

Have You ... Given Away Half Your Possessions?

[Luke 19:1-10](#)

With Jesus on the Road to Jerusalem:

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

Wednesday, April 9, 2003

You may wonder if the printer made a mistake in the title of tonight's homily. It looks as though I had started to ask "Have you been born again?" but then changed the question to "Have you given away half your possessions?" But the strikethrough is not a typo; it is intentional. It's there to remind us that the question many evangelists ask, "Have you been born again?" is only one of many questions Jesus put to people during his ministry. Jesus never said the same thing to different people. Instead, he always tailored his appeal to the person with whom he was speaking. So when he met the woman at the well he asked for a drink of water. When he met fisherman Peter he said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." He asked blind Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" To the rich young ruler he said, "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor." To none of those people did Jesus say, "You must be born again." Yet the notion of being "born again" has become, in some Christian circles, the only authorized way to enter the family of God in spite of the fact that Jesus asked "Have you been born again?" of only one man, Nicodemus, and apparently never repeated it to anyone else. And since that is the case, perhaps it would be just as appropriate to ask all new converts to act like Zacchaeus whose faith in Jesus Christ led him to give away half his possessions. Yet I have never heard an evangelist give an altar call based on his example.

Nor should they, because giving away half of one's possessions is not a universal law for all believers. But it was appropriate for Zacchaeus because gold was his god and tax collecting was an easy way to get it. Yet his god was failing him. Having amassed a fortune, he was not a happy man. Something was missing, thus the urge to see Jesus. Perhaps Jesus knew the secret to a happy life, so he determined to join the crowd on Jericho's Main Street, to overhear what Jesus had to say. But he arrives too late to get a front row seat and has to climb a sycamore tree. But why a tree? Why not clamber up on someone's roof, or on the bank where he did business? But that would have been too obvious. He could see Jesus but Jesus could also see him and perhaps point an accusing finger at him. So he positioned himself behind lush foliage where he could see and hear, and also maintain his anonymity.

But Jesus spotted him anyway, and something revolutionary happened when Jesus called him down, something deeply transforming. If Zacchaeus had been afraid Jesus would denounce him as a turncoat, if Zacchaeus was afraid Jesus would consign him to hell for collaborating with the occupying powers, Jesus did nothing of the sort. Rather, right there in front of Zacchaeus' worst critics, Jesus declared himself a friend of this corrupt tax collector. Jesus went to lunch in his home as if he were not a traitor at all but a true son of Abraham. And, lo and behold, Zacchaeus became what Jesus said he was. He became, not only a true son of Abraham, but a generous brother to every neighbor in need: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

Let me tell how revolutionary that was. The Old Testament set the penalty for fraud at 20%; Zacchaeus offered 400%. Nor did he have to give half of his possessions to the poor. The charitable rule of thumb in first century Palestine was that no one should give away more than a fifth of their goods. In other words, there was a ceiling on charitable giving, no more than 20%. But with great exuberance Zacchaeus gave 50%, and in so doing, he teaches us something about genuine discipleship. A famous preacher of the last century called it "the expulsive power of a new affection." It happens every time a woman and a man fall in love. Earlier infatuations go into the round file. Phone numbers are deleted on their Palm Pilots. Pictures of former girl and boy friends are thrown away. The expulsive power of a new affection drives out all rivals and lavishes extravagant gifts on the object of its affections.

Having met Jesus, and having learned that, far from condemning him, Jesus welcomed him into his family, Zacchaeus expelled the god of gold and invited Jesus Christ to occupy the throne room of his will.

It was the expulsive power of a new affection, and it led to an exuberant display of generosity.

I say it again: no one has a right to take what Zacchaeus did and make it into a law for every believer. If the statement "You must be born again" was made to only one individual in all of Holy Scripture, so was the example of giving away half of one's possessions. But if it is not a statute laid on all believers, it is a stimulus to those believers who want to show their gratitude for the grace they have found in Jesus Christ.

So I ask, how are you expressing your thanks for the grace of God in Jesus Christ? Is there anything even remotely exuberant, anything the least bit extravagant about your giving? Many think of Lent as a time for giving up something they enjoy, chocolate, or coffee, or desserts. I prefer to think of Lent as a time for giving away, for being openhanded, for doing something extravagantly generous. And if you agree, I suggest that you choose the One Great Hour of Sharing offering for your lavish generosity. One Great Hour has already sent \$230,000 to purchase relief supplies for Iraq and will be sending much more as the needs become clear. You and I can add to that number next Sunday, Palm Sunday. Then, instead of simply wringing our hands when we see pictures of the wounded in Iraq, we will be supplying medicines to treat those wounds. Then, instead of shaking our heads at dehydrated people in beleaguered cities, we will be sending tankers laden with water to slake their thirst. Then, instead of hiding behind the foliage of our well-watered gardens, we will be out in front of the parade, walking with Jesus as he ministers to the people of Iraq through all the wonderful agencies that are bringing aid to that unfortunate nation.

Out of gratitude for the welcoming grace of God in Christ, fill this OGHS envelope with love!