

A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR
THE ZACCHAEUS SOLUTION
by John Killinger

General suggestions for group use:

- Employ the material in this guide as a discussion starter; that is, don't let it usurp the real interests and expressions of the members of your group
- Try to draw out as many participants as possible; praise their contributions and encourage them to share whatever is on their minds
- Listen creatively to what people say and let their remarks become the building blocks for your conversation
- Conclude each group meeting with at least a rough summary of the most salient points that have been made
- Offer a brief prayer or ask a member of the group to do so just prior to departure
- Make some notes on each meeting, either while it is going on or directly afterward, so that you can use them to summarize the group's thinking the next time it meets

Introduction

Begin a study of this book by commenting on its applicability to almost everyone's life in these difficult financial times. We are living through one of the most trying economic eras since the Great Depression that hit the U.S. in 1929 and continued until World War Two. There are more than 10 million people who are jobless in the U.S. alone, and many have become hopeless about finding work or financial security. Most of us know someone who has lost their home during these hard times. Churches

as well as other institutions are experiencing a hard time because people simply don't have as much money to donate as they once had. That is where *The Zacchaeus Solution* begins--with a church whose members are suffering and that may have to lay off some staff members because it isn't meeting its budget.

Chapter One

Look at the people Pastor Jack Frye is dealing with in this chapter. All of them have come to him with financial problems. He is their spiritual leader, not their financial director; but when people are having money problems, it soon affects their sense of spiritual well being along with everything else. Discuss the problems these folks were dealing with. Are you facing any similar problems in your life or do you know people who are? Do you think a recession affects older people or younger people the most? Explain your answer.

Chapter Two

Ken Black, in this chapter, is a financial planner. He obviously sees a lot of folks who are having trouble in a troubled economy. When Pastor Frye brings up the subject of people's needs, Ken, like a good church leader, thinks the church should see what it can do to help them. Is this an appropriate reaction for a church leader to have? Why? Some Christians argue that the church's only business is the preaching of the gospel. Do you agree? Why or why not?

When Pastor Frye goes home for supper, he learns from his family that his children's school is being affected by economic problems. Do you think this is an unusually critical time for America's schools? How will the many lay-offs and curriculum shifts affect our children's futures for years to come? How will they affect the future of America itself?

Chapter Three

Twelve people meet in the Fireside Room of First Community Church's building to talk about the economic difficulties confronting its members. Do you see any reason for starting with twelve and not ten or

fifteen? Does this foreshadow any deeper theological significance for the story that will unfold in this novel?

What is your personal reaction to businesswoman Susan Campbell's suggestion that their church should emulate the early Christian community and ask the entire membership to hold all their goods and possessions in common? Are there reasons why the church should or shouldn't attempt to be so radically faithful to the practices of the early church?

Read aloud Ken Black's prayer near the end of the chapter. Would this be a good prayer for your own group to pray?

Chapter Four

When Doyle Henson and Myrtle Sprock, members of the church's board of trustees, have lunch with Pastor Frye, they give him some bad news about the discrepancy between the church's budget and the money that has actually been received. Do you think this is a common story for churches today? Is your own church having a similar problem? Suppose you faced the dilemma faced by Pastor Frye, of having to decide which staff members would have to be released in order to meet the church's budget. Could you make such a choice involving the lives of people you know and work with?

Chapter Five

What do you think of Pastor Frye's way of wrestling with the sermon he is going to preach? Do you think most preachers approach their sermons with this kind of dedication and eagerness to say what God wants them to say? Are your own pastor's sermons usually relevant to the current situation?

Pastor Frye notices how much the Gospel of Luke has to say about poverty and wealth. Beginning with Luke 18:18, cast your eye over the several accounts between there and Luke 21:4 in which money is part of the Gospel's focus. Do you think Jesus didn't like wealthy people? Or was it simply that he expected those with more than they needed to share with those who had little?

Discuss the story of Zacchaeus and his decision to give half of all his goods to the poor. Was that a foolish decision on his part? Was it a natural one, given his joy at having Christ in his home?

What do you think of Jack and Myralee Frye's decision about how they would save the jobs of the imperiled staff members at their church? Would you consider them unwise to make such a grand gesture or is it a natural thing for Christians to do?

When Pastor Frye goes to call on the family of Maisie Strock after her death, she isn't in the home where he expected her to be. Why not? Do you know people who are becoming as hard pressed as Maisie must have been? Are you personally acquainted with people who could no longer afford to live in their old homes and had to find other accommodations? Discuss their plight in a "repo" society.

Chapter Six

Read aloud the third paragraph of this chapter. Do those sound like headlines you yourself have encountered in recent weeks and months? Someone has said that no one alive today will ever again live through a period of easy credit and upbeat financial circumstances like the one that ended with the collapse of Lehman Brothers and other big Wall Street firms in 2008. Do you believe that is true?

Did you like Pastor Frye's sermon about Zacchaeus? Did he paint a fair picture of what happened to Zacchaeus the day Jesus came into his life? If you were to meet Jesus in a similar way, do you think it would affect your life as dramatically as it did Zacchaeus'?

Pastor Frye says this is the point of his sermon: "It's a question," he says. "What if we were to respond to the presence of Jesus in our lives the way Zacchaeus did? I mean, what if you and I, who all profess to be followers of Jesus, and would say under oath that Jesus has come into our lives and changed them and transformed them the way he did Zacchaeus' life, what if we stood up today and said, 'Look, Lord, half of everything I have I am going to give to the poor.' What would happen to this church if we did that? What would happen in our community?" Try to imagine and put into words what you think this would mean to your life and the life of your church and community.

Why do you think Pastor Frye's sermon produced such a galvanizing effect on so many people in his church that morning? Could it have had something to do with the fact that *he didn't just preach about giving away half of what we have but actually doing it or pledging to do it in his and his wife's own case?*

Chapter Seven

After going through all the calls to his office on Monday morning, Pastor Frye was "blitzed" to discover how many of his own parishioners were in great financial need. Do you think we would feel the same way if we only knew how many of our fellow church members are in a difficult plight at the present time? Without actually naming names, cite some of the critical cases of which you are personally aware.

What did you think of Herb Menendez? Does he impress you? He is obviously a man who thinks big. What happens, do you suppose, when people who think big get involved in the programs of the church? Do churches appeal as much as they ought to to such movers and shakers?

When Ken Black tells Pastor Frye that what he and Myralee have done encouraged him and his wife Marge to make the same commitment to give half their savings to help others, how does it make you feel? Are the acts we do that important in the lives of others we know? If they are, why don't we do more heroic things all the time?

Chapter Eight

As the people gathered for their big meeting in this chapter, how did you feel? Did you have a frisson of excitement about the kind of people they were and the power they represented in their community? A bank president, a prominent neurosurgeon, a TV personality, a big-time realtor, the owner of a cosmetics manufacturing plant--these really would be shakers and movers, wouldn't they? Why do you think the church so often fails to challenge the intellects and abilities of the keenest people in society? What do we need to do to change the situation?

Lesley Stahl's appearance with a TV crew to film this meeting adds considerably to everybody's excitement. What does this say about ours as an age of celebrity? Do you think the church needs to do more to cultivate

a following among media people so that its message gets out more freely into our culture than it has generally done in recent years? Or should the church remain above what someone has called “the celebrity game”?

Did you notice in this chapter how many people were ready to volunteer for assignments in this new “movement” among the church members? What do you think we can do to make volunteerism a more exciting possibility in our churches? Where do you see it as already being exciting in your church or another church you know?

Do you like the idea of having persons in need come before church gatherings to talk about their plights? Would doing this help all of us to be more sensitive to the desperate situations in which many of our fellow members live? Do you think it would be too embarrassing for the people who were asked to present their situations?

One of the clear lessons of this chapter is the way people’s excitement gets revved up when they begin sharing their feelings and ideas with one another over the needs of others. Why don’t we do more of this in our churches? Is it because we don’t want to get carried away and become involved in other people’s lives or is it because we think of this as an invasion of people’s private domains, where they conceal their innermost feelings from one another?

Chapter Nine

Vance Clifford, the reporter who interviewed Pastor Frye, said that First Community sounded like his kind of church because of what was happening there. Do you think more people would be interested in all our churches if they were as active in helping the poor as First Community? Discuss this question.

Do you think your church staff has the kind of happy camaraderie seen in this chapter’s description of the thank-you party the staff threw for Jack and Myralee Frye? What does it take to make a church staff happy? What would make the members of your own church staff happier?

Chapter Ten

Do you agree with what the committee decided to call their project? Would you have favored one of the other names? If so, which one and why?

What is it about pet stories that we find so heart warming? Do you think some people's pets are suffering from our poor economy? In what way?

Do you see any significance in David's decision to call his dog Zoe, a name that means "life"?

Chapter Eleven

As the people who talk about their problems at this week's meeting provide details of those problems, do you recognize them as relating to anybody you know? Rita Marcum talks about a major problem with health insurance. Alberto Gomez is having trouble paying for his college education. Ginger Stevens, a single mother, has a child with significant medical needs. Sometimes, says Ginger, she lies awake at night and cries because life seems so hard. Think about people you know who could give similar testimonies, whose lives are also hard. What should you and your church be doing for them?

Notice Ken Black's witness to the group that he has never felt more alive or alert in his church than he does now that the church is so directly in touch with people's needs. He says it's "as if some kind of membrane had been removed between the church and real life in the world," so that now they are dealing with real life right in their own church. How many churches seem to have this kind of portal on reality, do you think? Where are the places in your church's life where this appears to be happening?

At the meeting in this chapter, people begin revealing what they are trying to do for others through their own businesses. A woman named Brenda Walker tells how her husband Ray is donating free plumbing to a poor man whose house needs it. Trevor Bradley runs a drycleaning establishment and doesn't charge some of his customers who are having a hard time. How could you or others in your church help people in similar ways during a recession?

Chapter Twelve

Gerald Marston, chairman of the new member committee, reports to the group that his committee is unusually busy processing the applications of people joining the church. Sally Jamison, chair of the diaconate, says, "It's like a revival every Sunday!" Would you want to join a church like the one in this story? If your own church got more involved with people's lives and needs, do you think it would attract more people to join it?

Once the story of First Community Church's involvement in people's problems is broadcast on TV, the church's mission suddenly explodes into something much larger and more dynamic than it was. People phone from all over the country, some even from other parts of the world. Journalists can't get enough stories to satisfy their readers. People often say that only bad news gets into the papers and on TV. Is it unrealistic to think that a church would become widely known for doing good things?

In addition to encountering more needy folks at this chapter's meeting of the Zacchaeus group, we meet Brandon O'Keefe, one of the young whiz kids in computer programming, who has made a lot of money with some programs he designed and has discovered the joy of assisting other people. Do you know anyone who has done anything like this? Bill and Melinda Gates, of course, established a foundation that gives away millions of dollars every year, much of it in Africa, to help poor people have a healthier, better life. Do you know other celebrity icons who have followed this model?

The final paragraphs of this chapter touch on the contagious nature of love and charity. Do you think such a program would become contagious in your own church and community? Why or why not?

Chapter Thirteen

Adrienne Gooch is a woman of vision. She dreams big dreams, then acts to implement them. One of her dreams is of a large building that can house homeless families, a refectory to feed them, and a business where people can buy donated supplies at a fraction of their regular price. Another is a job-processing office where people can come and find short-term jobs to tide them over until they can locate permanent employment. What kind of dreams would you dream for your church to undertake and bring to fruition? What would stand in your way of implementing those dreams? Could those impediments be overcome? How?

Mr. and Mrs. Ling, the representatives of churches in China who want Pastor and Mrs. Frye to visit their country, remind us of the great ferment occurring in that vast nation at this time. Years ago, our fathers and mothers spoke of China as a great mission field. Is it still such an opportunity for the gospel? What is your church doing to try to bring the knowledge of Christ to the most populous country on earth? Can you think of any unique opportunities the church might have in nations such as China and India during this time of world-wide recession?

Chapter Fourteen

When Jack Frye's parishioners are seeing him and Myralee off to China, they give them a bundle of travelers' cheques to distribute among the poor of China as a sign of their solidarity with Christians in that country. Do you think this is a good idea? Should Americans be reaching out to people in other countries at a time when so many are poor and needy within our own borders?

Phil Stanford, the contractor who is supervising the church's renovation work on its new buildings, says that there is at least one big bonus in a time of general recession, and that is that they can find workers and supplies more easily than at other times. Should this inspire us to think more about how to turn hard times into profitable ones for the people we are trying to serve in our communities? Discuss this.

In his first sermon after visiting China, Pastor Frye takes his text from the words of Peter in the book of Acts, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you." Then he talks about all the people who want to help others but don't have much money. Name some of the many ways we can help others even when we have no financial help to offer. What can an underpaid teacher do, for example, or a nurse or a carpenter or an electrician?

Chapter Fifteen

Reread the remarks of the fiftyish businessman who stands at the meeting in this chapter and says he is not a Christian but has come because he is almost persuaded to be a Christian by the wonderful works being done by First Community Church. Consider people you know who may

live at the edge of the church and might be a part of it if they saw it doing the kinds of things First Community does. Share your thoughts about this. Do we need an evangelism of sharing to precede an evangelism of words?

Herb Menendez announces at the meeting that he and his former wife Adrienne have been reunited by their excitement about the work being done by their church and consequently are going to remarry. Before, he says, they went their separate ways because they were both ambitious to succeed and didn't have time to make their marriage work. Do you believe people would be happier with their spouses and families if their lives and efforts were centered in church-related activities? Discuss.

Chapter Sixteen

We have been witnessing how the Zacchaeus Solution has moved from being a local phenomenon to being a global one. In this chapter, we hear a report about how bankers and politicians at a meeting in Washington were discussing the effect of the Zacchaeus emphasis in their areas. Then we witness Jack and Myralee as they move from place to place in Ireland, and at one point even receive a phone call from Queen Elizabeth, who thanks them for what they are doing in behalf of the poor in all countries. Do you believe it would be possible for a movement like the Zacchaeus Solution to become a worldwide influence for good? What do you think would need to occur for this to actually happen? Could you imagine yourself and your church as part of such a movement? Discuss this possibility.

Pastor Frye says in this chapter that he realizes the Zacchaeus Solution is only a passing thing and will someday be viewed as only one small wave in the history of world Christianity. Do you agree with his insight? If you do, does this make a movement like the Zacchaeus Solution less compelling to you, or would you still feel the great importance of it? Why?

Chapter Seventeen

What do you think of the idea of a Lincoln Medal to be awarded to persons who do a lot for the poor and underprivileged people of America

and the world? Would the annual award of such a medal help to stimulate more charitable acts in our midst?

Pastor Frye says in his remarks after the president has awarded him the Lincoln Medal that “what happened to Zacchaeus that day [when Jesus came to his house] has happened again and again in the lives of all kinds of people, and is still happening today.” Do you agree with those words? Name some examples if you can. To what extent would you say that your own relationship to Jesus makes you think about helping the poor or underprivileged around you? Please describe.

Chapter Eighteen

Reread the part of the chapter in which the board members say to Pastor Frye that they want to share him and his gifts with a wider audience than his own congregation. Do you believe most churches would be this generous with their pastors? Why or why not?

Reread the job description Pastor Frye uses to attract a new associate pastor for First Community Church. Does it sound like an apt recruiting tool for his church’s situation? What is your opinion of John Ngure, the minister who is hired for the job? Would your own church be happy to have multiracial pastors like Jack Frye and John Ngure working together? Would you personally? What does First Community’s choice say about their position for the future of global Christianity?

John Ngure was previously associated with a very conservative religious group, the Assemblies of God, and is stepping into a role in a much more open, progressive church. Do you believe this is a good move, both for him and for the church? Is it credible to you that an African minister from a conservative background could be a successful pastor in an upscale, mainly Caucasian congregation? Discuss where you see Christianity as being today in its racial, economic, and social composition.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Pastor Frye quotes Andrew Carnegie, one of America’s early millionaires who became a great philanthropist, as saying, “A man who dies rich, dies disgraced.” What does this mean? Do you agree or disagree?

What do you think of Pastor Frye’s intended use of the Nobel Prize money? For what other use might you have earmarked such a sum?

Reread the description in Pastor Frye's New Year's Eve sermon of the van Dyck's painting, "The Adoration of the Shepherds." The gift extended to Christ in this painting, says the pastor, is "what real giving is all about. It is about providing the things ordinary people need." That, he says, is what Christ expects of each of us, and, when we give it, is what will cause him to say to us at the end of the way, "Well done, good and faithful servants." Do you believe this? Do you try to live by such a rule?

Now, at the end of this study, can you describe what, if any, effect it has had on your thinking and hence on your life? Does it inspire you to want to share more of what you have with others, and to concentrate less on what you want and more on the needs of those around you? Talk about this. Then discuss what you can do to make this effect more lasting in your life, so that it doesn't quickly evaporate and leave you just as you were. Try to imagine what a big difference it will have made in your life ten years from now if you follow your present inclination to serve God by sharing with others.

You may want to conclude your group study of this book with this little prayer: "Dear God, you have blessed my life with many things for which I admit I have failed to be properly thankful. Help me to be more aware of the needs and sufferings of those around me, and to see more clearly each day what I can do to alleviate their situations by sharing what you have given me. For I too would like to finish my course by hearing Christ say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things; now I will make you master over many.' Amen."