

17. We believe in restitution for past wrongs whenever possible.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on July 24, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

"If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed. If the sun has risen on him, there shall be guilt for his bloodshed. He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If the theft is certainly found alive in his hand, whether it is an ox or donkey or sheep, he shall restore double. If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed, and lets loose his animal, and it feeds in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best of his own field and the best of his own vineyard. If fire breaks out and catches in thorns, so that stacked grain, standing grain, or the field is consumed, he who kindled the fire shall surely make restitution" (Exodus 22:1-6).

Whenever I read various aspects of the ancient Jewish Law two things usually come to mind almost immediately. First, God wasn't messing around! He was very serious and the penalties imposed are to be taken seriously. And second, does any of this Law apply to our lives today? For example, what about the ancient law of restitution? In addition to the Exodus 22 passage, Numbers 5:5-7 says, *"Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel: When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit in unfaithfulness against the Lord, and that person is guilty, then he shall confess the sin which he has committed. He shall make restitution for his trespass in full, plus one-fifth of it, and give it to the one he has wronged.'" Furthermore, Leviticus 2:2-5 says, "If a person sins and commits a trespass against the Lord by lying to his neighbor about what was delivered to him for safekeeping, or about a pledge, or about a robbery, or if he has extorted from his neighbor, or if he has found what was lost and lies concerning it, and swears falsely—in any one of these things that a man may do in which he sins: then it shall be, because he has sinned and is guilty, that he shall restore what he has stolen, or the thing which he has extorted, or what was delivered to him for safekeeping, or that lost thing that was lost, which he found, or all that about which he has sworn falsely. He shall restore its full value, add one-fifth more to it, and give it to whomever it belongs, on the day of his trespass offering." Solomon addressed the subject in Proverbs 6:30-31 by saying, "People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy himself when he is starving. Yet when he is found, he must restore sevenfold; he may have to give up all the substance of his house." And Ezekiel 33:15 says, "If the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has stolen, and walks in the statutes of life without committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die."*

So the Old Testament has plenty to say about the subject of restitution, but what about the New Testament? Does the principle of restitution only apply to those under the Law or does it apply to the generation in which we live as well? Well, I believe that it does. And though the New Testament doesn't deal with it as direct or as specific as the Old Testament does, it clearly suggests that forgiveness doesn't eliminate the need to do what is right or to make things right. In other words, someone may say, "But if God has forgiven me, what else really matters? Isn't God's forgiveness enough? Doesn't that settle the issue once-and-for-all?"

Consider with me a man named Zacchaeus in Luke 19. From that chapter we discover many interesting facts about him. For instance, apparently he was a big-shot in the IRS. Verse 2 says, *"Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector..."* Then we learn that he was rich, because verse 2 goes on to say, *"...and he was rich."* Thirdly, we find out he was hated. Let's face it, tax collectors aren't the most beloved people even now, but back then these publicans were notorious for overtaxing people. If the Roman government levied a 5% tax on a particular item, publicans were well known to charge 10%, 15% or whatever they wished. Because of that, they were viewed as the worst of the sinners and hated by nearly everyone. Fourthly, we discover that he was curious because verse 3 says Zacchaeus *"sought to see who Jesus was..."* Fifthly, we know that he was short, because verse 3 goes on to say, *"...he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature."* And lastly, we ascertain that he was a quick-thinker, because verse 4 says, *"So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way."* And what happens? As Jesus passes by, He looks up and sees Zacchaeus and says to him, *"Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house."* And the next verse says, *"So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully."* And to me, that may be the most important verse in the story.

John 1:12 says, *"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name."* In this series we've talked at great length about the importance of both believing in Jesus Christ as Savior and receiving Jesus Christ as Savior. Step one is believing. I must believe that Jesus Christ is sent from God as the vicarious sacrificial Lamb for the sins of mankind, but believing isn't enough. The devil believes that Jesus was the Lamb of God that came to take away the sins of the world. After one believes, he or she must receive. In other words, one must open up the door of his or her heart and say, "Jesus, I welcome you in. Come live inside of me." In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."* That's exactly what happened to Zacchaeus that day, and the reason we know that's true is because we see what I'd like to call the 3-R's in his life. And they are not reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic.

This Story Teaches Us About Repentance

As I've already stated, repentance means to change. It literally means to stop, turn, and go 180 degrees in a new direction. And we know that Zacchaeus' repentance was for real because immediately there was a dramatic and marked change in his life. For instance, verse 8 says, *"Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord, I give half my goods to the poor..."* Here's a man that had spent his

life taking, stealing, cheating, using and abusing people. And now he's willing to go 180 degrees in the opposite direction! That's what true repentance does to a person; it changes him or her! Their life is never the same again. That's why 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."*

Matter of fact, in 2 Corinthians 7 the Apostle Paul goes on to teach us more about what true repentance looks like. Paul had evidently written them a very stern and convicting letter about sin in the life of some of the members of the church, and he says, beginning in verse 8, *"For even though I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."*

And how do we know that we've truly repented? Paul says, "I'm glad you asked." For he goes on to say, beginning at verse 11, *"For observe this very thing; that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter."* In other words, if a person is no different after they have been saved then before they were saved, Paul would argue that they were never saved.

He's saying that when a person truly experiences godly sorrow, that person will now be diligent about the way he or she lives, will now try to clear things up as much as possible, will now be indignant about sin in his or her life, will now have a healthy and reverent fear of God, and will now be vehement and zealous about the things of God and proclamation of the Gospel. Essentially Paul is saying, "There is no such thing as an undercover Christian." You will be exposed because your life will be dramatically different! And Zacchaeus was dramatically different.

This Story Teaches Us About Restitution

In verse 8 of Luke 19, Zacchaeus says, *"Look, Lord, I give half my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold."* You have to wonder if his ears were shocked to hear what his mouth was saying! By that statement he is publicly renouncing his old life of sin, lying, stealing, cheating and extortion. He is announcing to the entire world that he not only realized that he needed to make restitution, but he was determined to do so. I can only imagine there were probably people lining up at his door to get what was rightfully theirs, and I'm sure Zacchaeus made it right with everyone, even if it cost him everything he owned.

Could it be that you need to make restitution with someone today? Maybe you took something and no one knows but you and God, but it's prevented you from really being at true peace ever since. I want to encourage you to ask the Lord to make it clear to you and give you the courage to follow through and make it right. Or maybe you've injured someone, not by stealing, but with your words. Damaging words, hurting another's reputation, does far more damage than taking a worldly possession. If so, ask God to give you the courage to do all that you can to restore that relationship and make things right. Is it tough to do? Absolutely! It had to be tough for Zacchaeus as well. But he did it and by doing so he teaches us a final powerful truth.

This Story Teaches Us About Release

In Acts 24:16, Paul says, *"I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men."* In other words, I want to have a clear conscience when it comes to both my relationship with God and my relationship with men. Zacchaeus felt that very same way and when Jesus saw that Zacchaeus was sincere with regard to his repentance and restitution, in verse 9, Jesus says, *"Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."*

Do you know the greatest song that can ever be sung? It's the "song of the soul set free." And that was the song of the day! Salvation had come to the house of Zacchaeus because Jesus had come and Zacchaeus responded the way that God expects all men to respond. He was serious about his repentance, he was serious about restitution and that always leads to release! It always leads to liberty! And the Bible says that when Jesus sets us free, we are free, indeed! But you will never be free if you leave unsettled issues—unsettled. You will never be free until you lay it before the Lord and say, "Lord, what must I do from this point forward to be all that you want me to be?"

When I took English Literature 101 back in College, my favorite story out of the seemingly hundreds we were required to read was a story by Bret Harte called "The Luck of Roaring Camp." It's a story about the change that took place in a mining camp in California. The only woman in the camp was named Cherokee Sal and she was a woman of questionable reputation. But while giving birth she died, which left the rough and uncultured men of Roaring Camp no choice but to take care of the baby.

The baby was first found lying in a box, but the men felt it was not appropriate for a baby's crib so they sent one of their men eighty miles on a mule to Sacramento to get a rosewood cradle. When the cradle arrived, the rags the baby was sleeping in seemed out of place so the man was sent back to Sacramento to get some lacy, frilly clothes for the baby. But once the baby was dressed in the lovely clothes and placed in the rosewood cradle, the men noticed for the first time that the floor of the cabin was dirty, so they scrubbed it. Then they noticed that the walls and ceiling were unsightly, so they cleaned them. Then they repaired the windows and put drapes on them. Because the baby needed sleep, the men tried to keep quiet and stopped their rough language and rowdy ways. And when the weather permitted, they took the cradle up to the mines but discovered the mining area had to be cleaned and flowers needed to be planted to make the surroundings lovely and attractive for the baby. Finally, the men began to improve their own personal appearance and change the way they treated one another.

The moral of the story is pretty obvious: The coming of a baby and a sense of responsibility to that baby transformed these men and everything in their lives. From that point forward, they were never the same. From that moment forward, they did everything they could

to make things right. The bottom line was this: A baby changed everything about their lives! Well, a baby came 2,000 years ago to a manger in Bethlehem to do exactly the same thing. His coming and our sense of responsibility to Him ought to change everything about our lives, including making restitution whenever possible. And with His coming, came the power to do whatever He leads us to do.