



## Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little . . . Mafia Don?

10.29.06 by Gordon Atkinson

### Article:

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man,  
A wee little man was he.*

These are the opening lines to a Sunday school song that I sang many times in my childhood. The story of Zacchaeus—found in the [19th chapter of Luke](#)—is a popular one for children. Zacchaeus was a very short man who climbed a sycamore tree, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he walked by. We like to tell this story to children because Zacchaeus was small, just as they are small, and he wanted so badly to see Jesus.

Isn't that a nice story?

Unfortunately, like many Sunday school stories, this one has been scrubbed and sanitized until it is hardly recognizable. The truth behind the Zacchaeus story is darker and more sinister. The most notable trait of Zacchaeus was not his lack of height, but his lack of character. Zacchaeus was a traitor. He collected taxes for the forces that occupied his homeland, and he carried out this task with brutal efficiency. He took more than was required and kept the extra. Further, as the chief tax collector, he was the equivalent of a mafia don. Zacchaeus got a piece of all the local action.

Children suffered and went hungry while Zacchaeus grew rich with money that rightfully belonged to their parents. Hard-working men and women went to jail because they couldn't afford Zacchaeus' outrageous tax rates, and all the while he was sipping fine wine from golden goblets. That's the sort of man Zacchaeus was, and everyone knew it.

According to Luke, Jesus saw the chief tax collector peering at him from the branches of that tree and invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner that night. No one knows what happened between them, but [Zacchaeus was a changed man](#) by the end of the evening. He publicly repented of his past wrongs and promised to be a better man in the future.

The people would have none of it. They were angry that Jesus would even eat with such an evil person, and they were right to be skeptical of the tax collector's alleged change of heart.

Can't you picture Zacchaeus, a little tipsy and overly emotional, proposing a toast to Jesus as he rose to his feet and told his rich friends that he was going to clean up his act? Isn't that the sort of thing we've heard a thousand times from alcoholics, womanizers, and thieves? Does anyone still believe them?

But that's not the way it happened with Zacchaeus. He didn't just propose a toast or offer hollow promises. Instead, he publicly pledged to give half of his wealth to the poor and to repay everyone he had cheated—with interest. In the culture of the Middle East, this public promise was as binding as [Herod's promise](#) to deliver the head of John the Baptist on a plate. Once spoken aloud, it had to be done.

Zacchaeus repented, but he also took action to set things right. That's why Jesus rejoiced and proclaimed that Zacchaeus had been saved. He even called Zacchaeus a son of Abraham, which was a pretty high compliment in those days.

We are flawed people, you and I. We walk through this life making mistakes that cause real hardship to others. Sometimes we hurt people outright. The nature and severity of our mistakes are not as important as our willingness to take responsibility for setting things right. Apologies are nice, but making amends puts flesh and blood on our words. It was not Zacchaeus' words of apology that won Jesus' heart and admiration, but his willingness to put his life behind them.

*Read more of Gordon Atkinson at [RealLivePreacher.com](http://RealLivePreacher.com).*