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Zacchaeus Effects and Ethics of the Spirit

ROBERT B. SLOCUM*

Effects and ethics of the Holy Spirit today can be described in terms of the themes of abundance, hope and community in the story of Zacchaeus. The Gospel of Luke (19:1–11) records that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, and rich. He was an outcast, and isolated from those around him by the shameful behavior that built up his fortune while keeping others weak and poor and subjugated to the ruling authority. In the world of his day, Zacchaeus would have been scorned and resented for the abuses of power that made him wealthy. For all his riches, Zacchaeus may have lived with a perspective of scarcity, haunted by the fear that there would never be enough for him. In a world of limitation and not enough, it seemed that he had to look out for himself—even at the expense of the poor and helpless.

Abundance

Things began to change for Zacchaeus when Jesus entered Jericho. Seeing Jesus meant a change of perspective for him. In specific, tangible terms, it was physically necessary for Zacchaeus to change his place of perspective to see Jesus. He was short in stature, so he had to climb a tree to see Jesus as he arrived. More importantly, Jesus' visit to his home made it possible for him to move from a perspective of scarcity to one of abundance. It was an expression of incredible generosity for Jesus to visit the shunned tax collector, and it caused no little scandal in the community.¹

People grumbled that Jesus had "gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." But through this visit Zacchaeus realized the nearness and abundance of God's forgiveness, and he responded with enormous generosity of his own. Jesus' visit set Zacchaeus free from his past and

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¹ For a helpful discussion of Jesus' "scandalous" ministry of reconciliation relative to the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), see Arthur A. Vogel, *Radical Christianity and the Flesh of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 66–68 (Chapter 5, "The Scandal of Mercy").

healed him. Zacchaeus's neighbors didn't want his sinful past to be overlooked, but he came away from this moment with a new life. He would give half of his possessions to the poor, and pay back four times anyone he had defrauded.

Perspectives of scarcity and abundance can dominate our lives as well. From the perspective of scarcity, there's never enough. Not enough time, not enough money, not enough energy, not enough life. Scarcity leads to grasping, overprotection, and hoarding. It is a perspective of fear and great insecurity. There may be money in the bank, and investments in the portfolio—but the money may be devalued by inflation, and the stock market may crash. Instead of bringing assurance, having more things can mean even greater anxiety. Maybe someone is taking something, maybe an investment is going bad, maybe a partner is seeking an unfair share. As the Scripture warns, moth and rust do corrupt, and thieves do break in and steal.² It could all be gone tomorrow! So the tendency is to seek even more. Perhaps it was that way for Zacchaeus, who seems to have been defrauding people even after he became rich.

Of course, the ultimate perspective of scarcity concerns life itself. We are finite and limited. Many people want more life than they can have, or they want to live a life that is not possible. When they can't hold on to a time of life, or a way of life, or life itself, they try holding on to other things. The grip can tighten as time seems to be passing even faster, with more and more of life slipping away. If only possessions could wall out the changes and the losses! Not too long ago, the maker of a popular luxury automobile promised in an advertisement that "this car will save your soul." Sadly, the luxury car will not save the soul or change the basic terms of mortal existence. But the temptation still beckons—save your own soul, save your own life, get what you need, keep it for yourself. Zacchaeus probably believed that he really needed every coin that he could get his hands on, and he was looking for more. Until Jesus came to him.

Zacchaeus found new life beyond himself in Jesus. In this renewal and conversion, he didn't have to save himself any more. He didn't need to stockpile his resources, or depend on them for hope. He found a different kind of life and a different source of life. Jesus' visit to his home meant a new future for him. As Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house." However, for us, unlike Zacchaeus and

² See Matthew 6:19–20; Luke 12:33.

his contemporaries, it will not be possible to see Jesus walking into town or sitting down at our dinner table. For us, the abundance of Jesus' presence and forgiveness is made available by the Holy Spirit. As noted by the English theologian R. C. Moberly (1845–1903), "to have the Spirit is to have the Son."³ Or, as stated by the Episcopal theologian William Porcher DuBose (1836–1918), "All God's operations in us as spiritual beings are by the word through the spirit."⁴

The answer for us is not found in grasping at additions to shore up our situation, because our situation is not going to be fundamentally changed by more money or fame or personal power. All those things will still leave us in scarcity, and we know it, prompting us to reach out for even more of the same. As Augustine said, our hearts are restless until they rest in God.⁵ Nothing less than God will fill the place where God belongs. By the Spirit, we can begin to know the abundance of God's life.

Hope

In all kinds of ways, people seek life and meaning from their "god," and worship the source of their hope. The things less than God that we worship become idols, and our attempts to draw life and meaning from them will prove frustrating.⁶ But it may be difficult to

³ R. C. Moberly, *Atonement and Personality* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1905), pp. 168–169.

⁴ William Porcher DuBose, *The Soteriology of the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1892), p. 56. For a discussion of DuBose's pneumatology, see Robert Boak Slocum, *The Theology of William Porcher DuBose: Life, Movement, and Being* (Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 74–82.

⁵ See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961), 21 [I, 1].

⁶ William Stringfellow and James E. Griffiss both explore the question of idols relative to the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13). Stringfellow understands all idolatry in terms of succumbing to the claims and temptations of death. See Stringfellow's books *Free in Obedience* (New York: Seabury, 1964), p. 35; *Instead of Death* (New and Expanded Edition) (New York: Seabury, 1976), pp. 109–110; and *Count It All Joy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 86–88. For a further discussion of Stringfellow, see Robert Boak Slocum, "William Stringfellow and the Christian Witness Against Death," *Anglican Theological Review* 77:2 (Spring, 1995), pp. 173–186 and Robert Boak Slocum, ed., *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life: Essays on William Stringfellow* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1997). See also the section "Meditations on the Idols of our Temptation" in James E. Griffiss, *A Silent Path to God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 87–108.

let go of the focus of our hope and attention, even when it has repeatedly proven itself to be dry and sterile. A faulty source of hope can seem much better than no hope at all. We resist being empty-handed because it brings us face-to-face with our vulnerability. The assurance of Jesus' presence in our lives makes it possible for us to let go of false hopes. In Jesus' presence, Zacchaeus changed a way of life that was killing him and hurting others. He would no longer put his hope in getting more money and power over other people, and he let go of those idols. He turned from death to life.

Zacchaeus found peace and confidence in Jesus. He suddenly discovered that he could "afford" to be generous. Giving has so much more to do with assurance and inner abundance than wealth. The widow who gave all the money she had to the temple treasury knew about inner assurance and abundance.⁷ Those who have seen parish finances from the inside know that the most generous people are not always the most wealthy. A person with disposable assets may want to keep it all for himself or herself, may not want to let go of any of it, and may actually be anxious about what will happen if too much gets away. Zacchaeus was wealthy before Jesus ever appeared to him, but Jesus' presence made the money available to Zacchaeus for sharing. Instead of anxious scarcity, Zacchaeus came to know the abundance of hope.

James DeKoven (1831–1879) once preached a sermon titled "Gathering Up the Fragments," saying, "The Gospel for the day tells of something still that can be done, even for a wasted life, saying, 'Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.' The fragments of a life, beloved! The broken pieces of a mighty whole—they

⁷ See Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4.

⁸ James DeKoven, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions* (New York, 1880), p. 314 ["Gathering Up the Fragments," preached at Racine College, the last Sunday after Trinity, 1878]. In the Gospel of John (6:1–14), after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, Jesus directed the disciples to "Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost." DeKoven was dead within four months of preaching this sermon. For a further discussion of DeKoven, see Robert B. Slocum, "Romantic Religion in Wisconsin: James DeKoven and Charles C. Grafton," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 65:1 (March, 1996), pp. 82–111, pp. 82–96.

⁹ DeKoven was at the center of the churchmanship controversies in the 1870s. He pleaded convincingly for comprehensiveness in doctrine and worship at the General Conventions of 1871 and 1874. DeKoven was elected to be Bishop of Illinois in 1875, but his election was not confirmed by the necessary number of diocesan standing committees in the Episcopal Church. His doctrine of the eucharist was questioned. DeKoven's life is commemorated in the Episcopal Calendar of the Church Year on March 22.

may be gathered up again.”⁸ DeKoven’s own life certainly took some unexpected turns, and at times he may well have wondered about its meaning and value.⁹ But he knew that in Christ the broken fragments of a life are taken up and drawn into a greater whole, so that nothing is lost. The change of perspective is from despair to hope, from fragments to integration. At times we may seem to be at a dead end, without hope or direction. This can lead to discouragement and apathy. We feel that we can’t make a difference—not in the world, not in our relationships, not in our own lives. We can give in to inertia, even just the inertia of routine and business as usual. Zacchaeus could well have rationalized his greed and fraud by saying, “Everybody’s doing it, why not me?” Without hope, there’s little incentive for change, and limited openness to the future. People who experience this despair can be very dangerous to themselves, and others.

Hope and direction come from beyond ourselves. Zacchaeus saw something new for him when he climbed the sycamore tree and beheld Jesus walking into his world. Jürgen Moltmann offers a moving personal narrative about the movement from despair to hope in *The Source of Life*.¹⁰ He had been a German soldier in the last days of World War II, and he was subsequently a prisoner of war. In confinement he faced the horror of the evil he had not realized he was supporting, and the meaninglessness of the sacrifice of many in his generation. He faced searing memories of combat, including the death of a friend standing next to him in a blast that left Moltmann unharmed. But something very unexpected happened to Moltmann as a prisoner. He came to know forgiveness and hope for the future. Dutch students came from a country that had been torn apart by Moltmann’s Germany to offer forgiveness in Christ to the German prisoners. In many ways, Moltmann discovered that Christ’s loving presence can touch even the broken and outcast. It meant a new life for him.

Hope, openness to the future, and surprise are closely related. It was a surprise for Moltmann to discover Christ’s presence for forgiveness and renewal in a prisoner-of-war camp. Clearly, since he introduces a book on the theology of the Holy Spirit with this story, he understands this to be the work of the Spirit. Indeed, the Spirit is the

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life, The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 1–9. I have used this book as a text for teaching an undergraduate course in theology of the Holy Spirit at Marquette University, and it has served as a theological starting point for this essay.

¹¹ See, e.g., The Nicene Creed in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 358.

surprising person of the Trinity. Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that was certainly surprising.¹¹ It is precarious for us to circumscribe what God can do in our world and in our lives. Faith (not diplomacy) is the art of the possible, including the surprisingly possible. As Robert Cooper notes, we may find ourselves to be overtaken by "God as surprise," who "appears among us and acts among us as One who puts life out of human control."¹² We must not wall out the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in our lives, with all its unexpected implications.

For Zacchaeus, the forgiving presence of Jesus in his home was a wonderful surprise, and it led to Zacchaeus's most unexpected generosity to the poor and the victims of his past greed. After this episode, other tax collectors may well have shaken their heads and concluded with regret that Zacchaeus was utterly out of control. And they would have been right. He quit trying to control his own future and guarantee his own security. Zacchaeus quit trying to save himself with his acquisitions and power. He let Jesus in, and opened the door to a new future and a new world that was not under his control. It would be a future with less money in his accounts, but it would be a future with hope. It must have been a joyous moment when Zacchaeus discovered his ability to give.

To sin against the Holy Spirit is the unforgivable sin.¹³ But what does that mean? We can understand this sin as rejecting or blocking the means of forgiveness, whereby Christ's saving presence is locked out from our lives and needs. Zacchaeus could have barred the door to his house when Jesus drew near, thus preventing all that was to happen inside. In this regard, our attitude of openness to the Spirit is most important, because the Spirit will not force us to receive life, love or forgiveness against our will. Freedom is essential for real participation in any relationship of love, and the Spirit respects our otherness. Jesus would never have broken down the door to Zacchaeus's house.

To sin against the Holy Spirit is to sin against hope and the future. Michael Ramsey discusses this sin as "'an *aeonian* sin'—a sin relating to the aeon to come."¹⁴ We are on the frontier of the coming kingdom

¹² Robert M. Cooper, "The Fantasy of Control," *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 33 (September, 1990): pp. 259–269, p. 269. The word surprise is from the French, *surpris*, overtaken (pp. 264–265).

¹³ See Matthew 12:31–32; Mark 3:28–29; Luke 12:10.

¹⁴ Michael Ramsey, *Holy Spirit, A Biblical Study* (Boston, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1992), p. 30 [first published, 1977].

of God as we are led by the Spirit in the way of forgiveness, renewal and hope. We are awakened by God's future in us, and enabled to live new lives. Like Zacchaeus, we may abandon old patterns of behavior that were harmful. We may allow ourselves to be led in unknown and unexpected directions—as the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee who accepted Jesus' invitation to follow could not have had the slightest idea *where* they were going.¹⁵ To sin against the Holy Spirit is to sin against the new future of God's life in us, and to hold at a distance the unexpected possibilities of God's invitation. To sin against the Holy Spirit is to sin against hope. Zacchaeus embraced hope when he welcomed Jesus and began a new life.

Community

Zacchaeus was lost in the isolation of his fraud and wealth before Jesus came. No one made room for him or offered to help him when the crowds gathered to see Jesus. People grumbled when Jesus came to be his guest. But Zacchaeus's conversion has everything to do with others. With Jesus, in response to his presence, Zacchaeus begins a new life of generosity and reparation. He has been called into a context of relationship and concern for people in his world. As Moltmann states, "The opposite of poverty isn't property. The opposite of both poverty and property is community."¹⁶ Zacchaeus found surprising new wealth in relationship, even as he discovered himself able to share with others in need and those he had harmed. In community, it is not necessary or good for one person to do everything. It was different when Zacchaeus was alone, and had to be the only one watching out for himself. Who would help a dishonest chief tax collector? Jesus' presence restored him to community, and to a way of life that would show concern for others in community.

It is easy to imagine that Zacchaeus's new life was celebrated by a feast, with others present to rejoice that salvation had come to his house that day. When we eat together, we celebrate the community and the food that sustain us. As in the parable of the prodigal son, the

¹⁵ See Matthew 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11.

¹⁶ Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, p. 109.

¹⁷ See Eucharistic Prayer D, Book of Common Prayer, p. 374.

reconciliation of the lost is worthy of a feast. By the Spirit, we share that feast of new life and reconciliation in every Eucharist, as we receive the Spirit who completes God's work in the world and brings to fulfillment the sanctification of all.¹⁷ Our fulfillment is made possible by the Spirit in the context of community, because we are social beings who cannot realize ourselves in isolation.¹⁸

The community of the Spirit draws us into a relationship of respect with others and all creation. The closeness of Jesus' relationship with God the Father was expressed when he prayed to his "Abba," which we may translate with the familiar and loving sense of "Daddy."¹⁹ We are to share this loving union of Jesus and his Abba.²⁰ By the Spirit, we are made sons and daughters of God and heirs of God's kingdom.²¹ Indeed, by the Spirit we are drawn into the Trinity's own dynamic community of love and unity, even as we continue in the distinctness of our own personhood. But there are responsibilities that come with this wonderful relationship of love. If we claim God as our Abba, we are brothers and sisters who share the same loving parent. We find ourselves in community with many others who were created and are loved by the same God who created and loves us. The Spirit is manifest in the "*koinonia* of ourselves with God in Christ."²² The Spirit that binds us together is the principle of unity in the Church, and the basis of the Church's vitality.²³

¹⁸ See Charles Gore, "The Holy Spirit and Inspiration," in *Lux Mundi, A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation, Twelfth Edition*, ed. Charles Gore (London: John Murray, 1902), pp. 230–266, p. 243 [first published 1889].

¹⁹ See Mark 14:36.

²⁰ See John 17, in which Jesus prays for those who come to believe in him through the disciples, "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).

²¹ See Galatians 4:6–7, "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God." See also Romans 8:14–17.

²² William Porcher DuBose, *The Reason of Life* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1911), p. 149.

²³ Gore draws on Thomas Aquinas to state that his belief "*in the Holy Catholic Church*" means "*I believe in the Holy Spirit vivifying the Church.*" Charles Gore, *The Holy Spirit and the Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 357. He makes the same point in "The Holy Spirit and Inspiration," in *Lux Mundi*, p. 243. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981), III, 1172 (Pt. II–II, Q. 1, Art. 9).

²⁴ See the hymn by Percy Dearmer, "Draw us in the Spirit's Tether," Hymn 889, in *Cantate Domino*, compiled and edited by the Bishop's Advisory Commission on Church Music, Episcopal Diocese of Chicago (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, 1979).

As we perceive “the Spirit’s tether” that draws us together with others and the Other, we recognize our calling to relate to people as true brothers and sisters—not as objects for our agendas and ambition.²⁴ After embracing Jesus, it was no longer possible for Zacchaeus to turn a blind eye to the suffering of the poor or the hardships of the people he had cheated. When Zacchaeus began to realize God’s love for him, he could also see God’s love for others. His focus turned away from himself, and it was irresistible for him to share generously. He could no longer defraud his brothers and sisters. Of course, if we are sisters and brothers who turn in love to our one Abba, we must also realize that we are in relationship with all creation relative to the one Creator of all. As we turn to other children of God with love and respect, we should also treat the whole creation with care, and never assume that God loves only humanity in all of creation.²⁵

By the Spirit, we can know the salvation and open future that came to Zacchaeus’s house. We can receive new life and share generously as abundance replaces a perspective of scarcity, as despair gives way to hope, and as we are drawn out of isolation into community with others and all creation.

²⁵ For an interesting and provocative theology of God’s love and the relationship of humanity and animals, see Stephen H. Webb, *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).