

BETTER THAN ANY OLD OX

Luke 19:1-10

Have you thought about what life is like these days? In 1950 the average new home in America was 983 square feet. The average new home in 2011 was 2480 square feet. In 1900 nearly 1 out of every 1000 childbirths resulted in the death of the mother. Today that number is 1 out of every 10,000 childbirths. Here's an interesting gauge: in 1900 considering teacher salaries and the price of eggs it took a teacher an hour to earn enough money to buy a dozen eggs. Today the average teacher must work 3 minutes to earn enough to buy a dozen eggs.

Consider the technology we have at our fingertips. In their book, *Abundance: Why The Future Will Be Much Better Than You Think*, Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler tell us that the typical Masai warrior in Africa today has a mobile cellphone that gives him better communication ability than George H. W. Bush had as President of the United States 25 years ago. Through Google that Masai has access to more information than Bill Clinton did as President 15 years ago. On that mobile device in addition to a phone that he can use almost anywhere he has a watch, a stopwatch, a calculator, a camera, a video camera, a voice recorder, a GPS tracker, a vast library of books, films, games and music. Those goods and services would have cost most than \$1 million 20 years ago.

Life expectancy in the United States today is just about 79. In 1900 it was 47! We are living longer, we are healthier, and we have a lot more material goods. Despite all this depression is at an all-time high in our nation. Why are people so unhappy? There are many reasons, but there is one thing we can do to help us experience more joy in life and it is a relatively simple, but life changing thing. We will get a glimpse of this in Luke 19:1-10.

ZACCHAEUS RECEIVED GRACE

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where in a little more than a week he would face execution by crucifixion. On the way to Jerusalem he went through the city of Jericho, about 17 miles away. He is on the verge of the final week of his life. In the town of Jericho he does something that would confound everyone.

In Jericho there was a man named Zacchaeus. His name meant "clean" or "pure." He is a reminder that names are not always destiny, for he was the farthest thing from clean and pure. Maybe it was an ironic nickname like calling a guy who is 6 feet 8 inches tall "Shorty." Zacchaeus was a wealthy chief tax collector. We've seen this before, but remember what it meant to be a tax collector in the first century. No one today is especially fond of the IRS, with the possible exception of the current White House administration. Tax collectors have never and likely will never be very popular. However, in first century Israel they were significantly more than merely unpopular.

In Luke 5:30 you see the reaction when Jesus attended a party at the home of Matthew (also known as Levi and also a tax collector). “The Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’” The sinners were the outcasts, the scum of society. The tax collectors were viewed as so bad they had their own category of awfulness. There were sinners who were to be avoided at all costs, then there were the tax collectors, who were worse.

They were worse because they were also traitors. They were sinners in that their lifestyle included flagrant and continual violation of God’s Law. But they added treason against the people of God to their sin. They were Jewish people who worked for the Romans. The ancient Jews hated the fact that the Romans ruled them in the first place. But to add insult to injury the despised oppressors exacted taxes from them that they used to fund their occupation of the territory. Without the taxes they wouldn’t have had the money to keep their army in place enforcing their rule, nor could they have afforded the authorities that administered that rule. People like Zacchaeus collected the taxes from their own people for the Romans. He helped fund the Roman occupation of Israel!

To make matters even worse they were usually unscrupulous. The Romans had a certain amount of taxes that their lackeys were required to collect and turn in, but they gave their agents permission to get pretty much whatever they wanted from people and keep the difference. So if the tax was actually 10 drachmas but they were able to squeeze 20 out of someone, they profited 10 for themselves. Imagine if the IRS played fast and loose with tax laws and threatened you with their particularly nefarious brand of mayhem if you didn’t cough up whatever they demanded and you had no way of refusing them. The ancient tax collectors were essentially extortionists.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, meaning he was running a crew of tax extortionists. This business was absurdly lucrative so he had become very rich. But with that came rejection. Decent people shunned him. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* says he may have been the most hated man in Jericho. Often in the New Testament you will see that the “tax collectors and sinners” were together at some event. The only people who would have anything to do with tax collectors were the worst sinners, those on the lowest rung of the social ladder. The prostitutes and criminals would associate with them, but no one else would.

Why would you become a traitor to your own people and choose to have everyone to hate you? Why would you willingly put yourself in a position where people wouldn’t speak to you, they would talk behind your back, they would shun you and would exclude you from all social events? Why would you choose to be hated by pretty much everyone you knew?

Maybe Zacchaeus grew up in a dysfunctional family. Maybe he was abused or abandoned. Maybe all the jocks in high school made him the butt of their jokes and bullied him continually. We don't know about any of that. What we do know is that Zacchaeus decided he would rather have money than be accepted. He wanted to be rich, so if being totally ostracized by his own people was the price he had to pay, so be it.

Unfortunately it was not just his people who rejected him. Zacchaeus was under no illusions when it came to the state of his soul. He knew that not only was he not worthy of acceptance by other people he had also earned rejection by God. Inside Zacchaeus felt the guilt of his betrayal, he felt the longing to be loved that is an unavoidable aspect of being human, and he could not get away from the desire to be loved and accepted by God. He was no atheist. He knew God was very real, and he wished there was some way he could have a positive connection with that God. He also knew that was impossible.

Zacchaeus had sold his soul for the almighty drachma. His choices created a tidal wave of emotional, psychological and spiritual pain. He told himself that he didn't care and he stuffed it all down deep, locked away where no one could see it and he could deny it. Unfortunately trying to just deny that something exists doesn't make it go away. About 5 years ago Laurie and I noticed some suspicious shavings in our bedroom. We had an exterminator come out to investigate and he informed us that our house was infested with termites. We arranged to have the house tented and gassed. Right after that we ran into some significant obstacles and had to put off the whole thing. We saw no more signs of the bugs so I chose to just tell myself maybe the problem wasn't that bad and maybe it had even gone away. Last year we were confronted with undeniable evidence that telling ourselves there was no problem didn't work. We finally did have to tent the house because termites were eating it. Zacchaeus might have been able to tell himself that he didn't care, that he was fine, but his problems were eating him up.

How do we know that? We know it is true because when Jesus came to Jericho Zacchaeus wanted to see him. He wanted to see him because he had heard one of the most unlikely things imaginable, and that was that Jesus claimed there was hope for people like him.

It's a pretty safe bet that Zacchaeus had been hearing about Jesus from some of his unsavory outcast friends. They flocked to Jesus because of his message of love and hope for them. Having received that hope with joy they told Zach there was this amazing guy going around doing miracles so he clearly was from God. This guy was saying things they'd never heard. He was telling people like them that there was hope for them, that those who admitted the awful state of their souls and their spiritual poverty, who longed to have something better, would be the ones God would give his kingdom to. This preacher, whose name was Jesus, was brilliant, and more to the point, he cared about them. Why he even had

a former tax collector as one of his main disciples. And the rest of them weren't pious religious dudes, they were fisherman and even a political radical.

Zacchaeus wondered if it could really be true. Was it possible that there was hope for him? Could it be that God would accept him? Would this man from God really accept him? When he heard that this man was coming to town Zacchaeus had to see him, hoping against hope that maybe he would say something that might confirm the things that Zach's friends had been telling him.

In addition to being spiritually challenged Zacchaeus was also vertically challenged. He was short. Perhaps this was the cause of his becoming the person he was. We know that today tall men make more money than short men, they have the inside track to more prestigious jobs, are considered more appealing to women, and some studies even suggest they live longer. Perhaps Zacchaeus' outcast lifestyle was actually rage against heightism. Well, probably not, but it did present a problem when he wanted to see Jesus, because there was a big crowd around him. Statistics say I am almost exactly average height for a man in our country. It doesn't feel like it. We were at Disney's California Adventure park watching their "Wonderful World of Color" show. But we were standing and I kept having to shift positions to see because there were taller people in front of me. Poor Zacchaeus dealt being short everywhere he went. He came up with a solution. He climbed a tree so he could see over everyone.

When Jesus reached the tree he stopped, looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." How did Jesus know who Zacchaeus was? He had never met him. He was simply passing through town so there was no reason why he should know who Zacchaeus was. Yet when he reached his perch he knew exactly who he was. Second, if Jesus did know who he was, why would he ever single him out for attention, and why on earth would he invite himself over to Zach's house? No decent person would have anything to do with that crook, but Jesus wanted to spend the night at his house.

My mother is planning to attend the Rose Parade this year with her sister-in-law. That started me thinking about the last time I was at the Rose Parade. It was 1973. I was 2 years old. Just kidding. I was actually 12. Still kidding. The Grand Marshal of the parade that year was famous actor John Wayne. What effect would it have had if the Duke had reached my location along the parade route, stopped, looked right at me and said, "Rick Myatt, come over here right now. I want to come over to your apartment and have dinner with you, Pilgrim"? That would have been inconceivable. Yet that's more likely than what Jesus did with Zach.

Having a meal and staying at his house implied fellowship with and acceptance of Zacchaeus. In Revelation 3:20 John pictured Jesus saying, "I stand at the door and knock. If

anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person and they with me.” There you see the symbolism of eating together representing love and acceptance. That’s what Jesus was offering Zacchaeus. Z Man did not deserve this, nor could he ever even have imagined it. He was utterly undeserving of what Jesus offered him and he knew it. Yet Jesus was offering him the forgiveness, the acceptance, the love, and the fellowship that could heal his wounded, sad heart. He offered it freely, though his kindness and grace.

This is not merely an anecdote from ancient history. It has a message for us today. We are Zacchaeus. We don’t like to see ourselves that way, but we are as undeserving of the attention, the acceptance, the forgiveness and the love of Jesus as Z Man was. On the human scale we may not be as bad as he, but that’s the wrong scale to use. In God’s scale of perfection there’s not much difference between us and Zach.

Imagine that God said to us that he will love and accept us if we can sprint from here to Boston. How are we going to do? How far can you sprint? Some of us might only make it 10 yards. Some might go 50, or 100. Usain Bolt, world champion sprinter, might be able to go as far as 400 meters. His 400 meters will be vastly better than my 50 or 100 meters or than the 10 meters some will run. There’s no comparison. On a human scale he is way more acceptable than we are. But here’s the problem: after his 400 meters how far is he from Boston? He’s still 2581 miles away. His little sprint on that scale is about the same as mine. I may be way better than Zacchaeus on the human scale. But on God’s scale on my best day I don’t even move the needle on the meter.

Ephesians 2:1-2 says, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.” In Ephesians 2:12 Paul wrote, “remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.” That was us, without hope and without God in this world, just like Zacchaeus.

Do you know why Jesus stopped and expressed love to Zacchaeus and why this story is recorded for us? It is because Jesus offers us the same love he offered him and he did so for the same reason. None of us is beyond the reach of his kindness and grace. If he could love, forgive and accept Zacchaeus, he can do the same for anyone. He came to seek and save that which was lost, and that’s us.

ZACCHAEUS RESPONDED WITH GRATITUDE

So when John Wayne invited himself to my place during the Rose Parade do you think I responded, “Uh, gee, Mr. Wayne, that’s a nice idea I guess, but, well, you know I already have plans for after the parade. And I really don’t have time to go home and clean the apartment or to cook a meal for us. So, I’m going to have to decline your kind offer. Perhaps I could take a rain check and we could do it some other time.” Absolutely not! I

would be more than honored and humbled that such a noteworthy and famous person as he would have anything to do with me. I would trip all over myself to welcome the great actor to my home. Zach had the same response. Verse 6 says that he immediately climbed down from his perch and welcomed Jesus gladly. Literally he welcomed Jesus with joy and rejoicing.

Last week for the first time in months we got to be with our daughter Carissa and her husband, Michael. We went out to dinner with our four favorite people in the world, Carissa, Michael, Anna and Toby. At one point during the dinner Laurie said to me, “this is so much fun.” We were so happy. We were rejoicing! That’s what Zacchaeus did when Jesus offered to fellowship with him. He couldn’t believe it was happening. He was so happy, he just was full of joy because this unique, divine man loved him! He was accepted, and not just by one man, but by a man from God, meaning God himself had a place for him, despite his awful life.

Not everyone felt that way. Verse 7 says “all the people began to mutter.” I doubt that Luke meant every single person was involved, but this was the general reaction of people. How could Jesus go hang with that guy? Doesn’t he know who he is? Doesn’t he know what a piece of garbage he is? Doesn’t he know he’s going to be defiled just by being in his presence?

This is another one of those little vignettes that make me admire Jesus all the more. He is at the climax of his life. He is about to present himself as the Messiah, Israel’s hoped for Savior. And on the verge of doing that he singles out the worst, most degraded, most hated man in the city of Jericho as the target of his love and acceptance. He picked the most politically, socially and religiously incorrect person he could find to associate with. He didn’t have to do that. He could have just walked right by that tree without a word and no one would even have noticed. But he did something that would inflame and irritate pretty much everyone. He did it, he tells us in verse 10 because he “came to seek and to save what was lost.” He didn’t care about political or any other kind of correctness. He didn’t care if what he did was popular. He didn’t care if he gave his opponents lots of ammunition by his action. He refused to do what would be expedient or safest. He cared about saving this one lost, lonely, wounded, tortured soul. He wanted to send the message that no one was beyond the reach of his grace.

Zacchaeus got it. He understood both the unimaginable gift Jesus gave him, and he understood the cost of it. He knew what people would think of Jesus’ action there. And that made it all the more precious to him. So indeed he rejoiced. In fact, he couldn’t contain himself. In verse 8 Zacchaeus said, “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.” That’s a recipe for bankrupting himself, because pretty much everyone

could claim that he had cheated them. They could claim it because he had. That's how he got rich. He didn't care if he ended up giving back everything he had. He had been given a gift that was worth more than every drachma he had, and he had to respond.

Why did he do that? Was he trying to prove something? Was he trying to earn Jesus' acceptance, and by extension buy his way into the kingdom of God? Was he doing this because some law of God required it? No, that wasn't the motivation at all. He had already been given the love and acceptance he longed for. Zacchaeus made that commitment because he was so full of joy he had to do something to respond. He was full of gratitude and he had to let it out somehow. With a heart bursting with joy he wanted some way to thank God, so he chose giving money away. He did it as a response to a gift that had already been given to him.

Jesus says something in verse 9 that is critically important. "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." He was a son of Abraham, meaning he believed in the promise of God like Abraham did. He was righteous by faith the way Abraham did. The sign of that was his gratitude for what Jesus did. It was a tangible, visible, costly way of saying, "thank you" to God. There is a crucial message in this story. ***The sign of having received the gift of God's grace is gratitude!***

IMPLICATIONS

GOD IS PLEASED WITH THANKSGIVING

Psalm 69:30-31 says, "I will praise God's name in song, I will glorify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an ox, more than a bull with its horns and hooves." The way we usually think about relating to God is represented by the sacrifice. God's idea in sacrifices was to picture for us that we have earned judgment and death, but that God will provide some substitute so that we might live. It was mostly a picture for us. But human nature turns the sacrifice into doing something that God requires and that somehow makes us all right with him because we've done the required thing. The human mindset is that we earn something from God the old fashioned way – by doing the right things. We buy him with sacrifices or enough good deeds to gain his favor. But what did Zacchaeus do to gain God's favor? He did nothing. Quite the opposite, he had done a great deal to earn his rejection. He was given a great gift purely by the mercy, kindness and grace of Jesus Christ, and he responded as a way of saying thank you. Jesus said that's precisely the right response.

What God wants far more than your sacrifices is that you would give him thanks! Let the ox and the bull stand for all of the things you could do to gain God's favor, everything you could do to earn points with him. The Psalm says what God desires is not all of that, but your gratitude, giving thanks for the gift he has already given to you through his grace.

That message is present in the New Testament as well. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 Paul wrote, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” God’s will, what God wants at every moment of your life, is that you thank him! The same message is seen in Ephesians 5:20 which says we should be “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.”

WHY IS THANKSGIVING SO IMPORTANT TO GOD?

I know a person who makes a big deal about thank you notes. If this individual gives you a gift and you don’t write a thank you note and send it you are going to hear about it. For this individual it kind of feels like what matters most is that she gets recognition for giving the gift. Is that God’s problem? No. There are some excellent reasons for the priority of giving thanks.

Gratitude requires humility

A couple of years ago Laurie and I went on an historical outing. We visited a place where a significant event in our lives occurred. It is a restaurant in the town of Lahaina right on the main street. This was the site of our first argument as a husband and wife. We were there on our honeymoon. The majority of the restaurants we patronized on our honeymoon no longer exist, but that one has gone on to establish quite a favorable reputation. We had not been back since that memorable day, so we decided to go back to the battleground. We were seated at a table and we located the very table at which we had our historic tiff. It still looks much the same. When our waiter came we told him our history and pointed out the table where our history happened. He was not the least bit interested. He gave us adequate service that evening, but there was a sense that he was going through the motions and doing his duty. He just didn’t seem particularly happy that we were there nor did he ever express any thanks for our patronage.

We did not have to go to that restaurant. We owed the restaurant nothing, and we certainly had no obligation to come into the place and give our waiter the generous tip we gave him. He went about his business as though it was just what was supposed to happen. I doubt he intended this but it sort of came across to me as though we owed it to him to be there, so eat your food, pay your bill and go away. In retrospect it strikes me as kind of funny because our first argument occurred at that place over the fact that the service was so terrible. I wished the guy would have thanked us for coming to the restaurant, and done it with some heart in it. But giving thanks like that requires humility. It says, “I do not deserve this, you do not owe me anything.” If I think I am owed something, if it is simply my due, then I will not be especially thankful for it. I do not thank the gas pump at the gas station for giving me gas. I pay for it, it gives me what is my due.

Gratitude is important because when we thank God we are admitting that he owes us nothing. He is not in our debt. We have earned nothing from him and deserve nothing from him. The very act of giving thanks both reminds us of this and acknowledges it to God.

Gratitude evidences faith

It is interesting that 1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us to give thanks in all circumstances. Some circumstances are just bad. A couple of Sundays ago we were setting up chairs for the service. Someone at the school had stacked the chairs so high on their dolly that it was unstable. Clearly a case of heightism at work again because only a very tall person could have stacked the chairs that high. I believe he did it just to prove his superiority to us average sized and short people. I carefully maneuvered the stack out of the closet. Then I tried to pull a chair off the top of the stack. It didn't work. The stack toppled over and fell with a crash, in the process smashing my thumb. This was not a good circumstance. There was nothing good about it. It wasn't tragic, but there was no good in it either. My thumb was battered and our job of moving chairs was made more difficult. Am I supposed to give thanks in that circumstance? Yes. I do not give thanks for that bad thing. I don't have to give thanks for that churl of a tall person who booby trapped that stack of chairs. The event was just bad. But even in it I can give thanks. My thanks expresses faith in God that he is there and is watching over me and blessing me even when a bad thing that I cannot understand happens. It expresses thanks that God can bring good even out of a stack of chairs falling over (maybe it can be a sermon illustration).

Giving thanks is saying to God, whatever else may happen, in the midst of the good and bad, you have given me something so good, *you* are so good, that I still have reason to be thankful. Last summer we had the opportunity to visit Michael and Carissa in Mississippi. For some reason they seem to be very creative in finding ways to leave their lovely town of Meridian. They felt we would enjoy a trip to Pensacola, Florida for a weekend while we were there so we could enjoy the beach. We drove down on Friday. Saturday in mid July, a time when you know for a fact it will be hot and humid in Florida, it was rainy, cloudy, windy and cool the whole day. In the middle of July? How was that possible? It was disappointing. While it was disappointing, Laurie and I were still joyful and thankful. We were with Michael and Carissa, and that was so good that a little disappointment could not dim our joy. So it is with the grace our God gives us. We will go through disappointment and hardship, but we always have reason to give thanks.

Giving thanks also says to God that we are submitting to him. It is accepting his Lordship, his wisdom and his goodness in our lives, which means it is actually most important when circumstances are bad. It is easy to give thanks when things are good, it requires little or no submission or faith. Giving thanks when life is hard is a way of saying to God "I trust you, even when I can't see why you would allow this in my life." It expresses faith. Hebrews 11:6 says faith is essential. "Without faith it is impossible to please God."

Gratitude Is Good For Us

God loves us and he wants to fill us with joy and hope. That's why he tells us to give thanks. Psalm 9:1-2 links being glad and rejoicing with praising God and giving thanks to him.

A number of years ago Laurie and I had the unfortunate experience of having a flight home canceled. We were in Maui and were scheduled on the red eye flight, the last flight out. But after a long delay a little before midnight they canceled the flight due to a mechanical problem. That's a miserable situation. The only people left in the entire airport were the people from our flight. Everything was shut down. It was late. We were checked out of our hotel. The airline had our baggage and had squirreled it away someplace. We didn't know what we were supposed to do next or how we would get home the next day. There were a couple of hundred tired people from that flight standing there all in the same circumstance. With a couple of exceptions people handled it pretty well. They were mostly patient and calm, though all were quite stressed and most were on edge. We waited a long time to find out what the airline was going to do with us. While waiting I struck up a conversation with a young single guy that proved to be quite remarkable. He stood out from most everyone else in that his demeanor was one almost of wonder. He was not negative in any way, but seemed quite happy. I remarked on this and by way of explanation he told me his story. He was from New York. He had been given this trip to Hawaii. It was the first time in his life he had ever been on an airplane. On the way out his flight was delayed and he missed his connection in L.A. turning that trip into an ordeal that cost him a day of his vacation. Now the airline had crossed him up again. But he said, "I'm happy just to be here, and for me everything is new. It has been quite an adventure. I find it all quite exciting."

His situation was no different than any of the rest of us. In fact, it was worse, because he had a longer trip ahead than most. But he was positive, relaxed and joyful because of his attitude. He was excited just to be there experiencing it all. When we take the attitude that God has given us great things and that we both can trust him and should be thankful we will find ourselves being much like that young man.

Giving thanks is God's will for us. It brings joy to his heart. This week make it your theme to thank God in everything that happens. Be so persistent at it that people know what is coming every time you open your mouth. They will know that you will be thanking God. I guarantee you that God will never tire of that and you will find your own spirit being lifted as well.