

19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. 2 A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." 6 So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus.

7 Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

8 Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much."

9 Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 The Human One came to seek and save the lost." -**Common English Bible**

---

I remember well the feeling I had after I purchased my first automobile. Driving down Lakeshore Drive in the great city of Chicago, sunroof open, my hair blowing, my music playing. I kept thinking, "This is MY car. It's MY car." I felt a rush of exhilaration raise all the hair on my body. I remember talking with an older, wiser friend later that day and squealing into the phone, "I just bought a car!" He chuckled and said "Really? Well, be careful, you think you own that automobile, but the truth is that automobile owns you. It's the same way with houses. You'll see." Very quickly I did come to see.

Stuff. We all have too much of it and yet, most of us, are quick to purchase more. Many of us are convinced, perhaps by effective advertising, perhaps by some inner drive, that our lives will somehow be more secure the more we accumulate, the better our homes are equipped, the better the automobiles in our driveway are, the more padded our bank accounts and investments are, the more secure we'll be. But it doesn't seem to work that way, does it? The more we have the more we have to maintain. The more we have the more we feel we need. Stuff.

I say "stuff". Our Bibles use the more elegant word "possessions". Same idea. You may be wondering "your sermon title said something about oppression. What does oppression have to do with possessions?" Well... I'm glad you asked.

Zacchaeus was a ruler among tax collectors and he was rich. Tax day is rapidly approaching for us and as much as we might dread mid-April, we can't even begin to

imagine the nature of taxation in Jesus' time. In first century Palestine there was no such thing as a free market. The rulers (both the Roman emperors and their client kings) set up the economy for their exclusive benefit. Peasants, and this includes the fishermen who became Jesus' first disciples, were kept in a position of just barely scraping by thanks to a series of taxes, tithes, and tributes. All "excess wealth" flowed to those at the top. Take the case of fishermen; here are just a few of the taxes they would have to pay- if they owned their own boats- which was rare- they were taxed on every single item used to make and stock the boat- if they didn't own their boats- far more common- they paid ridiculous rates to lease them. They paid taxes to ensure their right to fish, and paid a tax for every single fish they caught. And they paid taxes to have the fish they caught processed and transported. And then random tribute payments would be demanded at the whim of those in authority to top it all off, this was money demanded to pay honor to those in power. All this money flowed through the hands of tax collectors like Zacchaeus. These men had the right to viciously and publicly beat anyone who didn't pay their taxes, and were known for demanding more than was necessary to pad their own pockets. And the money flowed through the hands of these tax collectors straight to the top, to the likes of King Herod, and Pontius Pilate, and even to the Emperor himself.

Now I think we can all agree that this system is the very picture of oppression. To oppress is to wield authority tyrannically, to subjugate some by such a tyrannical use of authority. And perhaps, having this understanding of the world in which Jesus was ministering, perhaps we'll start to see the act of calling the fishermen away from their labors a bit differently. By calling them to drop their nets and follow him he was freeing them from the oppressive system in which they were caught. But I wonder if we can also see Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus as an act to free him, an oppressor, from oppression.

Who knows what drove Zacchaeus. He took on a job that made him despised of his kin and he must have done that job to the great satisfaction of his superiors because he wasn't just a tax collector; he was a ruler among tax collectors. He somehow managed to climb the ranks of that oppressive system and to reap great fiscal benefits as a result- he was rich, afterall. He, like those at the top of the pyramid,

*Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.*

had more stuff than he could ever possibly need. People like to comment on the fact that Zaccheus was so short; perhaps this made him insecure. Perhaps he was the butt of jokes when he was growing up, perhaps the butt of jokes once grown. Perhaps this insecurity drove him, drove him to accumulate, to cooperate with oppressors, to oppress, thinking that this would somehow make him secure. The trouble is, the better he was at his job, the more hated he would be by those around him. The more he accumulated while countless others were struggling to feed themselves and their families, the more he would become the subject of scorn. Zaccheus was as trapped in this oppressive system as were all the peasants of the day. I would say that just as surely those at the top of the pyramid were trapped as well. Oppression works that way tying up oppressor and oppressed in apparently different, but equivalently insidious ways.

So can we see that when Jesus called out to Zacchaeus, much as he once called some fishermen, when Jesus showed acceptance, welcome, and love to Zacchaeus, despite all those grumbling around him, this had the result of freeing him, much as Jesus' call had once freed the fishermen? Jesus didn't scold Zacchaeus. Jesus didn't shame Zacchaeus. Jesus just called his name and asked to spend some time with him. And before Jesus could say anything else, Zacchaeus was emptying his pockets, opening his hands up, letting go of the possessions that had for too long possessed him. And he was redirecting the flow of wealth, away from those who have to those who have not. And he was evidencing commitment to right wrongs he had committed in accordance with the highest standards of restitution. I don't see any sign that Zacchaeus did this out of a sense of obligation or burden. He didn't make these vows to live in relation to his possessions differently with any sense of resentment. He did so joyfully, freely. Thanks to a simple act on Jesus' part, he was a free man, freed from the system of oppression that had trapped him for so long.

That's what Jesus did about the brokenness of oppression. One person at a time, he called out, and set free, one person at a time.

So what are we to do? I went looking to the Book of Acts, which is one of the only story books we have about the life of the early church, about our earliest kindred in Christ, for wisdom on this question. What did they do about the oppression they

encountered in light of their commitment to be followers of Jesus Christ?

Interestingly, in the picture that is painted of the life of the early church, possessions play a prominent role. It is suggested that the believers shared all things in common, selling their possessions and goods and distributing the proceeds to any who had need. Some scholars say that this picture painted in Acts 2 is an idealized picture and that surely there was never a time when all shared so freely and got on so swimmingly. We're all active in church, we know how hard it is to have a totally harmonious, peaceful, common life together. Why would it have been any easier then? People are people, right? But remember the effect that encounters with Jesus seemed to have on people. People who met Jesus, perhaps especially those who met the risen Lord, found themselves much freer in relationship to all aspects of their lives, found themselves freed from all the oppressive systems that once bound them. Perhaps it is not so hard to imagine then that a community led by folks who had direct personal encounters with Jesus would live in this way, letting go of their possessions, meeting needs, sharing.

And what about us? In the United States, the wealthiest ten percent of individuals own 2/3rds of the wealth in the country, while the poorest 50% own, collectively, 2.4% of the wealth. And the disparity is greater on a global scale, the top 10% own 3 quarters of all the resources, while 50% of the world's population is almost entirely deprived of wealth. We may have come along way from the particular oppressive circumstances of Jesus' day, but has that system of oppression been totally destroyed? Evidently not. Right now, with threatened cuts to various social programs, circumstances stand to worsen substantially in our own nation. Quite possibly none of us are counted among the top ten percent of America's wealthiest, while some of us may be counted in the bottom 50%, but most of us are somewhere in the middle. And most of us in the middle feel stuck, working or having worked just as hard as we can, and never seeming to get very far ahead. And to boot we find that we are often slaves to our possessions. Do we want to be slaves to our possessions? Do we want to be trapped in an economic system where the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer?

*Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.*

Jesus freed the oppressed one person at a time. Can we hear Jesus calling to us, assuring us of his love for us, his acceptance of us, and be freed from our anxious participation in this system of oppression? Can we all open up our hands and let possessions flow freely to any as there is need? We can't undo the system, but we can, one person at a time, by the grace of Christ, stop putting our trust in this broken system and start putting our trust in God. We can be freed. That's what it means to be touched by Jesus.