

**The Possibility Business—Part 3:  
“What Generosity Can Do”**

**OT 30C-19**

Luke 19: 1-8

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The Possibility Business—Part 2:  
“What Generosity Can Do”

So who knows the song? The Zacchaeus song?

If you don't know it, please don't think you should. It's a children's song that the church tended to teach kids back when my generation was going through church school. It's a song about Zacchaeus and the story we just read... so if you know it, sing it with me:

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.*

*He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.*

*And as the Savior passed that way he looked up in the tree.*

*And he said, Zacchaeus, you come down.*

*For I am going to your house today.*

*For I am going to your house today.*

It's a sweet song that makes it seem like it's about this sweet story of a sweet little man who wanted to see Jesus so desperately he climbed a tree.

That's the way it's taught to children—which is fine. That outline is, essentially, true.

But it's also lacking...

Because the story of Zacchaeus doesn't happen in a vacuum. It occurs along Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.

For three years now, Jesus and his disciples have been making their way through Galilee on their way to the capital of Hebrew society. All along the roads they traveled, Jesus interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures to the throngs they encountered... he taught them about the kingdom of God... and most importantly... most importantly... he *showed* them the kingdom of God. He showed them in the way he turned the values of the world upside down. He showed them in the way he embraced the outsiders... the way he treated women as equals... the way he cared for untouchables.

And yet, every town he went through, even though they'd heard the stories, they were still surprised by it all. Even though he'd made clear women were equal with men, folks were still surprised he let a sinful woman bathe his feet with her tears. Even though he regularly healed the sick, they were surprised he would talk to, let alone heal a leper. And even though he carried no belongings for himself, folks were still surprised at the way he kept confronting the notion of wealth in his day.

This last lesson, in particular, was the hardest of all for the Hebrews. After all, they'd been taught their whole lives that wealth was a sign of God's favor... but Jesus kept saying things like the last will be first and the first will be last.

In fact, in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter, just before our lesson this morning picks up, Jesus told a rich ruler that it'd be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who's rich to experience the kingdom of God."

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And yet... and yet... when Jesus began his entrance into Jericho... and the crowd rushed to greet this prophet they'd been hearing all about for three years now... of all the people he would notice... of all the people who could've chosen to single out... Jesus called out to Zacchaeus. He chose the richest man in town... the *chief* tax collector of the entire city... which seemed like a contradiction of everything they people of Jericho had been hearing about this miracle man and the kingdom he was proclaiming.

For despite what the song we sang may say about the man, let me be blunt. Zacchaeus was grade A scum. According to the Hebrew people, he was lower than scum. He was the scum the grows on the bottom of scum, you know?

As a tax collector, Zacchaeus had made the conscious choice to align himself with the Romans—the empire oppressing the Hebrews—all in the name of money. But even worse, as the *chief* tax collector for all of Jericho, he had agreed to oversee and maintain the entire corrupt system that suppressed the Hebrew people. It meant there was not a good bought or sold... nor was there a person who resided in that city who Zacchaeus didn't take from.

Clearly, Zacchaeus' choices in life had made him an incredibly rich man. He wasn't just a bit better off than his neighbors or even well-to-do. He was rolling in it.

But his pursuit of wealth had come at a cost. Everybody knew how Zacchaeus made his money. And they despised him for it. I mean... they loathed him.

"How can he sleep at night?" they wondered. "How can even look at himself in the mirror?"

It meant he wasn't welcome in the neighborhood gatherings.

Fathers wouldn't let him come near their daughters.

In fact, the only kind of community Zacchaeus knew was with his fellow tax collectors... the other low-life's of his day.

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You see, Zacchaeus wasn't just a wee little man according to his height. He was a wee little man according to his morality and his integrity and, most of all, his faithfulness.

Every day he woke up and decided to go to work for Rome, he was choosing the way of the Empire over the way of God.

Every time he took and passed on money to Rome while keeping some for himself, he was choosing the way of greed over the way of grace.

*That's* why Zacchaeus had to climb a tree when Jesus came to town. Sure, he was short, but there were other short folks in Jericho as well. And the crowd let the other short folks move to the front of the line so they could see Jesus pass by.

But Zacchaeus didn't even bother asking to be let up front, did he? He knew how despised he was. He knew nobody was going to dare make even the slightest room for him.

So he climbed a tree. It was his only option.

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How pathetic, right? The richest man in town forced to climb a tree.

But still... he climbed it, you know?

We're not told why.

Maybe Zacchaeus had heard how Jesus had eaten with other tax collectors and wanted to see this man who would eat with his kind.

Or maybe... maybe Zacchaeus *had* started to grow weary from all the worldly wealth he'd accumulated and all it had cost him.

Whatever the reason, he climbed the tree to see Jesus.

And grace upon grace, *Jesus saw him*. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down: I'm gonna stay at your place today."

Zacchaeus couldn't believe it! He was entirely overwhelmed. Overwhelmed and overjoyed.

But the people of Jericho—they were *not* overjoyed. Even though they'd heard all about the amazing grace of this prophet from Nazareth... even though they knew Jesus tended to side with those the world rejected, the people could barely pick their jaws off the ground when Jesus chose Zacchaeus of all people.

So Luke says the people of Jericho grumbled... which I suspect is Luke's way of putting it nicely.

"What about Ishtar," they wondered, "who's been caring for his dead brother's six children?" "Why didn't Jesus choose him?"

Or, "What about Benjamin and Susanna, who are caring for three orphans?"

"Why did Jesus choose to single out Zacchaeus—the richest, greediest, worst one of all?"

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If I'm being honest, I would've been grumbling, too. Even though I truly believe God's grace is for everybody... even though, in my more generous moment, I want the grace of God to include people like Zacchaeus, I have no doubt that had I lined the street in Jericho that day, I would've had a hard time accepting it, too.

It's was God in the flesh singling out and blessing the very worst of humanity.

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Zacchaeus heard the crowd grumbling, but he was used to their disdain. He didn't care. He just couldn't get over that Jesus saw him. He couldn't believe the grace that Jesus would choose little, despicable him.

And upon experiencing such unmerited grace, Luke makes clear *Zacchaeus was changed*. He was, in a very real way, transformed. "Look, Lord," he said. "I will give to the poor half—half of everything I own; and if I've defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." It is a sign of astounding generosity coming from the one you'd least expect.

"Today, Jesus said, "salvation has come to this house."

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Put it all together, and many people believe this is a story about repentance. Many believe this is a story about a guy named Zacchaeus turning from his old, bad ways in order to be blessed by Jesus.

But actually, it's not a story about repentance leading to grace at all... but a story about grace leading to generosity... and generosity leading to joy.

The order of the plot is actually pretty clear.

Zacchaeus doesn't change his way in order to be blessed.

Zacchaeus doesn't come down from the tree and commit himself to the way of God in order to receive Jesus' grace.

No. Zacchaeus changed when he saw how blessed he already was.

Zacchaeus changed the moment he experienced the grace of Jesus Christ up in that tree.

Zacchaeus changed the moment Jesus decided to see Zacchaeus amid his full human.

Zacchaeus changed when Jesus called him down and so told everyone in Jericho that that this wee little man, like it or not, was a child of God, just like all of them.

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It's important to see... Grace came first. Repentance didn't lead to grace.

- Grace led repentance.
- Grace is what enabled Zacchaeus to see how backwards he'd been living.
- Grace is what enabled Zacchaeus to see how poor his earthly pursuits had actually made him.
- Grace is what enabled Zacchaeus to see life is not made by what you make or earn or secure for yourself.
- Grace is what enabled Zacchaeus to finally see how true life... kingdom life... salvation in the here and now... is built on the generosity.
- Grace enabled him to experience the inverted principle that we are actually our fullest, we are happiest, we are the closest we will get to God's kingdom in this lifetime when we are using our blessings to be a blessing.

*That's* why Zacchaeus turned from being the city's most selfish man to one its most generous.

Which is why, when Zacchaeus started to give his money away... when Jesus saw Zacchaeus finally get what kingdom life is really all about... it is *then* that Jesus said, "Today... Zacchaeus... today salvation has come to this house."

For it was then Jesus knew Zacchaeus finally understood the intimate way grace and generosity are irrevocably intertwined. And not just that, but generosity and joy, as well.

For at the end of it all... what the story of this wee little man truly reveals is the way grace leads to generosity... and how generosity leads to joy.

It's no less than the path that of salvation—not salvation in terms of where we go when we die—but fullness of life in the here and now. Grace to generosity to joy.

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Now... an obvious segue here would be to turn now to a stewardship message and ask you to be generous in your pledges to TPC for the coming year. In fact, stewardship experts would agree that's exactly what I should say next. And please don't get me wrong, I do hope you will continue growing in your generosity to TPC next year.

But more than that... even much more than that I want you to know the joy... I want you to know the deep-down joy that is more than happiness... that is more than pleasure... the kind

of feeling you can only get when you spend your God-given gifts in pursuit of God's kingdom... expecting nothing in return... no strings attached... except a desire to be a blessing.

For that, friends, is the life Jesus wants for us.

It's nothing less than the life we see modeled at this very table... where Christ pours himself out for us that we may go forth and know the salvation of pouring ourselves out on behalf of others.

In fact, at its core, that's what this meal is all about—generosity, and all the possibilities God seeks to reveal to us and through us. So let us prepare for the feast... that we might taste and see and experience all that generosity can do. Amen.