My Beloved Ones,

This Sunday’s Gospel tells of our Lord’s meeting with Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector of the city of Jericho. As we prepare to begin the Triodion on February 5th, “Zacchaeus Sunday” demonstrates the importance of repentance, as we look to that season that will bring us Great Lent, Holy Week, and Pascha.

In the Holy Land of the 1st Century, as in our own time, tax collectors were not loved. During Christ’s ministry, however, these feelings were even more negative because Jewish tax collectors took money from their fellow citizens to pay their Roman masters. Even so, Zacchaeus wished to see Jesus. However, the Gospel tells us that Zacchaeus “…could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature.” (Luke 19:2)

Being a clever man, Zacchaeus decided to climb into a sycamore tree, in order to give himself a better view.

Jesus, stopped as He was passing by the tree, looked up, and said, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” (Luke 19:6) Zacchaeus was very happy to hear that Jesus wished to visit him, and he was so moved, he was inspired to change his ways, telling Jesus, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.” (Luke 19:8) Zacchaeus obviously understood that his practice of extorting his neighbors was wrong, and so he decided to begin the process of true and sincere repentance.

Let us pay close attention to the fact that he does not just give them back what he has stolen but repays them four times the amount. He understands that it is not a simple matter of asking his neighbors for forgiveness, but truly showing them love and charity. One chapter earlier in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus told a Rich Young Man, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Luke 18:22).

The Young Man heard the Word of the Lord, but was unable to part with his riches, while Zacchaeus understood that only by freeing ourselves of the need to own things, can we truly be free.

My beloved, as we prepare to begin the Triodion, we are not faced with the choice to give up everything to follow Christ, but if we wish for the spirit of God to dwell within the house which is our hearts, are we willing to fast from the spirit of greed? Are we willing to search our hearts and apologize to those we have wronged? As we prepare for a solemn season of reflection, prayer and fasting, let us think about how we may invite Christ into our hearts, through a spirit of repentance, not only during the Triodion, but every day of our lives.

+ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta