

Money, a Little Man, and Jesus

Luke 19:1-10

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As many of you know, I like golf. My dad introduced me to it when I was four years old. We watched it on Sundays. I still remember watching Jack Nicklaus win the 1986 Masters as the oldest major winner ever at the age of 46. Nobody could believe the old man could still win one. I turn 46 in three months. So this might be my year.

I have attended some golf tournaments. This is really cool if you like golf. I took the pastors some years ago to the US Open at Medina here in Chicago. I think they thought it was okay. But for golfers, to see the best in the world is something special, especially if it happens to be one of the four majors. In 2002, I was able to get tickets to one of those four majors, the PGA Championship at Hazeltine Country Club in Minneapolis. Tiger Woods was in his prime. A guy named Rich Beam had the lead on the last day, but Tiger was charging back up the leaderboard and nobody left the course, which compressed the whole crowd onto the last two holes. I don't know if you have ever seen 45,000 people crammed around two holes, but that was what happened. It was truly wall-to-wall people. I remember thinking, *This is crazy*. Then I saw people so desperate to see Tiger Woods play that they were climbing the trees to get a view.

I remember thinking, *If I ever preach on Zacchaeus, I'm telling this story*. And now I have.

And now we turn to this famously short man to learn something about what happens to your old passions and idols when Jesus becomes the new affection of your heart.

As you turn to Luke 19, we are on a 7-week kickoff to *Mission Them 2.0*—the next chapter in what God is doing here at Bethel Church. We have looked at the gospel and ethnic diversity; last week, Tony urged us to be personally involved in the Great Commission; the week before that we were challenged by Jesus to ask, *Am I laying up treasure on earth or am I laying up treasure in heaven?* We continue to explore this idea with the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus.

The Little Man

He entered Jericho and was passing through. (Luke 19:1 ESV)

Who is the "he"? This is Jesus. Jericho was along the valley of the Jordan River that ran from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea and made for a fairly flat walk north to south. The middle part of the country is hillier. Would you rather walk across Indiana or Colorado?

It seemed that Jesus was just on his way and Jericho was a pass-through town on his journey. But there was someone there he wanted to meet.

And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. (Verses 2-3)

Here is the infamous Zacchaeus. Luke includes three details about him. First, he was a chief tax collector. This is important to the story. The Romans financed their empire through a

vast network of taxes which required there to be local employees of Rome who collected those taxes; the Roman IRS. The rules were loose regarding what the tax collectors could exact and this led to such widespread corruption that tax collectors were considered the very bottom of the social barrel. They were essentially thieves and traitors. Why? They worked directly for imperial Rome. They took money from the Jews to give to the Romans.

Second, tax collectors became personally very wealthy as they played favorites, worked deals under the table, could punish whomever they liked, and skimmed money off the top. All of the taxes were collected through three hubs in Israel: Capernaum, Jerusalem, and Jericho. Presumably, nearly one-third of all the taxes collected in the whole nation passed through Zacchaeus' fingers. Think Jon Gotti or Tony Soprano. He was the head of the cartel and he didn't get to his position because of his perfect Sunday school attendance. Zacchaeus was ambitious, greedy, corrupt, and a traitor to his own people.

The last detail that Luke adds is his height. He was small in stature; vertically challenged. He was a Hobbit. Here is where the PGA Championship is helpful. When there is a huge crowd on a flat surface, you can't see. The Hobbit Zacchaeus didn't become the head of the tax cartel without being a resourceful guy.

So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. (Verses 4-6)

There is so much raw human experience here. We don't know Zacchaeus' spiritual background. He was a Jew, so presumably he was raised in proper Jewish teachings. Yet, he was clearly a fraud and a thief. However, John the Baptist ministered near Jericho and he may have heard him preach. He may have heard of Jesus' miracles. Clearly, there was a spiritual curiosity or stirring in his heart. We see it in his actions. He wanted to see Jesus. He "ran" ahead. That's not the kind of dignified action of a wealthy aristocrat. He "climbs a tree." I am going to guess all of us have climbed a tree in our lives. Do you see a lot of adults up in trees? No. I don't think it's too hard to understand this man's personal pain.

Long ago he sold his soul to power and money. His greed was greater than his patriotism and greater than his moral sensibilities. The temptation to financial gain was so powerful to him that he gave up his standing as a Jew and a citizen, and he probably lost his family and friends. Who brings cookies or hangs out at the tax collector's house? Yet he was very wealthy and powerful. So think big house, lots of money, no friends, lonely. And as we all know, money doesn't buy you happiness.

So for a man like this, he may be thinking, "Who cares if I run? Who cares if I climb a tree? The Jerichonians hate my guys anyway so why put on airs?" But he wanted very much to see Jesus.

The text says that Jesus walks by that sycamore tree, looks up, and says, "*Zacchaeus, hurry and come down for I must stay at your house today.*" (Verse 5) The emphasis of the Greek word "must" is surprisingly strong. He's not saying, "I'd like to," he's saying, "I have to." It's as if Jesus wasn't passing through Jericho randomly but actually went to Jericho to meet the chief tax collector and to stay at his house.

Zacchaeus is overjoyed. I wonder how long it had been since anyone wanted to come to his house. Yet, this Jesus who everyone was talking about and seeking an audience with, wants to spend time with Zacchaeus. He received Jesus "joyfully."

And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." (Verse 7)

This is important to Luke's purpose in telling the story. The crowd understands the significance of this. Zacchaeus is a notorious man and criminal in their eyes. He was the worst sinner in town. Yet, of all the people crowding around him, Jesus chooses the traitor in the tree as the person he wants to be with. Jesus will say why in a moment.

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Verses 8-10)

Zacchaeus' words are shocking. First he stands. There is a formality here. An official statement. Zacchaeus has something to get off his chest. He confesses his sin and makes two vows as signs of his repentance. First, he gives to the poor half of everything he has. Remember, Zacchaeus was a man who had a lot. This was no small commitment. Secondly, he says, *"If I have defrauded..."*, presumably he had defrauded many. He will pay it back times four. The law only required restitution plus 20%. Zacchaeus goes way beyond the law. Amazing what grace does with rules.

Jesus' response is to declare that Zacchaeus is a true son of Abraham, meaning he was a true son of faith. Then adds this, *"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."* Zacchaeus is held as an example of the kind of person Jesus came to save—a sinner who knows he is a sinner—not a person who is righteous in his own eyes, or looks down on sinners like the crowd did. Rather, Jesus came for the broken and spiritually shattered. I wonder how many years and how many nights Zacchaeus, in the privacy of his home, had cried out, "Is this all there is? I am rich! I am powerful! But I am so empty." The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost, meaning those who know their lostness and their need. Zacchaeus did.

How about you today? Can you resonate with ambitious Zacchaeus? And yet, the whole thing feels so empty. There must be something more! Would you climb a tree to maybe find what your soul is longing for?

Don't misread this to say gifts to the poor and restitution save us. Salvation is entirely by faith in Jesus. Zacchaeus wasn't saved because he made financial restitution any more than he was saved because he climbed the tree. **Salvation came to Zacchaeus' house because Jesus came to Zacchaeus' heart.** Like so many others who met Jesus, Zacchaeus was convinced that this man was utterly unique. He was the Messiah. God's Savior to the world. Zacchaeus believed.

The power in this story is the effect this new relationship with Jesus had on Zacchaeus. Money had always been the real god of his life. To get it, he gave up friends, family, morals, and self-respect. Money was his obsession.

Does that sound familiar? Any echo in your own story? Of all the idols and gods in our culture, money reigns supreme. Not that it's money itself. The Bible says money is neutral, *the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.* (1 Timothy 6:10) For a sinner, money is so easy to love. It provides what we want. Security. Self-worth. A sense of superiority over others. Self-reliance. Zacchaeus would fit well in the American way of life. Ambitious. Materialistic. Craving money and status. While money is neutral, where money sits in our priorities reveals just who is our god. Jesus put it this way, *"No one can serve two masters,*

for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Matthew 6:24)

There is only one throne in the human heart. Something or somebody has to reign. His whole life, money reigned on the throne of Zacchaeus' heart. Until one day, when Jesus came into town. What happened that day in Zacchaeus' heart was a spiritual revolution. Money had always been his king and god. But Jesus reached out to him. Went to his house. Spoke with him about his spiritual condition. And his words and life were so transformational and wonderful, how could he live for money anymore? With eyes of faith and by the power of God through Jesus in his heart, money was out and Jesus became his treasure, his worship, his Savior and God.

How do we know that? Look at what happens to the old idol money. He uses it to right past wrongs and he freely gives it away to meet the needs of others.

"Half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." (Luke 19:8) When greedy people become generous, something radical has happened. When drug abusers throw their drugs away and sexual idolaters throw their porn away and tax collectors give back money, something radical has happened. When a new affection takes over, the old idol becomes disposable.

What Zacchaeus Did with His Old Idol (Money) Evidenced His True Conversion

Imagine that the story was exactly the same—the crowd, the tree, Jesus coming to Zacchaeus' house, all of it—but the next day, Zacchaeus went right back to his job and money-loving extortion. Does Jesus declare him a true son of Abraham? Did salvation come to his house? No. How do we know it did? What he did with his money said it all.

This is why Jesus taught about money so much. For most, if Jesus is not on the throne, money is. How do we know when Jesus has assumed his place as Savior and Lord of our lives? Just like Zacchaeus, when the old idols are displaced and disposable. As it relates to money, an enthroned Jesus produces generous Christians.

This is where *Mission Them 2.0* is a critical moment for our church. Not so much because of *Mission Them*, but it is a defining moment just like *Mission Them 1.0* and maybe someday 3.0. These moments unveil to ourselves who is on the throne of our hearts. *Mission Them* is about meeting the spiritual and physical needs of people in our Jericho. When Jesus is here, there is generosity here. Why? The old idol money becomes disposable and givable for Jesus' sake.

This is an ongoing surrender and how easy it is for money to creep back onto the throne of our hearts. I know this well in my own life and if I may, I'd like to share something personal regarding my own sinfulness and battle. In my early 30s, I found myself often being asked to do this funeral or wedding or speak at this thing. That's great. However, what usually goes along with those opportunities is an honorarium or thank you gift of some kind. Not big money, but enough that I found it subtly playing with my heart and motivations. I say this with shame because when I was asked to do something, I found myself calculating the decision to do it or not based on the financial gain. This bothered me because I became a pastor to serve the Lord and yet this financial thing kept pestering my conscience.

I finally decided that the only way I was going to get past it was to find a way where I didn't think about it. The only way I could conceive of not thinking about it was if I gave all the honorarium money away. That's what I have done. You know what I found? It immediately

fixed it. I didn't even have to think about it. On top of that, over the years it's been my joy to use that money to support kingdom work here and there. Do special things. It's part of how I am doing my own personal *Mission Them* commitments.

When we give money away, it forces money off the throne of our hearts. On top of that, as Jesus said, *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* (Acts 20:35) This is like fun money for me. And it has been fun. Now I need to add, that I have thought that if I ever had a child I might use it to save for education. So that's part of my life and struggle now. How about you? What have you done to dethrone your love for money? Or like Zacchaeus, what evidence is there that Jesus is your true treasure?

An old Puritan named Thomas Chalmers, wrote something called *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*. It continues to be read because it continues to be true. Let me read one section:

"The love of God and the love of the world, are two affections, not merely in a state of rivalry, but in a state of enmity - and that so irreconcilable, that they cannot dwell together in the same bosom. We have already affirmed how impossible it were for the heart, by any innate elasticity of its own, to cast the world away from it; and thus reduce itself to a wilderness. The heart is not so constituted; and the only way to dispossess it of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one. Nothing can exceed the magnitude of the required change in a man's character - when bidden as he is in the New Testament, to love not the world; no, nor any of the things that are in the world for this so comprehends all that is dear to him in existence, as to be equivalent to a command of self-annihilation." (Thomas Chalmers)

We are not told what happened to Zacchaeus, but I imagine an honest mob boss doesn't last long. He may have lost everything, like Mary, who poured her expensive perfume on Jesus. Or like Moses, who *considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.* (Hebrews 11:24-26). Or like the disciples who left everything to follow Jesus. And let us not forget the ultimate example of Jesus himself.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Whatever we admire in Zacchaeus we have to worship in Jesus. Jesus so valued the will of his Father that he left infinite riches and glory and gave his life on the cross. Ultimate love. Ultimate self-giving for our good and our eternal joy.

I wonder if God might use this exciting but critical time in our church to create such gladness in Christ that the old idol of money and the pride that lurks behind it might be removed.

When you meet Zacchaeus in heaven, don't sing the children's song to him. He'll hear it a million times. Thank him for his example. I hope we as a church walk faithfully in it.

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