

There was a man named Zaccheus; he was chief tax collector, and rich. And Zaccheus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it to him fourfold." As [the crowd] heard these things, Jesus proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.

Luke 19:1, 8-11

This story is a big favorite in the progressive church. This is the first time in the Gospel that an officer of the Roman Empire declares himself for Jesus. Zaccheus is a Jew, but he's also the local enforcer, a greedy little quisling. (Picture Danny DeVito in sandals.) But he looks up at Christ, like a deer caught in the headlights, and presto! he turns into Eleanor Roosevelt. This story has everything for left-wing believers like me: we get epiphany, forgiveness, the redistribution of wealth. Like the crowd in Jericho, we take this as proof of the power of God.

But there's a problem. Jesus tells the crowd a parable, and it doesn't fit. It's dark and harsh: the dreaded parable of the talents. God is like a rejected king who leaves his money with his servants. Some of them invest and get rich, but a lazy servant buries his share away. When the king comes back, the servant shows him the gold: "Here, Lord, I kept it safe for you." And God damns him for not getting any usury out of it, and he takes the poor guy's money away, distributes it to the rich, and he orders all the unbelievers be brought out and slain before him.

Boy, that really kills the mood. Whatever this parable means, it's not about forgiveness or equality, and it's definitely not about the power of God's presence: quite the contrary. Jesus is angry here. He's telling the crowd that the Kingdom of Heaven is not at hand.

Zaccheus is too much like the lazy servant in the parable. Sure, when Christ is standing over him, Zaccheus remembers the Jewish tradition of social justice. "Here, Lord, I've kept the truth safe for you." But Zaccheus got to be who he is by offering himself to whoever is in power

at the moment. Today that's Christ, and today salvation has come to his house, but yesterday it was Rome, and tomorrow it will be Rome again. If you listen closely, Zaccheus doesn't really come clean. Notice, he doesn't admit that he has defrauded anyone. He just says that if he has, he will restore it. The promise of fourfold repayment assumes that "fraud" is an exception, not the rule. The crowd's real grievance isn't that Zaccheus *overcharges* them, it's that he makes them pay any tribute to a pagan emperor at all. If Zaccheus admitted that was sinful, every penny he had would be tainted, and his fourfold offer would be a meaningless gesture by a bankrupt man. Zaccheus' speech presumes that he is not bankrupt, that he can become righteous without giving up his place in the Empire. "Half my goods I give to the poor" – notice, he doesn't promise to stop taxing them. This is the problem with the welfare state – you can give half your money to the poor, but if you don't stop exploiting them, you're going to get it all back.

But the crowd isn't so cynical. They're delirious with hope. Walking on water, that's just a magic trick, but when the Messiah starts to control the tax collectors, that's some real power. And Jesus is headed for Jerusalem, so why can't he work the same magic on the governor? Why not convert the whole Empire? This is will happen in just 300 years. Constantine will see a burning cross and Holy Roman Empire! all the tax collectors will pledge allegiance to God.

So why isn't this the Kingdom of Heaven? I think it's because empires depend on submission, while Jesus is telling the crowd that we are free. Zaccheus kowtows to Jesus as if he's the new Emperor, a master who will always be watching over him. Jesus is saying that we can't expect that kind of supervision. Faith is lonelier than this. It's what you do when God is not around, when God is rejected by the world, when God is not king. Faith without authority – that's a scary kind of religion.