

“Giving with Great Joy”

Together We Can Do More, part 3

Luke 19:1-10

[SLIDE 19] Thank you for joining us today online, friends. I miss you so much! I appreciate all the encouragement you have been sharing with me and each other this week. By the way, stick around for the virtual coffee hour at 11am. The link was sent out to our email database, so if you're not on it, please contact me. The truth is, we need the Lord and we need each other more than ever. For every little success we see in our church and community, there seems to be one more piece of bad news. Don't give up, friends! As the old song says, we shall overcome. And Zechariah 4:6 adds, “not by our own power or might, but by the Spirit of the Lord!”

Please join me in prayer. O God, who sees into the deepest depths of our hearts, listen to your people praying. We are yours, O God, for you are our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Take this moment now and make it precious in your sight. Change us, sanctify us, lead us onward, so that the people of this world can know the good news: Jesus saves. We are ready to listen to your word, and we are ready to obey. To you be the glory, Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.

[SLIDE 20] A certain man had a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital. He could receive little company and was not to be excited. While in the hospital, his rich uncle died and left him one million dollars. His family wondered how to break the news to the man with the least amount of excitement. They decided to ask their pastor to go and break the news quietly to the man. The pastor went in and gradually led up to the question. The pastor asked the patient, hypothetically,

what he would do if he inherited one million dollars? The man said, "I think I would give half of it to the church." In shock, the pastor had a heart attack.

[SLIDE 21] Generosity is surprising, isn't it? We just do not expect generosity as often as we should these days. Why is that? Partially, it is because the world makes a lot of demands on our money. Wealth is a valuable resource. And I should point out, money is inherently neither good nor evil. Money is simply a tool. How we choose to use that tool is what matters, and many people choose not to use their wealth to help others, so when we encounter extreme generosity, we are almost shocked.

[SLIDE 22] Today, people in the United States, on the whole, are not very generous. Here are just a few statistics I have found: The average American gives away slightly less than 2% of their personal disposal income.¹ Roughly one third of all Americans make no charitable contributions at all. Zero, zilch, nada. About half of the U.S. gives something to charity - more than zero - but less than 2% of their income. There is a small percentage, including churchgoers, who give away more, yet it is a small minority. Only 15% of Americans give between 2% and 10% of their income to charity.² And only 5% - one twentieth – give away 10% or more of their income. "The average giving by adults who attend US Protestant churches is about \$17 a week."³

I find these numbers disappointing, frankly. We live in the most prosperous nation in the world, and yet our generosity, on the whole, doesn't reflect it. It seems that the more we have, the less likely we are to give.

¹ <https://lifewaygenerosity.com/2019/08/06/giving-trends-are-shifting/>

² <https://www.church-development.com/blog/on-tithing-how-many-churchgoers-tithe>

³ <https://nonprofitsource.com/online-giving-statistics/church-giving/>

[SLIDE 23] However, our country does not have a money problem. We do not have a giving problem. We have a faith problem. We have a profound lack of joy, and it reveals itself in our giving or lack thereof. Our giving is directly connected to the joy we experience in a relationship with Jesus. If that relationship is weak and the joy is lacking, our generosity is affected, even totally absent, and we miss opportunities to impact others for Christ. Yet if we are filled with the joy of the Lord, our generosity overflows to others.

As evidence for this, I submit to you the life of Zacchaeus. We find this beautiful story of redemption and generosity in the gospel of Luke, chapter 19.

Let me set the scene for you. **[SLIDE 24]** Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, one week before he would die on the cross to save the world. Christ’s purpose and mission were deep on his mind as he was “passing through.” (Luke 19:1) Because of his popularity, the crowds were pressing around him, curious to see him, as many of us would be if a popular celebrity was passing through our town.

Zacchaeus, however, was having trouble seeing through the crowd. You know when you are at a parade, and some little child wants to see the firetrucks? Usually you move to the side and let them through, because you can see over them, but they can’t see over you. Zacchaeus was getting none of that.

Why did the people treat Zacchaeus this way? Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, responsible for collecting money on behalf of the Roman government. I don’t know how you feel about paying taxes; I am guessing not great. However, Roman taxation was much more oppressive! To the Jews, Zacchaeus was a traitor. He worked for the enemy, the “evil empire”. The Jews didn’t want to talk to him, let alone make space for him to see Jesus. **[SLIDE 25]** They cut him off and cut him out. They rejected him.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt like an outsider, like the whole world was against you? I have. And it made me want to hide. Zacchaeus did the only thing he could think of: he hurried up the road to a sycamore tree and climbed up, so at least he could have a passing glance of Jesus. It was not very dignified of Zacchaeus to do this, but he didn't care. It wasn't like the people could respect him any less.

[SLIDE 26] Jesus was intending to pass through Jericho without stopping. After all, he was about to fulfill the greatest purpose of his life in Jerusalem. But upon seeing Zacchaeus in the tree, Jesus saw another opportunity to show the people why he had come to earth. He looked up and said those famous words, “Zacchaeus, you come down. I must be a guest in your home today.”

No one ever looked up to Zacchaeus before, figuratively or literally! Zacchaeus was invisible to the people. Yet Jesus saw him and looked up to him. Jesus knew what needed to be done. Jesus invited himself into a relationship with Zacchaeus, signified by sharing a meal at home.

Think of the last time you invited someone over to your house for a meal. It was probably because you cared for them and respected them. You were not afraid of what the neighbors might say.

However, Jesus entering the home of Zacchaeus would have been very taboo to the Jewish people. They knew if you associated with someone who was outcast, who was “unclean,” you became like them. So the people grumbled. Why didn't Jesus come to their homes? Weren't they better? Why would Jesus stoop so low and have dinner with a chief tax collector, a traitor to his own people?

Interesting, isn't it, how Zacchaeus received this invitation with great joy, but the people tried to take his joy away from him? Have you ever seen this happen before? Did you ever think that someone did not “deserve grace”? Did you ever wonder, “Why should they be forgiven? Why should they get a break? Why should I let them sit in my pew? I was here first! I've been more faithful. I deserve it more.” How many times have we acted just like the crowd, jealous that God would favor them?

First the crowd was going crazy to see Jesus, and then they criticized him. The exact same thing would happen again when Jesus went to the cross. The crowd was fickle, and Jesus knew it. And it didn't matter. What mattered is what Zacchaeus did next.

In the presence of Jesus, Zacchaeus became a changed man. He stopped. He stood up – not that this was impressive, but he was now standing in the presence of the crowd that had rejected him for so long. And he didn't attack them. He didn't berate them. He asked for their forgiveness.

[SLIDE 27] Zacchaeus could not contain his joy. He 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.” (Luke 19:8)

From a financial perspective, I find this statement ironic. Supposed you fail to pay your taxes. What happens? You not only pay what you owe, you pay penalties, fees, and interest on top of that. Repaying four times the original amount is pretty steep, and this tax collector knew it! Yet, Zacchaeus freely offered to pay it. And, he gave away half of his possessions. Just imagine his home the next day – it must have been the best garage sale ever! Except, Zacchaeus wasn't selling. Everything was free. He was giving away the things that

suddenly didn't matter anymore, because he had found true joy. He had found salvation. Jesus had come to him.

[SLIDE 28] Jesus addressed the people. Jesus told them, “Look, here is a true son of Abraham.” (Luke 19:9) Jesus was saying to them, “This man truly follows God's law. He is not an outcast. He is one of you. He has been restored to your community.”

Zacchaeus did not pay Jesus to be saved. Zacchaeus found grace. He found redemption. Jesus freely gave him a second chance. Jesus saw past the tax collector label and understood who Zacchaeus really was. Zacchaeus was changed and restored. And Zacchaeus responded with love and generosity.

[SLIDE 29] Here's the most important thing we need to take away from this story. Zacchaeus, when he made his promise, spoke directly to Jesus, not the people. “Lord, here and now I give away half of my possessions to the poor.” (Luke 19:8) Zacchaeus implied that nothing was going to stand in between him and Christ. He gave what he felt God was asking him to give. He gave from the heart. He gave sacrificially. He gave joyfully. He made a promise to Christ, and he kept it.

[SLIDE 30] I remember climbing into a tree in my yard as a kid. I got scared, even though I was probably only six feet off the ground. I waited until my dad saw me and rescued me. I wonder if Zacchaeus was scared, not of falling, but of being found out. I think Zacchaeus was scared of changing. Yet, when Jesus reached out to him and rescued him, Zacchaeus was changed, and it was good.

I know that Jesus has rescued me and changed me. Therefore, my giving is a response of gratitude for what the Lord has done. **[SLIDE 31]** The Bible tells us, in Malachi 3:10, God's goal for our giving is 10%, what we call the “tithe”. God

says, "Test me in this, and see if I supply your needs." I can testify that God has always made it possible for us to tithe to the church and give to other charities, and still have enough for ourselves.

Yes, there have been times when finances were tight. However, I have never regretted giving to the church, because I see what a powerful force we are in the world. We are salt and light in a world of darkness. The church is not perfect; however we are loving and giving when we are obedient to Christ.

[SLIDE 32] What about you? Have you been rescued? Do you know the joy Zacchaeus felt? Are you giving out of a response of love and gratefulness, or do you cling to your possessions? George Mueller once said, "God judges what we give by what we keep."⁴ Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, your heart will be as well." (Matthew 6:21) Is your treasure with God and with those served by the church? Or is it in possessions that don't give you eternal joy?

It's time for you to hurry down. Jesus wants to enter your home and to enter your life. Christ wants to enter your wallet and your purse. The Lord wants to come into every corner of who you are and fill you with joy.

Make it your goal to give sacrificially out of joy. Don't make it a legalistic thing. It's not about the 1%, 2%, 10% or 50%. C.S. Lewis said, "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare."⁵

Our giving serves an amazing purpose. We have a chance to be a beacon to the world. A bell that rings out hope. A light to remind people God loves them. Will we give like we expect those things to always remain true in this place?

⁴ <http://www.liveatthewell.org/quotes-from-george-mueller.html>

⁵ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/506691-i-do-not-believe-one-can-settle-how-much-we>

As you consider what you give to the Lord, may you find the joy that Zacchaeus knew, and respond the same way.

Memory verse

Psalm 4:7 - You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.

Reflection questions

1. Where is your joy meter right now? High or low? What about your giving meter? Are the two related?
2. Whom would you identify as outcasts in your life? Who are your "Zacchaeus's"?
3. If your life were a house, what rooms would you want to show Jesus? What rooms would you rather he not enter?
4. What stuff do you have that needs to be given away? What are you holding on to, expecting it to make you happy?
5. What percentage are you giving to the church? What percentage do you need to give to make it sacrificial?