

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 1:16-18  
SECOND LESSON: Luke 19:1-10  
October 30, 2022

### **“Bad Company”**

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

True confessions: back in the 70s “Bad Company” was one of my favorite groups. Wild west imagery was big back then, and the rebel outlaw was a very attractive figure. “Bad Company” reflected this cultural fiction in the lyrics to their title song:

I was born 6 gun in my hand  
Behind a gun  
I'll make my final stand... hey  
That's why they call me  
Bad company  
And I can't deny  
Bad company  
Till the day I die . . .

I think the romance of the image has now been shattered because of the gun violence that has erupted in our society since that time. No one was shooting up schools in the 70s. And truthfully, these “rebel outlaws” that we made our heroes weren’t really evil. They were actually good guys who had been wronged. Zacchaeus from our story today was definitely defined as “bad company” by his peers, but he wasn’t a “rebel” they secretly admired. In their eyes he was a traitor.

It has been more than two centuries since Philadelphia was “occupied” by a conquering force—the British, for about six months starting in September of 1777 and extending into the spring of 1778. The hard core “patriots” (which by the way included the members of our original congregation) got out of town fast. The minister was furious when he got back because the British officers had stolen all his furniture and used the church as a stable. Must have smelled pretty ripe. But the rest of the people of Philadelphia, a surprisingly large majority, didn’t really care about the political situation one way or another. They stayed. This only changed when Philadelphia was cut off from supplies and bored and hungry British soldiers started plundering property. Once the British were forced out and the revolutionaries returned, those who had worked with the British suddenly found themselves very unpopular.

A far more severe type of oppression happened in occupied France during WWII. There were collaborators among the French. There always are. Civil servants worked on behalf of the Germans. Businesses supplied the Germans, and of course a lot of ladies entertained the Germans. But this too did not come without cost, because these collaborators were hated by their own people, and they paid a very high price when Germany was driven out.

The Jewish nation was occupied land. And the occupiers were not friendly. They were not close relatives like the British and Americans. They were more like the Third Reich. And we need to realize this when we look at the position of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a collaborator. He worked for the ENEMY. **He collected money for the enemy**. And because he was actually referred to as an “arch” tax collector, we know that he was the man in charge. Zacchaeus was the one who owned the local franchise of tax collectors. He hired and fired. He sent people out and sent enforcers in the form of Roman soldiers when there was resistance. Zacchaeus was HATED. We would hate this guy. It’s easy for us to turn Zacchaeus into a cute harmless little fella up a tree, but he was anything but. And we who judge the people who objected to Jesus welcoming Zacchaeus should put that judgement aside, because we would have been doing the same thing. *Jesus! How could you? Do you know who that guy is? Do you know what he’s done?*

Zacchaeus might have had a lot of money, but he would have had very few friends. He would have been friendly with others who collaborated with Rome, and maybe a few minor Roman officials. There may have been a few sycophants who sidled up to him because he was rich. But Zacchaeus would not be welcome in the synagogue or society. And not only was he despised because of his trade, he was probably also mocked because of his height. Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus and he wanted to see him, but he couldn’t see above everyone’s heads. So, he abandoned his dignity and climbed a tree. No adult man would ever do this, because he would never live it down.

Jesus must have known who Zacchaeus was. He may have heard the crowd talking about him and making fun of him. So when he reached the spot where Zacchaeus was Jesus looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” The result was a shockwave of indignation. *Whose side was Jesus on? This guy wasn’t just a little bit bad. He was a traitor to his people. People spit on the side of the road when he walked past.*

Jesus said it was necessary that he stay at Zacchaeus’ house. The original Greek conveys this sense of urgency. God has a plan, and it is necessary to fulfill this plan. And Zacchaeus came down immediately. He was overjoyed. He couldn’t believe that Jesus wanted to come to his home. He would also have been well aware of what the crowd was thinking, so he stood up and said, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Four times the amount was way beyond what the law required, and if Zacchaeus had cheated a lot of people, it would have impoverished him. Jesus responded, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

When Jesus made a conscious decision to associate with “bad company” he wasn’t hanging out with the cool kids. He was hanging out with the least popular kid in the entire school. He was going to stay at the home of the school bully who also looked funny. And he did it because that is exactly the kind of person who really needed him. He came to seek and save the lost. And Zacchaeus was lost—he was spiritually hungry, with every door to God closed

to him. Perhaps it had been okay for awhile. Maybe the bargain he made with himself to at least be rich, if he couldn't be popular, worked for awhile. But when he heard about Jesus and his acceptance of those society cast out his heart was stirred. He could no longer go on as he had before. He wanted to at least see this man.

Jesus doesn't approve of evil. He didn't hang out with people who engaged in bad behavior because their behavior was okay. He came to rescue them. Jesus saw the heart, and he offered a road back home. Isaiah proclaimed: "Come now, let us settle the matter," 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. God gives second chances to people like Zacchaeus. We usually don't.

When Jesus changes a life, a huge part of that is restoring the person to community. Jesus breaks down isolation. Zacchaeus may have been rich, but he was very alone, so Jesus did the most restorative thing he could do. He came to stay with him. He shared a meal with him. He brought all his friends. And he reconnected this outcast to his community. He reminded people that Zacchaeus, too, was a son of Abraham. No matter what he's done, he's family. And Zacchaeus himself had a dramatic change of heart. He realized that the money that he once thought would make him happy and secure did no such thing.

Zacchaeus was a real person, a living parable. He learned the hard way that sin destroys life, and money does not fix the problem. But when he met Jesus something changed. He gave half of his money away to the poor, and as for the rest, he promised to make radical restitution. This was definitely a "sell the mansion in Gladwyne and move into a twin in West Philly" kind of lifestyle change. But it was worth it, because he gave away the things that had taken the place of God, and he was able to come home and be part of the family again.

There are many things that we put before God, and money is the most common. And if we have gotten that money corruptly, it's even worse. As one grandmother said to her young grandson, that's "tainted money. It taint yours and it taint mine!" Zacchaeus suddenly realized what he was missing when he looked at Jesus. And there are people like Zacchaeus all around us, just waiting to be invited home. May God give us eyes to see and hearts that are open to welcome them. Amen.

Isaiah 1:16-18

**16** Wash and make yourselves clean.

Take your evil deeds out of my sight;  
stop doing wrong.

**17** Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed.  
Take up the cause of the fatherless;  
plead the case of the widow.  
**18** “Come now, let us settle the matter,”  
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.

Luke 19:1-10

**19** Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. **2** A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. **3** He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. **4** So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

**5** When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”**6** So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

**7** All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

**8** But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

**9** Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”