

364 Days of Thanksgiving – Week 2

February 12, 2017

Luke 19:1-10 (NIV11) – ¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” ⁸ But 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.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a fitness center that offered \$1,000 to anyone who could show they were stronger than the owner of the gym. Here’s how it worked: The muscle-bound owner would squeeze a lemon into a glass until all the juice was gone. Then he’d hand the lemon to the challenger. Anyone who could squeeze just one more drop of juice from the lemon would win the money. Over time, many people tried to best the owner – other weight lifters, construction workers, even professional wrestlers – but nobody could. Then one day, a small, skinny man in a suit came in. He’d come for other reasons, but when he heard about the challenge, he said he wanted to give it a try. When the laughter finally died down, the owner grabbed a lemon and squeezed away. Then he handed the wrinkled remains to the little man. The crowd’s laughter soon turned to silence as six drops slowly fell from the lemon. The crowd cheered. As the owner paid out the prize money, he asked the little man what he did for a living. “Are you a lumberjack or weight lifter or what?” he asked. The man in the suit replied with a gleam in his eye, “I work for the IRS.”

Sermon Exposition: Overwhelming Gratitude Leads to Overwhelming Generosity.

The IRS has ways of squeezing out every last drop. Though as Christians we understand that paying taxes is part of our Christian duty, that doesn’t mean we actually like it. Raise your hand if you’re a fan of the IRS. The way we see it, someone whose job it is to collect a good chunk of your earnings isn’t very appreciated.

In Jesus’ day, however, it was even worse. You see, the Romans who ruled over Israel would pick people from every town and region to collect their taxes for them. So, if you agreed to be a tax collector, right from the beginning people would hate you. You were a traitor to Israel and to the true God. You were collecting money for the hated Romans and their pagan emperor.

The way the Romans collected their taxes was by having the tax collector collect a certain amount from each person to give to the government. But anything the tax collector could get above and beyond that, he could keep. And as he went door-to-door or as people came begrudgingly to his toll booth, he’d likely have a couple Roman soldiers standing right behind him as muscle?

You can see how tax collectors oftentimes became extremely wealthy. Most were corrupt politicians. They cheated the people. They were traitors. They were the scum of society. People looked at them as many people today look at Ken Lay, the former CEO of Enron, who pocketed millions from his company and ripped off stockholders; or Bernie Madoff, the guy who stole millions with his Ponzi scheme in which people invested money and lost everything. Tax collectors in Jesus’ day were considered the worst of sinners. Everybody hated them.

Understanding that will help you understand our lesson today. In this section of Luke’s Gospel, we find Jesus, the week before Holy Week, about seven days before his death. He was walking with the thousands of pilgrims who were headed up to Jerusalem from Galilee for the Feast of the Passover. The last big city they passed through

before arriving in Jerusalem was Jericho, the City of Palms. Located in a lush valley about six miles from the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, Jericho was a tropical paradise filled with luscious vegetation and towering trees.

The custom in those days was that, as the pilgrims went through a town on their way to Jerusalem, the people from that town would gather along the streets and cheer on their brothers and sisters. It was like a parade.

The people of Jericho had heard that Jesus, the great prophet from Nazareth, was coming. The whole city flooded the streets. Curious onlookers came to see the man who some said was the Messiah. If you looked around, you'd probably see moms lifting up their young children, hoping they'd catch a glimpse of and maybe be blessed by the great prophet. Can't you just hear the chatter? "Will he do a miracle? Will he stop in Jericho or keep going to Jerusalem (which was only six hours away)? If he stays here, whose house will he stay in? Will it be one of the chief priests or the elders of the city?"

And that's when we meet Zacchaeus. The name Zacchaeus in Hebrew means "just" or "pure." Zacchaeus, however, was anything but just or pure. He was the chief tax collector of the district – the top of a corrupt pyramid. If he was what most tax collectors were, he was a crook.

Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus. He wondered about Jesus. He wanted to see him, but he had a problem. You see, Zacchaeus was vertically challenged. He was short. He couldn't see over the crowds.

Remember, Jericho was the City of Palms. The road was lined with all kinds of different trees. So, Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree so he could see. We can imagine with the size of the crowd, he probably wasn't the only one in the trees trying to get a bird's-eye view of Jesus.

When Jesus came to Zacchaeus' tree, though, he stopped, looked up, and said, "**Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.**" Jesus was going to spend the night in Jericho, but at the house of the chief tax collector! The people went nuts. They couldn't believe it. "**He has gone to be the guest of a sinner,**" they said as their noses went up and their eyes looked down.

We aren't told what Jesus talked about with Zacchaeus when they got to his house, but we can assume he talked about sin and forgiveness. We can assume he talked about how he'd come to save sinners. We can assume that, because that's what Jesus regularly talked about.

We can assume he talked about saving sinners because Zacchaeus stood up to make an announcement. "**Look, Lord!**" he said. "**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.**" Think about that. Zacchaeus gave half to the poor and then used the other half to pay back everybody he'd wronged. Overwhelming gratitude is more than words. Overwhelming gratitude leads to overwhelming generosity.

At that, Jesus said something which probably shocked and amazed the people. "**Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.**" But wait a minute! This was a traitor to Israel and the true God – a corrupt politician, a thief – how could he be considered a son of Abraham, a member of the family of believers? Because Jesus, the Son of Man, "**came to seek and to save the lost.**"

Those words echo even more loudly when we remember that only seven days later this same Jesus, the Son of Man, would rescue the world by bringing salvation on the cross. He would be beaten and bloodied, nailed to intersecting pieces of wood, and forsaken by his heavenly Father on a hill called Calvary. But there Jesus would bring lost sinners into his family. They'd go from being outcasts to being Abraham's children, part of the family of God. Jesus had promised Zacchaeus salvation at the cross.

"**The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.**" The people of Jericho struggled to accept that truth. The Pharisees, Jesus' enemies, the ones who had him put to death, couldn't handle that truth. They were endlessly

horrified because Jesus was always hanging out with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners. If he was so holy, if Jesus was from God, how could he wallow with the filth of society? They lifted up their noses and looked down their eyes on those whom they considered unworthy of God's love.

Sadly, each of us has a little Pharisee who's taken up residence in our hearts. Our noses go up so easily and our eyes look down so quickly as we see the sinners out there in the world. You know the ones – those corrupt politicians who are running our country into the ground, those drug dealers and drug users who are a blight on our society, those husbands who hit their wives and wives who cheat on their husbands. Our little Pharisee even looks down on those sinners sitting next to us here in church.

In polite conversation, we'll say that we don't think we're any better than they are, but deep down in the recesses of our hearts, each of our little Pharisees sits back in a comfortable chair and says, "I'm so glad I'm not like them. I'm above their low-life living. I haven't done what they've done."

What we so often forget – what we so often fail to see – is that the Son of Man came to seek and to save each one of us. *I* was lost. Do you hear that word? That means nowhere near heaven, nowhere near perfection, nowhere near Jesus. *I'm* the worst of sinners. That's me sitting in that tree. That's you sitting in that tree. Like the Pharisees, we have spiritual blind spots. We so easily see the sins of others, but fail to see how lost we really are in our sins of pride, anger, lust, and laziness. We fail to see sin's dark stain so thoroughly imbedded in us that makes us lost for eternity in hell.

But Jesus came to seek and to save *you*, a lost one. He practiced purity by never cheating or stealing, by never welling up in selfish pride, and by never giving in to unrighteous anger, lust, or laziness. As he hung with his back pressed against the wood of the cross, he allowed himself to suffer God's righteous wrath that we, the lost scum of society, deserve. But because he did, we're forgiven. He tells us to come down from our tree. He's here for us and stays with us. He brings to us free forgiveness and a home in heaven.

And when we finally get that – when we finally understand how lousy we are and how loving he is – when we truly appreciate what it means when God says, "I forgive you" – then you and I will react as Zacchaeus did. Zacchaeus couldn't contain himself. He'd finally found what money couldn't buy. He'd found peace and hope. So he gave away a large amount of his money. Overwhelming gratitude leads to overwhelming generosity.

My friends, the secret to overwhelming gratitude – the secret to the joy that Zacchaeus found – is opening our eyes and recognizing all the amazing things God has done for us. The secret to overwhelming gratitude is understanding that we don't deserve any of it.

God has been overwhelmingly generous with you. Start with recognizing how much Jesus gave you by bringing his forgiving love that changed you from being lost to being found. He changed you from being a citizen of hell to a citizen of heaven. Recognize how much Jesus gives you as he treats you as family and generously cares for you. Look around you at your home and cars, your family and friends. Look at the food you eat and the air you breathe. Look at your church family, the freedom you have to worship God and learn from him. Like Zacchaeus, you haven't earned any of it. You don't deserve it. You're not better than anyone else. Yet God has been overwhelmingly generous with you.

So now respond with overwhelming gratitude. Respond with overwhelming generosity. Respond like Zacchaeus and give generously. As you give from a generous heart, God promises to bless you. So be overwhelmingly generous with your family and friends. Be overwhelming generous here at church. Be overwhelmingly generous with complete strangers. Give as God has given to you. Learn from poor, vertically challenged Zacchaeus. Overwhelming gratitude leads to overwhelming generosity. Amen.