

Luke 19: 1-10: Blessings In Our Labor

Tomorrow is Labor Day: the unofficial end of summer, a day many of us mark by doing something restful, or at least by trying not to work too hard. It is good for us to pause to celebrate work. It is also good to remember that work itself is not a punishment. In Genesis, God placed Adam and Eve in the garden to tend it and care for it. Work was meant to be part of the goodness of creation: a way to serve, to steward, and to participate in God's life-giving purposes.

It was only when sin entered our human story, that work became difficult. The ground brought forth thorns and thistles along with the good seed. What was meant for joy became toil. We suffer the consequences of sin, but God does not abandon us to endless labor. God gives us Sabbath—rest, worship, communion with God—as a day of restoration.

Jesus knew the world of work. Tradition tells us he worked with his hands as a carpenter, and throughout the Gospels he speaks about laborers, vineyards, servants, wages, and faithfulness. But as he so often does, Jesus turns our expectations upside down. His followers become great, he says, not in being served, but in serving. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” If Jesus himself came among us as one who serves, then no honest work done in love is beneath us.

That brings us to Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector—and not just any tax collector, but a chief tax collector. He was wealthy, connected, and deeply disliked. He had made his living by working for Rome and by taking more than he should from his own people. By every ordinary measure, he was seen as morally compromised.

And yet Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. He, the dignified, climbed a tree just to get a glimpse of him. Then came the astonishing moment: Jesus looked up, saw him, and said, “Come down. I’m coming to your house today.” With that invitation, something changed in Zacchaeus. He did not announce that he would quit being a tax collector. He said he would become an honest one. Immediately. He would give half of what he had to the poor. He would repay anyone he had cheated four times over.

That is what stays with me: Zacchaeus did not change what he did; he changed how he did it. His encounter with Jesus transformed his relationship to his work. From that day forward, his work became something different—not exploitation, but fairness; not greed, but generosity; not self-service, but service to God and neighbor.

Zacchaeus is an example for us all. Whatever our work may be—paid or unpaid, public or hidden, prestigious or overlooked—we need to ask ourselves how we do it. Do we do it with honesty? With mercy? With patience? With fairness? With love? When we do, our work becomes more than a task. It becomes a form of discipleship.

Paul tells us to pray without ceasing, and I'll admit that can sound impossible. But perhaps constant prayer is not only words spoken in church or in quiet devotion. Perhaps prayer is also the faithful way we move through the ordinary work of our lives. Martin Luther said that everything a believer does can become prayer when it is done in faith, with reverence for God, and with care not to wrong, cheat, or harm another person.

So tomorrow, whether you are resting, playing, or working, may you remember Zacchaeus. May you see prayer in your activity. And may the work of our hands, done in love, become both service to God and prayer. Amen.