[Isaiah 1:10-18](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=287#hebrew_oth_reading)

Psalm 91

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

[Luke 19:1-10](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=287#gospel_reading)

THE SIREN SONG Sermon for November 3, 2019

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: The heart is restless, until it finds peace in God.

We've pointed out many times over the years from this pulpit that the primary instruction Jesus provides us is an instruction on how to see things the way God sees them, how to prioritize things the way they are prioritized in heaven, how to value people and actions and even ourselves the way eternity values them.

We can also put this by saying that Jesus is teaching us how to be at home in heaven.

It's of course presumptuous to claim to know very much about heaven, and so almost everything must be offered with reverence and as speculation. But that being said, if we accept Jesus as our guide and teacher, we can't go far wrong in deriving from his instruction at least a rough picture of the sort of values and attitudes that will enable us to feel most at home in heaven.

And if we look at that instruction, one thing we will notice is that there are really two elements of human reality that Jesus seems more concerned with than almost anything else. When you read through the Gospel accounts, you find that Jesus has relatively little to say about the activities we might describe as involving gross immorality. He doesn't dwell much on murder or theft or physical or emotional abuse.

I suspect the reason for that is that Jesus realizes that ordinary moral thinking is adequate to warn us against those sorts of behavior. It doesn't take God come down from heaven to teach us that it's wrong to kill your neighbor or commit adultery. What's lacking with regard to gross immorality is not moral knowledge, but rather moral character, character that is harnessed by that understanding. And while the organized Church has certainly assumed and played an important role in that 'harnessing' over the centuries, it is not, in my opinion, of central concern to Jesus himself.

What is of concern to Jesus are rather those elements of human character that threaten, not so much society, but the individual's own eternal health and well-being and ongoing growth.

Specifically, the two things that concern Jesus the most are moral and material pride.

Over the last few months we've discussed one of those concerns from this pulpit quite a lot. Moral pride is an extraordinarily deep and subtle temptation, especially for those who have begun to make progress in consciously following Christ. “When you do a good deed with your right hand,” Jesus tells us, “don't let even your left hand know about it.” Yet how many of us can keep our moral good deeds to ourselves, completely to ourselves, hidden for eternity? How many of us can resist the temptation to publicize our own goodness, and resort instead to the subterfuges of false humility or oblique references.

But it is exactly because those temptations are so subtle and deep that Jesus warns us most vigorously against them. And surely his point in doing so is because he wants us to be aware that in heaven, there is no reward for virtue. None, nada, zip. It would be as buffoonish in heaven to be proud of one's virtue as it is on earth to be proud of breathing.

But today we'll move on the other great temptation that Jesus devoted so much of his ministry to warning us against, and that is the temptation to pride posed by material wealth.

Oftentimes in church, when the topic is the Christian attitude towards wealth, you will hear some message to the effect that it's not the wealth that's the problem, it's the attitude towards the wealth. But based on what Jesus actually says, that seems to me to be much too comfortable a moral to draw. It would sort of be like saying that it's not the cancer that's bad, but rather our attitude towards the cancer. There is a small and obvious truth there, that some attitudes towards cancer are preferable to others; but that doesn't mean the cancer isn't itself bad.

If we are to take Christ's message seriously, I think we must come to grips with his estimation that material wealth is as threatening to spiritual well-being as cancer is to physical well-being.

Suppose someone were to offer any of us a billion dollars. Presumably we would all take it, and regard ourselves as having received a wonderful gift. But if we are to take Christ seriously, we should regard ourselves as having received a terrible punishment. How can that be?

Maybe by looking more closely at the story of Zacchaeus, we can begin to come to some understanding. The reason Luke includes this episode in his gospel, after all, is because Zacchaeus is a rich man. We see Jesus recognizing something about this particular rich man, and blessing that quality or those qualities. What is it that Jesus sees in this man that makes him different from other rich men, and what does that tell us about the riches themselves?

The episode itself is brief, only a few verses. A rich tax collector has heard about a strange young man who has been preaching a message of repentance throughout Galilee and now Judea, and he wants to at least catch a glimpse of him. But as always there's a big crowd around Jesus, hemming him in, so Zacchaeus climbs a tree along the roadway where the crowd is passing. Jesus sees him in the tree, and calls him by name, and invites himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner. And at that dinner, Zacchaeus announces that he's going to rid himself of his ill-gotten riches.

And that's it, short and sweet. But even from this little account, I think we can make out at least something of what Jesus saw in this particular rich man, something that set him apart and made him a suitable recipient for Christ's acknowledgment and blessing.

The first thing that Jesus would have noticed was that here was a rich man who had come to see him, not even to meet or talk with, but simply to see him.

Now crowds gathered from all over to touch Jesus, to receive healing from him, to listen to his strange new message, sometimes to debate with him or argue with him. But here was a man, a rich man, who came simply to see him.

We desire riches because we believe that riches will provide us with a more satisfying life than the one we lead. It will offer opportunities for new experiences, new sensations, new and more interesting ways of filling our hours.

Yet here was a rich man who could be anywhere else, doing anything he wanted, enjoying all the experiences money can provide...and yet he chose to come here today, just to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

Jesus saw that in Zacchaeus, and blessed it. And surely that teaches us one of the great and terrible temptations of wealth, the temptation to believe that it can satisfy our deepest needs, that it can give our lives meaning and fill them with the things that make life worth living.

When Martha was fussing around preparing a meal, Jesus stopped her and pointed to her sister, Mary, sitting quietly next to him, and said: But one thing is needed, Martha, and Mary has chosen it.” When the rich young ruler asked what was needed for eternal life, Jesus said, Sell everything, and follow me.

The point is always the same. The siren song of wealth is hypnotic but also spiritually deadly, because it tempts us to think that material things can fill the deepest needs of our spirits, material things rather than God.

As Saint Augustine famously put it: Thou has made us for thyself, O Lord, and out heart is restless until it finds rest in thee.

And the second thing Jesus would certainly have noticed was that here was a very rich man, sitting in a tree.

Our text tells us that Zacchaeus couldn't see Jesus through the crowd, because he was small in stature. But both our English translation and the original Greek leave the pronoun 'he' ambiguous. It might refer either to Zacchaeus or Jesus, and in fact there are hints in some of the early Christian writings that suggest that Jesus himself might have been short.

We obviously can't know one way or the other, but I think our account gains much more poignancy if, instead of picturing Zacchaeus as a short, roly-poly sort of cartoonish individual, the way he's typically portrayed, if instead we picture him as a tall, dignified figure, well-dressed and with an air of power and authority about him, who nonetheless has climbed a tree to see Jesus.

For surely another one of the almost universal by-products of wealth is that we tend to see ourselves as to some degree separate from and superior to those of lesser status. Celebrities don't go to the beauty parlor to get their hair done; the beautician comes to them. Downton Abbey is full of interesting characters, but there is nonetheless an invisible but unbreakable line between those who are at home downstairs and those who are at home upstairs.

In fact, I think we may put it down as a deep and nearly universal element of the human psyche that great material wealth convinces those who possess it of a position of special status viz-a-viz those who lack such wealth.

And yet when Jesus looks up, he sees exactly such an individual, having abandoned all sense of dignity, all pride of position, all concern for what the common folk might think, sitting in a tree. And Zacchaeus! Jesus calls out. Come down from the tree. We're going to eat at your house!

We're not given any of the backstory of Zacchaeus. All we are shown is a rich man who, for at least one afternoon of his life, had become aware of the depth and reality of a spiritual need that nothing in the material world could provide, and who had by some grace cast off or lost the invisible cloak that separated him from and elevated him above his less fortunate neighbors.

Like the tenth leper we talked about a few weeks ago, Jesus saw something in Zacchaeus, and it is that something that he acknowledges and blesses. In the leper, he saw a quality of faith deepened and enriched by gratitude. In Zacchaeus, he saw someone somehow freed from the false promise and soul-deadening pride of material wealth.

And in both cases the lesson is the same. Grateful lepers are apt to feel at home in heaven, and in heaven, the rich and proud will have to climb trees to get the best views.

And so our prayer for this morning, gracious God, is to be drawn closer to you, and farther from the illusions that life can be fulfilled without you. We ask for your protection from the siren song of material wealth. We pray for the awareness of Zacchaeus, that the security and satisfactions of excessive wealth are an illusion and a terrible danger. We ask for the same grace with which you blessed him, to realize that our hearts will always remain restless, until they find rest in you, the same that Jesus was referring to when he said, “Come to me, you who are weary, and I will give you rest.” And we offer this prayer in his name.