

**+ Luke 19:1-10 + Series: 364 Days of Thanksgiving +
+ Theme: Overwhelming Gratitude Leads to Overwhelming Generosity¹ +
+ 6th Sunday after the Epiphany + 12 February 2017 +**

The story is told of a fitness center that offered \$1,000 to anyone who could show they were stronger than the gym's owner. Here's how it worked: The muscle-bound owner would squeeze a lemon into a glass until all the juice was gone. Then he would 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 beat 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 had come for other business, 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 shocked 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 ninja?" The man in the suit replied, "I work for the IRS."

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. I don't know any of us who enjoying paying taxes. So in our day, someone who collects taxes isn't always very popular.

Yet in Jesus' day, it was even worse. You see, the Romans who ruled over Israel picked people from every town and region to collect their taxes for them. If you agreed to be a tax collector, however, right from the beginning people hated 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 Romans collected their taxes by having the tax collector collect a certain amount from each person to give to the government. However, anything the tax collector collected above and beyond that, he could keep. Oh, and did I mention he always had Roman soldiers standing behind him as he collected?

You can see how tax collectors in Jesus' day often became extremely wealthy. Most were corrupt politicians. They cheated the people. They were traitors and the scum of society. People looked at them like many people today look at CEOs who rip off stockholders or those who set up Ponzi schemes to rob people of their life savings. Tax collectors in Jesus' day were considered the worst sinners. Everybody hated them.

Understanding that will help you understand our lesson today. There we find Jesus about a week before his death. He was walking with thousands of other pilgrims headed up to Jerusalem from Galilee for the Feast of the Passover. The last big city through which they passed before arriving in Jerusalem was Jericho. Located about six miles from the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, Jericho was filled with luscious vegetation and towering trees.

The custom in those days was that, as Passover pilgrims went through a town on their way to Jerusalem, the people from that town gathered along the streets and cheered 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 whom some said was the Messiah. Mothers lifted up their young children, hoping they would catch a glimpse of and perhaps even be blessed by the great prophet. You can 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, where will he stay? With one of the priests or the elders?"

That's when we meet Zacchaeus. The name Zacchaeus in Hebrew means "just" or "pure." Zacchaeus was anything but just or pure. He was the chief tax collector of the district—the very top of a corrupt pyramid. If he was what most tax collectors were, he was a crook in every sense of the term.

Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus. He wondered about Jesus. He wanted to see him, but he had a problem. Zacchaeus was vertically challenged. He was a short man. He couldn't see over all the heads in the crowd.

Now Jericho was also known as the City of Palms because its roads were lined with trees. Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree so he could see. Chances are pretty good that he probably wasn't the only one in the trees trying to get a bird's-eye view of Jesus.

¹ This sermon was adapted from a 2016 stewardship sermon series—*364 Days of Thanksgiving*—by Rev. Andrew Schroer.

Yet when Jesus came to Zacchaeus' tree, he stopped, looked up, and said, **"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down because today it is necessary for me to stay at your house."** Jesus was going to spend the night in Jericho, but at the house of the chief tax collector! The people couldn't believe it. **"He's gone to stay with a sinful man,"** they said as their noses went up and their eyes looked down.

We aren't told what Jesus talked about with Zacchaeus on the way to his house, but we can assume he talked about sin and forgiveness. We can assume he talked about how he had come to save sinners like Zacchaeus. We can assume that because that's what Jesus usually talked about.

We can assume he talked about saving sinners because Zacchaeus stood up to make an announcement. **"Look, I'll give half of my possessions to the poor, Lord. And if I have extorted anything from anyone, I'll pay back four times as much."** Think about that. Zacchaeus gave half to the poor and then used the other half to pay back everybody he had wronged. Overwhelming gratitude was leading to overwhelming generosity.

At that, Jesus said something which probably shocked and amazed the people who were listening. **"Today salvation has come to this house...because he too is a son of Abraham."** Now wait a minute! Wasn't this man 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? Well, Jesus, the Son of Man, **"came to seek and to save the lost."**

Those words echo even more loudly when you remember that only seven days later this same Jesus would rescue the world by bringing salvation on a cross. He would be beaten and bloodied, nailed to two heavy pieces of wood, and forsaken by his heavenly Father on a hill called Golgotha. Yet there Jesus would bring lost sinners into his family. They would 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, couldn't handle that truth. They were often horrified because Jesus hung out with prostitutes and 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 has taken up residence inside our hearts. Your nose goes up easily and your eyes look down quickly when you see the sinners out there in the world. You know who I'm talking about—those corrupt politicians running our country into the ground, those drug dealers and drug users ruining our society, those husbands who hit their wives and those wives who cheat on their husbands. Our little Pharisee even looks down on those sinners sitting right next to us here in church.

In polite conversation, you and I say, "I don't think I'm any better than they are," but deep down in the recesses of your heart, your little Pharisee 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. That means I was nowhere near heaven, nowhere near perfection, nowhere near Jesus. *I am* the worst of sinners. That's me sitting in that tree. That's you sitting up in that tree. Like the Pharisees, we have spiritual blind spots. We easily see the sins of others, but fail to see how lost we really are in our sins of pride, anger, lust, or laziness. We fail to see sin's dark stain that makes us lost for eternity in hell.

...But Jesus came to seek and to save *you*, when you were lost. He was pure. He never cheated or stole. He never welled up in selfish pride. He never gave 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. Because he did, you and I are forgiven. He tells us to come down from our tree. He's here for you and stays with you. He brings you free forgiveness and a home in heaven.

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

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

God has been overwhelmingly generous with you. Recognize 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 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. You haven't earned any of it. You don't deserve it. You're not better than anyone else, but God has been overwhelmingly generous with you.

So, like we asked last week, how will you respond? You can respond with overwhelming generosity. You can respond like Zacchaeus and give generously. As you give from a generous heart, God promises to bless you. So you can be overwhelmingly generous with your family and friends. You can be overwhelmingly generous here at church. You can be overwhelmingly generous with complete strangers. You can give as God has given to you, because, my friends, overwhelming gratitude leads to a life of overwhelming generosity. God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.