

## Jesus Reforms Zacchaeus | 2 Thess. 1:1-4;11-12; Luke 19:1-10 | LUMC | 10-30-2022

Dear Church family and friends: Today is Reformation Sunday, when we celebrate the courageous acts of Martin Luther. He nailed 95 theses on a church door challenging the Catholic church for her failure to preach from Scripture as well as live on Jesus' terms as written in the Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Last year I preached on the origin and growth of the Protestant church and her position in world Christianity. This year I want to preach Jesus reforming the human soul, and Zacchaeus is our point of reference.

Today we encounter Zacchaeus, a Roman government chief tax collector stationed in the city of Jericho. Zacchaeus learned that Jesus would pass his way. He knew Jesus attracted large crowds and he would not be able to see him because of his short stature. Perhaps he also felt the guilt of his sins, and decided to climb and hide in a sycamore tree with the hope of seeing Jesus as he passed under the tree. Traditionally a sycamore tree is associated with regeneration and transformation. Zacchaeus and Jesus shared the same cultural customs; they were guided by their social traditions.

The cultural norm and Christ's teachings convinced Zacchaeus to recognize his social abominations and inner evils generated by his profession—tax collecting, which made him a traitor to his citizens<sup>2</sup>; When Jesus spied Zacchaeus in the tree and asked him to come down and host Jesus in his home, Zacchaeus felt unworthy. He did not allow his wealth to entangle him; he behaved like the tax collector Jesus spoke of that we discussed in the last week's sermon. Zacchaeus confessed his wanton sins to Jesus, His savior.

Jesus accepted Zacchaeus' repentance. He was willing to listen and lavish Zacchaeus with love and forgiveness. When Jesus offered to be Zacchaeus' guest; he was willing to sit in Zacchaeus' house. Zacchaeus accepted and welcomed Jesus into his home without hesitation. Zacchaeus did not care about his home being unready for a special guest, nor was he concerned about the time it would take to prepare his guest's food. He felt honored that Jesus and his guests were coming to eat at his house.<sup>3</sup>

At some point Zacchaeus reflected on his sins of greed that unequivocally caused him to steal from taxpayers by overcharging and keeping the extra for himself. Zacchaeus knew by his tax records the total amount of money he extorted, and from whom he stole. Although Jesus was routinely blunt in pointing out sins during his earthly ministry, he was lenient with Zacchaeus. He let Zacchaeus recognize his transgressions through association and interaction at the meal. Jesus knew that associating with sinners was against Jewish teaching. Nevertheless, he sat with Zacchaeus and

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<sup>1</sup> On Oct 31, 1717, Martin Luther challenged the Catholic Church to a reformation debate that continues today.

<sup>2</sup> Tax collectors worked for the Roman government and there were no controls placed on them. Tax collectors typically added an extra charge that they pocketed. When tax collectors came to be baptized, John the Baptist told them to collect only the taxes imposed by the Romans. (Luke 3:12-13).

<sup>3</sup> This action led Jesus' enemies to accuse him of eating with sinners. Jesus will tell them he came to the world to save sinners; he came to the world so no one will perish.

this gesture convicted Zacchaeus and alerted him to the need to reform his life. When Jesus convicts a sinner there is real reformation, a change of attitude and will, and the kind of action displayed by Zacchaeus' resolve.

Zacchaeus made three great moves: 1) he decided to keep only half of his wealth; 2) he pledged to offer part of his property to the poor; and 3) he paid people four-times the money he fleeced them out of.

I searched the method Zacchaeus used to return the stolen loot, and found it was not an ancient or modern banking calculation. This is because the oldest known bank started in 1472 in Tuscany, Italy. Modern banks emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Both of these banking systems borrow their banking model from the ancient BCE grain merchants in Assyria who loaned grains to traders transacting deals between cities and the farmers. The model was common in Africa, India, and Sumeria--Samaria.

Surprisingly, Zacchaeus based his payment plan on Old Testament law, which demanded repayments for dishonest acts<sup>4</sup>. However, Zacchaeus paid a little more than required by the law, and he was willing to terminate entirely his larceny.

From the day he met Christ, Zacchaeus experienced God's love, and he renounced his greed and announced he was now controlled by his inner love for others. When one encounters Christ, there is a transformation of life. The transformed person shall seek Jesus with their whole heart, mind, and soul. We learn from Zacchaeus that Jesus brings changes in the new convert's career, family, and lifestyle. The transformation is irreversible if one remains focused on Christ's saving grace. What a challenge we have from Old Zacchaeus!

Zacchaeus' past life reminds us that the natural human tendency is to look out for oneself. Without Christ people will cheat whenever they can despite their awareness of the needy all around them. We have the potential to grab anything and everything, and ignore the less fortunate. When we meet with Christ, our heart of humanity reminds us constantly of the needs of others. Living with awareness of other people's needs is what Methodist theology emphasizes. When we allow Christ to influence our lives, we get regenerated and reformed for mission of the self and others. This is what Zacchaeus became convicted of. This heart of mission is what most Christians are aware of. This is the mission I live daily and encourage others to do.

While Zacchaeus literally climbed the tree in search of Christ, modern-day people hear the gospel on the web, TV, and radio. When and how can we filter out disinformation, and focus on what is truth? We can decide what we want to participate in, or to what we want to contribute. These are situations that appeal to our own needs as well as the needs of others. During this election period we can watch debates, read the news, listen to commentators, and filter out lies from the truth. We must decide to stay on the side of the truth as the election nears. We can transform our neighborhood by electing genuine leaders whose vision coincides with ours.

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus: 22:4,7; Lev 6:5; Numbers 5:7,

Unless we allow Christ to transform us, the cultural teaching does not create a lasting impact in our lives. For example, the name Zacchaeus means “pure” or “innocent”, but until Zacchaeus met Christ, the cultural significance of his name did not influence him. He did not live up to his name; instead, he lived an impure and felonious life. He lived on the wealth gained from the backs of his Jericho citizens. The taxpayers had no power to overrule Zacchaeus because there was no law prohibiting overcharging taxes.

When Jesus transformed Zacchaeus’ life; Zacchaeus adopted Christ’s heart of mission. He was willing to share his wealth with the poor. He virtually repented and lived by the power of example, giving back fourfold of his ill-gotten loot to those he stole from. He did these acts of love in appreciation of God’s salvation.

Do you hear a voice of dissent against Zacchaeus’ changed life? In a normal sense everyone would have celebrated that Zacchaeus would not steal from them again. But instead of rejoicing, a group of Pharisees took offense and tried to incite the public. The Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the religious taboo of associating with sinners. This behavior is found in modern society, as not everyone appreciates you because of your faith, or the blessings you have as a consequence for your faith.

This human jealousy occurred in ancient times when the Israelites rebuilt the Jerusalem wall. The group of detractors said, “Even squirrels can break down this wall”. When Saul became Paul, some people kept running away from him, fearing of being killed because he was initially a killer of Christians. Are you aware of those working against your faith? Or do you know some people working against others faith? This unchristian behavior reminds us Jesus advising to: “Watch and pray not to get tempted.”

May we learn to accept the Lord’s work and live within Christ’s call without concern for what others think of us. May our faith move us beyond our detractors’ negative schemes and evil thoughts.

When you encounter resistance from others because of your changed life, please recall that Zacchaeus encountered the same resistance, but retained his vision for mission. Zacchaeus also reminds us to right our wrongs and not live on improper gains we don’t intend to pay back. Being a child of God enables us to straighten up our past life when we can, to reform those we grieved as quickly as we can, and to encourage forgiveness from those affected by our past actions, and for all of us to live a loving life.

Amen