

Using Our Blessings Well

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – November 2, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Luke 18:18-27

¹⁸A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ²⁰You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.’” ²¹He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” ²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²³But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. ²⁴Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁶Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?”

²⁷He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” ⁹Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

As we prepare for Commitment Weekend on Nov 8-9, we continue our series: “Sharing Our Blessings”

Two stories

Here we have two stories. They both involve possessions and wealth. Jesus is at the center of each. Both stories involve powerful people – a wealthy administrator and a chief tax collector. Luke even tells the two stories virtually back-to-back.¹ Yet, for all the similarities between Jesus’ encounter with the administrator and his encounter with Zacchaeus, the outcomes could not be more different.

Tax Collectors

The Roman tax system was nothing like our IRS. Rome would contract out the collection of taxes in geographic areas. The winning entrepreneurial bidder would agree to pay the contracted amount of taxes to Rome. The tax entrepreneur would then put together an organization to do the actual collection. The winning bidder would employ chief tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, who made the whole thing work. Zacchaeus would have employed lower-level collectors, like Jesus’ disciple Matthew, who would man toll booths and other small tax collection businesses. In all, it was one of the largest enterprises of that time.

In the Roman system, tax collectors would be free to collect all the money they could and keep whatever wasn’t owed Rome under the contract. Thus, not only were they agents of the Roman oppressors, we can only imagine the methods they employed in gaining their wealth. Not surprisingly, in the Gospels tax collectors are usually lumped in with the prostitutes!

¹These stories are separated in Luke only by brief episodes about the blindness of the disciples and Jesus’ restoration of sight to a blind beggar. As in all the Gospels, Luke’s literary skills are at work here. It is no accident that the stories about blindness lay between the story of the rich ruler and the story of Zacchaeus.

Jesus' encounter with the rich ruler

In the first of our stories, a wealthy administrator, a paragon of worldly success, comes to Jesus seeking to inherit eternal life. Jesus offers the man nothing new; he is to keep God's commandments. Almost as if to say "is that it!," the ruler tells Jesus he has done that his whole life!² But then Jesus drops the other shoe. He confronts the man's true commitment by telling him that he is to sell all he has, give it to the poor, and then follow Jesus. This, the ruler is unwilling to do . . . and he leaves deeply saddened. Jesus too is saddened, for the man's wealth has made him blind. He has chosen to cling to his wealth rather than to serve God. Ironically, the man's wealth has not given him advantages over the poor, it has disadvantaged him! Given the power that possessions can have over us all, Jesus uses pointed hyperbole to emphasize that only the power of God can open his kingdom to rich and poor alike.

Jesus meets Zacchaeus

In keeping with the blindness of the rich ruler, Luke then tells us of the disciples' continuing inability to see where Jesus' journey must lead him (18:31-34). Next, we are told of a blind beggar who cries out for mercy, throwing himself completely upon God . . . and is healed (18:35-43). Then, we come to Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus in Jericho.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, every bit as much an outcast as the blind beggar. Already contemptible in the eyes of his fellow Jews, Zacchaeus subjects himself to further ridicule. This little tax collector runs to catch a glimpse of Jesus even though it was most unseemly for a Jewish man to run. Zacchaeus also climbs a tree; something else unbecoming for a grown man. Perhaps because Zacchaeus has made such a spectacle of himself, Jesus spots him in the tree and, as was his custom, he goes to Zacchaeus' home. Can you imagine the joy Zacchaeus must have felt as he welcomed Jesus? Of course, the townsfolk didn't much like Jesus entering the home of the hated tax collector, but Jesus always seemed to hang around with the wrong sorts of people.³ Having invited himself into Zacchaeus' home, what happens next will be Jesus' miracle alone.

In contrast to the rich ruler, Zacchaeus asks nothing of Jesus, not even a question. He simply steps forward and, without prompting, commits to giving half of his ill-gotten possessions to the poor – not all, but half. Then, in keeping with the most stringent interpretation of the ancient Judaic law, Zacchaeus promises that he will repay four-fold those he has defrauded. Zacchaeus' repentance and generosity demonstrate that he is a "son of Abraham." He was lost, but now is found. This is no less a miracle than Jesus' healing of the blind beggar. Zacchaeus was morally blind, but now sees.

Our possessions and the use of our blessings

None of the other Gospels matches Luke's interest in the implications of wealth and possessions. Walter Pilgrim suggests that the story of Zacchaeus is the most important text in Luke on the subject of how we are to understand and use our wealth. Though Jesus asked it of the rich ruler, he does not ask Zacchaeus to give up all he has. Nor does it seem that Zacchaeus abandoned his life to follow Jesus. Rather, Zacchaeus is redeemed *in* his life. By God's grace, Zacchaeus points his life toward repentance and away from exploitation. He will be generous to the poor. He will make amends to those he has wronged. He will stay a tax collector, but he will now conduct himself with honor and justice. He will heed John the Baptist's teachings to tax collectors: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you" (Luke 3:13). Zacchaeus will "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8). Even after giving away half of his wealth and making reparations, Zacchaeus would have still been a wealthy and powerful man. But now, he will use his wealth and power and talents for God's purposes. He will be a force for good, pointing others toward lives of generosity and justice. Truly, this is what it means to use our blessings well!

²In his book, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a culture of wealth*, John Schneider points out that in the list of commandments, the rich ruler fails to notice that Jesus has left out "you shall not covet," and doesn't see what is coming.

³This is, of course, no accident. By eating with "sinners," Jesus demonstrates with his actions that all would be invited to God's great feast. The kingdom of God is open to all – including those we least expect!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 18:9-14 The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 18:15-43 Why might Jesus' encounter with the ruler be preceded by the story of the children and followed by the stories about blindness?</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 19:1-27 Why might the story of Zacchaeus be followed by a parable about a greedy king? How does the parable prepare us for Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem?</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 12:13-21 The parable of the rich fool. What is the vision for our lives? If we attain some measure of financial security, to what purpose will we put it?</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 16:19-31 The rich man and Lazarus. Who is the rich man's neighbor? Is it the rich man's wealth that doomed him or his hard-heartedness?</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

NEW!! Scott's Book of the Month Recommendation for November

The St. Andrew Bookstore and I are starting a new program. Each month, I will recommend a book that I think you might enjoy reading. You'll be able to get a copy in our new bookstore. My first recommendation is Philip Yancey's new book, *Rumors of Another World*.

It is hard for many Christians to grasp the present-but-coming reality of God's Kingdom. So often, we tend to think of it as somewhere "up there" or only "to come." We struggle to see that there actually is an unseen world. And as hard as this is for Christians, it can prove nearly impossible for those who live in "the borderlands of belief," between faith and doubt. Philip Yancey helps us to hear and to see the "rumors of another world" that surround us all. He helps us to understand the reality of the seen & the unseen, the visible & the invisible, the natural & the supernatural. He shows us that these rumors point us all toward God and a new perspective on our lives. As always, Yancey is honest, thoughtful, and easy to read. I'm confident that his words will speak to your heart as well as your mind.

Scott Engle

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In his commentary on the story of the rich ruler, Alan Culpepper writes this: "God's love reaches out prejudicially to the poor because their poverty violates God's intention for human life. Similarly, the rich find it difficult to experience God's sovereignty because their wealth turns them away from people in need and blinds them to their own need of salvation." Discuss today's contrasting stories of rich men and their encounter with Jesus. You might make two columns on the board and then list out key similarities and differences between the stories. How do Professor Culpepper's comments inform our understanding of these stories? How does the story of Zacchaeus guide us in the use of our own possessions? How is the story of Zacchaeus a story of unbounded optimism?
2. In the study, I described Zacchaeus as being redeemed in his life. He did not give up all that he had nor did he abandon his life to follow Jesus around Galilee. Yet, Jesus calls him a "son of Abraham." What do you think Jesus *did* expect from Zacchaeus? Anything? Clearly, in giving half of his wealth to the poor, Zacchaeus was both making amends and being generous. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. In the days and months after his encounter with Jesus, what are some ways that Zacchaeus might have lived out his own redemption? In other words, how might Zacchaeus have used his blessings well? How do we use our blessings well?