

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-figtree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Dear Children of our heavenly Father,

There is new book that has come out from the Northwestern Publishing House with the title, “*364 Days of Thanksgiving*.” The title pretty much explains everything, doesn't it? What a fitting title as we sit here on the day that we call Thanksgiving Day. And as we all know so well, this is just one of the 365 days of the year and every other day can also be called Thanksgiving Day. While we can sit down today and discuss for a long time the many material blessings that God has allowed to be a part of our lives this past year, it is God's spiritual blessings that need to really stand out. God's grace – his undeserved love for us – is the greatest blessing we could ever have received. God's grace sent his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. But it is more than that. God's grace which is so willingly given to us also strengthens us and moves us to a life of service to our God as a way of saying thank you. Our devotion for today will draw on that thought:

Theme: Overwhelming Grace Leads To Overwhelming Generosity

1. God's grace fills our hearts

2. God's grace moves our hearts

The story is told of a local fitness center that was offering \$1,000 to anyone who could show they were stronger than the owner of the gym. 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 best 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 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 what?” he asked.

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. Raise your hand if you are a fan of the IRS. In our day, someone who collects taxes isn’t always very popular.

In Jesus’ day, however, it was even worse. You see, the Romans who ruled over Israel would pick people from every town and region to collect their taxes for them. So if you agreed to be a tax collector, right from the beginning people would hate 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 way the Romans collected their taxes was by having the tax collector collect a certain amount from each person to give to the government. But anything the tax collector could get above and beyond that, he could keep. Oh, and did I mention he would have Roman soldiers standing behind him as he collected?

You can see how tax collectors oftentimes became extremely wealthy. Many were corrupt. They cheated the people. They were traitors. They were the scum of society. People looked at them as many people today look at Bernie Madoff, the guy who stole millions with his Ponzi scheme in which people invested money and lost everything. Tax collectors in Jesus’ day were considered the worst of sinners. Everybody hated them.

Understanding that will help you understand our lesson today. In our lesson, we find Jesus, the week before Holy Week, about seven days before his death. He was walking with the thousands of pilgrims who were headed up to Jerusalem from Galilee for the Feast of the Passover. The last big city through which they would pass before arriving in Jerusalem was Jericho, the City of Palms. Located in a lush valley about six miles from the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, Jericho was a tropical paradise filled with luscious vegetation and towering trees. The custom in those days was that, as the pilgrims went through a town on their way to Jerusalem, the people from that town would gather along the streets and cheer on their brothers and sisters. It was like a parade.

Now, the people of Jericho heard that Jesus, the great prophet from Nazareth, was coming. The whole city flooded the streets. Curious onlookers came to see the man who some said was the Messiah. If you looked around, you’d probably see mothers lifting up their young children, hoping they would catch a glimpse of and maybe be blessed by the great prophet. Can’t you just 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, whose house will he stay in? Will it be one of the chief priests or the elders of the city?”

And that’s when we meet Zacchaeus. The name Zacchaeus in Hebrew means “just” or “pure.” Zacchaeus, however, was anything but just or pure. He was the chief tax collector of the district—the top of a corrupt pyramid. If he was what most tax collectors were, he was a crook. Now, Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus. He wondered about Jesus. He wanted to see him, but he had a problem. You see, Zacchaeus was vertically challenged. He was short. He couldn’t see over the crowds.

Remember, Jericho was the City of Palms. The road was lined with all kinds of different trees. So, Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree so he could see. We can imagine with the size of the crowd, he probably wasn’t the only one in the trees trying to get a bird’s-eye view of Jesus.

When Jesus came to Zacchaeus’ tree, though, he stopped, looked up, and said, **“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today”** (Luke 19:5). Jesus was going to spend the night in

Jericho, but at the house of the chief tax collector! The people went nuts. They couldn't believe it. **“He has gone to be the guest of a sinner”** (Luke 19:7), they said as their noses went up and their eyes looked down.

We aren't told what Jesus talked about with Zacchaeus when they got 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. We can assume that because that's what Jesus regularly talked about.

We can assume he talked about saving sinners because Zacchaeus stood up to make an announcement. **“Look, Lord!”** he said. **“Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount”** (Luke 19:8). Think about that. Zacchaeus gave half to the poor and then used the other half to pay back everybody he had wronged. God's overwhelming grace had changed his heart, and God's grace moved his heart which led to overwhelming generosity.

At that, Jesus said something which probably shocked and amazed the people. **“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham”** (Luke 19:9). But wait a minute! This was 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? Because Jesus, the Son of Man, **“came to seek and to save the lost”** (Luke 19:10).

Those words echo even more loudly when we remember that only seven days later this same Jesus, the Son of Man, would rescue the world by bringing salvation on the cross. He would be beaten and bloodied, nailed to two intersecting pieces of wood, and forsaken by his heavenly Father on a hill called Calvary. But 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, the ones who had him put to death, couldn't handle that truth. They were endlessly horrified because Jesus was always hanging out with prostitutes, 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 in our hearts. Our noses go up so easily and our eyes look down so quickly as we see the sinners out there in the world. You know the ones—those corrupt politicians who are running our country into the ground, those drug dealers and drug users who are a blight on our society, those people who abuse innocent children. Our little Pharisee sometimes even looks down on those sinners sitting next to us here in church.

In polite conversation we will say we don't think we're any better than they are, but deep down in the recesses of our hearts, each of our little Pharisees 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. Do you hear that word? That means nowhere near heaven, nowhere near perfection, nowhere near Jesus. ***I am*** the worst of sinners. That is me sitting in that tree. That's us sitting in that tree. Like the Pharisees, we have spiritual blind spots. We so easily see the sins of others, but fail to see how lost we really are in our sins of pride, anger, lust, and laziness. We fail to see sin's dark stain so thoroughly imbedded in us that makes us lost for eternity in hell.

But Jesus came to seek and to save *you*, a lost one. He practiced purity by never cheating or stealing, by never welling up in selfish pride, and by never giving 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. But because he did, we are forgiven. He tells us to come down from our tree. He's here for us and stays with us. He brings to us free forgiveness and a home in heaven.

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

The secret to all this generosity is found in God's overwhelming grace. The secret to the joy that Zacchaeus found is found in the same place our generosity is found. It is found in God's grace which is shown to us in his Means of Grace – His Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper which are given to us by grace alone. When our hearts are changed, faith is created and our spiritual eyes are opened and we recognize all the amazing things God has done for us. The secret to overwhelming gratitude is understanding that we don't deserve any of it.

God has been overwhelmingly generous with you. Start with recognizing 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 around you 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. Like Zacchaeus, you haven't earned any of it. You don't deserve it. You're not better than anyone else. Yet God has been overwhelmingly generous with you.

So now respond with overwhelming gratitude. Respond with overwhelming generosity. Respond like Zacchaeus and give generously. As you give from a generous heart, God promises to bless you. So be overwhelmingly generous with your family and friends. Be overwhelming generous here at church. Be overwhelmingly generous with complete strangers. Give as God has given to you. Learn from poor, vertically challenged Zacchaeus. Overwhelming gratitude leads to overwhelming generosity. Amen.