

Exposing Zacchaeus

by [Vitor Westhelle](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us that grace is free but not cheap, gratis but not banal, gratuitous but not superfluous. The reformers of the 16th century defined the cost of grace by a single word: repentance. Repentance comes about when “terror strikes the conscience” (Melanchthon). Only thus can grace be truly free: in recognizing our sin, we are left without any bargaining chips, without appeal and defenses.

The movement of grace must always start with us. If terror does not strike the conscience, what we get is terrorism, whether through suicidal bombers or genocidal indebtedness, through weapons of mass destruction or weapons of mass deception.

The incipience of grace requires us to move away from the protected hideouts where we refuse to see, to hear, to talk about the truth. Consider this definition of an idol: that which arrests the gaze so that we don't see or hear or speak the truth. For the idol to be smashed, our protective hideouts need to be exposed. Exposure frees the gaze and gives us a true vision, a vision that strikes our conscience with terror at what is happening and makes us confess our share in it.

One encounters an idol being exposed in the words of Carolina Maria de Jesus, a woman who lived in the slums of São Paulo. She had almost no formal education, but she knew how to write, and she kept a journal, which was found by a journalist and published in the late 1950s. In an entry of 1956 she wrote the following about her son João:

João came in saying he had a stomachache. I know what it was, for he had eaten a rotten melon. Today they threw a truckload of melons near the river. I don't know why it is that these senseless businessmen come to throw their rotten products near the favela [shantytown] for the children to see and eat. In my opinion, the merchants of São Paulo are playing with the people like Caesar when he tortured Christians. But the Caesars of today are worse than the Caesars of the past. The others were punished for their faith. But we, for our hunger! In that era, those who did not want

to die had to stop loving Christ. But we cannot stop loving eating.

Worth noting is that the entry was made on December 25, Christmas Day—though this Christian woman made no mention of that fact.

Something seems to be amiss. This is after all the day that Christians in Brazil no less than in any other part of the world celebrate the birth of God among us as a little child. The woman's silence about Christmas is eloquent. And her comparison between loving Christ and loving eating could not be more evangelical: you stop loving Christ if you make him into an idol so that he is no longer the God exposed in the flesh, born of poor and displaced parents, in a stable amid animals, dung and flies, who hung helpless on a cross and who promised to be among the hungry, the sick, the little ones of all ages, in every street child.

The silence regarding Christmas in this diary entry is powerful because it tacitly reveals the idol that Christmas has become and exposes an unlikely place of epiphany: a dirty river bank where children eat rotten melons. Who defines Christmas—those hungry children amid the rotten melons or the merchants amid their luxurious and lavish Christmas banquets? Carolina Maria de Jesus exposes the dire conditions under which Christ was born and is being born, the place where faith and grace are brought forth amid the hunger of the world. Is this not what Jesus meant by saying that we don't live by bread alone? Is Jesus not saying that life begins among those who, like those children, cannot rely on bread alone, precisely because they don't have it?

Repentance, the bearer of grace, can come only when we expose ourselves and are exposed to the wounds of the world. This is what repentance means—literally to bow down, to be bent over (*re-pendere*) by the weight of the pain of the world.

A famous biblical story of exposure and repentance is that of the tax collector Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Zacchaeus means *pure or innocent* (from the Hebrew *ZaKal*). Ironically, this chief tax collector was called pure and innocent even though tax collectors ranked high in the registry of sinners. In the ceremony of his naming, Zacchaeus was given his name as a promise. Luke's story is about how Zacchaeus became *ZaKal*, became what he was promised to be. (Just so, in the baptismal rite we are given the promise that through repentance we return to righteousness and innocence.)

Tax collectors, not to mention chief tax collectors, were considered a special class of sinners by the Jews for a number of reasons. They were fellow Judeans who were working for the Roman occupiers. They not only got rich by impoverishing others, but were known to send troops to invade homes of those who allegedly were withholding unreported goods. Presumably Zacchaeus and his cronies invaded the homes of common people and plundered them; the more goods they could tax, the richer they would become. That was Zacchaeus's goal, and he reached it. He "was rich," Luke says.

What brought Zacchaeus into this Lukan story is that he somehow knew that he needed something that all his wealth could not afford. He had wealth, but not health; he was safe, but not saved (the word for health and salvation in Greek is the same: *soteria*). The text tells us he was a *zeteios*, someone who inquires, searches and seeks. When Zacchaeus learned that a healer by the name of Jesus was coming to town he was not in denial; he knew that he needed some sort of healing.

The text tells us that he was of short stature. The word for stature (*helikía*) can also be translated as maturity or, metaphorically, character. In other words, Zacchaeus did not have much character. He was held in low esteem. This was the case whatever his actual physical height.

It does not take much guessing to know what people like Zacchaeus do to compensate for their low character. They climb. They will do whatever it takes to be above the common folk, who they know have greater character and integrity. They climb political ladders or corporate ladders. Zacchaeus, we know, climbed a nearby sycamore tree. But the symbolism is the same. His aim was to raise himself above the common folk. He climbed the tree in the hope that he would see this acclaimed healer and that the man of Nazareth, respected as he was by the folk that Zacchaeus preyed upon, would also see him and affirm the stature he had earned by climbing. Maybe what his ego was waiting to hear was Jesus saying, "Zacchaeus, you climbed that tree to see me. That is what makes you greater than this entire crowd."

But beware, you social, economic and political climbers. Don't try to impress Jesus; it will backfire. The man from Nazareth looks at the man in the tree, way above the common folk and even above Jesus himself (for the text says Jesus needed to look up to see him), and orders him to come down immediately: *Zakxaie, speúsas katábethi. Sémeioron gar en oíko sou dei me meintai.*

The usual translations fail to convey the sharpness of Jesus' remark. *Dei me meintai* is not a self-invitation, a gesture of etiquette; it is an imperative, a demand, even a threat. It might be rendered, "Zacchaeus, get down at once; today I must definitely come to your house." Or, more fully: "Zacchaeus, get down from there and face your own low and debased stature and know yourself for what you truly are. And today I will enter your luxurious and secured home just as you have invaded and plundered the poor houses of these people." How about that for grace?

But grace is what it is—harsh grace, but grace indeed. Zacchaeus tumbles down from the tree; he repents, meets his true stature. He exposes his character for what it is. Zacchaeus, understandably, is a bit embarrassed, but like anyone who admits to a long-hidden wrongdoing he is also relieved. He happily welcomes Jesus into his house, which might well have been as guarded as are some of the houses of the wealthy in the U.S. Before Jesus says anything, Zacchaeus hastens to tell him that he will give half of what he has to the poor, and that to those he has defrauded he will make restitution fourfold, surpassing the law which prescribed that one-fifth of the defrauded amount should be added to the restitution. The words he receives from Jesus are what he was looking for: "Today healing/salvation (*soteria*) has come to this house."

Salvation was not promised to Zacchaeus in heaven. It was given in the very gesture of his act of vulnerability. He became *ZaKal*, innocent, like someone brought back to the baptismal font.

Did Zacchaeus live up to his words? That seems taken for granted. For Zacchaeus, that would be the easiest part. The hardest part was to welcome Jesus into his well-protected house—off-limits to common folks—to welcome that man of the common people who had addressed him with menacing and harsh words. That act was like piercing a hole through a dam. A small hole in a huge dam will eventually bring it all down. Zacchaeus's gesture of vulnerability had that effect: it pierced a hole in the dam that held secure his wealth and power.

So who are the Zacchaeuses of today? Where are their protected houses? What are their home-security measures? How is Jesus calling them down from the sycamores of success and wealth?

Before answering by pointing to others—or to the workplace, the corporation, the school, the city, the class, the nation that needs to be challenged—we need to start

with ourselves as we think about exposure and repentance. A sermon by John Chrysostom illustrates what it means to start with ourselves.

In one of his “Homilies on the Acts,” Chrysostom notes that the church of his day had created institutions to care for the poor and strangers. It would seem to be a great thing for the church to do. But to the surprise of today’s readers—and perhaps to those of his own time—the “golden-mouthed” preacher launches an attack on these institutions, not for the works of charity they perform but for the way they are put to use by well-off Christians. These ministries to the poor and the stranger were used to keep them out of sight and out of churchpeople’s houses. They were instruments to prevent exposure and to avoid the face of the poor, argues Chrysostom, instruments for keeping Christ and the angels at bay. Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Also, Christ says in Matthew 25:40, “Truly I say to you, as you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

Chrysostom knew where transformation begins: by allowing the other, the poor and the stranger to become known, to have a voice, to have a face. Without exposure there is no repentance; without repentance, no grace; without grace, no transformation.

The Gospels prepare us to hear the word of grace by first making us hear the voice of John, the voice crying in the desert, denouncing and exposing the leaders of the people as a “brood of vipers” and calling all to a baptism of repentance. This prepares the way for the one who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire—a baptism no longer in water, but in the wells of grace (the Holy Spirit) and in the fire that changes, transforms and purifies all.

Chrysostom criticizes his fellow Christians for excusing themselves from meeting Christ because church charities were doing it for them. He asks: If the priest prays, does that mean that you do not need to pray? If the church cares for the little ones, does that mean that you need not care and receive Christ in your own home? In other words, the great preacher was saying: You want a Christ without first meeting John the Baptist. You want a cute little babe in a golden manger, a fair and kind teacher, a glorious resurrected Christ now seated in the splendor of heaven at the right hand of God’s throne. But you avoid the filthy stable, and have paid little attention to the homeless preacher without a place to lay his head. You have not endured the exposed body on a cross, tortured as the worst sinner and killed as a

political criminal, who cried out words of abandonment.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas once observed that the marginalized are the fragile side of a society, and that is why they must be kept hidden. The centers of power see their own weakness in the margins, and they don't want those margins exposed. Exposure would hasten the transformation of the status quo, and that is the last thing that those benefiting from the status quo want.

Zacchaeus was transformed by an act of self-exposure. This is why the ultimate revelation of God is not the sight of God's glory—which is what Moses wanted—but the sight of God exposed in the misery of a condemned criminal, hanging naked on a cross and enduring an excruciating death. It is this sight that Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian film director and poet, calls us to consider:

All his wounds are open to the sun
and He dies under the eyes
of everyone: even His mother
under His breast, belly and knees,
watches His body suffer.
Dawn and dusk cast light
on His open arms and April
softens His exhibition of death
to gazes that burn Him.

Why was Christ exposed on the Cross?
Oh, the heart shudders at the naked
body of the youth . . . atrocious
offence to its raw modesty . . .
The sun and the gazes!

You must expose yourself (is this what the
poor nailed-up Christ teaches?),
the clarity of the heart is worthy
of every sneer, every sin,
every more naked passion . . .
(is this what the Crucifix means?
sacrifice every day the gift
renounce every day forgiveness

cast yourself ingenuous over the abyss).
We will be offered on the cross,
on the pillory, between the pupils
impid with ferocious joy,
leaving open to irony the drops
of blood from the breast to the knees,
gentle and ridiculous, trembling
with intellect and passion in the play
of the heart burning from its fire,
testifying to the scandal.

The quotation of Pier Paolo Pasolini's poem is from Michael Hardt's translation in "Exposure: Pasolini in the Flesh," in A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari, edited by Brian Massumi (Routledge, 2002).