just drifted into it through a lot of little decisions. One thing leads to another – then you're trapped.

But how can I change now? A man's got to live ... It seems like I just get in deeper and deeper. Oh, I've gotten soft-hearted on occasion and tried to be different – but you just can't get this sort of thing out of your system. It's hopeless! And besides – everybody else is the same.

Take those Scribes and those Pharisees. They make as though they're so righteous. But it's all show. Why, they bleed the people through their offerings and money changing, as much as I do. It is just their way of satisfying themselves. At least I'm not pretending to be a LILY.

There is only one person that has me stumped. This fellow they call Jesus – I think he comes from Nazareth. I can't figure him. They are making all kinds of claims about him – healing people – just this morning they say he gave sight to that blind beggar that sits at the edge of town. They even say he claims to forgive people's sins. He must think he's God or something.

But the religious crowd is dead set against him ... which is a good score for him in my book. Rumor has it they are plotting to kill him.

He is coming through town, they tell me. You know, I just think I will go down and see for myself. Funny thing – me – the head revenue officer getting interested in a holy man!

Frankly, I am not sure I know why I want to see him. Maybe to satisfy myself that all those wild claims just can't be true – but somehow, deep down, I have a vague hope that they are true. I have just got to see him. I don't know why – but I must!

... quite a crowd gathered already. How am I going to see over them? Why do I have to be so short?

Let me through here! Uh!

Yeah – they won't budge.

Public street ...

They figure they can get back at me out here.

Well, maybe someday I'll own this street. Then they'll move!

I didn't get to be head tax-collector by chance. I know how to get around things. I'll just go up ahead and climb that tree. Then I'll see everything when he passes by. Here he comes! Just look at all those people fawning over him. It makes you sick. But I wouldn't mind a little attention like that myself. But he doesn't seem to notice it at all. Almost seems to be above it. And yet I get the impression that he likes those people.

I can begin to see his face now. Those eyes – look right through you. They are looking at me!

He's stopping!

Oh, no!! Now you've done it, ZACH. Right out here on this limb – and this fellow is going to make a spectacle of you – right here in front of everybody.

He called me by my name! First time anyone's done that in a long time.

Not shorty –

Not publican –

Not sinner –

But ZACCHAEUS.

How does he know my name? What is he saying? Come down, because he wants to stay at my house!??

My house?

HIM?

Oh, brother! What a switch! What a chance to show all those miserable hypocrites. Look at them murmur.

But I can't understand myself. I just don't feel like crowing. I really don't deserve having this man at my house. He's too good. He is really good.

He makes me feel like ... somebody – almost as though he likes me – He accepts me.

Yet – at the same time – I feel awfully dirty inside – like I am a miserable sinner.

But I get the feeling he understands all this, too – and he still accepts me.

Why am I telling him all about myself?

Why does he listen?

Why doesn't he condemn me like everybody else?

I know he doesn't condone everything I've done. Yet, I believe he loves. Yes – he really loves me.

I feel I want to change – I've got to change – for HIM! This man must be God. He must be going to Jerusalem to die for us like he said. He must be able to forgive us and change our lives.

Lord, I will give half my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times as much.

Salvation has come to this house today ... for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.