



3. Response

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We give you thanks that you have not waited for us to seek you,
but have loved and cared for us
long before we could ever recognize, ask for, earn, or deserve your love.
We recognize and acknowledge that your grace invites each of us and
all of us to respond to your love by following the example of Jesus
and dedicating ourselves
to acts of acts of worship, fellowship, sacrifice, and service.
Amen.*

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe that God’s grace invites response.

Some Christians, including some college students and young adults, respond to the Presbyterian emphasis on God’s grace by asking what is the point of having faith and trying to be a good person if God is going to save us no matter how we act. They essentially view Christian faith as “hell insurance”—as the thing people have to do so God won’t send them to eternal punishment.

While Presbyterians don’t believe we have to do anything to get God to love us, we also believe God’s unconditional love invites and empowers us to respond in gratitude by worshiping God and striving to be instruments of God’s love in the lives of others. We absolutely believe that God cares what we do—how we act—but we think our responsibilities, as individuals and as a faith community, are exactly that: “response-abilities.”

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We all have important choices to make about how we respond to the love that is and will always be present in our lives.

Individually and together, Presbyterians make grateful response to God's grace by worshiping God, studying Scripture together, and caring for all of God's children and all God's creation.

1

Consider two stories from the Gospel of Luke—the Healing of the Ten Lepers (**Luke 17:11–18**) and the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus (**Luke 19:1–8**).

LUKE 17:11–12

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance,

At the time Luke wrote this story (probably around 70 CE) the terms “leper” and “leprosy” were used to refer to a variety of highly contagious skin diseases. Contemporary readers need to remember that this story was written in a pre-scientific context. It was not unusual for ten “lepers” to be together. They “kept their distance” because everyone around would have known of their illness and would have been legitimately afraid of getting sick after contact with them.

LUKE 17:13

they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

Jesus clearly had a reputation as a healer, and it makes sense for these ten lepers to ask him to help them (see **Luke 4:31–37, 4:38–39, 5:12–13, 5:17–20, 6:6–11, and 8:26–39**).

LUKE 17:14

When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.

It was often the case at that time that individuals who had suffered from one of the contagious diseases that were called leprosy got well. The disease went away. They were no longer contagious and were welcomed to return to the day-to-day life of the community. There are instructions in **Leviticus 13:2–8 and 14:2–32** for priests to examine lepers to determine whether or not they had recovered and could safely return to the community.

Note the grammar at the end of the verse. Luke doesn't tell us that the lepers "got well," he says, "they were made clean." The emphasis is on the healing action of Jesus.

LUKE 17:15

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

One of the ten healed lepers goes back and thanks Jesus. He realizes that he has been healed, that he is a recipient of grace, and his response is to "praise God with a loud voice."

LUKE 17:16

He prostrated himself at Jesus's feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

Another instance in Luke's Gospel in which a Samaritan, one who would likely have been derided and dismissed by the original audience and readers, is held up as an example of faithful behavior.

LUKE 17:17-18

Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?"

Jesus is pretty clearly disappointed that the other nine healed lepers don't immediately respond by praising God and giving thanks. But it's also very important to note that Jesus does not get mad and "unheal" them, even though they don't respond in a way that he would have preferred. The healing action of Jesus was not conditional on any behavior on the part of the ten lepers.

Grace.

When the Samaritan former leper praises God and thanks Jesus, he is *responding* to what God did first. His motivation is gratitude, not self-interest.

Presbyterians believe that we are as fully recipients of God's grace as those ten lepers.

And we understand that God's grace invites us all to respond as the Samaritan leper did—by "praising God with a loud voice" and regularly, repeatedly, and joyfully expressing gratitude to God. That's why we worship and sing and generally carry on about how awesome God is.

But praising God is not all we're called and invited to do.

Check out the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus in **Luke 19:1–8**:

LUKE 19:1

[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it.

At this point, we are 19 chapters into Luke's Gospel. Word was getting out about who Jesus was and what he did. It was kind of a big deal when he came to town.

LUKE 19:2

A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was chief tax collector and was rich.

A first-century audience who originally read or heard this story would have immediately recognized that Zacchaeus was a lousy, stinking sinner.

When the Roman empire conquered regions like Jericho, they sought local residents to collect taxes for the Romans from the conquered population. These tax collectors were responsible for passing a certain amount of money along to the Romans. The Roman army supported them, even when the tax collectors took more money from the residents than they were to give to the Romans.

That's how tax collectors got rich.

LUKE 19:3

He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

Luke reports this fascinating detail without comment. Why would this rich, sinful, and apparently vertically-challenged tax collector want to see Jesus?

We don't know.

But this wouldn't have been much of a story otherwise.

LUKE 19:4

So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

The short guy was persistent.

LUKE 19:5

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”

Jesus does three things in verse 5 that can be taken as a great model for ministry with college students.

First, he “looks up.” This implies that Jesus is not so focused on the path in front of him that he misses the opportunity to interact with a guy up in a tree. Ministry with college students often involves recognizing opportunities to engage others that arise in unexpected places, at unexpected times, and in unexpected ways.

Second, Jesus calls Zacchaeus by his name. He doesn’t refer to Zacchaeus by the categories he fits into—rich tax collector, short in stature, or as we’ll see in verse 7, sinner. Jesus treats Zacchaeus as a whole person with a name.

Nobody is just a “college student,” a “young adult,” a “person of color,” a “queer person,” a “believer,” or a “sinner.” Categories are very helpful for thinking about complicated things, but no individual is simply a representative of the categories they fight into.

Ministry with college students involves recognizing that each student is a whole, distinct, complete, and sufficient person with a name.

Finally, Jesus invites Zach to come down out of the tree and share a particular gift (his house).

Jesus calls Zacchaeus out of the audience and into the story.

Ministry with college students can similarly involve inviting students to recognize themselves as gifted and encouraging them to share their gifts with the larger community. It’s about inviting them to “climb down out of the tree” and play their role in the larger story, enabling them to think of themselves as ministry partners and not just ministry recipients.

LUKE 19:6

So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

It felt good for Zacchaeus to be noticed, addressed by name, and invited to share his gifts.

That’s true for all of us.

Attention is good.

LUKE 19:7

All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

This is Zacchaeus’ tacky neighbors trying to put him back in the boxes into which they had conveniently placed him. They’d rather think of him as a short, rich sinner than as a whole, gifted person with a name.

Luke doesn’t report any response at all from Jesus to the neighbors’ grumbling.

Jesus doesn’t tell the tacky neighbors, “No, he’s not really a sinner.”

He doesn’t say, “Yes, but I’m gonna fix him.”

Jesus just ignores them.

Haters gonna hate.

Now watch this:

LUKE 19:8

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “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.”

This is a happy ending to this story.

After having been marginalized by his grumpy but legitimately resentful neighbors, and after having been noticed, addressed by name, and invited to share his gifts, Zacchaeus tells Jesus that he’s going to share his stuff and clean up the messes he’s made.

It is important to note that Zacchaeus does not vow to share his stuff and clean up his messes *so that* he can get Jesus to notice him and come to his house.

Jesus has already noticed him and came to his house.

Zacchaeus’ change of behavior is not transactional. His motivation for giving away his stuff and paying back those whom he has defrauded is not self-interest; it’s *gratitude*.

Zacchaeus responds to the grace he receives from Jesus by vowing to change the way he behaves. He recognizes his giftedness and vows to use his gifts for others—especially for others who are facing difficulties.

The experience of being noticed, addressed by name, and invited to share his gifts leads Zacchaeus to think of himself as a partner in the ongoing ministry of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

While Presbyterians clearly and repeatedly emphasize the grace of God, we also believe that God's grace consistently invites us to make grateful response by praising God and sharing our gifts with others.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you or other Christians you know believe that we have to do the right things before God will love us?
- Is this idea that God loves us no matter what we do new to you?
- Is it comforting?
- Why or why not?
- If grace is real, what's the point of going to church or studying the Bible?
- If we don't have to do anything to get God to love us, why should we worry about living faithful lives and loving God and neighbor?