Sunday, December 10, 1978
A GIFT THAT CHANGES PEOPLE (NO. 3 IN A SERIES: PRICELESS GIFTS)
I Luke 19:1-10

We're in the season of gift-giving. The stores are filled with people buying gifts to give. Yet what we forget in times like these is that some of the best gifts we can give to those we love are not those purchased in a store but are gifts far more valuable and long lasting.

One reason we forget that some of the best gifts cannot be bought is that the materialistic orientation to life has become so ingrained that we actually believe that all things in life seem to derive from it. Happiness, self-esteem, status, means, integrity, in one way or another, you're supposed to be able to "buy" them all. Don't most of the advertisements imply this? We're supposed to be able to buy anything — and if we can't, we don't seem to know what to do.

However, there are precious gifts that can be given which cannot be bought anywhere. In the first sermon in this series, we talked about the gift of time. Today, I wanted to suggest that you give the gift that changes people for the better. You'll learn what that gift is in a few moments. First some background.

In a psychological experiment conducted a few years ago, the person conducting the experiment spoke to the teachers prior to the opening of school in the fall. He named some of the children as "academic sprinters" who were most likely to achieve, but he made no comment about the other children in the class. In reality, the children chosen as academic sprinters had been chosen at random — they had previously shown on greater intellectual promise than the rest of the group.

Amazingly, those children who were labeled as having good intellectual potential fulfilled the prophecy. At the end of the year, when all the children were tested, they showed more evidence of intellectual gain and achievement.

In another experiment conducted with a group of children in Philadelphia, it was found that children were more likely to learn to swim when their swimming instructors were told that the children were ready to learn. The instructors'expectations for these children were most likely to be fulfilled.

The reports of these experiments reminded me of a man I knew some years ago. I first met this person when he was about 35 years old. He was then a depressed executive. He wanted to leave a very find job in a company in order to take a new job as a part-time tennis instructor at a newly built indoor tennis club. His wife had spoken to me earlier and complained that each time her husband seemed to be getting somewhere, each time he began to experience some success in a position, he would shift gears and decide he wanted to do something else. Failure was more understandable than success.

As I got to know this young man, he said to me one day — "I guess my wife is right. Each time I start becoming successful, I get depressed. It seems like I'm more comfortable when things aren't going well. I've always thought of myself as a failure, and I guess I'm doing everything possible to make that nightmare come true."

As he remembered his childhood, he also recalled how his father would shout — "You're a failure," when he brought home a poor report card. "You're a failure," his father screamed when the boy lost his job as a paper boy because he forgot to deliver papers one afternoon. He also remembered a number of other similar incidents as he was growing up. Soon he accepted the failure label and in so doing he began to act out in his life the same role.

A few years ago in Tulsa, Oklahoma, doctors discovered a 17-year-old boy with the IQ of a genius who had spent two-thirds of his life in a school for the mentally retarded. There was nothing at all wrong with the boy's mind, a routine examination quickly revealed, but he did have an undisclosed handicap. He was deaf. The child had been sent to a state institution in Enid, Oklahoma, at the age of five, but recently had been transferred to another institution near Tulsa, a modern school which emphasized remedial rather than custodial care. The boy's true mental state was revealed when an employee left a transistor radio kit on a worktable and the young genius, after studying intricate wiring diagrams which he could not read, assembled the radio which played perfectly.

What had happened was that the boy had been so bright all of his life that he had quickly learned how he though he was supposed to act and so he acted like the mentally retarded children all around him. He had no other models to follow. Being deaf and alone, he got along as best he knew how — by pretending to be stupid, by adjusting to his environment. He is now attending a school for the deaf where he had to being instruction at the primary level. But before long, he's expected to be studying at a level which his I.Q. long ago fitted him for.

Isn't it amazing how we human beings are often shaped by the expectations of those who are close to us? If those closest to me from little on up see me as a failure and expect me to fail, I may very well follow that pattern. If those around me see me and treat me as being mentally retarded, I may very well act that way.

On the other hand, as in the experiment in the school, if the teachers and others see me as potentially a good student and treat me that way, I may very well accomplish more and learn faster than I would otherwise.

There is a very precious gift involved in all of this — it is the gift of seeing the best in people. So, this Christmas if you want to give a truly valuable gift, one that will change people for the better, try giving those you love the gift of seeing the best in them. More often than not, their behavior will move closer to your expectation.

Another way of saying this is that most of the time, prophecies made about people tend to be self-fulfilling. Without being aware of it, those of us who are parents very often give this gift to our children. Sometimes the gift is negative, but hopefully more often it is positive.

Can you hear yourself in any of these statements? "You didn't take the garbage out again; I think you'll be a bum!" "You got an A in spelling, that's wonderful. I think you are going to be an outstanding student." "Your table manners are terrible. You eat like a pig."

We can see the best in people, or we can see the worst. When we see the best in people and help them develop and build on it, then we are giving a beautiful and priceless gift. Jesus Christ knew about this gift long before psychology books were written. It was a gift he regularly gave to people he met and in so doing helped change their lives for the better.

The story this morning from the Gospel of Luke is just one example. According to Luke, Zacchaeus was a tax collector. He was rich and he was a small man, short in stature. He was so short that he couldn't see over the crowd and that's why he climbed a tree so that he could see Jesus Christ when he came by.

People who are small have often been discriminated against. Perhaps as a boy, Zacchaeus had been teased a lot about his smallness. "You'll never amount to much. You're a runt." "Nobody's ever going to pay much attention to you."

Up until the time Zacchaeus met Jesus Christ, no one had ever given him the gift of seeing the best of him. They had only seen the worst.

With Jesus it was different. When he came to the place where Zacchaeus was in the tree, he looked up at him and said, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for I must stay at your house today. I'm going to eat at your table." He climbed down in a hurry and received his guest joyfully. It was probably the first time in a long time that anyone had seen anything good in Zacchaeus. Others had seen only the tax-collector, the cheat, the little man, the traitor. We can imagine the labels that had been applied to him. But Jesus Christ treated him with respect and courtesy.

Luke doesn't tell us the conversation between Jesus and Zacchaeus at the meal, but we do know that as a result Zacchaeus was on his way to becoming a changed man. He began to behave according to the best that was in him and not the worst. He promised to give half his wealth to the poor, and also promised that if he had defrauded anyone in his tax-collecting, he would pay it back four times over.

Jesus Christ looked for the best in people. And he found it not only in Zacchaeus, but in Peter and Andrew, James and John, Mary Magdalene, and countless others. What a beautiful gift to give.

The gift of seeing the best in people can be given to anyone at any time. It will always do some good.

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to visit a clinic that worked with severely retarded children. The clinic had a good staff, and they all did what they could to help the children who were brought to them. The staff was composed of social workers, pediatricians, psychologists and psychiatrists. I remember one psychiatrist in particular who especially impressed me and everyone else. No matter how severely impaired a child was, this person would always come up with some suggestion that would build on the child's strengths, on what was best in them. He never focused on a child's couldn'ts, but always spoke about a child's coulds.

Once he helped the staff understand that a very severely retarded 8-year-old could probably be helped to learn to tie her own shoelaces if someone worked with her. Another time, he helped the staff understand that if the parents of a 12-year-old would handle him differently, the boy probably could be toilet-trained and then he could attend school. In each of these cases and more, it worked. As he helped others give the gift of seeing the best in children, those same children actually began to change and to develop some of those capabilities.

This valuable gift ranges far and wide. Not only can we give this gift to others in a personal way by seeing what is best in them, but we can also give the gift by seeing the possibilities in a

situation in addition to just seeing the problems. It's a valuable gift to someone when we can begin to help them see the best rather than just the worst in a predicament.

It's important because how one views a situation will most of the time largely determine how one responds to it. Take such a simple matter as growing older. All of us do it, but how we respond to aging depends on whether we see it as a problem or opportunity. Unfortunately, in our culture we are warned to expect all sorts of problems and crises that go with aging. If one expects a crisis, one is likely to get one. How you feel about growing older depends a lot on where you happen to grow up. In some cultures, again or growing older is seen as a blessing, a period of life people look forward to. In our culture we tend to think it means the end.

The gift of seeing the best in a situation or in people — a beautiful gift and there's an added dividend in giving this gift, it also makes the giver a more beautiful person.

Remember if you want to give this gift, it means resisting the urge to put people into pigeon-holes or categories, or to simply apply labels to them. In the case of Zacchaeus, it meant seeing beyond the label. Too easily we tend to classify behavior in too narrow categories. He's an athlete. She's a student. He's a musician. She's a hippy. He's a square. With labels or categories, we can narrow our vision of a person, and this can keep us from seeing other things which are also a part of them. It may keep us from seeing the very best in a person. He's a grouch. She's a reactionary. She's uptight. He's a bore. She's just like her Aunt Sara. He's got bad genes like his uncle. All of these descriptions narrow a person and deter us from giving the gift of seeing the best in them.

This Christmas season and next year too, you can follow the example of Jesus Christ and give the gift of seeing the best in people. Amen.