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## The Way We Are Made

(Second in series, *Christian Wisdom for Life, Ten Easy Verses*)

*It is a greater blessing to give than it is to receive.* —Acts 20:35- (Supporting Text— Luke 19:1-10)

The subtext of the biblical message this morning is often an unpopular issue, taxes. The financial requirement to live in a civilized society they may be, but we don't like them, and never did. It might be argued that hostility toward taxes generated the birth of our nation. British taxation of the American colonies was an even more sour taste upon our national palate than that of the taxes we are assessed now. The original events from which the political Tea Party of today takes its name were motivated by the added offensiveness of paying taxes to benefit primarily a King and a people living overseas. There is a bit of a difference, it seems to me, between paying taxes to King George and taxation today by our own government in order to provide us with things such as military defense, roads, schools, police and fire protection, emergency assistance, national parks, snow plowing and garbage collection, but that is really not the issue before us here. The *subtext* of the biblical message this morning is taxes. They are not the main concern. But what preacher can resist saying a word which could well secure a congregation's attention, taxes.

It may be difficult to understand the story of Zacchaeus without understanding the process for collecting taxes in the ancient Middle East under Roman occupation. The Romans were in a similar situation in relation to their territories as were the British in relation to the American colonies in the eighteenth century. The Roman government needed to collect taxes from people who would not be the primary beneficiaries of the money. So the Romans devised a system of tax collection which allowed them to receive tax payments from the occupied territories in a manner that was simple to the Romans and that minimized the risk of nonpayment. So what the Romans did was hire local citizens of the occupied territories as tax collectors, who from their own wealth or by borrowing, would pay up front to the Romans the whole tax for a district. Then the tax collector would garner the actual taxes from the people along with an additional percentage for the tax collector. The profit for the tax collector was approved by the Roman government, but then who knew the law better than the tax collector in authority who said he knew the law, and ultimately what did the Romans care if the tax collector overcharged a bit here and there or made a little more profit for himself than was

supposed to be made. The whole point of the system was for the Romans to get the taxes they wanted in the simplest way possible and as long as that happened, well, what concern was it to them if Jews wanted to cheat other Jews. In fact, if a tax collector regularly paid the Romans on time and without fuss the Romans might care even less about any complaints against the collector. The system practically begged to be abused. Perhaps the only thing the ancient Israelites hated more than paying taxes to the Romans were the Jewish tax collectors. They were often oily, weaselly traitors to their own people and Zacchaeus was one of them.

As long as a person did not have much of a conscience, being a tax collector for the ancient Romans was a pretty good gig. If what a person wanted more than almost anything else was to make money, that happiness lay in being like Ebenezer Scrooge before he saw the light, then there could be no higher aspiration than tax collecting for the ancient Romans in one of the occupied territories. Maybe Zacchaeus started out like that. For sure Zacchaeus knew well how to make a buck, but he didn't know how to be happy until he learned that from Jesus.

There are a few other things about Zacchaeus which we can glean from the story but may be overlooked by contemporary readers. Zacchaeus was a wealthy man yet one who did not always keep his dignity. As he was hated for his thievery he may also have been distained for his social vulgarity. The story leaves the impression that his wealth was added to an otherwise plebian sort of consciousness and style that in combination made Zacchaeus, for all his wealth, appear a somewhat ridiculous figure. Here was the rich man Zacchaeus, with all his financial prosperity, running like a school boy to get ahead of the crowd and climb a tree to see over them, and a sycamore tree at that. The sycamore in ancient Palestine was not like the tree we know by that name in North America today. In the ancient Middle East the sycamore was an evergreen tree with low lying branches that produced a second rate fig which was eaten by those of low income. We might get the picture of a man who was prosperous but lonely; knowing well how to make a profit yet ignorant of how to live well; able to command unwilling acquiescence but not respect; wealthy yet an object of public derision.

So, do you think Zacchaeus liked his life? Was how he lived working for him? Do you think he was satisfied not just with his life but with life itself? In effect, do you think he was happy? The questions are serious ones. Our answers have tremendous consequence for us. If we do not answer them intentionally we might do so unintentionally, and live according to unconscious assumptions about them. Christianity would say that Zacchaeus was not happy. Jesus would say that Zacchaeus was not happy. Jesus gave us our memory verse for this morning. *It is a greater blessing to give than it is to receive. Acts 20:25.* Now we either agree with that or we don't. We either get it, or we don't. And I think Jesus really meant it. I think it would do for us all to take it to heart. If ever life is not very satisfying maybe we should especially remember it then. I

mean, really, maybe sometimes it's not that we don't have enough of one thing or another, maybe the problem is that we haven't given enough.

Zacchaeus finally got it. Perhaps he had some idea about it all along and that was why he was so determined to see Jesus. And once he encountered Jesus it was not long before Zacchaeus knew what he needed to do. *I give half my possessions to the poor; he told Jesus, and if I have defrauded any I give them back four fold (Luke 19:8).* Zachaeus made a deliberate choice then, and answered the question of his own happiness by his actions. He understood that it was a greater blessing to give than to receive.

Our family always celebrated Christmas in the traditional American way of Santa Claus and gift exchange. As the children grew up, each one commented at some point or other to the effect of, *I used to like Christmas so much for when I got my presents. Now I like it more when someone opens a present that I give.* Yes, indeed. Like St. Paul wrote, *When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put away childish things (I Corinthians 13:11).*

Over two months ago I underwent Rotator Cuff surgery on the shoulder and had my arm in a sling for six weeks. For the first week I could not take the arm out of the sling at all. It became very stiff in that short time so that after just one week I could hardly move it. It would take over two months of intensive physical therapy to gradually bring it back to its full range of motion. I mentioned to the surgeon that I was surprised at how fast it became so stiff. He replied that shoulders are like that. They won't work unless they are regularly moved. That is the way they are made.

Christianity suggests that some things about life are always true, never change, and which we ignore at our peril. We heard one this morning. Like eating fresh fruits and vegetables instead of sugar and fats, it is better for us to give than it is to receive. It is a law as constant as gravity. It is the way we are made.