

April 10, 2016  
Luke 19:1-6  
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## “Up A Tree”

Good morning. I have two questions for you; I'm going to ask you to raise your hands in response, but I promise I won't share your answers outside of this building. What happens at Creekside stays at Creekside, OK? First question: Raise your hand if you pay taxes. (I figured. Most of us do.) Second question: Raise your hand if you *like* to pay taxes? (Even if we recognize the necessity of it, very few of us are happy about it) Thank you. I'm sure you're all familiar with the saying that nothing is certain in life except death and taxes. Every year, tax season coincides with Easter season. I still have a copy of the cartoon which Doug Reichenbach passed out which has two Roman soldiers looking inside the empty tomb, and one of them shrugs and says, “Well, just taxes, then.”

Taxes are nothing new. As long as there has been any form of civil organization, any building project -- temples, roads, food storage facilities -- people have had to pay to have it done. In the ancient world there weren't serial invasions or corporate tax shelters in the Virgin Islands or Panama: it was a direct transaction: you paid money, if you had it, or you did slave labor or had your sons conscripted into the military. Taxes have never been very popular, and they're always a reliable way to get people fired up against whomever is governing at the time.

In Luke 19 we're introduced to a tax collector named Zacchaeus. In this tradition, “tax collector” is another way of saying “sinner,” or “despised person.” I tried to come up with a 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent, and decided that tax collector or IRS agent still carries some of the same distaste for some of us. Maybe “special interest lobbyist”; someone who uses special influence with the government to take money away from decent, ordinary, hard-working people like you and me who are just trying to make our country great again -- like it was

back when David was king. Only Zacchaeus' situation was worse -- way worse. He wasn't representing a democracy of elected officials, he was a Jew, collecting money from his own people -- other Jews -- on behalf of the Romans. The Romans occupied Palestine by force, and they didn't give a rip about the Jewish people. As long as the Romans got their share, Zacchaeus could take as much money as he wanted. To be sure we don't miss this implication, Luke underlines it: Zacchaeus wasn't just *any* tax collector, he was the chief tax collector, and he was rich. The scumbag.

This is a guy everybody hated. He worked for the Romans who were taxing away without representation; and he was short. I bet Zacchaeus was a belligerent little guy; he would have had to be, because a lot of people probably wanted to punch him. But for all of his shortcomings (no pun intended), Zacchaeus has a redeeming quality. Something which we can relate to; something that makes him like us (I hope). Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus.

Let's see what Ted & Co. have to say about this.

**What's so Funny About Money? DVD Track 4 "Up A Tree"**

Those of you who are familiar with the story of Zacchaeus know that this is not the whole story. We'll see and hear the end of the story in two weeks, but if we don't get the beginning right, the end doesn't make any sense.

I hope you'll all be able to stay for the discussion during the Sunday School time today; there will be several groups that you can join. Spoiler alert, one of the questions for those groups is "Do you think it's appropriate to talk about money in church?" The study materials say right at the top that there are no right or wrong answers, so I'm going to tell you my answer to that question, and if you don't like my answer, you can talk about it in your group today. Here's my answer:

Yes, it's appropriate to talk about money in church; but only if we're talking about how money can help us and others to see Jesus. If our conversation about money is motivated by anything besides wanting to see Jesus, we've gotten our priorities wrong.

Let's go back to Luke 19. Jesus passes through the crowded streets of Jericho, looks up in a tree and sees Zacchaeus. Jesus knows who

Zacchaeus is and what he does and how people feel about him. And what does Jesus say? Zacchaeus, are you tithing that money? Zacchaeus, have you named the synagogue in your estate planning? Zacchaeus, would you come down and lead a capital campaign? Nope. Jesus begins by asking if Zacchaeus really wants to see him: Jesus tests Zacchaeus' hospitality. Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down, I must stay with you today," and Zacchaeus hurries down to welcome Jesus. (19:5-6)

We'll talk about the end of that story in two weeks, but here's some food for thought: if we want to see Jesus, we'll have to be willing to open up places in our lives -- our homes, our workplaces, our schools -- and welcome Jesus in; and that experience will change us. It will re-order our priorities and change our attitudes about what is important and what is most important. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus; wanted to see him badly enough to climb a tree and make himself uncomfortable and a little ridiculous.

I think it'd be good for us to be up a tree more often. That is, up a tree in the sense that we want to see Jesus so much that we're willing to be uncomfortable and maybe even a little ridiculous. Willing to put ourselves out there -- not just have other people put themselves out there -- to invite people to our church and welcome them even if there's no guarantee they'll be gracious or grateful. To treat other people like Christ, even if they never put money in the offering plate. If we are willing to go out on a limb for Jesus, I believe we get the beginning of this story right.

But the church can get stuck up a tree if we talk about money without talking about our desire to see Jesus. This is not a conversation between Us and Them: invitation vs. money; the church is all Us. We all share the privilege of inviting and welcoming others to come and see, and each one of us should be part of sharing ourselves and our resources to enable that invitation. Invitation and money are not two separate conversations; they are part of the same conversation about what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ.

I hope you have a desire to see Jesus, because that's where our story and Zacchaeus' story *has* to start. I hope we are willing to talk together about how we invite and welcome others and how following Jesus has changed us, and how through us, Jesus can change the

**world. Blessings to you and on your sharing and your speaking and your listening today. In Jesus name, Amen.**