

*Matthew 5:17-19 (NRSV)*

<sup>17</sup>“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

*Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV)*

<sup>34</sup>When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup>and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” <sup>37</sup>He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

*Luke 19:1-10 (NRSV)*

He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. <sup>2</sup>A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. <sup>3</sup>He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. <sup>4</sup>So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. <sup>5</sup>When 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.” <sup>6</sup>So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. <sup>7</sup>All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” <sup>8</sup>Zacchaeus 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.” <sup>9</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

*A life changed. A man transformed. Yes, Jesus is Good News.*

Let’s face it, we all seek success. And we often define it as something like this: getting straight-A’s and making the varsity, keeping a well-paid job with good benefits, staying happily married to one person for your whole life, having well-adjusted children who are themselves successful, staying thin, and, of course, the big house and SUV.

When I change the word from “success” to “greatness,” we may begin to feel some discomfort, but who doesn’t want to be a great mom or dad or have a great career or live in a great neighborhood. And many among those less than 30 seem obsessed with the possibility of celebrity via Instagram or TikTok.

We have trouble even entertaining the notion that there may be something wrong here. After all, success and even greatness are the American dream, to which we’ve now added celebrity. It is all just very . . . well, seductive.

But when we turn to the four gospels, we quickly discover that Jesus very often warns the wealthy and powerful about the dangers of their success. Why? Because such success can feed our delusions of self-reliance and independence. Wealth and status can cause us to believe our own press, that we actually are kings of the world. But the path of discipleship leads us toward the recognition that we are dependent upon God, that all our treasured stuff and the success that bought it, is a gift from God. This is why many Christians come to true faith in Christ at a difficult time, when it seems that we've been afflicted by life, when all our delusions of independence have been shattered.

The truth is success is another idol that tempts to turn from God if it is not kept in its place. So do our conceptions of success really feed idolatry? Eugene Peterson's warned us that when we enlist God's aid we run the risk of reducing God to what we can use for our purposes.

But success?

Here is an exercise. Read the following list and substitute the word "success" everywhere there is an "X":

- X sustains me
- X encourages me
- X comforts me
- X lifts me up
- X strengthens me
- X is with me everywhere

You might try "recognition" or "admiration" – which, for many, is what they mean by success or greatness. I remember a very wealthy business associate telling me that his lifelong pursuit wasn't really the money or even what it could buy – the money was merely a way of keeping score. He simply loved to win and to be seen as the biggest winner of all. His self-perception as a "winner" sustained him, encouraged him, comforted him, and so on. For him, that was success.

Now go back to the list and substitute "God." There are many verbs we associate with God that, in truth, we more readily apply to success or wealth or our possessions or any of a host of things that we feel sustain us, encourage us, and so on. God sometimes just seems so darn remote.

But look again at the list. What's missing? How about:

- X loves me
- X forgives me

I'm sure that even my business friend wouldn't try to say that his reputation as a winner "loved" him or "forgave him." It is the intensely *personal* nature of love and forgiveness that is missing from work, success, or the other idols we are tempted to embraced. Peterson wrote:

- "An idol is god with all the God taken out. God depersonalized, God de-relationalized, a god that we can use and enlist and fantasize without ever once having to (maybe "getting to" is the better phrase) receive or give love, and then to go on to live, however falteringly, at our most

human. The essence of idolatry is depersonalization. The idol is a form of divinity that requires no personal relationship. The idol is a form of divinity that I can manipulate or control. The idol reverses the God/creature relationship: now I am the god and the idol is the creature.”

We make idols of success or anything else because we begin to imagine that they provide us with what we think we most need. And of course, they can't. Success or greatness or achievement will never love you. But we were created to love and to be loved. It is why any of us are here. When Jesus is asked to sum up the Law of Moses, he does so by turning to two instructions, one from Deuteronomy, “Love the Lord your God,” and one from Leviticus, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love God and love neighbor – that’s the center of it all. This is not a surprise, for God is love.

Let’s meet a man who was certainly successful by many of the measures our popular culture seems to value today. If there was anyone who could afford lots of bling, it was Zacchaeus.

*A lesson in “success”*

Zacchaeus lived in Jericho and was a chief tax collector, a very rich man at the top of his chosen trade. Yes, in the eyes of fellow Jews he was an unsavory character or worse. But perhaps even that wasn’t bad so far as Zacchaeus was concerned. We Americans, after all, have had a constant fascination with *la Mafioso*. Perhaps Zacchaeus enjoyed the notoriety or the feigned respect that his money could buy. I’m sure he thought of himself as quite “successful.” But

#### Tax Collectors

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, but 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. 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.

he was one of God’s people and should have known better.

Well . . . one day, Zacchaeus hears that this Jesus from Nazareth, the talk of the town, is passing through Jericho. This diminutive tax collector, for he was a short man, runs to catch a glimpse of Jesus even though it was most unseemly for a Jewish man to run. He was probably long past worrying about being unseemly. Zacchaeus even 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, goes to Zacchaeus’ home. In fact, Jesus even invites himself.

Can you imagine the joy Zacchaeus must have felt as he welcomed Jesus. This would do amazing things for his reputation. Talk about success! 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. Having invited himself into Zacchaeus' home, what happens next will be Jesus' miracle.

Zacchaeus asked nothing of Jesus, not even an answer to a question. He simply stepped forward and, without prompting, committed 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 had defrauded. Zacchaeus' repentance and generosity demonstrate that he is a "son of Abraham" (v. 9) He was lost, but now is found.

Notice that Jesus 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. He is transformed within the life he is living. By God's grace, Zacchaeus points his transformed 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 just and generous lives. His success will no longer be his idol.

### *Transformation*

No amount of success or celebrity or money can transform us into people who live as we were created to live. Idols are de-personalized gods, often promising great things that they can never provide. Far more people have been ruined by celebrity than have been improved by it.

But the good news is that we are never beyond the possibility of redemption and transformation. Take Zacchaeus . . . What could there be to salvage in a man who had sold his soul to the Romans? Yet, when Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, he is saved, for transformation is the essence of salvation. He was lost and yet is found.

At the heart of Christianity lies this transformation, this renewing of our entire selves so that we might each become the unique person that God created. Hence, Soren Kierkegaard's insightful prayer, "And now Lord, with your help, I will become myself."

## **Scott Engle's Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Judges*

**THIS CLASS WILL NOT MEET JUL 29 AND AUG 5, 12, AND 19. WE WILL RESUME ON AUG 26.**

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *Acts*

**THIS CLASS WILL NOT MEET JUL 30 AND AUG 6, 13, AND 20. WE WILL RESUME ON AUG 27.**

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

This week: *Digging Deeper: "Right, Wrong, and Righteous"*

Upcoming schedule: Jul 28 w/ Brian Colligan; Aug 4, 11, and 18 w/ Rev. Lauren Gerlach  
Scott returns on Aug 25 to begin a new series, *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences*.

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page.  
Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.