

THE MOST HATED MAN

Luke 19:1-2 ... "Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was the chief tax collector, and he was rich."

When speaking to people in various barangays, I often learn there are one or two persons in those villages who are despised by others. If not despised, at least mistrusted or disliked. The reason? The belief that those disliked persons are greedy and take advantage of others. I, too, know of such persons. We have spoken in these devotionals previously about greed and how it can develop into an addictive disease. A man (or woman) in a barangay who cheats workers, pays them late, makes them indebted to the employer through high interest loans, or sells them food and other commodities at inflated prices, makes himself (or herself) hated by others.

In Jesus' day, tax collectors were the hated persons of society. The disciple Matthew was originally a tax collector, which probably caused some of Jesus' followers to not trust Matthew at first. Zacchaeus was a tax collector and our verse today says he was rich. The only way a tax collector could become rich, is by keeping some of the taxes for himself. In verse 8, Zacchaeus turned his life over to Christ and pledged half of his goods to the poor and promised to return what he had taken illegally, four times over. Jesus responded in verse 9, "...today salvation has come to this house."

One of the requirements for becoming a Christian is that we repent of our sins, which means that we turn away from them and never do them again. However, when Zacchaeus decided to follow Christ, he also paid for his past crimes. What would happen in our society if all people did the same upon turning their lives over to Jesus? What if business owners repented of their greed and paid back the money they had cheated out of their customers? What if people who previously committed crimes, confessed those crimes and turned themselves into the police upon getting saved? I personally know a pastor who embezzled money from his denomination, and an elected official who, prior to his conversion, killed several people. I know a pastor's wife who TAKES money from the offering. Even if God forgives these people (which can only happen if they confess their sins and repent), they have done nothing to seek the forgiveness of those they hurt or robbed, and they did nothing to repay their crimes. You can be a Christian but still hated by others if you fail to accept responsibility for repaying your victims.

If you were a dishonest person before dedicating your life to Christ, you have a debt to pay. If you killed someone before finding Christ, you need to seek the forgiveness of those left behind AND you need to turn yourself over to the police. If you were a thief, abuser, or liar, you need to find a way to correct your past deeds. If we do not take responsibility for our past mistakes, we cause the church to be ridiculed as a protector of criminals.

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