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## Truth In Advertising

### Luke 19:1-10

*Introduction to Luke: In Jesus' day, the nation of Israel, with the capital in Jerusalem, was ruled by Rome. Israel was not politically independent, but Rome did allow the Jews to have freedom within limits. There were Roman governors, and the people were required to pay taxes to Rome. But as long as the Jews did not cause too much trouble and paid their taxes, Rome gave the Jews freedom to worship as they wished. So, Roman officials recruited locals to be the tax collectors because they knew the people and the land better than the Roman transplants. So Zacchaeus was a Jew who worked for the Roman Government as a tax collector. So, Zacchaeus was an embodiment of the reality that the Jews were ruled by a foreign power. And, he was rich because, while Rome told Zacchaeus how much he had to give to Rome, Zacchaeus made his living by collecting more than he had to give to Rome. He got to keep this commission – whatever he could collect over and above the taxes that Rome required. And, apparently, he had been very successful standing in the space between the Jews and Rome. So, we read this passage in the light of the old truism – no one can hate us like family hates us.*

Zacchaeus was a “Son of Abraham”, says Jesus. He was a Jew, a part of the covenant people. He had been raised in Sabbath School, could recite the Law and very likely had a regular pew in the Synagogue. But while he had been very successful, he was tolerated, but not loved by the congregation in Jericho. His wealth likely earned him a seat at many functions, but his job was both a hateful reminder of the fact that the Jewish people were ruled by a foreign power, and also a reminder of the very real price that Jews paid to be allowed some religious independence. They didn't want to live with Zacchaeus and they couldn't live without him. It was a hard spot for everyone.

But when it came to the itinerant Rabbi Jesus everyone, Zacchaeus, the local towns people, and the Rabbis in the Jericho synagogue, came out to see and to hear. In fact, the crowds were so big that a short person couldn't see what was happening. So, Zacchaeus did what he needed to do to see – he climbed a tree. When Jesus stopped, called Zacchaeus to come down and went home to eat with him, the locals were aghast. Zacchaeus was not the influencer, the leader, the one to whom Jesus should be talking if his goal was acceptance and leadership. Luke says that everyone who saw Jesus going into Zacchaeus' house complained and grumbled, “Jesus has chosen to be the guest of the sinner Zacchaeus!”

Today's Scripture only underscores what all of Scripture tells us: It is almost impossible for good people to become followers of Jesus. Of all types, good people are the hardest to convert to the Gospel of Christ.

Because we good people don't want our lives turned upside down. We good people don't want to give half of our possessions away or take responsibility for how our economic fortune is built on the backs of injustice or in the messed-up mix of economic realities. Good people like us just want a tune-up. We are pretty good; we just want to be a little better. Good people want a qualitative improvement – something we can see and be proud of. We'd like to be about 10 lbs. lighter and a little more patient and better at loving the people important to us. And because that is who we are, we are very difficult for God to save.

The good townspeople of Jericho, their religious leadership and Zacchaeus were all out at the parade when Jesus came through, but ONLY Zacchaeus climbed down out of his tree, welcomed Jesus and shifted the center of his life from his own self-serving to a life centered on love of God, neighbor and self. Only Zacchaeus reorganized his life around the truth that he met in Jesus.

Jesus invites us to decide who and what we live for. Do we live our lives organized around our own advantage? Do we live our lives organized around our own community's advantage, our own race's advantage, our own country's advantage? Do we live our lives organized around our own comfort, security or privilege?

Or do we live our lives for some other larger, eternal reality? Do we organize our lives around the priorities of God's rule? Do we recognize how we benefit from God's providence and blessing and consider ourselves stewards of what we have, or view our wealth as a means to answering other's needs and prayers? Is there any reality larger than ourselves? Is there any truth that is eternal and by which all the world will be judged? I would call that larger, eternal reality God. If we believe in God, do we believe that we are in relationship with God and are accountable to that God?

Of everyone who saw Jesus in Jericho that day, only Zacchaeus reorganized his life around the eternal truth he found in Jesus. Only Zacchaeus reordered his economic life around the priorities of the Kingdom that Jesus brought. Only Zacchaeus received salvation on that day.

The God we have come to know in the person of Jesus Christ is not after our money, our time or our words. The God we have come to know in the person of Jesus Christ is after US – our whole heart, mind, soul and strength. The invitation that God extended to Zacchaeus and that is extended through Scripture to you and to me is to climb down out of our tree and reorganize our lives around God's purpose and rule. God is not after an improvement in people who are pretty good. God is after a shift in our center of gravity.

Mostly good people are either offended by Jesus – who chooses to eat with those who are not holy, sinners and sell-outs who make their living in ways that we judge sinful – or mostly good people decide to try harder to be better people so that Jesus will come to our houses to eat

when he shows up. And because we are mostly good people, we have misused and misunderstood the description of the fruits of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit that the Apostle Paul gives us in his letter to the Galatian Church. We have often heard this passage as a moral checklist of things that we ought not to do and things we ought to do. We have seen it as a sort of moral diet that requires great will power and determination. If we want to be better Christians we must be LESS angry, envious and drink less, and we must be MORE patient, generous, kind and loving. So – preachers have proclaimed – get out there and DO BETTER! Furthermore, Paul’s use of the term “fruits of the flesh” have been turned into anything that our body wants. In this moral tune-up version of Paul’s instruction, some have mistakenly preached that our bodies are bad and our spirits are good. So – no dessert for us! Run harder, eat less, do more, give more and you will be saved. It all turns into a works righteousness race.

I have come to believe that this is an absolutely incorrect way to read what Paul counsels. Paul is describing the nature of Christian Freedom in this letter to the Christians in Galatia. The Law – trying to be better, do more and eat less pork – is NOT the way to freedom in Christ – NOT the way to salvation. Instead of seeing this list as a checklist of self-improvement instructions for Christians, I think that Paul is describing two very different OUTCOMES OR DESTINATIONS. If we try to do better by following the Law – work harder at patience, be more loving, give more away to earn God’s notice – then we are doomed to failure. Tell the truth – can any of us claim to have become far more kind, patient and generous by willing it? When I can buckle down and exhibit more patience in one situation – my impatience explodes somewhere else. I think that is why so many people are mean online. If I have to be patient with my boss, my spouse and my H3 group, then my impatience and anger will explode when I can comment anonymously online.

Instead – what if we hear Paul’s instructions as a description of the outcomes of two very different ways to live – two very different paths we can take. The first path is where we end if we love self, what serves me, agrees with me and makes me happy. The first path might better be called the fruits of putting our own egos at the center of our lives. The second path is where we end up if we love God, neighbor and self and organize our lives so that God’s love, God’s purpose and God’s kingdom are at the center of our lives. So, as we listen to Paul’s descriptions of two very different destinations or outcomes, think about where we want to end up.

### **Galatians 5:16-26**

The Idea of “Influencers” – people who determine how we live and what we buy and how we think – is not a new concept. But in our age of social media, an Influencer has become anyone with a lot of “followers” (disciples?) – especially online. If you have a lot of people who watch what you suggest, purchase what you recommend or speak as you speak, then you are an influencer. And, this week, I was reading about how the lack of regulations on social media advertising has caused troubles. So, a well-connected business person can be paid by a shoe company to say that when they run they always wear Brand X, and it is a win-win. They become an “Influencer.”

You know how the drug commercials on TV all picture beautiful, loving families doing amazing and fun things while try to get us to purchase a blood thinner, an exzema medication or a pain reliever? The pictures are sweet, beautiful and intended to create longing in us – we want to be like them! But after the initial pitch, and while the dad is still playing catch with his son against a beautiful sunset on the beach, what we hear is a long list of the possible outcomes of taking this drug. So – take this drug, be like this dad and son, stand on a warm beach playing catch with everyone smiling and laughing – but you might also suffer from blood clots, heart attacks, suicidal thoughts, uncontrollable blood pressure and sudden death. While there is a sort-of truth in advertising here, the clear press is to keep us focused on the images of beauty and joy, hearing but not focusing on the terrible life changing consequences that MIGHT happen to us.

Apparently, online, because there are not many regulations that require truth in advertising, any person who has enough social media followers can be paid to “pitch” a product with little or no truth telling. The influencer gets money from the manufacturer, his/her “followers” think that they are getting a little piece of the beauty, luxury and joy of the life of the influencer, and the economy just rolls along.

What the Apostle Paul gives us today is some truth in advertising. If we persist in keeping our own egos, needs, wants and security at the center of our lives, then the inevitable outcomes will be anger, greed, idolatry, dissension, envy and the like.

But, if we instead put God, God’s love, God’s priorities at the center of our lives, then the inevitable outcomes will be love, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness and the like.

This list is NOT about trying harder to be good or better. These lists are describing where we will find ourselves depending on what is at the center of our lives and priorities. If I say that I want to drive to Charlotte, but I get on I-77 south, my outcome, my destination will not be Charlotte.

If I say that I want to love God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength but instead I spend my time, energy and money pursuing something other than God, then I will not find the Kingdom of God. So, today we are offered a choice like Zacchaeus’ choice. If we can live with a life that is pretty good – has its ups and downs – costs and benefits - and we are satisfied with just trying to “do better” – be a little more patient, be a little more generous, be a little kinder – then we (like the good people of Jericho and their religious leaders) will be offended by both Jesus and Zacchaeus, and we will say to ourselves – well on good days, I can be pretty kind and mostly patient, but I am not hanging around with the likes of a tax-collector!

But, if we believe that there is a God who created all that is, rules the Universe and loves us and all that God has made, and that this God has called us into relationship – “I’m coming to your house today!” -then we get to decide which reality will govern our lives. And the Apostle Paul wants us all to know the outcomes of both choices. Living in the Way of Jesus Christ really is a better way to live – a beautiful way to live – a way to live that does and will result in love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We don't have to love and obey God. We get to love and obey God. The results are life-changing and life-giving – now and always.