

Beyond Apologies

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**Mini-series for Bridgeway Community Church broadcast service
July 18-25, 2021**

Part 1:

Beyond Apologies: Addressing Offenses

Once upon a time, Cindi and I were missionaries in Spain, where I taught theology at the Spanish Bible Institute outside of Barcelona. We spent a lot of time with our Spanish friends, but we also had some dear American colleagues who lived in the neighborhood. One of those families included a scrawny, freckle-faced kid named Zach, who sometimes played with our daughter, Jen. Zach was a pleasant young man who was part of our lives for a number of years, but, then, during his teenage years, he and his family moved back to the States.

Zach ended up at Colorado Springs Christian High School, where he joined the soccer team. And that's where Zach met Ryan. Now, Ryan's grandfather was a pastor, and most of his aunts and uncles were missionaries, so they kind of had that family ministry theme in common. But they also shared an interest in music, and kind of out of the blue in their senior year, they decided to start their own band. They had a bit of fun playing some local gigs, but the following year they went their own separate ways to college.

Ahh, but that's not the end of the story. A year after his graduation from Oral Roberts University, Ryan Tedder re-contacted his friend, Zach Filkins, and asked if he was still interested in doing that band thing. So, Zach joined Ryan in LA, and One Republic was born. In 2008 their song, *Apologize*, became the biggest radio airplay hit in the history of the Mainstream Top 40. And the group is still wildly popular.

In case you're wondering, we did manage to reunite with Zach a few years ago, when One Republic played the 9:30 Club in DC. We met for supper at the famous Ben's Chili Bowl and then walked a few blocks to the club, which is near Howard University. Zach took us in the side door and set us up right in front of the stage—standing, of course, for the entire concert, as there are no seats in the 9:30 club.

So, there we are, pretty much the oldest people in the place by a solid generation, packed in like sardines. Of course, being right in front of the stage also meant being right in front of speakers,

which were so big that we're like staring right into them. Cindi literally had to cover her ears, which I thought was kind of inappropriate—but it was *very* loud. We got to go backstage for a bit after the show, which was fun, and it makes for a good story.

But this story also has a kind of sideways connection to today's theme. One Republic's song, *Apologize*, insists that, guess what, it's now too late to apologize. Now, I don't know how often or under what circumstances it's actually *too late to apologize*, but what I do know is that it's often *not enough to apologize*.

So, we're about to embark on a two-week series entitled "Beyond Apologies." Because there are times when apologies are simply not enough. Maybe you've been there. You offered an apology, but it just didn't work. Didn't resolve the issue. Didn't repair the relationship. Or maybe that's where you find yourself today. Or perhaps tomorrow. If so, this message is for you.

When apologies are not enough, what else do we need? What's missing? I hope these messages will give you some divine insight into how to go beyond apologies to bring about real change in yourself and in your relationships. This week we're going to look at "Beyond Apologies: Addressing Offenses." And next week we'll look at "Beyond Apologies: Redressing Offenses."

But before we can talk about how to go beyond apologies, we need to spend a moment thinking about why apologies are often insufficient. And the basic problem is that apologies may not address the real offense.

Think about it. We say "I'm sorry" for all kinds of things, even when we haven't done anything wrong. When we say, "Sorry you're having a bad day," we're not really taking responsibility for it. I've apologized to guests in my Airbnb for a stretch of bad weather during their stay. We both knew that I had nothing to do with it. In this case what sounds like an apology is really just an expression of empathy.

If you accidentally step on someone's toes, you might offer an "excuse-me" apology. If you're British, you might even apologize if someone else steps on your toes. But, then again, across the pond "sorry" is something of a national sport.

But even when we're offering an apology in response to an actual offense, saying "I'm sorry," or "I apologize" is not necessarily an admission of guilt. Sometime, it's just "Sorry you feel that way," or the even more seemingly sensitive, "Sorry I upset you," which is still not an admission that we did anything wrong. It may just be a polite way of saying that they're kinda touchy. We're hoping they'll just reply, "Oh, that's okay," "No worries," and we can all move on without anybody actually taking responsibility for what happened.

Possibly the worst sort of insincere apology is the "I'm sorry, but..." apology, which then goes on to place the actual blame either on circumstances beyond anyone's control or, even worse, on

the other person. “I’m sorry, but, you know, you kind of pushed me over the edge.” Oh... that’ll make things better, right?

When something that sounds like an apology can mean so many different things, it just gets confusing. So, when someone apologizes, how do you know that they actually “get” it? That what they did was wrong? That it hurt you and your relationship with them? And how do you know they won’t do exactly the same thing the next time? Well, apologies don’t always tell you that—which is why apologies are often not enough.

Not only are apologies often insufficient from a relational point of view; they’re often insufficient from a scriptural point of view. I’ve made what I think is an exhaustive study of the biblical admonitions to offer an apology. So, if you have a paper and pen, you might want to make note of this. If you don’t have a paper and pen, don’t worry. You can probably just remember. Because there aren’t any. No biblical admonitions to apologize. Zero, zip, nada. Sorry.

Which isn’t to say that we’ve never been commanded to apologize, because we all have been. By our mamas. Who hasn’t heard, “Now I want you to apologize to your brother or sister or friend? Tell them you’re sorry.” Which was often followed by a completely deadpan, “I’m sorry.” Yes, those were some classic moments in the history of contrition, weren’t they?

But what about a passage like Mt. 5:23-24, in which Jesus tells us that if we are on our way to worship and remember that a brother or sister has something against us, we must first go and be reconciled with that person before continuing with our worship? Doesn’t that call for an apology?

Well, it might, but not the kind we’ve been talking about to this point. Because those lackluster apologies are unlikely to lead to real reconciliation, which is, after all, the goal Jesus has in mind.

An apology, you see, is essentially an expression of remorse. Which is all fine and dandy. But it’s the *reason* we feel that remorse and our *reaction* to that remorse that determine the value of the apology. That’s what matters to God. Which may be why—though we are not commanded to apologize—we are commanded to confess and to repent.

So, let’s look at these two dynamics, confession and repentance, and see how they can take an apology and — kick it up a notch. Susan Wise Bauer, in her book, *The Art of the Public Grovel*, explains how confessions are unlike apologies. She says: “Apology and confession are not the same. An apology is an expression of regret: *I am sorry*. A confession is an admission of fault: *I am sorry because I did wrong. I sinned*.” See the difference?

A few weeks ago, Pastor Gary Coiro talked about the dynamic of confession and repentance before God. Which is, of course, absolutely appropriate and necessary, since any sin is an affront to a holy God. But we’re sometimes less inclined to own up to our sins in front of the *people*

who are affected by them. Maybe that's because we know we can't fool God, but we think that maybe the sins we commit on the horizontal plane won't seem so serious if we don't actually admit them out loud. Or maybe it's just the embarrassment. But, for whatever reason, we try to wiggle out of it, don't we?

“Bad idea,” says the wise man. King Solomon observed in Proverbs 28:13: “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” James 5:16 tells us to confess our sins to one another and to pray for one another. Now, that circle of confession may well be broader than the circle of offense—that is, we may confess our sins to people other than those we've directly offended. But it seems to me that this command to confess to others doesn't mean much if it doesn't at least *include* the people we've offended.

Earlier, we mentioned how Jesus tells us to reconcile with the person who has something against us. But in order for that reconciliation to be authentic, there must first be a common understanding about the nature of the problem. You see, apologies are often driven by sentiment, but confession requires us to confront the truth—the truth about who we are, about what we did, and about how it affected others. In fact, the Greek word, *homologia*, which is translated as *confession* in our English versions of the Bible, is a compound word made up of *homo*, which means *same*, and *logia*, or *words*. To confess is to “to say the same thing, to agree.”

That's why, when the black majority took power in South Africa, they instituted a Truth and Reconciliation Commission chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It wasn't enough to allow people (in this case, white people) to pretend that half a century of apartheid was just a big oops, some kind of misunderstanding, or, perhaps, a collective learning experience. Because that's not how those who suffered under that oppression experienced it. If everyone had been allowed to have their own version of the facts and (maybe) apologize and move on, that kind of sweeping things under the rug was not going to lead to reconciliation. And, by the way, we in this country could learn an awful lot from the South African experience and example.

When we confess to God, we are agreeing with what he knows to be true. And when we confess to others, we must also agree with what they know to be true—which is how that thing we said or did landed in their world. Not what we intended, but what they experienced. And even then, it's not enough to simply acknowledge that common truth; you have to appreciate that truth as well.

Let me illustrate the difference between acknowledging a truth and appreciating it. When I was doing research for my book, *White as Sin*, I decided to do a deep dive on the subject of lynching. (Now, there's a word that will bring a hush to the room.) Of course, even before I began that study, I already *acknowledged* that the lynching era was a terrible and shameful part of our past. In fact, that's exactly why I chose to study it. But after spending *all* of my working hours on that *single* subject for an *entire* month, after allowing my spirit to steep in that truth, I came to *appreciate* it in a way that I never had before. Fact is, I've never been the same since. To this day, I can hardly tell that story without getting teary-eyed.

What I'm trying to say here is that for our confession to be therapeutic, for it to bring healing, it can't be just a grudging agreement with those we have offended. That agreement must be empathetic. When we confess, when we say the same thing as the offended person, we're not just acknowledging a truth. We must appreciate it, feel it, and come to grips with that reality.

It's true that confession is good for the soul. But that doesn't mean it's comfortable. Because it isn't. Unlike in the world of apologies, there's no hiding behind alternative narratives about what happened. There's no pretending that we're not really the sort of person who would do the kind of thing that, in fact, we did. "What I said was unkind. What I did was selfish or cruel or haughty or fill in the blank." That's not easy to admit.

Yes, confession is tough, but when apologies are not enough, confession may be just what the Divine Doctor ordered. And, guess what? Once we agree with the person we've offended that what we did was wrong, it often takes the wind out of the sails of their animosity. When we give that offense a name or admit that our motive was just as stinky as our actions, it becomes clear that we're taking the matter seriously. That affirms the other person's feelings and at least begins to relax the relational tension. And that, in turn, opens a pathway to genuine reconciliation and healing.

Let me give you a simple, real-life example as told to me by my wife, Cindi. And I share this story with her permission. Those of you who follow me on Facebook know that during the month of May Cindi volunteered on a special work detail. Her regular job is that of a budget analyst for the U.S. Attorneys in Washington, DC. But she ended up in the desert outside of El Paso, Texas, working with unaccompanied minors—teenage girls in this case, many of whom had been traumatized in the course of their journey northward across the U.S.-Mexico border.

Some of you prayed for her, and Bridgeway's missions outreach helped us provide some Spanish New Testaments for the girls. So, I just want to say that we really appreciate the involvement of our church family.

Cindi was able to make a difference in the lives and the care of these girls, but it was not an easy assignment. She had to leave her hotel between 5:30 and 6:00 AM in order to be in place for a 12-hour work shift, beginning at 7 o'clock. Six or sometimes seven days a week. The complex was a hastily-constructed tent city, and the tent she was working in accommodated some 800 girls in very cramped quarters. The *upper* bunk of the bunk beds was only about waist-high, and the beds were so close together that she had to turn sideways to pass in between them. It was hot and noisy and always dusty. She and another woman were appointed as the spiritual leads of the group, and Cindi would come alongside girls who were praying at the makeshift altar to pray with them and make sure that there were plenty of the New Testaments.

One of her main responsibilities was clothing distribution, which was quite chaotic when she arrived. If the girls didn't label their laundry just right, it might not get back to them. Sometimes

new clothing would arrive in the wrong size or with two left shoes. But one day they got a huge shipment of new clothing, so large that they had to close down the distribution area in order to organize their inventory.

The girls, however, saw the boxes of clothing and kept coming up to ask about it. Cindi and her colleagues had to just keep telling them, "Sorry, we're closed right now. Sorry, we're closed right now." There was no system for communicating with everyone at the same time, so when there was new information, they might have to repeat it 800 times.

Finally, after they'd been turning away the immigrant girls for hours on end, one of the adult federal workers came up to ask a question, and Cindi just brusquely cut her off and said, "We're closed."

This woman, who was normally quite reserved, walked away but soon returned, looking agitated. She said, "I just wanted you to know that you were really rude."

So... here we go. What's going to be the next volley? And the next?

But this time Cindi found the proper response. "You're right. I was rude. I'm sorry."

This lady actually took a step back and said, "Wow! I wasn't expecting that response." As we were just discussing, when you confess, when you agree with the offended person, it takes the wind out of the sails of their animosity.

Cindi continued, "Thanks for telling me. That was brave. I shouldn't have done that. That's not the kind of person I want to be, and I needed someone to confront me, so that I don't do that again."

Later the two women got a chance to work together and developed a good relationship. In fact, by the end of the month they were laughing about the incident.

Of course, sometimes people have their own issues, and things don't work out quite that smoothly. But, still, when you mess up, you gotta 'fess up. Not only is it the morally responsible thing to do; it's a great way to de-escalate the situation. And that keeps the door open to eventual reconciliation.

If you were listening carefully, however, you might have noticed that Cindi's response contained another important element that's related to confession, but one that actually goes an important step further. She not only admitted that what she did was wrong, agreeing with the offended party; she committed herself to a better pathway going forward. "That's not the kind of person I want to be," she said. And she thanked the woman for having the courage to say something, so that Cindi wouldn't do the same thing again.

This commitment to change is called repentance. Repentance goes beyond an admission of wrong to an actual rejection of that behavior and a commitment to a new and improved way forward—one that conforms to God’s righteous standard.

You see, sometimes, when apologies are not enough, even confession is not enough. Yes, you’ve admitted doing wrong, and you may be genuinely remorseful. But the other person is still suspicious, wondering if you’ve really changed and what’s going to happen the next time. Maybe they’ll forgive you. Maybe not. But, still, they’re not anxious to be around you, for fear that you’re going to hurt them again. So, you’re not really reconciled.

Remember one of our key verses from Proverbs 28:13: “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses *and renounces them* finds mercy.” Every time we confess a sin to God, we should also renounce it, forsake it, turn from it. But, if you’re like me, you have some sins that you’ve confessed to God over and over, because, guess what? You haven’t actually *changed* your pattern of behavior.

So, while confession and repentance are related, they are not the same. One doesn’t automatically lead to the other. Repentance is not just turning away from our sinful ways; it is turning toward, adopting, embracing a new pattern of behavior that pleases God.

This dynamic of repentance, this commitment to change, this moral pivot, if you will, is also critical in our horizontal, interpersonal relationships. When you explicitly turn from the behavior that damaged your relationship, people are much more likely to give you a second chance. Reconciliation, all of a sudden, looks a lot more inviting, because the future doesn’t look so much like the past.

When you’ve truly offended someone else, apologies may not be enough to repair that relationship. Confession—the recognition of your own wrongdoing—it’s a tougher road, but it’s a surer remedy. But even when you confess, you can’t just say, “Well, I admitted it, and if they can’t forgive me now, phooey on them!” You may have to prove your commitment to change over time. The question is: are you willing to do whatever it takes to restore that damaged relationship?

Today’s message is entitled “Beyond Apologies: Addressing Offenses.” But how do you know *when* you need to go beyond apologies?

Well, just examine your relationships. Is there someone in our life to whom you did or said something that drove a wedge between you, built up a relational wall, and left you more or less estranged? Maybe you’ve apologized. Maybe they’ve even “accepted” your apology. But in your heart of hearts, you know that things are still not right.

At this point maybe you’re even blaming them—your husband or wife or friend or family member. You think that because you apologized, you’ve done everything you need to do, and

that they're just being stubborn. But you know what? This may be one of those times when apologies are not enough. Because, when you've done actual wrong to someone, a confession is in order. And often some further evidence of repentance may be necessary as well.

Relationships are complicated things. So, even when you do everything God requires, there are no guarantees that you will turn the heart of another person. Even Jesus had his Judas. So, I'm not offering you a magic elixir or an other-people-fixer today. Rather, I'm inviting you to step into your own moral responsibility before God and before others. Just do what God has called you to do, and leave the things that only God can do to him.

And while there are no guarantees in human relationships—when you plant a seed of humble contrition, when you water it with love and prayer, and when you give it the time that patience requires, watch out. Because our God is all about reconciliation. He's concerned not only with reconciling you to him but with bringing about relational healing in this world. In your world. If you'll dare to go beyond apologies.

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Part 2: **Beyond Apologies: Redressing Offenses**

When I was a kid in Sunday school, back in the Paleozoic Era, we used to sing a song about one of my favorite Bible characters, a guy by the name of Zacchaeus. It was a catchy little song with really cool hand motions and everything.

In fact, I still remember the lyrics to the Zacchaeus song, but, no, I'm not going to sing it for you today. Because, in retrospect, it just seems a bit overly obsessed with the idea that Zacchaeus was, and I quote, "a wee little man." Now, it's true that Zacchaeus was shorter than average. But no man I know would ever want to be referred to, even posthumously, as a "wee little man." So, I'm not going to do that to my buddy, Zacchaeus, who actually stands quite tall as the hero of his story.

Fact is, in my Sunday school Zacchaeus was what you'd call a flannelgraph favorite. Oh yeah. And if you don't know flannelgraph, then you just haven't been around—long enough.

Flannelgraph was a board covered with, well, flannel, sometimes imprinted with the background of a Bible scene. It sat on an easel, and each story had a set of colorful cutout characters made of heavy-duty paper with a backing of felt or sometimes sandpaper that would adhere to the flannel when you pressed on it. And as kids, ooh, we were completely spellbound by this technology. Yes, those were simpler times.

In recent years I've become fascinated by Zacchaeus all over again, but now for somewhat different reasons. Because Zacchaeus has so much to teach us about the nexus between spirituality and interpersonal justice. If you were with us last week, you may remember that we're engaged in a two-week series called "Beyond Apologies." In the first installment, "Beyond Apologies: Addressing Offenses," we talked about how adding confession and repentance to an apology can help us achieve genuine reconciliation.

There are other circumstances, however, in which, even when we confess what we have done and even when we demonstrate a commitment to changed behavior, that's still not going to be enough. Not enough to satisfy God, and not enough to bring about relational healing. And that's why this week we're doing part two: "Beyond Apologies: Redressing Offenses."

But before we get too far into this topic, we need a term-defining time out. Because *redress* is not exactly a common term, and even if you're familiar with it, you may have heard it used in a somewhat different context. So, let me clarify how I'm using the term *redress* today.

Of course, redress has nothing to do with a change of clothing. Redress is simply bringing justice to bear on injustice by some compensatory mechanism. In other words, if, in the course of our relationship, one of us took something from the other or caused the other to suffer some form of loss, redress tries to right that wrong by compensating for it.

You may have heard about people *seeking* redress or *demanding* redress, because they believe that perhaps another person, or a company, or even a government has unjustly disadvantaged them. As a matter of fact, that's the most common use of the term. It's even enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. That's right. Tucked right in alongside the freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the freedom of peaceful assembly is the right to "petition the Government for the *redress of grievances*."

People seek redress for all sorts of grievances, from the neighbor's dog digging holes in their yard to international genocide. But today we're not talking about seeking or demanding redress but, rather, about *providing* redress, as in voluntarily. Not because it's demanded by the offended or ordered by the court or imposed on us by peer pressure. But, rather, because, first, it's right and, second, because sometimes it's the only road to from here to reconciliation.

If you're a student of Scripture you might be more familiar with the concept of restitution than that of redress. The problem is that, to many of us, restitution feels like simply giving back the exact material item that was taken away—or perhaps its financial equivalent. And we tend to think of restitution as operating primarily between individuals.

Redress, on the other hand, is a bit more comprehensive. It may involve either individuals or groups of people. It might include compensation for non-material losses. Redress might end up being either more or less than the amount of the original injustice, depending on the circumstances. And redress might apply to broad injustices rather than just particular offenses.

Now, we could do a case-by-case study of all the Bible passages that deal with various forms of redress. But I'm thinking it might be a lot more interesting to start with a story, and the story I'm thinking of involves our old buddy, Zacchaeus, in Luke chapter 19.

Let's begin by reading this story. "He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. ² And there was a man called by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich. ³ Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house."⁶ And he hurried and came down and received Him gladly. ⁷ When they saw it, they all *began* to

grumble, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.”⁸ Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.”⁹ And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.¹⁰ For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

So, let’s set the physical and cultural stage for this powerful narrative. By chapter 19 of Luke’s gospel, Jesus is a well-known preacher and miracle worker. In fact, this incident takes place not long before Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the week leading up to his crucifixion.

Jericho, where this story takes place, was a very special city. It claims the title of lowest city on earth, sitting at some 800 ft. below sea level. It was a beautiful and wealthy city, kind of the Palm Springs of its time, except that it was also a thriving commercial center and was situated at the intersection of busy trade routes. The city was such a gem that, some sixty years earlier, Mark Antony had gifted it to his main squeeze, Cleopatra.

And in this lovely city lived a not-so-lovely man named Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, which is never going to win you any popularity contests. But back then tax collectors were not bureaucrats but entrepreneurs. You see, Zacchaeus had a contract with the Roman government to collect taxes. But nobody else knew what that agreement said. So, the tax bill ended up being whatever the tax man said it was. Some of that went to Rome, and the rest went into his pocket.

As you can imagine, tax collecting was a lucrative business. And, according to verse 2, Zacchaeus was not just a tax collector but a *chief* tax collector. So, he probably got a cut out of all the money skimmed by all the other tax collectors in the area. Kind of like a giant pyramid scheme.

As a result, Mr. Zacchaeus was very wealthy, but not very well-liked. I bet they called him a “wee little man” behind his back. And probably worse. Think of Ebenezer Scrooge as played by Danny DeVito.

We’re not told why Zacchaeus is so determined to see this folk preacher phenomenon by the name of Jesus. Maybe he’s heard the buzz about how Jesus healed a blind beggar named Bartimaeus on his way into Jericho. Maybe he’s heard that Jesus has a soft spot for people like him. Maybe he’s heard about a former tax collector named Matthew who’s now one of Jesus’ disciples.

Well, the crowd lining Jesus’ route must have been considerable. Because the diminutive Zacchaeus couldn’t find even a shoulder to look over or a gap to peek through. So, he boogied on ahead and, of all things, climbed up in a tree. I say that because you don’t usually see rich people climbing trees, especially to get a good view. Rich people usually have a front row seat.

But now the plot thickens. Because not only does Zacchaeus see Jesus, but more importantly, Jesus sees him. And not just because Zacchaeus looked out-of-place up in that tree. I think Jesus saw Zacchaeus because he was looking for him.

Jesus tells him to get down, because Jesus *must, must* go to his house. That could also be translated, “it’s necessary for me to go your house today.” So, going to Zacchaeus’s house is already part of Jesus’ plan. He already knows who Zacchaeus is. Even knows his name. And Jesus doesn’t wait for an invitation. He just invites himself and tells Zacchaeus what to do.

Let me just say, before we continue with this story, that Jesus is looking for you too. Whether you’re rich or poor, famous or infamous, you’re on his radar. He’s already looking for you, and when you show an interest in getting to know him, as Zacchaeus did, he’s going to respond by taking your relationship to the next level.

Well, Zacchaeus practically falls out the tree in his haste to welcome his self-invited guest. But the rest of the people—they’re, uh, not quite so enthusiastic about this arrangement. A moment earlier they’d been wondering whether this might be the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel. But now he’s ditching the adoring crowd to go hang out with the most unholy guy in town!

Remember, in that culture, to accept an invitation to someone’s home (much less invite yourself) and to break bread with that person, was a social statement of acceptance. So, this was downright scandalous on a whole bunch of levels.

Take a look, then, at verse 8. Now, depending on which Bible translation you’re using, it may say that Zacchaeus “stood” or “stood up” or “stopped” or “stood there.” The Greek word in question could legitimately be translated in any of these ways. So, we’re not sure if they’re still in front of the crowd or on the way to Zacchaeus’s house or in his house. But, even if the scene has jumped ahead to the home of Zacchaeus, this meal would not have been the strictly private affair we might imagine today. In that day and in that climate, the house windows had no glass but just opened to the outdoors. And when an important teacher like Jesus was at the table inside, it’s likely that a crowd of people gathered outside to listen in. So, regardless where this conversation took place, it wasn’t just for the sake of Jesus and Zacchaeus but partly for the sake of other people as well.

The key thing about verse 8, however, are the two commitments that Zacchaeus makes here. Both commitments relate to our theme of redress, but, as we’ll see, they target two different groups of people. In order to understand what’s happening here, let’s jump ahead to Jesus’ explanation in verses 9-10 and work backwards.

Whatever Zacchaeus said in verse 8 leads Jesus to conclude that “today salvation has come to this house.” In other words, his host has just experienced a genuine conversion. So, what was the clue? Did he say that he’d put his faith in Christ? Or prayed the sinner’s prayer? Or decided to follow Jesus?

Well, not exactly. Actually, Zacchaeus is talking about money. Specifically, about giving it away. But Jesus understands that when somebody like Zacchaeus starts parting with his money, that change must have come from the inside out.

Look at the end of verse 8. What does Zacchaeus promise to do? He's going to pay back every penny he's swindled from people, right? Well, yes and no. Because he's not just *returning* his ill-gotten gain; he's going to give back *four times* the amount he took! Dang.

He does say, "*If I have cheated anyone...*" But that's not an escape hatch. Because the Greek grammar indicates that the "if I have cheated" condition is assumed to be true. So, there's no real contingency here, both because of the grammar and because everyone, including Zacchaeus, knew that cheating was his business model.

Under Old Testament law, the amount of restitution due in a given circumstance could vary quite a bit. Sometimes all that was required was the simple return of the stolen item or its cash equivalent. Sometimes they had to give back an additional 20%. In this case, Zacchaeus probably wouldn't have been obligated by Jewish law to pay back any more than double. But it's not clear that he even knew or even cared about his actual legal responsibility. He's just making an over-the-top gesture out of a transformed heart.

Why would he pay back more than he owes? On the one hand, to demonstrate the extent his repentance before God and, on the other, to satisfy the people he'd cheated. And for that, a windfall tax rebate of four times what they'd paid sounds kind of like a plan. See, he's not just righting the wrong but righting the relationship as well. That's the power of redress.

But Zacchaeus isn't done. Look at the beginning of verse 8. In addition to the fourfold reimbursement, this dude is going to give *half of his possessions* to the poor! Now, even if you're rich, you're going to feel 50%.

But note, and this is important, that this is not a particular debt that he owes to anyone because of a personal offense. He takes care of that redress in his second commitment that we already looked at. This is for the poor in general. So, it appears that Zacchaeus is recognizing structural inequities in his society and, as one of those who has benefitted from that unjust arrangement, he's trying to bring a measure of justice to bear on injustice. And that, too, is redress.

According to Dt. 15:4, God's plan was that there would be no poverty in Israel. God promised to provide enough for everyone. And he built safeguards into the economy to keep people from becoming permanently marginalized from that provision. The problem was that Jewish society hadn't paid much attention to God's design for centuries. Some people had enriched themselves at the expense of other people. And, once those rich and powerful people were running the show, they set up a system that favored—guess who?

So, in this first-century society there were systemic reasons why people fell into poverty and ended up stuck there. Could Zacchaeus solve these historic inequities single-handedly? No way. But his newfound commitment to righteousness motivated him to do *something*, and that something was significant for him.

But get this. Zacchaeus's example is not just for our entertainment; it's also for our admonition. So, what does Zacchaeus teach us? What do we learn from his example of redress? That when have taken something from someone that rightfully belongs to them, it's not enough to just recognize that wrong or even to just apologize or to seek God's forgiveness—or to confess or to promise never to do it again. We have to give it back!

If I steal your car, I can't just apologize and keep the car. Right? As long as I'm in your car, waving a happy hello as I pass your house, where you're stuck without wheels, even if you try to forgive me, I'm thinking that we're not really going to be reconciled.

Of course, we good Christian folks are probably not into grand theft auto. Still, maybe you did just straight-out take somebody's stuff. It happens. But how about that money you never paid back or how you shafted him or her in that divorce proceeding? Or that thing you "borrowed?" Or that status or honor or opportunity that should have belonged to someone else?

Zacchaeus teaches us that if it's not ours, not only do we have to give it back; we have to give it back in a way that redresses not only the material loss but also redresses the relational grievance. Give it back in a way that invites reconciliation.

Now, admittedly, we don't know what the relationship between Zacchaeus and the citizens of Jericho was like going forward. Or if his redress led to reconciliation. But, you gotta admit, it sure didn't hurt his chances.

Some of you have unfinished relational business out there. You've taken advantage of someone, and, as a result, the relationship has gone cold. Maybe you've apologized. Even confessed. Maybe even restored some portion of what was lost. But it hasn't been enough, has it? Because things still aren't right. So, you may need to sprinkle a little Zacchaeus sauce on that situation—in the form of redress.

As the story of Zacchaeus illustrates, there are these particular, personal offenses for which we need to provide redress. But we can also see in his example that there are structural inequities that we may need to redress, either because we're complicit in or have benefitted from collective injustice. And here I'm thinking specifically about America's longstanding racial inequities.

The divide between rich and poor in Zacchaeus's day was not really his doing. He had inherited a system that would have existed regardless of his participation in it. And, yet, he feels the need to redress that situation by making some significant personal sacrifices.

Likewise, we white folks living today did not *create* the racial divide that exists in America nor the racialized hierarchy of social wellbeing that accompanies it. We even try to distance ourselves from our obvious ancestral associations by insisting—and with some frequency—that only a small percentage of people ever actually bought and sold slaves or lynched anyone. But that, of course, ignores the fact that these atrocities could only happen, and happen in a legally-protected environment, with the complicity of essentially an entire nation.

Not only that, but the benefits of this immoral institution extended far beyond the slave industry. The whole of white society profited from slavery. During that era, the vast majority of American exports, particularly cotton, were produced by slave labor. And the ripple effect from slave production created untold jobs throughout the *entire* economy and enriched the *entire* nation by bringing in wealth from abroad.

Okay, so maybe the complicity was broader than we like to admit and the benefits more widely distributed. But, still, that was then, and this is now. So, what does yesterday have to do with us today and with redress—and with Zacchaeus of all people?

Well, let me ask you this: if I con my neighbor out of his life savings and I give some of that money to you, does it then become your money? Let's say that the law never catches up with either one of us, and we pass our ill-gotten gain on to our children. Now whose money is it? Can you ever, in the eyes of God, do enough intergenerational money-laundering to erase that injustice and make it okay for my clan and your clan to be doing quite nicely while my neighbor's descendants are struggling to get by?

Perhaps we are not the *perpetrators* who carried out what Ta-Nehisi Coates has called “the national sin of plunder.” But we have now become the beneficiaries of that plunder and therefore the *perpetuators* of that injustice.

The median net wealth of white families in America is currently ten times that of black families. Yes, that's right—ten times. This is not an accident of history. Nor is it not the product of white superiority. It's a legacy of racial injustice that we, the living, have embraced and preserved.

So, now, like Zacchaeus, we have a choice. We can continue to perpetuate this injustice or we can redress this injustice. We can be part of the problem or part of the solution. But we can't dodge the question by doing nothing. Because doing nothing about injustice perpetuates injustice. And when we perpetuate an injustice that also benefits us, it's kind of hard to claim that we're just disinterested do-nothings.

Oh, Zacchaeus, couldn't you have just been justified without being so gung-ho about justice? I mean, he could have been redeemed without providing redress—right? Right? Well, I guess we could ask the rich young ruler...

But, more to the point, let me just ask you. If Jesus came to your house today and observed your attitude toward racial injustice and redress, what would he conclude about your spiritual state?

When I began to ask myself that question, I didn't much like the answer. Which has led me, over the years, to some significant lifestyle decisions. To dedicate a portion of my retirement savings and a portion of my estate to redressing racial injustice. To dedicate several years of my life to writing a book on the subject. And more recently to start a nonprofit that promotes racial justice.

Like Zacchaeus, I can't personally right all these systemic wrongs. But even as I support the broader principle of reparations, I feel as if I need to put my own money where my mouth is. Because I don't know when or if or how others will eventually act. I can't wait on everybody else to do what God has called me to do. For me, this is not a political agenda; it is an ethical imperative, a baton passed down to me by Zacchaeus himself for my leg of the race.

That's me. I can't say precisely what God is calling other white folks to do about redress. Maybe it's investing your time, maybe your money. But it can't be nothing. Because racial injustice is one of those offenses that requires us to go beyond apologies. Without redress there can be no equality; and without equality racial reconciliation remains an elusive dream.

This story of Zacchaeus leaves us two powerful examples of redress that underline Jesus' words: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Speaking of your heart, is God speaking to your heart today, shining a light on some situation that requires redress? Whether we're talking about a personal relationship or a systemic injustice, redress is a powerful tool—to bring justice to bear on injustice and to bring people together. The question is: are you willing to embrace a Zacchaeus moment?

If I can help you along that journey, feel free to shoot me an email at scottgarber@scottgarber.com. Or you can visit my nonprofit website at RedemptiveRedress.org. And Dr. Anderson always has great resources available at EmbraceGracism.com. May God empower each of us individually and all of us together to fulfill his justice, to trust in his grace, and to be ambassadors of his reconciliation.