



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The Righteous Zacchaeus: A Re-Reading Of Luke 19:1-10

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: May 8, 2024	<p>This work is a re-reading of Luke 19:1-10 from a perspective wherein Zacchaeus, a chief tax-collector in the Jewish-Roman interaction is seen for who he actually was. It employs the hermeneutical reconstruction against the backdrop of undue theoretical generalization, and opines that, Zacchaeus was actually a righteous man worthy of emulation in the contemporary corrupt milieu. Do his words, δίδωμι and ἀποδίδωμι actually speak of restitution or a boast of what his real life and character were as compared to his name, which means transparent, clean or pure? Were they hallmarks of his righteous acts compared to the Jewish law in respect of the poor and restitution? The work used content analysis for data collection and concludes that, the Lukan Zacchaeus was a righteous man, whose righteousness is worthy of emulation, even today. It brings to the fore a re-reading of Luke 19:1-10 to correct the negative impression often associated with Zacchaeus because of his profession as a chief tax collector in the Roman empire, while at the same time encourages everyone to maintain righteousness in all spheres of work, even in those professions which have been negatively pigeon-holed by the public. The contribution of this work to academics lies in the fact that, it has brought to the fore the breaking stereotypes associated with the reading and interpretation of the Zacchaeus story, and possible asking readers and interpreters of scriptures to always have a constant examining of scriptural texts to avoid undue generalization in its interpretation.</p>
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### INTRODUCTION

Sometimes history is re-written to correct some impressions when new information has been found, or the historical texts are re-read with new insights. Anytime a new ray of understanding is cast on a text to illuminate it, its meaning, implication(s) and application may tend to be modified in the light of this new understanding, even though the previous stereotype interpretation may not be easy to part with. This axiomatic thought may be applied to the Lukan Zacchaeus' story (Luke 19:1-10), especially when the text is re-read with the understanding of the title of this paper, "The Righteous Zacchaeus: A Re-reading of Luke 19:1-10". Adding the adjective, righteous to Zacchaeus may raise

some questions – was he a righteous person before he met with Jesus, while meeting with Jesus or after he had met with Jesus?

Worthy of note is the simple fact that, many interpreters and readers of Luke 19:1-10 often than not represent the Lukan Zacchaeus as one who was of dubious character before his encounter with Jesus (Alana, 1-17; Willimington, 18-21). This therefore calls for a re-reading of the Zacchaeus text with greater care in the light of historical-grammatical view taking into cognizance the Roman-Jewish political, economical and religious context of Zacchaeus' days. It therefore means, having a careful consideration of the *sitz en leben* of this Lukan text. Was Zacchaeus really a sinner or a 'sinner'?. When the people accused Jesus of being a guest to a sinner (Luke 19:7), was Zacchaeus called a sinner circumstantially? Was he an object of undue generalization? Was it based on religio-political bias? What does his expression which is often referred to as restitution in v.8 mean? Was his self-declared restitution futuristic or present? Can Zacchaeus be declared a righteous person or still wear the garb of unrighteousness? What will be the implication of this in our question of righteousness that exalts a nation, especially in an era where righteousness is a scarce commodity.

The call to re-read Luke 19:1-10 with the understanding of the righteous Zacchaeus stems from these questions and the desire to de-vest the text of undue generalization and stereotype of interpretation. Significantly, this paper intends to have a fair presentation of Zacchaeus and by implication a reappraisal of persons who have been judged as unrighteous based on religio-political and economic context. Righteousness in this case should therefore not be seen from the perspective of the crowd, but from the proper understanding of the context those involved. This paper which is written using qualitative analysis avers that, Zacchaeus was a righteous person worthy of emulation, not just in his society but in every culture.

### **The Lukan Motive**

In his treaty to one whom he called, 'most excellent Theophilus' - κράτιστε Θεόφιλε, *kratiste Theophile* (Luke 1:3); one whose identity according to Laurence Porter is unknown (Porter, 1182-1228), this quasi-historical document has a universalistic perspective of the gospel of Jesus who was sent not only to the Jews but the Gentiles as well. Effiong Udo rightly opines that, "Luke, of all other New Testament writers, is acknowledged to pay more attention to social and economic problems of his time. His entire corpus – Luke-Acts – reveals the socio-economic *sitz im leben* of the ancients to whom Jesus ministered" (102). It is on this note that, David J. Bosch points out that, the themes of wealth, materialism and stewardship, and contrast between rich and poor, are widely recognized as being dominant in the Lukan Gospel (Bosch, 103). The story of Zacchaeus falls within these Lukan themes of wealth, materialism, stewardship and a contrast between poor and rich among other issues of stereotypes.

Luke also has as one of its main focuses, the uplifting of those who are said to be social outcast or the downtrodden, and those who are at the margin of the society, of which the subject of this paper, Zacchaeus falls under. Others in this category are the sinful woman in (7:36-50), the prodigal son (15:11-31) and others who stood in contrast with the attitude of the self-righteous Pharisees and the crowd. Hence, the concept of salvation is a central theme of his corpus. Walter Liefield strongly opines that, "the central theme in the writings of Luke is that Jesus offers salvation to men" (811). The offer of salvation here is not to be dissociated from the concept of salvation-history, which if properly understood, has a significant place in Luke and elsewhere in Scripture. It does, however, focus on the person and the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ, rather than a scheme of history. The Greek word σωζω, *soozoo* (save) occurs in Luke 6:9; 7:50; 8:12, 36, 48, 50; 9:24, 56; 13:23; 17:19; 18:26, 42; 19:10; 23:35, 37, 39; *soter* (Saviour) in 1:47; 2:11; *soteria* (salvation) in 1:69, 71, 77; 19:9; and *soterion* in 2:30; 3:6. It can be easily observed that, one of the main texts in Luke is 19:1-10 in which the Lukan Jesus points out vividly that, he "came to seek and to save what was lost"

## The Pericope of Luke 19:1-10

In the historical cum theological Lukan treatise, the narrative of Jesus begins with his birth and culminates in his ascension into glory. In this narrative, Luke presents Jesus last journey to Jerusalem (17:11-19:27) before his Passion Week events (19:28-22:13), his last hours (22:14-23:56), his resurrection and ascension (24:1-52). Our focal text falls under Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem, precisely his approach to Jerusalem and is sandwiched between the healing of the blind beggar (18:15-43) and the parable of the pounds (19:11-27). This narrative contains what may well be considered as the "key verse" of Luke, viz., 19:10. The incident contains several primary Lukan features such as, the universal appeal of the gospel (vv.2-4); the ethical problem of wealth (v.2); the call of a "sinner" who was in social disfavour with his community (v. 7); the sense of God's present work (vv.5, 9); the feeling of urgency ("immediately," *σπεύσω*, *speusoo* v.5), of necessity ("must," v.5), and of joy (v.6); restitution, with goods distributed to the poor (v.8); and, above all, salvation (vv.9--10) (Liefeld, 814).

## Re-Reading Luke 19:1-10

According to Rudolf Bultmann, "some authors understand the narrative as a conversion/salvation story while others interpret it as a vindication story. There are others who have gone farther than v. 8 to understand the story as a biographical apophthegm" (55-56). This article intends to study this text with the view of discovering if Zacchaeus was actually a righteous person prior his encounter with Jesus or he was a dubious person as presented by many scholars.

v.1. The text begins with, *καὶ εἰσελθὼν διήρχετο τὴν Ἰεριχώ*, *kai eiselthoon dieecheto teen Iericho*, which means, "and he entered Jericho." The absence of the name of Jesus, though most translators have added it to the text, making it to read, "and Jesus entered Jericho" is intentional by the Lukan narrative. It is meant to link this story with the preceding narrative of the healing of blind man (see Like 8:35)

v.2-4 The text introduces the focal person of this study and it reads, "And there was a man named *Ζακχαῖος*, *Zakchios*. The name Zacchaeus seems to have been a common name among the Jews. Both the Scriptures and Rabbinic Literature bear records to a Zacchaeus – one who was an officer in the army of Judas Maccabeus (one of the groups that was given the task of besieging two towers in which Idumean forces had taken refuge, 2 Macc. 10:19). The second one was the Lukan wealthy chief tax-collector who had an encounter with Jesus on the Jericho Road (Luke 19:1-10). Colin M. Kerr mentioned of two other persons with the name Zacchaeus in

*The Clementine Homilies (iii.63) as having been a companion of Peter and appointed bishop of Caesarea [and] another one who according to the Gospel of the Childhood, by Thomas, was also the name of the teacher of the boy Jesus" (Electronic copy).*

*Worthy of note is the fact that, the name Zacchaeus (the Greek Ζακχαῖος and the Hebrew זָךְ, zky come from the word 'clean/ or 'pure'.*

*In naming of Hebrew children, Nabal was said to have been as foolish as his name (1Sam 25:25), then Zacchaeus whose name means pure, clean and/or righteous may also have been so named after his character. This is in tandem with G. F. Hawthorne who rightly opines that,*

*In the Bible, "name" is that title, label, designation by which a person, place, or thing can be known or marked out as distinguishable from another. More fundamentally, however, "name" is that which (1) reveals the true nature of its bearer (1 Sam 25:25), so that to know the name is to know the person (Ps 9:10 [MT 11]), or (2) designates the relationship that exists between entities, especially between God and His people (2 Chron 7:14; Isa 43:6). (Electronic copy)*

It is in this vein that J. A. Motyer avers that, “the Bible is no stranger to the custom, now virtually normative, of giving a name simply because it appeals to the parents” and goes further to ask, “What else is likely to be behind calling a little girl Deborah (meaning ‘bee’, (Jdg. 4:4) or Esther (Heb. *H<sup>a</sup>dassa*, ‘myrtle’).” Motyer concludes his thought by rightly pointing out that,

The Bible’s view of names and naming would be offended by the idea of a mere coincidence or accident of parental choice; the link it sees between a name and person is both too close and also too dynamic for that. (810).

The Lukan Zacchaeus being a Jew, may have possibly fallen in line with this Jewish thought in respect of his name.

He was a chief tax collector, and rich: The Lukan Zacchaeus is called a chief tax collector, a designation which is worthy of study and reflection. This is to enable us understand Zacchaeus and his role in the Jewish community, especially as the Jews were under the Roman government. It is good to note that, taxes were regular payment extracted from the state and its provinces by its own rulers and this was distinct from wealth received from conquered states which was called tributes (Millard, 1167). In the beginning of Jewish nation, they were only expected to pay taxes to maintain the tabernacle and its ministers, a practice that was renewed after the Exile (Deut. 14:22-27; 18:1-5; Neh. 10:32), but with the monarchy came heavier taxation as was warned by Samuel and experienced during Solomon’s reign (1Sam 8:15-17). In the New Testament era, Roman provinces (which Israel was one of them) paid regular taxes to Caesar using Roman coin and this was unpleasant to the Jews. Hence, in one of their tempting of Jesus, they put a question as to the appropriateness of them paying tax to Caesar (Matt. 22:17-21).

The said taxes paid to the Roman government was done through tax agents who were not on the government payroll, but had to survive on the extra income they get after paying the statutory amount required of them by the government. These agents were always designated as *τελώνης* tax-farmer, i.e., collector of public revenue usually known as publican. Zacchaeus was one of the heads of this people and was referred to as *ἀρχιτελώνης*, *architelooones*. He was therefore most likely a collector of tolls on merchandise moving through Jericho and may have been the one who had the contract from the Roman government for the collection of these tolls, and he probably made use of a number of sub-contractors in the collecting of them. At any rate, his position made him wealthy, but it also subjected him to a large measure of the contempt that fell on collectors of Roman taxes from most Jews in Palestine. J. H. Harrop points out that,

*For the strict Jews, the hatred towards tax collectors was a natural aggravated and altered in character by the religious consideration that the telooones was regarded as ceremonially unclean, on account of his continual contact with Gentiles, and his need to work on the sabbath. This uncleanness, and the rabbis’ teaching that their pupils should not eat with such persons, account for the attitude evidenced by the expressions tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:10ff; 11:19; Mk. 2:15ff; Lk. 5:30; 7:34; 19:7) (Harrop, 1167).*

The hatred of tax collectors (and by extension chief tax collectors) was therefore based on political, religious and economic reasons, not actually on the persons of these tax collectors.

The rest part of the unit, i.e., vv3-4 speaks of Zacchaeus’ desire to see Jesus and the steps he took – irrespective of his *μικρός* stature. Though this may not impinge directly on our focus in this paper, but it is worth noting that, his desire to see Jesus and finally fraternize with him is worth commending, especially bearing in mind his social status of being a ‘sinner’ among his people. The important point here is that Zacchaeus is presented as one who was disadvantaged on account of his stature and statue in the society, but he had a way of overcoming these disadvantages simply because he had a desire to see Jesus who was passing through Jericho for the very last time.

V5-6 Here we have Jesus' response to Zacchaeus and desiring to be his guest and the corresponding joyful welcome of Zacchaeus to host Jesus. Zacchaeus though in the Roman employment as a chief tax collector, may have been one of those Jews who was having high Jewish messianic hope

v.7 The reaction of the crowd is worthy of re-reading over and over again to help understand the import of their reaction. To the crowd, Zacchaeus was ἀμαρτωλός, *amartoolos* – a sinner. Comparing this story with that of Jesus at the meal in a Pharisee's house as recorded in Luke 7:36ff shows a point of similarity. In 7:36ff, the woman who came between Jesus and the Pharisee at a meal is described as γυνή ἣτις ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἀμαρτωλός a woman who was in the city, a sinner (ἀμαρτωλός, *amartoolos*). Here there was a declaration of her as a sinner, having lived a sinful life in the city, but

*In the Zacchaeus-story on the other hand, there is no precise declaration that Zacchaeus is a sinner, and sin or its equivalent is not alluded to by Jesus in his message to Zacchaeus. The only source for the stereotype interpretation is the identification of Publicans as sinners, and the accusation from the crowd is consequent on this presumption (Naseri, 4).*

The rendering of debatable stigmatization of Zacchaeus as an extortioner was it based on fact, presumption or mere accusation? Would it not have been possible for Zacchaeus to be a tax collector without being a sinner? It is like alluding that all police officers are corrupt, is it really true that there are no righteous police officers? Does merely being a police officer makes one corrupt? These are questions which are begging for answer just like that of Zacchaeus.

v.8 This verse contains Zacchaeus' declaration about himself and the major import of this declaration lies in the use of the words δίδωμι, *didoomi* and ἀποδίδωμι, *apodidoomi*. These verbs are in first person singular present active indicative. According to William d. Mounce, "the present tense in Greek indicates either a continuous or undefined action" (127 cf. Wallace, Daniel B., 521-533). It can be translated as either 'I am giving' or 'I give' in the case of δίδωμι, *didoomi* and 'I am restoring' or 'I restore' in the case of ἀποδίδωμι, *apodidoomi*. The notion here is that, the verb is not in the aorist tense, which depicts an action done only once but it depicts a continuous action. It is on this note that Naseri points out that, "the verb *didōmi* is a present indicative active verb and is to be translated as 'I give' and in this context expresses a customary or habitual action" Naseri, 2). The same tense, voice and mood (i.e., present active indicative) are also conveyed in Luke 18:12 where the words used by the Pharisee in prayer are translated as, "I fast and ... I give tithes". Therefore, Zacchaeus' declaration which is translated as, 'half of my goods I give to the poor' should be understood as what Zacchaeus has been in the habit of doing. There is no instance of using δίδωμι in the present tense to imply a future action in any of Lukan corpus. The few occurrences in Luke and in other New Testament books where a present tense verb is used with a future sense show that they are mostly verbs of movement (cf. Luke 12:40; 14:19; 22:10; Acts 20:22). Hence, the case where τελειοῦμαι cited by J. O'Hanlon (7), where a present tense is translated as a future tense to mean "I will reach my goal" (NIV) or "I will accomplish my purpose" (NLT) and other translations is because the Greek voice here is passive not active. This word therefore, is in the present passive indicative not present active indicative like the ones used in the Zacchaeus' narrative and in other places in the New Testament. Therefore, the verbs δίδωμι and ἀποδίδωμι, *apodidoomi* should be translated in the present tense to mean, 'I give' and 'I restore' respectively, not 'I will give' or 'I will restore'.

A brief comparison of the Lukan Zacchaeus in 19:1-10 and the Pharisee in 18:9-14 shows a great similarity of persons who want to vindicate themselves. In these two narratives, Luke, a Gentile physician cum historian may have been comparing the 'righteous' Pharisee and the 'sinful' tax collector represented by Zacchaeus the chief tax collector. While in the place of prayer, the Pharisee recounts what he does regularly i.e., νηστεύω, *neesteuoo* (I fast) ἀποδεκατῶ, *apodekatoo* (I give tithes) to prove his 'righteousness' and to spite the tax collector; Zacchaeus on the other hand also highlighted what he does on a regular as one who has been declared a 'sinner' that, δίδωμι, *didoomi* (I give) and ἀποδίδωμι, *apodidoomi* (I restore). Prompted by the crowd, Zacchaeus gave an account

to prove himself innocent and vindicate himself. He justified his accustomed honesty and solidarity with the needy in his community. Alfred Plummer while comparing these two narratives points out that, in “the parable of the toll collector and the Pharisee in the temple (Luke 18:9-14) one may not rule out a swank” (435). Placing the ‘righteous’ Pharisee and ‘sinful’ Zacchaeus on the point of not ruling out a swank may a contrariety. D. A. Ravens posits out vividly that,

*But from the point of view of a defence against a character sneer from the crowd, Zacchaeus’ show off (unlike the Pharisee’s in 18:11- 12) is wholesome and can rightly be called ‘a defensive boast.’ It would therefore not be a fair judgement to place Zacchaeus’ gesture on the same scale with the arrogant swagger of the Pharisee in the temple because there is an enormous theological gulf between stating one’s case before the ever just claims of God (cf. Luke 17:10) and declaring the truth before the unjust accusation and vilification of people (26).*

A further juxtaposition of the two narratives shows the use of the participial verb, σταθείς in 19:8 is used by Luke in 18:11 in relation to the Pharisee. By his declaration in v. 8 Zacchaeus is painstakingly proving to the crowd and to Jesus that though his occupation has been branded as “sinful and unrighteous, he is a generous man who makes effort to respect the law. He is justifying his right to a good name and vindicating himself from the crowd’s disparaging accusation of being a sinner” (Naseri, 3).

In the course of Zacchaeus’ occupation, which is a work done by human institution, it is easy to have overtaxed the people either through intentional fraudulent means or mistake. Here, Zacchaeus openly declared that, if in the course of his work he noticed this, he repays the person fourfold. Mosaic law requires a thief voluntarily confess his crime and restore what s/he has stolen with an additional one fifth (i.e., twenty percent), and then bring a trespass offering to the Lord (Lev. 6:1-7). Zacchaeus points out that he pays fourfold as against the Mosaic law’s demands, he did not quibble over the terms of the Law but went on to prove his righteousness by doing beyond the requirement of the law.

Zacchaeus’ declaration shows a man who presented himself to both the crowd and Jesus for vindication and the proof of his righteousness. In contrast to the rich young ruler who had no regards for the poor (Luke 18:22-24), the Pharisee who only adheres to the obligation of fasting twice a week without necessarily showing his faith by his deeds to the poor (Luke 18:12 cf. James 2:18-20, 26) and that he exceeds all of them in terms of keeping the Mosaic law. In this declaration, Zacchaeus vindicated himself publicly which signals his justification. Vindication has to do with being proven right or innocent. In the Jewish canon, it would be conceived in line with righteousness in the context of Yahweh’s covenant and demonstrates one’s faithful adherence to the tenets thereof. To vindicate would therefore be translated as ἐδικέω (Luke 18:3, 5) or δικαίω (1 Tim 3:16) which also means to be righteous; or to make a good case for oneself or for another before the public (Luke 10:29; 16:15). The Lukan Zacchaeus here makes a case to demonstrate how he has been consciously keeping the obligations of the law in respect of the poor and restitution. He presented his case before the Lord and the public to be vindicated and like Ibitolu Megbelayin has put it, Luke does not condemn Zacchaeus whose actions were vindicated by the law (179).

v.9-10 The salvific expression of Jesus contained in these verses in respect to Zacchaeus are often interpreted to mean that, Zacchaeus having repented and showing this by his confession in v.8, Jesus now declared salvation on him. If this interpretation stands, the salvific plan as put forth in the New Testament will no more be by grace but by works. In this case, that which was done by Zacchaeus. This was salvation in its wholistic concept, which is from adamic sin and not salvation from specific sin. On the other hand, also, the ‘lost’ whom Jesus came to seek and save here may represent those whom the society has wrongfully condemned and ostracized like Zacchaeus.

## SUMMARY OF THE LUKAN ZACCHAEUS' NARRATIVE

Luke 15:1-7 begins what is often called the "Gospel of the Outcast." The large body of material in chapters 15-19 is unique to Luke and dramatically shows Jesus' concern for the social outcasts of his day (15:1; 16:19-- 25; 17:11-19; 18:1-8; 9--14; 19:1-10). Observe the proximity of this story to that of the rich ruler, whose attitude toward wealth kept him from the Lord (18:27). Zacchaeus' desire to see Jesus, though commendable, was surpassed by the fact that Jesus wanted to see him. He was a chief tax collector and was among those who were ostracized because their work was considered dishonest or immoral (Jeremias Joachin, 132). New International Version and some other versions appropriately put the word "sinners" in quotation marks to show that this was not Luke's designation but the way others, i.e., the Pharisees and the crowd, thought of them. The bottom line of the narrative is that, Zacchaeus was vindicating himself as one who has kept the law and has gone beyond its stipulation, a righteous person, contrary to his condemnation by the crowd based on his profession. Consequently, it can be affirmed that, a New Testament image of this narrative would be the account of Zacchaeus, a righteous man, ὁ δίκαιός, *ho dikaios* who is unjustly rejected and ostracized (c.f. Acts 3:14; 7:52) but subsequently vindicated, ἐδικαιώθη, *edikaioothee* (c.f. 1Tim. 3:16).

### Gleanings from the Zacchaeus' Narrative

From the Zacchaeus' narrative, the following can be gathered:

1. That it is possible to negatively brand a person based on societal perception what the person is not in the actual sense.
2. That Zacchaeus was actually branded a sinner not because of his person/being but on account of his profession which was perceived to have been dubious, and this was on account of undue generalization. This is akin to the case of saying that, the police officers are corrupt and therefore by extension, every police office is corrupt.
3. That Zacchaeus' self-declaration of innocence based on the law showed his vindication and his righteousness based on the Old Testament Torah, where righteousness was based more on the works of the law.
4. That no one should shy away from any profession because of what the society has negatively pigeon-holed such a profession or job. Rather, when one is in any profession, s/he should always work in such a way that, s/he can always place herself/himself for self-vindication based on the ethics/laws of the land.
5. Zacchaeus' vindication and righteousness brings to the fore that, Christians should not shy away from the calling to be politicians, police and other such professions which are negatively pigeon-holed in Nigeria, but should work assiduously in line with the law to show their righteous acts and thereby build the nation.

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