

## Ten Theses: With Apologies to Luther & Letterman

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Luke 19:1-10

Reformation Sunday

October 30, 2022

On October 31, 1517, over 500 years ago, Martin Luther posted a document on the doors of the Wittenberg Castle church. It's tempting to believe that he hammered them to the door defiantly. The more likely scenario is that he gently posted them, his intention being to announce and invite people to an academic discussion of the document's content. Regardless, what the document became was the spark that set off the Protestant Reformation. Luther's "95 Theses" put forth two central beliefs - that the Bible is the central religious authority, not the church, not priests or even the pope, but the Bible; and that salvation comes to us not by our deeds, but by grace through faith. Good deeds are important, but as a grateful response to God's gift of salvation through faith, not as a way of earning it.

Having made those points in the first two of his 95 theses, Luther then used the next 93 to launch an attack on the church's corrupt practice of selling "indulgences."<sup>1</sup> If you messed up, committed some sin, you could make a payment to the church and have that sin absolved; or if you were concerned about the eternal fate of a loved one, you could buy an indulgence, thus paying for their release from purgatory.

We don't sell indulgences here at Winnetka Presbyterian Church, but we do ask you to prayerfully consider how much money you will give to the church each year. So, this morning, in the spirit of the Reformation, with apologies to Martin Luther and to David Letterman, I would like to post on your hearts not 95, but just "Ten Theses." Think of it as a "Top Ten" list as to why we give of our financial resources to the church.

**Number 10 – Some people give out of fear or guilt.** I hope this isn't you. It was certainly true of people back in Reformation days who were taught to fear the wrath of God more than to embrace the love of God. I'm telling you that you need not have the same fear – the Bears have as many wins as the Packers and Aaron Rodgers' total Quarterback rating is 26<sup>th</sup> in the league right now which leads some to believe that hell hath surely frozen over. No need to fear. Plus, fear and guilt are not good motivators when it comes to our giving.

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<sup>1</sup> "Martin Luther and the 95 Thesis," The History Network, History.com

Although I once heard the story of a man, not very well educated and whose manner was a bit unrefined, actually a little bit crude, who became a Christian and was an enthusiastic new member of his church. He constantly pestered the pastor to let him be of some genuine service to the church. In desperation, the pastor gave him a list of ten people, saying, *“These are members who seldom attend services; some are prominent people of this city. Contact them any way you can and try to get them to be more faithful. Use the church stationary to write letters if you want but get them back in church.”*

The man accepted the challenge whole heartedly. About three weeks later, a letter arrived in the church office from a well-known physician, whose name was on the list. In the envelope was a check for \$10,000 and a note, *“Dear Pastor, enclosed is my check to make up for missed offerings. I’m sorry for missing worship so much but be assured that I am going to be present every Sunday from now on and will not by choice miss services again. Sincerely, S.T. Jones, M.D. – P.S. Would you kindly tell your secretary that there is only one ‘t’ in dirty, two ‘t’s in rotten, and no ‘c’ in skunk.”*

Using our gospel lesson this morning, let’s think about giving from the perspective of the one in the story who is the dirty rotten skunk. That would be Wee Zacchaeus. We can call him “wee” because that’s what our good Scot forebears would have said about him. In ten *short* verses (pun intended), we learn a lot about this wee man from Jericho. He is not only very rich; as the chief tax collector, he is particularly despised by his fellow Jews. The chief collector had risen to that level because he was especially good at colluding with Rome and cheating his neighbors in order to make a healthy profit for himself.

If anyone should have feared God, it was Zacchaeus. But when Jesus comes to town, he does everything he can just to get a glimpse of the man, including climbing up into a sycamore tree *“for to see what he could see.”* Who knows why? Maybe he had heard stories about Jesus being a friend to *“tax collectors and sinners.”* Or maybe there was an emptiness, a loneliness inside him, dark nights, and moral voids that he alone knew, which permeated his days and nights. People looked at Zacchaeus and saw his wealth, power, and position, but they didn’t see that he lived as an outcast among his own people, with no one to call a friend, no social life, no involvement with neighbors, except those who wanted to use him for their own ends. Maybe he just wanted to be free from all that. It feels like he went with hope and more out of excitement than guilt.

But his encounter with Jesus makes it least a couple of things clear. One, those who seek out Jesus, who know their need, Jesus seeks and finds. And when it comes to the God we worship, it is not a matter of our own goodness that earns God’s love, but rather God’s goodness. God pours out God’s love upon us even when we are undeserving. It is all grace. It is not *be good* or you won’t be loved, worse yet, be punished. It’s *be good* because you are

already so deeply loved, despite yourself, so you are free to change. Fear and guilt are not good motivators when it comes to our giving.

There are other, better reasons to give. **Number 9 – through your giving we can transform our physical plant.** Our building needs some tender loving care. We'd like to maintain and enhance it into a beautiful house where God and God's people are glad to reside. Like the psalmist we can proclaim, *"I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'"*

**Number 8 – There is something very egalitarian in giving.** All of us can share in the ministry of the church through our financial resources. It's not that we all give the same. Some are able to give at a higher clip, but no gift is too small. No amount is insignificant. Christ invites all of us to share – from the rich chief tax collector to the widow's mite.

**Number 7 – because we have a dedicated and talented staff who serve the church well;** who view their work here as a calling, not just a job, but who, none-the-less, appreciate being compensated fairly.

**Number 6 – because there is great need in our area, nation, and world,** and by giving your money to the church you can know that you are spending your money wisely, for the good of God's kingdom, teaching the faith to our children, making a blessed difference in the world – feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, working for what is good and just.

**Number 5 – because as human creatures we need to give,** it is part of who we are, it is in our DNA. Part of what it means for us to be created in God's image is that we are the most "God-like" when we are giving; because we worship a God whose giving knows no ending. And following Christ's self-giving way, the more we give the more human we become, as well.

**Number 4 – we give, because God has commanded us to give.** Luke is the only one of the four gospel writers who tells a whole series of stories that deal with wealth and possessions – the prodigal son, the unjust steward, the rich young ruler, the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus, and Zacchaeus. The stories suggest that following Jesus not only entails putting our life at God's disposal, but our money as well.<sup>2</sup> Zacchaeus said to Jesus, *"Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."* Jesus' response makes it clear that salvation entails not just personal and private virtue, but economic and public practice. Salvation encompasses more than an inward and spiritual

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher R. Hutson, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2014

grace leading to heavenly rest. It involves as well using our money to make a practical and discernable difference in the needs and conditions of people in the here and now.<sup>3</sup>

**Number 3 – because through this church, God is transforming lives.** Zacchaeus had an encounter with Jesus that transformed his life. He came down out of that sycamore tree a new man. Here in this church, we encounter the transformative power of the risen Christ in our midst. So many good things are happening in the life of our church – children and youth; eighteen confirmation class kids – biggest class in a long time; new individuals and families, through our worship and music; bible studies and fellowship groups; our mission partners, work with Afghan refugees, sponsoring a family of seven, and working with at least 19 other families. You better believe it is transforming their lives and ours in the doing.

**Number 2 – because in giving, we receive.** Being a disciple entails serious commitment to God, but it also brings great joy.<sup>4</sup> Zacchaeus decided to give, and a great burden was lifted from him. He didn't do it begrudgingly, but with a light heart and a radiant face. And Jesus' response tells us all we need to know. *"Today salvation has come..."* Not when you die, Zacchaeus, but today. If we wait until we die to experience salvation, it is too late. Salvation comes this day and every day that we choose to be giving, loving people. It brings our lives meaning and purpose and great joy!

And finally, **the number one reason we give – gratitude.** The extravagance of divine love calls forth extravagance from us.<sup>5</sup> Jesus sought Zacchaeus out, called him down from the tree, and invited himself to Zacchaeus' house. He does the same for you and me. Jesus was willing to enter our world, to live and to die, to be crucified and raised again, in order that we might have salvation come to our house.

Salvation – the gift of life abundant and life eternal. This past week you received the stewardship brochure in an email asking you to prayerfully consider your financial giving to the church for 2023. I promise you that the words "dirty," "rotten," and "skunk," are not contained therein. With a glad and grateful heart, I hope you will give generously to support the mission and ministry of Christ's church. For salvation has come to your house, to this church house, as well.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> D. Cameron Murchison, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2014

<sup>4</sup> Laura S. Sugg

<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Proctor-Smith, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2010

