

Thanksgiving Eve, November 27, 2024

LUKE 19:1–10. (EHV)

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man named Zacchaeus was there. He was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but since he was short, he could not see because of the crowd. He ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Jesus, because he was about to pass by that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, **“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”** He came down quickly and welcomed Jesus joyfully. When the people saw it, they were all grumbling because he went to be a guest of a sinful man. Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, **“Look, Lord, I am going to give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone out of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”** Jesus said to him, **“Today, salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”**

Who is going to be in your home tomorrow? Thanksgiving is of course one of those American holidays where families are expected to get together. So I imagine that there will be family members in your home, and maybe some friends, especially if they live too far from their families or don't have anywhere else to go or anyone to gather with.

What about Jesus? Will he be in your home? In one sense, he'll be in everyone's home tomorrow, because as true God he is everywhere. But will he be there in the way he wants to be there? Will he be present in his Word? Will he be present in believing hearts? Will those gathered at your table be conscious of his presence there, and will they acknowledge it?

Why is it so important that Jesus be in your home, not just tomorrow on Thanksgiving, but every day?

1. When Jesus Is in Your Home, There Is Joy

We just heard about a man who had Jesus visibly in his home. He wasn't planning on it when the day began. Maybe some of you have celebrated Thanksgiving at someone's home in the past because you received an unexpected, last-second invitation. That's sort of what happened here, except Jesus wasn't at Zacchaeus's home for dinner because of an unexpected invitation from Zacchaeus. He was there because he unexpectedly invited himself.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and not just any tax collector, but a chief tax collector. You see, the Roman government didn't have an income tax filing day like our April 15. They had a certain amount of taxes to collect every year, and they simply farmed that responsibility out to tax collectors. These collectors were responsible for collecting their portion of the tax amount and they could keep anything extra they collected. Those chief tax collectors in turn farmed their particular tax responsibility out to other tax collectors under them, after raising the figure considerably to make a tidy profit for themselves, and told their underlings the same thing. “Here's what you need to collect; you can keep anything extra.” You can see how such a system had a lot of room for abuse, and many tax collectors did abuse it. That's why they had a bad reputation, and that's why Zacchaeus was a rich man.

But Zacchaeus must have been one of those few rich men who actually stops to reflect: Is amassing money and stuff all there is to life? Is my incredibly comfortable life worth my hated

reputation and my conscience continually pricking me about all the people I've cheated? And maybe his self-reflection was spurred on by the spreading fame of this teacher named Jesus, who preached against greed and gave peace of heart and the hope of eternal life to those who acknowledged their sin, no matter how bad their sins may have been. Could Jesus give Zacchaeus the same peace and purpose he had given to other tax collectors whom Zacchaeus might have known, like Matthew, one of Jesus's apostles?

One day in Jericho Zacchaeus heard Jesus was passing through there. "Well, here's my opportunity at least to see the man everyone's making such a fuss over," Zacchaeus thought. But the crowds were packed in tightly along the road, and Zacchaeus was short and couldn't see over them. So he ran on ahead to where Jesus hadn't come yet and found a sycamore fig tree near the road that he could climb, so that he could see Jesus approaching.

But when Jesus came to the place, Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus, as if he knew he would be there, and he called Zacchaeus by name, even though he had never met him before: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." This was enough for Zacchaeus to realize that Jesus was everything good that he had heard he was. He came down quickly and welcomed Jesus in his home with joy. The meal he served Jesus doubtless rivaled, and probably exceeded, the best Thanksgiving dinner we've ever prepared or enjoyed.

Why is it so important that Jesus be in your home? When Jesus is in your home, there is joy. There isn't just joy because a guy named Jesus is there, and Jesus is a really cool name. There isn't just joy if Jesus is with us...and there's a particularly large spread on the table. There's joy for the same reason Zacchaeus had joy. First Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus and his message through the grapevine. Now he got to hear it for himself, from Jesus's own mouth. A message of free forgiveness of all sins, including greed and theft, because of what Jesus himself had come to do—to pay for all sins and to seek and to save the lost. A message about a definite and substantive purpose and goal of life—to glorify and serve God in one's vocations and to live knowing that we are but strangers here, with heaven as our true and certain home.

We can tell this message was what gave Zacchaeus joy, because of the attitude of those who didn't share his joy. "When the people saw it, they were all grumbling because he went to be a guest of a sinful man." They didn't have Zacchaeus's joy because they thought they were inherently better than Zacchaeus. They thought that, whatever blessings they had from God, they had them coming and had earned them. They didn't think they were by nature sinful, that they were lost and in need of salvation. Yeah, maybe they had done bad things here and there, but they could atone for those things themselves.

Zacchaeus was under no such delusion. He knew that Jesus being in his home was an undeserved honor, as were the spiritual blessings that Jesus brought with him. So Zacchaeus had joy. And we too will have that same joy when we share Zacchaeus's attitude and his faith, because then Jesus will be in our homes too, not just on Thanksgiving, but throughout the year.

2. When Jesus Is in Your Home, There Is Thanks-Giving

But that's not all that happens when Jesus is in your home. There's not just true joy. There is also thanks-giving.

Now I don't mean "thanksgiving" the way we usually use that word and the way it's meant with our holiday. "Thanksgiving" usually means gratitude and expressions of that

gratitude. It usually means what I have already called “joy” and expressions of that joy. But what I mean by thanks-giving here is actual giving prompted by our thanks, prompted by our joy.

Listen to what Zacchaeus did: “Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord, I am going to give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone out of anything, I will pay back four times as much.’” Under Roman law, if a tax collector actually managed to be successfully convicted of wrongful confiscation, under certain circumstances he might have to replace what he had taken. Under certain circumstances, he might have to pay back double the worth of what he had taken. If he used force to wrongfully confiscate someone’s goods or money, he had to pay back three times the worth, at most. But Zacchaeus voluntarily offered to pay back those he had wronged *four* times the amount, and to give half his possessions to the poor on top of that.

Jesus didn’t command him to do that. Jesus just preached the gospel of forgiveness and salvation. But Zacchaeus’s joy, Zacchaeus’s thanks, led to thanks-giving.

I recently listened to an interview with a WELS pastor who is also an author. Some particular circumstances in this pastor’s ministry have led him to deeply explore the concept of thanksgiving and how it can be utilized to make us happier people—not happier in the sense of more smiles and laughter, though that’s related, but in the sense of contentment and peace. One of the things the pastor advises is keeping a journal and writing down every day something we’re thankful to God for—and no repeats. That means paying attention not just to the big things, but also the often-overlooked things, like electricity, indoor plumbing, and soft carpets and vinyl and hardwood flooring instead of dirt floors. Oftentimes our lack of happiness comes from focusing on our problems and what we don’t have and missing all the wonderful blessings God showers on us every day.

But another thing the pastor advises for increased happiness—and not only God’s word but a number of studies back this up—is intentional generosity. You see, the world tries to convince us that, in order to be happy, we need to focus more on ourselves and on satisfying our own dreams and desires. But that’s precisely our natural, sinful problem—we’re turned in upon ourselves and are self-absorbed. And guess what? Seeking your own happiness as its own goal doesn’t actually lead to increased happiness. It leads to increased dissatisfaction, depression, and anger.

But when we turn outside of ourselves to others, when we find our happiness in the happiness of others, in helping others and being generous towards them, guess who benefits? Not just them, but us! Just look at Zacchaeus. He was already joyful in the gospel, joyful in Jesus’s saving presence in his home, but when his joy in Jesus prompted him to voluntarily give half his possessions to the poor and to pay back those he had wronged four times the amount, you can almost hear his joy reaching an even higher level. And note that Zacchaeus wasn’t doing it because he knew the psychology of giving, that being generous to others would actually increase his own happiness. He did it for Jesus. “Look, Lord, I am going to give half of my possessions to the poor...”

So not just tomorrow, but throughout the year, be conscious of Jesus’s presence in your home, and seek to ensure his presence there more and more through his saving word. You will then find yourselves not only considering how you can make your gathering, your dinner, your circumstances as enjoyable as possible for yourselves. You will find yourselves considering how

you can turn your thankfulness in Jesus into actual thanks-giving, or do so even more. After being generous toward God and the work of his kingdom, you can start with the happiness of your wife, your husband, the other members of your family and extended family, your fellow believers at large, and then move out from there.

Why is it so important that Jesus be in your home? Because joy and thanks-giving are what happens when Jesus is in your home. Amen.