

Luke 18:18-23 (New Revised Standard Version)

A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You 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.'" He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." When 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." But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich.

Luke 19:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

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

Today is Reformation Sunday, the day when we remember and celebrate
Martin Luther's attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church,
by nailing 95 thesis or topics he intended for discussion
to the doors of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Saxony.

At issue, at stake was the question of what does God want from us?

Is salvation a free gift of grace, or are good works also required?

In Luke 18, a certain ruler asks Jesus a similar question, vs. 18.

"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Am I doing the right things, and what must I do
to earn & deserve, so that I achieve eternal life?

There is a subtle and ironic twist to that question... because,

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will be crucified.

He was on his way to suffer & die, to provide eternal life

as God's gracious and costly **free gift to sinners**.

In the original Greek, the emphasis is on the word, "I",

so the man is asking very specifically, what must **I** do to inherit?

But Jesus goes much deeper by challenging him, vs. 18~20

Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments... and he replied, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

This is a righteous man who has tried to be faithful to God.

But deep down he's not certain that his good works are enough.

The best way to describe the something more that he senses as missing,

is the Hebrew word for soul or inner-spirit, the word "**nephesh**".

Nephesh is the internal essence of the person God created.

It is who we are. It is the God-given and God-breathed part.

It is our innermost self, our passion and living-truth.

Nephesh is that which longs for and hungers after God,

as we sang earlier based on Psalm 42, *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.*

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

This rich ruler in Luke has a longing, a hunger in his nephesh.

And for this man Jesus sees and recognizes his particular problem,

as Jesus reveals what his soul or inner-spirit was lacking, vs. 22-23

Jesus 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." But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich.

That is the heart of this text and the point of this story.

It's not about his external righteousness or the good he does,

or even **if he** had given away his wealth to the poor **or not**.

The issue was the health of his nephesh and his true sense of self.

What does he really trust, how does he determine value and worth?

According to both Matthew and Mark, the man walked away grieving.

It's an instance where someone intentionally walks away & rejects

a personal invitation to come and follow that came from Jesus...

... because **at this point, this man's possessions, possessed him.**

Luke 18 doesn't specify that this man was extraordinarily rich,

it's just that he has more than he's willing to give up,

or to trust that in Christ, God will always provide.

This text also directs us as readers, to consider **how we'd respond,**

and would we be willing to trust and obey, or is something

blocking the flow of grace and our relationship with God?

Our lives can be so packed and over-filled with so many distractions,

that our stuff & our desires, all that baggage **so absorbs our life,**

that our inner lives, our nephesh hungers with a longing

that **receives too little care, feeding and attention.**

We all struggle to be faithful against our favorite temptations,

and particular areas of weakness & failure that we often don't see.

And so in that quiet place of our hearts & innermost self, Jesus asks,
what do you love, what is nearer and dearer and more to you than me?
What do I most fear or refuse to give up and submit to the Lord?,
for this will probably be among our toughest spiritual battles.

It is a question of priority -- who or what will be the God I serve?
Idolatry is not just bowing down to a graven image or to a statue.
It is whenever we place **anything** before God in our lives,
and it can be anything that matters more to us than the Lord.

In our world and in our lives,
there are many other voices that seek our attention and loyalty.
We are always under pressure from our world and busy demanding lives
to compromise on integrity, commitment and loyalty to God alone,
for we cannot serve the Lord truly and compromise with the world.

**This is a stark and radical and challenging story, as Jesus
allows this man sadly walk away his choice, by his own free will.**

And so too, our walk with God is about making our choices & decisions
to believe, to accept the gift God has promised, --- **or to reject.**

We decide, one way or the other, and God accepts the choice we make.
But what God does not allow is a safe middle ground of undecided.
Either we take God and God's word seriously, or we do not.

Today we also read a second and contrasting story, also from Luke,
about Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector who wants to see Jesus ---
-- and though he might not have known at the time, I believe,
it was his desire and longing to feed his hungry nephesh.

This is really a miracle story, as when passing through Jericho,
Jesus encountered Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector,
a most lucrative job that made him very rich and despised.

The Roman tax system was set up to collect tribute as conquerors.
It was intended to crush and oppress the people through taxation
and by using the greed of the locals to do Rome's dirty work.

To their neighbors, tax collectors were hopelessly lost,
and were written off as those who could never possibly change,
and surely way beyond and outside even the grace of God.
So it's a surprise that for some reason, Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus.

It was the grace of God that first put that desire in his heart,
that caused Zacchaeus to recognize the black hole of his greed
and that he felt the downward tug of materialism on his life.

Zacchaeus, a short *wee-little* man was unable to see over the crowd,
and so he runs ahead, climbs a tree so he can watch Jesus pass by.

I imagine that the sight of Zacchaeus running and climbing a tree
would have caused considerable ridicule among the crowd,
but also indicates how desperately he longed to see Jesus...
... the insatiable desire of his nephesh.

One would expect that a religious teacher, a man of God like Jesus

to ignore, certainly not acknowledge a man so enriched by corruption
for Jesus would hardly condone such avarice and greed.

So like the crowd, we are surprised by what follows in the story, vs. 5

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"

How could Jesus so honor
this most dishonorable and despised man in all of Jericho?

How could Jesus possibly share a meal with such a notorious traitor,
such a greedy & godless man that they all knew was hopelessly lost?

But Jesus saw something more, possibilities that no one else did,
something other than the sinful and wrongful choices of Zacchaeus.

The person Jesus saw was not just a greedy sinful outcast,
but someone who **could respond** to God's transforming grace.

So Jesus invited by offering new possibilities of grace and miracle.
Yes, you can make a new start and have another second chance.
Yes, you can step beyond the life-limits you have chosen.
Yes, you can move beyond your corrupt and selfish past.

Starting now, today you can change and you can do the right thing.

In the presence of Jesus, Zacchaeus re-evaluates his whole life,
and decides he wants a better, more faithful life, a new destiny.

He responds to Jesus, and by grace becomes a new person, vs. 8

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."

For Zacchaeus, receiving God's grace through Jesus Christ
meant responding by turning away from the sins of his past.

A grace redeemed life means having a new set of priorities in life.

He has a new priority - he wants to live within God's law & intentions.
Zacchaeus now wants to participate in the work and purposes of God,
and so to glorify God, he puts his money where his mouth is.

He wasn't ordered or compelled by Jesus to sacrifice his wealth,
but simply wants his wealth to accomplish good, in gratitude to God,
and to demonstrate before all that God had truly changed his life.

It's a miracle for Jesus has set a man free from greed to generosity.

This man who used to care more about money, than his neighbors,
who for wealth, turned against both God and his community, --
now, voluntarily gives it all up in gratitude to Jesus.

In response to this obvious change in Zacchaeus, Jesus explains, vs. 9.

"Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.
By grace, Zacchaeus is restored to live as who he truly is,
a Son of Abraham, precious and loved by God, and called to respond.

Against all human expectations, he has been found and saved by Jesus.

vs. 10 "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Indeed, perhaps the very reason Jesus came through Jericho,
was to seek and save the lost by turning a rich man's heart.

Since God's grace is real, and God's word and promises are truth,
then are we not also challenged to feed the longings of **our nephesh**,
and are we not also called to an appropriate response to grace,
in contrast to that certain rich ruler who sadly walked away,
for either God is the priority in our lives, or God is not.

Today, to move things a little closer and get a bit more personal,
are you satisfied with your faith & your journey with the Lord? ...
... and more importantly, do you think that God is satisfied?
Thinking about your choices and the things you most value in life,
are they taking you in the direction that you really want to go?

I believe that from our shared struggles and losses through Covid,
we may have grown a bit lax and complacent in our faith practices,
maybe too willing to sit back, isolate and play at the edge -

--- but we can do better, for we've got to rebuild what we have lost,
and I believe that God is calling for much more from each of us.
So will you join me **in taking up a personal challenge?**

I challenge us for the next few months that we each commit ourselves
to doing everything we can to grow deeper and closer in Christ,
by making **every decision** toward improving and strengthening
our walk of faith, active service and feeding our nephesh,
for the rebuild of 1st Pres. begins **from within each of us.**

The brighter future that we desire and hope for this church-family
will not come about just through fancy new church programs,
but through the deepening of our faith in response to God's grace,
as we are called, inspired, guided & equipped by the Holy Spirit.

To that end, let me give you a short list, nothing spectacular,
just a few specific things that I believe will make a difference,
habits of the heart that can help feed and nurture a nephesh.

1st Make prayer an on-going priority, listening and speaking to God,
so that before your feet hit the floor in the morning,
thank God for the for the night's rest and for the new day.
Then throughout the day be in regular conversation with God
as through gratitude, we notice & appreciate God's blessings.

Pray for God to guide, bless & equip us toward renewal and rebuilding.

2nd Try to read at least a chapter of Scripture each day,
which becomes a place for quiet reflection and contemplation,
for our human soul to rest and to listen and to wait upon God.
I have frequently found that the helpful insight I most need
will come from a Bible text that I have most recently read.

3rd Set aside deliberate time and space to wait- to delay in silence.
Just pause & be still, and waste a little time alone with God,
for our lives get packed with schedules and activities,
so just stop, refresh and let your nephesh catch up.

4th I don't know exactly what it is for you, you'll have to ask God.
Ask God to reveal what you specifically and maybe uniquely
can offer, give and provide toward rebuilding our church.

This is by no means a complete list, but it's a start.

And it isn't about what we can restore or accomplish on our own.

It is about how we choose to receive & respond to God's gift of grace.

It's about trying to recognize and face the obstacles
that are blocking our faith and our walk with Jesus,

**for the growth, renewal and rebuilding of 1st Pres. will only be
by God's grace alone and the Spirit's good work within each of us.**

Our call, as we are promised and reminded in Jeremiah 29:11-13

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, **to give you a future with hope.**

Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; **if you seek me with all your heart.**