

Zacchaeus: Discipleship as Reparation

by Ched Myers (October, 2022)

Luke's middle part (roughly chapters 9-19) is called by scholars the "[Special Section](#)" because it mostly consists of uniquely Lukan material. The backbone of this sequence's architecture is a remarkable series of stories about rich men (*right*). They articulate a searing critique of "Affluenza," but culminate in the surprising tale of Zacchaeus—a rich man who is healed through the practice of reparation. This gospel text for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost is proximate this year to All Hallow's Eve—appropriately *scary* for those of us who live with class and economic privileges.

Part of the sophisticated narrative interweaving of strands in this section is how this story is actually a doublet, which puts a rich and poor man in uncomfortably close proximity—as does the story of Lazarus and Dives (which appeared in last month's lectionary). Just as Dives' fate is linked to that of Lazarus, so is Zacchaeus linked to a blind street beggar, whose story immediately precedes it (18:35-43; *see right*).

This "twinned-but-contrasting" characterization functions in much the same way as the political cartoon from a U.S. newspaper in the mid-1990s at right. Two men sit on the sidewalk in front of the White House. One is dressed shabbily, has a downcast countenance, holds an empty cup, is silent, and bears a sign reading "Starving and Alone." The other wears a suit, smiles happily, his cup is overflowing with money, and proclaims what a great country it is, his sign reading (alliteratively) "Savings and Loan." This cartoon alludes to the [late 1980s/early 90s federal government bailout of banks](#) gone bankrupt because of bad investments; thousands of Americans lost their homes, while the banks continued to prosper. Fifteen years later, of course, it happened again, more dramatically: bankers survived, while the homeless grew poorer. And another 15 years after *that* it happened again during the pandemic real estate bubble. I use this example because we can interpret immediately the meaning of this contemporary sophisticated symbolic narrative, because it is a familiar type of storytelling from our culture and historical moment. We are not so quick to recognize Luke's "political cartoon" from a time and culture far removed from ours.

The stories of the blind man and Zacchaeus are juxtaposed relative to Jericho; both receive vision; and both decide to follow Jesus' Way. In the process, however, there is a certain leveling of the playing field. The blind beggar is "lifted up" and recognized for his full humanity by Jesus, while the rich man is "brought down" from his perch high above the crowds. I'd go so far as to say that this doublet represents not only the culmination of the "rich man series" in the Special Section, but indeed the apex of Luke's narrative as a whole; from here the story turns toward Jerusalem and the Passion (19:28). Moreover, it seems to be a dramatic enactment of that revolutionary lullaby we call the "Magnificat" (*right*), which launched Luke's story: "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (1:52-53). Indeed, at the end of this doublet, Zacchaeus and the beggar will stand on level ground as a reunited family, participating in the gifts of God equitably.

Jesus' Diagnosis of Affluenza in Lk 12-19

- 12:16ff: "The land of a **rich man** produced abundantly..." *Parable of the rich fool*
- 16:1-13 "There was a **rich man** who..." *Parable of the De-fective Steward / God & Mammon*
- 16:19-31: "There was a **rich man** who..." *Parable of Lazarus & Dives*
- 18:18-30: "...for **he was very rich**" *Ruler's rejection of discipleship*
- 19:1-10: "Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and **was rich**"

A Rich Man and a Beggar: Lk 16 & 19

- 16:19-31: The Story of Lazarus and the Rich Man
 - "There was a rich man (Gk *plousios*) who..." (16:19)
 - "A poor man (Gk *ptochos*) named Lazarus..." (16:20)



Rich Man & Lazarus, medieval Danish fresco. Jesus & Zacchaeus, St Andrew Bible Missal

- 18:35-19:31: The Blind Man and Zacchaeus at Jericho
 - A blind man begging (Gk *epaitōn*)... (18:35)
 - Chief tax collector Zacchaeus was rich... (Gk *plousios*; 19:2)



BY JEFF MACHIELLO FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE



Charles McCullough, "Jesus and the blind man," contemporary



In our churches, Zacchaeus gets portrayed as a fat little man with no particular social identity who climbed a tree to see Jesus; there's even a cute little [Sunday School song](#) about him. But such sentimentalizing obscures the real economic terrain of the first century. The tax collectors referred to in the N.T. were local Jews employed by the colonial occupiers to do something called "[tax farming](#)." In this system the tax farmer paid Rome its money in advance, and then had to make it up by exacting commissions on taxes, tolls and customs (on land, products and persons). Since poor people had no idea what sort of financial arrangement had been negotiated by the tax collector, they were at the mercy of whatever he charged. Due to their extortion as agents of Rome, therefore, tax collectors were socially rejected, religiously excommunicated and politically viewed as traitors. And because their profits flowed up the hierarchical ladder, the *chief* tax collector was at the top of the pyramid. Thus Zacchaeus would have been the *most* rapacious and *most* despised—hardly perceived by a peasant audience hearing this story as an innocent and jolly little character! As a political and economic structure that strategically advantaged the elite, this ancient tax system was no different than our own.

Zacchaeus' headquarters were in Jericho, a center for trade as the port of entry for all traffic crossing the Judean frontier and the river Jordan from the east. So our two characters represent the top and bottom of the social pyramid in this powerful place. Was Zacchaeus "short" of stature, or "young in age," as the Greek term *hēlikia* is usually translated in the N.T., Septuagint and papyri? If the latter, Zacchaeus likely inherited his lofty position as a result of family patronage, probably to the royal house of Herod (who kept a winter palace in Jericho). So Zacchaeus' intergenerational privilege contrasts sharply with the nameless blind man, who had doubtless endured years of marginalization and invisibilization. But this is a story full of surprises, the first of which is that this scorned representative of an oppressive occupying regime was actually "trying to *see* Jesus"! Here is the first connection between him and the poor man: both are blind, if in different ways. Luke thus begins inter weaving their fate.

Impossible to bridge the gulf between these opposite ends of the social spectrum, we think (having long ago abandoned the imagination of such a possibility)? The rich and powerful will never give up sovereignty? Here's where little narrative details matter in traditional story-telling. The kind of tree Zacchaeus mounts is a mulberry tree (Gk *sukomorea*). And Jesus had something to say earlier in Luke about such trees: "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree (Gk *sukaminō*), 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you'" (17:6). He believed that another economic order was not only possible but imperative, and here he challenges someone high up in that very tree to make an "impossible" change. (Incidentally, John the Revelator would later envision the oppressive economy of the Roman Empire disappearing *into the sea*, swallowed up like Pharaoh's army of old; see Rev 18:21). And it is Zacchaeus who will be uprooted and replanted into the soil of [Sabbath Economics](#).

In 2018, the super-rich paid a lower tax rate than the bottom 50%

Average effective tax rates of the 400 richest families and the bottom 50 percent of U.S. households



Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. (Lk 19:1-2)



He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature (or of a young age; Gk *hēlikia*). (Lk 19:3)



The blind man said, "Lord, let me see again." (Lk 18:41)



So he ran ahead and climbed a mulberry tree (Gk *sukomorea*) to see Jesus, because he was going to pass that way. (Lk 19:4)

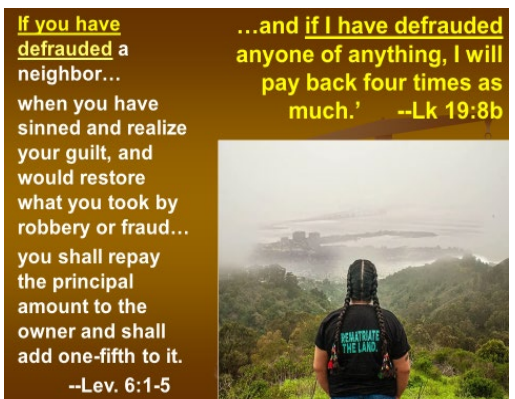
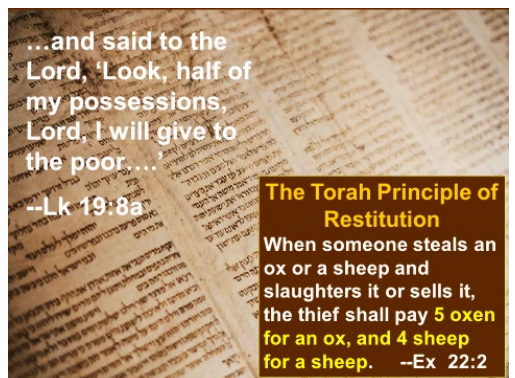
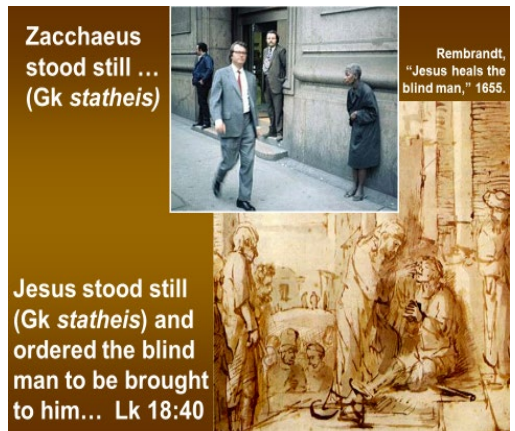
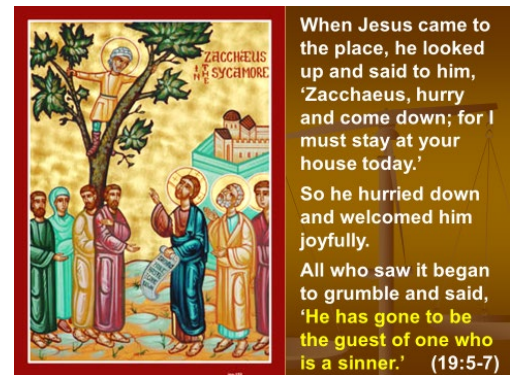
"If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree (Gk *sukaminō*), 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." (Lk 17:6)

Now come more surprising twists in the story. Summoning Zacchaeus to “come down,” from his lofty position, Jesus now invites himself over to his place for dinner—an aggressive and risky strategy! Despite having been razor-critical of rich people in his teaching thus far in Luke’s gospel, and though he has just seen his call to discipleship summarily rejected by a rich man a few episodes earlier (Lk 18:18-30), Jesus nevertheless takes initiative. But this shock is immediately followed by another: Zacchaeus hastens down and welcomes Jesus “joyfully.” This is an unexpected, bold, and even courageous pivot for someone of his lofty social standing. After all, he lives in the insular bubble of the wealthy, and surely it is evident to him that by welcoming the homeless man Jesus he is also welcoming Jesus’ entourage—which specifically now includes the poor blind man. Imagine this group trooping into Zacchaeus’ elegant home (or into our suburban churches)! I’m thinking there were tensions. The characters in the story are unsettled by this awkward “class mixing”—no doubt from *both* Jesus’ and Zacchaeus’ people—who lodge immediate protest. The former object to sharing table fellowship with an oppressor; the latter likely worry about the fine china and silverware!

Apparently Zacchaeus senses the tension. So—read carefully now—Luke tells us “he stood still.” Here is a second connection to the previous story. It’s the same exact phrase that described what Jesus did when he heard the blind man screaming at him: stopped and took the time to feel and hear the cry of the poor, rather than just walking by (as most of us do on a daily basis). It must have been contagious, because now it’s Zacchaeus who stops dead in his tracks. Luke uses this sort of rhetorical repetition to suggest that Zacchaeus has encountered not only Jesus, but the marginalized as well. He “sees” them, no doubt for the first time, which leads to his second step of liberation. In that Zen moment of pause, he seems to realize that Jesus is interested in more than hospitality; he’s pushing relationship. Which leads to a stunning turn of events—and heart.

Zacchaeus now offers, unbidden, *two* ways in which he might take what we call in our work “response-ability.” Not a public lament about inequality; nor ritual apology in front of the press; nor a call for a committee to study the problem; nor a summoning of the chair of the charity fund; nor a rant against government policy. No, he commits to redistributing “half of his *huparchonton*” (which is to say *property*).” This is not charity, but *restitution* according to Torah: Exodus 22 says that someone who has stolen from another must restore four or five fold of what was taken in order to make up for the breach of trust and the aggravation. When Zacchaeus then adds that he *may* have defrauded some folks, one can imagine Jesus raising an eyebrow and saying, “*If??*” Leviticus asserts that fraud requires restitution plus 20%, adjudicated through rituals of accountability.

Remarkably, Zacchaeus is doing all this and then some, in stark contrast to Luke’s portraits of every other rich man in his gospel narrative. He is committing to *reparations*, which is here revealed as the true indicator of conversion to the Way.

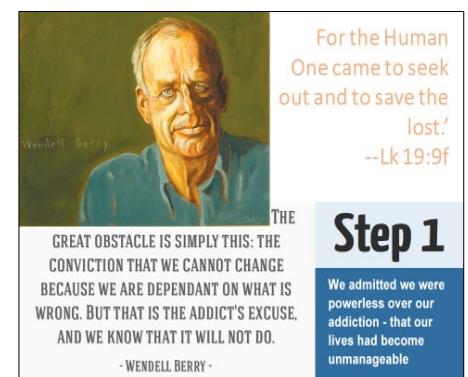
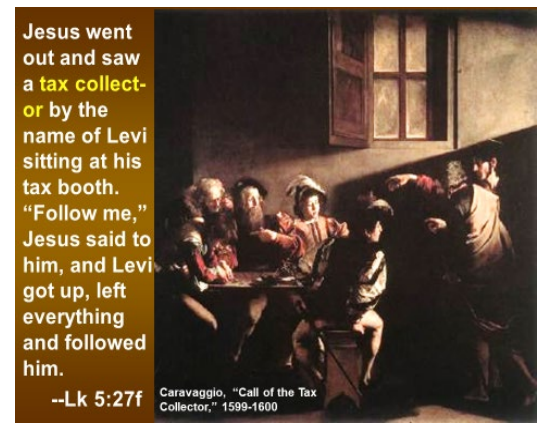


The only explanation of this dramatic initiative—and one suggested by Luke’s story arc—is that Zacchaeus must have received intelligence (he is after all *chief* tax tsar) from his underlings in Capernaum, that this prophet from Nazareth was serious about repentance as actual redistribution of wealth to those on the other side of the socio-economic divide. Back in Luke 5, a certain Levi responded to Jesus’ discipleship call not only by abandoning his tax office, but also inviting the prophet to his home for a feast, which Luke describes as Jubilee hospitality: debtors and debt collectors sharing table fellow-ship. There, too, objections were raised: the table was a primary determiner of social relations in antiquity, and such dramatic boundary-crossing would threaten the status quo.

How Jesus responds in Capernaum illuminates our Zacchaeus story: “You can’t heal people who don’t know they’re sick,” he says; only those who acknowledge the dis-ease. Jesus can’t do much for those who fancy themselves pious, or “woke,” or who don’t think there are any problems with the status quo. But he *can* build a movement with those who commit to the hard, lifelong work of turning personal and political history around. The resonance between the stories of Zacchaeus and Levi is striking; in both cases, Jesus’ responds to their “open-ness” by inviting himself (and his entourage) over to these class enemies’ houses in order to embody redistribution of food and wealth! Restoration by concrete reparation.

Jesus makes an extraordinary, three-fold response to Zacchaeus:

- First, he declares that “today salvation has come to this house.” Jesus means this quite literally: when he and all his funky friends entered the home of the chief tax collector, they brought with them Zacchaeus’ liberation. It is the *encounter* that brings transformation.
- Second, by calling him “a son of Abraham” Jesus restores Zacchaeus’ membership in (and identity with) his people. This is another way of linking his healing to that of the nation as a whole, but also to its marginalized in particular. [Back in Luke 13:11-17, Jesus healed a “bent-over woman”](#) (whose condition commentators believe was symbolic of someone crippled by unpayable debt), and similarly named her a “daughter of Abraham,” which again rankled the authorities. [But that’s the same Abraham who rocked Lazarus in his bosom while directing Dives’ attention to the “great gulf” \(Gk *chasma mega*, 16:22-26\) fixed between the desperation of the poor and the depredation of the rich.](#) Luke’s Jesus is clear that *both* debtor and creditor must be healed through redistribution and reparation for the Beloved Community to be restored.
- Third, Jesus reminds us that the predatory rich are *lost* unless and until they repent. The bent over woman and the blind beggar were *dehumanized* by economic disparity, and were made whole (in economic as well as physical terms). But the chief tax collector is *lost*, hopelessly addicted to privilege and power, unless and until he restores equity. [“Rocka my soul”](#) is Lazarus’ song; reparation is *ours*.



As [Wendell Berry puts it](#): “The great obstacle is simply this: the conviction that we cannot change because we are dependent of what is wrong. But that is the addict’s excuse. And we know that it will not do.” At the culmination of Luke’s sprawling narrative about economic disparity, Jesus accompanies Zacchaeus to take Step One—to admit the dis-ease, the portal to recovery and healing. Searching moral inventory, amends and reparations then become our discipleship Way.

So what have we learned from this gospel text?

- Jesus pays attention to the poor, and animates their empowerment: “Your faith has liberated you,” he says to the blind beggar who follows.
- Conversely, he invites the powerful to change and to execute concrete justice: “You too are a son of Abraham he says to Zacchaeus;
- He is also realistic about the consequences of resisting the system that made and kept Zacchaeus rich and powerful—a story told in the episode that immediately follows this one: the Parable of the Pounds (19:11-27). Discipleship, Bonhoeffer reminded us, is *costly*.
- And it shows that Sabbath Economics is a vision for the healing for everyone. But for those of us who have a leg up in that Jericho tree—who have too much, who have benefitted materially from settler colonialism, who continue to enjoy white privilege—our dis-ease will only be healed by making reparations and collaborating with oppressed communities to forge relational justice.

From beginning to end, Luke’s gospel narrates the personal and political struggle between “Mammon” and “Manna”—nowhere more dramatically than in the story of Zacchaeus. And for us who are settlers on Turtle Island, whose flourishing is predicated upon stolen Indigenous land and Black labor, it is paradigmatic for [our healing and discipleship](#).

