

## Gospel ABCs

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“Break open” a Gospel by applying “Gospel ABCs” – that is, identifying the attitude(s), behavior(s) and consequence(s) that surface in a particular person within the Gospel story.

Choose a character/figure from a Gospel reading – any character. Of course you may always choose Jesus but all the other characters also have the potential to teach us something. Positive characters like Andrew who brought Peter to Jesus might teach us to have a missionary spirit or to put a better-good, a higher-good, a common-good before an ego-choice. Andrew cared more about sharing Jesus with his brother Peter (a higher-good) than keeping that secret treasure for himself (ego; me/myself/and I)! What else can you say about Andrew?

Negative characters like Pilate also have something to teach us. Ego, fear of losing his position, peer-pressure, trying to please everyone, etc., led Pilate to wash his hands of his responsibility to be just. What else can you say about Pilate?

We'd all rather be an Andrew than a Pilate but, truth to tell, we are, at different times, both Andrew and Pilate. So both characters have something to teach us about ourselves and about choices of Christian character. Both persons portrayed an attitude that led to a behavior; and all attitudes/behaviors have consequences. We can build a Gospel character within our souls by paying attention to the figures in the Gospel.

Weekly we hear the Good News proclaimed at the Sunday liturgy – sacred stories with contemporary application. Each Gospel speaks of **ATTITUDES** that lead to life and loving relationships here and now, like openness, forgiveness, conversion, and awareness. Or the Gospel points to attitudes that block life and love, like suspicion, rash judgment, self-righteousness, or negativity.

An attitude often prompts **BEHAVIOR**. **Life-giving attitudes** might lead us to welcome another, share gifts of nature and grace with others, own up to mistakes, offer reconciliation, or to ask forgiveness. **Life-blocking attitudes**, on the other hand, might erupt into hurtful behaviors like lying, betraying another, gossip, excluding others, acting out on prejudices, or seeking revenge.

**CONSEQUENCES** result from our attitudes and behaviors. Positive attitudes result in joy, energy, enthusiasm for life and vital relationships whereas negative thinking paralyzes. It blocks the heart to what good there is and it becomes a “turn off” to others. Jesus said that he came so that we might have life and have that to the fullest extent possible.

The Gospel message is one of life, love, wholeness, and true happiness. It is worth the time it takes to “chew” on the Sunday Gospel and identify the **attitudes**,

**behaviors** and **consequences** contained in the story and then, to weave those pieces into a prayer for the week.

Slowly and reflectively read a Gospel story. Decide on which person to concentrate. Name one attitude of the person (or more), the behavior(s) that surfaced, and the consequence(s) of the character's choices. Then ask yourself what life-message or connection exists between the Gospel character and personal life? Talk this over with Jesus and ask him to focus you on his will for you.

If you are praying this exercise as an individual person it may be helpful to keep a notebook or journal to jot down your thoughts and continue to add to them when you use this prayer-exercise with additional Gospel stories on other occasions. If you are using this prayer-exercise with a group of people designate a poster board for each element (attitude, behavior, consequence) where you will collect all the responses from the participants. In time a list will grow of positive elements and negative elements – both form a vocabulary for shaping Gospel Character. I suggest having one poster for **ATTITUDES** and divide it into two columns; one for positive traits and the other for negative traits. Do the same for **BEHAVIORS** and for **CONSEQUENCES**. Recognize that if four people reflect on the Sunday Gospel, it is likely that four unique responses will emerge. There is no one, common, “right” conclusion. If anything, our God is the God of possibilities and the Spirit tailors grace to the individual soul and the circumstances of the present.

By way of example consider the Gospel story of Zacchaeus, the Tax Collector.

“He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 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.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” 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.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

(New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE), Luke 19: 1-10)

1. Focus one Gospel-Character: Jesus, Zacchaeus, a member of the crowd, or the person who grumbled, or be a person who was nearby and observing the entire scenario, or be the tree.
2. **A (Attitudes):** What attitude(s) or character trait(s) do you see in the Gospel-Character within this particular story?
3. **B (Behaviors):** What behavior(s) do you associate with this Gospel-Character within this particular story?

4. **C (Consequences):** Name the consequence(s) of this Gospel-Character's attitudes and behaviors?
5. Create a prayer of petition (a single sentence) that reflects a focus or insight that came to you while exploring Gospel ABCs. *Example: "Give me the courage to go out on a limb in order to see you, Jesus..."*

Or pursue these kinds of questions:

1. How do my responses connect with what is going on in my life today?
2. Why do I think the Holy Spirit is calling my attention to these particular ideas? What might Jesus be asking me to do?
3. Talk this over with Jesus.

A group of young teens (eighth grade students) "broke open" this Gospel story and they focused on Zacchaeus. (They also decided to nickname him Zee!) The collective vision of the teens suggested the following:

- Zee's **attitudes** included resourcefulness, creative hope, willingness to "go out on a limb," compensation for/and coping with a disadvantage (shortness), being proactive, and claiming his desire/need/curiosity to see Jesus. Being denied this opportunity was not an acceptable option for Zee!
- Zee's attitudes prompted the **behaviors** of "thinking outside the box" and climbing the tree.
- The **consequence** of Zee's choices was that his proactive energies paid off! Not only did he get a view of Jesus, he received a personal invitation into relationship with Jesus. Even though the public "black-balled him" because of his tax-collecting practices, Jesus was open to him – and publicly so!

The teens concluded that since the results (consequences) were positive it suggested that Jesus must approve of:

- thinking for yourself,
- taking action rather than griping or whining or letting others crowd you out,
- being willing to climb a tree or overcome an obstacle to get what you desire,
- going out on a limb,
- being proactive in meeting the needs of your soul.

Life-message connections varied among the teens, but each recognized a nudge from the Holy Spirit to *name, claim and tame* a personal short-coming and each teen formulated a personal prayer that requested a related grace. For example one teen wrote:

*Jesus, I think you are making me look at forgiveness today because I need to ask forgiveness from peers to whom I have been rude and mean. I am scared to do this because I am embarrassed by my actions. I will have difficulty talking to these people. Please give me the courage that I need. And please open up their hearts to hear me and to forgive me.*

## STUDENT EXAMPLES

**1. Summary Statement:** Zacchaeus was short, but Jesus noticed him.

I may not be outstanding but I know you notice me, Jesus. I know that you don't care that I am not the best of all, just the best I can be! Your words mean that I shouldn't belittle myself; that I should have more confidence. I don't think you are asking anything of me, expect maybe just to believe in myself. I don't know if I can muster up any more confidence. I was never very confident about most things. I can only say that I will try my best, because it really is not my nature to be self-confident.

**2. Summary Statement:** Sometimes people have to go get what they want by themselves without depending on someone else.

Jesus, I think you are telling me to stop trying to blend in with the crowd. I want to be my own person. I have to depend on myself some more. You are giving me the opportunity to do things by myself and different from others. You are asking me to depend on myself more or to find the unique part of me that is different from everyone else and precious. I want to respond by being more responsible and unique and to stop trying to blend in with the crowd and almost miss opportunities.

**3. Summary Statement:** Jesus loves everybody -- great and small!

It doesn't matter what my size is. You still love me. You probably want me to stop comparing myself to others in size and other things. You called my attention to the fact that you called Zacchaeus and welcomed him. You are asking me not to focus so much on little details, but the big picture itself.

Holy Spirit, please help me not to worry so much about little details and hurt feelings but to try my best to welcome others. I want to respond to you, Jesus, by giving a sign of affection to everyone I meet. Help me overcome the difficulty of getting my feelings hurt when I do this.

**4. Summary Statement:** Although we may feel lost, left out, or unnoticed in our lives, Jesus always notices us and loves us just as much as he loves anyone else.

I think you are telling me that you love me no matter how many mistakes I make. And I think you are asking me to make friends with those who feel unwanted and seem lonely. I think you want me to make them feel special. I am willing to try to do what you ask but I might have difficulties such as being teased and not being able to have enough patience. Please help me to be patient and understanding. Thank you for relaying your message to me today.

**5. Summary Statement:** Jesus did not let the criticisms of the crowd change his decision to stay with Zaccheus.

Jesus, I think you are telling me no matter how different I am, that I can be myself with you and you will still love me. If someone comes up to me I should be myself and not let another person put me down for being unique. Thank you for making me unique. I will try my hardest to be an individual.

**6. Summary Statement:** Zaccheus got more than he hoped for!

I'm not sure what you are telling me but I think it is that you will still like me no matter what I do or what happens. I think you called this to my attention today because you don't want me to act without thinking. I don't know what you are asking. If I understood what you wanted, I would be very willing to do it for you. Thank you for giving me something to pay attention to. I need your help. **Whenever I do these prayer experiences I never know what you want me to do.** I'm sorry, but **would you make it more clear?**

**7. Summary Statement:** People are sometimes led off the right road and need to be corrected or reminded by something or somebody.

I think you are telling me that money is not all important. I think you want me to spend more time with my brother and not be so mean to him. You are correcting me and telling me what I should be doing. You are asking me to be nicer to my family and spend more time with my brother. **I'd rather not talk about it anymore today and just do it when I get home.** Jesus, I do want to respond, but my homework and swimming will hold me back. But **if you can pass the time to the weekend,** I can spend more time then.

**8. Summary Statement:** Zacchaeus realized his sins, admitted them, and was willing to turn around his life.

Jesus, you are telling me to go back and to be kind or to build new relationships with those I have hurt or haven't really become closely acquainted with. I think you want me to correct my relationship with my friends. I should erase all the bad things and begin new, good ones. You are asking me to start over on a clean slate. I will try very hard to do this. I know it is important. Thank you.

**9. Summary Statement:** Maybe Zacchaeus was offended by the crowd's anger, but he stood his ground and became a son of Abraham.

I feel you are telling me not to be so selfish. If people ask things of me that aren't life threatening, I should give it to them. You are correcting me. I probably should have gone with "N" because the circumstances were urgent for her. You are asking me to be more lenient with my friends and the things they want. But I do this many times everyday and it doesn't cause me much good. But I guess I don't mind it.

**10. Summary Statement:** Jesus invited himself for dinner to the home of the most disliked man in town.

Jesus, you are telling me to admit what I do wrong instead of making excuses. You want me to be completely ready for Confirmation and for me to be a better person in general. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for this news.

## **A Family Journaling Exercise** *(A follow up to Gospel ABCs)*

Gospel ABCs is a versatile tool. It engages a variety of ages and it is suited to a variety of settings: individual prayer, a class session, family activity, or an intergenerational gathering. Perhaps the most non-threatening way to share it with parents would be to organize a family event where children sit with their parent(s). Depending upon numbers, two or three families might be seated at the same table.

1. Using powerpoint or other visuals provide an overview explanation of Gospel ABCs. Post large poster-paper or newsprint paper around the room for each of the elements: attitude(s), behavior(s), consequence(s). Divide each chart in half. Designate the left column for positive qualities and the right column for negative qualities.
2. Use the Gospel of Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10). Direct the families to brainstorm characteristics and to then list them on the poster-paper. Have someone read the lists aloud for all to hear. Add ideas.
3. Schedule a break.
4. After the break introduce the group to a rubric for formulating a personal prayer response. Give the family a printed copy of the rubric.

<sup>1</sup>Write a brief, one-sentence summary statement about the story. <sup>2</sup>Analyze what Jesus is saying to me. (2.1) What do his words mean today in the circumstances of my life? (2.2) Why do I think Jesus is calling my attention to a particular idea, word, phrase, or thought? (2.3) What is Jesus asking me to do? <sup>3</sup>Dialogue. Use “I-you” language. Talk with Jesus about the issue(s) that the Holy Spirit is stirring up in me. <sup>4</sup>Make a resolution. Tell Jesus how I want to respond; what difficulties I predict that I will encounter; and how I will need Jesus to help me.

5. Explain that eventually their family will write a sentence for each point. It would be helpful to have a group-size visual of the prayer rubric. Then, as each of the ten students prayers are proclaimed, point to the steps in the rubric that correspond to the prayer sentences. For example:

*<sup>1</sup>Although we may feel lost, left out, or unnoticed in our lives, Jesus always notices us and loves us just as much as he loves anyone else. <sup>2</sup>I think you are telling me that you love me no matter how many mistakes I make. And I think you are asking me to make friends with those who feel unwanted and seem lonely. I think you want me to make them feel special. <sup>3</sup>I am willing to try to do what you ask but <sup>4</sup>I might have difficulties such as being teased and not being able to have enough patience. Please help me to be patient and understanding. Thank you for relaying your message to me today.*

6. After the ten examples have been heard verbalize the conclusion that there is no one “right” answer; that the Spirit of God works in each of us individually, according to our needs. Invite all present to get in touch with what message Jesus is whispering to them.

7. Dim the lights. Play soft music. Provide three minutes of quiet time for personal prayer. Restore the lights so that the family can create a common prayer response to the Zacchaeus Gospel Prayer. Invite families to send a representative to share aloud the family prayer. Or, if preferred, post the family prayers on the wall.