

## LEARNING FROM JESUS (PART II)

Let us continue to look at how Jesus interacts with different people, from those who are eager to know him to those who are eager to test him.

### THE REPENTANT TAX COLLECTOR (LUKE 19:1-10)

In this passage, we see Jesus interact with Zacchaeus, whose profession would have made him an outcast in society, even though he was rich.

<sup>1</sup> He entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup> And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. <sup>3</sup> And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. <sup>4</sup> So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. <sup>5</sup> And 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.” <sup>6</sup> So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. <sup>7</sup> And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” <sup>8</sup> And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” <sup>9</sup> And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:1-10)

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, headed to the cross. Before he makes his “triumphal entry,” he passes through Jericho. There, he meets Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector. In order to understand this passage, we must remember something about tax collectors. Judea was under Roman rule at this time, and the occupying force levied various taxes on the Jews. The Romans imposed a land tax, which required farmers to pay about ten percent of the produce of the land to Rome. Residents of Jerusalem had to pay a house tax and a city sales tax. A head tax was paid each year, so that each person had to pay one denarius (a day’s wage) per year (see Matt. 22:19-21). In addition, a customs tax was collected on goods transported through ports or cities.<sup>1</sup>

Rome collected these taxes through Jewish leaders (the land and head taxes) and “tax farmers,” the tax collectors we read of in the Gospels. “In this tax-farming system Rome received its money in advance, and the tax farmer made his living from commissions on tolls and customs.”<sup>2</sup> Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, which meant that he supervised other tax collectors, who made their living from collecting taxes for Rome. These tax collectors collected the customs tax, which meant they would stop travelers and demand a portion of their goods.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas E. Schmidt, “Taxes,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 804-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 805.

The tax collectors made a commission of the customs taxes collected, and whole institution seemed to breed dishonesty. “To stop people on the road and demand a portion of their goods certainly appeared to be institutionalized robbery, and the only apparent beneficiary was the tax farmer himself. Although the commission system was regulated, the power of the assessor to determine the value of some goods encouraged dishonesty.”<sup>3</sup> The rabbis regarded tax collectors as unclean.

Tax collectors were also hated because they represented Rome. Jewish tax collectors like Zacchaeus and Matthew (see Matt. 9:9-10) were seen as traitors, because they were making money by cooperating with the enemy. To understand this situation, it might be helpful for us Americans to imagine our country being invaded by foreigners (perhaps the Chinese or some group of Muslims), and then to imagine that a certain group of Americans helped those foreign occupiers collect taxes for their own government. We might naturally hate any Americans who helped a foreign government subjugate our country.

Zacchaeus, though rich, was considered unclean and a traitor. As we will see, he made his money through unrighteous means. Yet Jesus invites himself to the tax collector’s house.

Perhaps Jesus invites himself to eat dinner with Zacchaeus because the tax collector shows such an interest in seeing the Nazarene. Because Zacchaeus is short, he climbs a sycamore tree to see Jesus. In so doing, he is willing to look rather undignified, acting more like a boy than a wealthy and powerful man. Jesus sees this man’s enthusiasm and responds by calling him out of the tree, by name. Once again, Jesus shows his supernatural knowledge.

Jesus tells Zacchaeus, “I must stay at your house today.” Surely, this is because this meeting between the Messiah and the tax collector is divinely ordained. The command to Zacchaeus demonstrates Jesus’ authority. Although it might seem odd or presumptuous, Zacchaeus is glad to comply with Jesus’ wishes.

We should note the obvious: Jesus is willing to go into the tax collector’s house to stay with him. According to the customs of the day, this would make Jesus unclean. “Jesus is making himself socially, ritually, morally, and religiously unclean by going to Zacchaeus’s home. He is polluting himself just as if he had gone to the house of a Samaritan or a Gentile.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus is not breaking God’s law, of course, but he is going against the customs of his day.

Jesus’ decision to stay with Zacchaeus elicits grumbling from the crowd. This grumbling reminds us of Luke 15:2: “And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables about the “lost”: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (or prodigal) son. In context, the message is clear: Jesus came to save the lost, the “tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 15:1). The Pharisees and scribes are likened to the older brother of the third parable. Will they rejoice that the lost have been found, or will they remain outside the party, stewing in their self-righteous, self-justifying attitudes?

The grumbling also reminds us of those faithless Israelites who grumbled after being redeemed out of Egypt. Of these people, Moses spoke: “They have dealt corruptly with him;

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 806.

<sup>4</sup> Jerram Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 87.

they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation” (Deut. 32:5). Paul alludes to this verse and to grumbling in Philippians 2:14-15. Christians are to avoid all grumbling in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation of people who reject God. Luke is subtly telling us that those who are complaining about Jesus’ association with sinners are those who are not actually part of the family of God.

Jesus does not respond to the crowd. Rather, he is glad to spend time with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus’s response to Jesus indicates that he now has faith. He is willing to repent of his dishonest ways. He is now willing to give half of his goods to the poor and repay (fourfold!) anyone whom he has defrauded. He is not commanded to do such things, but he chooses to out of a changed and grateful heart. In fact, the Old Testament law only required that the guilty party repay the full amount, plus twenty percent (Lev. 6:5; Num. 5:6-7), though Exodus 22:1 and 2 Samuel 12:6 provide a precedent for paying back the victim fourfold.

Jesus’ response to Zacchaeus’s repentance tells us that the tax collector is indeed saved. He is a “son of Abraham.” Of course, Zacchaeus was already a Jew, but now he has faith. Like Abraham, Zacchaeus is accounted righteous because of his faith (see Gen. 15:6). Abraham is the father of all who believe—both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 4:11-12; Gal. 3:7-9, 29). Jesus also gives us something of a mission statement: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (v. 10). He could be alluding to Ezekiel 34:11-16, which describes God as a shepherd who will search diligently for his people.

### **Learning from Zacchaeus**

Before we consider what we can learn from Jesus, we should think for a moment what this tax collector teaches us. He wasn’t going to let his short stature keep him from seeing Jesus. His willingness to climb a tree shows that pursuing Jesus is more valuable than having society view us as dignified. To the rest of the world, when we pursue Jesus, we look like fools.

Zacchaeus also gives us a wonderful picture of repentance. When we come to faith in Jesus, we need to confess our sins and turn from a lifestyle of sin. We should also make restitution. If we have wronged others and it is in our power to make things right, we should do so, even when it is costly.

### **Learning from Jesus**

Once again, we see Jesus willing to break human traditions in order to reach the lost. He doesn’t care about the crowd’s perception of him. He doesn’t care about manmade rules that say that “sinners” are unclean. Instead, he sees a man who is willing to learn more about him.

We, too, may come across unbelievers who show some interest in learning about Jesus. Are we willing to associate with people who are not only unbelievers, but also outcasts?

We should also notice that Jesus takes the initiative in this situation by inviting himself to Zacchaeus’s home. Now, we are not Jesus, but we should be intentional about making relationships with unbelievers. Jerram Barrs recognizes the importance of following Jesus’ example in this area. “We are to imitate Jesus by being intentional about developing intimate fellowship with sinners. This means that we are to make the effort to build such close relationships with unbelievers, regardless of their beliefs or way of life, that we delight to eat and

drink at one another's tables and visit joyfully in one another's homes. This will mean that we are going to get to know people who are considered by some of our churches to be sinners—the kind of people that God-fearing people should despise.”<sup>5</sup>

I realize that the above idea is difficult for some of us to consider. But we must remember that Jesus was and is the perfect, sinless, and holy God, yet he ate and drank with sinners. He went into their homes. In fact, the heart of the gospel is that while we were enemies, Jesus came to pursue us.

We, too, should pursue unbelievers. Though we are not Jesus, we can seek out the lost around us, with the hopes that they will believe in Jesus. We shouldn't wait for “divine appointments.” Though we should pray for God to give us evangelistic opportunities, we should also take steps to create them. Whenever we obey God by responding to his revealed will, we don't have to wait for a sign from heaven. After all, we don't wait for God to suddenly put the Bible in our hands and turn to a certain passage he wants us to read. We don't wait for a divine moment to pray or sing God's praises. Likewise, we shouldn't wait for God to miraculously bring unbelievers into our lives, though he may do that. If our family, friends, coworkers, or neighbors don't know Jesus, we can invite them over for dinner, or out for coffee. (You may try to invite yourself to their house, like Jesus, but that might not go over well with everyone.)

We must remember that we have a priceless message. It is one of great value, yet one that we can give away freely. Knowing the value of this message and the one who commissioned us to share it should encourage us to be the ones who initiate relationships with unbelievers. We shouldn't wait for them to come to us. This does not mean that we have to be aggressive or pushy. Rather, it means that we should be the ones who walk across the street or the lawn to talk to our neighbors, the ones who engage our coworkers in conversation, the ones who invite these people into our homes and our lives.

One final word regarding this passage and the many others in which Jesus associates with “sinners”: there may be contexts in which it is sinful to spend time with unbelievers. If we are tempted by a certain activity that our unbelieving friends engage in, then it would be best for us to spend time with them doing other things. If we have struggle with anger or pride, it might be best to avoid being around angry and proud people. We have to know our weaknesses and temptations in order to protect ourselves. Though we can be like Jesus in many ways, we are not perfect like him.

When considering our attempts at evangelism, we should examine our motives. We could be spending time with unbelievers because we want to pursue their sin and be worldly, while convincing ourselves that we are “evangelizing.” We could do the very same things with pure motives, too. Barrs suggests we ask this question: “Is my motivation for being with people a desire to imitate their sin and to worship at the shrine of their idols, or is my motivation mercy, compassion, love, and a desire to serve the purposes of Christ?”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 99.

## JESUS' EVANGELISTIC PARADIGM

By now, we have observed that Jesus welcomes the humble and hurting, such as the woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery. We have also seen how he welcomes those who are genuinely interested in him, like Zacchaeus. Jesus always welcomes those who show great faith, even those who are considered unclean. Two examples are the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30) and the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). Jesus' conversations with both of those Gentiles show that the key to being a Christian is faith.

We have also seen how Jesus responds to the Pharisees, such as those who were ready to condemn the woman caught in adultery and Simon, who judged both Jesus and the sinful woman who washed and anointed his feet. In the former case, Jesus asked the Pharisees and scribes to examine themselves, to see if they were without sin. In the latter case, Jesus indicated to Simon that the sinful woman who washed and anointed his feet was forgiven and Simon was not. Whenever people approached Jesus with the intent of justifying themselves, Jesus pointed out their sin and their failure to follow all the Old Testament law. When sinful people came to Jesus with humble, broken hearts, Jesus showed them grace.

We will now examine two episodes in which self-justifying men ask Jesus how they can inherit eternal life. Instead of giving them straightforward answers, Jesus points them back to their own sin and their failure to keep all of God's standards.

### THE RICH YOUNG MAN (MARK 10:17-31)

In this passage, a wealthy asks Jesus a very important question about eternal life. Jesus gives him a surprising answer, one that shows how it is impossible to earn such a thing.

<sup>17</sup> And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>18</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" <sup>20</sup> And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." <sup>21</sup> And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." <sup>22</sup> Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

<sup>23</sup> And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" <sup>24</sup> And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." <sup>26</sup> And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" <sup>27</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all

things are possible with God.”<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.”<sup>29</sup> Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,<sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.<sup>31</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:17-31)

Prior to this passage, Mark shows how different the kingdom of God is from the kingdom of this world. Jesus says, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Then, immediately before the passage at hand, Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Mark 10:15). Those who enter the kingdom of God must be humble servants who exhibit a childlike dependency upon their heavenly Father.

The rich man who approaches Jesus in this passage does not seem to be so humble. Rather, he is proud of his religious accomplishments. The man is eager to speak to Jesus, so he runs up to him. He also respects Jesus, as evidenced by his kneeling. In that position, he asks a question that we would love to have unbelievers ask us: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Imagine your neighbor or coworker asking you that question. Wouldn't you love to tell him or her about faith in Jesus and repentance of sin? Perhaps you would be prepared to give your concise, winsome gospel summary, with a call to believe and receive Christ at that very moment. But Jesus doesn't do this. Jesus knows what is in this man's heart.

The man had called Jesus “Good Teacher.” Jesus uses this title as an opportunity to tell him something very important: only God is good. The point Jesus is making, rather subtly, is that no human being is good. We tend to speak of “goodness” in a rather flippant way, not realizing that God is the true measure of goodness, or moral perfection.

Jesus then reminds the man of some of the Ten Commandments: “Do not murder [number six], Do not commit adultery [number seven], Do not steal [number eight], Do not bear false witness [number nine], Do not defraud [possibly a reference to number ten, but also touching on number eight], Honor your father and mother [number five].” Jesus' point is to say, “You know the commandments; do them and you will live.”

The man claims that he has kept these commandments from his youth. Of course, given how Jesus further defines the sixth and seventh commandments in Sermon on the Mount, it would be impossible for this man to say that he has kept all of these commandments *perfectly* since his youth. Apparently he wasn't paying attention when Jesus said, “No one is good except God.”

In order for Jesus to direct this man to his sinful status and his need of salvation by grace through faith, he addresses a sensitive subject. In Mark's account, we see that Jesus does this because he loves the man. The most loving thing that Jesus can do is show this man that he cannot save himself through good works and obedience to the law. Paul makes it quite clear that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Paul refers to the law as

something that “imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22). It was a sort of schoolteacher that told Jews that the only way to be justified is through faith (Gal. 3:24-26). In the book of Acts, both Paul and Peter acknowledge that the law was a burden that could not bring freedom (Acts 13:38-39; 15:10). Jesus intended to show this wealthy man that it was impossible for him to earn salvation.

Even as Jesus shows this man his sin, he does it in a gentle way. He doesn’t say, “You are a sinner! You have rebelled against God!” Rather, he identifies the man’s idol: his wealth. Jesus tells him to sell *all* that his possessions and give to the poor. This is the only time in the entire Bible where one is told to sell everything. The point is that this man’s love for wealth is standing in the way of his love for God. He may excel at some of the Ten Commandments, but perhaps not the first one: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). Since this idol stands in the way of his love for God, Jesus tells him to get rid of it. Jesus also says, “Come, follow me.”

The rich man apparently is unwilling to part with his idol. He walks away disheartened and sorrowful. In contrast to the joyful giving of Zacchaeus after he meets Jesus, this rich man thinks giving away his wealth is a joyless duty.

Jesus then continues to speak of wealth in front of his disciples. He acknowledges that those who are wealthy will have a difficult time entering the kingdom of God, probably because wealth is one of the greatest idols. Jesus tells his disciples that it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom. This is hyperbole, of course. Jesus uses the Palestinian animal and the smallest aperture to show just how impossible it is for a human being to earn salvation, particularly one with an idol.

Jesus’ comments provoke a reasonable question: “Then who can be saved?” Jesus tells his disciples that salvation is impossible for human beings, but all things are possible with God. God is the one who saves and salvation is a supernatural event, one that cannot human effort cannot achieve.

Peter, ever the bold speaker, reminds Jesus that he and the other disciples have left everything to follow him. Jesus tells the disciples that though they have given up much, they are receiving much more in return. They have given up their former occupations and their families (at least their parents and their siblings), but they are entering into a new family. In their new family, the disciples have access to so much more. Even though they have left much, they will not be in need, because the church will share its wealth and take care of others. There will be persecutions, but this new life available through faith in Christ will lead to eternal life in the age to come.

### **Learning from Jesus**

Jesus had obviously earned this man’s respect, because the man came to him hurriedly and he kneeled before Jesus. Because of this respect, Jesus was able to speak into this man’s life. We would do well to think of we can earn the respect of unbelievers around us. When we work hard, do good works, manage our homes well, and prove ourselves reliable, honest, and caring, we may have our unbelieving friends approach us with important questions.

Jesus apparently did just that. Jesus then used the opportunity to reveal what was in the rich man's heart. He did not give this man a straightforward answer to his question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus instead pointed out the incomparable goodness of God and the man's particular idol. We also would do well to tell people how great God is by highlighting his power, his love, his perfection, and all his other impressive attributes. In contrast, we can show people the foolishness of idolatry. Jerram Barrs writes, "Showing the beauty of righteousness or the ugliness of sin is a far more effective way of bringing people to conviction, rather than telling them directly that they are sinners. Revealing the character of God and helping people see the impurity of their heart—these open the eyes far more effectively than accusation or condemnation."<sup>7</sup>

In other words, we should show people how God is greater than any idol. How can temporary wealth compare with the eternal glory of God? When we view idols in the light of the one true God, there is no comparison.

Of course, when we expose sin and idolatry, it can be difficult for the other person. Jesus handled this situation graciously and gently, and still the rich man walked away sad. Yet exposing this man's idolatry was the most loving thing that Jesus could do. According to Proverbs 27:5-6,

<sup>5</sup> Better is open rebuke  
than hidden love.

<sup>6</sup> Faithful are the wounds of a friend;  
profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

### **JESUS AND THE LAWYER (LUKE 10:25-37)**

There were times when people approached Jesus with sincere questions. There were, of course, many other times when people tried to test Jesus with questions. Usually, these people were the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus would often respond to their questions with a question of his own, to get them to think and to turn away their attacks. In this passage, a lawyer, an expert in the Old Testament law, tries to put Jesus to the test and justify himself. With one parable, Jesus is able to escape the trap and show the lawyer that he is not living up to the Law's standards.

<sup>25</sup> And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>26</sup> He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" <sup>27</sup> And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

<sup>29</sup> But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho,

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<sup>7</sup> Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, 78.



and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.<sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.

<sup>34</sup> He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.<sup>35</sup> And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’

<sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”<sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25-37)

Before we even read the lawyer’s question, Luke tells us the man’s motives: the lawyer has come to test Jesus. Perhaps he hoped that Jesus would give a deficient answer, thereby failing the test. Like the rich man, he asks, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Once again, Jesus does not provide a direct answer.

Instead, Jesus asks a question. “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” Jesus is the master of questions. In the four Gospels, Jesus asks hundreds of questions. These questions help his conversation partners think. They lead the other person to a correct answer or reveal what is in the person’s heart. Of course, sometimes Jesus’ questions do both. If this lawyer had a sincere heart, Jesus would have given him a direct answer. But knowing the man’s motives, Jesus leads the man to reconsider the heart of the Law.

The lawyer answers Jesus’ question quite well. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus is the one who gives us the two greatest commandments and his answer is the same as the lawyer’s. The greatest commandment is to love God with everything we have (heart, soul, strength, and mind), and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus tells the lawyer that he has answered correctly. If the lawyer does these things, he will live.

Apparently, the lawyer was not satisfied with Jesus’ response. Again, Luke reveals the man’s motives: he wanted to justify himself (a recurring theme in Luke—see 16:15; 18:9-14). He wanted to know who is neighbor was so he could obey the law. Surely, he thought his neighbor was the man next door, or perhaps only Jews. He seems to be looking for the minimum requirements: “Exactly how much do I have to do to get eternal life?” Jesus does not give a direct answer. Rather, he answers with a parable.

Parables often function like questions. They also get people to think. A direct answer can make someone defensive. One statement can lead to a counter-statement, which is simply the product of a reaction. We see this in a great deal of political debates. A story, however, has the advantage of being less accusatory. When a person listens to a story, he or she is less likely to be defensive.

Jesus tells the lawyer the parable of the Good Samaritan. We all know the story. A man has been robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the road to Jericho. A priest passes the near dead

man and walks on the other side of the road without stopping to help. A Levite does the same. At this point in the story, the lawyer would be waiting for the hero, the one who helps the fallen man in his distress. Much to his surprise, a Samaritan is the hero. He is the one who goes out of his way to care for the troubled man. When Jesus asks, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” the answer is obvious. Of course, the lawyer cannot bring himself to say, “The Samaritan,” so he says, “The one who showed him mercy.”

The lawyer wanted to know who his neighbor is. Jesus responds with a story that shows that the lawyer had the wrong question. He should have asked, “How can I be a good neighbor?” or, “How can I be a loving neighbor?” He focused on himself, rather than on others. Those who try to justify themselves are often the most selfish people.

### **Learning from Jesus**

When people ask us honest questions, we should give honest answers. However, there are many times when people want to play theological games. When we try to share the gospel, people trying to justify their own positions may ask us questions. They are trying to put us to the test. When this happens, it is best not to give direct answers. We could learn from Jesus by asking questions of our own.

Just yesterday, I saw a video clip from a 2009 special edition of ABC’s *Nightline*. The special was titled, “Does Satan Exist.” It was a debate between Mark Driscoll, another Christian (Annie Lobert), New Age spiritualist Deepak Chopra, and Carlton Pearson, a bishop who embraced the heresy of universal salvation. After the four guests debated, some members of the audience were allowed to ask the guests questions. A man came to the microphone and asked Chopra and Pearson a question.

Man: “You stated before that all belief is a cover-up for insecurity. Right?”

Chopra: “Mm-hm.”

Man: “Do you believe that?”

Chopra: “Yes.”

Man: “Thank you.”

The man simply walked away from the microphone as the audience roared. He proved his point by asking two questions.

Our questions can be witty, as in the case above, but they can also be sincere. We need to understand why people are asking us questions before we can answer. If people are sincerely open to hearing about Jesus, we should be prepared to answer them to the best of our ability. But we won’t know their hearts unless we ask some questions first. Though we can follow Jesus’ example, we can’t see into people’s hearts like God can.

The Christian theologian, author, and apologist Francis Schaeffer used to say that if he had one hour to share the gospel with someone, he would spend the first fifty-five minutes

asking questions, and then five minutes speaking in light of what he had learned.<sup>8</sup> When we understand a person better, we are better prepared to point them to Jesus.

When we adopt an indirect approach, through questions or even stories (such as Jesus' own parables, narratives from the Bible, or perhaps even creative uses of novels, movies, and television shows), we help people understand themselves better. Most people do not examine themselves thoroughly. Unbelievers (and even many Christians) can be blind to their own sin and idolatry.

When the prophet Nathan wanted to confront David in the wake of his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, he did not accuse the king and demand repentance. Instead, he presented David with a parable about a rich man, a poor man, and the poor man's only lamb (2 Sam. 12:1-15). This indirect approach helped David see how sinful his own actions were, whereas a direct approach might have elicited defensiveness and even more evil.

Some people need to be shown their hypocrisy, the inconsistency of their beliefs and their actions. Some people need help seeing the sin and idolatry in their hearts. By asking questions and answering indirectly, we may end up pointing people to Jesus.

We will soon move into our study of apologetics. This method of asking questions will help us defend our faith. Our goal, of course, is to help people believe in Christ. When we ask questions of others, we hold up mirrors to their lives, helping them see truth and their need for salvation.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Do you have a Zacchaeus in your life, someone eager to learn about Jesus?

How will you be like Jesus, by inviting yourself further into that person's life?

How can you be intentional about reaching unbelievers?

Do unbelievers respect you enough to ask you important questions about life?

Do you know any "rich men" or "lawyers" who try to justify themselves through their good works? In other words, do you know people who think they will be in heaven because they have lived good lives?

How can you help people like that see the holiness of God? How can you gently show them that they do can never please God by being good?

How do you respond to people who try to test your faith?

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 62.