

Love and Justice

Light + Life Group Conversation and Study Guide

Based on *Love and Justice* by Peter Chin
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The Story of Zacchaeus

Let's begin by reading from Luke, chapter 19.

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. (2) A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. (3) He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. (4) So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. (5) When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." (6) So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. (7) All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." (8) But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "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 the amount." (9) Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. (10) For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:1-10)

First Thoughts?

1. Are you new to this story or is this story very familiar to you?

2. For those that are new to the story, what are your first impressions of Zacchaeus' response to encountering Jesus?
3. Take a moment to complete this sentence and discuss it. *"This story is about: _____."*

Pray Together

Lord God, You are holy and just – righteous and full of light. In You there is no darkness. We ask for Your light to guide us as we look into Your Word. Take us deep into Your truth – take us beyond concepts into transformation and change. We declare our need for You. Holy Spirit, come and be in our gathering, helping us – teaching us – guiding us into the ways of Jesus. We pray in His holy name. Amen.

Peter Chin, the lead pastor of [Rainier Avenue Church](#) in Seattle, Washington, helps us see how love and justice are combined using this well-known passage of Scripture. As we read, we'll pause throughout to discuss his teaching.

Zacchaeus is well-known to Christians, not in small part due to the children's ditty that many of us grew up singing:

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man

And a wee little man was he.

He climbed up in a sycamore tree

For the Lord he wanted to see."

When you think about it, as children's songs go ... that is pretty accurate!

But what many of us fail to recognize is that Zacchaeus was also a force of generosity and justice. It tells us in Luke 19 that Zacchaeus had become wealthy as the chief tax collector of Jericho, a prominent city of the time with access to spring water, a priceless commodity in an arid land. Zacchaeus offers to give half of that great wealth to the poor. For comparison, the richest man in my city happens to be Jeff Bezos, the second wealthiest man in the world. If he were to give away half his wealth at this moment, that would be \$91 billion, more than the gross domestic product of most nations! Can you just imagine the transformative effect that would have upon a city?

Generosity and Justice are a "force."

1. Pause for a moment to think about how you would define generosity in your own words. Now, share your thoughts in your group? Are there any repeated thoughts or ideas that you have in common? Write those thoughts here:

2. In your group, identify a need in your community or region. Write that need here:

3. How could that need be filled with a massive release of generosity that Peter mentions? Describe the good that could come from such a generous outpouring

Let's continue reading.

Zacchaeus doesn't stop with this act of laudable generosity — he is willing to pay restitution. He tells Jesus that if he has cheated anyone out of anything (which is quite likely given that graft was common practice for tax collectors), he is willing to pay back *quadruple* the amount that was stolen. He will actively make right what he has done wrong — or in other words, he pursues justice. This is the bigger story of Zacchaeus: yes, a wee little man, who becomes a transformative force of generosity and justice in the city of Jericho.

Even as we recognize this overlooked facet of Zacchaeus, we should not lose sight of what motivated him to such acts of humility and sacrifice. It wasn't innate, as if he was born with a soft heart and predisposition toward compassion and fairness. After all, this was the same man who had unfairly amassed great wealth at the expense of others, collecting taxes on behalf of the empire that occupied his own homeland. Neither was it the disapproval and shaming of the crowd, which would have been nothing new to Zacchaeus as tax collectors were spiteful figures in that context. And I'm fairly certain it wasn't an ancient podcast or popular trend that inspired him, the ancient version of Warren Buffett's ["Giving Pledge."](#)

It was love.

Before Zacchaeus performs even one good act, Jesus extends unconditional grace and hospitality to him. He sees Zacchaeus and calls him by name, and bestows upon him the honor of hosting Israel's (and the world's) Messiah, an honor that causes Zacchaeus to come leaping out of a tree with joy. Jesus sees him! Jesus knows him by name! Even better, Jesus wants to spend time with him, a tax collector! In light of this great gift of grace, his material possessions mean nothing to him. He gives freely to the poor because he has found a treasure far greater in worth. He can admit he has done wrong because he has discovered that even when he was wrong, Jesus loved him. Instead, he wants to make things right as a means of worship and adoration. Zacchaeus' deeply sacrificial and transformative acts of generosity and justice are rooted in an even deeper source: the grace and love of Christ.

This is a perfect picture of the relationship between *love and justice* — not separate concepts that have little intersection with one another, but two aspects of one idea, two sides of a single coin. For far too long, we have falsely separated one from the other, seeing *love* as a spiritual reality and *justice* as a more concrete dynamic. One belongs firmly in the purview of the church, the other, not so much. Sadly, far too many of us have been indoctrinated to see these ideas in this way.

But the story of Zacchaeus illustrates that this is a false dichotomy, for at its best, each of these truths flows naturally into one another. *Love* naturally inspires us toward *justice* — after all, how can we *love* someone and, at the same time, be content with their maltreatment? What kind of *love* is that? *Love* also shapes our pursuit of *justice*, ensuring that the goal of justice is not retribution and punishment, but redemption. *Justice* gives our love movement and action, preventing it from becoming mere charitable sentiment and nothing more. The pursuit of *justice* requires *love*, for how can we run the long and arduous race toward *justice* without drawing from the endless wellspring of God's *love*?

Restitution, driven by love.

Studying words and their meaning is a great way to overcome our own preconceived notions.

1. One reality of our times is that words can generate deep, unsettling emotion. So let's be honest and open for a moment. When you hear the word *restitution* attached to the story of Zacchaeus, do you experience positive or negative emotions – or somewhere in between? Why?

The Greek word used for “pay back” is **apodidōmi**, and is defined as: *to give away, that is, up, over, back, etc. (in various applications): - deliver (again), give (again), (re-) pay (-ment be made), perform, recompense, render, requite, restore, reward, sell, yield*

2. How does this definition further inform your understanding of Zacchaeus' actions?
3. Discuss the layers of meaning in this word and write down any new revelation you experience regarding what Zacchaeus would mean when he said, “I will **pay back**”?

Let's continue reading.

Such a balanced and interconnected vision will not be easy to follow as we have few models to follow. The world will tell us that shame is the best motivator for righteousness in the world, that calling out and canceling those who have made mistakes will transform them into better people, even when it has failed to do that in ourselves. Sadly, this balance is sorely lacking in the church as well. The church has long looked with skepticism at any acts of justice, blithely labeling them as worldly endeavors. We have refused to lead on issues close to God's heart like racial justice, while also refusing to humbly learn from those who have taken that mantle instead.

Despite these challenges, this is our calling as well as our heritage. We are followers of Christ, who taught us that to love our neighbors is not only to think fondly of them, but to be ready to bind up their wounds at the cost of our own wealth, even if that person were considered our enemy. This calling is also our theological heritage as admirers of John Wesley and B.T. Roberts, who loved Christ so deeply, but also the poor, the slave, and the outcast.

And it is a balance that we can become better at navigating with conviction and commitment. [Rainier Avenue Church](#), a Free Methodist Church established in Seattle in 1904, has pursued a similar approach that we call “Justice and Spirituality.” Through this vision, we constantly explore and celebrate the innumerable points of connection between the classic aspects of Christian spirituality and God’s calling to justice. And over the course of years, we have discovered that these two themes, so often cast in opposition to one another, are complimentary, strengthening each other. We are finding out that with time, effort, and commitment, that we can merge these two perspectives into the greater whole that they were intended to be, and we are better for it.

Lastly, we have our God, with whom nothing is impossible. We have the Holy Spirit, who lives and breathes in us, empowering us to preach and live out the gospel in word and in deed. We have the Father, who embodies both uncompromising *justice* and unquenchable *love*. We have the Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus, whose love for humanity was not mere sentiment, but took real and concrete form in the cross. And we have one another, our Free Methodist family, born with our roots steeped in both revival and abolition, in the proclamation of freedom for our spirits and from chains at the same time. Let us cleave to these roots as we pursue *love* and *justice* together.

A Legacy Equal to Our Heritage

Peter draws our attention to our abolitionist, freedom-preaching roots at the founding of the Free Methodist Church. We are passionate about freedom! Zacchaeus, being set free by Jesus’ love and compassion for him – yet a sinner – compelled him to offer restitution to those whom he had cheated. In the personal sense, we see this as *just* – setting things right. However, many still see a disconnect between setting things right in our communities.

1. Rainier Avenue Church is actively exploring and celebrating the connections between classic Christian spirituality and God’s call to justice. Think of and discuss one way your local church could pursue a similar initiative.
2. What do you know about the history of the Free Methodist Church in terms of its active stand for justice – setting things right – in their day? Discuss what you know with one another?
3. Name one issue of injustice that we face as a society today. Should the church be involved? How so? If you answered no, why?

Close in prayer.

Lord, we accept Your call to love mercy – to embody with increasing measure the mercy you offer us and everyone else.

Lord, we accept Your call to act justly – to consider every action and thought we have – and to seek be just in all our actions and interactions we have with individuals and society as a whole.

Lord, we accept Your call to walk humbly with You – to renounce any and all arrogance or pride in us. We seek to be humble and gentle with others in the very same way You are with us.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

Peter Chin is the lead pastor of [Rainier Avenue Church](#) in Seattle, Washington, located in one of the most culturally diverse ZIP codes of the United States. A graduate of Yale University and Fuller Theological Seminary, his advocacy work in racial reconciliation has been profiled in several national news outlets, including [“CBS Sunday Morning,”](#) [The Washington Post](#), and NPR’s [“Tell Me More”](#) and [“All Things Considered.”](#) He has been a frequent contributor to [Christianity Today](#), [Relevant](#) and [Our Daily Bread](#). His first book is titled [“Blindsided by God,”](#) a memoir of his wife’s fight against cancer while pregnant with their third child. He is the husband of a courageous breast cancer survivor, and father to five wonderful children.