

Pastor Don Nelson

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**“WALKING IN JERICHO”**  
**Luke 18:18-27; Luke 19:1-10**

Why me?

God gifted me with parents who nurtured my faith, folded me into the church, encouraged other Christian involvements, and helped me prepare for ministry. Most of my 19 first cousins were not so blessed. Why me?

I have three sisters. In God’s generosity we were all provided the same spiritual foundation and tools. By outward measures it appears that, of the four of us, I am doing the most with those opportunities. Why me?

I know men whose wives make it harder to follow Jesus (and women who can say the same of their husbands). But God has united *me* with a woman who not only shares my walk with Jesus but inspires me to grow deeper, higher, farther, purer and stronger in him. (Thank you, Beth!) Why me?

I have been broken, stained, and infected with sin. One more bad choice at the wrong time and I might have ended up in the gutter, behind bars, or dead. Yet God pursued me until I could deny him no longer, and He has poured an endless flood of goodness into my life ever since. Why me?

I am getting better at asking this, but I have a long way to go. Sins of pride, entitlement, self-reliance and self-pity still inhibit my gratitude and sense of wonder.

○ Please turn to the Gospel According to Luke. We will be flipping back and forth between two narratives, one in 18:18-27 and the other in 19:1-10.

➤ They are close on the written page, and probably occurred a few days apart. Each describes an interaction between Jesus and a potential disciple.

Let’s do an exercise in comparison and contrast with the two men who meet Jesus here:

⊕ As for initiative: in 18:18 the ruler approaches Jesus and strikes up a conversation. In 19:5 Zacchaeus waits for Jesus to instigate an encounter.

⊕ As for etiquette: the ruler praises Jesus as a **“Good teacher”** (18:18). This is unprecedented! In all Jewish literature no one will call a Rabbi, **“Good teacher”** until the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Luke makes no reference to any similar compliments by Zacchaeus.

⊕ As for spirituality ~ in 18:18 the ruler asks **“what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** There is no record of pious questions from Zacchaeus.

⊕ As for morality ~ in 18:20, Jesus states: **“You know the commandments,”** and lists five of the Ten Commandments that address human relationship. In 18:21 the ruler answers: **“All these I have kept since I was a boy.”** The Rabbis contend {*Sanhedrin* 101a} that it is possible to keep the whole law, and this man sincerely believes he has done so. He is a good person. Zacchaeus makes no corresponding assertion.

⊕ As for wealth ~ both men are very rich.

We are not told how the ruler made his money, but certainly it was by ethical means. Most first

century Jews see lawful riches as proof positive of God's approval, so this cements his image as virtuous man.

Not so with Zacchaeus. In regard to his fortune Luke 19:2 reports that "**he [is] a chief tax collector.**" Of course the guy is loaded! Every chief tax collector is. But there is rich, and then there is filthy rich. Zacchaeus falls into that last category because he's in charge of the Jericho district (Luke 19:1).

Jericho stands at the intersection of 4 trade routes, among them the busiest crossing over the Jordan River. It is famous for its first-rate wine, dates, and medicinal ointments. The city boasts pools, banks, parks and imposing buildings. The district is known as {DSB} "**the fattest in Palestine**" (that is, the most fertile).

Zacchaeus is wealthy indeed. However, no one construes *his* wealth as evidence of God's favor.

☞ 1<sup>st</sup>, he is a collaborator.

The money he takes from his people funds the oppressive Roman bureaucracy and the armies who do violence to Israel. His neighbors hate him as a traitor.

☞ 2<sup>nd</sup>, he buttresses an unjust tax system.

⊖ He enforces the poll tax. This has nothing to do with voting, and everything to do with existing. Men between the ages of 14-65 and women from 12 to 65 are required to pay just because they are alive.

⊖ He enforces the ground tax. Anyone who grows grain must turn over 10% of the crop. Those who produce wine or oil are forced to give 20%.

⊖ And he enforces the 1% income tax.

It is hard to complain about that income tax, but the poll tax is wrong on principle. And when there is flooding,

drought, or locusts, 20% can mean the difference between keeping one's farm and losing it, staying free or going into slavery, living or dying.

☞ 3<sup>rd</sup>, Zacchaeus is a cheat of the worst kind.

If the poll, ground, and income taxes are unjust, the duties are worse. Imagine that a small-time farmer named Joshua is traveling to Jericho. He comes to the river and on its bank there is a toll booth. Zacchaeus' subordinate demands a duty on the cart, and on each wheel of the cart, and on the oxen pulling it, plus a duty on the produce he is going to sell. What he does not tell Joshua is that his rate is five times that set by Rome. One-fifth of the total goes to Caesar, 1/5<sup>th</sup> to the subordinate, and 3/5ths to Zacchaeus.

As Joshua draws near the city he comes to another toll booth at the cross-roads. This subordinate charges only 3½ times the official rate on the cart, its wheels, the oxen and goods; but he spies Joshua's personal belongings and exacts a separate duty on these items. (The tax code does not stipulate this; he's just making it up). One-third of the total duty goes to Caesar, 1/3<sup>rd</sup> to the subordinate, and 1/3<sup>rd</sup> to Zacchaeus.

The farmer finally makes it to Jericho. Besides collecting the requisite sales tax, Zacchaeus obliges an inflated market user fee and spontaneously invents yet another duty for wear and tear on the city streets.

Our chief tax collector is greedy, idolatrous, heartless. Like most of his professional brethren he is a leech, a blood-sucker, a parasite on society.

Consequently his neighbors treat him no differently than a robber or murderer. Zacchaeus is barred from giving testimony in court. If he tries to give a donation to a charity, it will be rejected. The temple refuses his offerings, and if he enters a synagogue he will be forcibly removed.

So why does God's Word record Zacchaeus' name, but not the name of the man in chapter 18? How is it that the wicked tax collector is qualified for discipleship, while the good man is not?

Three things: in order to walk with Jesus...

- ⊗ We must rely on Jesus, rather than ourselves.

The ruler asks, "**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**" He assumes that kingdom citizenship is earned. He recognizes that Jesus has the truth; yet his failure to obey Jesus he reveals he is relying on his own merits to secure forgiveness and salvation.

Zacchaeus is not. And so in Luke 19:9 Jesus says, "**Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.**" Romans 4 {3-5, 11} explains,

**"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." To anyone who works, their wages are not credited to them as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to anyone who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness .... So then, [Abraham] is the father of all who believe [without trusting in human effort], in order that righteousness might be credited to them.**

- ⊗ We must identify and destroy our idols.

In Luke 18:22 Jesus tells the rich ruler, "**Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**" Divesting oneself of all money and possessions is not a universal requirement of discipleship. Jesus commands it for this man because wealth owns his soul.

He professes orthodox theology, observes the external forms of the law, and surely he is devout in worship and sacrifice. But when confronted with the choice he cannot serve God if it means parting with his money. The LORD God does not have first place in his heart.

Likewise, although he avoids doing wrong to his neighbors, this ruler does not love them as himself. One of the early Church Fathers {Gospel of the Hebrews} adds this detail to the interchange in Luke 18:

**The rich man began to scratch his head because he did not like this command. The Lord said to him, "Why do you say that you have obeyed the law and the prophets? For it is written in the law, 'You must love your neighbor as yourself,' and look...there are many brothers of yours, sons of Abraham, who are dying of hunger, and your house is full of many good things, and not one single thing goes out of it to them."**

Zacchaeus has served the same idol with greater depravity. Yet when he meets Jesus he sees

his idol for what it is, and demolishes it. In Luke 19:8 he stands up and says to Jesus, “**Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times that amount!**”

Zacchaeus is not saved by this, but it demonstrates authentic love for God and neighbor. Moreover, I would argue that, given his past, God’s saving grace cannot be activated in his life until he acts in justice and generosity.

☼ Finally, we must humbly admit our desperate need and act accordingly. To put it another way, we must cultivate the habit of asking, *Why me?* in a spirit of gratitude and wonder. This is essential to Christian discipleship.

Not to mention that no one here has earned God’s mercy and generosity. Each and every one of us is undeserving – no ifs, ands, or buts.

But this is precisely where the good news breaks in. Broken and unworthy as we are, Jesus comes to us and says: {Lk 19:5} “**I must stay at your house.**” He keeps offering {Jn 10:10} “**life...to the full.**” He gives us opportunities to rely on his true goodness instead of our false virtue. He repeatedly offers freedom from bondage to idols, though we go back to them again and again.

Why me, Lord? Why have you called me to discipleship?

I don’t know the whole answer, but I am grateful and my sense of wonder is growing. And, like my brother Zacchaeus, I will walk with Jesus.