

### *Generation Z: A Confession*

I've always wondered what Jesus said to Zacchaeus during their visit recorded in Luke 19. Whatever it was must have been good, because Zacchaeus got excited. "Look Lord," he said, "half my possessions I give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I will pay back four times as much." Jesus' response was simple and joyful. "Today salvation has come to this house."

I bet Zacchaeus was even more excited after that.

But what if Zacchaeus had said "no" to Jesus? What if Zacchaeus kept on defrauding people until he died, and then left his wealth as an inheritance to his children? And then...what if Jesus had dropped in to visit Zacchaeus' children after their father's funeral?

Would Jesus have said, "Look, your father accumulated some of his wealth through unjust means. I told him how he and his household could be saved from this sin, but he refused to repent. But don't you worry about all that. By inheriting unjust wealth it is cleansed of the fraud by which it was acquired. Enjoy your good fortune."

Or might Jesus have let the children know that his continuing invitation to salvation involved their use of some portion of the inheritance to set right Zacchaeus' wrong doing? Might Jesus have told them that true reconciliation with their father's victims required they produce fruits in keeping with repentance?

I'm guessing the latter. I'm guessing Jesus would have invited Zacchaeus' children to offer reparations to their father's victims. Moreover, I'm guessing that if the ill-gotten wealth was passed down to the next generation, Jesus would have offered the same invitation to Zacchaeus' grandchildren as well.

At no point do I imagine Jesus saying to a member of Zacchaeus' family, "We both know some of your fortune comes as the result of fraud, but don't let that trouble you. Your awareness of Zacchaeus' misdeeds doesn't make you responsible in any way. Live it up! Today salvation has come to this house."

I can't see it. When ill-gotten resources fall into the hands of an innocent person, that person does not become responsible for their benefactor's fraud or injustice. However when a Christian becomes aware they are the beneficiaries of prior wrongdoing it certainly becomes their responsibility to do what they can to set things right. Neither Jesus, nor common sense, could allow them to ignore their legacy or offer them cheap grace.

Moreover, instead of grudging reparations that only do justice, Jesus calls his followers to the irrational joy of generosity that surpasses justice. Jesus, as the embodiment of God's justice-surpassing generosity (a.k.a. grace), incites Zacchaeus to go beyond justice and joyfully give half of his possessions to the poor!

Of course, as a white American, Jesus' invitation is both an opportunity for joy and a big headache for me. After all, it requires little education in United States history to realize white Americans are generally the beneficiaries of at least two monumental injustices. First, this land I live on was often taken from the Native Americans by means of broken promises and military force. Second, African men, women, and children were brutally enslaved in order to provide cheap labor for many of the new landholders. Unsurprisingly our secular government has never even offered a formal apology for these abuses. But, as a Christian, I live with an awareness of needing to seek to make right the reality that some inestimable, but not insignificant, portion of my resources are the legacy of these injustices. I'm hereby not overlooking the significant part of my resources that are the result of generations of hard work and thrift, nor am I seeking to grovel in disabling white guilt, instead I'm trusting that amidst the struggle with these truths Jesus will set me free. Like he did Zacchaeus.

So I've taken to recognizing myself as "The Child of an Unrepentant Zacchaeus."

This is the third phase of my adult scriptural self-identity. For years I sought to follow Jesus while only giving out of my abundance (Luke 21:1-4). Then growing awareness of Jesus' message about caring for the least of these led briefly to my heroic identity as a good Samaritan intervening to save the day (Luke 10:25-37). Now Zacchaeus has helped me recognize that part of why I get to play Good Samaritan is because my forbearers were such efficient robbers. It has been humbling to embrace this more honest identity and struggle with what it means for me.

Like an unrepentant Zacchaeus, white Americans – our parents and grandparents, and their parents and grandparents – generally turned away from the complex costs of reparations. They, and I suspect we as well, often feared Jesus' invitation to conversation. As much as we want to hear Jesus say, "Salvation has come to this house", we resist wrestling with the origins of some portion of our resources.

This legacy of resisting Jesus now falls to this generation. Will we pass it to another? Will we ignore what we know to be true? Will we act as if it is only government's responsibility to apologize, rather than wrestling with personal repentance and reparations? Will we continue to build upon these foundational injustices by enjoying new luxuries provided largely by the exploitation of people and resources in totalitarian nations?

Still I look around our home and find I am unrepentant. Like those who came before me, I daily choose to treat the privileges and resources I have inherited as though they were entirely untainted by my nation's original sins. I carelessly enjoy the endless array of cheap consumer goods produced by the victims of oppressive governments to whom we've outsourced slavery. I overlook unfair labor practices if they make my stock portfolio rise. I prefer discussing racial reconciliation and urban poverty exclusively in the legitimate terms of personal responsibility while setting aside the consequences of these legacies. I want to walk with Jesus today while holding on to unjust privileges the past affords me.

But then I remember. I remember Zacchaeus did repent, and I remember he celebrated his salvation with Jesus.

I want that too.

Jesus, please show me the way.

*- Josh Kaufman-Horner*