

Christianity is a Religion of “Musts”

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner.’”

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “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.”

Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

Musk for Men. My wife found it at Walgreens. Some people love the smell. Others hate it.

Musk for Men came to mind as I noticed a key word that Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus. “I must stay at your house today.” “Must!” The Greek word is found very often in the New Testament. Literally the word means, “It is necessary.”

Christianity is a religion of “musts.” For some people, that is a turn-off. Christianity stinks because of the “must” of Christians. But the way Jesus used the word “must” is different. It changes us. It is a fragrance of life.

So let's look at the three “musts” of Christianity.

I. Your Must

Sadly, when many people think of Christianity, they are thinking of what I'll call “your must.” There is something that someone else thinks is necessary. You tell me what I must do. So it is “your must.”

The Pharisees were great at imposing “musts” on other people. “They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Matthew 23:4).

Jesus dealt with their “musts” all the time. You must not heal on the Sabbath. You must wash your hands before you eat. You must not eat with sinners at all!

Now we can look down our noses at the Pharisees, but the reality is that the church today imposes all kinds of “musts” on others too.

You must not curse. If you do, you aren't welcome here. You must do drugs. If you do, you are not welcome here. You must not be living together outside of marriage. If you do, you aren't welcome here.

You must not have tattoos showing. You must dress nicely at church. You must be serious about your faith.

Now some of these "musts" are just our feelings of right and wrong. Whether you laugh out loud or whether you wear slacks or a skirt or have tattoos are not commanded in the Bible. But some of these "musts" are God's commands, just as some of the Pharisees' musts were God's commands.

The issue is not simply that we make sure we are telling people God's commands and not our own interpretation. The real problem is that we convey the message, "These 'musts' are what Christianity is all about. Salvation comes to you by obeying these 'musts.'"

When that is the message that is given, quite simply, these "musts" stink!

If people think Christianity is all about fulfilling someone else's expectations, no wonder people are turned off by it! Paul said this kind of "must" only produces anger. "Law works wrath" (Romans 4:15). If you tell me what you think I must do, the likely reaction is that I'm going to do just the exact opposite.

And what is worse, very often these very "musts" that we convey to others reveal us to be hypocrites. Paul wrote in Romans 2:22-24: "You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'"

When socially conservative congressmen get caught having extra-marital affairs, what happens? We rightly hear the charge: "Hypocrite! You want me to follow your 'must' but you aren't willing to do it yourself. "

Or ask any teenager. They see the double standard. Parents too often are saying, "Do what I say, not what I do." Why should they be interested in "your must"?

II. God's Must

But Jesus uses the word "must" in a very different context. When he comes to Zacchaeus, he doesn't impose his will on Zacchaeus. Instead he talks about God's will, God's desire, for Zacchaeus. "I must stay at your house today."

Think about it. Was it an accident that Jesus stopped under that tree and looked up to see Zacchaeus? Someone suggested that people in the crowd were pointing up at this funny picture of a grown man in a tree and so Jesus noticed. Does Jesus need someone else's help to see a man in need? Of course not! This was no accident. This was part of God's plan, "God's must," to save Zacchaeus. God "makes everything work the way he intends" (Ephesians 1:11 *God's Word* translation).

In the same way, it is no accident that each of us is here today. This was part of God's must. He must make his love known to you today.

He called Zacchaeus by name. How did Jesus know his name? Did someone say to Jesus, “That’s Zacchaeus”—like the presidential handlers will whisper the name of a big contributor in the president’s ear as he steps up to greet him? Maybe. Maybe not. One thing I know for sure: he knows my name and he knows your name. “I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1). He wrote your name in the Lamb’s book of life before the creation of the world. It is “God’s must” that he called you by name in your baptism.

Did someone say, “Ugh, that’s the chief tax collector”? That would be like one of us saying, “Ugh, there’s is the biggest pimp in Milwaukee.” Didn’t Jesus know? Of course he knew Zacchaeus’ background. But this was part of God’s plan. It was necessary in God’s plan that Jesus associate with Zacchaeus that day. That’s true of us as well. Today may be the day that you have come into God’s house with a sign on your back, “I don’t belong here. I’m not good enough to be here.” There is no sign like that, but I know that sometimes I feel that way and I’ve spoken to enough of you to know that I’m not alone. But it was necessary that Jesus associate with us today. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (KJV).

It was God’s will – God’s must – that Jesus come into Zacchaeus’ house to save him.

Now to “perfect people,” this “must” of God stinks! “All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner.’” Jesus had violated their “must.” You must not associate with sinners!

But to Zacchaeus, “God’s must” was the fragrance of life (2 Corinthians 2:16).

How sweet to hear Jesus say, “Salvation has come to this house.” A house that all rejected, Jesus came into with a message of acceptance.

“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” That is good news if you admit that you are lost! Like the alcoholic at the beginning of an AA meeting who says, “Hi, I’m Pete and I’m an alcoholic,” so if we are willing to admit, “Hi, I’m Pete, and I’m lost,” God’s must is the fragrance of life. “I must come and stay at your house today.”

III. My Must

Jesus didn’t tell Zacchaeus, “You must change” before he came and proclaimed this good news of salvation for the lost. Jesus didn’t even tell Zacchaeus, “This is what you must do!” Yet Zacchaeus made a very generous offer. “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.”

Why did Zacchaeus do that? There was another “must” involved. It was not something or someone outside of Zacchaeus compelling him. He couldn’t say to anyone “this is ‘your must.’” Zacchaeus was compelled from within. Romans 7:22 explains, “In my inner being I delight in God’s law.” Zacchaeus was saying, “This is My Must. I must do this because I want to do this to thank my Savior.”

This “My Must” went way beyond expectations. God never commanded anyone to give half his possessions to the poor. In the Old Testament God never said that if you cheated someone, you were to repay four times as much. In Leviticus 6:5 God commanded restitution plus 20%. Why did Zacchaeus do so much more? Because it was his own “must.” There was this inner

compulsion that Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 5:14,15: “Christ love compels because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

Can you say, “This is my ‘must’”? Can you say, “I have to do this, not because someone else says that I have to do it, but because I want to do it out of love for Christ”? I think of our outgoing congregation president Joel Nelson. He is being installed as principal today at Garden Homes Lutheran Church. Before he was elected, he was told that he would probably need 20 hours per month to fulfill his duties as president. He went way beyond those hours. Why? Because of your must, because you compelled him? No, there was an inner “must.”

Or I think of the Building Committee as another example of individuals going way beyond what we expected. They are meeting every Tuesday evening this summer, often for four hours or more. Why? Because of your must, because you are compelling them? No, it is because each has a “my must” in their hearts.

Or I think of the man who shared with me his personal ministry to individuals in the congregation, a ministry of talking, counseling, picking them up and taking them to meetings. Why does he do this? Because he must. Not your must. Not even God’s must. There is nothing in the Bible that specifically says, “Take this person to a meeting.” His actions are based on God’s must. He understands that he was lost and now is found. But no outside force is compelling him to do this. It is his own must. “My Must.”

Do you have a “my must”? Does something inside you drive you to give of yourself generously and joyously? For example, are you here in worship because inside you are saying, “This is my must. I want to do this for my Savior”? Or are you here because of a “your must:” Mom or dad or a spouse or friend or even the expectations of a pastor are compelling you to come?

If you don’t have a “my must” to love God and love your neighbor, it isn’t going to help for me to go over a list of things that you should do. It would be a “your must” list.

The best thing I can do is take you back to “God’s must.” Understand how God loved you as a sinner. He has seen all the things that make you “chief of sinners,” including all the things you have done only because you felt someone was watching you and making you do them. Notice how Jesus is looking up at you like he looked up at Zacchaeus. Only he is looking up at you from the depths of the cross. He invites you to look down at him – that he bore the curse of your sin on the cross. Listen as he calls you by name in your baptism. Listen as he says to you through Word and sacraments, “I must stay at your house today.” Listen as he says to you, “You may not even know it, but you are lost, and I have come to find you and save you.” Focus on this “must,” God’s must.

When you admit that you are the lost that has been found, this “must” is the aroma of life. And this must will create in your heart your own “my must.” Amen.

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