



On your marks

One of the most often repeated sayings of Jesus is 'The first shall be last and the last shall be first'. This is a massive challenge to the way things usually work in this world, but again and again we discover that the kingdom of God turns everything upside down. During his ministry, Jesus regularly demonstrated what this paradox might look like in the way he showed God's love to the social outcast, the unloved stranger and even the hated enemy. The following session looks at how Jesus showed that love to one unlikely recipient - Zacchaeus of Jericho.

Get set

Although we might hope that the amazing story of 'the little man up a tree' who ends up having Jesus round to tea is already well known, you might be surprised at how many people still haven't heard it. And even if your group or all-age congregation has, then coming at it from a fresh angle and exploring it creatively can open new windows on what God wants to say to us all through 'the cheater' who did change his spots! God is always surprising us with his unlikely choices.

You can find a retelling of the story from Luke 19:1 - 10 in **The Barnabas Children's Bible** (story 292) and in **My Storytime Bible** (p. 118).

You will need a selection of the following items:

- some small bags of coins
- a bunch of leaves - real or artificial
- paper, coloured pencils and pens
- playdough and collage material
- lengths of string with knots tied at each end

Go!

Choose a way into the session or service from the following suggestions.

1. Play a game of hide and seek with a small bag of coins. Make it harder and harder to find the bag, if you can do this in a safe space. In church, hide several small bags in different parts so everyone has a chance to search in the area nearest to where they are sitting.

Today, we're going to explore a story about someone who had so much money that he had to hide it safely around his home.

2. Invite your group(s) to find a space to work together and become statues of various items from the story on the count of three: a big leafy tree; a pile of shiny gold coins; a treasure box; a best china teapot; a knife, fork and spoon; a set of steps (that someone might use to reach the top shelf).

Today, we're going to explore a story that connects up all these things.

3. Produce a bunch of leaves - real or artificial. Place them somewhere central so everybody can see them. Invite people to wonder how a pile of leaves might end up together like this. Imagine you came across them outdoors - what would you think? Develop all suggestions - they might involve a tree, autumn, the wind, a football game, birds or maybe someone climbing a tree and knocking them off.

Today, we're going to explore a story where someone hid behind leaves but was still seen.

Telling the story

In order to encourage new viewpoints on a familiar story, retell it using the following technique.

Sit the group in a square with at least one person on each side. Stand someone else in the centre of the square and ask him or her to stay still. You could do this on a large scale in a church with someone standing in the centre of the main aisle.

Now ask each 'side' to answer these questions about the person in the middle:

- How many ears can they see?
- How many eyes?
- How many arms?
- How many faces? And so on.

Depending on their perspective, each side will give different answers, yet they are all describing the same person. In a similar way, it is possible for individuals and groups to have different viewpoints on the same Bible story. It depends on a number of things, such as their relationship to those in the story, their background, their interests and their personalities. Any Bible story can be seen from different points of view like this.

So, using this approach, before you retell the story, give a different 'perspective' to each side or group, as follows:

- one side should always be very **angry** ('Zacchaeus takes money from us for those hated Romans and takes a cut for himself - we hate him')
- one side must be very **sympathetic** (for example, Zacchaeus' fellow tax collectors and family)
- one side should always be **confused** ('I can't understand why Zacchaeus behaves like he does... and I can't make sense of what Jesus is doing either')
- one side is very **bored** (they never think anything interesting will happen and they suspect everything and everyone - even Zacchaeus' motives after his dramatic gesture at the end of the story).

Now invite one person (or this could be you as the storyteller) into the centre of the square and, as you retell the story again slowly, he or she should mime some of the actions of Zacchaeus, the

crowds or Jesus until you pause. Then, he or she should freeze and those on each side of the square be invited to comment on the person in the story from their given perspective. Pause several times for this during your retelling.

For example, put Jesus in the centre of the debating square.

Verse 1: 'Jesus was going through Jericho, where a man named Zacchaeus lived. He was in charge of collecting taxes and was very rich.'

What do you think so far?

The **angry** side might comment: *We hate Zacchaeus and we hope Jesus sorts him out.*

The **sympathetic** side might say: *With all these crowds out to see Jesus, it would be safer for Zacchaeus to stay indoors today.*

The **confused** side might chip in with: *We're excited Jesus is here but what good will it do?*

The **bored** side might add: *I wonder why Jesus has come here of all places? He's probably taken a wrong turn.*

The story should proceed in this way in short sections, each stage opening up different viewpoints which explore the story from different angles.

There is also a fun, poetic version of this story in [The Gospels Unplugged](#), which lends itself to a group dramatic performance, and a further idea [Zacchaeus](#) on our website, with younger children in mind.

Talking about the story

Use the following open-ended questions for groups of people to discuss or talk about each question in turn as a group together. Ask them to come up with what they think might be the answers. What do their answers tell us about what Jesus is like? Or what Zacchaeus was really like? And what might the possible answers say about us?

- Why was Zacchaeus so keen to see Jesus?
- Why didn't Zacchaeus just invite Jesus to his house?
- How did Jesus know Zacchaeus was in that tree?
- What did Jesus say to Zacchaeus during the meal?
- What did the poor of the town think of Zacchaeus at the end? What did his tax collector friends think?
- What happened to Zacchaeus afterwards?
- How did Jericho change because of what happened that day?

Playing with the story



Choose one or two activities from the following suggestions.

1. Imagine what Zacchaeus would have written in his diary for the day before, the day of and the day after this story.
2. Create a 'wanted poster' for Zacchaeus, as the most hated man in Jericho.
3. Design an eye-catching advertisement for a blockbuster film that tells the story of Zacchaeus - the man who met Jesus.
4. Using playdough, make simple models of the things Zacchaeus might have had in his briefcase before he met Jesus... and then decide how these contents might have changed after meeting with Jesus? What new things might he now carry?
5. Write or act out some headlines from 'the further adventures of Zacchaeus'.
6. Make a model of the tree where Zacchaeus hid.
7. In a group, create a freeze-frame (still photo) of what you consider to be the most important moment in this story.

Reflecting on the story

'Jericho will never be the same again.' This might easily have been a comment from some of Jericho's citizens after the story. Perhaps they thought that getting rid of Zacchaeus would have been the best way to improve Jericho's image rather than changing him, but that wasn't Jesus' way. Instead, Jesus helped the last to come first; and he made it possible for the most unlikely to become the most liked.

Give out lengths of string with knots tied at each end. Invite everyone to hold the string between their hands pulled tight. The knot at one end is 'first' and the other knot is 'last'. One end is Jesus and the other is Zacchaeus - last and far from Jesus.

But God's love is like a circle with no end or beginning, so Jesus (as God on earth) moved to Zacchaeus in love. Link up the string into a circle on a flat surface. Now the last is also first because the first became last for him.

Repeat this action as a prayer for various people and situations, such as those in need, in hospital, in trouble; for family and friends; and for ourselves, saying together each time:

The first shall be last and the last shall be first.