

There are a number of internet search phrases that return some interesting results. One of those is "Hold my beer." While there might or might not be an actual beer to be held, this phrase is the lead in to some rather dangerous stunts, many of which result in epic fails. One example results in a video of a man attempting to jump from the roof of a house into a backyard pool. And misses it by a few feet. There are numerous ones of skateboarders attempting, unsuccessfully, to master some new move. I tend to wince in pain as I see them even though many others find them humorous.

Generally the phrase "Didn't see that coming" leads to videos that are much less disastrous; however with totally unexpected results. One is of a very small European car slowly moving down a narrow country lane. You can almost sense the frustration of the person making the video as they try to find a place to safely pass. When they do and turn to say something, perhaps something less than kind and understanding, to the slow driver, they discover something that they didn't see coming. The slow car is really only the rear part of a car. The front, where the engine should have been, has been cut off. And the car is being pulled by a pair of small ponies. Didn't see that coming.

How often in our reading of Scripture do we encounter events with results that we really did not see coming. Much more often, those present at the events really, really did not see it coming. Today's reading from Luke is definitely one of those. In fact, it is full of strange twists and turns.

I'm going to try and capture some of those as we listen in to one side of a phone conversation. True, Zacchaeus didn't really have a telephone, but use your imagination.

Hello, you have reached the telephone assistance center of the IRS: Israel Revenue Service. My name is Zacchaeus. How may I assist you today?

*Pause.*

Yes, that's right: Zacchaeus. The name means "pure" and "innocent."

*Pause.*

I understand your laughter, ma'am. I really do. I know that most people don't think of IRS agents as pure and innocent. So, where are you calling from?

*Pause.*

Jericho. Excellent. Great place. Lots of history. I live there, too, you know.

*Pause.*

Yes, ma'am, I am a Jew. Just like you.

*Pause.*

No, I am not a dirty, rotten Roman.

*Pause.*

Yes, you are right: I *work* for the Romans, but I am still a Jew.

*Pause.*

Ma'am, may I put you on hold? *Press imaginary button, and speak to congregation.* I don't know why I get so much criticism from my own people. I do my best to keep the Ten Commandments, and it's not like I've murdered anyone. Some people think that I steal, but tax-collecting is a tricky business. I know for a fact that many of my neighbors have cheated on *their* taxes!

I think the reason I get so much criticism is that I am the chief tax collector, and I'm rich. I oversee all of the tax collections for this area, so I have a team of people who collect taxes, tolls and tariffs from Jews — my people. Someone's got to do it. We're hated because we're cooperating with Rome. But look — I have to make a living!

*Press imaginary button again, and return to call.*

Ma'am, I'm back now. How can I help you?

*Pause.*

Yes, I can assist you with that. I'm good with numbers, so I can calculate your tax. When do you need this to be completed?

*Pause.*

"Maybe never," you say? Why is that?

*Pause.*

I see. You don't think you'll have to pay taxes to Rome because Jesus has come. People hope that he will lead an army like a sort of new King David and drive the Romans out. But ma'am, I have to be honest with you — I think that's a stretch. Jesus and a Jewish army would not have a chance.

*Pause.*

No, ma'am, I'm not on the side of Rome. I'm just more interested in Jesus as a religious leader. He healed the servant of a Roman centurion. He forgave a sinful woman. He healed a boy with a demon. Best of all, I hear that he is "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (7:34). That's exactly what I need.

*Pause.*

Yes, ma'am, Jesus is a friend of outcasts. I think that's good news.

*Pause.*

I hear what you are saying, but do you have a minute? I'd like to tell you about what just happened to me. Yesterday, I looked out my window and I saw a crowd headed for town. I joined them and asked a man what was going on. He ignored me, knowing who I was. Instead, he turned to a friend and said, "I hear that Jesus has just healed a blind beggar! Can you believe it? You know the guy I am talking about: That disgusting beggar who always sits in the dirt outside of town. People are saying that he is now following Jesus into Jericho, with a spring in his step."

I got excited when I heard this. Jesus had healed a man who was as reviled as any tax collector. But as we approached the edge of town, my heart sank. The sides of the road were packed with people, five deep. I began to work my way along the edge of the crowd, but I couldn't see a thing, even when I hopped up and down. Although I may sound tall on the phone, I'm only 4 feet 11 inches.

*Pause.*

You say that I *don't* sound tall on the phone?

*Pause.*

Anyway, I knew I needed a plan, so I looked to where Jesus would probably enter Jericho. I ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree with large, low branches — perfect for climbing. I knew people would laugh at me. As you know, it's undignified for a grown man to run. Running is for kids. And a man of importance will never climb a tree. It is humiliating. But I didn't care. I wanted to see Jesus.

The crowd continued to swell, and I was glad that I had my vantage point in the tree. I could see over the heads of everyone along the road, even the men and women who were looking up at me and laughing. I heard one of them say, "Look at Zacchaeus, up in a tree! He may be rich, but he looks like an idiot!"

*Pause.*

Yes, you're right. I probably did look like an idiot.

As Jesus reached the sycamore tree, he turned his head up and looked straight into my eyes. I was so shocked that I almost lost my grip and fell out of the tree. Then he said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today". I tell you, I did *not* see that coming. The crowd was silent. People looked at Jesus and they looked at me, back and forth, wondering what in the world he was doing. Why was Jesus talking to someone with so little or no social standing?

I scrambled down the tree, almost flipping upside down when my robe got caught in a branch, but somehow I managed to reach the ground safely. I pushed myself through the crowd until I found Jesus. I brushed a number of leaves off of my clothing, and then threw open my arms to him, saying, "Welcome. A thousand welcomes." I was so honored that the great Jesus wanted to stay with me.

The crowd was still stunned, but they were no longer silent. They knew that Jesus was breaking the code of purity by going to the house of an IRS agent. In addition, he was honoring a man who just humiliated himself by running and climbing a tree. The people began to grumble and say, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner. For shame, for shame."

Jesus said nothing, but just continued to look at me as though I were the only person in the crowd. I had never seen such a loving gaze.

The silence was awkward, so I broke it by saying, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (v. 8).

Because Jesus had honored me with his presence, I felt a need to make amends for my past wrongs. I volunteered to pay people back, fourfold.

Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost". I could hardly believe it — Jesus had restored my good status by calling me a "son of Abraham." He had broken through my isolation by seeking me out and saving me. As long as I live, I'll never be able to do enough to pay him back. But I am going to try. Each and every day. And that is why I want to help you, ma'am. I want to do your taxes right.

*Pause.*

No, ma'am, I'm not trying to be a hero. *Jesus* is the hero, because he reached out to me and made me

his friend. Wherever you are in your loneliness and isolation, he'll do the same for you.

*Pause*

Where can you find Jesus?

*Pause.*

Well, Jesus is just about everywhere. He will probably find you. Thing is, when you want to find Jesus — that's sort of the moment you'll find him. He will call you his friend. I guarantee that you will be thankful that he breaks through your loneliness. And you'll want to spend the rest of your life wanting to make him proud that he knows you.

*Pause.*

You are welcome. Call me when you are ready to work on your taxes.

If this call has been helpful to you, please stay on the line for a short survey. This is Zacchaeus ... at the IRS.

Jesus is still doing things that we didn't see coming. He still breaks through loneliness and isolation. He is still healing. He is still a friend of outcasts and sinners. That last Passover evening, the disciples absolutely did not see it coming: Jesus offering his body and blood for our salvation. Yet at His table we once again can experience the presence of the Lord in ever new ways, ways that we didn't see coming.

And if we aren't the ones that need help at the moment, who need a renewed sense of His presence in our lives, Jesus just might use us to do such amazing things that help others that they didn't see it coming.

Like Zacchaeus, let us make Jesus proud that he knows us.