

Sermon for the First Sunday after All Saints' Day November 2, 2025 jj
Rev'd Mark B. Stirdivant, Christ our Savior Ev. Lutheran Church, St. Augustine, Florida
✠ sdg ✠

Rich men were not winning at the Jesus game. What I mean by that is, during Jesus' ministry that is recorded by the Gospel of Luke, every time there was a mention of a rich man, there always seemed to be something that prevented him from believing in Jesus and receiving His gift of salvation. Here are some examples: a rich young man asked Jesus, What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said, Sell all you have and give to the poor, then follow Me, but the man couldn't do it; he walked away sad. (Luke 18) Jesus told a story about Lazarus, a poor man who went to heaven, and the rich man for whom it was too late for him to escape the punishment of hell. (Luke 16) It was a rich fool who decided to build bigger barns so he could store his abundance of crops selfishly instead of having treasure in heaven. (Luke 12)

What is the problem with these rich men? What keeps them out of the kingdom of heaven? We're beginning to think that it's the wealth itself that's the problem. Especially when we hear Jesus speak words like this: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:25) Saint Paul gives us a little relief when he explains that it is not the money but the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10), so that helps us understand why Jesus tells us it is important instead to be rich toward God. It's about having a proper attitude about money and remembering God as the giver of wealth, as well as all other blessings, but still, the odds don't look good for these rich men.

Then we come to Zacchaeus in Jericho. He may be a rich tax collector—a chief tax collector at that—but with Jesus, his odds don't look too good. We're talking about saints today, and this guy is the last man who would be considered a saint. Zacchaeus lives in a cursed city—Jericho. Ever since Joshua fought the battle and the walls came tumblin' down, Jericho was a symbol of God's judgment and rejection. If it was rebuilt, then someone would have to die. That was the curse of Zacchaeus' hometown Jericho. Then you have a thronging crowd pressing in to see Jesus as He's passing through. He isn't going to be in Jericho for long; He has already said three times that He's headed for Jerusalem and this would probably be the last time these people would be able to see Him. As a small man, Zacchaeus would have little to no chance to catch a glimpse of the Savior. No doubt he would be the object of ridicule as well—look at the tiny tax collector now! He can't buy himself a couple more inches of height just to see over the peoples' heads. What a sinner he is—unworthy! Yet another rich man in the Gospel record going the way of those other rich men.

But then Zacchaeus makes a desperate move. Disregarding his fine robes and his already ragged reputation, he ran on ahead of where Jesus was going to walk and he climbed a sycamore tree just so he could see who He was. And yet he did more than see Him, because Jesus told Zacchaeus to come down, "I must stay at your house today." Seeing Jesus only would not help this rich man of short stature living in a city under God's curse. Zacchaeus must hear Jesus teach. Faith for eternal salvation must come

by hearing the Word of God. That's how he will reverse the rich man's downward trend in the Gospel. Zacchaeus was doomed, but Jesus the Savior brought salvation right into his house.

You see, Jesus would soon leave below-sea-level Jericho and hike up the steep road to Jerusalem. That's where He would accomplish the salvation that He announced in the tax collector's home. The curse on Jericho, on Zacchaeus, the curse on you and me and the whole world could only be satisfied if someone were to die, and Jesus died that death for us all. He ascended not a sycamore tree, but a dead wooden cross. He was punished with torture and death, not for anything He had done, but for all that sinners did and continue to do to separate ourselves from the God who created us. He who was truly rich, for your sakes became poor, that in Him you might possess the greatest riches of all—the righteousness of God.

Now Salvation has come to this very house for you to hear, to bring you out of your rich man, Zacchaeus-like, cursed existence into the kingdom of heaven. You hear the message of forgiveness in Jesus, and from those very words you hear, forgiveness is yours. Whether you are rich or poor, there is a curse you have been under, and you feel its weight. Wholeness is now restored to your troubled soul. You have won the Jesus game! And all you had to do was humble yourself to rely totally on Jesus and His invitation to you to believe and be saved. You too, are no longer counted a sinner, but a saint, a true child of Abraham like Jesus said of Zacchaeus. All Saints' Day now includes you and me, thanks to our Lord.

Yes, it is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but with Jesus, it is now possible to have a confident expectation in your heart for the life of the world to come. No impediment holds you back from the mercy of your Heavenly Father who hears your prayer. You know that you have God's favor resting upon you. You have His peace, and like Isaiah proclaimed, though your sins were like scarlet, a stain on your conscience that would never be cleansed with man-made works or detergents, they are washed white as snow in baptism.

Jesus must stay at your house today; He desires to eat with you a meal He prepared to benefit both your body and soul unto life everlasting. You have opportunities in your life and calling to show love to your neighbors, reflecting the love God has shined into your heart. Hurry down from the tree, Saint Zacchaeus! Listen to the words by which the Son of God Himself releases you from your curse. In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins...

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.