

Themes in Luke (cont.)

Luke chapters 1-4 introduced two things: the historical reliability of the Gospel of Luke and the great theme of Jesus' ministry, preaching good news to the poor and oppressed. The theme of Luke 4-9 is the identity of Jesus. Two persistent questions are present throughout Luke 4-9. The first is, "Who is this?" The first answer is, Joseph's son. Then it is asked, "Who is this to make such claims?"

That question, once raised, is used again and again throughout the Gospel of Luke. It comes in chapter 5 when a paralytic is lowered through the roof and Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven," and they ask, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sin but God alone?" In chapter 7, Jesus performs a great miracle, raising a little boy from the dead, the only son of a widow, and the people say they know who Jesus is. Luke 7:16 records their excitement as they said, "A great prophet has appeared among us. God has come to help His people."

The term 'great prophet' is a technical term. A prophet is someone who speaks God's Word. A great prophet is someone who speaks God's Word and verifies it with works. In the Old Testament, there are three great prophets: Moses, Elijah, and Elisha. They each had a ministry both of the word and of miracles. In the same way, Jesus is a great prophet. But not everybody is sure of that. The question comes up in Luke 7:39-49 when the Pharisees invite Jesus to dinner and a sinful woman comes and anoints His feet by washing them with her hair and tears and using perfume. The Pharisees then ask, if Jesus were a prophet, would He not know what kind of woman this is—a sinner? He did know, and He responds, "Silence. I have something to tell you." He goes on to make it very clear that He knows she is a sinner and He proves that He is a prophet.

In another scene there is a storm at sea, but the storm was quieted. The disciples ask, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him." Thus we have the question asked by the crowds, the Pharisees, and by the disciples. You know the answer, so this does not have you wondering, but if you were reading the Gospel for the first time you would say, "Okay! Okay! Who is this then?" But even still, the question comes up one more time, in Luke 9, when Herod the Tetrarch, who beheaded John the Baptist, asks who it is that he is hearing such things about.

Jesus knows that the reader should be aching for an answer at this point. So He puts the question to His disciples, "Who does the crowd say I am?" Their first answer is John the Baptist. But that cannot be because John the Baptist said Jesus is the Christ and also said several things to show Jesus is much greater than he was, such as "There is one who is coming more powerful than me. I am not worthy to untie His sandals. I baptize you with water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Since the crowds are wrong, Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" The correct answer comes from Peter: "You are the Christ of God." Jesus goes on to say to His disciples that He is going to die on the cross. When He does, Peter calls Jesus aside and says that it will never be. In the next scene, the transfiguration, we receive further clarification about Jesus as the Father declares, "This is my Son," and the next statement is, "Listen to Him." It is Jesus, and not Peter or the crowd, who will define who He is and define further what it means to receive Him as the Christ, Son of God. And the main thing He wants to say about defining Himself is that He has to go to Jerusalem to die.

In Luke 4:44, Luke shows Jesus dealing with the disciples, as they do not quite get the point. The English translation of the verse says, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you." In the King James Version the translation is, "Let these saying sink down into your ears." A literal translation would be, "Put these words in your ears," or, "Stick this in your ears." This is not sweet language. "The Son of

Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men,” Jesus says. We hear the same thing four times. The first time, they did not understand what it meant. The second time, it was hidden from them. The third time, they did not grasp it. On the fourth time, they were afraid to ask about it. So time after time they did not get it, and they were afraid to admit it. That is the saddest trait of the disciples. After hearing who Jesus is, where he is going, and what kind of savior and Christ He is, they fail to really try to understand Him and His mission. It is a failure that is culpable, and you can tell exactly how culpable their failure is because instead of taking their ignorance to Jesus and saying, “Please explain,” in the next scene they are arguing about which of them will be the greatest. Jesus is going to die; they do not understand that. But they do understand that they want to be important, and that is what they spend their energy on in Luke 9:46-48.

In light of all this, Jesus has His work cut out for Him, and that is what He works on in the section called, “The journey to Jerusalem.” That section begins in Luke 9:51, “As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” He starts the long journey, which takes ten chapters of Luke to finish. Repeatedly through the section, He reminds them that they are going to Jerusalem. No matter where they travel, they are still going to Jerusalem—that is the point. Even when they are not heading there geographically, at least they are on the way spiritually.

Many important topics come up during this time, both for them and for discipleship today. The first topic is the question of where does greatness lie. The disciples think it lies in prominent position; they are quarreling about who will be the greatest. Jesus corrects them, in Luke 22:37, saying He is among them as one who serves.

The second question is how we should treat our neighbors. The first time they take a trip—the first step to Jerusalem—is going to take them through Samaria. Jesus sent a group of messengers ahead who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for Him. The Samaritans were not impressed. Luke 9:53 says, “The people there did not welcome him.” Why? It says it was “because he was heading for Jerusalem.” In other words, “If you want to come to our place and worship, fine, but you are moving on so we are not going to welcome you.” When James and John saw this, they asked what they could do about it. They wanted to call down fire from heaven and burn them up. Maybe if they incinerate the city the next one will be more responsive. What are they thinking of with this idea of burning? They get this from Elisha. When some men came to arrest Elisha, he called down fire from heaven. This is a theme in Luke: Jesus is a great prophet in word and deed. What do great prophets do? They perform miracles and great signs of judgment—Moses brought curses on the Egyptians; Elijah withheld rain from Israel; Elisha called down fire from heaven. I take the parable of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10 to be the answer. How do we treat our neighbors? Well, here is a Samaritan, and he knows how to act like a neighbor. The question is not kinship or blood, race, religion, nationality or anything else except who you are next to. ‘Neighbor’ means who you are next to. Those are the first few things that Jesus says to His disciples.

Broadly speaking, throughout this time, Jesus is rather confrontational with the religious leaders. He is calling the crowd to discipleship. For the disciples, He is describing the way of the kingdom. We have seen some of these themes already. One is the importance of prayer. That is seen in the parable of the friend coming at midnight. There is frequent teaching on money. The parable of the rich fool is one such instance. Maybe Luke’s greatest theme is to show that anyone can be a disciple. Jesus’ ministry is for every kind of person. The last people you might expect are exactly those who could be disciples.

Another important emphasis of Luke is Jesus’ ministry to women. Luke is the Gospel that shows the

most interest in women. The first time that comes up is Luke 8:2-3, a bit before this journey to Jerusalem. The next two scenes are in the midst of the journey. There it says, “And also some women [were with Him] who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them [Jesus and the Twelve] out of their own means.” That statement means nothing to us. We imagine the disciples were driving around in big buses and staying in hotels, but that is not the correct picture. Consider that there were twelve male disciples and a group of many women living and traveling together. Many people would say this was scandalous. But that brief observation from Luke means that women can be full fledged disciples. And you may say, “Of course!” But let us look at a second passage to show you how much work Jesus had to do to get this idea across.

You may remember that when Jesus told the parable of the rich fool, somebody blurted out a comment in the middle of His teaching. It happens again in Luke 11. Jesus was teaching about the kingdom and His power when Luke tells us, “As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, ‘Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.’” What might motivate a woman to shout out that statement? It comes from a conception of how a woman in the ancient world attained honor. The conception was this: the greatest thing a woman could do was have a great son. There was no greater honor for a woman. The most blessed woman would be the mother of Jesus, or a philosopher, or Alexander the Great. This woman is saying that because Jesus is so great, His mother is blessed. Furthermore He is so great that she wants to shout it out as a testimony to Him. Jesus understood that. But He did not quite accept it. He responded, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” So how is a woman blessed in the teaching of Jesus? The same way a man is blessed—by hearing the Word of God and obeying it.

If that is the big principle—that everyone can be equally blessed—then the story of Mary and Martha makes a little more sense to us. At the end of chapter 10, Jesus is going with His disciples, thirteen men at a minimum, on a journey and they come upon Mary, Martha, and Lazarus’ house. So they enter and of course Mary and Martha know they need to get some food ready. Martha opens the house, but Mary sits at Jesus’ feet and listens to what He says. Martha is cooking for sixteen people, at least. She has no dishwasher, no stove, no conveniences whatsoever, so she is getting worn out. She comes up to Jesus and says, “Lord, do You not care? Mary is at Your feet and she should be with me, helping. Do You not care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me. Let me remind You of Your duties, Lord. Get her in the kitchen, now. Do it.” That is the gist of what Martha says, but Jesus is tender with Martha. Jesus says, “Martha, Martha, I know the problem, but there is really only one thing that is needed and Mary has figured it out—she is at My feet. We have had crumbs of bread and leftover fish before and that will do. This is her chance to hear, and she is sitting at My feet in the posture of a disciple.” In the ancient world, the speaker stands and the disciples sit and take notes. Thirteen men, one woman—she is doing the right thing. So women can be disciples. We know that today. But I want to tell you that it was Jesus who started it. He inaugurated this idea, even though it was not acceptable in His day. This was radical news, but it was not the only radical news about who can be a disciple.

Jesus taught disciples indiscriminately among the rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female. Think back to the miracles Jesus performed. Jewish males, Gentiles, paralytics, the centurion’s son, women, a Roman official, all these received the benefit of Jesus ministry. Jesus would later perform miracles for one of His Roman captors. He performed miracles for someone who oppressed the Jews. I do not think it made the people happy. But the point was, if you had faith, anyone could be a disciple. Jesus performed miracles for the poor, the outcast, cripples, lepers, the blind, the

lame, the mute, the deaf—anyone who would be impoverished because of their condition. Of course, He also ministered both to sinners and to people who were self-righteous. In the beginning of the Gospel, the prophecy is that Jesus will be a revelation to the Gentiles. At the end of the Gospel, it says in Luke 24:47, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all the nations.” You name the group, Jesus is willing to minister to them.

In the Gospel of Luke, it is easy to observe the theme of Jesus’ social and economic ministry. Some people interpret this Gospel through the lens of liberation theology, which is the idea that the Gospel is largely about liberation—social, political, and economic. My summary of the Gospel may sound to some like I am stressing the economic and social themes too much. Others may think I do not stress them enough. Some may read Jesus as having a preferential view toward the poor, but I would argue that He loves the poor. The argument that Jesus prefers the poor will not work in Luke either, because He also shows amazing openness to the powerful, rich, and the insiders.

Luke 14 begins with Jesus in the home of a Pharisee, watching how people strive for seats of honor, and He says not to do that because, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” He illustrates the point with a parable about an honorable man who invites all sorts of honorable people to a party. Because these people proudly disdained the offer, they are dishonored, they are excluded. Those who are humbled by their circumstances, who are thought to be dishonored, are brought into the party and thereby exalted. The people listening to Jesus do not like what they hear. And since Jesus does that Himself, He gets criticized for spending time with tax collectors and sinners—the outcasts. Remember, tax collectors are rich and have status in Roman society, but they are outcasts among the Jews. But Jesus associates with them and demonstrates the idea that God welcomes crass, rebellious, wicked sinners like the prodigal son. And that upsets classy people. They are offended by Jesus’ welcome of sinners. But if you are thrilled because the lower class brother is in, I hope you are not offended that the upper class brother is in. Jesus welcomes all those who need Him.

The story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 serves as an intriguing example of Jesus dealing with a rich man. Zacchaeus was a small man, and although He was a chief tax collector, he wanted to see the Lord as He passed through town. It must have been fun to see Zacchaeus, a quasi-dignified man who was yet fair game for ridicule by everyone because he was a chief tax collector, up in a tree. Everyone was laughing at Zacchaeus, yet as Jesus was walking through Jericho, the biggest town miles around, of all the people to have lunch with or stay the night, not only did He stay with Zacchaeus, He told Zacchaeus He had to go to his house. Jesus invited Himself to Zacchaeus’ house. Then all the poor and humble people who thought Jesus would stay with them, they began to grumble, which is recorded in Luke 19:7, “The people say that Jesus has gone to be a guest of a sinner.”

Zacchaeus heard this and rose to the defense of Jesus. He said, “Look, Lord, here and now, I am going to be generous.” Zacchaeus says that if he has cheated anyone, he will pay back four times the amount. This shows us Zacchaeus has changed. But the people are humbled too. Jesus said that salvation had come to this house. There is no favoritism with God. That is an important theme of the book of Luke. Jesus’ ministry is inaugurated with the prophetic statement in Luke 1:51, “He has performed mighty deeds with His arms. He has scattered those who are proud in their innermost thoughts.” Jesus is never predictable. Every time you think you have a handle on what He is going to do, He surprises you. Whether for the poor and humble or for the rich like Zacchaeus, Jesus summarizes His purpose in Luke 19:10, “I am here to seek and to save what was lost.”

Jesus does have to deal with a lot of lost people. This comes up with His relationship with the crowds

and Jewish leaders on the trip to Jerusalem. The first clue about the crowds comes in chapter 13. Near the close of the journey, Jesus is evaluating people on the basis of their response to Him. In Luke 13:31, some Pharisees, who seem to be more friendly toward Jesus, tell Him to leave this place and go elsewhere because Herod (the Tetrarch) wants to kill Him. Jesus says in response, in Luke 13:32, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’ In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” Herod is not going to kill Him. Jesus states that He is not going to die in Galilee, because all the prophets die in Jerusalem.

Next He says something in Luke 13:34-35 about Jerusalem and its murderous ways: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” Luke is not going to drop a hint like that and let it go unfulfilled. The statement “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” reappears later on. Luke 19:37-39 tells us, “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, when He came near the place where the road goes down to the Mount of Olives, the crowd of disciples began to praise God.” Notice very carefully who is praising God—the whole crowd of disciples. These are the people Jesus is gathering under His wings. These are the people who are gathered and are blessed because they confess. But who does not confess? In Luke 19:38, some of the Pharisees in the crowd said, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” Neither the Pharisees in chapter 19 nor the crowds in chapter 13 are saying, “Blessed is He.” The crowd of disciples gives praise, not the crowds. So unless the crowds say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,” they will not see Jesus again. They will not be gathered under His wings because they will not confess.

In Luke 18:9 Jesus warns not the crowds but the Jewish leaders this time. They had a fatal flaw, which was self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is a theme in Luke, and this is one key instance. It says, “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers.”’ Is this a bad prayer? You may have said a prayer like this. It is not bad to say, “Lord, thank You for saving me from major sin.” So far, the prayer is okay. But what the Pharisee says next in Luke 18:11 is not okay. “I thank you I am not like other men...or even like this tax collector.” The prayer takes a turn for the worst when he says he is better than these other people and especially this slob in the corner. Furthermore, the Pharisee asks God if He has noticed all the good he does. “I fast two days a week. And I give a tenth of all that I get. God, have you noticed?”

The tax collector, at the back of the temple, could not even look up to heaven. Kneeling or looking to heaven are both good postures for prayer. This man would not look up; he was humbled. He said simply in Luke 18:13, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” as he beat his breast. We who hear the story now, know how this goes, but I guarantee everyone who heard this the first time was astonished. Jesus says the tax collector went home justified and not the Pharisee. Why should that be? It is because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Jesus is saying that everybody is a sinner, whether you are low or high. If you abase yourself, God will lift you up. But if you lift yourself up against God and say, “Look how good I am, look how well I have served you,” then He will bring you down. In that case, you are not saying, “Blessed is He,” but rather, “Blessed am I.” So pride and self-righteousness is the fatal flaw in the religious leaders. The only way to receive God’s blessing is to humble yourself and ask for it. On the other hand, if you ask for it, He will give it to you every time.