

Problem: Is it possible to follow Jesus while participating in a broken world?

-One of the most interesting places on earth that I know of is this peninsula off the coast of Greece called Mount Athos. The show *60 Minutes* did an extensive feature on it a couple years back which I encourage all of you to watch online at some point. Mount Athos is a collection of 20 monasteries (mostly from the Greek Orthodox tradition), some of which are over 1,500 years old. We know from historical records that there have been monks living on this peninsula for about 1,800 years, possibly longer. Currently, it is home to about 2,000 monks who live mostly self-sufficient lives of solitude and prayer. If you think that isn't crazy enough, some of the monks that live there aren't associated with any of the 20 monasteries and live actually *on* Mount Athos itself, a 7,000 ft high peak located in the middle of this peninsula. Following the ways of St. Anthony or what is commonly known among Christian historians as the "Desert Fathers", many of these single monks live in such extreme solitude that they haven't been seen or spoken to by another person for 50 years.

-One of the monks, who was an American, that *60 Minutes* interviewed and who did live in a monastic community talked of not leaving the peninsula even to bury his own brother who passed away. "This is the closest place to heaven that exists on Earth," he said. "I have a job to do, and that is to pray for my brother and for the world." Indeed, this is how the monks see their mission: to follow Jesus Christ through prayer and solitude.

-Part of the reason why I marvel at the monks who live on Mount Athos is their commitment to being undistracted Christians.

-Maybe it is the craziness of my own life right now that leads me to putting these monks on a little bit of a pedestal. Indeed, this is what much of history has done as well: monks (and nuns) are those followers who have devoted themselves totally to God and I, too, as a follower of Christ will never live up to their prayers and impact.

-What makes a good Christian? Is it necessary to be completely removed from this broken world in order to follow God in deeper and deeper ways?

Solution: As Zacchaeus was both a tax collector AND a follower, we too can find love and grace in any vocation that we do. We can still be followers of Christ and stand up to injustice.

- The Zacchaeus story is a powerful one that plays around with this question, though again we rely on traditional readings and interpretation of the Greek that may not serve the important points of this story as well.

-I normally do not remember Sunday School songs, but this one I remember pretty well: *Zacchaeus was a wee little man a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.*"

-Now, in beginning to explore the nature of interpretation a little more, let me just say as an aside how most of us throughout our childhood and adulthoods have relied on

Zaccheaus being short man (“short in stature”). The song, of course, wouldn’t work if he wasn’t short because he had to climb up in that sycamore tree! But there is a problem if you go back to the original Greek text: “short in stature” (or “mikros”) is not directly connected with Zacchaeus, in fact it is left unusually ambiguous in the sentence structure. So another honest way of translating verse three would be: “Zaccheaus was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because Jesus was short in stature.” So, is Zaccheaus or Jesus the one who is short? Again, it probably doesn’t really matter theologically if Jesus was physically short, but it does rock my Sunday School days a little bit if the Zacchaeus song is wrong! Go figure.

-But what does get a little more into our question of being a follower of Christ in or apart from the world is how verse 8 is translated. Or how it is not translated because there is an addition of a key word in English that doesn’t exist in the Greek: “will”. “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.” (verse 8) Now maybe the trusty (or not so trusty) translators had the way this story was taught to them in Sunday School and added “will” to Zaccheaus’ statement because most of us think that this is a statement of repentance. O God, now I see the light, you are sitting in my house and forgiving me for being a lousy, rich, conniving tax collector and so I repent of my sins and *will start* to give these things away in the future. But what if that view that Zacchaeus is repenting from some sin is wrong? A more accurate reading of verse 8 should be: Moreover, standing there, Zacchaeus said to the Lord: ‘Look, I give half of my possessions to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it to them fourfold.’ He’s not giving a repentance, he’s giving a statement of defense. Look Jesus, I am *already* doing this. To this statement Jesus says: “Today, salvation has come to this house because here too is a follower of Abraham.”

-In reflecting on this text this week, what I have come to find so interesting is that in our traditional way of learning and viewing this story, we actually are putting ourselves into “ the crowd” who “began to grumble.”(verse 7) It’s like Jesus going to eat with a banker, stock trader, weapons scientist, or Big Oil executive. They must be sinners! So it’s only logical that they repent before Jesus and everything is good. So what does this say when they don’t repent, but instead give a defense?

-We talk about a traditional tithe being 10%. Well, Zacchaeus gives 50%! Stringent Jewish law says that if you have ever cheated someone, you give that person back double of what you cheated them. Zacchaeus gives *quadruple*. Here is a man who goes far above and beyond the widely held ethical practices. Zaccheaus, it seems, is a model of what it means to be an ethical and fair person.....and he’s a tax collector.

Implication: Where is love and grace in your life?

-Which brings me back to my marveling of the monks on that isolated peninsula called Mount Athos. How could we ever be as good, devoted, virtuous, and faithful as these monks who separate themselves from the world? What Zacchaeus shows, I think, is that this “rating system” is thrown out the window. Jesus doesn’t tell Zacchaeus: “Wow, that’s great! Now if you want to be even better, quit your tax collector job, pack up your bags, say goodbye to the broken world, and move to Mount Athos.” Instead he says: “Here too is a faithful believer.”

-Nothing against the monks at Mount Athos, because I do think their mission is worthy, but 99% of us are never going to be like that and that’s OK. We are going to continue to work as pastors, lawyers, realtors, farmer, ranchers, and teachers. Some of us even the reviled bankers, coal and big oil execs, or stock traders. Most of us are going to participate in a world that is broken and unjust.

-But what the story of Zacchaeus can mean for all of us is that we can do these things *and* be faithful followers of Christ.

-This is what the Reformation was all about! Martin Luther was once approached by a man who enthusiastically announced that he’d recently become a Christian. Wanting desperately to serve the God, he asked Luther, “What should I do now?” As if to say, should he become a minister or perhaps a traveling evangelist. A monk, perhaps. Luther asked him, “What is your work now?” “I’m a cobbler.” (shoemaker) Much to the cobbler’s surprise, Luther replied, “Then make a good shoes, and sell it at a fair price.” All of us are proclaimers of the Gospel (“priesthood of all believers”). What Martin Luther and the Reformation that we celebrate today did was point out the fact that the shoemaker can preach the teachings of Jesus Christ just as well as a priest. A tax collector, can even teach us a thing or two about following Christ.

-All people, through finding the love and grace of God in their own contexts can point to where God is at. So, the challenge becomes for us: where is God’s love and grace in your life? How can we learn from Zacchaeus and do the best we can?

-Fred (my father -in-law) has been building us a shelf for our kitchen. He’s spent the whole week thinking, measuring, and designing it to fit perfectly on this one wall. Late last night, I helped him put it in our new kitchen for the first time. He looked at it and said: “you know, it’s been awhile since I have really put my best effort into something.” Sure enough there are some tweaks that need to be made, it needs a coat of finisher and he forgot to cut out a piece on the bottom so the shelf fits around the house baseboard and fits snug to the wall. Since Fred is leaving today, I gave him permission to finish the shelf and not come to church. It may sound silly, but that’s church for him today.

-May all of us find that important grace and love and be able to do the best we can do, knowing we all are fully given the power and the responsibility to share Jesus Christ in this distracted world. Amen.