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## Stories of Solidarity :: This is Pure.

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News of the Rabbi who taught a radical redemption was spreading well beyond the religious community. The common people followed him in hoards, hoping to hear his healing teaching - or even experience the touch of his hand.

Jesus made his way through Jericho - the place Joshua and the people of Israel saw the city's walls of self-protection fall, making way for their new kingdom. It was a place of Jesus' own family heritage - it had been the home of King David's great grandmother, the Gentile madame infamously restored, Rahab.

The crowd pressed in as Jesus walked along the road, hanging on his every word.

The region's most notorious traitor - Zaccheus - hurried along trying to break through the crowd to catch a peek at this problematic prophet. It was rumored Jesus encouraged his followers to live lives tilted toward grace, not judgment; reconciliation, not separation; radical hospitality, not exclusion.

Some said Jesus had even restored sight to those who were blind. This gave Zaccheus hope that he too might receive the grace of redemption, as - in the eyes of his neighbors - he'd whored himself out to a pagan empire set in opposition to God's kingdom.

As the chief tax collector, Zaccheus extorted from his neighbors the heavy tax imposed by the Roman occupiers on the Jewish people. His reputation within neighborhood circles was damning - but he had to make a living somehow, and had always been good with numbers.

Zaccheus had always been more brains than brawn, and the pay from the Romans for his collections was incredibly enticing.

In spite of his fiscal fortitude, Zaccheus was wounded by the looks of disdain and disgust he received each time he was around his own people. He often heard whispers behind his back - stinging words, jeers, the cursing of his name. Sometimes he even overheard his own friends and family wishing him dead.

Zaccheus often masked his pain with anger, resulting in heated arguments and hateful words. There was a constant tension, an 'edge' in every interaction. This time was no different.

As he tried to penetrate the mass of those gathered to follow Jesus, he found himself blockaded by a human wall. Almost instinctively, the group closed the gaps he could sneak through - some even locking arms in a posture of partiality.

*'You're the last person who deserves to see him, traducer.'*

Unable to see over the gathering, Zaccheus left the road and ran ahead to where he knew Jesus was going, about a mile up the only road leading out of town.

Exhausted and out of breath, he climbed a large sycamore tree near the side of the road.

He was desperate to catch a glimpse of grace incarnate.

When Jesus got to the area near the tree housing the tax collector, he looked up - and his own penetrating eyes met those of Zaccheus.

*'Come down from there, my friend. Today is my day to be a guest in your home.'* Jesus had just invited himself over.

Everyone who saw this was indignant, and grumbled to one another. *'What right does Jesus have to eat, associate and stay with Zaccheus? He's a sinner.'*

Hurrying down, Zaccheus accepted the imposition of God and opened his home to the Teacher of Israel.

But the accusations kept coming.

*'He's a tax collector! He's not really one of us! He still works with and for them - the Roman oppressors! He's impure by the very nature of his work - wheeling and dealing with Gentiles and pagans! He is a sinner - you shouldn't be here, Jesus.'*

Zaccheus defended himself to Jesus, stammering apologetically. *'I give half of what I earn to the poor - and whenever I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages to make up for it.'*

His own walls of self-defense erected in haste, the words sounded hollow - even to Zaccheus.

The crowd that had gathered outside expected Jesus to condemn him, a vindication of their intolerance.

But Jesus had other plans.

*'Today salvation is in this home!'* Jesus exclaimed, putting his arm around the host. *'This is Zaccheus, and he's just like all of us! A true son of Abraham! I came to find and restore that which was lost, not condemn it.'*

The crowd stood in disbelief, absorbing the irony. 'Zaccheus' is translated, 'pure.'

*This is pure - and he's just like all of us.*

Jesus had again surprised everyone with his response of an upside down gospel of grace, forgiveness and hope. His commitment to solidarity with all people was certainly leading to some interesting conclusions.

All of the people were hanging on his every word - and expectation of the coming kingdom had never been higher.

What they failed to realize is *it was already here*.