



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

- 📖 Zacchaeus: Short and Un-Seen  
(*Disability*, pp. 11-17)

### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Desperate  
(*Disability*, pp. 54-55)
- 📖 Lasting Wounds  
(*Disability*, pp. 56-57)
- 📖 Unexpected Healing  
(*Disability*, pp. 58-59)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Zacchaeus: Short and Un-Seen

Societal fears of disability warp how we read the Bible. But the Zacchaeus story challenges the normative assumption that disability is a problem to be fixed or eliminated. All human beings can be accepted as children of Abraham regardless of their physical characteristics or capabilities.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 19:1-10

### Meditation†

Slowly, however, there has been the gradual realization that people with disabilities, even those with intellectual disabilities, should not just be the objects of Christian ministry. Rather, the church needs to begin discerning where, when, and how people with disabilities can be engaged in the doing of Christian ministry.

*Amos Yong*

### Reflection

It is difficult to see “the Bible really is good news for all people, including those with disabilities and those who are temporarily able-bodied,” Amos Yong notes, when we read it through the lens of “normate and ableist assumptions, experiences, and perspectives of non-disabled people.” We may think “disabilities are ordained by God for God’s purposes,” “people with disabilities are or ought to be pitiable and charitable objects of the care of others,” and “[disability] is a sign of divine punishment for sin, or of the presence and activity of an evil spirit.” Such a misreading, he warns, may “lead people with disabilities to internalize the normative view and thereby wonder what is wrong with them that prevents their reception of God’s healing power.”

The history of interpreting the story of Zacchaeus shows an ableist bias. Many interpreters ignore his littleness, or spiritualize it as an emblem of humility. For them, nothing depends on his shortness! Yet this hides an important part of the story and Luke’s overall message. Did Zacchaeus suffer from pathological dwarfism? In any case, the people would have taken his shortness to be a sign of character flaws like small-mindedness and greed. Luke is subverting these ancient physiognomic beliefs.

To bring out this feature of the Zacchaeus story, Yong invites us to re-approach the narrative from a *littlist* or *shortist* perspective. A littlist reader might notice:

- ▶ *Zacchaeus is an agent, not a passive recipient of pity.* He is a role model of what little people can do. Unfortunately, no matter how physically capable little people are, many stereotype them “as bitter, disagreeable, and vengeful, and...rarely portray them ‘as thinking, feeling individuals who were at the center of their own lives, but rather... as adjuncts to the lives of others,’” Yong notes. Zacchaeus is not only fully employed (albeit in a role that is despised in the community), but also he can and does seek out Jesus within the crowd, and welcomes the chance to host the Son of Man in his home.
- ▶ *God welcomes and values Zacchaeus.* Dwarfism (like lameness, mutilation, blindness, and skin disease) was a “blemish” that kept a person



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from God's altar (Leviticus 21:16-24). "With Jesus' pronouncement, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham' (Luke 19:9), the (Levitical) prohibition against dwarfs from full participation in the liturgical cult of ancient Israel was lifted," Yong observes.

- ▶ *Zacchaeus and the people are saved or healed in ironic ways.* "Normate assumptions would have expected Jesus to heal the sick, impaired, and disabled. Jesus does no such thing in this case, although he definitively acknowledges the presence of full health in the sense of salvation for Zacchaeus. On the other hand, the prejudices of the people are confronted, and Jesus' acceptance of Zacchaeus just as he is undermines their expectations that those who are impaired and disabled need to be 'fixed' or cured in order to participate fully in the renewal and restoration of Israel," Yong writes. For little people today who fear they must undergo various surgical procedures touted to help them fit in with the aesthetic sensibilities of normate culture, this is good news.

"The ableist bias is insensitive to the world of disability and their normative assumption is that the world as it ought to be will not feature any signs or marks of impairment, even those related to littleness.... The result is not only an overlooking of important features of a text expressive of the salvific message of the gospel, but the perpetuation of an oppressive social imagination that has negative repercussions for people with disabilities," Yong concludes. "Perhaps what the Zacchaeus story teaches us is that human beings are equals both in their sinfulness and need for repentance, and in their being accepted as children of Abraham regardless of their physical characteristics or capabilities."

### Study Questions

1. What does Amos Yong mean by a "normate" or "ableist" perspective on Scripture? How can it distort the interpretation of biblical stories?
2. Visualize Zacchaeus as a dwarf (a person under 4'10" tall). What new meaning does this add to the story?
3. Recall the problem Yong raises in the meditation. How does the story of Zacchaeus guide your thinking on that point?
4. Select one of the pieces of Christian art that Heidi Hornik discusses — Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, Nicholas Poussin's *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man*, or the Byzantine mosaic of the woman suffering from a hemorrhage who steals a healing from Jesus. Does that artistic depiction seem to reflect or to undermine an ableist bias on the interpretation of the particular biblical story?

### Departing Hymn: "The Twisted Form upon the Tree"

† Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Baylor University Press, 2007), 189.

# Zacchaeus: Short and Un-Seen

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how a “normate” or “ableist” perspective can distort our interpretation of the biblical stories that involve disability.
2. To illustrate this distortion with the story of Zacchaeus, and to read the story instead from a “littlist” or “shortist” perspective.
3. To discuss how some works of Christian art which depict biblical stories can either reflect or subvert an ableist interpretation of Scripture.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with an Observation

In an article entitled “‘Who Causes the Blind to See’: Disability and Quality of Religious Life,” the sociologist Avi Rose notes that Jews and Christians tend to see disability in negative terms, in part because of how they read biblical stories that feature disability. They often take a disabling condition to be a sign of God’s punishment or an evil incarnation, as a challenge to divine perfection, or as an indicator of spiritual incompetence and exemption from religious practice. At best, they think it is a reason to pity and show charity to the person with the disability.

Are these attitudes in the biblical stories themselves, or are we reading them into Scripture? Amos Yong explores the extent to which we are at fault for projecting into the biblical narrative our own normate and ableist assumptions about disability.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to open members’ hearts to hear the written Word afresh.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 19:1-10 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

As we begin our reflection on human disability, it would be appropriate to investigate the role of disability in Scripture. However, as Amos Yong warns in this study, our interpretations of the biblical stories are often distorted by the normate or ableist assumptions of our society. To help us escape these biases, he imagines how little people, or people with pathological dwarfism, might interpret the story of Zacchaeus. Not only does this

show us a different side of the Lucan story, it opens our eyes to one of Luke's major themes – namely, that the gospel of Jesus Christ subverts the physiognomic beliefs of ancient (and contemporary) culture.

### **Study Questions**

1. Amos Yong explains these two terms: "'Normate' in the field of disability studies refers to the assumptions about disabilities held by those without disabilities; 'ableism,' parallel to *sexism* or *ageism*, thus represents the discriminatory perspectives and practices imposed, sometimes unconsciously so, by non-disabled people, structures, and policies, on those with disabilities." Because readers with a normate or ableist perspective assume that the biblical message is "obviously meant for normal people (like them)," Yong thinks they tend to overlook the presence of disabilities and their importance in biblical stories. They further assume "the world as it ought to be will not feature any signs or marks of impairment."
2. As you read the story of Zacchaeus once or twice, ask members to close their eyes and visualize him as a dwarf. What do they "see" now in the story? Yong suggests, "The image of Zacchaeus running ahead of the crowd and climbing a sycamore tree (19:4) would have provoked the derision of the crowd...fascinated by the awkward movements of a pathological dwarf with his less symmetrically proportioned body." Do members now notice how assertive Zacchaeus is in meeting Jesus, how surprised and pleased he is to receive Jesus' blessing, or how able he appears in hosting Jesus in his home?

Reflect on the restriction against dwarfs in Leviticus 21:16-24 and the ancient physiognomic belief that dwarfs must be small-minded or greedy. What other negative views of dwarfism do members recall from fairytales and popular culture? Discuss how the Lucan story undermines these negative associations with the disability.

3. Yong distinguishes ministering from being ministered to, being active from just being passive in the Church. He says the story of Zacchaeus "undermines [the people's] expectations that those who are impaired and disabled need to be 'fixed' or cured in order to participate fully in the renewal and restoration of Israel." Ask members to list the disabling physical and intellectual conditions that threaten to reduce some people to passive recipients of ministry in your congregation. How can you discover these people's gifts for ministry and incorporate them more fully into the congregation's ministry?
4. If time permits, divide into three small groups to review the pieces of art. Otherwise, choose one or two pieces of art that members will discuss together as a group.

Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1602-1603), which interprets John 20:24-29, "emphasizes the corporeality of the risen Christ," Heidi Hornik writes. "The painter conveys the sensation of touch as we watch Christ guide the finger of Thomas into the gaping wound." The interpretation subverts the normate perspective that ignores disabilities or assumes that they "will be erased in the end."

Nicholas Poussin's *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man* (1655) interprets the story in Acts 3:1-10. The artist highlights the man's beggarliness, not his lameness; Hornik notes, "He has a malnourished body, but...no deformity or disability is evident in his figure."

The sixth-century Byzantine mosaic from San Apollinare Nuovo depicts the story of the woman suffering from a hemorrhage who steals a healing from Jesus (Mark 5:24b-34; Luke 8:43-48). Due to the mosaic's placement high on the church wall, "the actions had to be clear, the gestures exaggerated, and the number of figures reduced to a minimum." The woman's prostrate figure dominates the image. Does this emphasize her active role in the story, or her passive reception of Jesus' healing?

### **Departing Hymn**

"The Twisted Form upon the Tree" is on pp. 43-45 of *Disability*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.