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# Jericho: A Case Study for 21st Century Urban Evangelism

## Introduction

Everyone wanted a glimpse of the Nazarene. He was a storyteller who reached across social strata. A healer who did not demand a paycheck. Many spoke of him as a prophet. Still, others believed him to be the Messiah—the liberator of Israel. His journey to Jerusalem was intentional, yet at a snail’s pace as he connected with people along the way. Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, was such an individual.

Zacchaeus’ curiosity had gotten the better of him. He wanted to catch a glimpse of the rabbi who befriended Levi, another tax collector, and other religious outcasts. Healing a leper was radical. This man was not afraid to connect with the untouchables. “Could he be the Messiah we have been waiting for?” Zacchaeus’ pondered.

With the crowd pressing him, Jesus refocused. He stopped under the sycamore tree. The crowd grew excited. They expected another miracle from the miracle worker.

Having never met Jesus, Zacchaeus was surprised at the appearance of the rabbi. He had no display. His plain attire marked him as a commoner. “Why,” Zacchaeus thought, “would anyone want to associate with this teacher? He had nothing to draw the crowd.” Yet, the crowd grew even while he tried to conceal himself in the tree. It was too late. The teacher spotted him. The crowd gasped when the rabbi asked to visit Zacchaeus at his home. Was Jesus a traitor like Zacchaeus? No, Jesus wanted to converse with Zacchaeus without the jostling crowd or the scorn of the religious leaders.

Once home, Zacchaeus had Jesus' feet washed. They ate and fellowshiped together. From Zacchaeus' response, it is clear their talk was about things close to Zacchaeus' heart. Inspired, convicted, and embraced by the love and acceptance Jesus offers him, Zacchaeus repents and recognizes that restitution is needed. Having misused his authority to enrich himself, he seeks reconciliation. He pledges to be unselfish as he understands God to be.

Samuel Escobar (2003:97) observes that Jesus was God's best missionary. Granted Escobar speaks in terms of Jesus dying on the cross; however, the term can be applied to Jesus' daily activities. Ellen White (2010:358; see also 1990:24) argues that Jesus is our example in all things. She is referring to his daily interactions with humanity as well as his interactions with our heavenly Father. As we seek to understand God's mission for our metropolitan areas, we can learn key principles from God's best urban missionary as he engages the city of Jericho. It is a case study in urban missions.

### **Lesson #1: Listening to the Holy Spirit**

Jesus' life demonstrates three important facets of listening to the Holy Spirit: surrendering self and total dependence on God, connecting with God, and intentionally listening and obeying the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was a perceptive student. He studied the biographies of Jewish heroes: Esau and Jacob, Saul and David, Joseph, and Daniel. From each he discovered important lessons. Esau, Jesus discovered, trusted his own skills and abilities. Jacob manipulated circumstances to benefit himself. Finally, there came a point when Jacob realized his selfish treatment of people forced him to keep checking his backside. He had no peace. One evening he was caught in a wrestling match. As his opponent moved to withdraw, he pleaded, "I need you to bless me." Self stood between him and God. He surrendered self to embrace God's blessing by leaning upon God. Saul's rule faded as his focus moved from serving the kingdom to clamoring for self-glory. David, a man after God's own heart, strove to surrender to the authority of God. He made poor choices and did bad things, but he was teachable. He was humble. He was Spirit-led. An important lesson Jesus learned from these heroes was distrust of self and dependence upon God. Andrew Murray (1984:13) reasons, "For a healthy Christian life, it is indispensable that we should be fully conscious that we have received the Holy Spirit to dwell in us." Jesus' heroes understood the power of connecting with the divine. It was this connection that gave them the power to overcome adversity and be successful as overcomers in diverse circumstances.

Jesus argued; “I do nothing of myself.” “My Father is in me” He also stated: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me.” White suggests this is the reason Jesus argued he was the vine (1990:674). The vine is not an independent plant like the cedar or an oak. It requires care and nurturing to produce a quality harvest. Jesus was dependent upon his Father while living on this earth. Jesus applied this lesson in his life by recognizing that the mission was not his but the One who sent him (John 4:34, 20:21). More than just connecting with the One who sent him, Jesus obeyed his instruction. His intimate listening to the Father gave him the edge. It made him “God’s best missionary.” To do God’s mission is to have the Spirit within. To state it differently, worship of the Creator allowed him to intimately connect with God and be open to receiving instruction. This became the secret ingredient that set him apart. To the point that the Temple guards stated, “We have never heard someone talk like this man” (John 7:46) when they were asked why he was not arrested. Frank Hasel (2012:15) indicates that the Holy Spirit empowers God’s people for evangelism. Jesus instructed his disciples to wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit before venturing into the wolf’s world. As lambs, they needed power from without to face a foe as wily as a wolf. God’s people need God’s blessing through dependence.

While on his final journey through Jericho Jesus is not merely passing through the city. Neither is he accidentally passing under the sycamore tree. He moved through Jericho with intentionality—having been sent. To be engaged in God’s mission is about going where God directs. The Father spent hours talking to Jesus about Jericho. He wanted to engage Jericho. Jesus needed to know the Father’s heart for the city. After much prayer, he went on a duty-directed journey to serve Jericho. Not every detail was divulged but the mission opened to him as he progressed through the city. Jesus was, therefore, alert to opportunities. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, thronged around him. Led by the Holy Spirit he reached Zacchaeus, an obvious seeker hiding in a tree.

## **Lesson #2: Reflect God’s love**

Jesus understood the value of being connected to God in doing God’s mission. More than that, he also valued representing God in every circumstance of life. He needed to reflect the God of love as best he could. It is this ability to care for others, to love the unlovable, and to serve the underserved that illustrated that God was interested in people (as individuals).

Jesus’ reputation preceded him across Palestine to Jericho’s tax booth where Zacchaeus found himself uncharacteristically up a tree. There was a uniqueness about this teacher. Jedd Medefind and Erik Lokkesmoe call

it Jesus' "North Star." They argue he was "robust, loving, bold, loyal, sacrificial, outwardly-focused, self-denying, disciplined, and continually giving" (2004:143)." All because he "did not come to be served, but to serve (143)." Medefind and Lokkesmoe (2004:137) suggest that Jesus' "North Star" was his servant's heart. He was a servant of the One who sent him. Many rabbis perceived his servanthood as a weakness; however, the masses were enamored by the Nazarene. Herein lies success says Medefind and Lokkesmoe (2004:138), not in words or projects undertaken but in the heart of the evangelist. A servant's heart displays God's love. Having a connection with God allows the evangelist to identify seekers. Jesus healed to encourage the seeker to look beyond the physical restoration. He did not want to remain the physical healer. He wanted to give holistic salvation (liberation), restoration, and healing that repairs the lost image of God in the person. This could not be accomplished through words. It was to be accomplished by looking to see where the Spirit of God was working and joining the Spirit in what he was doing in the life of the person. God's mission is not an event or a one-time interaction. God pursues an individual through multiple interactions to help the person discover him. Jesus understood the Father's "multifocal missionary vision" (Cheryl Doss 2016:11) as he engaged people.

How does Jesus accomplish this in Jericho?

Hypocrites. Brood of vipers. Wolves in sheep's clothing. Whitened sepulchers. These are a few descriptors Jesus reserved for religious leaders. These were not slurs but observations Jesus made. He qualifies his thoughts. These people "honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Matt 15:8). Quoting Isaiah, Jesus argues that the religious leaders were focused on grandstanding. The love and grace of God were absent in the way they dealt with people. They were willing to enforce the letter of the law by ignoring the law Giver. Eugene Peterson argues, the religious leaders "miss the forest for the trees" (John 5:39).

The whisperings that the Nazarene is the Messiah grew louder each day, suggesting the Jewish march to liberation was imminent. The Jewish mission was focused and steadfast as it sought liberation from an oppressive regime. Charles van Engen (2017:588) observes, "mission theology is simultaneously missiological action-in-reflection and theological reflection-in-action." This was certainly evident among the religious leaders of the first century. Their theology drove their mission. Stated differently, "True theology should move us to mission, and mission rightly practiced should lead to theology" (Dybdahl 2005:19)." Dybdahl illustrates the point by sharing the mission and theology of the quintessential Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, with Paul, the Christian convert. His mission prior to his Damascus Road experience is very different from the one after. Each

fulfilled a different purpose because his understanding and talk of God differed (19). Jesus, on the other hand, epitomized the need for experiencing God. Ellen White speaks of Jesus' ministry as between the mountain and the multitude (1892:101). Through worship, Jesus understood God and God's mission. Jesus arrived at his missiological praxis based on his theological reflection of God from those quiet places and times spent with his Father. He then built on his theological understanding as he engaged people trapped in sin. He was able to conclude his ministry by praying, "I have glorified you" (John 17:4). He displayed God's love to the world and thereby glorified the Father.

The Jewish desire for a Messiah, emboldened their mission to focus on separateness. The Messiah was to unshackle them from Rome. Jesus addresses this misconception as he launches his ministry, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His message demonstrates the desire of the people, yet he broadens their understanding of God's kingdom. Rather than be entangled in the traditional Jewish teaching, Jesus adds a caveat—repentance. From the Scriptures available to Jesus, repentance suggests an appeal to embrace a different way of living. Here Jesus brings the two concepts of God's kingdom and repentance together. Arguing that if one was to live as God's child, change is needed. God's kingdom is not about independence but submission (trust) to the Creator-God. Van Engen argues that the Bible is a "tapestry of God's action in the world" (1996:40). That is, it is a display of God's love in action. Jesus understood the Bible as such and therefore, he could live as one who participated in God's action in his 1st-century world. Our urban mission today needs a display of God's action through human agents.

Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus allowed him to experience the love of God afresh. It gnawed at him that he was not allowed in the temple, isolated from family and the wider Jewish community. "Does this mean God has rejected me?" was Zacchaeus' concern. He was cut off from religious rites. However, the God he knew intellectually was experienced differently through Jesus. Rabbi Jesus entered a relationship with a religiously ostracized individual. His desire to eat with Zacchaeus is illustrative of God's desire to be with Zacchaeus. God does not wait for people to make things right before he allows himself to be associated with the person. Jesus, a religious teacher, treated him as a person. He was willing to speak to Zacchaeus the tax collector and not Zacchaeus the irreligious person. He demonstrated a connection with Zacchaeus. Through this encounter, Jesus demonstrated that God wanted to be involved in the life of Zacchaeus. God wanted to engage Zacchaeus as a person. He wanted Zacchaeus to have healing and to be a son of Abraham—a child of faith and a friend of God. Jesus' mission focus was to allow humanity to experience reunification with a spiritual community and with God. Thus,

Jesus worked with God in drawing individuals into community because he understood God's purpose. He displayed a love for humanity not seen in other religious teachers. The encounter between Jesus and tax collector motivated Zacchaeus to want to participate in God's mission.

### Lesson #3: A Discipling Movement

The biblical record does not divulge much about Zacchaeus. The chief tax collector was of Jewish descent with a Hellenistic connection. Only Luke recalls the narrative of his conversion. What is known about Zacchaeus is associated with his job as a tax collector, and his place of work in Jericho.

Every city has a unique culture. Jesus was a diligent student. He understood the city and read it through the prism of God's heart. Understanding the culture of the city guides how best to do God's mission. Knowing this would be his final journey through Jericho, he took time to learn more about the city. He understood the history of the people. He was aware of current affairs. He understood the social dynamics and their accompanied race relations. His mission was to work with the dynamics in a way that would represent God within the context rather than to be a social activist.

Jericho was a market city not far from Jerusalem. It was a strategic city that allowed travelers moving east-west or north-south to stop and rest. Hospitality was important to the city. Jewishness of the city was tainted by the Roman authorities and the merchants traveling through. It was a cosmopolitan city. In praying for the city of palms, Jesus focused his dialogue with the Father on revealing the challenge of God's mission. Jesus' experience suggested identifying an individual who was cosmopolitan enough to bridge three worlds—the Jewish community, the Roman authorities, and the merchants. To open the minds of the Jewish people he had to be counter-cultural in the way he did things. He wanted to help the people understand that God was bigger than their ethnocentric cultural focus allowed.

Jesus entered Jericho not to establish an institution or a memorial but to start a movement in that city. He entered as one sent by God. He was to connect with a person of influence. The blueprint of Jesus' missionary method is simple: be in tune with the Holy Spirit, understand the context, and communicate appropriately to the audience. Malcolm Gladwell (2000) studied ideas and suggests there is "The tipping point." To arrive at the tipping point, it is important to pay attention to small things that make a big difference. The little details give one foresight. Jesus does not choose Zacchaeus. He is directed to Zacchaeus. His focus on the interest of Zacchaeus, the economy, and reinstating Zacchaeus into the Jewish community, drives their engagement. It is Jesus' attention to these little details that draw Zacchaeus into a relationship with God.

God's mission is not to change people's circumstances but to bless humanity in their circumstances. Through a renewed relationship God draws the convert into new ways of living within his/her context. His goal, therefore, is to work through each of his followers to bring the world into a renewed relationship with the Creator. Jesus accomplished this in Jericho, not through a special project, but by taking time to visit in a home. At God's appointed time he connected with the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus. This impacted the culture of the city as Zacchaeus was a person of influence who was ostracized religiously but commercially connected. Through Zacchaeus, Jesus confronted the culture of alienating tax collectors from religious services, and he confronted the extortion rampant in the city. Zacchaeus' conversion was evident for all to see. The chief tax collector now used his influence with the Roman authorities and the Jewish community to spread God's kingdom principles. God was strategic in sending Jesus to Zacchaeus. Through one individual, God influenced the Roman authorities, the Jewish community, and the business community. Zacchaeus becomes a disciple and a disciple-maker.

Zacchaeus' transformation was a genuine change in his identity. He now lived for others. Here the goal of Jesus' method in doing evangelism is identified. He engaged in evangelism for the purpose of making disciples. That is, helping people to live differently, so they can help others to live differently. Luke does not share the impact of Zacchaeus' conversion. However, from his response to Jesus, it is evident that Zacchaeus helped many in Jericho to understand the power of God's kingdom principles—living for others rather than self. This transformed the business community and how the synagogue leaders served the people. Jesus transformed not just one individual. He transformed a commercial city by impacting the least likely convert—the chief tax collector. He did not seek to change the tax rules. He transformed the life of the chief tax collector, who in turn influenced his colleagues and those who did business in the city. This in turn challenged the ongoing extortion the city dwellers experienced. Jesus challenged people to live differently—to view the world from an unselfish perspective.

Christopher Wright (2016:968) argues that God called Abram to be a blessing in the world. Jesus applied this principle by challenging the convert to live differently. Thus, evangelism is not about the individual. It is about the individual receiving the blessing and then blessing others. This makes the evangelistic challenge bigger than the convert. It is about the next generation. Hence, Jesus encapsulates his commissioning of his disciples with "go make disciples." Wright (968) asserts that Abraham was given this instruction when God asked him to teach his children. For the blessing of God to permeate society requires a generation that will train

the next generation to look for God's work in society and follow him in his mission. The Ethiopian proverb speaks to this; "He who learns teaches." In learning and applying the learning, Zacchaeus became a missional teacher (a disciple maker). This is the goal of evangelism, making disciples so the love of God is shared organically across society.

## Conclusion

Zacchaeus was rich, famous, and lived in affluence. Jesus was an itinerant teacher who had no place to call home. They were not from the same social strata. It was unlikely for them to connect except by divine appointment. For Jesus to effectively minister to Zacchaeus he needed to understand God's purpose for humanity and God's purpose for the city of Jericho. To know God's purpose, he needed to spend time with God in worship. Through this connection, he was empowered through the Holy Spirit to work for the city of Jericho. Thus, Jesus lived a Spirit-filled life. Being sent is to know where God wants to work and with whom. To impact the cosmopolitan city of Jericho Jesus understood that he must watch out for a person of influence. One who could bridge the divide between Jew and Gentile and the larger business community. God identified Zacchaeus and then Jesus allowed the Spirit to lead him to Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. Upon experiencing the love of God, Jesus invited Zacchaeus to be a disciple who would lead others into a relationship with the kingdom principles of God. Ellen White (1974:143) comments, "Christ's method alone will give true success." It is for us to study his life to learn his method, so we can reach the cities today.

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