

**“It’s Not The Gift -- It’s The Giver.”**  
**Luke 19:1-10**

I want to begin this evening by telling you about one of my most prized possessions.

It is a short fishing pole. I’ve had it for about a year now. It’s not worth a lot, but I cherish it. If I tried to sell it, I couldn’t get much money for it, but you see, I would never even consider selling it, because I treasure it so much. Why is it so special to me? Not because of what it is. Not because of how it looks. Not even because of what it does... but because of the one who gave it to me. That’s what makes it special – the one who loves me and gave it to me. My son, David, gave this fishing pole to me last year for Father’s Day. He made it for me in Sunday School. It’s the symbol of his love. The giver, not the gift, makes it special.

Celebrating the giver rather than the gift – that is what I want to talk to you about tonight. Once you can see the Giver over and above the gift, your life will be changed and you can never be the same again. There is a beautiful example of this in the Bible – the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19.

Jesus and His disciples are heading toward the show-down in Jerusalem. As they pass through Jericho, a great crowd gathered to see Jesus. Zacchaeus was in the crowd. The scriptures tell us that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and rich... and that he was disliked and despised by his fellow townspeople. They resented paying taxes to Rome and they felt that Zacchaeus, a fellow Jew, had betrayed them, had sold out to Rome, and had gotten rich at their expense. So, they rejected him, shunned him, detested him. If you had conducted a popularity contest in Jericho that day, Zacchaeus may well have come in dead last.

This was the setting when Jesus came to Jericho that day. People had heard about Jesus and they gathered along the streets to see Him. Zacchaeus was also eager to see the Nazarene, but Zacchaeus was a little man and he couldn’t see over the crowd. So Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed into a sycamore tree in hopes of getting a glimpse of this great leader everyone was talking about.

When Jesus saw him, he sensed that Zacchaeus was the loneliest man in town and His heart went out to him. Jesus looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Zacchaeus was visibly touched, indeed, overwhelmed by this acceptance and this special honor. It had been a long time since anyone had been nice to him.

Zacchaeus was so grateful, so filled with gratitude, that it changed his life. Notice that Jesus gave him no material gifts. He gave him something better: love, respect,

acceptance... forgiveness. Zacchaeus became so grateful that his whole lifestyle changed. Why, it even touched his pocketbook. Before he had been a “taker,” and now he became a “giver.”

**Zacchaeus recognized the gift of God....but unfortunately, not everyone does.**

Zacchaeus had reached a place in his life when he was ready for the things of God and for his life to be turned around. It came to a head when Jesus told him to climb down out of that tree he was sitting in.

When you realize that God is loving, accepting, forgiving... it changes your life. You don't have to be afraid or anxiety-ridden anymore... Gratitude becomes the lifeblood of your lifestyle. Zacchaeus learned it that day in Jericho... and it gave him a new relationship with God... not a relationship built on fear and appeasement, but now a relationship built on love and grace.

A couple of weeks ago I quoted theologian Paul Tillich. Tonight, I'll paraphrase that quote: *"Your life begins when you accept God's acceptance of you."* I'll say it again. *"Your life begins when you accept God's acceptance of you."*

Albert Einstein once put it like this: *"There are only two ways to live your life: one is to see nothing as a miracle – the other is to see everything as a miracle."* That's what we learn from the Zacchaeus story -- that miracles are possible. The miracle of a changed life. The miracle of a person being made right with God through Jesus Christ.

Far too often, what we want from God are the wrong things. *"Dear God, please let me win the lottery. I promise not to be an idiot with my money if you just let me win the lottery."* Or: *"Dear God, please let our team win the championship. The other team doesn't deserve to win, Lord, because they are a bunch of godless heathens."* God is our Divine Parent to be sure, but too often we want to act like children when we approach Him.

God is smarter than we are. God also knows us even better than we know ourselves. God knows that our greatest need of all is to have a relationship with Him. Our deepest need isn't to win the lottery or to have our favorite team win -- our deepest need is for God.

I remember when I was twelve years old. The one thing in life that I wanted most of all was a .22 caliber rifle. Oh, if only I could have that .22! I would take it down into the woods of Massbach, Illinois with me....I would hunt rabbits so we could eat wild game every week...I would shoot rotten squash and pumpkins with yellow jacket hollow points....oh, the world would indeed be a better place if only my parents

would arm me with that beautiful Remington .22 that I saw at the hardware store in town!

Well...some twelve year olds are mature enough to handle a .22. Other twelve year olds are NOT. I was one who was not! My Dad knew this -- but I didn't. Needless to say, Dad didn't buy me that rifle.

At the time I was hugely disappointed. But now looking back, I'm glad that Dad didn't cave in and get that rifle for me! It's hard telling what kind of irreversible damage that would have been done! I wasn't mature...I wasn't ready. A .22 rifle wasn't what I really needed. I didn't know that at the time -- but my father did!

We all have our hopes and our expectations of what we think that God our heavenly Father should give to us....but the greater truth is that God knows better!

**I could go and on, but I won't. Here is the truth that we need to take home with us tonight: *We attain spiritual wisdom when we recognize life itself as a gift from God, and we attain spiritual maturity when we are thankful for it.* In other words, it's not what we have been given that is as important as WHO it is that gave it to us!**

Some years ago, I ran across a story about a young college student who was visited one weekend by his father... It was at one of those uppity, prestigious universities in the East. The father had an old beater of a car that he drove in when he came to the campus to visit his son. When the dad drove away to go home, some of the boy's friends began to laugh and tease and make fun of that car. The young man said, "You can laugh if you want to, but let me tell you something. My father could have had a new car years ago if he had wanted one. He had the money to buy it, but he wanted me to have an education at this school... more than he wanted a new car for himself. The only reason I am here is because he chose to drive that old car. I am so grateful to him because in that one generous sacrificial act, he taught me so much about life and thoughtfulness and love. I love that old car and I love the man in it."

The Giver is not only more important than the gift, the Giver is the gift! Zacchaeus the tax collector came to understand that. May God grant us the wisdom to understand that as well. Amen.