

How Far Will You Go?

Luke 19:1-10

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We've been looking at John Wesley's encouragement to "gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can." He says to gain or earn all we can without harming ourselves or others either in body or spirit. He says to save all we can by refusing to waste money. Then he goes on: If all you've done is earn all you can and save all you can, you haven't done anything. You need to use what God has entrusted to you. You need to give all you can.

Wesley preached to a lot of poor people. As they became committed followers of Jesus and learned about and practiced diligence and hard work ("earn all you can") and frugality ("save all you can"), they began to accumulate wealth. Wesley recognized the dangers of riches. He knew that piling up money and possessions is spiritually suffocating. So he also taught generosity, stewardship, putting money to use for God's kingdom ("give all you can").

And Wesley practiced what he taught. When he was on the faculty of Oxford, he earned twenty-eight pounds a year. Later in life, he earned thousands through publishing and other ventures, but he continued to live on twenty-eight pounds. When he was in his 80s, the tax collector claimed he wasn't paying enough property tax. Wesley replied, "Sir, I have two silver spoons here in London and two in Bristol. That is all I have at present; and I shall not buy any more while so many men [and women] around me want bread" (Bob Tuttle, personal email, 11/9/16; also see his book *The Partakers* 98).

In today's Scripture reading, we see another example of giving. Jesus is passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. On his way through the city, Jesus meets and saves a rich tax collector.

Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector. The Romans contracted out to people to collect tolls, customs and various fees for them. A chief tax collector of a city or an area would hire others to help with the collection of these fees. The Romans expected their pay up front. The tax collector then had to make back what he had paid the Romans plus meet expenses and

make a profit. Such a system was open to corruption. And Zacchaeus was right in the middle of it.

But when Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is in town, he wants to see him. Something in Zacchaeus responds to something he has heard about Jesus. It's surely more than mere curiosity that makes him so determined to see Jesus. Maybe he's heard about the kinds of things Jesus teaches and the miracles he does. Maybe he's heard that Levi/Matthew, the tax collector from Capernaum, left his business and now follows Jesus. Maybe Zacchaeus has heard about how Jesus spends time with and eats with tax collectors and other "sinners."

A rabbi—some say a Messiah—who is a friend of tax collectors? That'd be a switch. Everybody looks down on tax collectors because their dealings with Gentiles make them unclean and exclude them from Israel's religious life. They look down on them as traitors because they support the Roman occupying force and help fund that pagan empire.

And people literally look down on Zacchaeus. As a smaller person, he's known what it's like to be ridiculed and stepped on. He was determined to get to the top so people would look up to him. Chief tax collector in Jericho is the place to make a lot of money and wield a lot of power. Jericho is a wealthy city and several trade routes run through it, so there are many tolls and fees to collect. But the very job that brought Zacchaeus wealth and prestige also brought him the scorn of his neighbors.

Maybe, just maybe, if he can see this Jesus, life could be different for him somehow. But Jesus has attracted a crowd as he moves through Jericho. Short as he is, Zacchaeus can't see over the crowd. Unpopular as he is, the crowd won't give way and let him through. So he runs down the road behind the crowd and finds a tree he can climb that will give him a good view of the road and of Jesus as he passes by.

Finally, Zacchaeus sees Jesus. He's leading his disciples up the road and the crowd is swirling around him. He doesn't look extraordinary, certainly not like a king, and yet there's something special about him. Is Zacchaeus wondering what it would be like to meet Jesus? To be his follower? Hidden in the branches of the tree, he may be imagining such a

relationship. But can he risk going to Jesus? And how embarrassing if people see someone of his position sitting in a tree.

Then Jesus stops at Zacchaeus' tree. He looks up and sees Zacchaeus. He says, "Zacchaeus, come down right now. I must stay at your house today." *Jesus is seeking Zacchaeus.* Jesus wants to share Zacchaeus' hospitality.

Hardly able to contain his excitement—"He noticed me! He wants to be a guest in my home!"—Zacchaeus hurries down from the tree. He forgets to be embarrassed. He begins right then to show hospitality to Jesus. With joy he welcomes Jesus to come home with him and be his guest.

People in the crowd grumble their disapproval of Jesus' choice of homes to visit. "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." Pious Jews would avoid someone like Zacchaeus whom they perceived as breaking the Law of Moses. But Jesus seems especially eager to spend time with Zacchaeus.

And Zacchaeus speaks up and says to Jesus, "Look, Lord! I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I pay back four times the amount." I wonder if Zacchaeus starts thinking, "What am I saying? Why would I do such a thing?"

Jesus then announces, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Receiving salvation is why Zacchaeus would do such a thing.

Earlier Jesus told Zacchaeus, "I must come to your house today." Now he says, "Today salvation has come to this house." The presence of Jesus is salvation—for Zacchaeus and for all who will welcome Jesus. Salvation for Zacchaeus meant deliverance from greed, but also restoration to the community of God's people. He's a true child of Abraham, not because of bloodline, but because of relating to Jesus. To be a descendant of Abraham was to be a true Jew, a true child of God. By including Zacchaeus in Abraham's family, Jesus shows that he's acceptable.

Jesus shows that Zacchaeus is accepted by going to his home. As a guest in Zacchaeus' home, Jesus would eat with him. Eating together in that culture is a sign of peace, trust, family ties, forgiveness and commitment.

What they ate and who they ate with was part of what made Jews distinctive in a pagan culture. The shared table symbolizes a shared life. That's why the Jews only ate with others who were religiously and socially clean and acceptable. And that's why Jesus often ate with anyone, clean or unclean, Pharisee or tax collector, acceptable or unacceptable.

Jesus came looking for the lost so he could save them. If we're followers of Jesus, if we have salvation and life in him, it's because he sought us. We found him because he was looking for us.

Zacchaeus was changed by his encounter with Jesus. There's no indication that he quit being a tax collector, but he became very generous—giving away half of everything he had to the poor. He quit cheating people and paid back anyone he may have cheated. He became a new person, living in God's grace in his old circumstances.

Zacchaeus went across town, around a crowd, and up a tree to see Jesus. How far will we go? Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus with joy. Receiving Jesus into his home, he received salvation. Salvation is not just being forgiven or going to heaven when we die. Salvation is God renewing and transforming our lives, taking us farther than we ever dreamed. Salvation touches every part of who we are, including our attitude toward money and how we use money. How far will we go with God? Zacchaeus gave half of everything he owned and he repaid four times what he had gained by cheating. How far will we go in our giving?

John Wesley says that God is the Owner of heaven and earth. God makes us stewards. He entrusts to us for a season various kinds of goods. We are not our own, and what we have is not our own. God shows us how to use what we have for him, to make it a holy sacrifice acceptable through Jesus.

Wesley says we give all to God by taking care of the needs of ourselves and our families. If we have more than we need, we give to help other Christians. If we still have money left, and as we have opportunity, we do good to all people.

In so doing, you give all you can; nay, in a sound sense, all you have:
For all that is laid out in this manner is really given to God. You

"render unto God the things that are God's," not only by what you give to the poor, but also by that which you expend in providing things needful for yourself and your household.

Wesley gives advice about evaluating how we spend and give. Are we acting as stewards? Are we obeying God's word? Is it an offering to God? Will God be pleased in the end? If you still wonder what you should do, then pray for guidance. He concludes: "Give all ye have, as well as all ye are, a spiritual sacrifice to Him who withheld not from you his Son, his only Son" ("The Use of Money," <http://www.umcmision.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-50-The-Use-of-Money>).

Jesus came all the way to become human for us. He entered fully into human life. He went all the way to the cross and to death for us. How far will we go? Jesus came back from the dead. He goes ahead of us, leading and empowering us. He returns to glory and wants to take us there. How far will we go with him?