

Matthew 5:21-24 / Luke 19:5-10

Restitution: Restoring Relationships

A story – about Jim

As a teenager Jim had always wanted to grow a moustache. He'd heard somewhere that if you shaved your face, your beard would grow out dark and stubby. Grabbing his dad's shaving mug and razor, he locked himself in the bathroom and shaved off the imaginary beard. It didn't work. The fuzz merely regrew as fuzz.

Several years later the church youth group had a Halloween party and Jim had no outfit for the party, so he and his friend John stopped off at the local store on the way home from school to shop. Among the Halloween masks and outfits was a stick-on moustache packaged in a nifty little plastic case. Imagining himself with this moustache causing all the girls to swoon Jim tried it on. It made him feel taller, more mature. The problem: he had no money.

So never having stolen anything before that, he slipped the little moustache in his school jacket and sneaked out to the street. He wore it to the party and the girls didn't swoon.

Jim had a hard time forgetting that moustache – knew it was wrong, and he should go back to the store, confess and pay for it. But he was afraid.

He feared both the embarrassment and the penalty.

A lady who worked the store attended the church where Jim's dad was pastor. He thought she'd tell him, and his Dad would punish him like the thief he was. He conjured up all kinds of "worst case scenarios" as he remembered the large poster near the store entrance with the words "Shoplifters go to jail."

Jim could visualize a whole newspaper spread on how nice teens -- even a preacher's son -- could go bad. He would be the illustration in dad's sermon. Parents would whisper after church, "Doesn't it make your heart ache...you know, how Jim turned out!" They would admonish each other, "Keep a tight rein on your kids or they'll turn out like the preacher's kid."

So Jim never went back.

Each time Jim recalled his offense, he'd try to ignore it, excuse it, or dismiss it. First telling himself he couldn't afford making things right - simply didn't have the money. The moustache had already lost its stickiness, so returning it wouldn't work. But mostly he just put it off. He intended to make it right...eventually.

With time his conviction gradually disappeared, he almost forgot about it. Occasionally guilt would surface but he would dismiss it with comments like, "It was such a little thing," or, "that was a long time ago." Jim left high school and moved away to college, forgetting the little moustache. For the most part, that is.

Except that every time he heard about "restitution" - read in an article or heard someone's testimony - he'd remember that little moustache. The moustache was always there, reminding him of unmade restitution.

At a retreat two decades later, God convinced Jim of the necessity of this restitution. It was clear that he'd better fix it soon. He knew if he delayed much longer it would be more than foot dragging -- it would be outright disobedience, even rebellion. Within a month Jim was in the area with his family. He loaded his five-year-old boy into the car and went to make restitution for what had been stolen 20 years before. Jim explained to his son David what he'd done and what he was about to do. All the way to the store he was secretly hoping it had gone out of business. It hadn't. David was intrigued by this whole idea. He seemed to get a kick out of seeing his Dad be humbled.

After paying for the moustache, they returned to the car and headed out of town. Jim's son had said nothing throughout the whole process, but Jim could sense this young boy's mind whirling. As he drove up the entry ramp of the motorway, he turned and said, "You know, Dad, it would be better if you'd never take things like that...then you wouldn't have to go back like that."

David understood, and I guess Jim got David's point too!

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Today's passage from Matthew 5 concerns Jesus' radical interpretation of the 6th commandment. The actual committing of murder is only an outward manifestation of an inward attitude. Jesus is saying this inward attitude is a problem...

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment

And then it moves to the passage about repairing broken relationships, offering a positive counterpart to the negative verdict of ...

anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

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The passage is about one who has come to the only place for sacrificial offering – the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus is relaying this story at the sermon on the mount in Galilee. We must understand the improbable scenario Jesus portrays – someone comes to Jerusalem with his sacrificial animal, then leaves the animal to travel for a week or so back to Galilee and back again so they could affect reconciliation with a wronged brother or sister, before coming to offer to God.

It's saying - right relationships demand decisive action...

Go see your wronged sister or brother. Sort it out – get right with one another before getting right with God.

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In Luke we heard only part of the Zacchaeus story – today I am concerned about the response of Zacchaeus to Jesus.

For this is what we are talking about in our 12-Step Christianity series. This is all about how we as followers of Christ respond to the salvation we find in a relationship with the risen and ascended Lord.

Dare I say – if becoming a Christian has not changed your life, then you need to get on your knees and ask why. Ask the question

Jesus – will you transform me?

Will you show me the way to life in all its fullness?

Show me my sinfulness and show me what to do about it?

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All it took for Zacchaeus to be changed was to welcome Jesus

I must stay at your house today.” 6So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

Jesus came and shared fellowship – shared hospitality.

Do you offer that to Jesus?

Do you invite him to sit with you at the table, on the sofa, next to you on the bus, or as you drive to and from work?

Do you welcome Him gladly?

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If we truly welcome Him, the change cannot be ignored...

“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

The presence of Christ convicts Zacchaeus of his sin, of the guilt of cheating people... and the need for restitution.

Steps 8 and 9 of the AA 12-Step program are to

- Make a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all; and then
- to make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

And so, in our Christian lives we are also called to make restitution for the harm our sin has done to others.

But why?

- What would possess a Christian to take such humiliating steps?
- Why have believers through history practiced this discipline

1. It's a matter of obedience.

More than fifteen times the Old Testament teaches restitution for followers of God. Jesus confirmed the idea, as we hear his words to Zacchaeus

“Today salvation has come to this house”.

Not that making restitution can save a man or woman. Nothing we can do will bring salvation, except trusting Christ.

And it is through trusting Him we can know he is by us in the difficulty of restitution... even when we don't like the idea... and most likely we don't.

The reason we don't like it is not because it's unbiblical; it is because it is in total opposition to our pride. We hate to be humbled, embarrassed, humiliated.

It goes against our nature. So, we would rather save our pride than make restitution. But, it's a matter of obedience - "If you love me, keep my commands". (John 14:15).

2. Restitution reinforces personal happiness.

Obedience brings happiness -- not a silly, frivolous kind of giddiness, but a deep-seated joy of knowing we are living up to what we've been commanded to do.

We may have asked God to forgive and He has fully washed away our sin, yet still feel guilty?

When we leave a restitution unmade, we add a load of guilt to the burdens of our daily walk. We feel guilty.

But once we've made restitution, we experience a new happiness and freedom in our lives.

3. Restitution releases you to greater service.

Unmade restitutions are like a great monkey on your back. Satan sidles up to your ear every time you try to do something for God. He whispers, "Where do you think you're going...we know what kind of person you are, remember how you..."

When restitutions are all made, there is a new boldness to serve Christ in other areas.

4. Restitution releases you to greater service.

Just think, another person may hold a grudge against you for what you said or did long ago?

Have you ever thought that the offended person may be sour, bitter, and full of resentment over that "little thing" you did?

Yes, our course, they are sinning. But are you not an "accessory" to their sin?

What would happen if you approached them to humbly ask for their forgiveness? What if they granted forgiveness to you?

Could they then hold a grudge any longer?

Your tardiness in making restitution may be placing a great stumbling block in another's path toward God.

5. Restitution releases you to teach others.

If you needed to advise another believer on the advantages of restitution, what story would you tell?

What story will you tell your children or your grandchildren? Do you have one? Have you never done a thing deserving of restitution? Not once?

After you've made restitution for past wrongs, God often uses these experiences to help you teach others.

6. Restitution humbles you...

perhaps more than any other discipline of the Christian walk. And any time we are humbled -- reminded of who and what we are -- that's good!

7. Restitution vaccinates the offended against future wrongs.

Nothing guarantees you won't slip and fall again, but restitution comes close.

The next time you are tempted to take something which doesn't belong to you, you will remember the past pain and humiliation of returning to make restitution.

When you are about to let loose with a biting, sarcastic, hurtful remark, you may think of the embarrassment in store for you when you later must ask this person to forgive you.

These thoughts tend to be "preventative medicine." A little pain now -- doing without biting your tongue -- is preferable to the greater pain of restitution.

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Restitution then involves 4-simple steps

1. Make a list of people you have sinned against
2. Determine the effect of your sin
3. Determine the best way to make restitutions... and then
4. Do it

But doing the right thing the wrong way may make things worse.

Just as there is a collective wisdom about how to pray, read the Bible, or restore a backsliding brother, so there is sound sensible advice on how to make restitution.

These are on the sheet that came in your bulletin this morning – put it with your work-book to help you:

- 1. Start with the key unmade restitution** – pray first, what is God leading you to
- 2. Prepare your speech** – Prayerfully think what you are going to say (Luke 15:17-19).
- 3. Pick the right time, place, and means** - Don't ask when the other person is exceptionally busy, tired, or irritable, but also don't put it off.
- 4. Don't combine witnessing with restitution** - Simply make your restitution and get on with life.
- 5. Give a full confession.** - Come clean. Humans are always trying to make themselves look better, even while making restitution... just say, "I was wrong; will you forgive me".

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So, what about you, my friends?

Can you think of any unmade restitutions? Or do you have a totally clear conscience?

I am guessing the answer to that question for all of us is no – none of us are without someone we have been responsible for hurting.

The question remains – what do we do about it?

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I humbly ask we pray – seek God and make restitution as he calls us to.

Wisely, carefully, compassionately and always guided by the Lord...

Our Lord of mercy and grace who said to Zacchaeus

Today salvation has come to this house...

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”