

“Who Do You Know That Has Changed the Most?”

Luke 19:1-10

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
November 7, 2004

Who is the person that has changed the most among your acquaintances? I am speaking of changing for the better. Who is so different from what they once were that you can hardly believe it?

What happened? How did the change occur? Was it gradual or sudden? How long have they been different and do you think it will be permanent?

If the people in Jericho were asked this question, I don't think they would have any problem answering. “Zacchaeus,” they would quickly respond and then I think they would tell you why.

“There was a time when he was the most despised man in Jericho. He was the chief tax collector, which meant he was the main person responsible for cheating all of us on our taxes and making life miserable. I doubt that he had a friend in the world. No one liked him or respected him. We just left him alone and tried to have as little contact with him as possible.”

“All that changed one day when a holy man named Jesus passed through our town. Everybody wanted to see Jesus and so the crowd was extremely large along his parade route. I guess Zacchaeus wanted to get a glimpse of him, too, because he climbed a sycamore tree so he could see. He was a short man and could not see over the heads and shoulders of others. I must say it looked funny seeing him up that tree. Most rich people don't sit in trees, you know.”

“The strangest thing happened that day, though. When Jesus approached the place where Zacchaeus was, he stopped, looked up in that tree and called Zacchaeus by name. Shocked us all! And we were even more shocked by what Jesus said. We thought Jesus might publicly scold him for being so corrupt but he didn't. Some of us were disappointed. It's what we wanted this holy man to do. It's what we thought he should do. But, like I said, he didn't.”

“Instead, he said, ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.’ And you know what? Zacchaeus scampered down that tree and took Jesus home with him. They left a lot of wide-eyed people standing in utter disbelief talking among themselves.”

“I sure would like to know what they talked about that day. Whatever it was, it did a number on Zacchaeus. There is no way to adequately describe the change in that man from that day to this. Best way I know to express it is that he became honest and generous, two traits completely unfamiliar to him. Immediately, he started giving money to the poor and trying to find people that he had cheated so he could give them back what he owed them with interest! I've never seen anything like it. Sure wish I knew what they talked about that day or where we could find Jesus now. I know some other people that need to have a little talk with him.”

How about you? Do you know someone that needs to have a talk with Jesus about values, priorities and lifestyle? Do you know someone that needs to be rescued from greed? Could you be one?

Would you want to sit down and talk to Jesus about how you earn and spend your money? Would you feel comfortable showing him your checkbook and credit card bills? What changes do you think he would recommend?

What do you think Luke's purpose was in telling this story? **I think Luke wanted us to know that change is possible.** Zacchaeus reminds me of Charles Dickens' main character in *The Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge. You recall that Ebenezer was the richest man in town but also the most despised because he was so selfish and rude. After three ghostly visits on Christmas Eve, he changed his attitude and lifestyle. He became the town's most generous benefactor and respected citizen.

Ebenezer may have been a fictional character but Zacchaeus was not. He was real and he really changed. We can, too.

I also believe that Luke wanted us to know that Jesus and change go together. This was true for Zacchaeus. The key to the changes he made was the influence of Jesus. Before he met Jesus, he was selfish and dishonest. After spending personal time with Jesus, he was a completely different person, repairing broken relationships and meeting the needs of the poor. Something changed in Zacchaeus' heart that was so profound that it could not be concealed. Luke wanted us to know that Jesus was the one that inspired and helped him make these changes.

I think Jesus is willing to help us make changes in our values, priorities and lifestyles, too. After announcing that salvation had come to Zacchaeus' house, what did Luke write? "For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost." Jesus' purpose was to find people that were headed down the wrong road and set them on the right track. He wanted to rescue people from greed and the guilt and loneliness that accompany it. He did this for Zacchaeus and can do it for us.

This is why I challenge you this week to invite Jesus into your home for a talk about your life. Specifically, I want you to have a heart to heart talk with him about the way you earn and spend your money. Evidently he had this conversation with Zacchaeus and I have to believe that Zacchaeus, his family and entire community were glad he did. Perhaps it is time for you to talk to him about stewardship, too.

On Friday I attended the funeral for James T. McAfee, Jr., for whom the McAfee School of Theology is named on Mercer's Atlanta campus. He was chairman of Hallmark Systems, Inc., an Atlanta-based health care company. He had a long and distinguished career in the health care business. During his tenure as executive vice-president of Charter Medical Corporation prior to working with the Hallmark Systems, he led in the developing, opening and managing of eighty-eight hospitals. It goes without saying that Mr. McAfee was a hard working and skilled businessman.

He was also a very good and generous man. At his funeral, his pastor and my friend, Dr. David Sapp said, "While many will remember Jim McAfee for his business and financial success, many more will remember him for his generosity, what he gave away." Dr. Kirby Godsey, President of Mercer University, said of Mr. McAfee, "Time and money were his servants, not his masters, and they served him well. He used them to make life better for a number of people that only eternity will reveal."

What I appreciated about Mr. McAfee was his lifelong example of generosity. For years, he gave away hope, encouragement, advice and money. He did not wait until he was elderly or after his death to give himself away. He did it all his life.

Can you imagine how happy he is that he made this decision years ago? What a smile must have crossed his face when he heard his heavenly Father say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

If you passed away today, would you hear those words of affirmation and appreciation from the Lord? Would you enter heaven with a smile of anticipation on your face? If not, remember, change is possible and I know the very one that can help you do it.