

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 1, 2014**

**FREEDOM IN SURRENDER**

**Luke 19:1-10**

In my first year at Princeton Seminary, I had a church history professor named John Mulder. As a scholar, author, teacher, and ordained Presbyterian minister, he was a rising star in the world of theological scholarship, at least in the Presbyterian and Reformed part of that world. After seven years at Princeton – following my first year in seminary – he left at the age of 35 to become the president of another theological seminary, a post he held for 21 years, from 1981 to 2002.

Mulder says that except for a brief period in college when he wrestled with some serious doubts about his faith, there was never a time in his life when he didn't think he was a Christian or didn't want to be a Christian. He jokes that his wedding was an "interfaith" ceremony: he was Presbyterian; his wife belonged to the Reformed Church in America. What mattered, he says, is that they were both Dutch. You may have to be Dutch to understand that. The Dutch have a saying: "If you're not Dutch, you're not much." I don't think you can find it anywhere in the Bible, but that is what they say (smile).

After 21 years as the head of a theological seminary, with all the prestige and power his office entailed, Mulder's world came crashing down. He writes about it in a short, three-page, personal testimony at the end of a book of conversion stories he edited, called *Finding God*. His crash took place on September 11, 2002, exactly one year after airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Mulder says: "I was physically, emotionally, spiritually broken. My crash, I later learned, was the result of undiagnosed bipolar illness and a pattern of drinking that had progressed into full-blown alcoholism. But," he confesses, "I was also morally broken. Alcohol had eroded my moral core and my moral code, and I had done things that were wrong and made me deeply ashamed." He resigned his position as a seminary president. He was subsequently suspended from ministry in the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) for sexual misconduct with a number of women. He lost his position and his reputation, but by the miracle of God's grace and the long-suffering love of his wife, he did not lose his marriage.

Looking back, Mulder makes no excuses: "What I did was terribly wrong. It was a violation of my marriage vows (and) my ordination vows. I will always live with the pain of having deceived other people and myself and God." Consumed by an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame, he struggled to deal with the physical, spiritual, and moral wreckage of his life. For more than a year, he says, he prayed continuously: "Please God, forgive me." In all that time, though, he had no sense of God's forgiveness, no sense of God's love, no sense of God's presence in his life. He was, as one counselor put it, "spiritually bankrupt."

More than a year after his world crashed, two months into a rehab treatment program, still without any sense of forgiveness, he began to pray instead for God simply to open him up to His (the Lord's) presence. That prayer marked a turning point in his life. Only after praying

to be open to God did God again become part of his life. Only then did he begin to experience true healing in his life.

Mulder says that what he knew intellectually about the Christian faith now “has traveled what’s called the longest distance in the world – the 18 inches from (his) head to (his) heart.” He says: “It’s like talking about Jesus for years and then, suddenly, meeting Him personally. What I realized is that God didn’t simply want my repentance in exchanged for (His) forgiveness. No, God didn’t want a transaction; God wanted a relationship. With me. Just as I am. Only after experiencing God’s presence did I know God’s forgiveness” (John M. Mulder, ed., *Finding God: A Treasury of Conversion Stories*, 394-396).

That 18 inches between your head and your heart can make all the difference in the world. It can make all the difference in your life. It can even make an *external* difference in your life.

John Mulder’s story illustrates the truth that freedom is found in surrender. *True freedom is found in surrender to God.* True freedom is found in surrendering to God whatever it is that controls you, whatever it is that drives you, whatever it is that has a grip on you, whatever it is that entices you with the promise of comfort or companionship or pleasure or power. It is only when you give it all over to God that you discover what it is to be truly free. It is only when you surrender your fears, your idols, your addictions, your pride, your reputation, your deceptions, your rationalizations, your moral and spiritual failings, your attempts to keep God out of some part of your life, and submit to the infinitely wise and loving direction and discipline of your Heavenly Father, painful though His discipline may be for a time, that you will truly be free.

True freedom, Jesus said, is found in willing surrender and loving obedience to His teaching (John 8:32). The freedom Jesus gives is not a license or excuse to do whatever you want (Galatians 5:13, MSG). Use your freedom that way, and you will lose it. You will end up destroying your freedom. The kind of freedom that makes you truly free, the freedom Jesus gives (John 8:36), is found in surrender. In willing surrender to Him – to His presence, His love, His forgiveness, and His right to rule as Lord over every square inch of your life.

There is freedom in surrender – life-changing, heart-pounding, joy-bringing, peace-giving freedom – in letting go of whatever is keeping you from being all in for Christ and His kingdom, and letting God have your life. All of it. It actually makes sense to let God have your life, since, as D. L. Moody once said, He (God) can do more with it than you can.

Look at Zaccheus. Here is what we know about him. We know he was a tax collector – actually, not just a tax collector, but a “chief tax collector” (Luke 19:2). He was in charge of the Jericho office of the Roman IRS. Being a tax collector could be a lucrative profession, even more lucrative if you were one of the higher-ups like Zaccheus, and the word Luke uses to describe Zaccheus is “wealthy” (19:2). A tax collector’s wealth came at a price, though. Jews working for Rome as tax collectors were despised by their fellow Jews, who considered them traitors to their people. In addition, most tax collectors, if not the whole unsavory lot of them, were unscrupulous and got rich by cheating the taxpayers. So, while Zaccheus was rich, he was probably also among the most unpopular men in Jericho.

We also know Zaccheus was vertically challenged. As the song goes, “Zaccheus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he.” Zaccheus had no doubt heard of Jesus, and now, he heard, Jesus was passing through Jericho. He was curious to see Jesus for himself, but his short stature and the large crowd that had gathered made it next to impossible for him to do so. Zaccheus, though, was nothing if not resourceful. Determined not to be denied, he famously climbed a sycamore tree in order to get a good look at Jesus (19:3-4).

In addition to his wealth, Zaccheus had power – a coercive, manipulative, heavy-handed kind of power that didn’t win him many friends, if any. But for all his wealth and power, he was not a happy man. His power and wealth had not brought him any lasting contentment or peace. None of it had set his heart free. In fact, the desire to accumulate wealth had clearly become an idol in his life. Rather than making him free, it took over his life. It was what he lived for, but he knew – he had to know – it would lead to a dead end.

Then he saw Jesus. *Jesus*, Luke says, saw *him* up in the tree (19:5). And Jesus spoke to him. Jesus saw the hunger in Zaccheus’ heart. Where others say only a despicable agent of the Roman government, Jesus saw a lost, spiritually bankrupt sinner who realized he needed a Savior. That day, the Scripture says, salvation came to Zaccheus’ house. Salvation came to Zaccheus himself. Zaccheus became a changed man (19:9).

It was not to impress Jesus or to gain His favor that Zaccheus pledged to give half of his wealth to the poor and to make restitution beyond what the law required to anyone he had cheated (19:8). What happened was that he experienced grace, which comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. Jesus did not accept Zaccheus because Zaccheus changed. Zaccheus changed because Jesus accepted him. In that acceptance by Jesus, Zaccheus found the freedom to surrender his relentless pursuit of the world’s wealth. He found freedom in surrender to Jesus and His love. His pledge, as one Bible commentator notes, was “the thank offering of a changed heart” (Ellis). His outward actions were the result and evidence of his inward change.

Contrast the response of Zaccheus to Jesus with the response of the rich young man who, on another occasion, came running to Jesus with a question about eternal life and how to inherit it (Mark 10:17-22). The difference is like night and day. The rich young man, unwilling to trade his financial security for the promise of eternal security, went away from Jesus with a sad and heavy heart. Unlike Zaccheus, he missed out on the freedom and joy Jesus gives, because he was not willing to surrender to Jesus what he held most dear.

This world is full of pitfalls and traps of all kinds, but there is freedom in surrender. There is freedom, as John Mulder discovered, in surrender to the presence and forgiving love of God. There is freedom in surrender to the gracious and sovereign rule of Jesus in your life. If there is anything that has you in its grip, if anything is holding you back from being the person God created you to be, give it up and give it over to God. Surrender it to your Heavenly Father, and trust Him to set you free. Trust Him to do in you what you cannot do.

If you are stuck on the treadmill of performancism, trying as hard as you can to be good enough, to do enough good, to make yourself acceptable to God, give it up. It will never work. Freedom is found in surrender to God's amazing grace.

Are you wrestling with anger or resentment toward someone? Have you allowed the roots of bitterness to take hold in your heart? Has hate taken up residence in your heart? Give it up to God. Let go of it. There is freedom in surrender. God really can change your heart.

Do you carry a burden of guilt and shame over something you have done that you desperately wish you could undo? There is freedom in surrender. Like John Mulder, open yourself up to the presence and love and grace of God.

Do you struggle with a pattern of temptation and sin, or addiction of some kind? Is it lust or porn or sex, or alcohol or drugs? Are you addicted to control, or to the pursuit of pleasure or the approval of others? Surrender it to God. Surrender unconditionally, because there is freedom in surrender. I can't promise that God will instantaneously and forever deliver you from any desire or habit or addiction that has you in its grip. Sometimes God does that, and sometimes He doesn't. But I can promise you that He will be with you. He *is* with you. I can promise that He will never stop loving you. I can promise that His grace is sufficient for you. And He gives freedom moment by moment to those who moment by moment surrender to Him.

Are you afflicted by fear or anxiety? Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by worry? Give it over to God. Freedom comes when you surrender your worries and fears, and put your trust in God.

Have you made money or wealth or success an idol? Are you driven by the desire to gain more and more wealth? Is there envy in your heart? Do you covet for yourself what someone else has? Give it up to God. There is freedom in surrender.

Do you need to always be right? About everything? Does pride get in the way of your relationship to God or your relationships with others? Give it up.

Do you need to have all your questions answered, to understand everything, before you believe? That is not how it works. You will never have it all figured out. That's why faith is necessary. There is freedom in the surrender that comes from faith in God.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. As Zaccheus and John Mulder and a myriad of Christians through the centuries testify, true freedom is found in surrender to Him. Are you all in for the Lord Jesus Christ? Let Him have your life – every square inch of it. He can do more with it than you can.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.