

Sermon for 2nd November 2025

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Isaiah 1:10-18; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

Sermon

In chapter 19 of Luke's Gospel, we are approaching the climax of Jesus' ministry. He has been travelling south towards Jerusalem for the final time, and now he enters Jericho, about 18 miles north-east of Jerusalem and over 3000 feet below it.

In Jesus' day, Jericho was a wealthy town. Herod had a palace there, and it was a centre of taxation, which is why it's no surprise that Jesus might encounter one of the chief tax-collectors. These chief tax-collectors were especially wealthy. They not only collected taxes on behalf of the Romans, but they also had other tax-collectors working for them, and they took a cut from every level of the taxation business, like some kind of ancient multi-level marketing scheme.

As you will no doubt have gathered by now, tax-collectors, and especially chief tax-collectors, were considered social outcasts and sinners, disapproved of by the poor, the wealthy, and the pious alike. So, of course, they are the people to whom Jesus is drawn.

Not many verses ago, in chapter 18, you may remember that Jesus was confronted by the rich young ruler who had strictly kept all the commandments but couldn't bring himself to give away any of his possessions. Jesus invited that man to follow him, but he couldn't give up his financial security to do so. He was pious in his religious observance and a perfect keeper of the law, but his heart was miserly. Here now in Chapter 19, Luke gives us an account of a parallel situation, but with a different outcome. Wee Zacchaeus is also wealthy, also a ruler of sorts, someone who has done well by following and exploiting the law

of the land. Jesus approaches him with a similar invitation of divine welcome. “I must stay at your house today.” I find myself wondering if Matthew the tax-collector and Zacchaeus the chief tax-collector may have known each other!

Zacchaeus’s reaction however could not be more different to that other rich man. Zacchaeus says he will give half his possessions to the poor and repay anyone he has defrauded with four times as much. This is the amount specified as a reparation for theft in the book of Exodus, which says that anyone who steals a sheep must pay back four sheep.

Some scholars say that the Greek implies that Zacchaeus is not just promising to do this in the future - something he could renege on when Jesus leaves - but that he has already been doing it, indeed he is saying that his customary practice is to give half of what he has to the poor, which is why Jesus can authoritatively declare to the grumbling onlookers that salvation has come to his house.

It's worth noticing, I think, the difference in mood between the enthusiasm of both Zacchaeus and Jesus for seeing each other, and the grumbling of “all who saw it.” So often we see Jesus personally seeking someone out to bring light and joy and relief into their life, and yet those around them equally often respond with negativity, complaint, and jealousy. “Why does Jesus spend time with sinners?” they mutter. You could imagine a similar reaction today if Jesus made a beeline for a modern-day billionaire and said, “I must come for tea at one of your mansions today!” You might quite reasonably be upset that not only is an extremely wealthy person getting privileged access to the Son of God, but that Jesus is spending time with someone who probably got their vast wealth from exploiting others.

The problem with that response, both then and now, is that we’re judging Jesus’s actions based on society’s expectations of privilege, power, and wealth. We expect wealthy people to attract more attention, and for spiritual influencers to

be drawn to money like moths to a flame. We don't like it, but we expect it. And the same was true in the first century.

What the grumbling onlookers hadn't realised is that Jesus isn't at all attracted by wee Zacchaeus' wealth, but by his willingness to change the path of his life and turn aside from greed to generosity. As is so often the case, when unconditional divine love meets a willingness and desire to change, there follows a very swift transformation of a person's life.

So, what we see from this story is that an encounter with a loving God produces a transformed heart, and a transformed heart leads to salvation, and from salvation comes this overflowing generosity. And none of this has anything to do with keeping strict religious rules. Through his teaching and action, Jesus repeatedly implies that being or becoming a blessed child of God is not a matter of parentage or piety, but of inner transformation, demonstrated by an abundant generosity – offering ourselves to one another with openness and authenticity.

This is a virtuous circle of generosity. The more we give of ourselves, the more we are blessed. The more we give of ourselves, the more others are inspired to give in return. When someone is the recipient of unexpected and undeserved generosity, isn't their heart also often opened and transformed, and generosity fired up in them as well? I think perhaps this is why so many people who benefit from a charity's work often end up volunteering or raising money for that charity in response.

In fact, the Apostle Paul often writes that the whole divine reason for having wealth, gifts, talents, and resources is so that we can share in God's good work. It's not *for* us alone; it's for all to share. Otherwise, we act like a child keeping a toy entirely to ourselves and refusing to share it with our siblings. *It's not fair, we cry, we kept all the rules, they didn't!*

A child doesn't want to share a toy because they're fearful they might not get it back. God on the other hand says he will repay generosity with overflowing abundance. "Give, and it will be given to you," says Jesus, early in his ministry, "a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap."

Generosity, I want to say, is Salvation. Those, like Zacchaeus, who are or become generous, have shown themselves to be children of God. Those who are children of God know that God's love is overwhelmingly about giving. God continuously gives. He gives us water and heat and food through the rain and sun and earth. He gives us forgiveness for our mistakes and selfishness. He shows us love to counter our self-doubt. And most importantly, he gives us himself, in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit.

This really is the entirety of the Christian faith, that we continually thank God for the abundance of undeserved gifts he gives us, and with hearts aflame in gratitude, we continually then seek to do the same for others.