

GOD AND MONEY

Matthew 6:19-21

Luke 19:1-10

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I realize I am in danger of transgressing sacred boundaries this morning in talking about money outside of Stewardship Season. Come to think of it, I may even be treading dangerous ground preaching about money at all. Many conscientious Christians feel that money carries too much of a worldly taint to be a suitable subject for church discussions. For others, the only problem with tainted money in church is, 'Taint enough of it!

Seriously, though, I wonder if the discomfort we sometimes feel bringing financial discussions into worship is the power which these topics have to make us feel guilty and inadequate. Jesus draws a pretty direct link between the use we make of our financial resources and the disposition of our souls: "Where your money is, there your heart will be also," he says. Thinking about money has a way of helping us get to the heart of things, and I trust I'm not the only one who finds the prospect of having my heart opened up a little disconcerting. It is, however, the Lenten season, when self-examination is the order of the day. And actually, there may be some comfort to be found in the story of Zacchaeus which we have just heard, because the role that money plays in his life is bad enough to make the rest of us look great by comparison!

Zacchaeus truly is a loathsome little man, whose pursuit of wealth has led him to betray his own people. Zacchaeus, you see, is a tax collector—a collaborator with the hated Roman occupation government. And he has become wealthy by helping the Romans oppress and exploit his Jewish fellow citizens.

Now the way the Roman tax system worked was that the Roman authorities would tell a person like Zacchaeus how much money they expected to receive from the area he was assigned to. Tax rates were notoriously high throughout the Empire, but if a collector somehow managed to collect even *more* than the Romans had asked for, the authorities would look the other way as he pocketed the additional amount. So the Roman equivalent of our April 15th Tax Day was having Zacchaeus show up at your door, accompanied by two large men named Rocko and Guido. And inviting themselves into your living room, they would sit you down and "negotiate" with you how much you were going to pay in taxes for that year.

This wealthy betrayer of his people is the one whose curiosity propels him into the branches of a sycamore tree in order to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he passes by. And to the astonishment and horror of all the ordinary, law-abiding people lining the parade route, Jesus stops, looks straight at Zacchaeus, calls him down from his perch, and announces his intention to honor Zacchaeus by staying at his home that day. Can you imagine how shocked and betrayed the respectable and upright citizens

of Jericho felt seeing Jesus honor this horrible little man that way? I suspect Luke is putting it mildly when he says they began to “grumble.”

There is additional cause for us to feel shocked by Jesus’ behavior here. Let me ask you something: Do you see any hint in Luke’s account that Zacchaeus was thinking about repentance as he climbed that sycamore tree? I’m drawing a blank. Zacchaeus is curious to catch a glimpse of a passing celebrity, but that’s it. Yet Jesus, completely out of the blue, honors Zacchaeus with a personal visit.

This is not how my Sunday School teachers said it should work. People are supposed to repent of their sins first, and then God will accept and forgive them in Jesus. This pattern is built into our Sunday services. **First** we confess our sins; **then** we receive an assurance of forgiveness and a blessing. Repentance is supposed to be the precondition that comes **before** grace and forgiveness, according to our standard ways of thinking.

But Jesus turns this pattern on its head. There is nothing remotely penitent-looking about Zacchaeus. Yet with no outward sign of repentance, Jesus honors him with the grace of a completely undeserved visit. It is only **after** Jesus initiates the encounter with Zacchaeus that we see repentance entering the picture, in the form of Zacchaeus’s change of heart. In Jesus’ hands, a completely undeserved grace and forgiveness come first, and then repentance emerges afterwards in response.

And this is not the only way that Jesus messes with our standard patterns of religious thinking. What do you think repentance should look like? I think many of us carry around a mental image of what a “good Christian” looks like. Nobody conforms perfectly to an ideal image, of course, but in general when we think of someone repenting, we see them becoming more kind and compassionate, more filled with the love of Jesus, more faithfully devoted to the life of the church. Our mental image of a good Christian is someone who looks a lot like many of us! But Jesus messes with that assumption here, too!

If money is indeed a window into the heart, it’s clear that Zacchaeus’s heart has undergone a profound change. After Jesus comes to him, Zacchaeus announces that he is going to give away **half of his fortune** to the poor, in addition to making generous restitution to people he has defrauded in the past. How many of us are willing to liquidate half of our assets and giving them to the poor? Raise your hand if you’re willing! Considering what a notorious financial predator Zacchaeus used to be, this far-reaching repentance can only be a miracle of the Holy Spirit.

But did you also notice what Zacchaeus’s repentance does **not** include? He says not one word about giving up his position as a tax collector! He will still be collecting money from his own people in the service of their Roman oppressors. His fellow Jews will still see Zacchaeus as a despised collaborator with the foreign occupation government. Zacchaeus’s repentance is breathtaking as far as it goes, but he doesn’t come away from it looking even remotely like a respectable, upright member of the faith community.

Which of course is why Jesus says, “Zacchaeus, you have made some important first steps today in your personal journey toward wholeness. If you keep making progress like this, you will one day find yourself genuinely worthy to receive God’s gift of eternal life.” Except that’s not what Jesus says, is it? Do you remember what he actually says? “Today salvation has come to this house!” What the heck, Jesus! How can salvation come to this awful little man who continues to betray his own people?!!

Jesus blesses Zacchaeus's woefully incomplete repentance without qualification or hesitation. So much for our assumption that true repentance will *of course* produce people who conform to our mental image of a "good Christian."

Does it bother you like it does me that Jesus affirms Zacchaeus when he plans to keep on working as a tax collector? Zacchaeus's repentance should be more like ours, which don't have huge gaps in them. *I* give away half of what I own like Zacchaeus does, but I also ... oh wait. Never mind.

Could it be that everybody's repentance leaves things out? "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost," says Jesus. Maybe that's good news not just for Zacchaeus but for all of us.

So here's a question: What would it be like if we as a church actually started imitating Jesus' way of dealing with a person like Zacchaeus. What if we let go of our assumption that repentance always has to come first for people to be accepted by God and have a place in the church? Or what if we stopped expecting that true repentance will always produce model church members, who think and act just like us? What if we set all that aside, and took as our primary job to simply help people draw closer to Jesus, no matter who they were, and then we could stand back and see what kind of unique fruits of repentance *God* would bring forth in their lives?

That sounds a lot more joyful and peaceful than our current tendency to get all tied up in knots over who deserves to be in the church and who doesn't, and whose repentance is acceptable and whose falls short. We bring everybody we can closer to Jesus (including ourselves!), and then we wait expectantly with open minds and hearts to see what God brings forth as a result.

That would be a really different way to operate. It would certainly go against the way many churches function. Most of the congregations I've been involved with tend to operate with an "us and them" mentality, which separates out *us*, the good and respectable people who clearly belong in the church, from those less savory *others* who think and act and maybe even smell different from us.

And of course our society adds a whole new layer to this classic distinction by dividing us all into opposing tribes. Society tells us that a person's acceptability as a church member, or even as a friend, depends *a lot* on whether they stand on the red side or the blue side of the great dividing line that cuts through our life as a nation. Society says that we have to treat people and churches very differently, depending on whether they are affirming and accepting, or defending traditional faith and families. And if they stand on the opposite side of the line from us, well then clearly it is our duty to shun and despise them! We have all become obsessed with sorting people into categories of acceptable and unacceptable. So maybe Jesus reaches out to hugely unacceptable Zacchaeus in order to shake us out of this fixation on judging one another.

What would it be like if we could let go of all this sorting and qualifying and categorizing? What if we let God be the judge and simply took it as our job, as best we could, to bring people closer to Jesus, whichever side of the great divide they stood on? We are all so accustomed to demonizing people across the aisle. Letting go of that habit could be scary and difficult, particularly at first. The differences that divide us are large and important, and it might just take a miracle of the Holy Spirit for us to place love and grace above politics and party as the most important principles guiding our lives. If God helped us get the hang of it, though, think how much less stress and drama and contempt would fill our lives, and how much more peace and grace and joy we might experience. How amazing would it

be if all the frozen animosities and grievances and resentments of our divisions started to melt away beneath the warm sun of God's love and grace!

Or think what a relief it would be if we could stop worrying which category we belong in ourselves. I think most of the anxiety which attends money discussions in church has to do with the question, "Am I acceptable?" "Am I really doing enough?" Money has a way of surfacing the insecurities that weigh on our hearts. But Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus shows us that these are irrelevant questions! Of *course* Zacchaeus's repentance wasn't completely acceptable or deserving of God's love. Jesus blessed him anyway! So maybe the one question that really matters for any of us isn't "Am I acceptable?", but "Am I drawing closer to Jesus?"

And if we do get closer to Jesus, transformation *will* happen. That is a wonderful thing, but Zacchaeus's example also shows us that our transformations may not always take the forms that we had hoped for or expected. We may rejoice to see our neighbors across the aisle growing closer to Jesus, but then the changes God brings forth in them, though real and impressive, may not be the ones we think they most need!" God's agenda is different from our agenda. Jesus doesn't seem surprised that Zacchaeus's repentance has notable gaps. "Today, salvation has come to this house," he says. And Jesus says the same thing to imperfect works-in-progress like you and me...and our neighbors across the aisle.

So draw close to him and know his peace, my friends. Rejoice in the gifts of love and acceptance he offers to you and to everyone. Pray and watch and wait for his transforming power, and see how Christ's own love begins to fill your heart, changing you in ways that surprise and delight. If Jesus can bring about such an amazing transformation in a man like Zacchaeus, think what he will do for you and me, if only we draw near to him.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.