

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**January 26 & 27, 2013**  
**John Crosby**  
**The Essential Teachings of Jesus: Give to Receive**  
**Luke 18-19**

Think of all the words we have heard spoken, all the chatter that fills our lives. From the time we wake up until, frankly, well after we are in bed, we hear words, words, words, words. Spoken and seen and sung, and the chatter fills our souls. But some words are more important than others and they can get drowned out, so we are trying to start the new year with the most important words. What are words that bring life? Words, literally, to live by. We said, let's look at the words to live by, the Essential Teachings of Jesus. If you boil it down, what are the Essential Teachings of Jesus? We started a couple of weeks ago, saying that Jesus makes the invisible God appear. "The one who has seen Me has seen the Father." "I and God the Father are one." Jesus comes and He talks like the King of the new Kingdom. Jesus comes to bring the Kingdom. He talks like the King of a new kind of Kingdom. Last week we had a guest come and speak to us about the rules of that Kingdom, the laws of the new Kingdom. The Jews had 618 different laws. Jesus said, "In this new Kingdom, there are only two you need to worry about." Just two. And our guest last week, Scot McKnight, called those the Jesus Creed.

We thought that was so good that we ought not just move onto the next thing before we say *yes*. Could we really get those right? Scot had everybody stand, turn, and face the east and repeat with him the two most important laws, which Jesus would have learned every morning on his mother's lap and every evening at his father's side at dinner. He would have repeated exactly the same thing. We said, let's take the next thirty days and each day try to learn those words to live by, so I thought we could do that together.

<sup>28</sup> One of the teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" <sup>29</sup> "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this:

Repeat after me,

<sup>29</sup> ...'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

(All:) Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

<sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart

(All:) Love the Lord your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your mind

(All:) and with all your soul and with all your mind

and with all your strength.’

(All:) and with all your strength.

<sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

(All:) The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

There is no commandment greater than these.” [Mark 12:28:31]

(All:) There is no commandment greater than these.

The King of the new Kingdom lays down the Law. For those who would live in the new Kingdom, this is what they would do. So to get those Laws deep in us, we repeat them morning and night and through the day. As you leave today, we’d like to offer you a card that has the Jesus Creed on it. The ushers will give it to you. I would encourage you to put it some place you will see it through the day, in the car, in the kitchen, in the bathroom. Somewhere where you will see it and say, “Oh, yeah. The Lord is one. Love the Lord with all my heart. Love my neighbor as myself.” Those are the Laws of the Kingdom.

This week we want to talk about how you get into the Kingdom. Words to live by. How do you get into this new Kingdom? And we want to talk about the teaching of Jesus. Most of the teaching that Jesus does is not in churches, or synagogues back then. It is not in classrooms or even sitting down. Most of the teaching Jesus does is on the road, person to person. Jesus meets two people back to back in the story right at the end of His mission here, right before He is killed in Jerusalem. You will recognize how when Jesus meets them, He shares the Jesus Creed in different ways. It is tweaked for every person He meets because we are all different. I’ve asked two of my friends to come up and share with you these encounters. We want to go back and forth between them. The stories are right next to each other but the people in them respond very differently. As you listen to these stories in Luke 18 and 19, we’d like to see if you can spot what makes the difference.

(Narrator No. 1.):) While Jesus was walking to Jerusalem on the road that goes through Jericho, a rich young ruler came up, fell on his knees and asked Jesus,

<sup>18</sup> ...“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

<sup>19</sup> “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.

<sup>20</sup> You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’”

<sup>21</sup> “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.

When He heard this, Jesus looked at him and loved him. He said,

<sup>22</sup> ...“You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

*(Narrator No. 2.:*) Right after this, the next thing you know,

19 Jesus entered Jericho

on His way to Jerusalem. Another man was there named

...Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. <sup>3</sup> He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

<sup>5</sup> When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” <sup>6</sup> So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

*(Narrator No. 1.:*) When the rich young ruler heard Jesus tell him to give everything away and follow Him,

<sup>23</sup> ...he became very sad,

and walked away

because he was very wealthy. <sup>24</sup> Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

<sup>26</sup> Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”

<sup>27</sup> Jesus replied, “What is impossible with human beings is possible with God.” [Luke 18:18-27]

*(Narrator No. 2.:*) All the people saw Jesus with Zacchaeus, and they

<sup>7</sup> ...began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

<sup>8</sup> But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

<sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” [Luke 19:1-10]

So, two different people. Both came up and made a special effort to get in front of Jesus, and that's not unusual, is it? All of the time, you probably hear your friends say, “You know, I'm not really religious but I'm spiritual. I like Jesus, but I don't like Christians. I'm not much for church going but I really like Jesus.” People are attracted to Christ, but when it gets just a little deeper, people respond a different way. The stories tell what happens.

Jesus tells stories for two reasons. The first is so that you can identify with one of the characters. Let's start it there. Who are you in the story today? As you think about the characters in these stories, who are you? Are you down on your knees? Are you up in a tree? Are you grumbling in the crowd? Are you running on empty? Where are you in the story today? Who do you identify with most? Stories, though, are also just there to connect emotionally, to tie into the feelings that they have that we often have. I think that both of these stories show that simultaneously we crave the love of God. There is something about us that says, "I want to believe that there is a God, that there is more to this life than between birth and physical death. I want to believe that God is out there and that God loves me and that in the end, it will be okay."

The rich young ruler throws himself at Jesus' feet and says, "What do I do to live forever with God?" On the one hand, that is powerful in our lives and on the other hand, there is a huge resistance to submitting our wills to anybody else's, even God's, and that tension is where our emotions connect. These stories are surprising to us, but they were enormously surprising back then. The surprise is that the good guy walks away and loses, and the bad guy gets rewarded and joins the Kingdom of Heaven. That's why the Kingdom of God is often called the upside-down Kingdom. The things you don't expect to happen mark the way that God works in the world.

The rich young ruler comes forward. Back then, and probably more than we want to admit now, we believe that the wealthy are blessed by God. That somehow God loves them and favors them more than the rest of us, so this man is the best of Judaism. On the other hand, Zacchaeus is a crook, just no doubt about it. He is the chief tax collector, very wealthy, unpopular. We know those three things immediately from the story, right? No one led him to the front of the crowd. He is unpopular because the Emperor of Rome has said, "I need a million dollars from Judea. You collect it. Keep whatever is left over." Zacchaeus goes to the people and says, "Can you believe it? They want a million, four." Everybody knows he is lying but he's got this paper that says, "Give the man whatever Rome asks for." So he is in charge of throwing widows out of their houses and because of him, parents have to choose between food and shelter. He is hated. He is hated so much that even going to his house is to be associating with the enemy.

The surprise here is that the good guy walks away and the bad guy somehow gets in, and it's because Jesus asks them both to do the same thing, right? Jesus asks the rich young ruler to leave everything and follow Him. Now probably every time I preach this, I have said, "Now it is important to realize that money was his problem and it's not everybody's. It's not about money. Let's face it, it *is* about money! Let's not over-spiritualize this. Theologian Tom Wright says, "Whenever money starts to talk, it shouts louder than all the other voices around us." Whenever money talks, we listen. There's a great new book that's been out for a couple of years now by Ross Douthat called *Bad Religion [Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics]*. I mention it in part because Douthat is going to be at the Search Ministries' breakfast this next month. I would really encourage you to go. *Bad Religion* talks about why people don't like Christianity. Douthat says this:

In Christian teaching, the pursuit of money can be as morally dangerous as the possession of great wealth, and the middle-class striver....

That's all the people in this church. We are middle-class strivers. None of you believe that you are rich. Most of you are honest enough to say that you are not poor. We are strivers.

...the middle-class striver may be as steeped in sinfulness as an Andrew Carnegie or a Donald Trump. In the story of the camel and the needle's eye, the disciples recognized, all men stand condemned—not because we are all rich, but because almost all of us desire to be so and too often organize our lives around that desire.

The way we work, the way we save, the way we give away, the way we spend, the way we worry. This is a hard teaching in any society, especially in one as steeped in money as ours. John D. Rockefeller accumulated a multi-multimillion dollar empire, he would have been a billionaire in today's society. He dies in 1937, and one of the newspaper columns says, "I wonder how much he left." And somebody else said, "He left it all!" He left every single bit of it, and that's what Jesus is trying to say. You can't get it through the eye of the needle. But for others of us, while money is the big kahuna, for others of us, the question is, what is in your hands that you are holding onto the way the young ruler was holding onto money? Many of you are holding onto the need to be loved. You want so much for this marriage to work out that you will do the wrong thing. You want so much to be loved for her or by him that you are becoming what you should not be. Or you see your life as a failure because there is nobody to love you. For some of us, you have put into your hands and will not let go, your children. You're worshipping your children. Their successes, their failures, their responses to you are far more important than what you believe about God. For some of us, it's not money. It's the recognition that we are getting old. We realize that there is a good possibility that if the incidence of the death rate is about 100 percent, you may not be the exception, and there is a fear of death that changes us. For some of us, it's career.

For many of us, it is a combination of all those. But for all of us, there is a sense that what we desire so much to make our lives worthwhile is what we live by. Jesus is coming up to us and saying, "Why don't you get rid of that. Put that aside and follow Me. As a matter of fact, if you don't put it aside, you can't follow Me. Not because I won't let you, but because you can't bring it along with you in the places I want us to go. You can't get it through the eye of the needle. Put that down. It's killing you."

One of them, the rich young ruler, has a socially acceptable desire. The other one is a crook. Why do you think this is recorded at the end of Jesus' ministry? These are the last two contacts that Jesus has before He gets into Jerusalem the week He is going to die. Last words are meant to last and I think the reason this is put last is because Jesus wants to make sure that people who get to heaven are not Minnesota nice. Jesus doesn't die to make people nice. Jesus dies to save the lost. The great surprise: Christians are not *nice* people. The flip side is, you don't have to become nice to become saved. We all have to choose whether we will let go of what is in our hands and follow the King into the new place or whether we will stay and try to make it through the eye of the needle on our own.

One of you introduced me to a Minnesota writer, David Wainwright. He is a mystery writer. He has this great character, sort of a detective, and in almost every book, he has this same line. He has finally gotten the drop on the bad guy and he says, "He didn't have a chance, but I gave him a choice." He didn't have a chance to win. He didn't have a chance to save himself, but he had a choice.

That is what this story is about. You don't have a chance. You can't make it. But you have a choice. God gives us choices; otherwise, there is no chance. One of the best books of the last century was by C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. It is a series of stories about people who find themselves in hell, and this boss from heaven comes down and says, "Anybody want to try it? You want to try heaven?" Several of these lost souls get on the bus and go to heaven to see if they prefer heaven to hell. They look like ghosts. They are almost ghosts in heaven, hardly even there. One of them is the narrator.

I saw coming towards us a Ghost who carried something on his shoulder.... What sat on his shoulder was a little red lizard, and it was twitching its tail like a whip and whispering things in his [the Ghost's] ear. As we caught sight of him [the Ghost], he turned his head to the reptile with a snarl of impatience. "Shut up, I tell you!" he said. It wagged its tail and continued to whisper to him. He ceased snarling, and presently began to smile. Then he turned and started to limp westward away from the mountains [back toward hell].

"Off so soon?" said a voice.

The speaker was more or less human in shape but larger than a man, and so bright that I could hardly look at him. His presence smote on my eyes and on my body too (for there was heat coming from him as well as light) like the morning sun at the beginning of a tyrannous summer day.

"Yes, I'm off," said the Ghost. "Thanks for all your hospitality. But it's no good, you see. I told this little chap' (here he indicated the Lizard) [representing lust], "that he'd have to be quiet if he came [up here]—which he insisted on doing. Of course his stuff won't do here: I realize that. But he won't stop. I shall just have to go home."

"Would you like me to make him quiet?" said the flaming Spirit—an angel, as I now understood. "Of course I would," said the Ghost. "Then I will kill him," said the Angel, taking a step forward. "Oh—ah—look out! You're burning me. Keep away," said the Ghost, retreating.

"You don't *want* him killed?" "You didn't say anything about killing him at first. I hardly meant to bother you with anything so drastic as that." "It's the only way," said the Angel, whose burning hands were now very close to the Lizard. "Shall I kill it?"

"Well, that's a further question. I'm quite open to consider it, but it's a new point, isn't it?" I mean, for the moment I was only thinking about silencing it because up here—well, it's so damned embarrassing." "May I kill it?" "Well, there's time to discuss that later." "There is no time." [said the Angel]. "May I kill it?" "Please, I never meant to be such a nuisance. Please—really—don't bother. Look! It's gone to sleep of its own accord. I'm sure it'll be all right now. Thanks ever so much."

"May I kill it?" [said the Angel.] "Honestly, I don't think there's the slightest necessity for that. I'm sure I shall be able to keep it in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it." "The gradual process is of no use at all" [said the Angel],

"Don't you think so? Well, I'll think over what you've said very carefully. I honestly will. In

fact I'd let you kill it now, but as a matter of fact I'm not feeling frightfully well to-day. It would be most silly to do it *now*. I'd need to be in good health for the operation. Some other day, perhaps." ["Choose," said the Angel.] "There is no other day. All days are present now."

"Get back! You're burning me. How can I tell you to kill it? You'd kill *me* if you did." "It is not so." "Why, you're hurting me now." "I never said it wouldn't hurt you. I said it wouldn't kill you."

"Oh, I know. You think I'm a coward. But it isn't that. Really it isn't. I say! Let me run back by to-night's bus and get an opinion from my own doctor. I'll come again the first moment I can...." "I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?" The Angel's hands were almost closed on the Lizard, but not quite.

Then the Lizard began chattering to the Ghost so loud that even I could hear what it was saying. "Be careful," it said. "He can do what he says. He can kill me. One fatal word from you and he *will!* Then you'll be without me for ever and ever. It's not natural. How could you live? You'd be only a sort of ghost, not a real man as you are now.... I'll be so good. I admit I've sometimes gone too far in the past, but I promise I won't do it again. I'll give you nothing but really nice dreams—all sweet and fresh and almost innocent....

"Have I your permission [to kill him]?" said the Angel to the Ghost. "I know it will kill me." "It won't. But supposing it did?" "You're right. It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature." "Then I may?" "Damn and blast you! Go on, can't you? Get it over. Do what you like," bellowed the Ghost; but ended, whimpering, "God help me. God help me."

Next moment the Ghost gave a scream of agony such as I never heard on Earth. The Burning One [the Angel] closed his crimson grip on the reptile: twisted it, while it bit and writhed, and then flung it, broken-backed, on the turf. "Ow! That's done for me," gasped the Ghost, reeling backwards.

For a moment I could make out nothing distinctly. Then I saw, between me and the nearest bush, unmistakably solid but growing every moment solidier, the upper arm and shoulder of a man. Then, brighter still and stronger, the legs and hands. The neck and golden head materialized while I watched.... at the same moment something seemed to be happening to the Lizard.

At first I thought the operation had failed. So far from dying, the creature was struggling and even growing bigger as it struggled. And as it grew it changed. Its hinder parts grew rounder. The tail, still flickering, became a tail of hair that flickered between huge and glossy buttocks. Suddenly I started back, rubbing my eyes. What stood before me was the greatest stallion I have ever seen, silvery white but with mane and tail of gold....

The new-made man.... leaped upon the horse's back. Turning in his seat he waved a farewell, then nudged the stallion with his heels.... I saw them winding up, scaling what seemed impossible steeps, and quicker every moment, till near the dim brow of the landscape, so high that I must strain my neck to see them, they vanished, bright themselves, into the rose brightness of that everlasting morning [into heaven].

In the end, we either cling to things that will kill us or we let them go. Some of you have done that. Some of you have said, "I want to love God more than anything else in my life. All these other Commandments I've kept since I was a child." "I know, but you still lack one thing. Give it all up. Love the Lord your God with all..." You've done that once, then when the coast was clear, you went back and picked it up again. Now you're trying to carry both into the Kingdom of Heaven, and you wonder why you're not changing to be more like a citizen of heaven. Our default is to pick it back up. Lewis says, in the end, there are really only two kinds of people. There are the people who turn to God and say, "Thy will be done," and they open their hands. Then there are the people God turns to and says, "You won't give it up? *Thy will be done.*" And they walk away from God.

"It will kill you!" Think about the rich young ruler. Think about Zacchaeus. They are both eager to be loved by God. One does all the right things; the other does everything wrong. Yet Jesus loves them both. The same is required of both of them. Both are clutching onto something. Maybe for Zacchaeus, the rich crook, what stopped him wasn't his money. Maybe it was the guilt and shame of all he had done. For the rich young ruler, maybe it was about being good enough and having enough to be in control. Both have to open their hands and let go. Words to live by. The reason Jesus came. The heart of the Gospel.

Could we finish with a spiritual exercise? Something you could do again if it makes more sense later. I'd ask you just for a minute to close your eyes. Just close your eyes and put your hands on your lap closed. Don't make a fist but close your hands and put them on your lap. Then I'd ask you, whom do you identify with? Think about whom you feel like more often.

Are you like the rich young man trying to be good but hauling around all this other stuff? Are you like the religious people in the crowd saying, "What are you hanging around with them for?" Can you stay away from the people with bad reputations? Or are you like Zacchaeus, haunted by the things you've done, afraid to change?

Now what I'd ask you to do is to hear the voice of Jesus saying, "Let it go. Let it go and follow me. Open your hands." What is in your hands that stops you from following the King? What is in your hands that is more important? You don't believe it's more important but you live like it's more important. Open your hands. Say, "God help me. I don't want to live like this. I want to be close to You and be loved by You today and forever." Now with your eyes still closed, if you would, please, for some of you, this is a struggle that you feel like you need help with. You'd like somebody to pray with you and for you because the money or the temper or the lust or the anger, it keeps coming back. If that's the case, again, with your eyes closed, just raise your hand if you would like the help of God to change.

Lord Jesus, better than I, You see them. It is impossible for us to change. But You say You can forgive us and change us. I pray for these sisters and brothers right now. Some of you have not recently had the experience of being free of the grip of whatever you hold onto so that the hand of the Savior can lead you through the eye of the needle into life. If

your hand feels freshly clean today, maybe for the first time or for the first time in a long time, while we keep our eyes closed, would you raise your hand. May God the Father show you grace and mercy and love and life. Lord Jesus, we thank You that You did not come to make us Minnesota nice but You came to seek and save the lost. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*