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THE STRUGGLE FOR LOVE AND JUSTICE IN LUKE 19:1-10: A HERMENEUTICAL APPLICATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the implications of Zacchaeus' transformation in light of Nigeria's socio-political landscape, where struggles for love and justice persist amid widespread inequality and corruption. The narrative highlights the importance of acknowledging one's flaws and the power of repentance, paralleling the urgent need for both collective and individual action in Nigeria's quest for justice. By analyzing Zacchaeus' archetypal journey from self-interest to social responsibility, this paper advocates for a renewed commitment to love and equitable justice as foundational pillars for national healing. Moreover, the research incorporates perspectives from ethical theology and social justice movements in Nigeria, illustrating how the principles of reconciliation and community upliftment can address contemporary challenges. Ultimately, the story of Zacchaeus is reinterpreted as a call to action for Nigerians to engage in transformative love and justice, fostering a society where all individuals can thrive and find belonging.

Keywords: Love, Justice, Struggle, Redemption

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation rich in culture, diversity, and history. However, it is also a country that has been plagued by centuries of struggle for justice, equity, and fairness. One such example can be found in the biblical story of Luke 19:1-10, where Jesus meets Zacchaeus, a tax collector in Jericho, and challenges societal norms by extending grace and compassion to those who are seen as outcasts.

The tale of Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector, is a familiar one. He was despised by his community for his role in collecting taxes for the oppressive Roman government, and his wealth was gained through dubious means. Despite his societal status, Zacchaeus was still yearning for something more, and this desire led him to climb a tree just to see Jesus passing by. In a similar manner, the people of Nigeria have been struggling for justice, equity, and fairness

against a system that seems determined to keep them down. The vast wealth of the nation does not benefit everyone equally, and corruption and exploitation are rampant. Many Nigerians are left feeling like Zacchaeus, longing for a better future but uncertain how to achieve it.

However, in the story of Luke 19:1-10, Jesus saw beyond Zacchaeus' societal status and extended love and grace to him. He challenged the norms of the time and showed that everyone, regardless of their background or wealth, is deserving of compassion and fairness. This message is one that resonates strongly in Nigeria, where many marginalized groups have been ignored and oppressed for far too long.

Moreover, Jesus' actions in this story also serve as a reminder that change is possible and that it starts with individuals. When Zacchaeus encountered Jesus, he was moved to repentance and made amends for his past wrongdoings. The same can be said for Nigeria; change can only happen when individuals choose to stand up against injustice and actively work towards a more just and equitable society. In recent years, Nigeria has seen glimpses of hope in this ongoing struggle. The #EndSARS movement, which called for an end to police brutality and corruption, united millions of young people from different backgrounds in a peaceful protest. This movement highlighted the power of collective action and the impact that individuals can make in bringing about change.

As we reflect on Luke 19:1-10 and its relevance to the current situation in Nigeria, it is evident that the struggle for justice, equity, and fairness is an enduring one. However, it is also a fight worth fighting, and the story of Zacchaeus and Jesus serves as a reminder that change is possible, and it starts with each individual. Let us continue to strive for a Nigeria where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their societal status or background.

1. Love and Justice: A Biblical Overview

In everyday parlance, justice is naturally a balance of rights and duties set up, maintained, and vindicated by the government for the sake of all. It is a "matter of everyone getting exactly what they deserve, 'good or bad, reward or punishment.'"¹ At such a level, ensuring justice is fundamentally the work of political governance, be it legal, commutative, retributive, or distributive.² This conventional understanding of justice represents what people generally have in mind when the justice of God in scripture is the topic on the table, especially when it concerns the Hebrew Scriptures. But a closer look reveals something more profound. This profundity is rooted in the fact that Yahweh's actions in relation to Israel were ultimately connected to the covenant with Israel and the terms of that covenant. So, a love component is involved that is affirmed or violated by the people's attitude and actions, which in turn attract necessary consequences.

That love component changes the color of the justice of God significantly in the Christian Scripture because of the centredness of that covenantal relationship on the person of Jesus.

Consequently, the general conventional or political view expressed a while ago is different from the justice that is at the heart of the gospel, whether as it is understood by Paul, Matthew, John, Mark, Luke, or any other New Testament writing for that matter. Politics cannot take care of all that is needed to ensure this kind of justice.³ It has a moral component, and that is why the Bible reminds us of God's involvement in issues of justice right from the Genesis incident of Cain and Abel (Gen 4).

Very often, the idea of the justice of God that people get from the Hebrew Scriptures is tied to the conventional model discussed above, that of a God who always punishes wrongdoing and rewards good deeds.⁴ Justifiably so, yet a thorough examination of available data would reveal that such a notion is half-baked. Even though we cannot invest any more effort and space in a general and comprehensive study of the justice of God as it is represented in the Old Testament, the part of it that pertains to the discussion on hand must be explored, albeit not in great detail.

The Hebrew conception of the justice of God is intimately tied to the experience of the covenant relationship and to God's *Hesed*, which is equivalent to God's saving action. Thus, sinful yet trustful, "Sinful Israel still comes to her God with a prayer that believes in the justice that is based on divine justice as *hesed*—"O Lord, hear my prayer; hearken to my pleading for your faithfulness; in your justice answer me. And enter not into judgement with your servant, for before you, no living man is just" (Ps 145:1-2).⁵ Even in times when Yahweh went to the law court with Israel's response was always to surrender (Mic 6:1-8; 7: 8-).

Such a saving divine activity was not just individual but also communal and thus a phenomenon that related to God's dealings with a whole people (see Psalm 145; Isa 51:45; 46:12-13). This communal or national scope is derived from the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and his people as well.⁶

Yet even greater than this is a constant reminder, especially in the prophetic tradition, but also evident from God's activities, of the notion that God is not just God of one people but God of the nations, whose justice has a universal and timeless dimension (Isa 10:5-34; Isaiah 13-27; Isaiah 40-45, Nahum 2-3; Obad 1). It's universal and the ministry of the Messiah, Jesus himself. In him and through him, the fullness of God's justice is realized in the here and now and in its eschatological ramification. Thus the saving justice of God ensures the right order on earth and in heaven by the one who is God of heaven and earth, with the power to subject all creation to a new order.

Justice in the Christian sense originates from God and flows down accordingly as humans respond to the call to exercise and ensure justice as a virtue in imitation of divine justice: That call was earlier aptly captured in the compelling injunction given through the prophet Micah: "Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God" (6:8). As such, the justice of God is equivalent to "God's saving activity, breaking through the impasse of human sin, calling creation out of the moral chaos into which it has fallen, re-establishing the covenant with a redeemed people—in a word,

¹ John P. Meier, "The Mission of Christ and His Church: Studies in Christology and Ecclesiology" in *Good News Studies* 30 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1990), 278.

² Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), no. 28.

³ Message of His Holiness, Benedict XVI for Lent 2010, from the Vatican, 30th October, 2009.

⁴ Thomas L. Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings and Scrolls* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 102.

⁵ Meier, 279.

⁶ Meier, 279-280.

putting things right, not through human merit (which is a pious illusion), but through the death and resurrection of Jesus.”⁷

Justice, as such, is the “forgiving, healing, gratuitous act of God’s mercy and love,” which must be the model for all other human relationships. Although the above definition is heavily Pauline in perception (Romans), it comprehensively captures both the perception represented in the prophetic interventions of God in the history and life of Ancient Israel. It vividly captures the rationale for the covenantal relationship between God and his people as *imitation dei* (Be holy as I am holy [Lev 11:44]). For Christians, therefore, justice must reflect the human experience of the interactive dynamics between the love and the mercy of God.⁸

J. P. Meier sums it up beautifully as follows: “God’s justice is God’s saving activity, (a) which rescues the sinner through no human merit, (b) which reconstitutes a sinful yet redeemed people in a new covenant, (c) which recreates the universe according to that perfect image of God’s will, Jesus Christ.”⁹ As such, it is an act of love—divine love. That love necessarily draws humanity into the realm of divine activity and becomes prescriptive because as God has acted, so also God’s people are invited to act. Also, justice and love then manifest themselves as inseparable components of God’s saving activity—one flows from the other, and they both encompass each other. The same love initiated by God in creation (Gen 1 and 2), in the covenantal relationship (Exodus), and the gift of his son, Jesus, to the world for the salvation of all (John 3:16), is the root foundation of the justice of God that scrutinizes and regulates human activity in their response to the God who creates and redeems, and concerning fellow humans, all made in the image and likeness of God, irrespective of life’s circumstances.

1.1 Love and Justice: The Covenantal Bond

The imperatives of the covenantal relationship with Yahweh in ancient Israel were determinant in the expectations of people/humans in the area of justice and love. That covenant itself is built on the love of a god, who betroths a people to himself because of a promise made to their ancestors in previous covenants, and it necessarily determines the terms of the relationship between human beings and one another—simply put, God expected people to deal with fellow human beings and one another—simply put, God expected people to deal with fellow human beings only as God has dealt with them. And so, for all future generations of Israelites, the demands of justice would be evaluated based on conformity with that covenantal relationship and the legal code flowing therefrom.

When in the 1st century AD, reference was made to that covenant and legal code, Jesus would summarise it in the bifurcated injunction—love of God and love of neighbor—bound together as one inseparable way that ensures both love and justice among human beings (Luke 10:25-28//Mark 12:28-31//Matt 22:34-40; see Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18).

2. Text of Luke 19:1-10 (NRSV)

¹Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ²A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴So he ran ahead and

climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” ⁶So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” ⁸But 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.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

3. The Zacchaeus Narrative in its Luke-Acts Context

i. Larger Narrative Context

The larger context of our focus text is the journey narrative section that spans from 9:51-19:29, with points of interest along the way marked by journey references in 13:22 and 17:11. This larger narrative section is further divided into three main parts; namely, 9:15-13:21; 13:22-17:10 (which stands at the exact mid-point of the gospel); and some eschatological material. It is important to note that the material in the entire section has some special Lukan elements in it, including our focus pericopé. This last part (17:11-19:27) makes up the proper literary context for this discussion. It includes the narratives leading up to the Jericho episode in 19:1-10 and the ones immediately following that episode.

In terms of the relation of our focus text to the larger Lukan context, it is important to emphasize that we cannot ignore the findings of scholars who have concluded that Luke 19:1-10 is a “microcosm of previous material in the Gospel”¹⁰ and where Jesus pays the supreme price for the salvation of all, thus accomplishing his mission of seeking out and saving what was lost (cf. 19:10). Even there, the very important encounter between Jesus and the *other criminal* on the side of his cross (23:39-43) must not be missed: just like he sought out Zacchaeus and offered him salvation, so is that thief sought out and saved even as Jesus was paying the price for that gift upon the cross in obedience to the Father (23:46).

One of the obvious connections of our focus text to its literary context may be found in the question the disciples asked in 18:26: “Then who can be saved?” The Zacchaeus episode is indeed the answer to that question. That question, as we know, was generated following the rich ruler’s inability to meet the demand to sell his possessions to follow Jesus and Jesus’ pronouncement concerning entry into the kingdom of heaven in 18:18-25. Now the evangelist responds to that episode. Yes indeed, the poor blind beggar is cured by faith in 18:42 and salvation happens to the rich tax collector who receives Jesus in his home and disposes of possessions (19:9). So, with God, nothing is impossible, but not with humans (18:27).¹¹

¹⁰ Bart E. Bruehler, *A Public and Political Christ: A Social-Spatial Characteristics of Luke 18:35--19:43 and the Gospel as a whole in its Ancient Context* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 197.

¹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina, 3; ed. Daniel Harrington, SJ Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 287.

⁷ Meier, 278-79.

⁸ Message of His Holiness, Benedict XVI for Lent 2010.

⁹ Meier, 282.

Let it be noted also that the Scribes and Pharisees, implicitly part of the crowd in the Zacchaeus episode, have been consistently present throughout the journey narrative section and have often been painted as an opposing force. The murmuring in 19:7 is symptomatic of their participation even if they were not explicitly mentioned. Yet they were so characterized because of their love of Justice, albeit, wrongly directed.

ii. Immediate Literary Context

In the immediate anterior context of 19:1-10 is 18:35-43. Both 18:35-43 and 19:1-10 are narratives that reflect individuals who responded positively to Jesus' mission and presence. Both episodes are located around or in Jericho – within the journey narrative section.

It is important to note that Luke has made some important contextual changes to the setting of the material he got from Mark 10:46-52. Contrary to the information given by Mark, which indicated that the event narrated took place as Jesus was leaving Jericho, Luke keeps Jesus on a journey through Jericho as he made his way toward Jerusalem and as the blind man is given back his sight; thus, making it possible to accommodate the Zacchaeus episode in 19:1-10 in Jericho.¹²

Another similarity between the blind man and Zacchaeus is that they are both publicly classified sinners: The blind man, because of a physical disability, that in the mindset of the world, was the result of his sin (see John 9:2); and Zacchaeus incurred his notorious public sinner image as a result of his occupation.¹³ Yet both episode involves people who are primary objects of Jesus' mission.

In both incidents, Jesus stops (breaks his journey) at the point of encounter with both men; encounters that transformed the lives of the blind man (18:42-43) and Zacchaeus (19:9-10). At the end of each of the stories, a statement of intent is obtained from the objects of his saving actions, followed by Jesus' pronouncement of God's saving grace on them. Both religious outcasts are restored, one from a physical malady and the other from an occupational malady.¹⁴

The Son of David of 18:35-43 gives way to the Son of Man of 19:1-10. The deliverance of a man "lost in blindness and poverty corresponds now" to the "deliverance of a man lost in wealth and corruption."¹⁵ Though one is very poor (the blind beggar, 18:18-30) and the other very rich (Zacchaeus, 19:1-10), both are blessed with salvation (18:42; 19:9, 10).¹⁶ Yet one who falls victim to the slavery of wealth becomes indeed one who is blind. On the other hand, it is important to note that sin is a kind of blindness and so is injustice. Once Zacchaeus becomes capable of "seeing", he can decide to be charitable and repair the damages he has done. For, once the person becomes capable of seeing, he can take initiative

without being told. The blind man follows Jesus after gaining sight and Zacchaeus explains in action what 'following Jesus' means.¹⁷

That the story of the blind beggar is placed between the stories of the rich men is not merely accidental. The evangelist has intentionally created a story that builds upon his denunciation of the dangers of riches.¹⁸ Effectively then, 18:35-43 serves as a connector between the first episode of the encounter with a rich man (negative) and the second (positive). The outcome of 18:35-43 helps to prepare the reader for the positive outcomes of 19:1-10 following the harsh saying about the dangers of riches in 18:24-25.

3.1 The Structure of Luke 19:1-10

Although there are varieties in the structure of Luke 19:1-10, the one presented here will be adopted for the purpose of our study. It fits well into the narrative critical stance from which we reread the story. Variation will be noted where necessary.¹⁹ The division tripartite.

- a. Jesus' Association with Zacchaeus (19:1-6)
 - (i) Setting (19:1)
 - (ii) Zacchaeus' Efforts to See Jesus (19:2-4)
 - (iii) Jesus' initiative to stay with Zacchaeus (19:5-6)
- b. The Crowds Murmuring (19:7)
- c. (c) Jesus' Explanation and Declaration (19:8-10)
 - (i) Zacchaeus' Defense (19:8)
 - (ii) Jesus Vindication and Less on: The Son of Man Seeks the Lost (19:9-10)49

3.2 Analysis and Interpretation

19:1. *Kai eselthōn diērchetō ten Iericho* (Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it). 50

19:1-10 is the second of two Jericho texts; the first being the healing of the blind man. The second Jericho event is a break away from his Markan storyline. What we have here is special Lucan material. The first story takes place on the outskirts, on the approach. The second takes place inside Jericho, about seventeen miles east of Jerusalem. The evangelist links both episodes by introducing the Zacchaeus story with a *kai*, which introduces a connection and then leads to the rest of the verse which indicates a shift of scene.²⁰

With the aorist participle *eiselthēn*, the evangelist places the episode in the context of the ongoing progression of the larger narrative movement toward Jerusalem. He also sets up a very important narrative context for the decision by Jesus to stop for some important intervention in verse 5. The events that followed took place while Jesus was entering Jericho, passing through (*diērchetō*) to Jerusalem. The double compounded use of the verb *erchomai* here underscores the continuity of this passage with the rest of the journey narrative section even as the evangelist prepares for the break that must come at the instance of the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus. First, he is entering. But

¹² Craig A. Evans, Luke in *New International Biblical Commentary*, 3; ed. W. Ward Gasque (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 278.

¹³ Evans, Luke, 278-79.

¹⁴ Evans, Luke, 279.

¹⁵ John Nolland, Luke, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books Publishers, 1993), 903.

¹⁶ Fred B. Craddock, Luke, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*; eds. J. L. Mays *et al* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 218.

¹⁷ Craddock, 219.

¹⁸ Michael Prior, Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology, *The Biblical Seminar*, 26 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 55-56.

¹⁹ Nolland, Luke, 904.

²⁰ Bruehler, *A Public and Political Christ*, 51.

he is not staying just going through. Yet something important would necessitate a stay, albeit not terminal, yet a stay with special significance.

Following upon the heels of the blind beggar episode, Luke has created a setting in this first verse to a story that has probed the minds of some scholars concerning the genre of what follows – the event that takes place as he passes through. Some have suggested that it is a conflict story.²¹ Others identify it as a biological apothegm.²² still others, a pronouncement account.²³ Some identify it as a conversion story²⁴ and others just say it is a story of Jesus.²⁵ Still, others would call it a Vindication story²⁶ or a quest story.²⁷ So, what happened and how do we classify it?

2. *kai idou anēr onomati kaloumenos Zakchaïos, kai autos hēn architelōnēs kai autos plousios* (There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax agent. And he was wealthy).

Having presented a temporal and topological setting, the evangelist employs his characteristic *kai idou* to draw the reader's attention to what follows. Often the phrase is used to introduce a new participant to the story and that is the case here as the evangelist introduces a man, by the name, Zacchaeus. Levinsohn notes that a person so introduced usually has a major role to play in the story, a significant act.²⁸

Onomati Kaloumenos is a pleonastic idiom, which is a Lukan hapax and may therefore be pre-Lukan in this episode.²⁹ The name Zacchaeus is also found in 2 Macc 10:19. It is probably a Hebrew name meaning “clean” or “innocent”. Nolland notes that it is “doubtful whether this etymology plays any role in the story” and that the “name could point to the man's destiny beyond this encounter with Jesus.”³⁰

Verse 2 is parallel to 18:18 (*architelōnēs*= *archōn* in 18:18) and both verses pertain to two very rich people. Note the biographical data given on Zacchaeus, including name, occupation, physical build (short), economic status (rich), and of course some detail in the narrative concerning his behavior. “Attention is thus directed at Zacchaeus as an individual, who begins to stand out as subject in

his own right.”³¹ The evangelist does this with a sentence that is rather dramatic in style as he uses “conjoined independent clauses with explicit subject pronoun” (*note autos in v. 2b and c*) to draw his portrait of Zacchaeus.³² *architelōnēs* is a New Testament hapax, not attested in any Greek writing up this period.³³ He was like a holder of a new taxing contract. In another sense, he was a chief, rich tax collector, the supreme sinner.³⁴ Such negativity is also reflected in other synoptic traditions – underscoring the widespread nature of this negative portrait of tax collectors and their outside status. Moreover, the emphasis of the narrative on the fact that he was rich, separate from the fact that he was a chief tax collector further underscores this negative note. His position placed him at an advantage for making big profits. It is, therefore, understandable that being rich could be problematic and the rich were not necessarily painted in bright colors in Luke.³⁵ Nevertheless, the fact that he was rich is very important for the plot of the narrative, especially in the context of 18:18-27, which deals with, whether or not, and how a rich man can be saved.³⁶ worthy of note, however, is the fact that the reader is also aware of other positive and encouraging references to the plight of the rich, for as Nolland notes: “The reader comes to the story with an awareness (i) that Jesus is the ‘friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (7:34; 5:30)”, even if (ii) “it is humanly impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (18:25; see v. 23).”³⁷

Even though the characterization of Zacchaeus as a rich chief tax collector evokes ambiguous interests; one negative, the other positive, narrative critically, such a characterization becomes a source of attraction as the reader is drawn to both the person of Zacchaeus as well as his words and actions. On a positive note, some earlier texts in the gospel reveal that tax collectors were responsive to the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus, and Jesus welcomed their company (5:27-32; 7:29; 15:1-2). Also, a parable is narrated in 18:9-14, in which a tax collector received God's approval. We must not undermine the fact, however, on a very negative note that this introduction highlights Zacchaeus' double tragedy – being a tax collector and a man of wealth.³⁸ Yet, the reader of the narrative is driven by the characterization to long for the outcome of the encounter that follows.

3. *kai ezētei idein ton Iēsoun tis estin, kai ouk hēdumato apo tou ochlou, hoti tē ēlikia mikros hēn* (He was trying to see who Jesus was but could not see over the crowd, since he was so short.

ezētei has a copula in verse 10. Zacchaeus indeed sought to see Jesus. The clumsy nature of the verse here actually points Zacchaeus in the direction of a search that was just a desire for the physical sighting of Jesus. There was an attraction involved as the verse indicates that Zacchaeus was not unlike the general gospel search for the true identity of Jesus. He desired to see Jesus. Yes,

²¹ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Cross Road, 1982), 176.

²² Rudolph Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans J. Marsh (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 33-34.

²³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary in Anchor Bible 28A* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:1219.

²⁴ D. Hamm, *Luke 19:8 Once Again: Does Zaccheus Defend or Resolve?* *JBL* 107 (1988):436-37.

²⁵ V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 75-76, 153.

²⁶ R. White, “Vindication for Zaccheus,” *ExpTim* 91 (1979), 21.

²⁷ R.C. Tannedill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol 1. *The Gospel of Luke, Foundations and Facets* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 111-12, 125.

²⁸ Martin M. Culy, *et al.* *Luke: A Handbook on the Greek Text, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament* (Waco: TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 20-21.

²⁹ Nolland, *Luke*, 904.

³⁰ Nolland, *Luke*, 904.

³¹ Robert C. Tannehill, “The Story of Zaccheus as Rhetoric: Luke 19:1-10,” in *Rhetoric of Pronouncement Semeia: An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism*, 64: ed. Vernon K. Robbins (Atlanta, GA: Schiolar Press, 1994), 201-211.

³² Cully, *Luke: Handbook*, 587.

³³ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1223.

³⁴ J. Honton, “The Story of Zaccheus and the Lukan Ethics,” *JSNT* 12 (1981), 2-26.

³⁵ Tannehill, “Story of Zaccheus,” 202.

³⁶ Tannehill, “Story of Zaccheus,” 205.

³⁷ Nolland, *Luke*, 904-905.

³⁸ Nolland, *Luke*, 904.

but he probably yearned to know who he was. That is the sense conveyed by *kai ezētei idein ton Iēsoun tis estin*, where the interrogative clause *tis estin* “stands in apposition to what precedes it.”³⁹

here the crowd constitutes the same barrier to access to Jesus just as they were initially for the blind man in 18:36-39. While it is true that *kai ouk ēdunato apo tou ochlou* introduces the obstruction that the crowd was, it must be noted that it has been suggested in certain quarters that *apo tou ochlou* may be a veiled reference to the “vantage point from which Zacchaeus was trying to see Jesus” and ultimately encounters Jesus. He was removed from the crowd and its blind ways of viewing religious commitment; removed from those who marveled earlier on saying, “Then who can be saved?” In terms of the perception of the saving presence of Jesus, he encounters him at a level that is over and above that of the crowd; again removed. So, while the causal effect of the phrase here must be appreciated (he could not see Jesus on account of the crowd),⁴⁰ one must remain open to this veiled reference, which is confirmed by what follows, especially, in verses 7-10.

Also, the reference to Zacchaeus’ stature (*tē ēlikia mikros*) has generated some interesting discussion regarding terms of reference. Is this just the citation of a natural physical statistic or does the evangelist use this reference as a foil for other qualities of the subject? Some scholars suggest that there is a reference to his physical stature,⁴¹ yet others think that “the phrase does not only refer to Zacchaeus’ height, but also serves to characterize him negatively,⁴² thus reflecting his reputation in society, hence morally short.

With that description, however, Zacchaeus suffered exclusion on two grounds. First, he was too short of stature to see over the crowd. Second, he was a tax collector, hatred by the Jews for “making a living collecting revenue for the occupying power, Rome...The physical problem symbolizes the exclusion he suffers on the socio-religious level. No one in the crowd is going to stand aside for Zacchaeus.”⁴³ Yet nothing of the private life of Zacchaeus was addressed directly at this point in the story. He stood condemned from an economic standpoint.

In the next verse, nevertheless, he does something “extravagant thereby joining the list of characters in this gospel who perform extravagant gestures in pursuit of or response to salvation”. That gesture, shameful and demeaning as it was, “breaks through the barrier and gives him access to Jesus”. The visitor to Jericho, whom the “whole town has come out to seem to stop below the tree” to initiate salvation.⁴⁴ Thus, Zacchaeus’ seeking (i.e., search) makes him an object of the mission of Jesus. For “Zacchaeus seeks to see and does not know that he is being sought after and saved because of the same reasons for which he was ostracized by

society: a sinner and tax collector”.⁴⁵ And that, as Buehler rightly emphasizes is tied to the very nature and purpose of Jesus’ mission.⁴⁶

4. *kai prodramōn eis to emproshthen anebē epi sukomorean hina idē auton hoti ekeinēs ēmellen dierchesthai* (He ran to the front and climbed up a sycamore tree that Jesus was about to pass by, to see him).

The very act of climbing the sycamore tree was a humiliating adventure for a man of Zacchaeus’ socio-economic status.⁴⁷ But nothing was more important to him than obtaining the object of his search. *Sukomorean* is another New Testament *hapax*, different from *sukaminos* in 17:6.⁴⁸ The sycamore fig is a large evergreen that is quite easy to climb.

Verse 4 manifests a strong Lukan residue in its distinctive vocabulary, construction, and word usage. Even though *kai prodramōn eis to emproshthen anebē* is a pleonasm as some exegetes have pointed out, it does suggest the natural “way of specifying the goal of Zacchaeus” enthusiastic “spirit.”⁴⁹

The use of *dierchesthai* here, following its occurrences in verse 1, unites the intention of Jesus with that of Zacchaeus, who shows up on the path through which Jesus would be passing and for whose sake Jesus would make a temporary break on his way to Jerusalem. Even though the word *hodou* does not occur here, the problematic *ekainē* supplies the absence.⁵⁰

Apart from Jesus’ initiative in verse 5, Zacchaeus’ “strategy would have produced only a quite anonymous contact with Jesus, with no communication,” noted Nolland.⁵¹ Yet the extraordinary character of the action here also elicits a contact like the blind man’s persistent screaming in the previous episode. As Craddock correctly suggests, “his intense desire to see Jesus, overcoming the risk of ridicule and embarrassment, is fundamental to the happy conclusion of the story. He has heard and believes that Jesus is a ‘friend of tax collectors and sinners (see 7:37).’”⁵²

5. *kai hōs ēlthen epi ton topon, anablepsas ho Iēsous eipen pros auton, Zakchaie, speusas katabēthi, sēmeron gar en tō oikō sou dei me meinai* (When he reached the spot, Jesus looked up. He said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry down from there! For I must stay in your house today!”)

As Jesus comes upon the place (*ēlthen epi ton topon*) where Zacchaeus was, he does not pass by because there is a mission to be accomplished; a searching soul to be encountered, sought out, and redeemed. Rather, he engages Zacchaeus visually first (*anablepsas*), and while still intentionally fixated on him visually (sense of the participle), he addresses him by name (that is to say, in a personal fashion, *eipen pros auton, Zakchaie*), and then he gave directions that must be followed.

³⁹ Cully et al., *Luke: Handbook*, 587.

⁴⁰ So A.T. A Robertson, *A Grammar of Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1934), 579-80.; Joel B. Green, “The Gospel of Luke” in *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 670.

⁴¹ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 669-70.

⁴² Mikael C. Parson, “‘Short in Stature’: Luke’s Physical Description of Zaccheus,” *NTS* 47 (2001); 50-57.

⁴³ Brenden Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 150.

⁴⁴ Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 150.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Luke*, 285.

⁴⁶ Bruehler, *A Public and Political Christ*, 222.

⁴⁷ Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 150.

⁴⁸ BADG, 776.

⁴⁹ Cully et al., *Luke: Handbook*, 587.

⁵⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 124.

⁵¹ Nolland, *Luke*, 905.

⁵² Craddock, *Luke*, 219.

Here again, as Jesus initiates the encounter, the reader is reassured by the evangelist that “Jesus has an uncanny knowledge of the secret affairs of others.” The evangelist does this to reinforce his conviction that the true initiative of the story belongs to Jesus. Zacchaeus is not hidden from Jesus, who insists that an anonymous encounter gives way to a close encounter. Jesus invites himself home and this enables Zacchaeus to welcome him in a manner that echoes the proper reception, in Luke 10, of the commissioning seventy with their message and the accompanying manifest reality of the kingdom of God.⁵³ Jesus’ decision to stay at Zacchaeus’ house looks back to the instruction given by him to his missionary disciples to stay in welcoming homes in 9:4 and 10:7. *Speusas* may reflect the eschatological urgency attached to the presence of Jesus and the invitation (message) even as it expresses a command that Zacchaeus would surely take very seriously. Together with *sēmeron*, that urgency is given a sense of certainty (see v. 9. Cf. 9:57-62; 12:54-59).⁵⁴ “Today” (*sēmeron*) is repeated in 19:9. Thus in these last days, the golden opportunity to save would not be missed or passed over. Such a sense of certainty is also applicable to another occurrence of *sēmeron* in 23:43 in Jesus’ reassuring promise to the other thief, the “good one”, on the cross.

The locative *en tō oikō* underscores the shift in a scene that is about to take place, from the outside into the house of Zacchaeus, a movement that would be symbolic in many ways, because here, in this house, Jesus would necessarily stay, abide, remain (*dei me meinai*).⁵⁵ Such a presence would have extensive ramifications because salvation would come not only to the house but also to the entire household (implied in verse 9). The impersonal verb also used to designate important turning points in the story as directed by God (2:29-4:43; 13:16, 33; 17:25; 21:9; 22:27; 24:7, 26, 44).⁵⁶ Worthy of note is Byrne’s observation that “As readers of Luke’s Gospel, we recognize in that ‘must’ (*dei*) the divine purpose that drives the mission of Jesus and shapes its direction.”⁵⁷ When one looks ahead to the use of the infinitive *kataludai* in verse 7, one gets the sense, that lodging is even implied. The house thus merely represents the persons upon whose life this encounter would have a positive impact, hence its ecclesiological symbolism. Together with Luke T. Johnson one can safely suggest that: “Zacchaeus is being provided the opportunity to welcome the prophet and his message about the kingdom of God”.⁵⁸ And his home will become a venue, not only for the public exchange that took place but also for teaching.⁵⁹

The fact that Jesus picks Zacchaeus out of a vast crowd is significant, both pastorally and exegetically, since it highlights the role that faith plays in this encounter and every religious encounter. This is not unlike the episode of the Hemorrhage woman who not only overcomes the crowd to get her healing but who alone actually benefits from contact with Jesus, even though many in the crowd were milling around Jesus when that happened (Luke 8:42b-48).

6. *kai speusas katebē, kai udezato auton chairōn* (He quickly climbed down and joyfully welcomed him).

Here the imperative in the last verse (v. 5 *speusas katabēthi*) “hurry, come down” or “come down hurriedly” is obeyed completely by Zacchaeus (here, *speusas katebē*) “hurrying, he came down” (see 2:10, 16, and 5:29. The movement of the verbs from the imperative to the indicative (both modified by the same attendance circumstance participle) reinforces an important point of encounter as both command and response are unified at the same pace. Although the description of Zacchaeus’ response does not explicitly mention faith, his actions show “that Jesus has made a deep impression upon him as confirmed in 19:8.”⁶⁰

The verse strikes a note of hospitality, using the same verb *udezato* as for Martha’s reception of Jesus in her house (10:38-42). Also, the language of welcome “evokes the mission charges” in 10:8-9, and its “import is underlined by the language of joy.” The kingdom of God has approached this man, and he has fully embraced it. He is no longer an outsider (contra vv. 3-4).⁶¹ His new insider status fills him with the same joy that those who met Jesus with the proper disposition in the Gospel hitherto received (1:40:44; 2:22-38). This is the same kind of joy that is associated with the seeking and finding of what was lost in Luke 15.⁶²

7. *kai idontes pantes diegonguzon legontes hoti para hamartōlō andri eisēlthen katalusai* (When everyone saw this they began grumbling. They said that he was going to lodge with a man who was a sinner).

The reaction of those present was grumbling, typical of the scribes and Pharisees⁶³ in this gospel (5:30; 6:1-11; 7:34, 39; 11:38-44, 53-54; 14:1-3; 15:2; 16:14-15; 19:39) but here it is everyone, and the scribes and Pharisees are absent, albeit their participation is implied. Although it is hard to see how Jesus’ disciples can be part of these reactions. *Pantes* here may also have joined disciples to the crowds and opponents. That their action is couched in the imperfect sense makes their reaction into an ongoing process, more like something that they did habitually. At least they were still doing so when Zacchaeus spoke up in verse 8 and when Jesus would speak in verses 9-10. The ingressive translation points to a relationship that is established as a result of their dissatisfaction with the person of Zacchaeus and by extension, the person of Jesus, whose fellowship with people of this sort always got such reactions. And these reactions were usually the result of their zeal for justice – *love of Justice* (see *Africae Munus* 25). Such sinners (public sinners) have disrupted the religious and moral fabric and order to a point where the only thing they deserve is God’s punishment, a payment for their sins, and justifiably so in the mind of those grumbling.

Those reactions are presented here as the observation of a scandalized group of onlookers. That is because it was widely believed that “(i) to accept the hospitality of a man whose wealth is ill-gotten is to become a partner with him in his crimes”, and (ii) the practice of ostracism was, therefore, employed as “a means of deterrence. But, Jesus practices a far more creative alternative” here.⁶⁴ Consequently, and as Byrne correctly suggests, “this

⁵³ Nolland, *Luke*, 905, 907.

⁵⁴ Bock, *Luke*, 1518.

⁵⁵ Bruehler, *A Public and Political Christ*, 220.

⁵⁶ Johnson, *Luke*, 285.

⁵⁷ Byrne, *Hospitality of God*, 150.

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Luke*, 285.

⁵⁹ Bruehler, *A Public and Political Christ*, 220.

⁶⁰ Bock, *Luke*, 1518.

⁶¹ Nolland, *Luke*, 905, Bruehler, *A Public and Political Christ*, 216.

⁶² Johnson, *Luke*, 285.

⁶³ Robert Doran, “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector: An Agonistic Story,” in *CBQ* 69:2 (April 2007): 259-70, here 269.

⁶⁴ Nolland, *Luke*, 905.

negative reaction of the nameless “they” signals, as so often in Luke, the presence of a third party in need of salvation” (Zacchaeus, in this instance).⁶⁵ An opportunity for Jesus to enshrine the *justice of the love of God*, who does not will the death of the sinner.

8. *statheis de Zakchaïos eipen pros ton kurion, Idou ta hēmisia mou ton huparchontōn, kurie, tois ptōchois didōmi, kai ei tinos ti esukophantēsa apodidōmi tetraploun* (Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I am giving half my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated someone of something, I make four-fold restitution”)

The entire verse is made up of Zacchaeus’ response to the grumbling crowd, even though his speech is directed to Jesus, whom he addresses directly in the vocative As he does that, the evangelist gives him a public face with the use of the participle He now stands his ground in response to the crowd. Even now he recognizes that he stands before the Lord of Life as in the case of the blind man in 18:41. Again this object of Jesus’ saving encounter recognizes an opportunity of grace. He would not let it go by him without effect.

He makes his propositions. His half, although less than the “all” of 18:22, suffices. For it represents a radical disposal of wealth for the benefit of the poor.⁶⁶ Such a benefit corrects and heals the violence done by the rich in the process of acquiring wealth. Such violence is symbolically represented in Zacchaeus’ statement, which uses to point out the misleading and aggressive ways of extortion.⁶⁷

Zacchaeus’ statement here reflects (even if not in total consonance) the Old Testament law of restitution found in Exodus 22; Leviticus 6:5 and Numbers 5:6-7. The use of the verb *esukophantēsa*, meaning unlawfully exerted (see 3:14), connects his proposition to the requirements of the Torah. Yet, as some scholars have pointed out, “fourfold restitution is probably not the fulfillment of any legal requirement.”⁶⁸

This verse has been contested very intensely by scholars because of the verbal forms in use here.⁶⁹ The verbal form is the root of the debate as to whether the statement made by Zacchaeus was simply restating and reaffirming what he was used to doing or was stating what his future actions would be, as a result of the saving encounter he just had with Jesus. The question that must be answered here, as Richard White states is: “Did Jesus forgive a penitent sinner, or did he vindicate a ‘pure’ publicans’ good name against a false, stereotyped charge.”⁷⁰ There seem to be very valid arguments on both sides. Those who argue for the representation of a customary practice argue that the present active indicative tense uses of the verbs (*didōmi* and *apodidōmi*) were Zacchaeus’ defense of himself against the murmuring of the crowd, in which case he is said to make statements insisting on on-going practices that are in keeping with the Torah.⁷¹

On the other side of the aisle, we have the scholars who argue that Zacchaeus was, in verse 8, reacting to the encounter with Jesus, which has affected a turnaround in his life, albeit his conversion was not explicitly stated or expressed.⁷² The last point made by Philips remains true, however, Zacchaeus’ reference to extortion points to some guilt on his part. Also, these scholars argue that while the evangelist uses the present tense verbs, he meant it to be read in the futuristic sense. Hence, Nigel Watson affirms this position by insisting “on the possibility that the third gospel’s use of the present tense in this saying is influenced by an underlying Aramaic tendency to use the present tense with future force in direct speech.”⁷³

The matter is probably unresolved at this conference, yet we must pitch our tent somewhere. A review of the entire story would point in the direction of the second position that is, that Zacchaeus’ statement was the result of a change of heart. “From the image of Zacchaeus that emerges in vv. 3-4, via the mission echoes in v. 6, through the role of the other statements similar to v. 7 in the gospel account, to the salvation-of-the-lost emphasis of vv.9-10,” available evidence necessarily supports that position.⁷⁴ Craddock has also articulated this argument quite convincingly: “what we do know is that he extended hospitality to Jesus, and as a result of their meeting he goes beyond the law’s requirement for restitution...an evidence of the radicality of grace and the power of Jesus’ good news on him.” Such radical response was the demand made by John the Baptist in 3:10-14 on those who asked him: “what shall we do?” for here, “grace is joined to repentance, and repentance is not solely a transaction of the heart.”⁷⁵ It bears fruit in action.

The excess of generosity in the response of Zacchaeus, however, typifies, as Talbert points out, “the appropriate response to the grace Jesus brought to this tax collector through table fellowship.”⁷⁶ And that is in tune with the invitation to the righteousness of excess elsewhere in the Jesus narratives (see Matt 5:20, 48).⁷⁷

9. *eipen de pros auton ho Iēsous hoti Sēmeron sōtēria tō oikō toutō egeneto, kathoti kai autos huios Abraam estin* (Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has happened in this house because he too is a child of Abraham).

As “today” (*Sēmeron*) reechoes the initial encounter with Zacchaeus that brought Jesus into his house as a guest, the evangelist looks back even to 4:21 where Jesus declared and affirmed the fulfillment of Isa 61:1-2 in his very first public pronouncement: a fulfillment that has its object in his person and ministry.⁷⁸ This salvation begins here and now: that is the effect of the reiterated “today” even as the evangelist does not lose sight of the future transcendent aspect of the saving work of God.⁷⁹ In Jesus, salvation dawned (see 1:69) and every encounter with him has the possibility of a saving effect for the well-disposed. So, the mission-links established in 19:6 are “here carried further, but with

⁶⁵ Byrne, *Hospitality of God*, 150.

⁶⁶ Nolland, *Luke*, 905.

⁶⁷ Cully et al., *Luke: Handbook*, 591.

⁶⁸ Craddock, *Luke*, 219, Bock, *Luke*, 1520-21.

⁶⁹ Johnson, *Luke*, 285-86, Bock, *Luke*, 1520

⁷⁰ Richard C. White, “Vindication of Zaccheus,” *ExpTim* 91 (1979), 21.

⁷¹ Allan C. Michell, “Zaccheus Revisited: Luke 19:8 As a Defense,” *Biblica* 71 (1990): 153-76.

⁷² Parsons, 57.

⁷³ Nigel M. Watson, “Was Zaccheus Really Reforming?” *ExpTim* (1965-1966), 282-85.

⁷⁴ Nolland, *Luke*, 906.

⁷⁵ Craddock, *Luke*, 219.

⁷⁶ Talbert, *Reading Luke*, 176.

⁷⁷ Johnson, *Luke*, 286.

⁷⁸ Byrne, *Hospitality of God*, 151.

⁷⁹ Nolland, *Luke*, 906.

the coming of salvation taking the place of the drawing near of the kingdom (10:9).” What is truly important here is that “contact with Jesus has transformed Zacchaeus is not to be disenfranchised from the people of God. And as one among the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6), he is not beyond the reach of the present saving outreach of God.” He is thus as on of Abraham, and declaratively so. That confirmed status of this newborn disciple is in line with other Abrahamic texts that the gospel has so far presented to the reader (1:55, 77;13:16).

Notably, Jesus has the last word just as he does upon the cross in the encounter with those crucified with him. In both cases, that word is both immediately effective and graciously salvific; underscored by the declaration of a saving gift that is immediately effective, hence today. Today, salvation has happened (has come) to Zacchaeus’ house. Such salvation is often associated with Lukan miracles as we find in 6:9; 7:50; 8:12, 48, 50; 9:24, 56; 17:19; 18:42. “Salvation ‘happens’ in this instance in the reception of the prophet’s visitation and the disposition of possessions for the poor.”⁸⁰ Thus Zacchaeus is included among the people of blessing (1:55; Acts 3:25) despite being despised by the Jews because of his occupation. His actions bring him under the Abrahamic heritage. From the stones of sinful condition, God has raised one more son for Abraham (see 3:8).⁸¹

One must not miss the double audience addressed by Jesus here. There was Zacchaeus to whom a message of salvation was proclaimed, on the one hand. On the other hand, there was the crowd who got to know that at this very moment, God was raising a son for Abraham from the midst of those trampled down in society like rocks and stones. In its resolution, the one mostly in need of conversion in this episode is not Zacchaeus, it would be the “they”, who murmured and criticized. Jesus had brought the ones put at the margins of society to the center and called on the ones on the margin of salvation to open their hearts to the message of repentance and redemption that would free them from their biases and move them to the center.

As we progress to the reading of the last verse of the episode, it is important to make one final note on the question of transformative encounter by emphasizing that Jesus’ concluding remarks (vv.9-10) that salvation has come to Zacchaeus’ house and that Jesus came to “seek and to save is in *tandem* with other Lukan encounters of this nature: a transformation takes place as a result of the proper disposition upon the initiated encounter between Jesus and the object of Jesus’ mission.

10. *ēlthen gar ho huios tou anthrōpou zētēsai kai sōsai to apolōlos* (For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost”)

Verse 10 is an open declaration and a restatement of Jesus’ mission (with another use of the verb *erchomai*, which guides the double infinitives *zētēsai kai sōsai*); in this case, it is a mission accomplished because the one who sought to set eyes on Jesus initially (19:3) has been sought out for salvation by the Son of Man, who came to seek out and save the lost. Rhetorically speaking, “Luke 19:1-10 is a pronouncement story in which Jesus’ final words rhetorically dominate” the discussion.⁸² Taken together with the parables of the Lost Sheep and Coin and the

Prodigal Father, one cannot but come away with the impression that there is a progression here from parable to action as what was considered lost is here redeemed through the saving encounter with Jesus. Jesus’ statement in 19:10 thus underscores the purpose and mission of Jesus’ presence. At first, the episode looks like a distraction from the Jerusalem focus of the journey narrative that began in Luke 9. A closer look reveals, however, that “Jesus’ visit to Zacchaeus’ house was not a delay or a detour on his journey to Jerusalem; this was and is the very purpose of the journey. ‘The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost’.”⁸³ Our commentary on verse 5 already indicated that there was a note of necessity and mission in Jesus’ use of express his intention to visit with Zacchaeus. When translated as “I must stay in your house today”, the *dei* (*must*) convey a divine purpose with a determinative force behind it.

The reader cannot miss the presentation of Jesus as the Shepherd of Israel here, as the evangelist connects the mission of the Son of Man to the prophecy that anticipates the great shepherd of Israel in Ezekiel 34. As such, Jesus comes to gather the scattered sheep of Israel. The Davidic role of the Son of Man is here presupposed because of the earlier occurrence of another Christological title in the immediate context of 19:1-10; precisely in 18:35-43. This proximity is also indicative of the fact that the fulfillment of the prophecy of the dawn of God’s kingdom, marked by the vision of the

“Son of Man” in Daniel 7:13-14 is in view.

The entire narrative, especially 19:10, presents “Jesus in the role of the champion of the outcast and of those who are maligned because of unwarranted assumptions and religious hypocrisy”. Verse 10, is also a climactic and thematic statement that concludes, not just the Zacchaeus episode, but also the entire journey narrative, especially, Luke 15.⁸⁴

3.3 Concluding Remarks of Interpretation

The whole of “Luke 19:1-10 is rhetorical in that it is designed to persuade readers to view Zacchaeus and Jesus in particular ways and thereby take certain attitudes toward life.”⁸⁵ In that process, even the crowd is made to function as a blocking force with verses 8-10 as a response to the crowd. And of course, the reader’s active and participative reading is instructive even as he/she applies the episode to today’s events. Yet their eyes must be open to Jesus’ correction against the excesses of the crowds’ love of justice, which resulted in unhealthy stereotypes and profiling. Jesus’ action persuades the reader to a vision that prioritizes the justice of love. Such a vision expands the demands of social justice and reconciliation as it seeks to bring the different strata and components of society into a healthy solidarity in action.

When the teaching is viewed through the lens of Zacchaeus becomes important to hold the two main effects of the encounter with Jesus together. There is the conversion on the one hand. And there is the action that followed that conversion on the other hand. Such conversion was necessary for the gift of salvation declared by Jesus in 19:10. Zacchaeus’ attitude has, therefore, been cited as the proper response of a wealthy disciple, in contrast to the preceding story in 18:18-30, where the rich ruler declines Jesus’ invitation to sell his “goods and distribute the money to the poor.” Zacchaeus’

⁸⁰ Johnson, *Luke*, 286.

⁸¹ Bock, *Luke*, 1522

⁸² Tannehill, “Story of Zaccheus,” 102.

⁸³ Craddock, *Luke*, 220.

⁸⁴ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1218.

⁸⁵ Tannehill, “Story of Zaccheus,” 101-211.

un-coerced generosity is a sign of repentance and faith whereas the hesitant stinginess of the rich ruler, or worse, the dishonesty of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) betrays an unrepentant heart, close to the grace of God.

4. Rereading the Zacchaeus Narrative in the Nigerian Context

The mission of Jesus as evidenced in our focus text (Luke 19:1-10) reflected also the mission of the Lukan community as we see in Acts of the Apostles and should define the mission of the Church today, especially in a country like ours. The spirit of Jesus, given to the Church at Pentecost, empowers the Church – one and all – to take up Jesus’ “vocation of proclaiming liberty to captives”. As such, the “call to repentance, which lies in the heart of the gospel proclamation for Luke, includes the call to reform individual lives and communal practices in accordance with the prophetic vision of justice, as set forth in the Isaiah texts that stand as the keynote for Jesus’ remains the paradigm for the Church amidst our struggles with the ugly realities of social injustice and multiple crimes against humanity. It is in imitation of Christ that the Church continues Jesus’ mission: seeking out those lost and offering them salvation.⁸⁶

a. Luke 19:1-10 in the Nigeria Context: As Aside on the Social Justice Status Quo

So much has been said about the general application. Let us now look homeward. What can we learn from our exercise on the Zacchaeus episode? The danger of materialism and the unethical acquisition of wealth at the expense of others are very familiar phenomena in Nigerian society today. In Luke-Acts such a danger was likened to sickness, blindness, and eventually death. There is a need to attune ourselves to it.

Our country has been tagged as one of the most religious countries in the world. Approximately 140 million people identify with the two major faiths, Christianity and Islam (roughly 70 million Christians and 70 million Muslims), making it, in the words of the internationally renowned religion journalist, John Allen Jr, “a bit like the Coke and Pepsi of global religion.”⁸⁷ However, it is also on record that our country is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. The question is: Why is it that Christians, many of whom are personally ardent believers, have not been able to prove the worth of their faith in a way that is politically, socially, economically, and ethically effective?

The hodgepodge of high religiosity and high-profile corruption in our country has been attributed to the lack of deep-rootedness, proper integration, and prophetic effect in Christianity in Nigeria. As a result, the Church makes so many statements, which in the eyes of an already obsessed public mean mere sanctimonious rhetoric without any serious effort to accompany those statements with practical action. Yes, the Church cannot take upon itself the political struggle to bring about the most just and peaceful society possible, but it cannot fold its hands and remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. It is worthy of note that Christians have not been able to intelligently allow their faith to permeate their political choices. Father Anthony Akinwale articulated many of these issues in a recent controversial and hotly debated article titled

“Absence of catholic intelligence”. Herein, Professor Akinwale argues that despite the “Prayer for Nigeria in Distress” and the “Prayer Against Bribery and Corruption in Nigeria” that are recited at Masses in virtually every parish church in Nigeria, corruption has not abated but astronomically increased. Akinwale sees his problem as one fundamentally linked to the educational sector. “How is it that with all the discipline we thought we had inculcated in them; some Catholic products of Catholic education are involved in corruption and other vices that have paralyzed our beloved country Nigeria? How is it that even in a state where the Governor, Deputy Governor, Speaker of the House, Chief Judge, and a good number of commissioners are Catholics, the business of government can still be afflicted and affected by corruption? The state of insecurity, and the refugee situation in our land, are symptoms of state failure. How come some of those responsible for the failure of the state in Nigeria are Catholics who recite the prayer for Nigeria in Distress with us?”⁸⁸

As individuals and as a community, Christians have not been able to effectively position themselves in the arena of national politics to make a difference. Many of them have moved along with the tide. The fact that people answer Christian names does not make for Christian participation in policy formulation in national governance.⁸⁹ If Christians are thus to become yeasts in political life, they need a Church that is sufficiently prophetic in its responsibility to prod them to think, behave, and act like Catholics in public and social life. Sadly, as Bishop Kukah has argued, many Catholics who find themselves in political life do not have the support of the Church to effectively navigate the troubled political waters and make a difference.⁹⁰ The question indeed bothers our theological and social responsibility as a Church.

We need authentic teachers and credible witnesses who embody the ideals and principles of Christian participation in political life. This challenge demands that we set out on the path of listening to what the Word of God tells us and how it speaks to us in the concrete circumstances of everyday life. As Benedict XVI emphatically stated in *Africae Munus*, authentic hearing of God’s word implies both *obedience and action*. “It is offering in life and society, a witness like the call of the prophets, which continually united the Word of God and life, faith and rectitude, worship and social commitment.”⁹¹ The challenge, therefore, is for Church leaders today to teach people and to live according to the Gospel value enshrined in the call of Benedict XVI in *Africae Munus*. We cannot afford to allow faith to stay in the Temple while life goes its way. The idea is that Christians have for too long practiced their faith on Sundays and left it behind during the workweek so that there is a moral vacuum in the workplace which plays politics with push for profiteer motives at the expense of the society and fellow human beings. In effect, we have people who take up public responsibility with absolutely no allegiance to the laws of morality other than the craze for profit and power. This compartmentalization of life destroys the quality of faith, and that is why Catholics have come out only marginally effective in public life. Our Church must be able to effectively bridge this separation

⁸⁸ Anthony Akinwale, O.P. “Absence of Catholic Intelligence”, 27 February, 2012.

⁸⁹ Matthew Hassan Kukah, *The Church and the Politics of Social Responsibility* (Lagos: Sovereign Prints, 2007), 29-30.

⁹⁰ Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Voice Magazine*, 2012 Edition.

⁹¹ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, No. 16.

⁸⁶ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 121.

⁸⁷ John Allen Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 22.

between faith and the ordinary affairs of daily life so that Catholics learn to live an integrated form of life.⁹²

Luke reminds us of his readers again “that the disposition of the heart is symbolized by the disposition of possessions. The one who clings to his wealth is equally close to the prophet’s call. The one who shares generously with the poor can welcome the prophet gladly.”⁹³ Thus refusal to share is a loss of joy and evokes sadness; shut to the experience of God’s saving love and the joy and gladness of welcoming Christ in the poor.

b. Luke 19:1-10 and the New Evangelization: Love of Justice and Justice of Love; The Way Forward

Like the crowd in our focus text, our love of justice has resulted in stereotyping, labeling, shutting down, ostracizing, and so on. Yet the challenges given to us invite the Nigerian church, individuals, and institutions, to the justice of love. It is a compelling call that must include new frontiers in the efforts for a new evangelization. It is a challenge to actively and selflessly engage people and systems, which were blacklisted hitherto or were explored or engaged only for selfish and self-serving reasons. Such new frontiers would include new missions, the following being the ones that immediately come to mind:

- i. Mission to the Poor and Deprived
- ii. Mission to the Wealthy
- iii. Mission to the Corrupt
- iv. Mission to the Dysfunctional System
- v. Mission to the Criminals
- vi. Mission to the Angry
- vii. Mission to Labour
- viii. Mission to the Economic and Political Rapists of our nation, which we must engage.
- ix. Mission to all the other Zacchaeuses of our time and place including HIV/AIDS Patients
- x. Mission to the Zacchaeuses of our day, who included corrupt politicians and public thieves, Prostitutes, Police, Soldiers, Local govt. functionaries, known fraudulent contractors, etc., and other public sinners.

That is how we can become a church that is committed to the common good of all, especially the poor and marginalized. That is how we can also realize the obligations of social justice as enshrined in the social teachings of the church and itemized in our catechism (CCC 2407-3449). Engagement on the levels of these new missionary frontiers would bring the agents of social justice in direct contact with those who make public policy and would help shape their decisions concerning the well-being of our people and social welfare.

5. Conclusion: Engaging the Zacchaeuses of Our Time

Our conclusion remains open-ended because this paper has not proposed practical models for engaging these new frontiers of evangelization. Suffice it to say, however, that until we engage the Zacchaeuses of our time effectively, creatively, hypocritically, unselfishly, consistently, and systematically, we will be paying deaf ears to the prophetic call of *Africae Munus*; and that amounts

to a disservice to Christ, his church, our continent (especially the poor, oppressed, and those on the margins of society), and our dear country, Nigeria. So far, so much of the engagement has been focused on what we can get from Zacchaeus, not how we can transform Zacchaeus for his salvation and the benefit of the poor. That must change.

⁹² Francis Cardinal George, *God in Action: How Faith in God Can Address the Challenges of the World* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 151-164.

⁹³ Johnson, *Luke*, 287.