



a Kendall Hunt Company

## Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary



### Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for this session read all the readings.

Wisdom 11:22-12:2

Psalm 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13-14

2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2

Luke 19:1-10

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Was there a particular reading that appealed to you? Was there a word or image that engaged you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need for the session.

## The Word in Liturgy

The book of Wisdom, attributed to Solomon, was in fact composed some time in the first half of the first century before Christ by an anonymous Jewish author in Alexandria, Egypt. It is thus the last of the Old Testament Scriptures to be written. The book is an extended meditation and reflection on the distilled meaning of all the Old Testament writings that precede it. Today's passage is a digression in a section devoted to the Exodus, and it reflects on the ways of the all-powerful and all-merciful God, who out of love holds in being everything in creation. It is followed by Psalm 145, a hymn of praise to God. In today's liturgy, this all-inclusive love of God becomes the background for Jesus' announcement in the Gospel that "The Son of Man has come to search out and save what was lost."

The story of Zaccheus, unique to Luke's Gospel, is one of a pair of stories that respond to the question of Jesus' disciples in 18:26 "then who can be saved?" In the eyes of the people, Zaccheus is assumed to be doubly despicable: he is a chief tax-collector, and he is rich. When Jesus agrees to go to his home, not only the religious leaders but the whole crowd murmurs objections. Tax collectors were despised as collaborators with the Roman ruling elite, and suspected of extorting money from the people as a means of enriching themselves.

Zaccheus, however, whose name in Hebrew means "the pure or innocent one" stands his ground and states (in the present tense) that he shares his possessions with the poor, and that if he has defrauded anyone, he pays them back fourfold — the harsher penalty assigned by Jewish law. Often interpreted as a conversion story, in which Zaccheus decides as a result

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of his meeting with Jesus to repent of his sins and to begin to practice generosity, this passage upon careful reading is revealed to be something quite different. Zaccheus is an example of hidden goodness revealed by the encounter with Jesus and gathered up into the reign of God. Appearances deceive. But truth emerges in the encounter with Jesus. The little man climbs a tree in order to see Jesus. But more important is the fact that Jesus sees him.

# Catholic Doctrine

## *Justification*

Our Catholic understanding is that justification is God's saving action in Jesus by the Holy Spirit which frees us from sin and renews us. Justification, in short, opens the way to salvation by good works through the community of the faithful, the church. Those who are justified are cleansed from sin and put in a right relationship with God. For us believers this happens in the gift of baptism (CCC 1987).

The Protestant reformers emphasized the universality of sin, the absolute gratuity of justification and insisted that human freedom was destroyed by original sin. The Council of Trent rejected this view. Instead, the Church proclaimed that it is possible to cooperate with God's grace and to be renewed inwardly. It is possible to grow in holiness as we practice the virtues of hope and love moving toward eternal life and increasing grace within ourselves by our good works. Unfortunately, the way in which the Catholic Church and the Reformation theologians initially spoke about justification only furthered the split in Christianity. Today, there is much closer agreement on the basic themes of justification: God justifies by grace alone, through the saving action of Jesus Christ, and individuals appropriate that justification by their faith-in-action.

Thus, in today's Gospel passage, Zaccheus stands as an image of one who is justified, one who cooperates with God's grace in life and moves toward greater holiness and inward renewal by his good works. Jesus recognizes that Zaccheus is on the path of righteousness ("Today, salvation has come to this house, for this is what it means to be a son of Abraham.") Justification, from our Catholic viewpoint, detaches us from sin, which contradicts divine love and purifies us, making us members of the household of God. It reconciles us with heaven, heals us, and frees us from our slavery to sin (CCC 1990). In this way, justification puts us right with God; it is an acceptance of divine righteousness within us. Justification opens for us the avenue of faith, hope and love (CCC 1991).

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We do not merit justification on our own. It is merited for us by the passion of Christ who

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offers himself on the cross, holy and pleasing to his heavenly Father. His blood becomes the atonement for the sins of all. Baptism bathes us in the blood of Christ and confers upon us justification and membership in the household of the faithful. In those saving waters, we know that original sin is removed, personal sins are forgiven and we are made totally new creatures, although the effects of sin in the world, such as sickness, death and proneness to further sin remain.

All of this is implied in the Catholic teaching of justification. We uphold the absolute sovereignty of God who alone saves us and justifies us. The reformers also spoke of inner change and outward works of love toward one's neighbor. The area in which we differ today is in our focus on God's saving activity through the Church and the sacraments as celebrated and lived.

