

My name is JR. and I'm privileged to serve as the teaching pastor here at Beaver Creek Nazarene. I was raised in the Church; when I was a kid, my family was a part of Methodist and Baptist churches. I remember one day very clearly: I was probably five or six years old. We were in a church of probably a couple-hundred people. It was small enough that every Sunday in the middle of the gathering, the pastor would ask if anyone in the congregation wanted prayer for anything, and people would stand up and ask for prayer.

This particular Sunday, I walked in next to my mom wearing a new jacket I'd just gotten that week. It was shiny, silvery (in retrospect, I'm sure it was just an ordinary gray coat, but to my young mind, I was blinged-out like Michael Jackson walking around in this thing). I was so proud of my new jacket - when we got inside the building, Mom offered to take it and hang it on the coat racks. But I didn't want to hang it up! I wanted to wear it.

That new jacket made me feel so big. I wanted to wear it in the Church. I wanted to walk tall. I wanted everyone to notice me.

But of course, to adults, a child's new jacket is hardly earth-shattering news. No one noticed. I walked around, proud, with my chest puffed out. I'm sure as the morning wore on, I began fake-yawning - doing anything I could think of to draw attention to myself.

Nothing worked.

So. There we were, in the worship gathering, that moment of congregational prayer approaching. The pastor asked if there were any requests and, seizing my moment, I leaped to my feet and proclaimed, "I got a new coat!"

Immediately the strong, undeniable hand of God closed like a vice on my shoulder. Okay actually it was my mom, forcing me back into my pew and whispering harsh and embarrassed in my ear: Sit. Down. Now!

The pastor recovered nicely, the church had a good laugh about it and I'm probably the only person who still remembers it today.

That's the first time I can remember wanting to feel big, and feeling small instead. The first time I can recall genuinely wanting to be noticed, to feel as though I'd made some impact on the world, left some significant trace of myself that others would acknowledge.

That desire - to be seen, to leave a mark on the world, to be seen, to feel large, that's a deeply human need. We all want to feel big, to stick out, to be noticed. We may not all want to be on American Idol or star in a movie with George Clooney, but we want someone to notice us. We don't want to feel invisible, as though we don't matter.

There's a particular way humans for millennia have sought to leave our mark on the world: the simplest way to say it is that we pile up wealth. Every human culture has marked wealth in some way - whether it was by how many goats and sheep you owned or how many enemies you'd killed or how many natural resources - like water or forests - you controlled or how many rare elements - like gold or silver or platinum - you own or how many zeroes are on your paycheck, how big your house or nice your car is.

Wealth is always a numbers game. It's about having a bigger number than the people around you, having more, a bigger pile of stuff [I'm imagining Scrooge MacDuck and his vault swimming pool of money]. We've all heard the less-biblical, but seemingly more realistic Golden Rule: he who has the gold, makes the rules.

The more we have, the more we can pile up, the larger we feel. The larger our pile of wealth, of accomplishments, of things that are valuable (and "valuable" means "people want it"), the taller we stand. The more we stand out. The more people notice us.

[move to ladder] So maybe we work for good old fashioned money. We chase that good-old-fashioned American Dream, the one that encourages us to pull ourselves UP by our bootstraps. To get higher. To climb that ladder.

Or maybe we pile other, less tangible stuff up. Like our accomplishments. Our abilities as a mother or father. Our craftiness or knowledge of sports or our fantasy sports team records. Maybe it's our kids' accomplishments.

We all have things that make us feel big. For me, once upon a time, it was a shiny new coat. These days, it tends to be church attendance or blog traffic. What is it for you? What are you tempted to stand on? What makes you feel tall? What ladder are you climbing?

It's important you take a few minutes to figure that out, because whatever that is, we've got the wrong strategy. As counterintuitive as it seems, the key to largeness, to significance, isn't found in piling up more stuff, striving to be bigger, climbing higher up the ladder. It's in giving yourself - and your resources - away.

Giving is how you grow.

You meet that with a mixture of hope and skepticism. Because you don't actually love the climb. At least most of us don't. A few of us may enjoy stepping on people as we climb, but most of us view this constant struggle for significance as a necessary evil. The fight to be noticed, to be large never stops. Even once you get a little higher on the ladder, not only is there always someone a little higher - a little more wealthy, in a bigger home, a nicer car, a better parent, a more accomplished writer - but now you're worried about those people below you to, who are coming for your position.

Actually, the higher you climb, the more precarious the ladder gets. Far from the security and stability you imagined, you find what Notorious B.I.G. warned is true: Mo money, mo problems.

So if it could actually be true that freedom is found not in ascent, but in descent, there's a secret part of our soul that wouldn't hate that at all. We'd love to come down off the ladder, to quit the climb altogether. But how can smallness lead to largeness? How can giving away lead to more? It seems too good to be true.

So today, I want to explore with you the story of a small man who wanted to feel big. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Luke 19. If you grabbed one of our Bibles off the rack on the way in, it's on

page 630. If you don't own a Bible, by the way, we'd be honored if you'd take that one with you and consider it a gift from us!

For the last month, we've been in a series called BOLD. During this series, we've heard stories both from the Scriptures and from Christians around the world of BOLD faith. Stories of people whose choices to follow God inspire and encourage us to imagine a brighter, stronger, more vibrant relationship with God.

Today, we're going to meet today a man named Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a small man who wants to feel large. And his encounter with Jesus utterly transforms him. He becomes a BOLD person, and his act of BOLD generosity is an invitation to us to learn that giving is how we grow. So let's listen to Zacchaeus' story:

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way.

Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem, and his route takes him through the ancient city of Jericho. We're introduced to Zacchaeus as the "chief tax collector in the region."

That doesn't sound so important to us - we might make some IRS jokes or something. But to Jesus' culture, Zacchaeus was much more than a deputy director for the IRS.

Palestine in Jesus' day was ruled by the Roman Empire. In political terms, that meant they were at the top of the ladder. Through wealth and military might, they'd fought to the top, and now they were at the center of the world stage.

And they stayed on top by collecting money from everyone they'd stepped on to get to the top. The imperial taxes were a constant reminder to everyone who had to pay them that they were down the ladder, that Rome was bigger and more powerful than they were.

But Rome ingeniously didn't collect their own taxes. Rather, they employed locals to collect Rome's taxes in their own countries and cities. And as long as Rome got their money, they didn't pay very close attention to *how* they got it, or how much extra these tax collectors took.

It was a brilliant political move: rather than hating Rome, who was really at the top of the ladder, people who had to pay taxes hated the tax collectors: not only were they taking Rome's money, they were taking it from their own people. From Rome's perspective, the tax collectors were a buffer so they didn't have to deal with the local tax payers.

From the conquered peoples' perspective, the tax collectors were traitors: getting wealthy by betraying their own people. And from the tax collectors' perspective, this was an opportunity to climb the ladder. They weren't going to climb as far as Rome, but they were going to be higher, more powerful, bigger, than anyone else in town.

And Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector. He's at the (relative) top of this local Roman pyramid scheme. That he's the *chief* tax collector tells us he's very wealthy and powerful. He's made himself large.

Which makes that next piece of information all the more interesting: we learn that Zacchaeus was a rather small man. He's too short to see over the crowd that's gathered to see Jesus, which tells us he's below average height.

No wonder he wanted to feel big, to feel powerful and strong. Here's a man who's spent his whole life climbing to feel stronger and more powerful. And he seems to be at the top when suddenly this man Jesus comes to town, a man who has some different kind of power, some different largeness than Zacchaeus is used to.

Zacchaeus wants to see this Jesus for himself. But he can't. Despite how far he's climbed, how big he's made himself, he's not big enough. He can't escape his inherent smallness.

So what does he do? What he knows how to do: he climbs. A tree, in this case, but none the less, just as he's done throughout his life, he tries to make himself bigger. And... it works. Jesus notices Zacchaeus:

When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. "Zacchaeus!" he said. "Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today."

Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. "He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner," they grumbled.

Jesus does what Jesus always does: he notices Zacchaeus (like Aaron talked about a few weeks ago). Then he invites himself over. Essentially, Jesus tells Zacchaeus to throw a party and make Jesus the guest of honor.

That sounds strange to us because today it's considered sort of rude. But a guy like Zacchaeus would never in a million years have thought a respected religious teacher like Jesus would come to his house. Even if he'd *wanted* to throw a party, in the ancient world, someone like Jesus wouldn't be caught dead sully his reputation with a guy like Zacchaeus.

Except Jesus does. Apparently, Jesus didn't even think twice about getting down off his high horse not just to come to Zacchaeus' party, but to notice Zacchaeus, to pick him out of the crowd and to insist Zacchaeus throw a party *so that he can come*.

He's essentially saying, "Hey Zacchaeus: I know you don't think you're good enough to be worth my time. You think you're too spiritually small to catch my attention. But I'm telling you that I'd *love* to party with you. I see you."

And - as usual - the religious leaders are not happy. They point out that Jesus is too important, too spiritual to be slumming it with the likes of Zacchaeus. So how does Zacchaeus react?

Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"

Jesus responded, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.”

Here's the act of BOLD generosity that's the heart of our story today: immediately upon being invited to have Jesus as a guest of honor in his home, he responds by abandoning the climb he'd been making all his life:

I'm giving away 1/2 of everything I own right now, to the poor. And anyone I've cheated, I'll pay them back *four times* as much as I took.

This is beginning to sound like an episode of *Secret Millionaire*. We love unexpected acts of generosity. The fact of these outrageous gifts inspires and moves us. And so too the story of Zacchaeus. We love the story of a small man who spent his whole life trying to feel big by stepping on people. And then, when he meets Jesus and he sees that true largess isn't in climbing, but in giving, and he responds with this truly outrageous generosity: giving 1/2 of everything away, *then* paying back 4x what he stole. (a better business person would've paid everyone back then split 1/2 of what's left, right?)

We hear a story like this and we *love* it, but we don't connect with it. We say, wow... a rich guy like Zacchaeus, easy for him to give so much. If I had that much money, I'd give like that too. Probably.

Why is it we love to *see* acts of radical generosity, but so seldom choose to participate in them?

But here is Zacchaeus, who's spent so many years climbing. So many years piling up accomplishments and wealth and power in a desperate attempt to be noticed, to be large, to be enough, finds himself noticed and known and loved.

And so he climbs down, out of his tree and away from the life of fighting and climbing and oppressing and stepping on those who were in his way.

Without even asking, he begins to give. It's his natural, immediate response to Jesus' presence, his love.

And when Jesus sees this bold act of generosity, he declares: Salvation has come to this house today!

The *first thing* Zacchaeus does when he encounters Jesus' love is *give*. Wow.

See money is one of the false American gods we're not allowed to talk about in Church (along with sex and politics). We put it up on a shelf and say it's too taboo to talk about. Behind closed doors, church leaders wring our hands and wonder how we can convince people to give and all the members don't want to hear about money again.

But here's Zacchaeus, whose *first response to Jesus*, totally unprompted, is to give. No hand-wringing or begging or cajoling or eye-rolling. Just bold generosity. What did he see in Jesus that I don't?

Maybe you're thinking, sure. But I'm not rich. I don't have enough to give that it matters.

But that sort of thinking is what happens when we make a rule out of giving. We think a certain dollar amount or percentage of our income is the issue. As though the uncreated creator, the infinite and eternal God of all could possibly need the scraps of income we offer up.

It's not a percentage or a dollar amount. It's about the person you are. The Jewish Law required Zacchaeus to repay a portion of what he stole, but four-times is way beyond what the Law required. It's clear he's not interested in making things legally right; he wants to restore relationships, wholeness. His giving isn't about what's required. It's a response to the God who left heaven to come to him, to notice him, to party with him.

It scares me that this bold generosity was Zacchaeus' first response to Jesus' love. In the Church, we often treat the spiritual practice of generosity as something for mature Christians, something only people who are growing spiritually should do.

But that has a lot more to do with how awkward it is to talk about money. Because here, Zacchaeus is a brand-new follower of Jesus. Giving isn't something he does because he's already grown. It's *how* he grows.

I read his story, his act of BOLD generosity, I hear Robert's story of a whole life of constant giving, giving sacrificially, giving until it actually costs me something, and I have to ask a really painful question:

What do they see in Jesus that I don't?

What did Zacchaeus see in Jesus that I'm missing? Because when he saw Jesus, when he experienced how Jesus loved him, he didn't debate or wonder or make excuses. He gave. Immediately and extravagantly.

What does Robert see in Jesus that day after day he gives up the wealth being a doctor offers him to serve people who desperately need him?

What do they see in Jesus that I don't?

Do you need to ask that same question? Are you radically generous? Is the way you use your money BOLD, sacrificial? Do you look more like Zacchaeus, or Ebenezer Scrooge?

If you don't look like Zacchaeus, it's worth asking: What does he see in Jesus that you don't?

What are the things you're piling up, trying to make yourself feel bigger, safer, more secure? Could you imagine that Jesus' story is true, that you are already noticed and loved by the creator of all things? Could you imagine that God wants to party with you, that in fact the path to life lies not in piling things up, but in giving them away?

Because if you could imagine that, then maybe you can begin to see what Zacchaeus saw: that giving is how you grow.

So this week: what can you give that will hurt, that will cost you?

It won't hurt as badly as you think. You don't need it as much as you think you do. Because you're noticed and loved by the giver of every good and perfect gift, the one who knows you and holds your future.

If you can see that, then give this week. Give like Robert. Give like Zacchaeus. Give and discover the God they know.

**Communion Set-Up**

We give because God first gives to us. All our giving begins with the gifts we've received. And so today we close with Jesus' table. Jesus has come to all of us and said, Throw a party so I can come! And this table is his invitation to us to discover