

## Zacchaeus: Expressing The Image of God

Lk 19:1-10

Orthodox possess an insatiable love for Holy Pascha. Pascha structures our life throughout the entire year, always calling us to run from the distracting crowds of this world toward a face to face encounter with our resurrected Lord: Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. As we approach Great Lent, the Church offers us Zacchaeus as the image of our life--an image of how we act when we have been smitten by the Christ. Zacchaeus' actions are not those of a mere curiosity seeker, nor of those of a cool-headed rational inquirer. Zacchaeus is responding not only to something--or, someone--outside of him but to something deep within his soul.

### *Image of God*

This inner longing is what we will explore this morning, beginning with the words of our contemporary, Archimandrite Maximus (Constas). In his introduction to his translation of a Elder Aimilianos' *Mystical Marriage*,<sup>1</sup> he writes:

We were created for God, brought into being for God, who is both the origin and aim of our existence. *To be created "according to the image of God" means to love and seek after one's divine source and archetype* (cf. Gen 1:27). *To love God is something that comes naturally to us*, it is something that is part of our deep and inalienable nature. *In order for us to realize and experience this love, we need only to stop our mind from wandering, let go of our troubled thoughts, and silence our inner noise and turmoil, at which the reality of God will come rushing towards us, a reality that has been rushing toward us from all eternity, though we are too distracted to see it.* The more we empty our mind, the more it will be naturally filled with the presence and love of God, *who pours Himself out to us to the extent that we open our hearts to Him.*<sup>2</sup>

According to this explanation, then, Zacchaeus's outlandish behavior--running away from the crowd and climbing a sycamore tree--is understood as fulfilling his true nature; manifesting the image of God in which he was created. He was seeking after his divine source and archetype with such single-minded zeal that his mind stopped being controlled by the self-consciousness of prevailing mores. His self-limiting inner dialogue dissipated in light of the reality of God rushing toward him. Eternity entered time, and he was not going to miss it.

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<sup>1</sup>Elder Aimilianos is the former abbot of Simonopetra on Holy Mount Athos, and *Mystical Marriage* is an extended reflection on St. Maximus the Confessor's Second Century on Love. It is well worth reading.

<sup>2</sup> V. Rev. Arch. Maximos (Constas), from the "Introduction" to *The Mystical Marriage*, by Elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra, Columbia, Missouri: Newrome Press, pp. xx. Emphasis added.

The nature of the human being is to love God. We often speak carelessly when someone makes a mistake or fails in some way; we say, "It's okay, don't be so hard on yourself, you're only human." Or, simply, "to err is human." This is wrong. It is *not* natural, not a part of our created nature, for human beings to err, make mistakes, fail. That is expressive of our *fallen* human nature. We fail because our human nature is fallen, damaged, not what it was created to be. We get used to thinking of ourselves as human beings who go around making a mess of things; that that's what it is to be a human, a mess-maker. So we begin our reflection this morning by saying that this is not natural at all; it is *contra*-natural; it is *against* our nature. What's natural is to love God, to be the recipient of his love, to be the receptacle in which his love richly and dynamically dwells, and to which we respond.

When we see someone engaged in extreme behavior for Christ, we think they're crazy, overly zealous, misguided, bound for a fall. But maybe these are the people who are behaving naturally, as God created them to behave. They are the ones, like Zacchaeus, who are letting their thirst for God be actualized.

### ***Distractions of This Life***

Zacchaeus, then, was acting as a true human, expressing his longing for his Creator. But the rest of the people, the crowd, they all thought they were the normal ones. They thought they were the ones behaving naturally--in accordance with their human nature, with good decorum. But they were living among the distractions of this life. That, at least, is how the holy fathers interpret this text: the crowd hinders us from seeing Christ. It represents, as Archimandrite Maximus said above, the mental wondering, the troubled thoughts, the inner noise and turmoil, all of which take the place of God in our life, supplant him from his home in our heart. Our natural yearning for God is supplanted by our *contra*-natural yearning for things. We become obsessed with the latest electronic gadgets. We are unable to stop checking our phone or to extract ourselves from social media. Hobbies like gardening or cooking, jobs and recreational activities, all begin to squeeze the life out of our daily routine by incessant busyness and inflated self-importance. Possessions, reputation and pleasure become the objects of our desire, diverting us from the deeper and more natural longing for the source of our very being, our Creator and God. We confuse the gift with the Giver, desiring and valuing the things of this creation more than the Creator who gives them to us (Rom 1:20-23).

To run from the crowd is simply to let go of these created things--beautiful though they be, together with all the anxieties, worries, and fears, that go with them; to lay aside all the cares of this life. We are the ones hanging onto them and we have the power to release them. Once released, however, we don't need to do anything else, for "*the reality of God will come rushing towards us, a reality that has been rushing toward us from all eternity.*"

### ***Restless Thirst for God***

In certain respects, Archimandrite Maximus is simply expressing what is expressed so beautifully and poetically by Blessed Augustine in the opening of his *Confessions*:

Great are you, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is your power, and infinite is your wisdom.” And *man desires to praise you*, for he is a part of your creation; he bears his mortality about with him and carries the evidence of his sin and the proof that you resist the proud. *Still he desires to praise you*, this man who is only a small part of your creation. *You have prompted him, that he should delight to praise you, for you have made us for yourself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you.*<sup>3</sup>

That inner restlessness, that distraction, diverts us from what God created us for--communion with him accomplished in an overflowing praise of him, to be in his presence without a care in the world. Blessed Augustine affirms that this natural inner longing is not obliterated by our sin, mortality and pride. They may compete with our true and natural desire, but they cannot defeat it—just as the crowd could not diminish Zacchaeus’ longing to see Christ.

Again, the same point is put even more simply by Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware):

“Man is thirsty for God. This is the image of God in man, his thirst for his creator in whose image he was created.”<sup>4</sup>

Thirst for God is exactly what Zacchaeus is expressing--so thirsty for God that he is not constrained by the allurements of this world.

### ***Implications for Asceticism***

Zacchaeus Sunday is always a signpost that says Great Lent is coming. In the Russian practice it is usually the Sunday before the Triodion starts, and in the Byzantine practice--which the Romanians follow--it is usually the second Sunday before the Triodion, with the Canaanite Woman being the final Gospel of normal time. The point is that we are approaching a time of intensified ascetic effort, and the holy fathers interpret Zacchaeus’ fleeing the crowd and climbing a tree in order to have a face to face encounter with the living Christ as an image of our lenten ascetic efforts. He shows us the great effort that we need to make. Leaving the distractions of this world, the crowd, involves a commitment to fasting, prayer, almsgiving, vigils, and spiritual reading. In this way, we put ourselves in a position to meet Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> *Confessions*, I.1; emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> “What is a person?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPKW6qwPO5A>

I will say, however, that in my own life it is easy to misunderstand this effort, to become sidetracked by the very activities that the Church invites us to engage in with such vigor. But if we reflect on the image of God as our thirst for Him, as we saw above, we'll see an important corrective to perverted ascetic practices. Here, again, it is expressed by Archimandrite Maximus (Constas):

Rather than demand the arduous labors of asceticism, the Elder Aimilianos emphasizes a simple yet profound change of mind and inner awareness. He knows that, once we find the “pearl of great price,” which is our innate love for God, we will gladly “sell all that we have” (cf. Mt 13:45-46). On a practical level, most of us will not be willing or even able to assume the degree of bodily discipline and self-denial required, not by Orthodox monasticism, but by the radical message of the Gospel. *In order for us to take up the daily cross of asceticism (Lk 9:23), the Elder knew that we must first experience the love of God, a revelation that shakes up our whole being, after which all things become possible.* Now I can work, now I can pray, now I can renounce myself and offer my life in sacrifice, because that is how I respond to the revelation of God’s love. Love makes it possible to forget about ourselves; it takes us out of ourselves; it halts the relentless torrent of the self. It leads us out from our inner turmoil and confusion into stillness; it opens our hearts to divine love and compassion, and with songs of joy it ushers us into the mystery of its spiritual banquet.<sup>5</sup>

His point is simple--we tend to get things exactly backwards. We think we need to work hard to obtain the love of God, but he says that experiencing the love of God is what energizes us to work hard in these ascetic practices. As we approach Great Lent we are tempted to feel overwhelmed by all that is coming--the fasting, the extra services, the prostrations; the weight of anticipation grows. Or, even worse, we naively think we can pull it off, do it all. We struggle with motivation or are motivated by the pride of accomplishing ascetic tasks--feeling good about what we have done. This is all backwards. Archimandrite Maximos, Blessed Augustine and Metropolitan Kallistos are reminding us that our efforts are a response to the Father’s love poured out into our hearts, a love that makes us tremble, that makes us drop everything and follow after it. This is precisely the beautiful story of Zacchaeus: so consumed by the reality of God’s love which has been rushing toward him from all eternity, he forgets about himself; he lets himself follow that inner thirst; he releases the relentless torrent of the self; he fulfills the image in which he was created; he becomes truly human.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> V. Rev. Arch. Maximos (Constas), from the “Introduction” to *The Mystical Marriage*, by Elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra, Columbia, Missouri: Newrome Press, pp. xx-xxi. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Some related texts from St. Gregory Palamas:

He who knows the hearts of men also sees the desire in Zacchaeus’ heart, looks up, and speaks to him, and calls him by his name, although he had never set eyes on him before, in order charitably *to show His face*,

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*to make Himself known* out of kindness, to the man who longed for Him, and to make it clear that Zacchaeus not only loved but was loved.” (*Homilies*, # 62, p. 513)

Let us imitate David, brethren, and not only turn our backs on lush and dissipated living, but undertake fasts, psalmody and prayers, *as if God were present and watching*. We know that fasting, psalmody and prayer by themselves cannot save us, but carrying them out *before God* can. For *when the Lord's eyes are upon us* they sanctify us, as the sun warms everything upon which it shines. (*Homilies*, # 9, pp. 63)

When our understanding gazes intently on God and, while looking towards Him, fasts, sings psalms and prayers, then we are carrying out these actions before God. If during prayer and psalmody our mind is sometimes directed toward God and sometimes slips away and floats about, it is necessary to realize that we have not yet dedicated ourselves completely to God and that the purpose behind our actions is not wholly in accordance with the law of the Lord. The more we fall short in righteous works, *the less we are able to remain in God's sight*. (*Homilies*, # 9, pp. 63-4)