

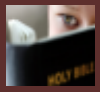


The Gospel of Luke

Part 1

Study Guide Workbook

Fox Valley Church of Christ
Momentum Ministries



Luke 1:1-4

Introduction

1 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled [a] among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.



Discover

1. What does verse 2 tell us about Luke and to what "generation" of believers he belonged?
2. Why is Luke so adamant about stressing that his Gospel is based on eyewitness accounts?
3. What does Luke declare will be the effect of his written account on the one who reads it in faith?



Display

The *hyperetes* were not only eyewitnesses but they served as those who preserved and passed on the accounts of what God had done among them. Are you as committed to serving as a servant of the word of what God has done in your life and the lives of those in God's family today? Do you serve as a constant witness and one who proclaims what God has done for you? If not, can you really think of a good reason why you haven't been doing that if you consider yourself to be a disciple of Jesus?



Dig Deeper

I distinctly remember being in high school and learning how to write introductions for papers. That had always been a weakness of mine and so it was difficult but I got to where I was at least decent at it. Then I got to college and I really started to enjoy writing papers. I went through a period, however, where I really fell in love with descriptive language and metaphors, especially in my introductions. I was learning how to become a better writer, at least better than I was, but I got a little carried away, at times, with the flowery language. I had a paper that I had worked quite hard on for a history class that was on the topic of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. I did over a hundred hours of research and began to put the paper together, waiting to write the introduction last. I put together what I thought was beautiful combination of imagery, metaphors, allusions, and word plays. The introduction was masterful in my own mind. Had anything ever been put together that was quite that brilliant? I felt that way at least until I got my professor's feedback. My score on the paper was very high. I had only lost a few points but quickly opened the paper to find out where. To my horror I realized that I had lost all of my points on the introduction. The teacher's comments put it all into perspective for me. He said something to the effect that my introduction was a beautiful work of master craftsmanship that was so intricate that he could not tell what my paper was actually about until he began to read the paper itself.

The introduction to any work is important because it alerts the reader as to where they are going on their journey of reading. Well-written introductions are like a road map that tell us what is ahead, what we should be looking for and where we are going. Luke's introduction to his gospel is no different. As we read this introduction we quickly realize that we are about to read about the new movement of Christ from the perspective of those who personally witnessed the events. Luke has gone to great pains to give us an organized account of things that will lead the reader to be more certain in their faith and understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is where we are heading and as we take this journey we will discover that Luke has masterfully accomplished precisely what he set out to do with his work.

As we begin to read any important work like the Gospel of Luke, some of the first questions that pop up are when was this written and why was it written. Neither of these are easy answers when it comes to Luke. Scholars argue that Luke was written anywhere between the middle of the first century all the way to the beginning of the second century. With that said, the reality is that most scholars who argue for a late authorship for Luke, especially as late as the second century base their theories more on ideologies than facts. Scripturally speaking, the most logical time to place the writing of Luke's Gospel is the late 50's or early 60's AD. If we follow the sections in Acts where Luke includes himself in the action by using the term "we" (Acts 21:17 through Acts 27), we can assume that Luke stayed in Jerusalem for two years without Paul before finally being able to join him on his journey to Rome. During those two years, it seems quite reasonable to assume that Luke did his research for his gospel and wrote it during that time.

The answer of why Luke wrote his gospel is not as simple. It seems quite counter-intuitive to us today, but the fact remains that people in the first century believed that oral histories and eye-witnesses were preferable sources to written histories. Anyone could write something, but if you could hear something from a witness or an expert oral historian, then that was reliable. If that's the case, however, why would Luke write down his gospel when there would have still been so many eyewitnesses to the life and resurrection of Christ? There were many eyewitnesses but the reality was surely creeping in that they simply didn't know when Christ would return to restore all things and resurrect his people and there was the very real possibility of those eyewitnesses passing into death. Couple that with the ongoing problems of false teachers and you had a worrisome situation. Jesus promised that there would be false teachers that would come and they had already experienced the dangers of such individuals as a community. Jesus had also warned about many coming claiming to be him or even possibly teaching different versions of who he was. The early Christians understood all of this and clearly began to recognize the need for reliable records of Jesus' ministry.

Luke asserted that by the time he was writing many had already undertaken to draw up account of the things that had been fulfilled among the community of believers. It is not precisely clear what Luke meant by that, but the word "many" was often used in Luke's day as a term of hyperbole, so it is likely that he was referring to the existing other three gospels that we have and perhaps a few other attempts that were not finished or did not meet the approval of the apostolic standard. One thing we can be sure of is that Luke was not referring to the much ballyhooed "Gnostic" gospels as those were not penned until the late 2nd and 3rd centuries.

Luke's intent was to do something that had not been attempted before but to write an orderly account of all that had been passed on down to them. As he opens his narrative, the style of Luke's introduction, we should note, is very similar to that of serious works of history at the time that Luke was writing. His introduction, in fact, is strikingly similar to the introduction of Josephus, a famous first-century Jewish historian. What that means is that Luke was sending the signal that this was a serious work of investigation, truth, and history. This was no religious fantasy. He had carefully investigated everything that he was writing and it was an orderly account. We would do well to understand, however, that by claiming an "orderly account," Luke was not primarily referring to chronological arrangement. As much as it offends our chronology-sensitive sensibilities today, chronological ordering was not the most important aspect of ordering a narrative in the first-century mind. Luke's intent was to present events in thematic order so as to help his readers better understand the full meaning and significance of the events that he was preserving.

Thus, Luke's Gospel is both a work of history and theology. Many scholars debate as to which of those options the gospel is as though they are mutually exclusive but Luke's aim was not write a work of theology devoid of the facts of history, nor was it to write a historical biography of the life of Jesus. He has a theological agenda certainly, to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel here to usher in the onset of God's Kingdom in a way that no one expected, but that doesn't mean that Luke's work is historically invalid or unreliable. He has infused history with the theological meaning behind it.

Luke opens the door for us to understand that he has based his writing not only on previously written works (likely the Gospels of Mark and Matthew) but also, and primarily, on the very important eyewitnesses who were servants (or ministers) of the word. These eyewitnesses of Jesus were one in the same with the servants of the word, which was a specific and honored role. The word translated "servant" is "*hyperetes*" in the Greek which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew term "*hazzan*." A *Hazzan* was a paid employee of the Jewish synagogue who was in charge of bringing the scrolls out during services. He was the keeper of the scrolls and the worship leader, and thus, was highly respected (see Luke 4:20 as Jesus hands the scroll back to the *hyperetes/hazzan*).

Luke takes this concept and refers to not a *hyperetes* of the synagogue or even church but a *hyperetes* of the word. The role of these *hyperetes* of the word, then, seems to have been as ministers of the word who were eyewitnesses to the events surrounding the life and resurrection of Jesus. These important people were special protectors and preservers of the word which is why they needed also to be eyewitnesses. They did not have a box of scrolls to carry but they carried with them the words and stories of Jesus. They were the protectors of the word and would have taken that role seriously. If, when reciting, they changed anything in their account, they would have been quickly rebuked and corrected by the other *hyperetes* and others who knew the accounts well. This was not a medium that was open to distortion or intentional changing of facts.

By the time Luke arrived in Jerusalem, however, this *hyperetes* were getting older and no doubt beginning to die off. They could have passed on the oral tradition but evidently the decision was made that these words and stories of the son of God were too sacred to allow non-eyewitnesses to pass it on. The only other choice was the writing of authorized documents that needed to be written while the *hyperetes* were still alive so that they could approve these works. For two years Luke worked with these oral sources as a uniquely educated and intelligent writer. The *hyperetes* would have no doubt served as a board of review of sorts and obviously approved of and endorsed Luke's gospel or we would not have it. We can assume that some didn't stand up to the test or possibly that some were made irrelevant by Luke, Matthew, and Mark's works. Luke's agenda is represented in his final work; he chose what he thought was important; he polished the language, organized the material, added his own interpretive nuances, and created smooth connectives, but this editing process does not mean that he created the material in any way.

Luke addressed his letter to Theophilus. Some have claimed, because the name means "dear to God," that this is a generic introduction that is used to address all Christians. It is far more likely, however, that Luke does address a specific person. The term "most excellent" would not have been used if this was a general greeting as it was a title normally reserved for a Roman political official, which is quite feasible to think that Theophilus was a Roman official of some type. We simply do not know if Theophilus was a young Christian who desired more teaching or if he was a skeptic who desired an orderly account in order to make a decision but it seems that the latter is the more likely option. Whatever the case, we know that Luke has laid out the road map for his gospel quite clearly. This is to be an orderly and persuasive work of historical fact that will allow the reader to be certain of the incredible claims of the gospel declaration. He invites us to sit back, buckle up, and find the solid foundation for a mature and lasting faith in the Messiah.



Luke 1:5-25

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both well advanced in years.

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

19 The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22 When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."



Dig Deeper

I enjoy watching movies and I always have, although admittedly, I don't get a big chance to watch that many anymore these days. I enjoy them so much, though, that I've always kept in my mind somewhat of an informal, flexible list of my five favorite movies of all time. That list changes from time to time but it almost always includes "Red Dawn," "White Christmas," and "Armageddon." One thing that hasn't changed on that list for the last 13 or so years is the top movie. In my personal opinion, "Independence Day" is the greatest and most entertaining movie that I have ever seen. I never get tired of watching that movie. One of the things that I really enjoy about that movie is how different and yet how familiar the story is all at the same time. In fact, that is one major aspect of the movie that most people miss. There are allusions, moments of homage, and echoes everywhere in that movie. It echoes everything from classic books like "War of the Worlds," and cultural myths like "area 51," to movies like "The Day the Earth Stood Still," "Alien," "2001: A Space Odyssey," "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," and many more. There are so many little intentional echoes and parallels in the movie that includes character lines, special effects, plot lines, and even things on TV and computer screens in the background. The overall effect is that the movie is a brand new and creative piece of entertainment but one that stands firmly as a continuation and completion of sorts of all of the other science-fiction-type movies that preceded it.

Luke's gospel reminds me a little of that. It is full of echoes, allusions, and parallels. Especially in the opening few chapters, it seems that nearly every verse harkens us back to an older story or passage in the Old Testament. At times, like the movies, the allusions are intentionally woven in by the author. Most of the echoes, though, are much more profound and of a quite different nature than a simple story or movie could ever accomplish. In a movie, the writers look back into the past and directly echo an older story to show respect or to connect their new story to that older one. Luke certainly wants to do that at times and, as stated, does connect it to older Scriptural passages. But far more often in the gospel of Luke, the echoes work exactly the other way. A God who stands outside of time has gently influenced history knowing that his plan has always been to reveal himself through the life of Jesus Christ. Rather than echoing the older stories of the Old Testament, those older stories are actually shadows of what was to come all along. With all of that said, however, the overall effect and what Luke assuredly wanted his readers to see is that the account of Jesus that he is recording is a continuation of the covenant story of God and his people.

Luke's language here echoes language from the beginning of many Old Testament prophetic books (Isa. 1:1; Jer. 1:2-3; Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1) signaling that in the account he is about to give there is a continuity with the ongoing story of God and his covenant with his people. As mentioned previously, there are numerous echoes and allusions to Old Testament Scriptures in this passage (and throughout Luke). So many, in fact, that we cannot possibly begin to discuss them all here. But certainly anyone who has a basic familiarity with the Old Testament would see another obvious echo. The main point of this opening passage is that a child is coming. The birth of this child to a formerly barren couple is nothing new when God works among his people. It is, in fact, similar to other births to formerly barren women or other announcements of the birth of a special child (Gen. 16:1-11; 17:15-17; 18:10-15, 20, 23; Gen. 21; 30:35; Judges 13:3-21; 1 Sam. 1:1). The most obvious connections are to the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah and of Samson and Samuel. No, this is not a strange new thing that God is doing, rather the point is clear that this will take place in the long sequence of God's purposes. The child who will be born to Abraham and Sarah will play a key role in the fulfillment of God's promises.

But certainly Zechariah and Elizabeth were hardly expecting this. They were simple, righteous Jews in God's sight, meaning they followed the law as a sign of their gratitude and devotion to God. They were going about their normal lives, not dreaming that anything like this was about to happen to them. Zechariah was a member of the priestly order of Abijah (1 Chron. 24:10) and had been chosen by lot to carry out the role of officiating at the sacrifice. Priests served at the temple for two one-week periods throughout the year but because there were approximately 18,000 priests throughout Israel, they would usually be able to officiate only one time in their life.

The angel Gabriel (Dan. 9:21) comes to Zechariah (echoing language from Gen. 15:1, Malachi 3:1; 4:5) and tells him that he will have a son named "John," which was no small detail because generally when God specifically named a child it was because he was to have a significant role in God's salvation history (Gen. 16:11; 17:19; Isa. 7:14). This child would be set apart from his birth and would be used by God in a unique way. He would not take any alcoholic drink which was typically associated with being separated from normal life for a divine task. He would not be filled with wine but would lead a life that was filled with the Holy Spirit, enabling his role as a prophet and forerunner to the Messiah.

We are told that Zechariah was a righteous man but that doesn't mean that he wasn't a very real human being. And it is the human aspect of this story that makes it so compelling. Sometimes righteous people do have disappointments in life. Elizabeth was old and had no children. This would have been viewed by those around her as a curse of sorts, as a sign of God's displeasure. This is why Luke makes it very clear that this was not the case. They were righteous and yet life hadn't quite worked out the way they had surely hoped. This couple had surely prayed (cf. 13) about their personal situation as well as God's overall purposes for his people so when the angel appears, God was, in effect, answering two prayers at the same time.

It's not difficult to relate to the fact that Zechariah was not prepared for anything like this and he needs some sort of a sign. The implication is that the appearance of the angel itself should have been enough of a sign. Zechariah doubts the message that is being given to him. How can this work, since his body is virtually dead? What he needed was the kind of resurrection faith that Abraham had when God told him that he would also experience his "dead" body come to life and produce a son (cf. Rom. 4:18-25). In effect, the angel tells Zechariah to "be quiet for a little and watch God work." God will bring his promises to bear as he always does. What Zechariah needs to learn is to listen to God and trust that he will do what he has promised, so he will be given a sign that will also serve as a bit of a punishment. He will not speak for a time, he will only listen. This left Zechariah unable to give the customary blessing as he emerged so the crowd immediately knows that something unusual has taken place. He frantically tried to communicate to the crowd what had happened which was, no doubt, somewhat of an amusing scene as we picture this stately old gentleman trying to use his hands to communicate that he has just seen an angel.

Elizabeth's response is different from that of her husband. As a result, we never get any indication that Elizabeth acted like a victim for her circumstances or became bitter at God or her situation. She took her burden to God but didn't let her burden embitter her. It was God's will to do with as he saw fit. Because of this attitude of heart in accepting her lot and serving God faithfully despite what her personal preferences might be, we see that when her burden was lifted she rejoices and sees herself as the undeserving object of God's personal concern and work. There is no "it's about time" or "what was he thinking in the first place" attitudes. She is a beautiful picture of someone who took her burden to God and was quite willing to serve God regardless of her personal situation, but who rejoiced genuinely when God blessed her.

This account reminds us that God often works through people who want to be faithful to him but are a jumbled mix of weak faith and devotion, yet who are constantly prepared to be used by God for whatever purposes he has in mind even though they may feel not up to the task on their own strength or understanding. Luke has written this story to show that God's covenant promises to his people have not been forgotten. Abraham would have a family of many nations who would be reconciled to God and through whom the world would be blessed (cf. Gen. 12:1-5; 17:1-3; Rom. 4) but within the context of fulfilling those large promises, God has not forgotten the needs, hopes, and prayers of ordinary people. This is Israel's God, YHWH, that can fulfill his promises to the world and bring joy and personal fulfillment to woman who could have easily thought of herself as forgotten. When this God acts on a large scale, he doesn't ignore the smaller human needs. He is a God who can and does accomplish both. This doesn't mean that God will always work the way that we would like or expect him to but we can be sure that he is working.

Yes, the personal story has been tended to in a beautiful way but we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the primary purpose of this incredible conception story is to point to an even more remarkable one to come.



Display

What is your reaction to personal disappointments? Do you get angry and bitter and constantly question God or are you more like Elizabeth who went about life not being bitter and when God did finally act, showed no kernel of bitterness but instead only joy and gratitude? What can you learn from Elizabeth that will help you today as you work through the situations in your life?



Discover

1. What significance does Malachi 3 and 4 have in explaining this account in Luke?
2. What was Gabriel's response to Zechariah's doubt?
3. Contrast the response of Zechariah and that of Elizabeth.



Luke 1:26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called [b] the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.



Dig Deeper

I knew a guy many years ago who could tell some incredible stories. He had experienced an incredible life and so, his stories were just as incredible. He could keep anyone mesmerized for hours as he told stories of his adventurous childhood, growing up with parents that sounded so wise, loving, and even exciting. He had been born, he told us, in a small village in Africa while his parents were there on a mission trip. The entire story that surrounded that whole event was interesting enough but that was just the beginning of his incredible life. He had traveled the globe with his parents and seen so many countries and fascinating places that I just couldn't believe that one person had experienced so much. We all were impressed and respected this guy a great deal if, for nothing else, all the things that he had seen and done in his life. Then one day I met his cousin who had briefly come to town to visit him. He seemed reluctant for me to spend time with her but eventually it worked out that we had a little time alone and began to talk. I was eager to hear her perspective on my friend's parents and their many adventures but quickly found out why he was so reluctant for us to spend any time together. None of what he had told us about his life was true. He had actually experienced a rather tough life. He never knew his father, his mother abandoned him at three and he spent the rest of his life bouncing between foster homes and the houses of relatives. He spent his childhood reading and dreaming of a life that he could only imagine. So, when he had a chance to start over he did. He created a new narrative of his life and just edited out all of what he thought were the embarrassing details of his life and substituted impressive ones instead.

That's generally the way it is when people make up stories, especially important ones. When people lie, make up a story, or even just embellish one to look more impressive than it is, they don't include the embarrassing details. Those are edited out. This is one of the sure markers of determining whether an account is true or not. Does it have those little details that aren't always the type of thing you would want others to know or does everything fit together impressively and beautifully? This is one of the things that just makes it nearly impossible to believe that the gospel of Luke is an invented or embellished story meant to make Jesus out to be something that he was not. Oh sure, there are critics who claim that, but those claims just don't hold water when we actually look at Luke's Gospel. There are too many embarrassing details that someone in the first century just would not make up if they were creating a story that they wanted others to believe. Not the least of those components is the role of women in the Gospel of Luke. Some of Jesus' most loyal followers are women and they will be the ones to discover and be the first witnesses of his resurrection. That's not something a first century writer would have made up unless it was true because women weren't considered reliable witnesses. As we go through Luke we will find many such details like that. We are given details of Jesus showing emotion and weakness, his disciples abandoning him, and here an insignificant young virgin from the middle of nowhere giving birth to the one who would be the Messiah and true King of the universe. It would just be too much to make up. It would actually harm your story... unless it was true.

If Luke were inventing a story about the Messiah who would one day claim the allegiance of the entire world to his eternal kingship, this is hardly the way he would start it out. There is no pomp, no circumstance, and nothing about his earthly circumstances that are befitting a king. How could this child possibly be offered as an alternative to the mighty and powerful Caesar? How could this impress anyone? Perhaps that is the entire point as everything about this coming birth echoes Paul's description of Jesus' incarnation: "have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil. 2:5-7).

There was nothing about Mary that would distinguish her in the eyes of the world as worthy of the vocation that Gabriel brings to her. She was a young Jewish girl of marrying age which would probably put her somewhere in the range of 12-16 years old. She was from Galilee, a region that was, at best, a backwater part of Israel, which was itself a backwater part of the territory of the Roman Empire. Mary was betrothed to Joseph who was a handyman day-laborer, so there was nothing particularly distinct about him either, save for his status as a descendant of David (which would make Jesus, even if not his biological son, a rightful heir in the descendancy line of David).

Jewish marriage involved a formal engagement including a contract and exchange of bridal price, and then a year's preparation period after which came the formal wedding. The engaged couple would not engage in sexual relations until the formal wedding so Gabriel came to this young lass while she was still a virgin. It has become quite popular in the last century or so to claim that the original biblical writers only intended to describe Mary as a young unmarried girl but the clear implication of both Luke and Matthew, in their separate accounts, are that Mary was indeed a virgin. This is confirmed by Mary's response in verse 34 which would be virtually pointless if the idea that Luke was conveying was that she was simply a young maiden. It only makes sense if she had followed Jewish custom and was a complete virgin.

One of the most striking things about Mary was her response to the vocation that the angel laid out to her. When Gabriel came to Zechariah his response stood in a long line of humans who were called by God for his purposes only to initially argue that they weren't up to such a task. Moses was called by God to free his people from Egypt but Moses argued about his capabilities for such a task (Ex. 3:10-13; 4:1, 10-17). Gideon was called by God to lead his people against their enemies but Gideon questioned his worth and ability (Jud. 6:10-18; 26-38). Saul was chosen to be the King of Israel but questioned his worthiness and even tried to hide (1 Sam. 9:17-21). Mary, however, stands in stark contrast to all of that. She certainly had many reasons that could have made her feel unworthy or incapable of such a task. Yet, she doesn't argue. She doesn't claim to be incapable. She trusts God's ability and power more than her own inability and impotence. Mary understood that the role of true faith in the life of one committed to God is to trust in God's ability and not our own weaknesses. She seems to have grasped the fact that she was not chosen by God because of her own merit or ability but simply that she was chosen by God. She is, in fact, the first in a line of faithful and honorable women that Luke will highlight in his Gospel, something that wouldn't really have helped his case, as we've already mentioned, in the eyes of his first-century readers and thus has the ring of truth to it. Truly the obedient humility of Mary is a constant call for us to echo her heart and willingness to be used despite our lack of earthly credentials.

Some have wondered about a seeming parallel between her response and that of Zechariah's but a closer look reveals the important difference. Zechariah's response is one of doubt. He just doesn't see how it is possible for such a thing to happen and Gabriel responds sharply with a sign that will serve the dual role of a punishment. Mary, however, doesn't display a lack of faith but a simple and faithful question. How is this all going to work out? It is a question of clarification not of doubt. Gabriel's response is a clear indicator that her question was a humble request for information not an expression of faithlessness. Gabriel doesn't give her all the details but it is enough to know that she doesn't need to lie with Joseph, the power of God will work out the details. And to verify all this, she will be given a sign even though she didn't ask for it. She will go to her aged cousin, Elizabeth. Her pregnancy will be the sign for Mary that God certainly has the power to fulfill his promises.

This scene continues the pattern of echoes that Luke has already established for his account. This story certainly echoes the previous one of John's birth announcement, but Luke also wants to establish the concept that John will be important but Jesus' role will be far more important. The clearest echoes, however, seem to clearly go back to 2 Samuel 7 where David is promised that his throne and kingdom would be established forever (although certainly this is not the only OT passage that Luke wants us to hear echoed in this passage as is demonstrated by a quick perusal of Isaiah 7:10-17). The promises to David are consistently picked up and echoed here, and dare we even say, in Luke's mind, fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. David is told that his name would be great (2 Sam. 7:9) and here we are told that the coming Messiah will "be great" (v. 32). David is promised that the throne of his kingdom will be established forever (2 Sam. 7:13) and here we are told that "the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David" (v. 32). The Lord promises David that his descendant will be his son (2 Sam. 7:14), and Luke declares that he will be called "the Son of the Most High" (v. 32). Your house and your kingdom, David is told, will be established forever (2 Sam. 7:16) and Luke writes that "he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (v. 33). Surely Luke saw the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, as the fulfillment of the promise and the hope that someday a descendant of David would lead his people in a new Exodus to their eternal promised land (Gen. 49:10; 2 Sam. 7:9-16; Isa. 9:1-7; 11:1-3).

Again, as in the previous section, we shouldn't lose sight of either the very real human story of the obedience of Mary despite the coming ridicule that an unmarried pregnant woman would receive (Her faith continues to challenge Christians 2,000 years later), or the larger story of which Mary's personal story is but one thread. The child to be born will be the Messiah of the house of David and will somehow be God's own Son. All of the promises that God had given that had been hanging unfulfilled have finally been answered. When we really boil down the gospel of Luke to its simplest terms, it is the account of God fulfilling all of the promises that he had given to his people. God would heal the world and deal with evil and he would do so through something so unimpressive as a baby.



Display

When you are called to serve God in different ways, what is your usual reaction? Do you try to think of all the reasons why you cannot or do you humbly trust God to provide you with the resources to do what he has called you to? Make a decision right now that when God calls you to do something (through prayer or through another Christian) that you will be willing no matter how incapable you feel of doing it on your own. Remember, that's exactly the point: You're not on your own.



Discover

1. What are the parallels between this birth announcement and that of John's?
2. What are the differences between Zechariah's response and Mary's?
3. What does it tell us about Luke that he is willing to include even potentially embarrassing details?



Luke 1:39-56

Mary Visits Elizabeth

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Mary's Song

46 And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors."

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.



Dig Deeper

Just this morning as I was studying over this passage and considering it, I looked down at my dog who was half-sitting, half-crouched at my feet. He was waiting in eager anticipation for me, looking for any little sign that I might be moving. This is actually not weird behavior for him in the mornings. I usually get up long before he does because he is lazy but when he finally does get up he comes to my feet while I'm working and he waits. He watches my every move, looking for some sign that it might be his time to go outside and take care of his business. It's amazing how he sits and studies me so carefully and seems to be at the point when he knows my every move. He knows the difference between me simply adjusting my sitting position or even getting up to get a different book. But if I make even the slightest move that he interprets to mean that his time has come, he gets unbelievably excited. He begins to celebrate in his own little doggy way as he spins around in circles and jumps up and down. He waits for that moment so intently that when it finally comes he can hardly contain himself. The time he has been waiting for has finally arrived and he has no thoughts of all that time that he might have waited. He's just full of doggy joy.

Not to demean the biblical story at all by comparing it to my dog, a rather ignoble dog at that, but it does make a certain point. Quite frankly, this story doesn't make a lot of sense if you don't understand the incredible anticipation behind it. Mary and Elizabeth certainly have the joy of learning that they will have babies that will be very special in God's purposes somehow, but they don't have many details beyond that. So why the incredible excitement and joy that clearly extends beyond the normal joy of having a child? It is because even though they might not understand everything or have all the details, they know that they, and all of Israel with them, have been waiting for a very long time for God to act on the promises that he gave to Abraham so long ago. They've been waiting in eager anticipation looking for the slightest sign that it is finally that time. These dual birth announcements have given them that sign. God has finally acted to fulfill their expectations. And they are full of joy.

As Luke describes the intensely personal scene between Elizabeth and the arriving Mary, he seems to stress the relationship between Jesus and John. Normally, because she was older, Elizabeth would receive the honor and respect, but instead it is Elizabeth who honors and gives a blessing to Mary. Inspired by the Holy Spirit she recognizes the significance of the baby that Mary is carrying. Elizabeth's child will play an important role in God's salvation purposes but Mary's child will be even greater. Even her baby, again inspired by the Holy Spirit (This is of the same type of Spirit action as in the Old Testament when the Spirit would "come upon" someone and should not be confused with the New Covenant actions of the Spirit or the indwelling of the Spirit that someone receives when they enter into Christ.), leaps with joy, showing that the baby Mary is carrying is even greater than he. There seem to be echoes here of Genesis 25:22-26, but in that this passage is like the film negative opposite of that passage. Rather than battling in the womb for supremacy as Jacob and Esau did, John is inspired by the Spirit to recognize and rejoice in the supremacy of his younger cousin.

Immediately following Elizabeth's blessing, Luke gives us Mary's song. This doesn't, however, imply that Mary uttered these words right at the moment of this meeting. Luke is not writing an historical account but is, rather, ordering historical events in such a way as to explain their theological significance. The song itself is known as the Magnificat which is the first word of the Latin translation of this passage. As we look at her song, however, it seems out of place at first glance. It is all about the mighty God of the universe overthrowing the powerful and the mighty and exalting the humble. It is a fiercely nationalistic song. But what has this got to do with the coming birth of her son?

It only makes sense if we understand the underlying anticipation. Mary and Elizabeth shared the anticipation that had been passed down in Israel since at least the time of the prophets. God had promised Abraham that he would have a family of many nations and that one day the entire world would be blessed through his descendants. Mary, like her fellow Israelites, knew that the prophets had spoken of a time when God would finally act and would deal with the evil that was in the world. He would bring a time of mercy, justice, reversal, freedom, and victory over evil.

This all comes bursting forth in Mary's song as nearly every line is an allusion or a direct quotation from the Old Testament Scriptures. Mary's song has many scriptural predecessors of hymns sung to praise God in response to his merciful actions, including the song of Moses (Exod. 15:1-18); the song of Miriam (Exod. 15:19-21); the song of Deborah (Judges 5:1-31); and the song of Asaph (1 Chron. 16:8-36). The clearest echo, though, comes from Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 as she rejoiced at the coming of her son Samuel. Hannah, Elizabeth, and Mary all shared in common an overflow of joy and anticipation of what God was going to do. We shouldn't, however, read anything into Mary's song beyond what is there. She was in great anticipation that God had finally acted but this doesn't mean that she knew exactly what he was going to do. Luke has set the stage that these two boys really would be God's agents to fulfill his promises of long ago but no one, including Mary, could have anticipated what Jesus was going to do and how incredibly God would bring his great reversal. Not even Mary likely understood that the great power that would be expended was not the Roman Empire but sin and death itself.

The song itself is full of a typical Hebrew parallelism in which the first line in a stanza is explained further by the second line. Thus: "Her soul glorifies the Lord," and her "spirit rejoices in God my Savior." As we go throughout this song we see that v. 49 echoes v. 48; v. 51b echoes v. 51a; v. 52 b echoes v. 52a; v. 53b echoes v. 53a; v. 55b echoes vv. 54 and 55a. The song is split somewhat in half as we see that the first half in vv. 46-50 deals primarily with Mary while vv. 51-55 have to do with Israel. There is a clear parallel given between the role of Mary as God's servant and Israel's role as God's servant. There are a number of repeated ideas and terms in the two halves of the song (such as "his servant; the object of his favor/ mercy; humble servant; and God's ongoing mercy) that demonstrate the connection that God's work in Mary's life and God's work in Israel will come through the same child that she is carrying

That is all coming soon but for now we are left with a story of an older woman showing humility and honoring her younger relative and the young girl showing that she deeply clings to the word of God. What I love personally about this story is the way that we can begin to see that these two boys will reflect the characters of their mothers. John would carry with him the type of humility that his mother displayed as we can see when, many years later, he said of Jesus "he must become greater, I must become less" (John 3:30). John, like his mother, understood and embraced his role in God's plan with no hint of selfish ambition. But it isn't just John. If we look at the life of Jesus we see that much of his teaching echoes the sentiments of Mary's song. Yes, this coming son would be the Son of God, but he was very much a human child who sat and listened like all Jewish children would as his mother taught him of God's word and his promises. He listened and learned carefully that the rich and powerful should not trust in themselves and that God's kingdom would be given to those who understood that they were poor in God's sight.

What we see most clearly in Mary's song is the hope that bursts forth in each word. Nothing had actually changed in the world but devout Jews like Mary had waited in such anticipation that at the first sign of God's action, the hope bursts forth like a flood. God will perform mighty deeds with his arm, which was Old Testament language meaning that God's power would be displayed in the world. The cause of all this excitement was that God had taken the initiative and had acted.

Perhaps the key to this whole section is verses 54 and 55. In many ways this is the thesis statement for Luke's entire writing which spans the gospel of Luke as well as the book of Acts. God has finally acted and has remembered his servant Israel. His mercy to the world will be on display. God had given Abraham promises which he is now about to fulfill. It is the mark of biblical faith, as Paul declares in Romans 4:21, to believe and live as though God's promises will be fulfilled. God's promised one family through whom sin would be dealt with and the world would be blessed has arrived. The coming birth of these two boys is the opening salvo of God's mighty arm reaching into his creation and showing that he has not forgotten his promises. It is our task to follow Luke as he describes the significant details of the lives of John and ultimately Jesus and even beyond that to the family of believers that Jesus creates to see how this all works out. We would do well, however to pay attention to these two immanently important details. The journey on which we are about to embark is about God fulfilling his long-ago promises and they will be fulfilled through the descendant of Abraham's family to create the ultimate covenant family that God had always promised.



Display

Do you so well know God's promises for his people that it could honestly be said that you wait in eager anticipation for them to be fulfilled? Do you so early await the expansion of God's Kingdom that you burst forth in jubilant praise at the slightest signs of it moving forward towards God's final destination of filling the whole earth with his presence when Christ returns and the resurrection comes?



Discover

1. What does Elizabeth's response to Mary foreshadow about the relationship between John and Jesus?

2. How does the content of Mary's song make sense as a response to the announcement that she will have a son by the power of God?



Luke 1:57-80

The Birth of John the Baptist

57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, 60 but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

61 They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John."

64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

Zechariah's Song

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a horn [c] of salvation for us in the house of his servant David

70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

71 salvation from our enemies

and from the hand of all who hate us—

72 to show mercy to our ancestors

and to remember his holy covenant,

73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,

and to enable us to serve him without fear

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;

for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,

78 because of the tender mercy of our God,

by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

79 to shine on those living in darkness

and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the path of peace."

80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit [d]; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.



Dig Deeper

"But you promised." I'd be willing to bet if you're a parent you've heard those words more than a couple of times. It seems that there is nothing more important to a child than if they believe that you promised something to them. In fact, I've learned to be very careful with anything that you tell them will happen or that you will do later because they are likely to take it as a promise, and to children a promise is a promise, end of story. You will not find any mercy in the heart of a five-year old when it comes to extenuating circumstances. If you said it, you had better come through. Adults are much more forgiving when you think about it. You can promise something to an adult and then apologize your way out of the situation pretty easily and most adults will let it go without much of a second thought. Perhaps we don't hold others to their promises so much because we don't want others to hold us to ours. When you think about it, maybe the kids are on to something. Maybe we should take promises more seriously. Kids seem to know that when it comes down to it you are only as good as your promises. If you keep them you can be trusted. If you don't then you can't and someone who doesn't keep their promises cannot be trusted for anything important.

The first couple of chapters of Luke set the stage for the remainder of the gospel of Luke but also for the second half of his extended work, the book of Acts. The primary theme of these early chapters has everything to do with promises. Going all the way back to Genesis, God made some pretty lofty promises to Abraham and his descendants. Those promises weren't just left with Abraham either. They were passed down from generation to generation and held on to tightly. The Israelites believed God's promises and they held him to them. They absolutely expected him to come through on them and make good. After all, they knew that it wasn't only people that were as good as their promises and their ability to keep them. That applied to God as well. That's one of the main themes in the gospel of Luke and Acts. God gave very serious promises to bless the entire world and deal with sin through Abraham's seed and God has finally acted. In a sense, Luke's gospel is an answer to a question. You want to know what kind of God you have? Look at his promises and then look at how he gave a resounding yes to every single promise through the life of the Messiah (2 Cor. 1:20). This is the kind of God that we have.

Luke has subtly set the pattern for John's role as a forerunner to the Messiah as he has consistently set a pattern of John first, then Jesus. First came the birth announcement of John and the reaction to that. Then came the birth announcement of Jesus and the reaction to that. Now we have the birth of John the Baptist and the reaction to that. Luke has not only given us certain historical facts in a fairly chronological manner but he has prepared us for the coming birth of Jesus as well as preparing us for the concept of John coming first as a sign that Jesus would soon follow.

The birth of John the Baptist shows us through Zechariah's actions that even righteous men need to learn new things constantly from God. When Gabriel first came to him his response was one of skepticism and questioning God's word. Now he has learned his lesson well. He had learned from his long period of silence and was now ready to burst forth in belief and praise of what God was doing. I think it's a fair assumption to believe that Luke wants us to see that in some ways Zechariah is representative of what had been happening to Israel as a whole. Prophecy had been absent from Israel for some time by Zechariah's day. God had been silent for hundreds of years but now he was acting and fulfilling all of the promises from long ago. How would Israel respond? Would they burst forth in jubilant praise of God and embrace that although he was working in a way that they never expected, this is how he was undeniably working?

Zechariah demonstrates that he has learned to trust the promises of God. Even though the people that have gathered around fully expect Zechariah to contradict Elizabeth's puzzling name choice of John, he does not. It would have been unusual and quite against custom and their culture to choose a name that was not from their family ancestry but Zechariah has had enough of going with the expected norm. No one would have expected him and Elizabeth to be blessed by God with a child at such an advanced age, so if God wanted the child named John, then John it would be. Immediately following this demonstration of faith, the silence ends. Again, we can't help but see a hopeful expectation that the same will be true for Israel. For those who respond in faith, the silence will be over. Zechariah's faith led to his immediate praise of God, which was quite likely the song of praise that Luke gives us after giving us the response of those who heard it. Zechariah's song is in response to John's birth fills the crowd with awe and wonder at what God is going to do next.

If we look at the world of Zechariah's time from his perspective the content of his song takes on fuller meaning. Things in the world were just not right. Israel had passed down the ancient promises from God that Abraham's descendants would be his people and that someday the whole world would be blessed through that family. But Israel was hardly experiencing anything of that nature. God's people were being oppressed at the hands of the pagans. How could that be right or just? Israel had been sent off into exile hundreds of years earlier and even though they had returned to their physical land they knew that the presence of Yahweh had not returned to the Temple. They were still in a spiritual exile and were waiting for God to return to his people. When you're under the thumb of oppression like that, the only thing that keeps you going is hope. Hope that one day things will change; the wrongs will be righted and the upside down will be turned right-side-up.

As Zechariah looks down at this baby all of that hope that he had been storing up, pondering, and wrestling to maintain comes bursting forth through the inspiration of the Spirit. This song is all about God finally acting. The promises that God had given Abraham were so important to the Hebrew people, that those who responded in faith and saw in the birth of this child and the one to come the very movement of God fulfilling his promises, couldn't help but respond in joy.

We simply don't know how much of this speech was of Zechariah's own understanding and how much came from the inspiration of the Spirit but we do know that most Jews of Zechariah's time were looking for a political and military Messiah. They wanted someone who would, like Maccabeus a century before, raise up an army and gloriously defeat the Romans, bringing freedom to Israel and hoping that God would again return to Israel to set up his kingdom. Zechariah's song certainly speaks of being redeemed and receiving salvation from enemies but his song repeatedly looks beyond the normal expectations and hints at something more. God would deliver his people and make good on his promises. He would raise up a mighty horn (a symbol of power) to save his people. He would answer the promises made to Abraham and through the prophets long ago. He would remember his holy covenant.

But Zechariah looks deeper than the normally expected solution of his day. God's mercy would extend to rescue his people from the real enemies of sin and death. It wouldn't be the Romans who would be defeated but death itself. God's people would be rescued and able to stand in his presence without fear. What God was about to do would bring lasting holiness and righteousness to the people of God. At long last God would have a people who would truly keep his covenant and whose sins would be forgiven.

The prophets had declared that when God did finally act and send a new David, one that would enact an everlasting kingdom, that a prophet would come and prepare the way for him. John would be that prophet to make way for the Messiah. It is in God's actions through these two boys that the ancient promises and the coming fulfillment would be held together. This would not be just a temporary action on God's part but the Messiah's coming will have everlasting implications. John will prepare the way for the rising sun (literally "morning star" which is likely an allusion to Num. 24:17 and Isa. 11:10) and so the Messiah will not just be a king but will be light. He will be powerful, yes, but more important than that, he will be the light of the world (Lk. 2:32).

Luke ends this section with a personal note about John. Once again, he has not lost sight of the intimate human stories encapsulated within the larger picture of God at work in the world. John was a real person. He was a joy to his parents who, no doubt, took great pleasure in watching him grow in stature and in the way of the Spirit. The fact that he lived in the wilderness demonstrate that John was likely very connected with people of Israel. Just as they were led through the wilderness following God's Spirit, so was John. He could identify with Israel. Some have claimed that his location in the wilderness might be a clue that John was part of the Essene community at Qumran, at least for a time. It is quite possible that the Essenes of John's time believed that they were the last generation before the Teacher of Righteousness came, so this group could very well have been a good training ground for John and his coming role in God's redemption plan but there is no hard evidence of that and even if John was part of the Essene community that does not limit him or Jesus to their peculiar beliefs. These little personal touches and glimpses, however, constantly remind us that is not just some dry religious tale but the very real story of God coming himself as a baby to rescue his people.



Display

Zechariah learned obedience, trust, and submission to God's will even in his old age. What lessons do you need to learn today from God? Are you open and ready to whatever God might call you to do? Are you pushing your expectations aside and waiting for God to work in your community in whatever ways he desires to work through you? Pray this week to be humble and to be open to God's will in your life and see if he doesn't call you to do something you never



Discover

1. What is the significance, biblically speaking, of God directly choosing the name of a child?
2. What aspects of Zechariah's song show hints that he was looking beyond the normal nationalistic and materialistic expectations of the Messiah to something even more significant?



Luke 2:1-20

The Birth of Jesus

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.



Dig Deeper

History tells us that long there was a very special child that was born about 2,000 years ago. The Father of this child was known to some as the potential savior of the world who would bring peace to all mankind. He was god and so his son would be known as the son of god. This son was the Lord and master of all and was the one who would carry out the saving activity of the Father and truly bring the peace that his Father desired for the world. Some were skeptical that the son was divine but as he grew older and more powerful, more and more people came to worship him as the savior of the world. An ancient writing that hailed the good news or the gospel of this savior on the occasion of his birthday, read: "The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it [our savior], by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a deliverer for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere. . . . ; the birthday of the god was the beginning for the world of the gospel that has come to men through him." This was, in other words, no ordinary human but the son of god that should be hailed, celebrated, and worshipped.

But here is the catch. You might have thought that I was describing the birth of Jesus, which would make sense seeing as how we are reading an account of the birth of Jesus. Yet if you really did think that the above paragraph was written about Jesus in the first century you would be wrong. It was describing someone from the first century alright but not Jesus, and the father mentioned was not the Creator of the universe. In fact I was writing about Caesar Augustus and his adoptive father, Julius Caesar. In fact, as we read this account of Jesus' birth it can be striking how similar it sounds to the things written about Caesar Augustus and that is exactly the point. Luke is announcing the birth of the new and rightful king of the entire world and to do so, he will use the language and descriptive terms of the most powerful pretender to the throne. The very announcement of Jesus as the Messiah and the true King necessitates the idea that not only is he King but that all others are not. So Luke has quite intentionally and provocatively taken Caesar's words and titles from the pretender and given them to the one that he believes really is the Savior of the world.

From the opening verse of this chapter Luke has set up a tale of two kings. But the tales could not hardly be any more divergent than these two. Everything about Caesar Augustus was impressive from a worldly point of view. He was the emperor of the mighty Roman Empire, the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He was feared wherever he went and worshiped as a god by more people every day. He had all of the might and power of Rome behind him. So much so that Augustus flicked his finger and could send people half a world away on a trip to register for the census to pay taxes that would further support his lifestyle. One could see why announcements about his birthday or great victories were given by messengers who went around the kingdom and declared the good news, or the gospel

On the other hand, we have the king that Luke wishes to present to the world. There is nothing attractive or impressive about his king. His king was born to a lowly and unimportant couple that was at the mercy of the might Caesar. This is not the kind of story you would make up if you were trying to show people that this king is more powerful and worthy to be followed than the might Augustus. There was no pomp, no circumstance, and certainly no wealth or worldly power. There was just nothing impressive at all about this small, helpless baby lying in an animal's feeding trough.

His parents were under the power of Augustus like everyone else and when he declared a census, Joseph went. It is likely that the Jewish people registered for their taxes for their census in their hometown as a part of a Roman attempt to be sensitive to Jewish customs and the importance they placed on inheritance land. Only Joseph would have had to go, but for reasons unknown to us, his young betrothed wife-to-be accompanied him (we can speculate that being pregnant and unmarried, she may have felt unsafe without Joseph nearby to protect her from those who might be very upset by her situation).

There is much that has grown up about the night of this young king's birth that has more to do with legend than reality and we should take it seriously to get rid of the myths. The nativity scenes that we see so often today have more to do with tradition than reality. Luke makes no mention of any magi as they likely didn't arrive (as told by Matthew) until Jesus was close to two years old. We also are never told that there were any animals that were actually present although they might have been. They did put Jesus in a feeding trough which has probably led to the presumption that there were animals around but the text doesn't tell us one way or another. The language used in verse 7 has several possibilities about where Mary actually had her baby but putting together the possible meanings of the word "katalyma" (often translated "Inn") and what we know of the history of the area at the time of Jesus' birth, means that the most plausible option, in my opinion, is that they had traveled to the ancestral family home of Joseph and found that there was no room for them in the normal family lodging quarters (another possible translation for "katalyma") which would have been on the second floor. So they were sent to the first floor where supplies could be kept and where animals could be brought in if the weather were particularly cold (which it would not have been at this time of year). This would have given them ample shelter and privacy and it was likely a place like this that this young king was born. Whatever the exact situation was, it is clear that it was not at all impressive when set in contrast with the mighty Augustus.

Yes, there was no comparison from a worldly perspective between these two kings. There was no servants to be ordered to go around the kingdom and tell all of the important people that a new king had come. But there was a gospel announcement for Luke's king and it was given by messengers that even Augustus could not muster up. Augustus' father was the mighty Julius Caesar, whom he claimed to be divine and whom many people worshiped, but the father of Luke's king was none other than Yahweh, the almighty God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The fact that a host of the Lord's own messengers burst forth to declare the gospel of the birth of the Savior might have been a hint of his true greatness and identity. He was the real Savior. He was the long-promised Messiah. And he was the true Lord of the world. He didn't come in impressive worldly power but he was the real deal of which Augustus, Luke wants us to see, was only the pale worldly shadow.

And yet, just as we begin to catch a glimpse of greatness, Luke brings us right back to the humility of the moment surrounding the birth of Jesus. His gospel messengers didn't go to the powerful, the mighty, or the influential. They went to a bunch of shepherds. Perhaps it was because shepherds were among the lowest rungs of the social order by the time of Jesus and this moment was all about humility and lowliness. Perhaps it was because this was the promised heir of David, who was himself just a shepherd boy before becoming the mighty king of Israel. Perhaps it was because God had often been described in the Old Testament as being like a shepherd (Ps. 23; 28:9; 100:3) and had promised through the prophet Ezekiel that he would return one day and would be a shepherd to his people, searching for them, rescuing them, binding up the injured, tending to them, and shepherding his flock with justice (Ezek. 34:11-15). Perhaps it was for all of those reasons that God chose to send his messengers to the shepherds who were out spending the night with their sheep in the field.

The shepherds are given a sign that will demonstrate to them that they have found the right child, the true Messiah. He will be wrapped in cloth and laying in that manger. He will not be wrapped in king's clothes and set in the finest crib, just simple cloths. When they see a baby wrapped in cloth in that unimpressive manger they will know that he is the king that God had promised. The next time we see him wrapped in cloth, it will be our sign to know that he really is the king that has fulfilled all that God said he would accomplish one day, so keep your eyes open for that.

Luke has laid out a stark contrast. The birth of this insignificant little baby, in an insignificant backwater part of the world, to insignificant parents is the opening shot in a confrontation between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. The kingdom of God has come, says Luke, in seeming weakness, frailty, and vulnerability, not much more significant than a tiny mustard seed. One day, though, and in a way that will seem just as weak, frail, and vulnerable the kingdom of God will flourish like the biggest of all trees and completely overshadow all of the kingdoms and all of the kings that the world could offer.



Display

Luke has given us the picture of God working through small, insignificant, and humble means. God always works that. Are you willing to realize that God wants to use you in mighty ways even though you might not be impressive from the world's point of view? Are you willing to truly step back and unleash the kingdom of God in your life and in the lives of those around you?



Discover

1. What were Luke's purposes in using so many titles and terms that were usually used of Caesar in his description of the birth of Jesus?

2. Why do you think God chose to announce the birth of Jesus through angels rather than through some other means?



Luke 2:21-40

Jesus Presented in the Temple

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord" [a]), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." [b]

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss [c] your servant in peace.

30 For my eyes have seen your salvation,

31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

33 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then had been a widow for eighty-four years. [d] She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.



Display

You may well have already made your decision of what to do with Jesus Christ but have you really taken stock of the ramifications of the fact that every single person will face eternity based on the decision that they have made to seek salvation and embrace Christ or to reject him? Do you have an urgency about that fact when it comes to sharing your faith with those around you? Who can you share your faith with today?



Discover

1. Why might Luke have included the details that let us know that Joseph and Mary were lawful Jews?

2. Why was Simeon so ready to be dismissed by the Lord now that he had seen Jesus?



Dig Deeper

I mean no offense if you happen to be in the medical profession, but the fact remains that I just do not like going to the doctor. If I can at all avoid going I will in a hot minute. In fact, the only reason that I usually go to the doctor is that my wife has made an appointment for me without my knowledge or consent, then springs it on me shortly before the appointment, and puts pressure on me until I go. It doesn't always work that way, but it's usually something along those lines. There are a lot of reasons that I don't really care to go to the doctor but one of them is the way that most of them communicate. I'm not at the doctor's office for small talk. I'm not there so that you can dance around things and make me feel better and feel positive about something. I want a straight shooter. I want someone that's going to get down to business and tell me the real deal, whether good or bad. A few years back when we were living about 100 miles from where we currently live, my wife found a doctor through her interaction with him as a nurse and thought I might like him. I went and she was right. He was great. He didn't try to tell me jokes or set the stage to make things palatable. If things were good, he said so. If they weren't, he said so. When my cholesterol level went up a little he said "It can't be your activity level, what do you eat?" I told him that I ate a couple pounds of sausage and cheese each week. He then responded by saying, "That's fine, that's fine, if you'd like to die soon." I like that. Tell me like it is. That will get my attention and let me know the truth without wasting my time.

Maybe it's because Luke was apparently a doctor, at least most historians believe that to have been the case, but Luke is a little like that doctor. He's a straight shooter. After setting the stage and letting his readers know that there is a new king who is about to make claims as the rightful ruler of the world, we might expect some flowering language about how mighty, loveable, and successful this king is going to be. Yet, he doesn't do that. Instead he gives it out straight. This will be the king of the world but his life won't be a bed of roses and not everyone is going to love him. As bluntly honest as Luke has already been about the humble and unimpressive circumstances of Jesus' birth, perhaps we should have expected more straight talk. Luke has definitely told it like would be. I like that. It gets our attention without wasting our time.

The opening verses of this section demonstrate to the reader that Mary and Joseph were not wild-eyed revolutionaries bent on raising a child that was going to be groomed to overthrow the status quo. They were God-fearing and law-abiding Jews who followed the customs and laws of the Jewish people. They had Jesus circumcised on the eighth day as was prescribed by the law (Lev. 12:3). They also likely took place in three separate ceremonies as verse 22 likely describes a trip to Jerusalem that would have taken place over a month after verse 21. The three ceremonies that they likely would have been a part of were the purification of a woman after forty days of the birth of a child (Lev. 12:2-4, 6); the presentation of the firstborn to God (Ex. 13:2, 12, 16; 34:19; Num. 18:15-16) and the dedication of the firstborn into the service of the Lord (1 Sam. 1-2). Luke's detail that they offered doves also demonstrates that Joseph and Mary were of modest means (Lev. 12:8).

As they bring him into the city, much to their surprise, they find that Simeon had been waiting for them his entire life. He longed to see the Lord act on his promises and send his Messiah and the time had now come. We aren't told much about Simeon himself other than that he was a faithful, God-fearing man. He knew that the hope of Israel and the world would only come through the sovereign work of the almighty God. Simeon was waiting for the Messiah because he knew that God was faithful. When he finally lays his eyes on Jesus, he knows that God has finally fulfilled His promises. The Messiah is here and Simeon feels like he's seen all he has to in this world. Yet, he doesn't just get to see the Messiah, the Spirit inspires and allows Simeon to hold the Messiah in his arms and to deliver an incredible prophecy concerning the life of this unique baby. This was no doubt a point of marveling to those who heard him that day and something that must have encouraged the Joseph and Mary to all the more wonder who and what he would be. Yet, Simeon's words still ring true today and challenge us to see the same things that he saw in the life of Jesus.

Simeon declares six important truths about the Messiah that he was now holding in his arms. First, that he would bring deliverance and salvation as Simeon declared that "my eyes have seen your salvation." The time had come for God to deliver his people from their true slavery of sin. Second, that he would fulfill the ancient promises to Abraham that his descendants would be bring blessing to all people of all nations and would dispel the darkness of being separated from God. He would be a light to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. God came as a man to demonstrate what a life of genuine humanity, free from sin, would look like. All people will be judged based on whether they reject or accept his life as their own.

Not everything about this child would bring joy though. Those who would harden themselves to the way that God's kingdom would break into the present age would find themselves quite opposed to God's Messiah. The third specific thing that Simeon declared to Mary and Joseph was that this child would provoke derision and be rejected by his own people as many would speak against him. Fourth, he would cause the falling and rising of many in Israel. Jesus would be "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" (Isa. 8:14). Although some would rise on this stone, many would stumble against it and be crushed by it. This is not a popular message in a world that wants desperately to value every point of view so that none might be seen as the one truth. The danger of truth is that it shows all other options to be false. Fifth, because he was the truth revealed by God, this child would determine the destiny of the whole world (v. 34). Those who embraced him would become part of the family that God had promised to Abraham, but those who rejected him would be outside of God's family forever. This child would not only cause division among his own countrymen and, indeed all people, but the sword of anguish over her son's ministry and message would pierce the world of his own mother.

The stark fact for every human being is that what we do in our lives with that baby that Simeon held in his arms over 2,000 years ago, determines our eternity. This is what Simeon meant with the sixth reality of the Messiah which is the fact that by his life "the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." Perhaps the most amazing aspect of Simeon's prophecy is that his words not only were fulfilled during the life of Jesus, they remain as true for people today as they were true during Jesus' lifetime.

Luke, always the careful reporter, gives us a second witness from this witness to the Temple. Anna is a devout woman who had dedicated the balance of her life to praying and fasting for the arrival of God's redemption of his people. She had suffered through Israel's barrenness for long enough and longed desperately for the time to come for God to give birth to his plan to fulfill his promises.

Apparently Luke couldn't help but see obvious connections between his account of Jesus here at the Temple and the account of Samuel's birth in 1 Samuel and is eager to bring out the parallels at several points. Luke, no doubt, felt that, like so many other Old Testament accounts, the birth of Samuel pointed ahead to the coming of God's Messiah. The parallels between these opening chapters and the birth of Samuel are many. We are told of the presentation of the child in both accounts (1 Sam. 1:22; Lk. 2:22). Hannah sings praises of thanksgiving (1 Sam. 2:1-10), while Anna (which is the same name in Hebrew as Hannah) praises God and gives thanks. Eli blesses Samuel's parents (1 Sam. 2:20) and Simeon, we are told, blesses Jesus' parents (Lk. 2:34). We are told in both accounts of the boy continuing to grow in stature and in their grace and favor with the Lord (1 Sam. 2:21; Lk. 2:40). The Temple plays a major role in both accounts as both boys are in the Temple without their parents (1 Sam. 3:1-18; Lk. 2:41-51). Finally, both accounts come to a close with similar words about the importance of God's word, his wisdom, in the continued growth of the child (1 Sam. 3:19; Lk. 2:52).

As we reflect back on Luke's telling of Jesus' first visit to the Temple we cannot help to think of his last trip there in the days before his death. Simeon's dark words, and Luke's blunt telling of those words, remind us that opposition, division, suffering, and death will be part of Jesus' vocation and life. This is what happens when the kingdom of God clashes with the kingdoms of the world. The kingdoms of the world are defeated through suffering and death. Let us, as followers of Jesus, constantly remember that we are called equally to confront the kingdoms of the world and that we are called by the master to follow his example of victory through death (Lk. 9:23-26). The strongholds of the world are defeated and demolished when we lay down our own lives and walk as Jesus walked (1 Jn. 2:6). May we never back down from that challenge.



Luke 2:41-52

The Boy Jesus at the Temple

41 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Festival, according to the custom. 43 After the Festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" [e] 50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And as Jesus grew up, he increased in wisdom and in favor with God and people.



Dig Deeper

A few years ago a friend of mine and I were doing some simple car work on a car in the street in front of my house. We each have two children who were outside playing for awhile. After a time, the three older children went inside while his two year old son remained outside playing in the front yard. After a couple of minutes we looked up and didn't see his youngest in the front yard where he had just been and assumed that he had gone inside by the older kids but went in just to check. We were surprised to find that he hadn't gone inside after all and so we made a quick search of both the inside and the outside of my house and yet he was nowhere to be found. I walked by my mini-van that was in the driveway and found that the doors were locked so I knew he couldn't be in there so we immediately went to the next level. We called the police and began to check the entire neighborhood. Within minutes the police had arrived and there were a number of neighbors helping us look, some on foot and some on motorcycles or in their car. The panic that you experience when your child or a child close to you is missing is nearly indescribable unless you've felt it yourself. As I completed a circle of our block looking for my friend's child and calling out his name, my brain was already in organization mode. A few years earlier I had been closely involved with the immediate response and search for a six year old girl who went missing. A girl in our town was reported missing so the next day I heard about it on the morning news and took my history to class to help look. Because they didn't know any better, the family had lost some important opportunities in the first few hours and never found the girl (who is still missing to this day), so I had learned some important things about how to respond properly. Just as I was organizing all of my thoughts on what we would do next, my oldest son ran up and told me that he had been found. Apparently he had gotten tired, crawled in my mini-van, locked the doors and laid down to take a little rest. We were relieved, to say the least, and the frantic search to find him was over.

One of the things that you have hopefully noticed by now is Luke's unique ability to convey God's larger activities and purposes through the very real and human stories that he is reporting. This is another of those stories that has larger theological purposes for Luke as he continues to demonstrate how God is going to work out the promises that he made going all the way back to Abraham. These things are immensely important and yet, we can see Luke's masterful ability as a writer, as these larger purposes never overshadow the very real and raw emotions behind something like these two devout and loving parents who have lost Jesus, their son.

It was quite common for Jewish people of this time to make at least one trip to Jerusalem per year for the Passover and many often went more often for other important Jewish festivals. Only men were required to go to Jerusalem for Passover but most pious families took everyone along with them. As we read this story of a Jewish family going to Jerusalem for Passover and returning home, however, we have to wonder how they could possibly have lost their son for an entire day of travel and not know it. The most likely answer has to do with Jesus' age. Passover pilgrims would travel in large caravans for safety, and usually the men and women would travel in separate groups though still in close proximity. Being a twelve year old boy, Jesus was in that middle area where he could have been considered close enough to a man to be allowed to travel with the men, or still a child enough to travel with the women. Thus, it is likely that Joseph assumed Jesus was with the women while Mary assumed that he was with the men.

Whatever the cause, their response was one of extreme anguish and panic (the meaning of the words translated "anxiously" in verse 48). Luke paints a heart-rending picture of two loving parents who have discovered, to their horror, that they have left their beloved oldest son in Jerusalem, a place full of travelers, revolutionaries, bandits, and dark alleys, not the place where you would want to leave a child unattended. The thought of what they must have been going through on the day that it took them to get back to Jerusalem and the day that they spent searching in Jerusalem is crushing and is only balanced by the realization that they did eventually find him unharmed. We can certainly understand their reaction when, after two days of furiously searching for their child, their reaction is to let off a bit of steam in a mixture of relief and the mild anger that usually follows extreme fear as they ask Jesus how he could have possibly treated them in such a way. Jesus' response is a mixture of respect, an intense focus on his vocation in life, and a gentle rebuke for his parents.

Luke doesn't give us all of the details that we might like, here and surely we have questions like where did Jesus stay during those wayward days but Luke is not concerned with details that aren't directly related with his theological purposes. And as usual when it comes to biblical texts, if the questions we want to ask aren't being answered, we're probably asking the wrong questions.

What Luke really wants to tell us about as it relates to his overall purposes in his gospel is to see the young Jesus hinting at what will be the singular focus of his life. Jesus' question as to why they were searching for him doesn't imply that he would have been just as well if they had continued on home and not come to get him. His point was that they need not have searched through Jerusalem. They might have known precisely where he would be. He would be in his Father's house. Luke, no doubt, found this interaction quite remarkable on many levels, not the least of them being the hint here that part of Jesus' vocation that he understood for himself was to be the Son of God. In the Old Testament this moniker could be given to Israel (Ex. 4:22) and even to God's messengers, the angels (Job 2:1). But by the time of Jesus, the term "Son of God" had come to be applied virtually exclusively to the promised Messiah. Jesus was telling Mary and Joseph that above all else, he was wholly focused, in essence, on doing the will of God. Thus, Luke sees in this account, the seeds of Jesus' mission in doing God's will above all else and his identity in being the Son of God, which meant that he was not only the Messiah but the representative of Israel and the one through whom God would fulfill all of his ancient promises.

Luke, in recording that Jesus referred to God as his father, was also hinting at the redefinition of family that Jesus will bring as part of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to bless the world through one family of many nations. Jesus would define this new family of God not through ethnic descent or a Jewish birth but those in the family of God would be those who hear God's word and put it into practice. In other words, those who followed Christ as his disciples would be the family of God. God is his Father and part of his work would be to form this new family. Jesus would align himself with his Father's will even it appeared to compromise his relationship with his earthly parents.

There is little doubt that Luke also found this story significant in that we find Jesus in the Temple. Jesus' relationship with the Temple will become a vital theme for Luke as he unfolds his gospel. We have already been taken to the Temple with Zechariah's vision, with the encounter with Simeon and Anna, and now with Jesus himself amazing the learned teachers of the law of the Temple with his acuity and knowledge of God and the Scriptures. As we follow Luke's narrative, this will not be the last time the Temple will take center stage. Much of the Gospel follows Jesus' resolute march towards Jerusalem and the Temple, a theme which will take on increasing importance. Some of Jesus' harshest warnings and most defiant acts will take place when he finally does reach the Temple, and the Gospel will come to a close with Jesus' disciples in the Temple praising God for all that he had done. It is, in fact, difficult to overstate the importance of the Temple for Luke as he infuses the historical events of Jesus' life with their theological significance.

Yet, in all of the mind-blowing theological significance that we find in pieces of Luke's narrative like this one, he never loses sight of the human details and neither should we as relate these accounts to our own walk as disciples. At it's core, we find a story of two people puzzled and anguished over the fact that they have lost Jesus (a phenomenon that is echoed and balanced at the end of the Gospel by two people who are on their way to Emmaus and who are also puzzled and anguished over the fact that they seem to have lost Jesus). It should cause us to reflect on the fact that there are times when we can be busy, scurrying around and taking care of our business that can fill our days so quickly, only to find out that we haven't had Jesus' presence with us for quite a while. Maybe it's only been a few days, maybe much longer. We assumed that he was with us, but somewhere along the line we left on our journey and realize that he is longer with us. What is our response? What would you be willing to do in order to search for him and find him again? Would you drop everything and search for Jesus with the same passion, anguish, and determination that Joseph and Mary did (or that we did when we thought my friend's child was missing) or that you would if it was your own child that came up missing? Would you even be alarmed at all? When we find those times that we have drifted away from Jesus we need to be prepared to search for him in prayer, in the Scriptures, in our fellowship with his people, and not give up until we find him. And when we do find him, don't be surprised to find him doing exactly what Mary and Joseph found him doing. He will be about his father's business waiting for us to join him. In fact, when we find that Jesus isn't accompanying us the way we might have thought, it's almost always because we went off doing our business rather than our Father's. Jesus knew that he needed to be about his Father's business and so do we.

As Luke brings this section to a close he notes that Mary once again treasured these things up in her heart, not fully understanding their meaning at the time, but understanding nonetheless that they were important. We have already discussed that Luke has made clear that his gospel was based in large part on eyewitnesses of Jesus' life. Could this second reference of Mary storing things up in her heart indicate that Mary was somehow one of Luke's sources? It's not, of course, something that we can say for certain, but it is surely a distinct possibility and it's just plain fun to speculate over.



Display

When you drift in your relationship with Christ are you anguished? Do you search for his presence again like you would a lost child or do you treat it with little urgency? Take stock of your spiritual status right now. Is Jesus truly with you or have you wandered off on your own business and haven't even noticed that you have left Jesus behind to do the work of his Father without you? If so, what are you prepared to do to find him again?



Discover

1. What was the significance of Jesus referring to God as his father?
2. What was the importance for Luke in this story of Jesus in the Temple?
3. What other passages in Luke does 2:52 connect with and stand as very similar to?



Luke 3:1-8

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracōnitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

5 Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

6 And all people will see God's salvation.' " [a]

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.



Dig Deeper

The first time I went off to college, I remember having to go into this class that seemed rather ridiculous at the time. It was basically a prep class to orient us and prepare us for what we were going to experience as college students. As I recall, however, the things that they told us were helpful but I cannot say that they were particularly cheerful or encouraging in most respects. We were told of all the mistakes that incoming freshmen make and how likely we were to be one of those people if we didn't make some serious changes in our work habits and character that most of us had brought with us from high school. Look to your right and to your left, we were told. Statistics show that one of those two people that we had just looked at were not going to make it. We were about to enter a whole new world and if we didn't prepare ourselves in our hearts and minds for what was coming, we would never be ready for it when it actually came at us full force. The time was coming and the choice was ours. We had been warned and prepared so we could not claim that we were going to be caught off guard by the challenges that college life was going to bring.

The Jew's of Jesus' time were, for the most part, expecting God's promised Messiah to come soon. There were many different ideas floating about as to what this messiah would be like and what he would accomplish when he came but nearly all Jews could be listed as expectant for a messiah to come. Some argued that he would be political in nature, some thought that he would be a king, others believed that he would be a mighty warrior that would drive out all of Israel's enemies, and still others thought that there might even be two or three messiahs to encompass all the seemingly different types of prophecies that were written in the Old Testament about the coming Messiah. What nearly everyone agreed upon, besides the fact that there would be a messiah of some type, was that he would have a forerunner that would alert people to the coming of the Messiah. This thought came from, among other passages, Malachi 3:1, in which God promised, "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty." The clear point was that one would come who would prepare people for the coming of the Lord, but as Malachi 3 goes on to make clear and as we will see in the next passage of Luke, this message wasn't all grins and giggles. It was a message of challenge calling people to get themselves ready for a challenge that they wouldn't have imagined and certainly wouldn't be ready to meet unless they began to humble themselves and see their need for preparation and change immediately.

Luke takes special care to give us some important political markers so that we can have a better idea of when and where to place John's ministry in the gamut of world events, so we would do well to take a moment and consider the information that he has given us. The opening two verses echo the introductions of other Old Testament prophets including those that describe the prophet in historical context with powerful leaders. But Luke is not so much trying to give us a list of the most important people of the time or even the clue to precisely triangulate the chronological beginning of John's ministry. Luke is giving a sketch to those who would have been familiar with these names of the swirling socio-political landscape out of which John steps. Tiberius had become Caesar following the death of Augustus, in AD 14, and was already being worshiped as a god in many parts of the Roman Empire despite his well-deserved reputation for ruthlessness. Rome was ruling Israel but had set up two of Herod the Great's sons, Herod and Philip, as rulers of the northern part of Israel, while Rome directly ruled the southern portion through the other tetrarchs mentioned. Yet, Rome's influence went beyond just military might and political leaders. It stretched all the way to the high-priesthood. Caiaphas was high priest from AD 18-36 and was the son-in-law of Annas, who had been high priest from AD 6-15, but Annas was an ever-present and formidable figure who still wielded much power. Both men were in the hands of the Romans and only had power because Rome had put them in that position.

Pious Jews were longing for something to happen, something that would be nothing short of God acting to save his people. They had returned from the disastrous exile in to Babylon many hundreds of years ago, but now they were being oppressed and ruled by pagans, they were, in a very real way, in a new exile in their own land. The promises of the prophets were clung to as they had promised that some day God himself would return and restore Israel. Perhaps, they hoped, it would be a new Exodus. Something on the scale of the first Exodus when God raised Moses up to lead his people through the waters of the Red Sea and into freedom. In a sense, the whole nation needed to be returned from this exile and into the presence of God, because they had turned away from God, said the prophet Malachi. But what was the answer? How could they be restored in their relationship to God? Malachi, speaking for God, said that all they had to do was to return to God, and he would return to them (Mal. 3:7).

The people could know that this time of return was coming when the forerunner would come and prepare the people of Israel for what God was going to do. The prophet Isaiah had foretold that this messenger would be the voice of one crying in the wilderness, calling people to return to God and to prepare themselves to be his people once again. Luke wants us to see that John was the one spoken of by the prophets. He was the one that symbolically would be connected to the Exodus by living and having his ministry in the wilderness. John was preparing people for the coming of God's glory and restoration, or as Luke interprets it, "God's salvation." This messenger, says Isaiah, would not just be preparing the way for another of God's messengers, but for God himself to return, "See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (Isa. 40:10-11).

It is certainly unlikely that John's listeners, and probably not even John himself, would have fully understood the implications of John's call. Somehow he would be preparing the way for God to return to Israel and for the Messiah to come, but no one could have foreseen that God would fulfill both of those expectations in the same person of Jesus. Even the call for repentance, forgiveness of sins, baptism, and salvation would not have been understood fully for the things that John's ministry was pointing to. In the context of the Old Testament these all would have been viewed as pieces of national repentance or turning back to God as a people. Baptism was what non-Jews did when they wanted to convert to Judaism and so John's call for them to be baptized would have been calling them to embrace the idea that they had drifted from being God's people. But if they returned to God and became his people once again, they would receive salvation, which they would have understood in it's Old Testament context of being restored to God as his people.

It is important for us to understand that John was not fully enacting any of this but pointing to the reality of these things that was to come. John was preparing people with a symbolic change of heart for the ideas that they were not automatically part of God's family simply because they had been born Jewish. He was preparing them for the idea of the need to be baptized into a new family and reconciliation with God for the ultimate salvation from sin death. Luke will make clear later in his narrative in Acts that the symbolic baptism of John was not adequate in restoring one to God's family; that could only be accomplished by the very real (and not symbolic act like John's was) of being baptized into the life of Christ (see Acts 18:25-26; 19:1-5).

But John's ministry was not to prepare people for other first-century messianic movements. If they were simply coming out in droves looking for the next promising movement to which they could attach their wagons to and hope that this one would finally end Roman rule and make way for the presence of God to return to Israel, then they could forget that notion. His was not a movement of going along to hedge your bets that you might be on the right side if this was the movement of the promised Messiah, but if not, then just go back home and wait for the next one. This was not about power, politics, or personal benefit at all. This was about seeing that not just Israel as a nation was exiled from God but that you as an individual were also exiled from God. It was about realizing that you were not part of God's family simply because you were a Jew. Simply being a physical descendant of Abraham would not bring you back to God. It was going to take a true changing of ways, a true allegiance to whatever God was sending next in order to be part of the promised family. Those that could see their need to be reconciled back to God and somehow brought into his family would be able to produce the genuine fruit of repentance and keeping the Covenant between God and his people. But there would also be those who wouldn't see their need. There would be those who would not accept the possibility that they were not part of God's family and who were simply waiting for God to work according to their expectations and in a way that was a benefit to them. If that response sounds frighteningly like the response of many today or even your own response to God's call to salvation and reconciliation then the rest of John's message will be of particular importance. Remember, he was preparing people for Jesus that was to come and if they didn't heed that call seriously, they would never make it. John's message of needing a heart open to repentance in order to accept Jesus as Lord is just as true today as it was 2,000 years ago.



Display

We can learn a very serious lesson from John's warning to the Israelites. We cannot presume that just because we have been brought through the waters of baptism to become God's people that this is a magic formula for salvation if we don't show the genuine fruit of real repentance in our life. Spend some time to reflect and pray about the true fruit of ongoing repentance that you have seen in your life as a Christian.



Discover

1. Why does Luke include the information of the rulers at the time of John?
2. What distinguishes John's baptism from the one that Jesus' disciples would call for in Acts 2 and beyond?



Luke 3:9-20

9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

11 John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with [b] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with [c] the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

19 But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, 20 Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.



Display

Are you fiercely dedicated to bringing God's justice to bear in the world? Are you just as dedicated to respectfully but firmly opposing those who stand opposed to God's justice? What does it mean for your life today to take up both of those vocations?



Discover

1. Why is John so clear that judgment is at hand as he is preparing the way for the kingdom of God?

2. What are the importance of the distinction between baptism with the Spirit and baptism with fire?



Dig Deeper

Every year in the United States, tens of thousands of people make a long journey to fulfill the lifelong dream of millions of Americans. They pack their bags, get everything prepared, and board a flight to go see the Super Bowl, the championship game of American professional football. Of course, Americans don't need me to tell them that, but it might surprise you to know that there are millions of people around the world who could not care less about American football and don't know much about it. The people who go to the Super Bowl are considered quite fortunate by those who would like to go, as the usual way that a normal person can get tickets is to win a lottery which enables you to buy the extremely expensive tickets. There are always, however, other ways to go about getting tickets whether it be through a ticket agent, a scalper, or through online means. Every year, though, you hear stories of someone who buys a ticket and confidently packs their bags and makes the trip to the big game, only to get there and be stunned to find out that their ticket is a forgery. They put all of their faith and trust in believing that they were one of the few to be able to watch the game live, only to find out that they had put their trust in the wrong thing. They did not have the proper qualification (a legitimate ticket) to get into the game. So, do you think that the people who put on the Super Bowl have mercy on these people and will let them in after all? I hope you didn't get your hopes up very high because there is no way that would ever happen. It's simple when it comes down to it. You either have a legitimate ticket or you go home and do not get into the game.

John's vocation is to make the way for the Messiah, to clear the path for the anointed one. He went symbolically into the wilderness, the place of the Exodus of God's people, and called people to return to God. This is the big event that most Jews were waiting for. They had, in fact, been waiting for hundreds of years and John was declaring that the time had finally come. Yet, the last thing that John wanted the Jewish people to whom he was speaking to think was that they would automatically be part of the family that God had promised to Abraham so long ago. If they relied simply on the fact that they were already in the family tree of Abraham and had nothing to worry about they were sadly mistaken. That would be to rely on the wrong thing. It would be like thinking that a forged ticket would get you into the Super Bowl. There were expectations of what the people of God's family would be and what kind of people they would need to be in order to be prepared to properly respond to the message of the Messiah once he came. For those in Israel who didn't have a legitimate "ticket" by embracing the Messiah, would find themselves just like those poor folks at the Super Bowl; on the outside looking in.

John came to prepare the way for Jesus and that included the reality that judgment awaited those who did not respond. As Simeon had foretold, he would be the cause of the rising and falling of many in Israel. This is not the Jesus that our culture prefers as opposed to the Jesus who would never dare to judge anyone, but it is the real Christ that John was preparing people for. The ax was already at the tree, meaning that the time was near. The trees that lacked the good fruit of keeping God's covenant would be cut down and thrown to the fire (Ps. 74:5-6; Jer. 2:21;22; 11:16; Ezek. 15:6-7; Hos. 10:1-2).

Many in the crowd understood the point that they had not held up to the covenant. They were not the kind of people that would be numbered among God's family. So, they want to know, what can they possibly do? John was doing two important things as he answered them. The first was that he was calling people to the standard of being God's family, God's Israel. They didn't need a bunch of lengthy rabbinical arguments and numerous rules to remember. They needed some basic principles to prepare themselves and show that they were serious about the desire to be God's people. Being God's people required a new way of life and a new way of thinking. There would be no more room in God's family for thinking of only themselves. They needed to learn principles of serving and loving others and thinking of other's interests even before their own. Even the reviled tax collectors would have to serve as example that they should not rip people off and gain benefit to themselves at the expense of others. Herod's own soldiers (it's unlikely that these were Roman soldiers) were listening too and will serve Luke's purposes as another representative group. The soldiers, said John, needed to not use low pay as an excuse to extort and abuse others. They needed to be content with what they had.

John's fiery message of needing to recognize your own falling short even extended to the dangerous ground of speaking against Herod Antipas in verse 19. Herod had created quite a scandal by having an affair with his brother Philip's wife. She then divorced Philip (a Jewish woman getting a divorce from her husband was almost unheard of in Jewish law and would have been quite distressing for the people under Herod's rule) and married Antipas. But John was doing more than just criticizing the moral failings of a ruler. His point was that if Herod were going to think of himself as the king of the Jews, something he was eager to do, then he, and they, had better think again. His behavior alone should demonstrate that he was not the one that would call people to a new way of life that was so needed. He was nothing more than a pretender to the throne.

The second thing that John was accomplishing is related to the first but importantly different. He was calling people to a new life rather than a set of rules but the gospel message would soon make clear that they could not actually live this life on their own and earn their way into God's family. To do so would be to trust in themselves. What John's call was really about was not to find people who could actually live consistently according to these aspects of God's will, and indeed God's will as a whole. What was necessary was to find people who wanted to live like this. God wanted people who would be humble and realize that they needed something beyond the way of life that they were currently conformed to. People who humbly embraced the types of values that John was espousing would be people that would be ready for the message of the coming Messiah.

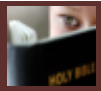
John spoke so clearly, so definitively, and so differently that people began to wonder if he was the Messiah himself. Yet, John would have none of that. His vocation was not to think more highly of himself than he ought. That would be to go against the very values that he had just espoused. John was not even worthy to perform the most menial task of a slave in comparison to the Messiah. In stating as much, he demonstrated the very kind of humility that would be necessary for people to be ready for God's true Messiah.

John was baptizing people symbolically and preparing them for the realization that they needed a new life but it was only a preparation not the real thing. He was the warm-up act but not the headliner. He baptized with water, but it was just water and merely symbolic. People would need a new life, but not one that they could bring about on their own. They would actually need a different life, the life that the Messiah would offer them. He would make his own life available for people to die to themselves and enter into (Rom. 6:1-10; Gal. 2:20; 3:26-27 Eph. 4:21-24; John 3:17, etc.). The Messiah's baptism would be the real thing that John's only pointed to (those who knew John's baptism would still need to be baptized into Christ as Acts 18:25-26 and Acts 19:1-5 demonstrate) in the same way that the life that John was calling people to could only point to the life in Christ that they would truly need to enter into God's family.

The Messiah would, in one sense, bring two baptisms (We must be careful, though, in using such language because Ephesians 4:5 is clear that there is only one valid baptism for believers. Claiming that there is more than one baptism for believers is clearly false and must be rejected.). One of the Holy Spirit and one of fire. This would be the spirit of fire that the prophet Isaiah had prophesied about (Isa. 4:4). Many have speculated what the baptism of fire is but the context of verses 17 and 18 make it clear that the baptism of fire refers to the judgment that would come on those who rejected the Messiah. The Messiah's vocation always involved dividing the wheat from the chaff, those that would embrace his life and those who would reject. His baptism would be into his life and not a symbolic baptism and it would involve the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Through this baptism, people could receive the Holy Spirit and have a renewed life, becoming the children of God. Paul stated this quite clearly in Titus 3:5-7: "he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life." Baptism would come down to the dividing nature of the life of the Messiah. Those who would enter into his baptism with the Spirit would receive the life of the Messiah but those who rejected that would be baptized, so to speak, into the unquenchable fire of judgment. Thus there really is one baptism for each person: the baptism into Christ or the baptism of judgement.

John's message, including his denunciation of Herod, had the same effect that the Messiah would have; it divided people. Some came to John and embraced his message but others, like Herod rejected his message. In fact, Herod did what so many of us can sadly do. He was given the dividing choice to repent or remain in his sin and he responded by trying to remove John, the source of his accountability, rather than removing the sin.

When the Messiah finally came, he would show himself committed to the same two things that John was. He would be fiercely dedicated to giving new life to those who would embrace God's justice as it broke into the present age, but he would be just as fiercely dedicated to opposing and peacefully overthrowing those who set themselves up in opposition to God and his kingdom.



Luke 3:21-38



Dig Deeper

The Baptism and Genealogy of Jesus

21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

23 Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, 24 the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melki, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, 25 the son of Mattathias, the son of Amos, the son of Nahum, the son of Eslai, the son of Naggai, 26 the son of Maath, the son of Mattathias, the son of Semein, the son of Josek, the son of Joda, 27 the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri, 28 the son of Melki, the son of Addi,

the son of Cosam, the son of Elmadad, the son of Er, 29 the son of Joshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jorim, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, 30 the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, 31 the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, 32 the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Salmon, [d] the son of Nahshon, 33 the son of Amminadab, the son of Ram, [e] the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, 34 the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, 35 the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, 36 the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, 37 the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalalel, the son of Kenan, 38 the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.

It's funny how, at least in the American culture, when we meet someone among the first thing we want to know about them is what they do for a living. This can be discovered by the virtually interchangeable questions of "where do you work" or "what do you do". Either question works just fine. I can't help but notice that for many people, though, what they do becomes nearly synonymous for them with who they are. In fact, if you ask the somewhat odd question, "who are you" of someone you whom you have already met to the point that you know their name and they don't think you're having some disturbing lapse of memory, they will answer that question by giving you their vocation, such as "I'm a lawyer". There is an important concept here that I discovered in college. There is a vital difference in understanding what you do, your vocation, and who you are. Whoever you are reading this, you are not a basketball player, or a college student, or a fireman, or a nurse, or a teacher. Those are things that you do, not who you are. When we lose sight of that we begin to take an unhealthy view, in many cases, of ourselves and what we do. Not to overstate the case and create a problem that's not there for people, but it is important to understand the difference between who you are and what you do for a living.

I have seen many disciples struggle with this same misidentification which is why a passage like the baptism of Jesus is such an important reminder for us. Jesus came to do specific things on the earth as the Messiah. He came to seek and save the lost and to serve men by laying his life down for them. But what allowed Jesus, I believe, to accomplish those tasks so well was that he knew very well his identity. He knew very well who he was and it was that which kept him focused on his mission. If we begin to think of our identity in terms of what we do, it can be easy to lose site of who we really are and we can easily, as time goes on, lose sight of the true motivation that will keep us going in our vocation and keep us balanced in all areas of life.

For Luke, this passage is all about identity. Who is Jesus? Who did he know himself to be and who should we know him to be? Jesus came to John to be baptized by him, that much we know. But the question of why he did it is what puzzles many people. The primary reason that Jesus likely was baptized by John was to demonstrate the truth of John's message. God was about to act on his promises to create his family of many nations and bring salvation to that family and so people had better get prepared just as John had suggested. At the same time, Luke likely saw this as an anointing of sorts. Just as kings of Israel were anointed by prophets, so was Jesus anointed officially as the Messiah by John through the means of this baptism.

Luke stresses that immediately following the baptism (he doesn't indicate a time frame so it's probable that Jesus was still in the water with John) Jesus began to pray. We are never told if Jesus' prayer was quietly between he and the Father or louder for others to hear, so we don't know if others also heard the voice that came from heaven. The text simply doesn't indicate one way or the other. As he is praying, the Holy Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove. The connection here is difficult to ascertain as there are no direction connections in any other Scripture between the Holy Spirit and a dove. We should note that the text does not indicate that the Spirit was in the bodily form of a dove but was in bodily form and that form descended in a dove-like fashion. Some have suggested that the mention of the dove is because a dove was often seen as the herald of good news in this society. If there is a connection that can be made, I would suggest the connection between Noah's flood and the dove that brought back evidence of life that was soon to come. What we shouldn't miss as Jesus is anointed by the Holy Spirit, though, is the biblical connection between water and the Spirit. In Genesis 1 we are told that the Spirit was hovering over the water. During the Exodus, the Israelites were led across the Sea by the Spirit that was in the pillars of smoke and fire. Isaiah 44:3 foretold of a time when God would pour out his Spirit and water on the land. Similarly, in Ezekiel 36:25-27, the prophet declared that God would one day cleanse his people with water and give them a new Spirit. This, of course, all seems to lead up to and culminate in the act of being baptized into Christ to receive the gift of the indwelling Holy spirit (Acts 2:38). It seems that God has a long history of connecting water events with his Spirit and we would do well to take notice of it.

But it seems for Luke that this all is leading up to the declaration that Jesus is his Son, the one that he love, and with whom he is well pleased. It seems that each phrase here contains important allusions back to passages in the Old Testament. The mention of Jesus as Son is an allusion back to the messianic Son in Psalm 2:7. Psalm 2 does not imply that the Father was not the father of son until a certain day but rather that there would be a specific day where that relationship was revealed. There are obvious connections as well to the idea of Jesus being the Son of God, an idea we'll return to shortly. The next allusion comes from Isaiah 42:1 where God promises to put his Spirit in a public and visible way on his servant so that he may bring justice to the nations. The best way to understand the "servant" mentioned throughout Isaiah 40-55 is that in some ways this was to be the role of Israel as God's servant and son but Israel shirked that role and so the Messiah would come to fulfill it and complete it. The final allusion comes likely from Isaiah 41:8 where there is connection between the loved servant being the one who was chosen. Behind all of this, there are surely echoes of Genesis 22 where Abraham is asked to offer the one and only son whom he loved.

When we put all of those allusions together we begin to get a good idea of who Jesus was in the sense of his identity. He was the chosen Messiah who would fulfill the vocation of Israel as God's servant. He would be the one that God loved and would be the Son of God. The phrase "Son of God" has thrown many people off over the years and is worth the time to consider briefly. There are two different strands of usage for the phrase "Son of God" in the Old Testament. The phrase was used on a few occasion to refer to angels (Gen. 6:2; Job 1:6; 2:1); although the term when applied to angels is always in the plural). The phrase was also used to describe Israel as God's firstborn son (Ex. 4:22). The New Testament writers appropriated that title and applied it to Jesus who called himself the Son of God on several occasions who came to reveal YHWH of the Old Covenant as the Father, the Son and the Spirit. To add to matters, as we see here, in verse 38, Adam was also called the son of God.

But what did the phrase "Son of God" mean in first century Jerusalem and what does it tell us about Jesus' identity? The first thing that we must do is rule out a few options. The identification of Israel and Adam as son rule out the possibility that the phrase refers only to angels. Yet, the phrase does not refer only to the nation of Israel so it cannot be just nations. The use of the phrase to describe angels and Israel rules out that the term can apply to any or all humans or those that were born through some specific fathering act of God.

We must look for something that ties all of these entities together. To put it succinctly, "Son of God" was a term that was given to one whose source was directly from God. The angels came directly from God. Israel was directly created by God as a people and a nation. Adam came directly from God as did Jesus, who was sent by the Father to be the Messiah, the Son of God. For the Jews of Jesus' day, however, they had come to use the term almost exclusively to apply to the coming Messiah. For Jesus, though it meant more than that. Not only are Sons of God directly manifested from God, it is also an indication of being in the image of God. Adam was created in the image of God but lost some of that image when he sinned and so his own sons were born in his image (Gen. 5:3) and could no longer be called sons of God. Israel was created to be God's firstborn son, the possessor of God's promises and inheritance but they forfeited that position as a nation as well and never fulfilled the role of being the true son of God. Jesus, however, was the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) and could rightly be called his Son. He would fulfill the role of the firstborn, meaning the one to whom the promises of inheritance would be passed. All that God had promised to Abraham would be given to Christ. What would soon become clear is that those who would trust Christ, die to themselves, and enter into his life through baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:1-10) would begin the process of being restored to the image of God (Col. 3:10; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:21-24) and have the right to call God our Father (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6; Jn. 20:17) and be called the sons of God (Matt. 5:9; Jn. 1:12; Rom. 8:14, 19, 21; Gal. 3:26; Phil. 2:15; 1 Jn. 3:1, 2, 10; 5:2; 19). Through the sacrifice of the Messiah, those who enter into his life can actually become sons of God as ones who have been reborn with God as our direct source.

The idea of identity leads in to the list of descent that Luke gives here. There is much more to be said here than can possibly be discussed in this format but suffice it to say that Luke's primary purpose is to demonstrate that Jesus is not only the descendant of Abraham, and thus a rightful human heir to the promises of Abraham, but he goes beyond that (Luke likely felt that Abraham was so entrenched as being the father of the Jewish people that he wanted to go beyond that to connect with a universal heir) as a direct descendant of Adam and thus could serve as the savior of all people from all nations. Much has been made of the differences between Luke's line and Matthew's, more than we can consider here but we need only mention that we cannot ever be certain as to the reason for the differences but there are several reasonable solutions to explain the differences. Probably the most attractive explanation is that the differences are the result of one gospel writer tracing the physical descent while the other traces the legal descent caused by levirate marriages such as described in Deut. 25:5-10 (another much-argued explanation is that Matthew presents Joseph's line while Luke presents Mary's). What we must remember, though, is that Luke has already let us know that Jesus' important identity is as the true Son of God whose true genealogy comes from the miraculous conception. The earthly descent listed here simply give him the legitimate status he needs from a human perspective to carry out his role as the Messiah.

To seek and save the lost and reconcile them into God's family was what Jesus would do, that was his mission, but that was not who he was. As a man, he was positionally the Son of God. In the same way, we are called to be followers of Jesus and walk as he walked (1 Jn. 2:6) which means that are mission is also to seek and save the lost. But our mission must come from our identity and not become our identity. If we believe our purpose is to evangelize, we are in danger of having it become a grind and begin to question "who we are". But if we know our identity as the sons of God brought into his family through the Messiah, then we will be spurred on by the gratitude of that gift to invite others into the family of God.



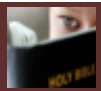
Discover

1. Why was Jesus baptized by John?
2. What is the significance of Jesus being identified as the Son of God.
3. Why might Luke have taken the line of descent all the way back to Adam while Matthew only took it to Abraham?



Display

Have you ever thought of the differentiation between your identity in Christ and your mission in Christ? How does firmly knowing your identity change your perspective on the mission that we have been allowed to share in to seek and save the lost?



Luke 4:1-13

Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted [a] by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'People do not live on bread alone.' [b]"

5 The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. 7 If you worship me, it will all be yours."

8 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.' [c]"

9 The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. 10 For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you

to guard you carefully;

11 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' [d]"

12 Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' [e]"

13 When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.



Discover

1. In the first temptation, Satan was tempting Jesus to do his own will rather than God's. How are you being tempted in that area in your own life?

2. In the second temptation Satan tried to tempt Jesus to turn to something other than God to get what he desired. How are you being tempted in that area in your own life?

3. In the third temptation, Satan tempted Jesus to put God to the test and avoid the hard times ahead. How are you being tempted in that area in your own life?



Display

When you are tempted, and you will be, there are two important things to learn from this passage. The first is the realization that often times, the temptation is not the trial we face but the desire to avoid it. The second is our need to rely on the Word of God alone. When temptation comes do you rely on nothing but God's Word to carry you through the tough times? Where are you being tempted right now? Are you applying God's Word to that temptation?



Dig Deeper

From reading the historian Herodotus, among other sources, we know that In 490 BC the Persian King Darius launched an invasion into Greece. Despite the fact that Darius was a powerful king with a powerful army behind him, Darius failed miserably. His Persian forces were defeated by the Athenians in a great victory for the Greek city-state at Marathon. After Darius died, his son Xerxes came to power as the new ruler of Persia. Above all else, Xerxes seems to have been resolved to succeed where his father had failed. He would go to the very spot of his father's defeat and gain a great victory that would both avenge his father and show him to be greater than his predecessor. In 480 BC Xerxes invaded Greece with an army that probably numbered around 150-200,000 (although Herodotus claimed that the number was 2.5 million soldiers). He was briefly stalled at the battle of Thermopylae by 300 Spartan soldiers and about 4,000 other Greek soldiers, but he eventually broke through and seized Athens. Xerxes then turned his attention to defeating the Greek navy as his fleet outnumbered them about 3 to 1 but the Greeks drew him into a clever trap and he was defeated at the battle of Salamis. Xerxes was forced to retreat with his army and end the invasion. He had failed in the very same spot that his father had failed.

Luke has just finished telling us that Jesus is the Son of God. We know that for Jesus, his father never fails so the comparison to Xerxes isn't exactly precise. Yet, Jesus was on a mission as clear as the one the Xerxes had picked up. God had not failed but the Old Testament scriptures describe the sad failure of two other sons of God, Adam and Israel. Jesus would follow in their footsteps and would go where they went. He would face what they faced and would succeed where they had failed. As Luke takes us into this stunning and inspiring scene of temptation that is so instructive for us as we face our own temptations through life from the same enemy, let's take care to not lose site of the echoes throughout this story. Unless we hear the echoes we will miss the profound and true meaning of the initial victory that Jesus secures here in the wilderness. A victory that those who went before him couldn't secure.

We would probably like to think that temptation only comes when we are straying from the will of God but this passage won't allow us such simplistic thinking. Jesus, who never strayed from God's will, was full of the Holy Spirit and was led directly by the Spirit into the wilderness where he would fast for forty days which would have left him in a physically weakened state. As we all have surely experienced, temptation seems all the more powerful when we are physically or emotionally weakened but Jesus was going exactly where the Spirit was guiding him. This means that it was God's will for him to be tested in this way and that there was a specific purpose for this testing.

At the end of the forty days Jesus has an encounter with the devil. None of the gospel writers make it clear whether this episode with Satan was a physical meeting or whether Satan came to Christ in the realm of his own thoughts, a realm through which Satan usually approaches us. It is quite permissible in the texts that we have to either see this as a real, physical encounter or one of a more mental level in which Satan was offering these thoughts up and Christ had to deal with the thoughts and visions of these particular temptations. It is decidedly impossible to choose between those two option and probably unnecessary in the end.

As should be familiar by now, this passage in Luke is full of echoes of other passages from the Old Testament that point to this moment in Jesus' life and help us gain the full significance of it. There are at least three biblical stories that are alluded to by this one that help us to see exactly what was going on here. Moses went on a forty day fast in the wilderness just before he received and proclaimed the word of God (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 9:9-18). In the same way, Jesus would go into the wilderness for a forty day's fast where he would declare the word of God to Satan and prepare himself to proclaim it to all of Israel. But there was an even more specific purpose for this time of temptation. Adam had faced temptation from the tempter in the Garden of Eden and had failed, choosing to do his own will rather than God's. Luke has adeptly planted the idea of Adam as the Son of God in the last passage, intentionally connecting it this one.

As we discussed in the last passage of Luke, God had another son after Adam had failed to do his will. God raised up the nation of Israel as his firstborn son (Ex. 4:22) and gave Israel the vocation of doing God's will. God took Israel into the wilderness where they faced the temptations of Satan and failed just like Adam to do God's will. As a result of their disobedience they wandered in the desert for forty years.

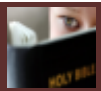
Jesus, as Luke has already demonstrated, was now the third of God's sons sent into the world to succeed where the first two had failed. He would go to the wilderness, the place where Israel had failed and would succeed in doing God's will. Jesus would be the Son of God that lived according to the will of God where the others before him had failed. In fact, each of the temptations that Jesus faced during his forty days echoes and reflects temptations that caused the fall of Israel during their wilderness wanderings for forty years.

As Israel moved into the wilderness they were told to "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands" (Deut. 8:2). This was done to teach them "that people do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut. 8:3). A good part of that testing was their lack of food and need to rely on God to provide for them but the people did not trust God's promises to care for them and instead grumbled against Moses and Aaron (Ex. 16:1-21). In the same way, Satan tried to convince Jesus that since he was God's Son (the term translated "if" in this passage should almost certainly be translated "since" in this context, meaning that Satan was not questioning whether Jesus was God's Son but was tempting him to be a different kind of Messiah than the one according to God's will) he should not have to go without food and be hungry. God surely wouldn't want him to go without. But Jesus refuted the temptation by turning to the word of God (all of Jesus' quotes come from Deuteronomy which is further proof that Jesus intentionally meant to connect his own experience with the failure of Israel in the wilderness). Jesus affirmed that he relied on nothing to provide for him apart from God's will, the precise thing that Israel and Adam had failed to do.

The second temptation connects with Israel's constant tendency to engage in idolatry. As Israel prepared to enter into the promised land and take up their vocation as the firstborn son of God, they were reminded to "Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you" (Deut. 6:13-14). Satan offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world if he will only bow to him and serve the devil. Satan often works this way through temptation in that he offers us things that are not his to give and it always turns out to be nothing more than allusion. False gods (in whatever form they take whether it be a statue or money or something else) can seem comfortable but always turn out to be an allusion. Satan offers Jesus another way to realize his mission of ruling over the kingdoms of the world other than through God's will. Throughout all of the temptations, though, Satan is not offering Jesus just strength or comfort but primarily he offers independence. The Israelites were constantly ensnared by idolatry and Adam was swayed by the prospect of reaching something that he desired through his own will rather than God's but Jesus stood resolutely loyal to God's will and the fear of God. He would succeed in following Deut. 6:13 where Israel and Adam had failed.

The third temptation involved putting God to the test. While in the wilderness, Israel complained and argued with Moses over having no water. Rather than trusting God they demanded a response. Moses' response was to rebuke them for putting the "LORD to the test" (Ex. 17:2; Deut. 6:16). Unlike Israel and Adam, Jesus would not put God to the test despite the temptation of Satan. Satan took Jesus (whether in a vision or in person) to the Temple, probably to the Royal Porch which looked over a cliff in the Kidron Valley and loomed about 450 feet above the bottom of the cliff (the historian Josephus reports that it made people dizzy to look down from that point because it was so high). The Jews of Jesus' day expected that when the Messiah came he would renew the provision of manna, would defeat Israel's enemies and exalt Israel, and would perform incredible signs and wonders that would convince the people that he was the Messiah. Satan was appealing to Jesus to act before his time but Satan also failed to understand that Jesus' vocation and allegiance to God's will did not mean that he would be kept from sacrifice, struggle, and death but that he would walk right into those things as part of his submission to God. We often think of the hard times in life as our temptations, and I suppose that sometimes they can be, but far more often it is the desire to avoid those trials that we need to help us grow in our walk in Christ (James 1:2-3) which brings us the temptations. The hard times are not the temptation, the desire to avoid them is the real temptation.

God's first son Adam had failed to do God's will. God's firstborn son (a term that referred to role as the receiver of the inheritance rather than strictly birth order) Israel had failed to do God's will in giving into temptation (note that Psalm 106 charges Israel with their failures in the same order that Luke gives: food, false worship, and putting the LORD to the test). Jesus succeeded where they failed. He was the true and eternal Son of God who demonstrated himself to be the Messiah not through spectacular signs and wonders but through self-sacrificial and quiet acts of humble obedience to God's word. This was truly God's unique (the true meaning of the word often translated "only begotten") Son who would do what Israel had failed to do. Jesus wasn't interested in public displays of power so much as he was in private obedience to God's word. That is after all, when obedience really matters. That is when temptation is it's most dangerous and powerful. Jesus responded the same way that we should learn to do. He didn't entertain the ideas of temptation or even argue with them, which is often just an excuse to mull it around until we can't resist it anymore. Jesus dwelt on the word of God and trusted in it alone to guide him to God's will.



Luke 4:14-30

Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [f]

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

23 Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"

24 "Truly I tell you," he continued, "prophets are not accepted in their hometowns. 25 I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. 26 Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. 27 And there were many in Israel with leprosy [g] in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. 30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.



Dig Deeper

I really love to eat pizza. I mean I really love to eat pizza. Almost any kind of pizza will do. I do, however, have a favorite pizza place in Milwaukee, the city in which we used to live for over ten years. Not too far from where we lived the last few years that we lived there is a pizza place named Ballisteri's. The pizza there is absolutely incredible and is still well worth the nearly two-hour drive to go back there to get it whenever we can. When we lived there, though, we got to eat pizza from there a couple times a month. I actually always wished that we could have eaten there more often but we weren't made of money so we had to limit our visits. A bout a mile further away from Ballistreri's was another place owned by the same family called the Ballistreri Inn or something along those lines. One night we were coming home from the other side of town and happened to be driving right by the other Ballistreri's. We were in a bit of a hurry and noticed that this one was less crowded than the other Ballistreri's usually is so we decided to stop and get pizza from there and take it home to eat. All night I had been anticipating having Ballistreri's pizza and so we got our pizza from the other location and went home. I opened up the pizza, with my mouth dripping in eager anticipation for one of my great joys in eating, and I took a bite waiting for the bliss that was sure overwhelm my palate. Suddenly, I noticed something horrible. This was not the same Ballistreri's pizza that I loved so much. This was not the same at all. I was so disappointed and disillusioned that I couldn't even eat that pizza, even though it wasn't bad. I went to the refrigerator and got some leftovers instead. I had so built up my expectations that any variation from those expectations were met with complete rejection. I just refused to alter what I was expecting and what I wanted.

We can do something like this on a much more profound scale when it comes to our religious beliefs. It is easy to build up expectations of what God should do or what his word should say that we simply will not accept if we somehow find it different than what we expected. The Jews of Jesus' day were certainly as guilty of that as so many humans since then have continued to be. We know the kind of God we want and when he doesn't match up with our expectations we have a choice. We can either humble ourselves and embrace who God says he is and who he has revealed himself to be or we can angrily reject that and shove him back in the box in which we want him to stay and go get our own religious leftovers out of our refrigerator of comfortability. The Jews that went to the synagogue the day that Jesus walked in certainly had many expectations of what God was going to do, when he was going to do it, and how he was going to do all of this through his Messiah. Yet, Jesus walked in and gave them something very different from what they wanted or expected and they were faced with that same choice to embrace the new thing that God was revealing or to reject it and keep their own preconceived notions. The big difference between this and the pizza analogy was that, in this case, the new thing was infinitely better than their expectations.

Luke doesn't give us much for details as he begins this passage but does draw attention to two things. The first is that as he returns to Galilee, he returns full of the power of the Spirit. The second is that news about him spread quite quickly which tips us off to the fact that Jesus did many miracles in addition to his powerful teaching while at Capernaum. Thus, Luke has stressed that Jesus' experience with John through his baptism and his time of testing in the wilderness have confirmed that Jesus is walking in the full power of the Spirit. Everything that follows should be viewed in that light with that knowledge.

Jesus followed his normal custom of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath (something that, after his death, his followers would only do to announce the message of his gospel as they immediately switched their day of worship to Sunday). He went in and took the scroll from the prophet Isaiah to read and choose his passage. His reading came from Isaiah 61, a passage that was all about the coming of the Messiah. The Messianic signs of proclaiming the good news to the poor, setting the prisoners free, and giving sight to the blind was finally here, says Jesus. This was the year of the Lord's favor and Jesus would bring miracles of physical healing to those groups of people so as to announce that the kingdom of God was breaking into the present. The point of the physical miracles was to point to the larger spiritual truths. The spiritually poor, blind, and oppressed were being set free.

The people at the synagogue that day had already heard that Jesus had been doing incredible things and performing signs and wonders and they were surely expectant that he was there to do these same sorts of things for them. Yet, they were skeptical. How could he be the promised Messiah when they all knew him and knew his Father? The initial reaction was a positive one, but still one of great surprise. They were amazed that he was speaking of God's grace being poured out and had questions. How could Joseph's son be the one to announce this? At the point of their question, though, it seems that they were seeing this with some skepticism but still as more of a possibly pleasant surprise.

Their expectation was that he would do the same things for them that he had done in Capernaum. They wanted to be convinced rather than believe. Jesus' response was not what they were expecting nor what they wanted. They wanted him to do what he did in Capernaum but Jesus hints that the miracles won't be coming. He seems to imply that even if he did miracles there, they would not believe. He would not, in the long traditions of the prophets of God, be accepted by his own people in his own town. The irony is that verse 19 literally reads that Isaiah was proclaiming the "acceptable year of the Lord." The acceptable year of the Lord would not be acceptable to his own people.

To make his point clear, Jesus tells two stories from Israel's past involving Elijah and his protégé Elisha. In both cases these men saved, not members of God's people Israel, but foreigners. Elijah wasn't sent to the many Israelite widows but to a woman that was not of Israel. It was she who received the saving power of Israel's God. In the same way, Elisha didn't bring God's healing power to the many Jewish people who had leprosy. Instead he healed the Syrian, Naaman. For Jesus, these were more than coincidental details, they were pointing to something important.

This was not what the people of Galilee wanted to hear at all. They were furious, as Jesus' point was obvious. The miracles that he had been performing which pointed to the coming of the Messiah, the year of the Lord's favor, would not be done among Jesus' own people, which in itself was pointing to the fact that God's outpouring would eventually, in large part, not be focused on Israel but on the people of the whole world. It was one thing to remind them that Elijah had ministered to a poor Gentile widow but to bring up that Elisha had healed a Syrian soldier while they were awaiting freedom from Roman oppression and then to imply that in those acts that God's healing and freeing ministry would include Gentiles, and even be focused on them. Well, this was just too much. They were expecting a Messiah that would come and free them and crush Israel's enemies, not minister to them, and not pour out God's Spirit on the despised pagans.

The passage that Jesus quoted from in Isaiah 61:1-2 skipped one important line that spoke of the "day of vengeance." The assumption of most Jews was that the parts about God's favor being poured out was for them while the vengeance stuff would be for the pagan nations. But Jesus flipped that all around by only quoting the portions about God's grace and connecting it to his own ministry, and then connecting that to the precedent that had been set by the two prophets who poured God's grace out to Gentiles. The implication was that if the prophets gave God's blessings to Gentiles and if Jesus was also a prophet who would not be honored in his hometown, then the reason that he had left out the part about God's vengeance was because it was being reserved for Israel who had rejected the prophets and would, in large part, reject Jesus. The Messiah had not come to inflict vengeance on the nations but to bring God's mercy to them. The punishment would be meted out to Israel who had been called to be a light to the nations and to pour the blessings of Israel's God out to all people, but had rejected that vocation and instead attempted to turn the light and the blessing in on themselves.

Jesus' declaration was so counter to their deeply held expectations and beliefs of who he was going to be and how he was going to work that they didn't consider adjusting their own beliefs. Rather, their response was to remove the contradiction at any cost, even including the willingness to kill him. In the previous passage, Satan had taken Jesus to a high point and urged him to jump off to show that he was the Messiah. Jesus wasn't willing to go outside of God's will and his timing and refused, but now he finds himself in the same situation by doing God's will. And God did protect him from being thrown to his death not because he was trying to take the sensational path of exalting himself but because he followed God's will. Perhaps Luke wants us to see that when Jesus really stayed true to God's will, then the Scriptures would indeed be fulfilled.

Jesus would stay true to God's will but would his countrymen? If they didn't abandon their own conceptions and expectations of who God should be and how he should work then they would indeed be left out of God's favor. This is a stinging reminder for us to constantly go back to God's word as our guiding light. Tradition and expectation have a far more likely result of leaving us outside of God's will rather than leading us to it. This is something of which we must always be aware and be on guard against.



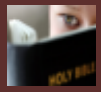
Discover

1. What is the significance of Isaiah 61 in this passage?
2. Why does Jesus' remarks about Elijah and Elisha make the crowd so angry?
3. How does the last temptation from the previous passage connect with this incident?



Display

Are you more committed to who Jesus is and his revelation of God coming to us in the flesh or are you hanging onto your own expectations of who God should be and how you would have like him to work? Are you willing to go wherever Jesus' leads and embrace the kingdom that he called us to? What does that mean for you today?



Luke 4:31-44

Jesus Drives Out an Evil Spirit

31 Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath he taught the people. 32 They were amazed at his teaching, because his words had authority.

33 In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil [h] spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, 34 "Go away! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

35 "Be quiet!" Jesus said sternly. "Come out of him!" Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him.

36 All the people were amazed and said to each other, "What words these are! With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!" 37 And the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area.

Jesus Heals Many

38 Jesus left the synagogue and went to the home of Simon. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to help her. 39 So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and began to wait on them.

40 At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. 41 Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Messiah.

42 At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. 43 But he said, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." 44 And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.



Discover

1. Why do you suppose that Jesus consistently moved about during his ministry rather than staying in one place and having people come to him?
2. Why was the issue of Jesus' authority such an important one for Luke?



Display

It might have been easier for Jesus to stay in one place but he was determined to order his life based on his desire to spread the message of the kingdom of God. What about you? Are you equally committed to determine where you live, what you do, and how you spend your time based on what is God's will for your life and what will be most effective in advancing his kingdom?



Dig Deeper

I just finished watching the most recent Super Bowl between the New Orleans Saints and the Indianapolis Colts. The game was only so-so in terms of excitement, unless you're a Saints fan, of course. But what I found far more compelling than the game itself was the new show that came on immediately following the game. It was a brand new show called "Undercover Boss." Normally I absolutely despise reality shows and try to avoid them like the plague but this one looked a bit more interesting and it was already on, so I figured why not. In it, the President of a major corporation went around the country completely undercover working in different locations of his nationwide business, Waste Management. He worked in different locations doing different jobs for one day and was even fired once for not being able to cut the muster when it came to picking up debris in a landfill. What was compelling to both viewers and the boss was what he learned about the regular people that were working for him on the street level. He simply couldn't believe how decisions that he made from corporate headquarters, decisions that seemed so good from that vantage point, were actually horrible and oppressive from the vantage point of his employees. One cost cutting measure that he had encouraged left one woman working at a waste management site to do the jobs of three or four people by herself. The boss simply could not believe how hard she worked all day, every day and was still making the same money that she did before the other employees, whose jobs she was now doing were let go. On top of that, she was in danger of losing her home because she could no longer afford the taxes on it. After seeing the impact that his decisions had, the CEO realized that he needed to do something immediately. He risked blowing his cover by meeting with the woman's immediate boss and instructing him to give her a promotion and significantly increase her salary immediately. The on-site manager immediately agreed to do this, but if you didn't see the show you might wonder why. The reason was that this manager knew who the President was and had been sworn to secrecy. So when they met to discuss this woman's plight he immediately recognized the authority of the man with whom he was meeting, even if no one else did.

This present passage is all about authority. Authority is the key to getting things done. Do you have the authority to do that or not? The President of the company could make immediate changes based on what he found because he had the authority to do so. Luke has laid out that Jesus has come as the unique Son of God and is already setting about his business of revealing God in a way that no one expected. If Jesus is going to be the conduit through whom the kingdom of God is going to break into the present age and if he is going to challenge the preconceptions of nearly everyone, then the question that must be answered before we even begin reading is, "does he have the authority to do this?" Luke's clear answer throughout this passage is that "yes," he does have the authority. The question of Jesus' authority will continue to hang in the minds of those who would have just as soon rejected his message but Luke has made the truth of his authority quite clear to his readers.

The common style of teaching for the spiritual teachers of Jesus' day (at least from what history can tell us) was to not just teach what the Scriptures themselves said, but to focus on the interpretation of said Scriptures. The way they achieved that, however, was to constantly quote the interpretations and teachings of other Pharisees or rabbis and to appeal to precedent. Thus, their teaching was a constant appeal to things like "this Scripture says this and rabbi so-and-so says that this means this, thus what we need to know is this." There is nothing inherently wrong with that style of teaching in so far as it can go, but Jesus' style of teaching was different. He occasionally appealed to things that were written but generally he made few appeals to Scripture (and would actually adjust what was written in Scripture such as in passages like Matthew 5:17-42). Jesus never quoted other rabbis, he didn't need to. Jesus rarely even made assertions like the Old Testament prophets who would declare that they were speaking the words of YHWH that had come to them. This is what amazed people. He simply said, "I tell you the truth." The only one who had the authority to speak on his own authority without appeal to another witness was YHWH himself, the God of Israel.

How could a man speak with such authority? This is such a key issue for Luke because in the ancient world authority was the key to power. Attempting to usurp power without the proper authority was a quick way to get yourself killed. And in the Jewish mind, to usurp the power of God without the proper authority was the worst kind of offense.

The issue of authority is why Luke has placed the accounts of Jesus' encounter with demons and sickness immediately following the description of the amazement over the authority of Jesus' words. Someone speaking with the great authority and wisdom that Jesus was, was certainly amazing but that was one thing. To actually demonstrate that authority beyond mere words, though, that was a whole different level of authority. Luke doesn't give us much detail about the demon or the ins and outs of demon possession here as we might like him to but none of that is his focus. The Bible gives precious little details about the origins of demons (although the early church was quite adamant that demons were the disembodied unclean spirits that were a result of the sinful union between fallen angels and human women as is described in Genesis 6). Nor does it ever draw a clear picture between things like mental illness and instances of demon possession when the symptoms seem very similar. As interesting as those topics may be, that was not Luke's point, so we will stick to what he wanted to stress here.

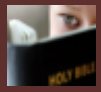
As with teaching, the amazing thing was not so much what Jesus was doing but how he was doing it. It was not uncommon for rabbis or Pharisees to exorcise demons. There were many people, in fact, who claimed to do that. Whether they actually had the ability to do that is suspect, but whether they did or not, it was a common spectacle, complete with many formulas, incantations, etc. In other words, quite a show was put on when demons were "exorcised," and it was usually done in someone else's name, like Solomon. But Jesus was different. There was no show and no mumbo jumbo. He simply ordered these demons out and they obeyed. And he did it on his authority without the need to do it in someone else's name (notice that his disciples would cast out demons in Jesus' name rather than their own authority). They knew who he was and they understood his authority. They feared that he would send them to the Abyss, the typical Jewish concept of the place of destruction for demons. Jesus' authority was not recognized by those in his own hometown, but these demons recognized his authority.

The fact is that all of Jesus' miracles, as already discussed in the previous passage, were a physical demonstration of a spiritual reality. The point of miracles and displays of Jesus' power went beyond just the act itself and showed a deeper spiritual truth. Jesus cast out demons because he had authority over the forces of evil, sin, and death in the world. And he rebukes Peter's wife's mother to demonstrate his power and authority over the human condition. Yes, Jesus could heal a fever instantly, but more important was to learn that he had authority over all of nature.

In the final scene of this passage, Luke pictures throngs of people still coming to Jesus to help them with all kinds of illnesses. Again, there was no summoning up of powers or appealing to someone else's name. Jesus needed no authority beyond himself. He touched, the sickness left. He spoke, the demons left. He taught, the Spirit of God moved. Everything that follows from here on out in Luke's Gospel will rest on the identity of Jesus as the Son of God (although Luke will give constant hints that his identity was even far greater than his human distinctions as the Son of God and the Son of man) and the authority that the Godhood has given Jesus as the earthly Messiah, the one who was full of the Spirit (what Luke will only hint at, Paul made quite clear—in Jesus all the fullness of the deity dwelt in addition to him being fully human).

But if Jesus wanted to demonstrate the truth of the kingdom of God and the fact that it was breaking into the present age through his life and ministry why would he order the demons to not declare who he was? Why was he silencing them from declaring that he was the Son of God? Verse 41 makes it clear, incidentally, that the Son of God was an interchangeable term for Messiah during Jesus' life. Later on, the Son of God would take on more significant meaning in the Christian community and come to describe the divinity of Jesus, but at this point in Jesus' life, when the term Son of God was used, we can rest assured that all that was understood was that he was the Messiah. But isn't that what he wanted people to know? In one sense, we cannot ever know definitively why Jesus kept his identity a secret at various times and places, all we can do is speculate. The most likely answer, however, is that Jesus was constantly dealing with misperceptions of what the Messiah was and who he would be, so quite often it was more accurate and helpful to simply avoid the distinction and let his actions define who he was. There was also the reality that directly stating that he was the Messiah would fan up the flames of his opposition who wanted him dead far quicker than he wanted.

What Luke has made clear was that God's kingdom was breaking into the present age in a new way that no one expected through the life of Jesus the Messiah. It certainly hadn't come in the way that anyone expected and that's why the issue of authority was so vital. Everything that Jesus did went against the expectations of the people of his day, but he had the authority to do it. Those of us who have committed our lives to following in the Messiah's footsteps should not miss the fact that Jesus transferred a certain amount of his authority to us to continue his mission and carry his kingdom throughout our world. We should constantly be asking ourselves what we are really doing with that authority.



Luke 5:1-11

Jesus Calls His First Disciples

1 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, [a] the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. 2 He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.



Discover

1. Luke doesn't tell us what Jesus spoke about but what do speculate that he might have spoken of before this miracle?

2. Why do you think that Jesus did not give a reasonable explanation beforehand as to why he was telling them to let down their nets?



Display

Are you willing to obey Jesus just because his word said so regardless of how crazy it may seem? To what is God calling you to do right now that requires the same sort of submission and obedience to his word? Go in prayer and determine to obey God's word with the same immediate obedience that Simon Peter demonstrated.



Dig Deeper

A few years ago Hollywood produced a film called "Remember the Titans." The film was based on a true story of an American high school football team in the late 1960's or early 1970's. This was during the time when America was intentionally integrating schools and trying to eliminate the existence of all-white and all-black schools. It was decided that an all-black high school would be combined with an all-white school and that they would start the process even before the school year began by combining the football teams during those few weeks when high school teams start practicing before the school year starts. As the movie depicts, the process of combining the white players with the black players was not an easy thing. The players didn't like each other and didn't really want to play with each other. There is one scene in the movie in particular that is an amazing scene. One of the star black players on the team, Julius, was upset because one of the white offensive linemen was clearly, intentionally not blocking for the black quarterback and allowing him to get nailed on play after play. So, the player confronts the white captain of the team, Gary, while at the same time the white player derided Julius for not playing as hard as he could. Julius retorted that there was no way he would play hard for the team when the white players wouldn't even protect their own quarterback. Gary responded by saying that he couldn't believe how much of a bad attitude that Julius had and was disgusted by the way that Julius refused to show respect to his authority and play hard. Julius' response was priceless. He looked at the captain of the football team, Gary, and said "attitude reflects leadership, captain." In other words, he wouldn't follow Gary's leadership because he didn't respect his authority and wouldn't submit to it. That left Gary speechless and with much to ponder about the fact that he hadn't been doing what he should have done as captain to bring the team together.

Luke has carefully shown us Jesus' identity and his right to be considered the Messiah, the Son of God, in both the earthly sense and in the deeper theological sense. He picked up on that identity and showed that Jesus had more than just the right to be Messiah, he also had an incredible authority that was noticed by those around him readily. His authority was so obvious and strong that even demons and illnesses respected the authority he possessed. But authority doesn't mean much if people don't respect it and submit to that authority. The football captain discovered that. Authority without submission to that authority is meaningless. That is exactly why, I believe, Luke has decided to give us this account immediately on the heels of several stories demonstrating Jesus' authority. If Jesus has authority, and Luke has demonstrated that, then he will need followers who are also going to respect his authority, submit to it, and obey him.

Luke's intent is not to give a blow-by-blow account of Jesus' life so we have no specific idea in most cases as to how much time passed between the last scene and the present one but we do know that Jesus' notoriety was increasing and people were coming to see and hear him in increasingly larger crowds. Local experts say that, to this day, if you get into a boat and push out a little from the shore that the slopes surrounding Lake Gennesaret act like a natural amphitheater of sorts, and actually allow the audience to hear the speaker better from the boat than if he was on the shore right in front of the audience. Jesus took advantage of this so that the crowd could hear him as he spoke of the kingdom of God. Luke doesn't tell us what Jesus taught on this occasion but is more interested in the object lesson that Jesus would provide after he was done talking. Jesus was about to, once again, demonstrate that the significance of his miracles go beyond just the physical realm but that they also display spiritual truths behind the act itself.

It is an important detail that we can deduce from Luke's details that this event took place in the morning. Simon Peter and the others with whom he was working had been out fishing all night. This is the most effective time to fish in this area so it is no minor detail that they weren't able to catch much of anything all night. If they were out during the prime hours and couldn't get anything, then why on earth would they think that they could catch anything during the day. In fact the thought of a carpenter/ handyman turned teacher giving orders to fishermen regarding their craft is a bit amusing on it's own.

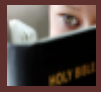
A great spiritual truth is revealed here in Simon Peter's response to a man whom they likely knew of to some degree or another but whom they hadn't yet been chosen by to follow. The other Gospel writers tend to just tell the basic facts of Jesus calling Simon Peter and the others to be his disciple but Luke adds some important details as he is showing not just the call to discipleship but the very grounds on which their discipleship and submission to his authority rest. It all boils down to obedience. Obedience to the word of God is perhaps the key element in being a true disciple of Jesus Christ anywhere at any time. Jesus' request to let down their nets makes no sense at all from a practical point of view. They had fished all night and caught nothing, and everything they knew about fishing told them that it was pointless to try again. But Peter, even though he gently alludes to the fact that this would be an exercise in futility, obeys at nothing more than Jesus' word. That is his only interview and his sole qualification for discipleship and it is so instructive for us. Much of the Christian life in general, and many of the specific things that we believe that God calls us to do on a more individual basis, make no sense from a worldly point of view. God's will is often not just counter-cultural but can seem downright crazy. But it is up to us to have the same response that Simon Peter did. It may not make sense, "but because you say so."

When Simon Peter obeyed wholeheartedly he discovered what so many disciples since then who have found themselves obeying Jesus despite the seemingly crazy things he is asking of us. He found that his obedience paid off in a way greater than he could have imagined. When they let down the nets, "they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break." Obedience to Jesus' word doesn't always have such tangible and immediate results but we will always receive a harvest for obedience that is given out of true faith in Jesus. They caught so many fish, in fact, that they nearly submerged both boats that were out there. Jesus was clearly teaching them a lesson about submission and obedience to his word. He offered them no pre-obedience explanation of why he would be telling them to let their nets down right there. He didn't try to persuade them at all. He simply gave the command at it was up to them to obey or not. But they found that when they did obey Jesus, things can happen that are beyond natural explanation. The same principle is as true for us today as it was for them nearly 2,000 years ago.

Simon Peter's response to the miraculous haul of fish again shows his submission and humility. He likely had no comprehension of Jesus' full identity yet, even though he addressed him as Lord, but he clearly recognized Jesus as the agent through whom the power of God was breaking into the present age. When an unclean and sinful man feels that he is in the presence of God's power, his response is exactly Peter's. He wants the Lord to leave. Peter immediately recognized that Jesus had an authority that no one else on earth possessed. He also knew that he was sinful and had no claim or right to be in the presence of such a man. His obedience combined with his humility were the very reason that Jesus deemed him worthy to not just be in his presence but to follow him and be among his first disciples.

Jesus wasn't just showing off to Simon Peter and the others, though. He wasn't just trying to give their business a little boost. He was teaching them what it would take to follow him on his mission and what that mission would be about. If they follow him they would experience a radical change in vocation. No longer would they be mere fishermen. They would be fishers of men. That would be the mission. But it would require the same sense of obedience, submission to God's will, and humility to bring in a harvest of men like the one of fish that they had just experienced. They would fish for men but they would have to continue to hold to Jesus' word no matter how crazy and contrary to good judgment that might seem. To be Jesus' disciple and to truly experience the success of sharing with him in his mission takes the utter conviction to hold Jesus' words above all else (Jn. 8:31-32).

But there was just one more thing that they would have to learn before they could truly follow Jesus. These weren't a bunch of guys out on a weekend fishing trip. These were lifelong fishermen who worked that lake for a living. It was likely that their family had been fishermen on that lake for many generations. This was a family business and it would have been the expectation that they would make the business as profitable as possible and pass it on to their children. But Jesus issued to them the same challenge that he does to anyone who would follow him as a disciple. They must drop everything and follow him immediately. Notice that they not only dropped their nets but they also left the bonanza of fish that they had just caught. The call to follow Jesus would surely mean that they laid down their lives and left everything to follow him. The call to follow Jesus today is different in that we don't physically need to give up our physical possessions in most cases, but the call to die to ourselves and give up everything in our hearts (Lk. 9:23-26) is just as real as it was for Simon Peter.



Luke 5:12-16

Jesus Heals a Man With Leprosy

12 While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. [b] When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

13 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.

14 Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

15 Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. 16 But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.



Dig Deeper

My wife is truly one of the most amazing people that I have ever known in my entire life. She works as a registered nurse in an ICU unit and I'm always amazed at what she sees and experiences on a regular basis at work. A few weeks ago she came home a little bit sad because she had a patient who had decided to have his tubes pulled which likely meant certain death for him. The patient was a quadriplegic and had basically decided that he no longer wanted to struggle through his medical care and he was, in essence, giving up. This saddened my wife because she truly cared about his welfare and had put a lot of effort into caring for him. The day before this was to happen he had someone come in and write down a note for my wife in which he thanked her for caring him. He noted that he felt like she was the first person in a long time that had actually paid attention to him and really took care of him. She had made him feel special and, in reality, feel human and alive for the first time in a long, long time. It was small little acts of love and humanity from my wife that so deeply affected him. In fact, in large part due to the hope that she had restored to his life, he later decided not to have his care pulled and fight on. He is currently doing well and will continue to live.

It is simply amazing when we think of how important it can be to treat someone in a humanizing and caring way, and how equally devastating it can be to treat someone in a dehumanizing manner. The simple touch of another human being, for instance, can have huge effects on a person. Studies among orphans in the 1970's have shown that babies who were taken care of in every other way but were almost never touched and were never held, had many problems, including stunted growth and serious ongoing social and mental issues throughout their life. Some researchers even suggest that a baby who is cared for by being fed but who is never touched by a human will die within weeks. On the other hand, recent research has shown that premature babies who are simply gently rubbed on their head and their back will grow and heal much faster than babies who are not touched in that manner. I don't know why human interaction and touch are so important and vital but I know that they are, and it seems apparent that God made humans that way. We cannot be fully human if we are treated inhumanly by others. We were made to live in community. We have a vital need to be accepted and treated like human beings by others.

The biblical word for "leprosy" could cover a variety of diseases but it was a much feared prognosis in the ancient world. Leprosy was considered to be highly contagious and thus, dangerous to the society around them. Because of this they were routinely ostracized and were not accepted in normal society, often being herded into leper's colonies. What was even worse, in many respects, was that lepers during these times were considered unclean by the Jewish people. This meant that they were eternally unable to take part in any religious ceremony or ever go to the Temple. Even to appear in public was not really acceptable and those who had leprosy were expected to yell "unclean, unclean" to anyone that they were approaching so that those healthy people could avoid them. The harsh reality was that this man with leprosy that Luke describes in this account had likely been cut off from human contact for years and had probably not been touched by another human being for a long, long time.

As Jesus continued going through different towns he came along a man that Luke tells us was covered in leprosy. This was no doubt intended by Luke to let us know that this man was not just suffering from leprosy but had been suffering from it for a long time and was deep in the throes of the disease which also meant that he it was visibly obvious to others that he was leprous. This man had surely suffered some of the most severe effects of being socially ostracized that were possible at the time. At every turn this man would have been cast aside and dehumanized. Just coming into a social center enough so that he could come into contact with Jesus on any level would have taken either a great deal of courage or a great deal of desperation. But despite the disapproval of the culture around him and even the danger of making such a move, this man risked being rejected soundly by Jesus and made his way to him. Once there, the man threw himself at Jesus feet and took the position of submission and humility to beg Jesus for mercy.

It is quite interesting to note that when this man appealed to Jesus he absolutely had no question about Jesus' ability to heal him and make him clean. The question was not if Jesus had the authority or power for this man believes already. Surely that is what Luke wants us to notice. It is equally significant that this man does not even appeal to Jesus to unleash the power of God. He apparently knew enough of Jesus to believe that Jesus possessed within himself the type of authority and power to alter the natural laws of the universe without having to appeal directly to the Father. Again, it is very unlikely that this man understood in any way the full divinity and theological significance of Christ, but certainly he understood that something was special about this man.

Jesus demonstrated that this man's faith in his power was not misplaced. But Jesus did far more than just heal this man of his leprosy. He first "reached out his hand and touched the man." This would have been technically against the law and would have, in theory, made Jesus unclean himself. But Jesus knew that love and mercy are often more important than religion and rules (this is the point of passages like Hos. 6:6). Jesus did something that no one had likely done in a long, long time. He touched this man. He humanized him. He took notice of him and treated him like a special human being. We may not have the healing ability that Jesus had but we can certainly all follow his example of loving the unlovable and bringing a much-needed touch of humanity to those who have been treated inhumanly. Jesus certainly had the incredible power of the Holy Spirit at his disposal to heal the sick, but just as importantly, he had the life-giving power of the love of God. He reached out with his heart in a way that others simply would not have.

But Jesus' care and concern for this man went even beyond the initial touch. It went even beyond the fact that the minute Jesus touched him the leprosy left his body and he was made completely whole. Jesus' concern for this man is also demonstrated in his command to the man to go show himself to the priest and offer the proper sacrifices. Leviticus 13 and 14 had laid out the lawful way for someone with leprosy to be handled but it also described how someone would be restored to the community in the event that they were healed of the disease. For someone who had been cut off from society and completely ostracized, simply making a claim of healing wouldn't accomplish much in the way of restoring someone's place in the community. In fact, a claim of healing would likely have been met with distrust and even persecution. So, the priests would serve as the ones who would verify that someone had been healed and along with the proper sacrifices, they could then restore them to their place within the community life. Jesus didn't just give the man a moment of human concern and love and heal him. Jesus wanted to restore this man's life. He wanted to make him whole. This is another reminder that the miracles that Jesus performed pointed to a spiritual depth and reality beyond just the physical impact of the miracle itself. They were designed to teach about the kingdom of God. Jesus wants to not just heal the broken lives of individuals but also to restore and create healed communities within the tent of obedience to the way of life of the kingdom of God.

The fact that Jesus was quite willing to have this man checked out according the customs and standards of the society so that the miracle could be verified and that the man could be accepted back into the society is quite instructive for many religious groups today. It is easy to turn the TV on these days and see "faith healers" all over the place. What is interesting about these so-called healers is that they are quite often hesitant to have their miracles verified. They claim that requests for evidence of verification of these miracles is a demonstration of a lack of faith but Jesus had no such hesitation. He wanted this man to go and have the priests examine him and be able to testify to his healing and allow him to be admitted back into the full life of the community.

Again Luke tells us that Jesus wanted to keep what was going on quiet to some extent but he doesn't give us the precise reasons for Jesus' hesitancy. He may have wanted the man to wait until the priests could verify his healing, he may have wanted to keep things as quiet as possible so that deadly opposition would not heat up until he could fulfill his vocation of preaching the coming of the kingdom of God to all the regions of Israel, or he may have had other reasons. What we do know is that despite his requests to keep things quiet, word about Jesus got out. Jesus did not seek fame or big crowds. He was merely trying to do God's will, but the crowds came nonetheless.

But what allowed Jesus to deal with the constant crush of those in need and those seeking to hear Jesus, to see him, or to be healed by him? As a buffer and an explanation to that question Luke inserts a brief scene between this latest miracle and the one that he will turn to in the next passage. It was nothing more than the simple art of quiet prayer that allowed Jesus to meet the incredible demands that would be increasingly made of him throughout his life. He withdrew for time alone with God. It should really cause us pause to think of how often we try to face things on our own strength without truly going to God repeatedly in urgent prayer. If Jesus found it necessary why don't we?



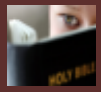
Discover

1. What most strikes you at a personal level about this account?
2. Why did Jesus command that this man go to the priests?
3. Why do you think Jesus encouraged both group and individual prayer?



Display

What do you need to most learn from Jesus through this passage? Do you need to take time to reach out and touch someone and make them feel noticed and humanized again? Or are you more challenged by his constant commitment to prayer? Which area is the Spirit challenging you to address in your own life today? Or is it both?



Luke 5:17-26

Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralyzed Man

17 One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. 18 Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. 19 When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

20 When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

21 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

22 Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? 23 Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? 24 But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." 25 Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. 26 Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."



Discover

1. Why was Jesus willing to offer a tangible demonstration of his power to forgive sin?
2. What clues has Luke given us in this passage to start to piece together the idea that Jesus was God in the flesh?



Display

Jesus differed from the religious leaders of his day because he offered the people hope and true transformation rather than just blaming them for being sinners. Does your tend to reflect Jesus' approach or that of the religious leaders? Take an honest look and assess whether you really present the gospel as a message of hope or one of condemnation.



Dig Deeper

Many years ago when I was playing basketball I had a teammate my first year in college who was very unusual. He seemed to be a pretty good player in practices before the season started but you also got the sense that he was not playing very hard. It wasn't that unusual to see guys who wouldn't give full effort during practices but would save up their best efforts for games, though. What was unique was that he had never dunked the basketball. He hadn't done it in practice, in scrimmages, and not even before and after practice when most guys would mess around and try to outdo one another in dunks. Dunking well was kind of a status symbol at that time so it was something of a small scandal that he had never done it. To add to the problem for him was that he was 6 feet 5 inches tall (1.96 m). If he had been a small guy, he might haven't gotten away with not dunking, but because of his height he took a great deal of abuse about his lack of throwing one down. His only response was always that he only dunked in real games. He didn't "waste his energy," was always his claim. Of course that's easy to say, so no one believed him and even gave him a harder time about it. Then our first game came. A few minutes into the game he caught the ball outside of the three-point line, took a few quick dribbles towards the basket, and then took off, flying past his defender and thunderously slamming the ball into the basket. He didn't say a word and didn't look in the direction of the rest of the team, but we all knew. Not another word was said on the subject of his dunking. He had proven that what he said was true all along.

To say that you can do something is one thing. In fact, it's pretty easy to make claims. Our world is full of people who make claims about various things, but to back up those claims is an entirely different thing. Think of how many times in your life you have heard claims being made that just could not be backed up by the subsequent actions. My friend claimed that he could dunk, although he never made a big deal out of it, and he could. Yet, I've known a few guys who would say that they could but then they really couldn't. Luke made some big claims about the authority that Jesus had and purported to have but he knew that those claims were not really very impressive if not backed up with demonstrable action to verify that authority. Jesus had already shown that he had the authority over demons and illnesses, but now he was about to make a claim of authority that goes way beyond that. Could it be that he really had the power to forgive sin? How could one possibly ever know the truth of that claim? Luke is about to show us.

Jesus' notoriety has spread enough that, even though Jesus was still in Capernaum, people had come from all over Galilee to see him. In fact, it went beyond just people from Galilee. The big boys had come out to see him. Luke tells us that Pharisees and teachers of the law had come not just the area of Galilee but as far away as Judea and Jerusalem. This is the first time Luke mentions the Pharisees who will serve as Jesus' main source of opposition throughout his ministry. The Pharisees, we should note, were not an official group at the time. They were an informal pressure group. They were the ones that went around speaking of the coming of the kingdom of God so when someone else was out making claims about God's kingdom, that was certainly going to catch their attention. What they would quickly discover, however, was that Jesus' version of the kingdom was diametrically opposed to the one that they had embraced. They were thoroughly convinced that the reason that the kingdom hadn't yet come was because of the many sinners in Israel. They were keeping God from returning to his people and if they would just stop sinning and hold to the law tighter then he would finally return and crush Israel's enemies. This led them, in many ways, to look down on others as the problem and to see themselves as the example and the solution. So they offered up more and more rules and regulations for people to follow so that they could escape their status as sinners, if they would only take up this heavy yoke then they might be accepted by God.

But Jesus was offering something very different and quite opposed to that mindset. Rather than clinging more tightly to rules, regulations, and their heritage as Jews, Jesus didn't appear to have a heavy yoke of laws that would help the lowly sinners improve their plight. He seemed to be more interested in faith and obedience to himself than in anything that people did or were born as to improve their plight. Of course if people did believe in his authority and live in submission to it, they would find that they would be better off, but that change would be real change that slowly came from within, not the more visible change that would come from conforming to the standards of others. Those were big claims and one would need a whole lot of authority to be able to make the radical claims that Jesus was making. But how could he possibly demonstrate the truth of such claims. Anyone, after all could say such things, but how could people know that what he was saying was true?

That is where the miracles came in. Jesus was healing people and demonstrating the power of the kingdom of God to make people whole through the physical reality of miracles. So many people were coming to Jesus that it was apparently becoming next to impossible to get in to see him. Surely this had to irritate the Pharisees who, although were respected in the community in many respects, certainly didn't have throngs of people pressing in to see them and hear them talk about the kingdom of God. But Jesus did. Luke tells us of one man and his friends who so badly wanted to experience the healing touch of Jesus that they climbed up on the roof and dug their way through the thatch to lower their friend down to Jesus. Jesus was struck by the loyalty that these men were showing to their paralytic friend (paralytics were of little to no value in the society and often left to fend for themselves in many ways). He saw their faith, Luke tells us, which is a clue and a key to this whole story. Their faith was demonstrated by their actions. We tend to view faith as a mental exercise, but the people of Jesus' time just did not see it that way. You acted on what you believed in such a way that your actions always demonstrated your beliefs. For someone to say, "well I did this but that's not what I believe or what is in my heart," is something that would make no sense to the Jews of Jesus' day. You did what you believed, end of story. Thus, Jesus' sees the demonstration of their faith and he will respond with a demonstration of his own.

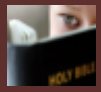
Their great hope was that Jesus would heal this man and allow him to walk home but Jesus did way more than that. The kingdom of God, after all, was not primarily about physical healing. The physical healing merely pointed to the true power of the kingdom of God to heal the lives of sinners. Because this man had demonstrated the determined kind of faith that was necessary for one to accept the kingdom of God, Jesus would demonstrate his position as the savior of the world who had the authority, even though he had humbled himself to become a man limited by the flesh, to forgive sins. It is important to note, that although those around him were still not fully cognizant of the fact that Jesus was claiming to be God (Luke will get to that soon enough), that Jesus was doing things that only Israel's God could do as savior. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "I, even I, am YHWH, and apart from me there is no savior" (Isa. 43:11).

The Pharisees certainly got the underlying point of the claim to forgive sin. If Jesus was claiming the authority of sin forgiver and savior, then he was claiming the authority and identity of God. They simply would not stand for this, especially when his message was so fundamentally opposed to the one that they embraced. This demonstrates an important truth in Jesus' ministry. The miracles were great demonstrations of Jesus' true authority but they weren't enough by themselves. They had to mingle with submission and obedience in order to produce the necessary faith of a true kingdom person. As Jesus' ministry will show, it was just as easy to see those miracles and still reject Jesus' authority.

Jesus knew that the Pharisees were thinking that he was making claims that he could not back up. His ability to tell them what they were thinking was another clue of his true identity, one that they rejected. In order to demonstrate his true authority, though, and give every opportunity to the Pharisees and the whole crowd to believe, Jesus will show that he does indeed have the power and authority that he has claimed in being able to forgive sins. First, he asks an important question. Is it harder to forgive sin or to heal a lame man and give him the power to walk? There is no good way for the Pharisees to answer that question and so they don't. But Jesus commands him to get up and walk. Surely the crowd was amazed and at least some realized that this was a clear demonstration that he did have the power to forgive sin just as he claimed.

In claiming his authority to forgive sins, though, Jesus dropped another clue that at least some in the crowd, not the least of those being the Pharisees, picked up on. Jesus used the somewhat mysterious phrase "the son of man." This is the first time that Luke has described that phrase from the lips of Jesus and it is no small thing. The phrase could simply mean "just another man," but by the time of Jesus, the phrase had almost exclusively taken on the meaning of its use in Daniel 7 and been applied to the messianic figure from that passage. In Daniel 7, the son of man is the one who is brought before God, suffers persecution, and is given all authority over the whole world. He was the Messiah through whom God would bring his kingdom into the world. Jesus was subtly indicating that he was Daniel's Messiah. He was the one who had authority over the whole world to forgive sin and to make the lame walk. His works showed that his authority was genuine just as our actions demonstrate the genuineness of our faith.

The people standing there that day were amazed and they certainly saw much more than they expected. Imagine that this was the first time that you had ever read the Gospel of Luke or even heard of Jesus. From that perspective, we should recognize that feeling of amazement because as we read through Luke we find that Jesus is much more than we could ever expect. Jesus made a life of doing things that people never expected and he will continue to do the unexpected in our lives if we recognize his authority.



Luke 5:27-39

Jesus Calls Levi and Eats With Sinners

27 After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, 28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

29 Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

31 Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Jesus Questioned About Fasting

33 They said to him, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."

34 Jesus answered, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? 35 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."

36 He told them this parable: "No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. If they do, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. 37 And people do not pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. 38 No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. 39 And none of you, after drinking old wine, wants the new, for you say, 'The old is better.'"



Dig Deeper

When I was a young man I absolutely loved collecting cassette tapes. There was a particular type of music that I grew up with and enjoyed and I so I took great pleasure in the fact that I had developed a rather large collection. I had such a large collection that I regularly had people come to me to ask me to borrow tapes. It got to the point that I had several tape carriers that were full of tapes that I carried in my car at all times and I also had many boxes at home that were full of tapes. As I passed through my teens and into my twenties, however, cassette tapes began to go quickly out of style and everyone around me began to get CD's. I resisted that for a long time and refused to buy CD's. I just simply did not want to accept CD's because I didn't really like them and I knew that it would render my incredible tape collection worthless. As people began to tell me more and more each day how great CD's were, I grew stiffer and harsher in my opposition to them. I would, I declared, never own a CD player. Then I became a Christian and my taste in that particular kind of music faded and so it didn't matter that much anymore but my new pride and joy was my collection of VHS tapes that were full of historical documentaries and films. I knew that these would never go out of style and I had spent an incredible amount of time working on recording, marking, and creating these tapes. I got to the point where I had over 1,000 hours of video tape and some incredible historical videos. Then all of a sudden, this new format called DVD's started slowly gaining steam. Once again, I would not accept this. I hated DVD's and never wanted one. What would I do with my VHS collection? I resisted getting a DVD player for years but finally my wife got one after our VCR broke. Now we don't even have a VHS player and all of those video tapes sit in dusty boxes in my basement.

That's what happens, though, when new things break into the old world. Those who have so much invested in the old order of things just will not accept the new. They don't like it, they don't understand it, and they don't want it because they think it will make everything that is important to them useless. And in some respects that's true. I cannot mix my old technology with the new. I cannot play my tapes on a CD player or my VHS tapes on a DVD player. I had to put away all of my tapes and embrace the fact that these new things were not only different, they are much, much better than the old way.

We should not lose sight of the fact that Luke is continuing to demonstrate the authority of Jesus as he reveals that the much-anticipated kingdom of God will be very different, as it breaks into the present age, than most people were expecting. Jesus continued to call disciples to follow him which was highly unusual in two respects. One, was that it appears that the common practice at the time was for students to approach the rabbi or teacher from whom they wanted to learn and then hope to be selected by them as worthy (this rabbinic training was apparently a still rather informal process in the 1st century that would be not be formalized until the 2nd century) . For a teacher to go around choose disciples was very uncommon if not unheard of.

The second unusual thing was in the type of followers that Jesus was choosing to be his disciples. These were not men of impressive stature. If a Messiah-figure was going to around and gather disciples the expectation might have been for him to put together a collection of the best and brightest rabbis, teachers of the laws, and religious experts. But these men were fishermen and now a hated tax collector. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors who worked in league with the oppressive Roman state. In fact, tax collectors were so reviled that they were seen as unclean under the law. In fact, it was common to not even allow a tax collector into one's home because of the belief that it would make the entire home unclean.

At the heart of this scene, then, is the kind of people that Jesus is spending his time with. If the Messiah was sent to purify Israel from sin and unrighteousness, as the Pharisees believed, then how could anyone making any messianic claims seriously hang around these kind of people? The fact that he would share table fellowship with the likes of men like Levi (an alternate name for Matthew) demonstrated to them that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting. Jesus' associations constantly raised opposition from those who did not approve of the fact that he would spend time with those who were separated from God. The Pharisees, on the other hand, radically pursued a lifestyle that avoided sinners and saw them as the problem that was keeping God from returning to Israel. To add to that, table fellowship was very important to the Jewish people. For the Jewish people, banquets were a symbol of God's age to come which was often symbolized by referring to that time as the time of the feast of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt. 8:11). For Jesus to share table fellowship with these sinners meant that he was embracing the idea that there might be a place for people like this in the age to come. That they would be accepted at the table before repenting was simply unacceptable.

The aim of the Pharisees was to remain quarantined from the lowly like of sinners and tax collectors. Jesus, on the other hand, didn't quarantine himself. His aim was the recovery and reconciliation of those that had a ruptured relationship with God? Jesus saw his ministry as one that could be likened to that of a doctor. How good would it be to have a doctor who refused to go around the sick and injured because he didn't want to catch what they had or deal with their less-than-palatable conditions? How good would it be if you had a doctor who would only go around other doctors or those that could demonstrate that they were passably healthy?

Why would Jesus spend such time with obvious sinners and people that were sinful and separated from God in both heart and actions? Because those were the ones that needed healing. His point was not that the Pharisees and their types weren't sinners or were actually righteous but that they thought they were and would be wholly incapable of being spiritually healed until they realized that they were the sick, they were the sinners just like everyone else. Jesus came to bring sinners to repentance not meet his own needs by hanging out with people who agreed with everything he said and pleased him with every word that came out of their mouths. This is such a vital point for us to remember today. As soon as we find ourselves not wanting to be around someone because of their "sin," we have completely lost sight of who we are as sinners ourselves and what Jesus called us to be for the world. We are not called to gather a group of Christians and quarantine ourselves off from the world but instead, we are called to take up Jesus' vocation as doctors that bring the healing message of the gospel to those who so desperately need it. When we break it down to simplest terms, the Pharisees wanted to see repentance before table fellowship was offered, while Jesus knew that showing them that the kingdom of God could be open to them would lead to their healing and repentance.

The fact was, though, that the Pharisees just couldn't comprehend or accept the new era that Jesus was bringing to light. Fasting was a part of Jewish life. It was required by the Old Testament only for the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29) and to remember the destruction of Jerusalem (see Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19). But the Pharisees had taken fasting far beyond that and, like John's disciples, engaged in a large amount of fasting. The Pharisees fasted twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays. Part of the reason for their constant fasting was to show their religious commitment and as a necessary part of their preparation for Israel's long-awaited redemption and the end of their long exile from God. Fasting for the Pharisees, then, was a sign that God's kingdom had not yet arrived. But that was exactly the rub between their deeply held beliefs and what Jesus was doing. They were fasting and hoping for God's mercy and Jesus was saying that God's mercy was there, that it was breaking into the present age in new and radical ways that they could not imagine. God's mercy wasn't something that needed to be somberly hoped for, it was there in exciting ways inviting all to come in and be healed. The kingdom was like a party. In fact, it was more like a wedding banquet than a funeral. You simply wouldn't go to a wedding and abstain from the celebratory act of eating and drinking. That wouldn't make sense. A time would come when Christ would die and be absent from his people, said Jesus as he is already beginning to allude to his death. The groom was there, so it makes sense that Jesus' disciples don't fast. When the groom has left, then God's people will long for and anticipate the time of his return and the completion of their redemption. Jesus doesn't give any hard and fast rules about fasting during this time but he does confirm that fasting is appropriate during that time.

Jesus' three short parables are really vivid demonstrations of our opening illustration. The new will not mix with the old. You can't tear out a piece of a new article of clothing and try to patch it into an old article of clothing. In doing so, you will ruin both garments. And you can't pour new wine into an old leather wineskin because it will cause the skin to burst. For that matter, when someone drinks the old wine, is used to the old wine, and is invested in one way or another in the old wine, they simply find it very difficult to ever accept new wine. Just like you cannot jam a VHS tape in to a DVD player with ruining both, you simply cannot take bits of the old way and combine it with Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God. Jesus knows the sad truth that most of the Jews that hear him will not switch their expectations and allegiances easily. We get used to the old ways and new things intimidate us.

Our challenge today is to constantly be ready to allow God's kingdom to challenge us in new and fresh ways even though it has now been around for a very long time. It is crucial that we don't become the people who cling to our old ways and don't constantly allow the kingdom to break afresh and anew into our own lives. It is our task to live out the new kingdom life that Jesus has brought into our lives and to remember that we simply cannot mix our old and comfortable ways with the new.



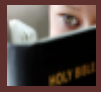
Discover

1. Why were the Pharisees so distressed concerning who Jesus ate with?
2. What does Jesus tell us about the way we should interact with those who are "sick"?
3. What is Jesus' point about the old and the new?



Display

Do you ever find yourself being a little like the Pharisees here and wanting to separate yourself from the unsaved rather than getting messy and being around them, with all that that brings with it? How does Jesus' example here challenge you right now? Is there any attitudes or actions of yours that you need to change?



Luke 6:1-11

Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath

1 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. 2 Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

3 Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." 5 Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

6 On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. 7 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. 8 But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there.

9 Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"

10 He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored. 11 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.



Discover

1. What is Jesus' point in comparing his situation to that of David?
2. What did Jesus mean by declaring himself the Son of Man that was Lord of the Sabbath?
3. Why were the Pharisees so furious with Jesus?



Display

Do you ever get so caught up with people looking "right" and acting "right" at church that you forget about God's mercy and love? Do you ever find yourself drifting back to the old mindset of rules, regulations, and religion rather than allowing room for the mercy and love that God really wants from his family?



Dig Deeper

One of the curious things about athletes is that the higher they go in their level of play, the more attached they seem to become to a certain jersey number. This seems to be particularly true of basketball players, although I'm sure players in other sports are the same way. But this oddity isn't just limited to college or pro players. I've seen guys at recreation adult city leagues get all worried because they couldn't have their specific jersey number. It's crazy how important it can be for some guys to have what they feel is their specific number. You couldn't imagine how much I had to deal with this issue as a high school basketball coach. It seemed like each year we would have some sort of conflict when it came time to assign guys numbers for the year, as a couple of guys would want the same number. If one player was a returning player and the number was his in the last season and one player was new, then the returning player would get his number. If, however, we had two new players that both wanted the same number, it wasn't as easy of a solution.

I recall one year in particular where two players wanted the number 23. This was the number that they had each always worn and it was a number of particular importance to many basketball players because it was Michael Jordan's jersey number. Neither of the two would back down and thought that they had the right to the number. I appealed to them to think of the importance of team and putting teammates first over the importance of a number but neither one would budge. They were simply letting the importance of a jersey number become way overblown, so I needed to send a clear signal to them. I came to them before our first game and told them that I was the one in charge and that neither one would be wearing 23 that year. Because they had lost sight of the real importance of their jersey number as opposed to other things that really did matter, I was going to remind them quite clearly that I was the one with the authority in this situation. I was the one who would decide how important jersey numbers were and who would have what jersey. Neither player was particularly thrilled but they both got the point.

Observance of the Sabbath was extremely important to the Jewish people, especially the Pharisees. Sabbath observance was one of the main markers of following the law and being the people of God. It was, for them, one of the main ways that they showed that they were God's people and others were not. Those that broke the Sabbath laws had, in the mind of the Pharisees, clearly demonstrated themselves to be anything but the true people of God. The problem came in that the Old Testament law was not very specific about what it meant to keep the Sabbath holy. It forbade working on the Sabbath but didn't give very many specific examples of what that meant. By the time of Jesus, though, a rather complex number of laws and definitions had risen up that defined what was okay to do on the Sabbath and what was forbidden. These rules, quite frankly, went way beyond anything given in Scripture but had taken the level of Scriptural commands in the minds of many Jews of Jesus' day. When it comes down to it, they had lost sight of what was really important and what the whole point of the Sabbath was. They needed someone to step in with the authority to put the Sabbath in its proper perspective.

In going through a field and grabbing some grain to eat, Jesus' disciples were only doing what was permitted under the law (Deut. 23:25) where grain could be taken from someone else's field with your hands but not with a sickle. The issue was whether in the act of taking the grain and rubbing it they were violating the prohibition from working on the Sabbath. One question that arises that Luke does not answer is why the Pharisees were even there. They were apparently following Jesus and his disciples around, seemingly waiting for them to make a mistake. What is really a minor issue can become a major issue and a point of extreme annoyance when you have already determined that you hate someone and want to see them fail. But the Pharisees jump on the tiniest of infractions although even the reality of this being an actual unlawful infraction rests on whether or not one accepted a particularly strict interpretation of the law.

Jesus doesn't make any attempt to apologize for the behavior of his disciples or to argue with the Pharisaical interpretation of Sabbath work laws. What he is doing is to infuriate the Pharisees even further by asserting an authority that they don't recognize or embrace. Jesus gives a slight insult by asking them if they have never read what David did. Of course they had read this account, but the point is really that they have not understood what they read. David was the rightfully anointed king of Israel who had yet to be seated on the throne. He was on the run from Saul who would not recognize his position and authority and ultimately wanted him dead.

When we take a step back and look at the example that Jesus was using, the point sharpens into focus a little more. He was doing a whole lot more than simply saying that there was one time when David did something that was technically unlawful and that he was going to rest on that precedent and claim that it was alright for his guys to do something slightly unlawful as well. The point was not whether David ate the bread that was reserved for priests alone but that David, as the rightfully anointed king, had the authority over the strict interpretation of the rules. David had rightful authority to do what he did. So did Jesus. That's his point, but it goes even deeper than just that. David was the properly anointed and true king of Israel who was on the run from his enemy and had yet to take the throne and be recognized as king. That was the exact position that Jesus was in. He was the rightful king of Israel. He was the anointed one (the literal meaning of "Messiah"). He was also, though, on the run, in many respects, from his enemies who increasingly wanted to have him killed. And like David, he had yet to be recognized as the rightful king and sit on his throne. Because Jesus was in the same position as David and had authority, just like David, to supercede normal rules or protocol.

In fact, Jesus' authority went beyond that of David's. David was appointed by God and anointed by Samuel as the king of Israel, but Jesus was the Son of Man. He was identifying himself in somewhat enigmatic terms as being the one like the Son of Man that Daniel had written of. He was, in other words, claiming the authority as the one who "was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Dan. 7:14). Why could the disciples go ahead and rub grain in their hand and eat it on a Sabbath even though it was against the normal interpretations of what was lawful? Because Jesus was the Lord of the Sabbath. He had the authority and that was really all they needed to know.

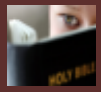
The reason, though, that the Pharisees had so much trouble with accepting Jesus' authority over the Sabbath and his claim to be able to bring a new understanding to what the Sabbath was all about was because they failed to understand the purpose of the Sabbath from the very beginning. It is for this very reason that Luke, I believe, decided to include the next incident in verses 6-11 between Jesus and some Pharisees concerning a Sabbath matter.

In the first confrontation, it seemed that the Pharisees were following Jesus around looking for a problem. The second account, however, seems that Jesus was intentionally instigating this situation as an opportunity to teach an important principle. He intentionally went into the synagogue and found a man with a shriveled right hand. Certainly, Luke says, the Pharisees were watching him closely and were looking for him to violate their Sabbath laws again. But Jesus seems more than happy to accommodate them. At stake here is the issue of the purpose of the Sabbath. Was it solely to forbid certain activities or was it a day on which God would be honored.

What was the Sabbath for? Was it a day when evil should be done or good? Was it to save life or destroy? Once again, Jesus didn't technically do anything that would constitute work even by the strictest interpretations of the law. He simply told the man to stretch out his hand. When the man obeyed Jesus at his word, he was healed. Luke has thus combined three important themes from the early chapters of his Gospel. First, faith is productive when people obey Jesus solely on the basis of his word (just as Peter and the others had the fishing haul of their life by doing nothing more than obeying Jesus). Second, Jesus could heal and even suspend the normal expectations or law of the Sabbath because he was the coming king who had every right and the authority to do so.

In both situations, Jesus put the Pharisees in seemingly difficult situations. If David had the authority to suspend Sabbath laws in certain situations then so did Jesus. If God had created the Sabbath to honor him then wouldn't it be right to do good things that brought life rather than evil (the assumption Jesus has is that to do nothing in situations like this when you are capable of doing good would be to do evil)? In both cases, it didn't come down really to breaking Sabbath regulations, it came down to the all-important issue of authority and the identity of Jesus. If he was who he was subtly claiming to be then he absolutely had the authority to do what he was doing. That was the real problem for the authorities. It wasn't so much Jesus' actions that were driving them nuts, but the authority he was claiming in order to take those actions.

Luke is setting the stage and showing us that Jesus was methodically shaping a new family of believers that found their identity as God's children around obedience to Jesus not through regulation and ritual. He was creating God's new family and preparing them to live in God's age to come according to an entirely new ethic. It is this way of life for the Messiah's new family to which Luke is about to turn but we cannot help but see the sharp contrast between the new people of God, the new Israel, that Jesus was creating and the old way of the Pharisees. If they would have just realized that rather than rejecting Jesus' authority, that they too, like the crippled man, could have reached out to Jesus and found themselves completely restored.



Luke 6:12-26

The Twelve Apostles

12 One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. 13 When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: 14 Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, 15 Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, 16 Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Blessings and Woes

17 He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, 18 who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil [a] spirits were cured, 19 and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

20 Looking at his disciples, he said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22 Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.

23 "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,
because great is your reward in heaven. For
that is how their ancestors treated the
prophets.

24 "But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.

25 Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26 Woe to you when everyone speaks well of
you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the
false prophets.



Dig Deeper

We have experienced a fair amount of upheaval in the last couple of years in American politics. There has been a seemingly increasing divide over the expectations, hope, and ideologies that people have and politics have gotten more contentious than they have been at least in my lifetime. Many people recently have completely lost faith in their representatives to do the right thing, regardless of their own political party or philosophy, or that of their representative. In the last year a unified movement of those who are discontent with the current direction of the American government and American politics has arisen. Those people call themselves the Tea Party movement (deriving their name from the American historical protest known as the Boston Tea Party which took place shortly before the American War for Independence). The primary unifying principles of these people, whether you agree with their beliefs or not, are that government needs to be answerable to the people and needs to be smaller.

Imagine, though, if suddenly one unifying figure rose out of the Tea Party movement and declared that a new era of government had come. Then that individual said that he was forming a group that would ensure that this new era would be built around a group of himself and twelve other individuals that would travel around together and take their new agenda to the people all around the country. It wouldn't be possible for these thirteen individuals to enumerate every single specific item that they were going to expect in government but they would have a few cardinal rules of thumb. A few things that they supported like smaller government, tax cuts, and balanced budgets, and a few things that they would stand opposed to in all situations like tax hikes, socialistic programs, and corruption. When groups do things like that, one of the clear markers you can use to judge them is by who their enemies become. You can tell a lot about a person if they have the right enemies. A group like that would likely see it as a badge of honor if they were persecuted by the big mainstream media and those who wanted government to continue to get bigger and more powerful.

It's important, though, to notice one particular detail from the previous imaginary scenario. A group that was talking about a revolution in governmental practices, reducing the power of the government, and getting back to the way things used to be, who declared thirteen people to be the leaders of this movement, would be making an obvious American statement wouldn't they? Why thirteen? That would be an obvious appeal to the thirteen founding colonies of the United States and would be making a clear statement about the values and beliefs of the movement.

These are exactly the sorts of things that Luke is describing here about Jesus' new kingdom movement. A deeply symbolic number of leaders, a handful of easily identifiable and repeatable core values that would stand as a good rule of thumb, and of course, the reality of making the right enemies. When we put all of those things together, we get a very clear statement about the values and beliefs of the kingdom of God that was breaking into the world through Jesus' ministry.

Before Luke gets into any of this, though, he reminds us of the foundation of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was getting ready to take a big step in his ministry and like he always did, he stopped to align himself with God's will through the vital discipline of prayer. Jesus didn't just pray at convenient or noticeable times but he prayed constantly, consistently, and sacrificially. He is often remembered to have prayed early in the morning before most people were awake, or like here, right through the night.

As morning dawned, Jesus chose twelve men who would serve as the leaders of his movement. The fact that he chose twelve had obvious symbolic undertones to it. Jacob had twelve sons which had eventually developed into the twelve tribes of Israel. The concept of the twelve tribes was practically synonymous with the very idea of being God's people. So when Jesus chose twelve men to be the symbols and leaders of his kingdom movement, the point was obvious. The twelve tribes of Israel were God's special people through whom he would work to bless the world but since the destruction of Jerusalem and exile over 500 years before this time, the twelve tribes were a memory and a symbol more than any kind of living reality. Jesus was coming into a storm of all kind of different people claiming new and different ways of being God's true people but in Luke's mind, only Jesus had demonstrated the necessary authority to actually do that. The clear symbolism of his choice of twelve was that he was, in his own way, reconstituting Israel. This would be the foundation of God's new special people, his new family. They were, in fact, God's renewed Israel but this would be far deeper than just the symbolism of the opening imaginary scenario regarding the Tea Party folks. This really would be the start of God's renewed people. In fact, this idea of symbolism of twelve and being God's renewed Israel would go on to become a recurring theme for several New Testament writers (Matt. 18:28; Jam. 1:1; Rev. 7:3-8; 21:12, 14, 16, 21; 22:2). There was also, perhaps, bold significance in the fact that just as Israel had twelve historic tribes who were led by God himself, that Jesus was not part of the Twelve but stood apart from them, leading them and taking on the role of God himself.

With his leadership of the renewed Israel firmly in place through the guidance of an overnight prayer session and the Holy Spirit, Jesus is ready to begin to give out samples of what this new kingdom will be all about. It is a place of healing and wholeness. The people were so convinced of his power and authority that they were, no doubt, pushing in on one another just to be able to touch Jesus. Now they were ready to hear the rules of thumb of the kingdom of God. These were not the whole of the values of the kingdom but simply slogans and principles that could be easily remembered and applied to one's way of life in general which would then guide his followers in most specific events that might arise. These were not requirements to enter the kingdom but were, rather, descriptions of the values of the resurrection age. These values are completely the opposite of the normal values of human society. That's the whole point here. The woes and blessings are generalizations intended to teach those who would follow Jesus and be part of the renewed Israel that they needed to upend their values and no longer conform to the patterns of thinking that they had learned in the world (cf. Rom. 12:1-2).

Each of the four blessings from verse 20-22 correspond to the four woes given in verses 24-26. But we must stress again that these are not intended to be specific truths as though you really are blessed for being poor and that being rich is automatically something that will disqualify you from the kingdom of God. The point was that the renewed kingdom of God would bring good news to the oppressed and outcast, those who had no reason to expect much good news in this age. Those who put the values of the resurrection age and lived according to God's will rather than by the things of the world would truly be blessed. This is best captured quickly by saying that those who are poor, hungry, who weep and who are hated for the sake of the Messiah are those who will embrace the kingdom of God.

Those who embrace the things of the world and seek after success according to the values of anything other than in Jesus' kingdom will find themselves cursed and outside of the new family of God. Those who value earthly riches, comfort, prestige, and their own will, will laugh now, thinking that they have "conquered the world," but soon enough that will all be shown to be a wasted life. The idea of wasting your life and forfeiting your soul by seeking the things of this world and doing your own will is one that Luke will return to again and again.

But just because someone desired to be part of this renewed humanity and be part of the family of God through whom the whole world would be blessed, they shouldn't begin to think that this would bring comfort, power, or prestige but just in a different way. God's people are those who completely reject those things from earthly sources and realize that they can only find those things in the resurrection age of Christ. This means being prepared to be hated and rejected by the world. If Christians are truly embraced by the world then that is probably a pretty good sign that they have become like the world. Truly sticking to Jesus' counter-cultural values would get Jesus' kingdom people the same sort of treatment that the prophets of the Old Testament got. They were the ones who spoke God's words and called Israel to do God's will and it wasn't as if they were ever treated very well, says Jesus. The prophets were generally rejected, ignored, hated, and eventually killed. The ones who were embraced and spoken well of were the false prophets. That should always serve as a stark reminder to the dangers inherent in the desire to be well thought of and celebrated in the world.

This would be the shape of God's family, his kingdom. But it's not as though we should fool ourselves into thinking that this was some temporary, radical measures that can now be relaxed as we can fit into the culture around us a little more. We are still called to be the renewed Israel built on the foundation of the twelve, the new and special people of God. And that means that we are still called to live by the sharp standard of those blessings and curses in ways that turn our world upside-down just as much as it did then.



Discover

1. What is the significance behind Jesus choosing twelve apostles?
2. What is the point of the blessings and woes that Jesus issued?
3. Why was Jesus so adamant about the fact that his followers would be treated like the true prophets?



Display

When you have a major event coming up or decision do you turn to prayer as consistently as Jesus did? Do you follow his example of sacrificial prayer? When was the last time that you prayed for something so fervently that you even came close to praying through the night? Remember, it's not so much the act of praying through the night but the sacrificial heart behind it.



Luke 6:27-38

Love for Enemies

27 "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. 35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Judging Others

37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. 38 Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."



Dig Deeper

A few years ago I watched a movie called "Space Cowboys" which was about a group of former astronauts that were well past their sixtieth birthday. They were going to go into space again and some officials in NASA were skeptical that they would be able to handle the rigors of space at their age. Before they would agree to send them, the men had to go through rigorous training and preparation to spend even a short time in space. No one will ever confuse that movie for a factual documentary but it did depict one thing quite accurately. When someone is going to go into space they have to prepare intensely for it. Vigorous training is necessary to prepare oneself to be able to function at a maximum level when in outer space. I watched a video recently on the training that real astronauts actually have to undergo in order to prepare themselves for time in space. It's difficult to describe in the written word the many aspects of their training but suffice it to say, they get spun around a lot, they strength train, and they even have to learn how to move, walk, and eat in low gravity environments.

Imagine, though, if you knew that you were leaving in a year and were going to live in space for the rest of your life. Would you prepare yourself or just that you were ready when that time came? Of course, you would want to prepare yourself. You would spend great amounts of time learning to live in your new reality and environment. In fact, you would probably practice for your future life at every opportunity. Yet, much of the things that you do to prepare for such an event would seem quite crazy from an earthly perspective. In fact, if you were not going into space the vast majority of those things would make no sense to do at all. These training exercises only take on any significant meaning if the future prospect of going into space is a reality.

This is the way it is with the challenging and often demanding way of life to which Jesus called his disciples. Many people get off course and misunderstand Jesus' teachings as some sort of new kind of law or rules that must be adhered to without thought. That's to miss the whole point, however. Jesus' teaching and principles, like those in this passage, are not rules but training principles. They are designed to give us rules-of-thumb through which we begin to train and transform who we are at a deeper level than most people ever consider going. We simply will not understand these sorts of guidelines, though, unless we comprehend that these are part of a training regime. His new family, said Jesus, are people that are rejecting wholesale the values of this age and choosing to live in the age to come, the resurrection age where we will live with our King forever. We would never think that an astronaut's training program meant that he was earning his way into space, though. No, we understand the difference between earning your way and preparing for what is ahead. This way of life laid out by Jesus is preparation, training his people for the reality that we will live in when we are in God's presence for eternity. And just like the astronaut training, it would make no sense if the future prospect of the resurrection age was not a reality.

At the heart of Jesus' instructions on the new way of living that his people are to embrace is the radical kind of love that is God. It is the love that makes little sense if one demands to view the world from a viewpoint of what is "fair". It is the type of love that takes the breathtaking stance of turning enemies into friends. It means living and loving the way that God loves. It means truly treating all other people the way that God treats people.

Jesus' words in this passage concerning the way his people are to think about their enemies could hardly be more challenging. To put it simply, this is big-boy stuff. This is not the kind of thing that can be done half-heartedly or even out of simple obedience. Obedience is the starting point to come to Jesus but to truly follow him as disciples we must go beyond that. This is what Jesus meant when he said "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn. 15:12-15). The point is that we know that the master's business is to transform us into people that will be prepared for the age to come not to just create a bunch of people that can follow a few rules. We are to move beyond mere obedience and into being Jesus' friends.

This means having the kind of love that only God can have and doing what seems crazy to the world. Jesus' point in his examples in verses 28-31 are all examples of the principle given in verse 27: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." This type of love and generosity is absurd and even naive if we look at it from the values of this present age. It only makes sense when we recall that we are called to this type of mercy and generosity because this is what God is like and we are becoming like him so that we can dwell with him forever. Many look at this ethic that Jesus lays out and think of it as weakness but it actually takes incredible strength to live like this.

Does this radical kind of love and mercy really have any effect, though? The life of Jesus demonstrates that it does. Jesus didn't just call people to live like this and not demonstrate himself. When people would slap him, punch him, mock him, steal his clothes, and try to take everything from him, he responded in grace and mercy, even asking the Father for forgiveness for those who had persecuted him. As mentioned, the greatest effect of this kind of love is to transform enemies into friends. Nowhere is this seen more clearly in the Bible than in the life of Saul who would change his name to Paul following his conversion. He was the chief persecutor of the church and personally oversaw the stoning death of Stephen. As he lay dying, Stephen prayed "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," and surely God did not hold it against Saul as he was transformed by God in answer to Stephen's prayer.

We should not think for a minute that this kind of living is easy. It is challenging especially because it is to be applied to enemies and not those who love you. In fact, says Jesus, loving those who love you doesn't demonstrate all that much to the world because the world is familiar, at least in theory, with that kind of love. The world loves those who love them. The world lends and extends credit to those who can repay. Those kind of actions make sense. But quite frankly, Jesus doesn't want the kind of people that make sense. He wants people that are committed to loving like He loves. He wants people who will love their enemies, curse those who bless them, and lend without any expectation of receiving reciprocity.

Let's be honest with all of this. It doesn't make sense and that's the point. At least it's not common sense from the values of this age. It does open up Christians to be taken advantage of. It does open us up to not being treated "fairly". But that's only from the vantage point of this age. Surely we are to balance this radical kind of love with Jesus' reminder to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16) and not be dangerously naive but he does call us to a love that only makes sense from the vantage point of the age to come. These are actions that only make sense if we realize that we are not people who are going to live by the patterns of this age in eternity and increasingly want to shed ourselves of those patterns now. Jesus was calling his followers to be like those astronauts in training and begin to live, as much as possible in this age, according to the way that we will live in the age to come. It doesn't make sense to share and love with abandon in this age but those will be the norms in the resurrection so our job is to begin to model that age for others and to begin to conform ourselves to those values and prepare ourselves for that time. This is what God's family looks like. This is, in fact, what separates Christianity from all religions. There is no religion that calls people to live by these sort of non-sensical values.

What this all means is that the children take on the nature of the merciful Father and begin to live out that same mercy. Not only are we becoming like our Father in heaven but the truth is that we will be treated by God according to the values that we embrace. If we want to cling to the world's ethic of what's "fair," then God will treat us "fairly," which will not mean a pleasant time of judgment for any human. But if we cling to God's mercy that he has shown us and pass that on to others, then we will stay in that place of mercy before God. Thus, if we want to not be judged by what we deserve, not be condemned the way our actions warrant, and to be forgiven lavishly then we must hold to those values in our own lives. The measure we want used for us is the one that we will use with others.

This all sounds good but the reality is that Jesus' people haven't done such a good job of consistently living by these values down through the years. We have, I fear, gone way too far in taming and applying logic to what Jesus said. It's not that the truths of God's kingdom have changed or weren't meant to be followed. At some point Christians have to face that fact that we have watered down some of Jesus' most challenging teachings. Perhaps when we get back to living by the radically futuristic values of the age to come will we really be able to have the kind of impact in the world that his first followers had.



Display

What about this passage is most challenging to you? Do you look at this passage and long to live like that or does it make you feel like you have a pit in your stomach? What do you need to change right now to begin to live according to this kind of mercy and love?



Discover

1. When all is said and done, why did Jesus demand that we love enemies rather than tolerate or even avoid them?
2. How does the ethics of this passage differ from the values of a religion like Islam?



Luke 6:39-49

39 He also told them this parable: "Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit? 40 Students are not above their teacher, but all who are fully trained will be like their teacher.

41 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 42 How can you say, 'Friend, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye.

A Tree and Its Fruit

43 "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. 44 Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. 45 Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in their heart, and evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

The Wise and Foolish Builders

46 "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? 47 As for those who come to me and hear my words and put them into practice, I will show you what they are like. 48 They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. 49 But those who hear my words and do not put them into practice are like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."



Dig Deeper

It's easy to sit and listen to a great speaker and get inspired by them. Think of how many times in your life you've gone to hear a motivational speaker or a good preacher or even just an emotional speech in a movie and you got inspired. You can feel the swell of emotion and desire to make a difference well up in you and you just want to go and act heroically on what you heard. Most of us, though, tend to let that initial wave of desire to act wane a bit. We begin to examine the specifics of doing something and the reality begins to set in. So, we begin to think more and talk more about it. In fact, we can often begin to talk about something so much and get in so much detail about it that we don't actually take action. I recall being a teacher and spending meeting after meeting after meeting talking about some new idea or program but we got so bogged down in thinking about it and working out every little imaginable detail that we seemingly never acted on anything, and eventually the ideas would just fade into the background. At some point we have to take action. At some point, we cannot sit by any longer as idle listeners and evaluate the pros and cons of taking action. There is certainly a time and place to determine the cost of taking action but at some point, we need to act on what we've heard. We need, in short, to make a decision.

In many senses, this is what Jesus is saying in this passage to his listeners. They have seen the miracles and they have listened to his shocking new teaching and what the kingdom of God was going to be about in this new era. Some obviously immediately rejected it and some quickly embraced Jesus' teaching and decided to follow him. But we get the sense that the majority of his listeners that day were like us. They sat and listened to Jesus and many, no doubt, got excited about the possibilities of this strange but exhilarating new humanity to which he was calling people. But they had to make a decision. They had to decide who they were going to follow. Would it be the Pharisees and the teachers of the law or would it be Jesus? At some point they needed to stop listening and getting vaguely inspired and decide which way of life they were going to go after and who they were going to follow. They just needed to make a decision.

Luke gives us a barrage of four separate sayings from Jesus that all have to do with, in one way or another, who his listeners are going to follow. Whose version of the kingdom of God are they going to embrace? We tend to read these sayings in a very serious and somber tone, and when we do so, we lose something of the original intent. There is a serious point behind each of these sayings, but they were meant to be a little bit humorous. Sometimes well-placed humor can challenge us far more than something said seriously. Jesus had an incredible way of teaching by using local humor and everyday things to get across very important points.

His first little saying concerning the blind sets the tone and topic for the other three sayings. The question is clear. What happens when you are blind and don't know where you're going but choose to follow another blind person? How is that going to work out for you? Do you really want to follow another person that is simply groping along, trying to find their way or do you want to follow someone who can see and who knows where they are going? A student is not above his teacher, so if the teacher is blind and about to go in a ditch, where does that leave the student? It was typical in Jewish literature to metaphorically use "blind" to refer to someone who lacked spiritual insight and it would seem that the Pharisees and teachers of the law are Jesus' main target here. There is a bit of suspense in verse 39-40 that Luke leaves hanging. The crowd has listened to Jesus up to this point and now what will their response be? Which teacher will they follow? Will they hear and take Jesus' message to heart by acting on it or not? If one becomes like their teacher, how will they become like their teacher? Jesus' unstated but obvious point was that there is only one teacher that can truly see and who should be followed.

The question was did they want to follow a teacher who was truly showing them another way to live, God's fresh solution to the problems of a world entangled in sin, or did they want to follow hypocritical teachers who did little more than to find fault with everyone around them and blame them as the sinners who were the cause of the problems? He illustrated this point with the ridiculous example of someone examining someone else's life so closely that they see a speck of sawdust in their eye, all the while paying no attention to huge plank of wood hanging out of their own. It doesn't take too much imagination to picture Jesus actually demonstrating this silly scenario by holding a large stick up to his eye which would have, no doubt, made the crowds chuckle at the spectacle while at the same time challenging them to think about the absurdity of such hypocrisy. The problem with the hypocritical sin sniffer that Jesus described was that their supposed devotion to God and personal piety lead them to censure the failings of others, but their behavior was not being determined by the kind of love and mercy that God really wants for his children. The heart and the action are inconsistent.

The brilliance of this example is that Jesus was not just pointing out the problem of teachers like the Pharisees but he was also challenging his listeners, and us who read his words today, to live by his standard. His challenge was to reject that kind of hypocrisy and follow him rather than the blind guides. Ultimately, though, we must realize that Jesus was criticizing hypocritical judgment not the act of lovingly helping another with their sin. His rebuke was against those who criticize and lose sleep over little tiny aspects of the law or their pet religious practices, and all the while ignore the main things like God's love, mercy, and justice (see Matt. 23:23-24 for similar sentiment). This doesn't mean that Jesus was calling for his followers to never challenge others on their sin. The ideal situation, said Jesus, was to remove the plank and then be able to help your brother remove the speck. He wanted the speck removed but not before the plank was dealt with.

So how could one know a blind teacher from one that could see? How could one recognize the teacher that did not have a plank hanging out of his own eye? Jesus said to check the fruit. In another example of exaggeratory humor he gave a picture of a fig coming from a thorn bush or a grape from briars. Everyone knew the silliness of such a suggestion. It just didn't happen. One of the ways (although certainly not the sole way) to tell a good teacher from a bad one is to look at the outcome of their lives. Good people produce good words that come from a good heart.

Verse 46, then, is really the application of the fruit example that Jesus gave in verse 43-45, and a bridge to Jesus' final illustration in verses 47-49. In the fruit example, Jesus warned of those who would have inherent inconsistency between their lives and what they said. Those who claim Jesus as "Lord" but then don't obey are a clear example of that. Jesus wanted the crowd to embrace his vision of the kingdom and reject the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and he realized that a large part of doing that would be to truly embrace Jesus as Lord by embracing his radical worldview and the new family to which he was calling his people. To claim Jesus as "Lord" and then not really do what he said would be to follow the way of the blind guides who showed themselves to be blind in the fact that the fruit of their lives did not match up with their words. This is also an issue of authority. How can one call Jesus "Lord," and give him authority in word, while keeping the real authority for ourselves by not living according to his authority?

The imagery for Jesus' final illustration comes primarily from Ezekiel 13. In that passage, God promises that he will send the violent winds and waves to wipe out the flimsy walls of those false prophets who have spoken presumptively in God's name. They will be wiped out, says Ezekiel. Jesus uses that imagery to make the point that those who build their lives on his teaching will not have those kinds of concerns. Following Jesus is the only way that one will be able to withstand the coming judgment of God. Any other foundation than the word of God revealed through the life of Jesus. The structure that is built on any other foundation will last for a while but eventually will not stand the judgment of God. This brings us to the importance of understanding the context of Ezekiel 13, the passage to which Jesus alludes. We often think of the flood in this illustration as being the troubles of life, but the fact is that there are other things one can build their "house" on which can withstand difficult times in life. But building on the foundation of Jesus is the only thing that can stand up to the flood of God's righteous judgment. Following Jesus as our teacher certainly will help us through the winds and waves of life, but it is the only thing that will withstand the storm of God's righteous judgment.

All of this calls us to make a decision and follow Jesus as well but each teaching has a very personal and practical application to our own lives. Are we following blind guides (including ourselves) or are we truly following Jesus and acting as though he is truly the Lord of our life in more than just word? Are we quick to point out the specks in the eyes of others while ignoring the planks in our own lives? Do we have fruit in our lives that betrays the vine from which we claim to come? Do we look good on the outside but have hearts that remain unchanged? Have we built without the true foundation? These are questions that we would all do well to spend some serious time considering.



Display

Jesus points out the folly of calling Jesus "Lord" but then not really doing what he says. Do you see that folly play out in your life at times? In what area of your life do you most need to start doing what Jesus says and truly make him Lord rather than just calling him that?



Discover

1. What is the common underlying theme of each of the four illustrations in this passage?
2. Why would Jesus use somewhat humorous examples to teach such important points?
3. Which of these four illustrations hit closest to home for you?



Luke 7:1-10

The Faith of the Centurion

1 When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. 2 There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. 3 The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4 When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, 5 because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." 6 So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. 7 That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 8 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

9 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." 10 Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.



Display

Do you have the kind of faith that would amaze Jesus? Do you obey Jesus' word for no other reason than your faith in his authority? Where is God calling you in your life right now to increase your faith and submit to his authority?



Discover

1. Why did Luke decide, do you think, to center this passage around Jesus' authority?

2. What is the significance of the fact that his centurion was a Gentile who had more faith than anyone in Israel?



Dig Deeper

A few years back we had some friends ask if they could take our kids with them and their children for a day of fun at a museum and a few other places. We thought that that sounded like a great idea and quickly agreed. We reminded our children about what proper behavior would look like as they spent the day with another family and sent them on their way. As they all returned they recounted what a wonderful day they had but our friends were a little disturbed about something. As I asked them how our kids behaved they said that this was what they were worried about. "Were our kids a problem," I asked. It wasn't our kids, my friend responded, but their own. In fact they said that our kids were extremely well behaved all day and that they had no problems whatsoever with our kids. It was their own kids, they said, who were rude and disrespectful all day and who seemed to have a real problem with their authority. They wondered what they were doing so wrong if other kids were so respectful of their authority while their own children seemed to not have nearly the same respect. I assured them, that although they surely had some things that they needed to work on with their kids, that this was not an unusual phenomenon. For many different reasons, many parents report the disturbing phenomenon of having offspring that seem to behave better for other people than for them. It's just one of those frustrating truisms of parenting, but oftentimes your kids will show more respect for the authority of others than for you on a consistent basis.

Throughout the first six chapters of Luke, our author has done a masterful job of weaving together several important themes including Jesus' authority, the lack of respect and acceptance that he would receive from his own people, and the hints that his ministry would be inclusive of all people, including Gentiles. These themes all intersect here in this one encounter involving Jesus and a centurion. The big focus in this story is not the healing of the servant but rather the faith that this Gentile demonstrated. The perhaps odd thing about this account is that the faith that this man had and the respect for Jesus' authority, far out-stripped any such respect shown by any of the Jews that Jesus had encountered to this point. And there you have it. It's that same frustrating reality that so many parents have faced. Jesus is about to experience an outsider who seems to get the concept of true faith in his authority far more than any of his own people. In fact, that is one of the important points of this whole scene.

Luke has been dropping hints from the very beginning that what God is doing through the Messiah will be the fulfillment of the one family that he promised Abraham so long ago. This would be the one family, the true people of God, who would have their sins dealt with and through whom the whole world would have the possibility of being blessed. The strange thing was that God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of one family but also of many nations. What Luke has only hinted at so far and what he will continue to point to in Jesus' actions in accounts like this one, he will make clear in his follow up to the Gospel of Luke, the book of Acts. The good news of the coming Messiah will not be just for the Jewish people but will truly be for all nations. All people of all nations would be able to enter into this one family of faith that had been promised to Abraham.

It seems quite probable that this event in Jesus' life brought some clear allusions of the account of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 and Luke seems equally intent on drawing that story to mind. Luke has already referred to the account of Naaman in Luke 4:27 and the parallels between the two accounts are striking. Both Naaman and the centurion are well-respected Gentile officers (2 Ki. 5:1; Luke 7:2, 4-5). In both accounts, an intercession is made by Jews (2 Ki. 5:2-3; Luke 7:3-5). The centurion does not actually meet Jesus before the healing and neither did Naaman meet Elisha (Luke 7:6-9; 2 Ki. 5:5-10). And in both accounts, the healing takes place at a distance from the healer (Luke 7:10; 2 Ki. 5:14).

The main point of this story, though, is not the healing of the centurion. Luke has included this healing because he wants to highlight the faith of the centurion. That is the centerpiece of this story. This is the intersection of authority and faith. Luke has been busy demonstrating the unquestioned and unrivaled authority of Jesus, the Messiah, but that authority must be met with faith at the human level or it will not flow into someone's life. Jesus does have all authority, but in keeping with the very nature of God, he will not force that authority into anyone's life and he never overwhelmed anyone with his authority. Jesus' authority was always subtle and deniable but quite open to anyone who would respond to his authority with faith. He continues to work that way with us. Jesus' authority in our lives is always quiet, subtle, and prone to being ignored or drowned out, but it is always there if we just respond in faith.

The situation was that this Roman centurion was living in the Capernaum area. One of his valued servants had become extremely ill with an unnamed illness and is on the verge of death. We are not told what this centurion knew about Jesus and how he came to have such respect for him but this was a soldier. This was a man who understood what a person who had true authority looked like. Perhaps he had seen Jesus perform other miracles and knew from the way Jesus carried himself, that he was something quite different from ordinary men. Military men tend to be no nonsense guys who appreciate others who operate within the proper authority structure and who get things done. Jesus was the embodiment of proper authority and this Gentile seemed to know it.

But there is, it seems, another layer to this story about simple authority and faith. The culture of the Roman Empire was a system of patronage and honor. Social relationships that were based on patronage and putting someone else in your obligation were an extremely common form of controlling the actions of someone else. This centurion had been quite respectful to the Jewish culture around him and he had served as the patron to build the local synagogue which would have fostered local peace but also would have put the Jewish leaders in his debt. We simply don't know whether this man had genuine respect for the Jews and their faith or whether he was simply extremely shrewd, but it makes little difference. Either way, they were in his debt in the Roman world.

The first group from the centurion that approached Jesus was comprised of the Jewish leaders. They did not approach Jesus and appeal to this man's need or their genuine affection for him. They, instead, appealed to the concepts of insiders and outsiders, obligation and honor. This man was an outsider but he had put the Jews in his debt by building the synagogue for them. Thus, as a Jew, Jesus should feel obligated to answer this man's patronage. The Jewish leaders demonstrated, by their own words, that they were beholden to this system of Rome rather than taking actions consistent with God's true family.

We might ask, then, why Jesus would continue towards the man's house. The reason was a demonstration of his words from chapter six. This kingdom is about loving enemies not just putting them in your debt. It is about turning enemies into friends by loving them. Jesus has outlined a new worldview for his family and he will now show what it looks like to live that out despite the attempt to manipulate him.

The fact that the centurion sent friends as Jesus got closer rather than sending the Jewish leaders a second time might indicate that he was not happy about them trying to put Jesus into his debt. He apparently did not want to do that and so he sends friends who appeal to him on a far more respectful level. He recognized Jesus' authority and believed in it without question. In fact, he attempted to show the ultimate deference and respect for his authority by urging Jesus to not come to the house of a Gentile and make himself unclean. He knew that Jesus had such authority anyway, that coming any closer was not necessary. He had an authority over nature and illness that the centurion could not explain but could certainly recognize and respect. He knew well what it meant to give an order to a man and have it obeyed without question on nothing more than that man's fear and respect of his authority. He knew that Jesus had that kind of authority and could dispel this illness at nothing more than a command from a distance.

What Luke has shown his readers is a snapshot of the Jewish elders who were captive to a worldly system that was being rendered null by the coming kingdom of God. It was not they, but the Gentile who saw and recognized Jesus' authority and it was he who abandoned that system of obligation and patronage, and appealed to Jesus on nothing more than the fact that he had faith in Jesus' authority. That's all he needed. That's all we need to have for Jesus' authority manifest itself in our life.

This account brings together many of Luke's themes to this point. Jesus' identity was clear to this man and he would, just as Jesus urged in chapter 6, respond to that identity and his authority by trusting in Jesus. This Gentile amazed Jesus which was quite a switch for a man who usually had that effect on others. He had more sensitivity, perception, and pure faith in Jesus than anyone Jesus had encountered in Israel thus far, and his faith was not misplaced. At the moment that this man's faith connected with Jesus' authority, his servant was healed. At some level, perhaps even underneath his obedience to Jesus' authority, this man seemed to sense that the God of Israel and all of his authority was somehow present in this one man.

Think of the faith of this centurion, though. Do you have this kind of faith? Is your faith in Jesus so strong that you are willing to go against the currents of your culture and live by nothing more than that faith? Do your prayers reflect the kind of faith that this man showed where you ask boldly and know that the answer might be no, but that Jesus has complete authority to answer any prayer you might offer up? If this centurion had that kind of faith, why can't we?



Luke 7:11-17

Jesus Raises a Widow's Son

11 Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. 12 As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. 13 When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."

14 Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

16 They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." 17 This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.



Dig Deeper

Not too long ago, my wife decided to buy me a new cell phone as a gift. I am appreciative for the gift but one problem has popped up since she gave it to me. It's a great phone but I have trouble figuring it out. There are so many gadgets and new technological features that I just have trouble doing the simplest things on it. I am finally figuring out many of the features but in the first week that I had the phone I could not, for the life of me, figure out how to close this particular application that somehow got open. I spent over an hour trying to click on different things and move things around and I could not get that ridiculous application to close. Finally, after all that time, I got it closed but I wasn't even sure what I had done. Imagine spending all that time and getting the desired result only to not really understand how you did it. Then my then six-year old son came into the room and heard me complaining that I got the thing closed but didn't know how, which would be a problem if I ever got it open again, which I also didn't know how to do that. My son, who to my knowledge had never seen a phone like that before, said "oh, let me see it dad, I'll explain it to you." I handed it to him, confidently knowing that he would be humbled by the overwhelming technological expertise needed to operate this space-aged item. Much to my chagrin, he grabbed the thing and in less than a minute had checked it out and was explaining to me how to both open and close the various applications.

It can be very frustrating when someone can figure out technology, put together a puzzle or read a book much faster or with much more ease than you ever could. It certainly demonstrates that they have talent or an ability that you simply don't. In other situations, it can demonstrate that someone has an authority that you don't have. The next time you're at an airport, watch how much easier it is and how much quicker it is for a pilot to get from outside the airport and onto the plane than it is for you. Or think about how much easier it is for the President to get into the White House than it is for you. He simply has an authority that you don't.

As we have seen already, Jesus seemed rather intent on representing Israel and at every turn showing that he is the true Israel. He has gone where God's people in the past have failed and has succeeded in doing God's will and being the true servant of God, the true Son of God. But he has gone beyond just reversing Israel's failures. He also went to the great and memorable moments of Israel's history, moments like the great healing miracles of Israel's prophets of the past. Many of Jesus' miracles, in fact, were intentionally mimicking the great miracles of those men of God but with an important twist. As we will see in this miracle account, it is very similar to one of the great miracles of the Old Testament but Jesus has an authority beyond any of the Old Testament prophets. So while there are many points of contact, and Luke is quite intent on making those echoes rather clear, Jesus performs this miracle with an ease, a power, and an authority that the prophets could never have even hoped to equal.

Just as the previous miracle brought to mind the healing of the leprosy Naaman, this passage has seemingly obvious parallels with 1 Kings 17:7-24. As both stories begin, both Jesus (Lk. 7:12) and Elijah approach the town gate (1 Ki. 17:10). Both accounts deal with a grieving widow (Lk. 7:12; 1 Ki. 17:9, 17) and the death of an only son (Lk. 7:12; 1 Ki. 17:17). In both accounts, the son is brought back from the dead (Lk. 7:15; 1 Ki. 17:22). In each account, the risen son is given back to his mother, both physically and metaphorically (Lk. 7:15; 1 Ki. 17:23). And in both accounts the mother realizes that she has witnessed a great man of God (Lk. 7:16; 1 Ki. 17:24). But as we shall see in a moment, there is one major difference between these two incidents (although there are many other minor details which vary as this miracle is an echo of Elijah's miracle and not a recapitulation of it). Before we get to that, however, let's enter into the scene that Luke has described.

As Jesus enters into this town, he was immediately struck by the sights, smells, and sounds of a funeral procession. It was the regular Jewish custom to bury a body on the day that the person died, partly due to the heat of their region and the smell that would quickly begin to emanate from a decaying body. The body would have been prepared, wrapped in a cloth tightly, placed on a board and carried through the town while the friends and family mourned and wailed loudly.

At the center of this crowd was a grieving widow who was surely stricken by the loss of her beloved son but the reality is that there were even more difficult times ahead for her. A widow was a common Old Testament picture of the most helpless person in society and the death of an only son as a sign of a truly crushing loss (Jer. 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zech. 12:10). A widow would find it very difficult to provide for herself and would have virtually no standing within the community. She would generally be at the mercy of the rest of the community. But even worse than that, this woman would be left alone with no children, with no protection, and the devastating reality that the family line had come to an end. This was a devastating event for this woman on virtually every level.

One thing we might notice, though, is missing from this account. Where is the faith? There is no faith mentioned on the part of this woman. No, Jesus seems much more moved by his own compassion than by any faith that this woman might have had. This is what it looks like when the radical love that Jesus taught in chapter 6 breaks into the real world. This is a combination of Jesus' compassion, his love, and his unparalleled authority. Jesus' heart went out to this woman and he comforts her, telling her to not cry. Jesus had said in Luke 6:21 that when the kingdom breaks into someone's life, weeping is turned to laughter and that would truly be the case here.

As Jesus turned his attention to the dead boy, he reached up and touched the board on which he was being carried. This was an act that would have left him unclean for seven days according to Numbers 19:11 (simply touching the board on which the corpse laid was the same as touching the corpse itself according to the Jewish interpretation of the law). That touch, though, showed that Jesus was far more concerned with showing mercy to this woman and her son than with his own condition. It is a touching reminder to us that truly helping others and touching their lives generally requires that we get a little dirty and "unclean" ourselves. The last miracle-at-a-distance showed Jesus' incredible authority but this moment of compassionate touch shows his overwhelming love and mercy.

Now for the major difference between this account and that of Elijah's raising of the widow's dead son. When Elijah raised the widow's son, it took him a great deal of effort. Elijah cried out to God in distress and appealed to him in passionate prayer to do something mighty. He stretched his body out across the boy three times and again fervently appealed to God to raise the boy from the dead. It was the LORD himself who heard Elijah's cries and answered his prayer, showing that Elijah was a man of God. But this is the major difference between Elijah and Jesus. We see none of that effort and pleading with Jesus. There is no fervent crying out to God, pleading with him to raise the boy. There is no stretching out over the boy. Jesus simply tells the young man, by his own authority, to get up. That's it. There was no effort and no struggle needed. Jesus merely spoke and showed that he had authority even over death.

Who could possibly have authority over death itself but God alone? What the people there that day did not yet fully grasp is a point that Luke surely intended for his readers to catch. The people clearly caught the connections between Jesus' healing and that of the prophets, though, and are quite ready to declare him a prophet. They were right inasmuch as they could comprehend but as Luke's readers we already should start to be piecing together the clues that he was much more than just another prophet. This was what it looked like when the God of Israel fulfilled his promises to return. The God of the Exodus who had once dwelt directly with his people finally had returned to come and help his people. Thus, Jesus was a great prophet, but simply giving him the status of prophet was not enough. No prophet had the authority to simply speak on his own behalf and move the power of death to the side.

Before we close the book on this passage, though, there are perhaps two other things that we should take a moment to consider. The first thing is that surely this incident echoed back to the miracle of Elijah (as well as Elisha's miracle of 2 Kings 4), but there are also echoes that point clearly forward to a time when Jesus' own widowed mother will mourn at the site of his death and his body wrapped in cloth. And just as this man was brought back out of death, so Jesus would not be bound by the chains of death. But just as his miracles were far greater than those that any man of God could enact, so would his resurrection be beyond any resuscitation from the dead. Jesus would not walk backwards out of death, only to die again one day. He would storm into death itself and come out the other side, transformed, glorified, the same yet somehow different. This is only an echo of that, though, we will have to wait to get to the real thing.

The second thing that we should consider is how this passage plays out in our own lives. You may not be grieving the loss of a child right now but what area in your life needs that compassionate and healing touch of Jesus? What situation do you fear or dread that can only be healed by the touch of the Master? Whatever it may be, rest assured that though his healing touch may not come the way you would like, but God's healing presence will come and carry you through if you only let him.



Display

When Jesus saw this woman he took compassion on her and made himself unclean in order to reach into her life and assist her. Are you willing to do that? How can you reach into someone else's life right now and touch them with compassion even if it means getting a little messy yourself?



Discover

1. Why would Jesus intentionally echo many of the miracles of the Old Testament?
2. How is this passage a real-life example of Jesus' teachings from the previous chapter?
3. What is the significance of the people realizing that through Jesus, God had come to help his people?



Luke 7:18-35

Jesus and John the Baptist

18 John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, 19 he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

20 When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

21 At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. 22 So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy [a] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 23 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

24 After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 25 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. 26 But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is the one about whom it is written:

" 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' [b]

28 I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

29 (All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. 30 But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)

31 Jesus went on to say, "To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other:

" 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.'

33 For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' 34 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' 35 But wisdom is proved right by all her children."



Dig Deeper

In a recent post, I described my reluctance to switch over to DVD's when they began to be popular. I had a huge collection of history documentaries and video on VHS tapes and simply did not want to switch over. To add to that I just don't tend to like new things very much. I eventually did give in and get a DVD player and we have a few DVD's now. In fact, I no longer have a working VCR and my tape collection sits in my basement collecting dust. But just as I began to get used to the whole DVD thing, albeit a few years after most people, I began to notice something new coming out called Blu-ray. At first, I didn't pay any attention to it and thought it would go away. When it didn't and more and more people began to talk about Blu-ray, I thought I might take a look at one. So, one day I was at a store and I picked up a box and looked at it. It looked just like a DVD to me and so I assumed that it was just another type of DVD that was perhaps a little clearer. I didn't understand that it was entirely new technology and that you had to have an entirely different player for it. Blu-ray is not, in fact, just another type of DVD. It is something completely new, a whole new world of technology and you simply cannot cross over one to the other. Blu-ray discs won't play on a DVD player and DVD's will not do anything on a Blu-ray player. But once I finally watched a movie on Blu-ray I realized that these things really were incredible. They were a whole different thing than DVD's and despite the fact that DVD's were pretty good, not even the best DVD could come anywhere close to the technology and quality of picture that a Blue-ray can give.

This is something of Jesus' point here as the attention turns back to John the Baptist for the first time since his arrest in chapter 3. John has been in prison for an undetermined amount of time and he apparently was beginning to have some questions and maybe even worries about Jesus and whether or not he really was the Messiah. His behavior was so different from what John was expecting that he was having trouble reconciling things. It all comes down to grasping that an entirely new reality was breaking into the present age. It was God's new reality, his kingdom. But this new reality simply wasn't compatible with the old age and could never be understood by using the old expectations and worldview. Even John would have to realize that the old ways of thinking wouldn't work in this new world if one really wanted to understand and be part of what was going on.

Even the best of us can have days of doubt and disillusionment. John's experience in prison is probably a good reminder of that. Many people have tried to come up with alternate explanations for John's apparent confusion from prison but I don't think we need to try to do any of that. The reality is that John was an incredible man of God, a prophet, but he was still just a man. He was weak, limited, and prone to his own preconceptions, even though he did have the Holy Spirit upon him, guiding and leading him. He was certainly capable of being led by the Spirit to speak more than he understood on his own terms. John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, had spoken rightly of Jesus as the coming Messiah, but that doesn't mean that he completely understood fully what Jesus would be doing. John had spoken of the coming judgment of the Messiah (Lk. 3:17) but he likely had his own preconceived notions of what that would look like. His disciples had come to him in the prison and told him of Jesus' incredible authority, but also that he was using that authority to minister to those on the fringes of the society. John surely was confused by this. Wasn't this a time for the winning fork to come out? Wasn't this the time to be cleansing Israel and bringing about a day of vengeance? Where was the ax that would be bringing down the tree (Lk. 3:9)? John doesn't question whether Jesus was really sent from God or not. He needed reassuring of Jesus' specific role. Was Jesus the Messiah or was he not? John's problem was not with Jesus but with his expectations of what the Messiah would do. His conceptions were quite similar to the audience in the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk. 4:28-29). He had called for repentance and for people to prepare for God's purging of the unrighteous. He simply couldn't see how Jesus' actions were related to that end.

Jesus' response is somewhat cryptic but also very clear when we stop and look at his response carefully. He was far too wise to come up and say directly that he was the Messiah. This would have opened him up to all the misconceptions that people had about the Messiah but would also ramp up the intensity of those opposed to him before his time had come to go to his death. His response was a symphony of notes from different passages of Isaiah (35:5-6; 26:19; 29:18-19; 61:1). His ministry was to the blind, the lame, the ill and outcast, the deaf, and the dead. His ministry, in other words, was the one spoken of all throughout Isaiah, especially Isaiah 61. He was delivering and bringing judgment upon those who rejected him, but just not the way that John might have expected. John was still thinking in terms of the old world and was not seeing that this was God's new reality breaking into the present. He simply could not grasp that Jesus' ministry was pointing to God's age to come when those who trusted in the life of Christ would be transformed and made completely whole. He could not comprehend that Jesus was calling people to embrace that future by giving out samples of what that would look like and then calling people to begin to live by the values of that age right now in the present.

John needed to change his categories and enter into the worldview of the new age and so did those standing there listening to Jesus. That was Jesus' point in verses 24-28. What did they go out to see when they went into the wilderness? Jesus' reference to a reed swayed by the wind could simply mean that they didn't go to see someone who went along with the winds of public opinion but a more likely reference was to Herod Antipas, whose personal symbol that he had printed on coins was a reed. They didn't go out to see just another reed, another man in fine clothes like Herod did they? No, they went out there to hear a prophet. But he was more than just a prophet. He was the one who would prepare the way for Jesus. If they went out there to hear something new from God, then they shouldn't be surprised that they got much more than they bargained for. The new kingdom that they were getting simply far surpassed what they could expect under the old order of things. Jesus made this point clear by stressing that John was indeed more than a prophet, there was no one greater in the entire Old Testament than he as far as his vocation was concerned. Yet, even with all of that, Jesus makes the point that even the least in the kingdom of God is superior to John because he is of the old order. He would not live long enough to enter into the kingdom himself. The fact that the chief of the prophets would have less than anyone in the kingdom of God doesn't speak to John's deficiency but to the incredible access to God and privilege that those in Christ would have.

Luke adds the note onto Jesus' exaltation of the new era that was dawning and the incredible grace that would be poured out to those in the kingdom by stressing that crowd that was gathered around, including even the reviled and lowly tax collectors knew that God's way was right. But the leaders, the experts, and the Pharisees rejected it. They were too concerned with consolidating and keeping their own privilege and power in the present age and so would not accept John's message of repentance and preparation for God's new work. In rejecting John's symbolic baptism, they would surely also reject true baptism into the life of Christ.

Jesus, as he often did, gave a descriptive example to show what that generation was like. The children's song that he cited may have been a common folk song like a nursery rhyme or the like that would have been quite familiar to all of his listeners, although no one can say for certain where the song came from. The more important question, though, is what does it mean? This has been an oft debated and discussed topic through the years among biblical commentators and experts but the clue to the meaning of the little ditty is likely hinted at in the verses immediately following the lyrics in question. Jesus' point was that many of the people, or at least those who considered themselves the religious leaders, were never satisfied. They were so beholden to their own expectations that they criticized and rejected whatever God sent. It was a classic case of the old saying, "damned if you do, damned if you don't." John came "singing a dirge" about the wickedness of Israel and their need to repent before God judged the whole nation, but they rejected John's serious and fiery message, claiming that he was demonic. So the message of condemnation didn't work for the religious leaders but surely they would accept a more positive approach. Yet, Jesus came "playing the pipe" and they would not dance. He introduced the kingdom of God as a celebration and something that should be received with joy, singing, dancing, eating, and drinking. But that approach didn't work with them either. The excuse became that he accepted sinners and those that should not be accepted and that he was acting like this was all a big party and thus demeaned the kingdom of God.

The fact is, "wisdom is proved right by all her children." In other words, the discerning eye could see that these men weren't going to accept anything other than their own will. John and Jesus' message would be shown to be right in time. God would vindicate them and their message but the game of the religious leaders had been exposed. They were not going to accept God's messengers regardless of what they said. They had decided that they would continue to follow their own blind guidance (Lk. 6:39).



Display

Can you ever be like the religious leaders of this passage? Do you ever get so attached to how you want God to work that no matter what he does, you will reject it? It is so easy to pre-determine what you want God to do in your life and then sit back and miss the many things he sends into your life because it doesn't match up with what you want. Are you refusing to dance to the pipe's tune or cry at the dirge? Are you really open to God's will?



Discover

1. Why was John likely confused by what Jesus was doing?
2. Why was Jesus more eager to answer questions about whether he was the Messiah with a description of what he did rather than a simple "yes"?



Luke 7:36-50

Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 38 As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

40 Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

41 "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, [c] and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my head. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

48 Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

49 The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

50 Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."



Dig Deeper

I was recently reading a book about a man who was trying to learn to be a better missionary and servant to all kinds of people. He recounted one experience that had stayed with him since the moment in his life when it first happened, and it has stayed with me since reading it. He had gone to spend a week working with an inner-city mission group in a large American city. This particular group walked the streets of this major metropolis during the hours of 10 PM and 3 AM every single day. They wanted to talk to people, meet people, help those in need, and just be seen regularly so that they would be trusted and known. The man had to learn certain aspects of their work that would keep them as safe as possible as well. He said that on the first night that he actually went out with the program director they passed by a young lady who was dressed quite scantily and provocatively. He waited until they passed by and were out of hearing range and then asked the director if that woman was a prostitute. He recalled in his book that it seemed like such an obvious thing that he was quite surprised that the program director took several seconds to answer. When he finally did answer, his response was shocking to the author. He said quite firmly and with even a little bit of rebuking tone, "No, she is not a prostitute. She is a human being that is currently in prostitution." That night the author learned how quick he was to categorize and, therefore dehumanize human beings who have been created to be God's image bearers. Lord forgive me for doing the same thing far too often.

When we categorize people we really do dehumanize them. Once we've categorized them, you see, we don't actually have to deal with them on a personal basis. We can accept them or reject them based on the nice, neat categories that we have created. In fact, studies in the US show that the average American has completely sized up and made a value judgment on other human beings within five seconds of meeting them. This is exactly what we see happening in this scene. Simon was so quick to dehumanize this woman by putting her into a category so that he didn't have to actually deal with her. In doing so, though, he will find that he has not so much dehumanized her as he has dehumanized himself and removed himself the very category into which he would have confidently placed himself.

At the outset, this whole scene seems a bit confusing to those of us who are well removed from a culture like this. The whole idea of privacy and the like was quite a bit different than we maintain now. When someone was hosting a dinner, especially with a public figure like Jesus, it would have not been that unusual to have it out in the open or to leave the doors open so that people could come in and observe the goings on. That was all well and fine providing that they kept their distance and did not intrude themselves inappropriately into the proceedings themselves. So, it is not actually that unusual that this woman would have had access to see what was going on. What she did do, though, that was so shocking and upsetting for Simon was that she didn't stay in the background. She didn't stay put in her place where she belonged.

In fact, as the men were reclining at the table, she inserted herself right into the meal itself. The men would likely have been lying on their stomachs and propping themselves up on their left elbows. They would have been facing a u-shaped table with their feet down away from the table. But this woman did not know her place. She was not of the right quality of personhood to be coming out from the shadows and coming right up into the table area. To make matters worse, that wasn't the only social custom that she broke. She was well known as a sinner, meaning likely that she was either a prostitute or something similar, yet she boldly came into the house and table fellowship area of a Pharisee. What was worse than that was that she, overcome by emotion, she washed Jesus' feet with her own tears and dried them with her own hair before anointing his feet with expensive perfume. Taking one's hair down in public was about as socially acceptable in their society as a woman taking off her shirt and drying off someone's feet with nothing but her bra on would be in ours.

Everything she did, in the eyes of Simon demonstrated two things. The first was a confirmation of his judgment of her. She was a sinner. She shouldn't be around them. Simply her presence could defile them and make them look bad in the eyes of others. She needed to be removed from the situation. Perhaps if she could somehow radically clean herself up and change her life, but then that wasn't really possible because even if she did do that, to change her perception in the community would have been almost impossible.

The second thing her behavior accomplished in Simon's eyes, was to confirm that Jesus was no prophet. Luke has already made clear that some Pharisees had rejected Jesus outright and already passed judgment on him. Others would hold off on their judgment, as Simon had apparently done. Yet, even though he invited Jesus to his home, it was obvious that he had not treated him with full respect, although Luke doesn't clearly define how he failed to treat Jesus with the proper social respect. But Jesus' reaction to this woman showed Simon that he didn't need to treat Jesus with any special honor. How could a prophet not know what kind of woman this was? How could a man of God allow this woman to be in his presence? How could Jesus not immediately rebuke this woman and send her away?

The irony in all of this is that as Simon is busy categorizing Jesus as someone that is not worth his time because he does not have the ability to correctly judge people, Jesus knew exactly who this woman was and he knew exactly what was in Simon's heart. Simon was judging him to be less than a prophet while Jesus was about to show that he was far more than just a prophet.

In operating from the old reality of a world embroiled in sin and death, perhaps Simon was right. Maybe this woman was just a sinner, but Jesus has made it clear that he is playing by different rules. Simon, and those like him, expected people to effect change in their lives before being worthy of being accepted. But when you play by those standards, worthiness is always judged by other human beings and can be elusive at best. The reality is that system always benefits those that are already on the top and it tends to oppress those on the bottom to keep them there. Jesus has already announced that the values of his kingdom were going to turn the world on its head and this is a living, breathing, example of that. Rather than operating by the old standards, Jesus is signaling that his kingdom is about fishing for people. It means going out and pursuing sinners. It means showing people that they are human beings that are valued by God and showing them God's transforming love. When people are shown this kind of love it is that very love that will change them. They don't have to change to earn the acceptance of others, they will be given the radically transforming love of the gospel message and be truly transformed from within by it.

Jesus' parable has a sharp point to it, and although Simon got the surface point, he seems to have failed to see the deeper truth. The debtor who owed about 20 month's salary was just as forgiven as the one who owed about 2 month's salary. But the one with the larger debt understood that they were a serious debtor that had just had something wonderful done for them for which they could truly never earn or repay. The other person, though, didn't see the greatness of the forgiveness because they thought that their debt was small. Simon understood that the one with the larger debt would be the most grateful and willing to lavish love on the master.

What he failed to see was that Jesus' point was not that this woman was the one with the larger debt while he was the one with the smaller debt. Many people read this passage and make that same mistake that Simon made. I don't believe that this was Jesus' point. His point was that they both owed the greater debt but that the woman realized that was her debt while Simon thought he had just a very small debt to God. Jesus' ministry was about forgiveness and canceling debts. It was about pursuing sinners, but Simon failed to see that he was the sinner that Jesus was pursuing as he told that parable.

The woman had understood what Jesus brought into her life and was overwhelmed with joy and emotion. She was humble and knew that she needed Jesus and when he accepted her by allowing her to wash his feet, she broke down with gratitude. Simon, however, failed to treat Jesus with respect and proper honor because he didn't think he was a debtor. She was not the one who truly broke any proper customs because her actions were understandable. It was Simon who by his arrogance and judgmental behavior had behaved improperly.

Verses 48 and 50 can seem a little confusing when placed together with the woman's actions in this scene unless we read them in context of verse 49. Why would she have been showing such joy and gratitude if Jesus had yet to forgive her and accept her? Was she anticipating his action? No, Jesus had already accepted this woman based on her faith in him and her desire to see herself as a sinner in need of him to change. Jesus was not declaring that under the Old Covenant her sins had been forgiven and that she was accepted into his kingdom movement, that had already happened. She had already been forgiven and acted appropriately in response to her new state of freedom but others were not willing to accept her as anything more than a sinner. She didn't need forgiveness from God but she did need recognition of her new state among those in her community. Rather than the onus being put on her to prove herself changed, Jesus was trying to change the worldview of Simon and his guests by showing that she was already forgiven. The responsibility to change wasn't on her. The responsibility to change their thinking and accept Jesus as one who had the power to forgive sins and bring God's kingdom to bear in the present age was on them. It didn't come down to her worthiness but their faith in Jesus. That's what it always comes down to.



Display

Are you ever guilty of categorizing and, thus, dehumanizing people? Are there any times when you find yourself thinking more like Simon than you'd care to admit? Have you come to terms with the depths of your own heart and allowed God's radical love to come into your own heart and then into the lives of others?



Discover

1. Why was Simon so outraged that Jesus did not reject this woman?
2. What was the point of the short parable that Jesus told?
3. How did Jesus turn the tables on Simon in this incident?



Luke 8:1-15

The Parable of the Sower

1 After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; 3 Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

4 While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: 5 "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. 6 Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown."

When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

9 His disciples asked him what this parable meant. 10 He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that,

"though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand." [a]

11 "This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. 12 Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. 13 Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. 14 The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. 15 But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.



Dig Deeper

I'm always amazed by the varying responses of Americans following a speech by the President, regardless of what President it is. As soon as the President gives a speech or lays out some new policy measure that he is proposing, the twenty-four hour news stations go abuzz with responses to the President's ideas. It's almost dizzying, though, to switch back and forth between channels with different political perspectives and hear the differing opinions on the same speech. From one perspective, the President's speech was a masterful work of oratory skill and brilliant policies that would be so wonderful for the country. Then you switch the channel and another commentator from another perspective is saying that this is one of the worst and most diabolical things they have ever heard. Surely if the country follows this path, says the pundit, the country will be far worse off. One speaker is full of kind words and admiration while the other one is full of criticism and disgust. It makes you wonder if they were listening to the same speech from the same President. But of course it was the same speech. So what accounts for such differing perspectives on the same speech, the same policy, or even the same person? It really doesn't have all that much to do with the speech or the speaker, it comes down to the listener. It is the perspective of the listener that causes the vastly different responses.

This truth is illustrated beautifully by a piece of chocolate and some muddy ground. If you go to a spot of muddy ground on a very hot and dry day and put a chocolate bar down right next to the mud, something amazing will happen. The very same sun that is shining equally on the mud and the chocolate will have completely different results. For the mud, the sun will be an agent of hardening. It will turn the mud into a dry and hard surface that will, over time, get nearly as hard as rock. But that same sun will serve as a melting agent for the chocolate. It will turn the chocolate into a melting mess of goo. How can the same agent cause such different results? It is because of the difference in the make-up of the mud and the chocolate. The substance of those items will determine what the sun causes them to do. The sun causes the mud to harden while it causes the chocolate to melt but it's the same sun.

It is important to keep this in mind as Jesus discusses, through this parable, the effect that the word of God as it was coming through his kingdom announcing, would have on those that heard him and those that continued to hear his words through Luke's Gospel. Jesus' words would have very different effects on different hearers but that had everything to do with the soil, or the heart that the seeds of that word landed on. It wasn't that Jesus was preaching different things in different places or that God had pre-determined that some people would not be able to have the privilege of responding to the gospel. It is just like the sun on that mud and chocolate. As the light of Jesus' kingdom shone on the hearts of men, it would have very different effects based on the condition of their heart.

As Luke continues his description of Jesus' kingdom announcing ministry in the outlying areas of Israel, he intentionally draws attention to the role of women in Jesus' ministry, which should not be that surprising as Luke takes more care than any other Gospel writer to stress the importance of women in Jesus' kingdom movement. By mentioning them this early in Jesus' ministry, Luke likely wants to stress that these women didn't just pop up at Jesus' resurrection but they were integral to his ministry throughout. They not only traveled with Jesus quite often but they helped to support Jesus and the Twelve. We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that having women travel with them and play such a vital role was unusual to the point of being scandalous in first-century Israel. With so many other elements of Jesus' ministry, though, that pointed symbolically to important spiritual truths, this all pointed to the fact that women would be on the same ground as far as membership in the kingdom family as men would be (Gal. 3:26-28). These women weren't just unnecessary bystanders but were vital to the development of Jesus' church and women would continue to have equal status and esteem within the kingdom of God. Luke also ably reminds us that financial generosity is absolutely vital to the establishment and continuation of the ministry of the kingdom of God.

Jesus was simply a master teacher who was brilliant in his ability to take normal, everyday illustrations that the most common of listeners could understand and relate to. That is certainly the case here as he gives a parable that used the common concept of sowing seed, something that an agrarian society would have been quite familiar with. Jesus' intent, though, is not to offer up a thorough and complete description of sowing practices and possible outcomes but to use generalizations to demonstrate something about his kingdom.

Up to this point, Jesus has had mixed results in announcing the coming of the kingdom of God. Despite the fact that he was the Son of God with authority over demons and illnesses and even the authority to forgive sins, his message was not universally embraced. Some, like those in the synagogue in Nazareth had the word sown to them but it was quickly trampled on and was gobbled up by their own preconceived notions of who God was and how he should be working. Some, like Pharisees who saw Jesus heal the man with the deformed hand, heard the word but it fell on the rocks of their own pride and messianic expectations and it withered away. Some, like Simon the Pharisee, heard the word and considered it, but then it was choked out by the thorns of his own cultural prejudices and refusal to embrace a new reality that recognized the humanity of all people. But others heard the word and believed it. Think of the Twelve who have left everything to follow Jesus, the men who in faith lowered paralytic friend through a roof, the centurion, and the grateful women who washed Jesus' feet with her own tears. The word of God had found good soil and was producing a good crop.

This parable is all about the impact that Jesus and his word has on human beings. These truths are already on display in the hearts of those described in Luke's Gospel but they are just as true in the lives and hearts of men and women that have been confronted with the word of God since then. The message of the gospel is the same for any human being, calling them to lay down their life and submit to the life of Christ in obedience to his word but the responses are varied. Just as with the chocolate and mud, the reactions to the gospel have everything to do with the heart of the one hearing the message. In that sense, the parables of Jesus were like the sun. He spoke in this somewhat enigmatic way so that those with humble and believing hearts would be able to grasp the truth of the message. But those who wanted to cling to their own expectations and trust in their ability to get themselves to God would find, just as Isaiah had declared (Isa. 6:9), that the word of God would not melt their hearts but actually make them harder. They would see but not really see; they would hear but never understand. Because of their pride, traditions, and indifference to God's true reality they had hearts of mud that, when they came in contact with the warming sun of God's love through the life of the Messiah, got dry, got hard, and cracked.

When we stand back at a distance of two millennia and look at this parable we often tend to think of it in terms of hearing the word for the first time and then deciding to become a Christian or not. The reality of this parable is that it does include the moment of initial decision, but that for Christians who have already made an initial response to the kingdom message, the far more pertinent point is that we must constantly examine ourselves according to the principles of this passage. How do we respond to the word of God on a day-in and day-out basis?

The first question we should ask ourselves is are we even sowing the word in our lives on a daily basis? If we're not, that's obviously a major problem. But if we do, what kind of heart soil does the seed of the word land on? Do we find ourselves listening to the schemes and temptations of the devil and allowing him to steal the word before it can ever take root? Do we take the word in a surface level, perhaps only at church or in shallow devotional times, only to find that when the hard times come we fall back on our own wisdom or will rather than God's? Do we take the word into our lives but neglect to pull out the weeds of being drawn to the things of the world and allow those thorns to choke out the part of us that wants to do God's will? Or are we that good soil? Are we constantly taking steps to ensure that when the word of God hits our hearts it will find good soil that is ready and willing to be obedient to God's word? If our hearts remain soft to God's word, constantly prepared to seek it out and be melted by it, we will find that it will continually produce a crop in our lives. When we bury the word deep in our hearts, we can't help but find that after a time, the radical love and mercy of God will begin to burst forth from our lives and make themselves evident to the world around us.



Display

Spend some time really reflecting on what kind of heart soil you have had lately. Is the word still consistently producing a crop in your life or has it found less-than-ideal soil lately? But don't just examine yourself. Ask others who are very close to you what they see. Do they see consistent humility and growth in your life?



Discover

1. Which of the four soils most sounds like your heart on a consistent basis?
2. What does the passage from Isaiah tell us about the purpose of parables?
3. How can the same word produce such different responses in people's lives?



Luke 8:16-21

A Lamp on a Stand

16 "No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. 17 For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. 18 Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Those who have will be given more; as for those who do not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them."

Jesus' Mother and Brothers

19 Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. 20 Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you."

21 He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."



Dig Deeper

When I was coaching high school basketball I noticed one phenomenon that was quite common to so many of the great young men that I had the chance to work with. They came to the game of basketball with a fundamental flaw in their whole understanding of what the game was about and what the purpose of the game of basketball was. This flaw in their thinking was most often demonstrated by the fact that after games, whether win or lose, many of them would run over to the scorer's table to see how points or rebounds they had. They did this because they usually came into our team thinking that the only thing that really mattered about basketball was their own success. For them being part of the team and winning games were secondary concerns. It took us a lot of talking and convincing to get them past the point where they would rather lose the game and score 20 points than have other guys score more than them and win. They failed to understand that the whole purpose of the game of basketball is to become part of a team. The desired goal is for five players to work together as one and forget their own individual interests in order to become one entity.

Surprisingly, I have seen a similar foundational flaw in the thinking of most Christians in our world today. We tend to think in terms of ourselves when it comes to our salvation and relationship with God. We think of salvation as an entirely individual endeavor with joining a church being a secondary endeavor. In that mindset then, the really important thing becomes my relationship with God which becomes an entirely separate affair from my connection with the body of believers. The sad part is that the whole point of Christianity is that we are to leave behind our individual mindset and become part of a family. This is the part that much of the evangelical Christian world has missed. The church is not a collection of a bunch of individually saved Christians who have decided to worship and follow Jesus together. The church is the family of God of which we become part when we choose to die to our selves and be born into this new family. Christianity, at its core is a family and it is vital that we learn to understand that so that we have a full understanding of all the good things that we have in Christ.

As a way of expounding the previous section of the importance of receiving the word of God, obeying it, and experiencing the crop that it produces in the lives of his disciples, Luke includes three separate quotes from Jesus. All of these quotes have to do with Jesus' revelation of the word of God in one way or another. The first example is a humorous picture of someone lighting a lamp and then hiding it so that no one could actually see it. It was always God's intention that his people would be a light for the world but Israel had turned that light inward and, in effect, put it under a jar. But Jesus' call for his kingdom people is to be a people that take the word into their lives and allow others to see the effects that it has. Hiding in Christian circles and not shining brightly in the world is a mistake in every aspect of our lives, whether it be that we meet so often together that we never have time to evangelize and build relationships with non-Christians or we begin to create our own Christian community events, and stores, and websites so that we never have to engage with the culture around us. We are to be a light and a light has to be seen.

This may have seemed somewhat at odds with certain elements of Jesus' ministry which he tried to downplay his identity and he repeatedly told people to keep quiet about who he was or what he had done. That was for a time and a specific purpose but would not be for long. Once Jesus had completed his work, culminating in his death on the cross, it would be time for everything about the kingdom of God to be announced to the whole world.

So, says Jesus, because it was vital to be a light that announced everything about the kingdom of God out in the open, it is important to listen to everything that Jesus taught. His real disciples, said Jesus in John 8:31, are those who hold tightly to his word and obey it. Those who constantly dig into the word of God, accept it, and then obey it will find that it consistently produces a crop in their life. As God promised through the prophet Isaiah, his word will never come back empty (Isa. 55:10-11). Those who take in the word and keep it will find that it is constantly productive while those who do not will find that even the little bit they had will be taken by Satan.

As Jesus' mothers and brothers came to see him, Jesus does something extremely shocking to make his point about the importance of hearing and obeying the word of God. The cultural expectation would have been for Jesus to immediately go out and show respect to his mother and brothers but Jesus took the opportunity to teach one of the most central aspects of the kingdom of God. It was not a religion. It was not just a new set of ethical teachings. At its heart, the kingdom of God was a family.

God's covenantal promise to Abraham was that he would make Abraham the father of a family that would consist of many nations and that through this family, the whole world would be blessed. The first step in the fulfillment of that promise was God's firstborn son, Israel (Ex. 4:22). Paul makes the point in Romans 9 that the promise of being that covenant family always followed along the lines of God's choice. Not every descendant of Abraham was part of that promised family (Rom. 9:7). Paul goes on in Romans 9 to argue that just as the promise of the covenant family passed to Abraham's son Isaac but not his son Ishmael, and just as the promise passed to Jacob but not his brother Esau, so now, the covenant family would pass to Jesus and not his kinsmen, Israel.

Because of the promise of the covenant family being the ones through whom the whole world would be blessed, Abraham's physical descendants, Israel, held the concept of family to be one of the most important core components of their value system and their whole culture. So for Jesus to not show the proper respect to his biological family was absolutely scandalous. But Jesus was quite intentional about this. Throughout his ministry he made clear the fact that he was redefining the true concept of family, especially as it related to being the people of God. Jesus' family, the family of God, was not about being a physical descendant of Abraham or part of the nation of Israel but would consist of those who heard "God's word and put it into practice." Jesus would make it clear that the way that this would happen would include dying to self and being born into God's new family (Jn. 3:5) through baptism into his own life (Rom. 6:1-14). Those who entered into Christ would become part of the family of promise, God's family. Paul stated this all concisely in Galatians 3:26-29: "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Jesus wanted his followers to know that to truly live the life of a disciple and find themselves as part of God's family of promise, it would be necessary to redefine their family (this does not mean that they would not care for or love their biological families but was a matter of identity and priority). In Mark 10:28-30, Jesus told his disciples, who had given up everything for him, that they would receive, in return, families and homes a hundred times over, both in the present age and the age to come. His point was that when his followers mentally (and often physically) left their families as their source of identity and means of honoring God, they would receive a new family that would be a hundred times (metaphorically speaking) larger than their biological families. They would be in a new family.

Jesus sent another clear signal of this on the day of his death when he asked John to consider Mary as his mother and care for her. Mary had other sons that could have done this, but Jesus wanted to send a clear message to his followers that the Kingdom of God involved new boundaries and new definitions of what it meant to be in God's family. This act would continue, throughout Mary's life, to send a strong message to Christians, as early church tradition tells us that Mary did go with John, and eventually died in Ephesus many years later.

An important question, though, is whether or not the early church actually understood that they were to be the new family, the sons of God (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). We know from Acts 2:42-47, that the first Christians certainly began to act like a family. An often-missed detail from the first Jewish Christians, though, is that as part of their early practice they sold off land (Acts 4:34, 5:1). It would have been quite disturbing for traditional Jews to see an entire group like the followers of Christ selling off their lands. This would have been deeply concerning to Jews who saw their land as an inheritance from God (Psalm 135:12). Why would the early church have been so eager to sell their land? Certainly they wanted to be able to care for one another and give to those in need, but there is more to it than that. The land was a sign of their family inheritance and their status as the people of God. Selling that land was a strong statement to the rest of the Jewish world that they had rejected that standard of being God's family and His people, and would, instead, embrace the new family of believers that Jesus created around himself.

We should not reduce all of this to mere theological chatter though. Being God's family means something. It means that we need to start realizing that salvation is not merely an individual endeavor. True, we have to come to Christ on our own faith but when we enter into Christ we are baptized into his family, his body (1 Cor. 12:13). It is part of our identity as God's sons and daughters in Christ to be those people who take the words of God and put them into practice. It is up to us to stop thinking as individuals and to realize that we have joined the family of promise. It is our call to begin to think and make decisions in light of that reality. Through Jesus, God fulfilled his ancient promises to Abraham to create a family of all nations and we have been given the grace and mercy of God to be part of that family. It is now up to us to work out in our churches what it truly means to be part of one family.



Display

Do you view your brothers and sisters as Christ as your true, primary family? Do you see your Christian walk as being part of God's family or have you been stuck in the mindset of seeing your Christianity as an individual thing? How does seeing the body of Christ as your true family change the way you think about it and the way you behave in it?



Discover

1. What is the problem with putting our light under a jar?
2. Why would Jesus be so deliberate about redefining family?
3. What is the connection between obeying God's word and putting it into practice?



Luke 8:22-25

Jesus Calms the Storm

22 One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. 23 As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger.

24 The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!"

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. 25 "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples.

In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."



Dig Deeper

One of the most well loved fairy tales of all time is that of Cinderella. I have heard and seen so many different versions of that classic tale that I don't even know if I've read or heard the actual original story itself. I've see that tale told in movies, reworked for television shows, parodied in a rap song called "Cinderella," and even mimicked in a book by Disney characters, which was one of my favorites growing up. In all of the different versions, though, there are a couple of central tenets that all of them have in common. Cinderella has evil step sisters and a wicked step mother who are all very mean to her. The step mother decides that her two unattractive daughters will go to the ball where the Prince is looking for a bride. Cinderella is told that she will not be going to the ball but will help her sisters get ready. Just then a fairy godmother pops up and makes it possible, through some magic, for Cinderella to go to the ball.

When she goes she makes an instant connection with the Prince and dances with him but she has to dash out in the middle of their romantic and magical dance together because the fairy godmother told Cinderella that her beautiful dress and everything else that the fairy had transformed would turn back to their original states at midnight. As she leaves, she drops one of her beautiful glass slippers on the steps. The Prince was so enamored with her that he called every woman in his kingdom back to the palace the next day to try on the glass slipper. Every single girl wanted to marry the Prince and tried to pretend that they were the mysterious women from the night before but when it came to putting on the slipper, they were all proven frauds. The Prince finally sees Cinderella and has her put on the slipper and she, of course, fits right into the slipper and shows that she, not all the pretenders, was the real woman of his dreams.

The previous verses in chapter 8 had much to do with recognizing Jesus' authority and responding properly to his word. But the question that continues to hang over all of Luke's narratives is who exactly is Jesus. That's certainly something that not even his own disciples quite grasped at this point. But the ability to demonstrate authority even over the natural elements of the wind and waves is a vital clue that Luke has given us as to Jesus' identity. As we will discuss in a moment, there were many pretenders who claimed to have the power and authority to control the sea and the natural elements but only one that could truly do it. In controlling the most uncontrollable events of nature itself, Jesus, like Cinderella was showing that he was the real deal. He was the only person who could fit into the slipper.

Luke doesn't tell us what size the boat was that Jesus was on in this incident and so we simply don't know if just the Twelve were with him or if there were more people than than that. What is clear, though, is that Jesus and at least some of his disciples were traveling across Lake Genesaret (also known as the Sea of Galilee). The Lake is unique in that it sits 600-700 feet below sea level and is surrounded by hills and canyons which makes it susceptible to volatile weather patterns that can open up quickly and seemingly out of nowhere. These storms can be common and get quite severe but this must have been a particularly bad one because even the seasoned fishermen that many of Jesus' disciples were, became extremely worried by this storm.

Jesus was quite exhausted and must have relished small opportunities like this to catch up on a little sleep, which believe it or not, has become the source of controversy and opened the door to many false teachers who wish to deny the deity of Christ. In Psalm 121:4-5, the Psalmist declares that "he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand." Many of those who deny that Jesus is God, teachers like popular prosperity gospel mogul Creflo Dollar, use this passage to argue that it says that God cannot sleep and if Jesus is sleeping on the boat then he cannot be God. This is a spurious argument when it comes down to it. The New Testament teaching is clear that Jesus is fully divine in his nature (Phil. 2:6; Col. 2:9) but that he also is fully human (Phil. 2:7). The point that the Psalmist was making was that God never let up in caring for Israel. To tie that poetic point to the human Jesus is ridiculous. Jesus never ceased to be fully divine in his nature but he was fully human so he needed sleep, he needed to eat, and yet he never ceased to be God in his nature. The irony of using this passage to attempt to deny the deity of Jesus Christ is that, in Luke's mind, this one of the events that clearly demonstrated that he was something far beyond what any of the disciples had grasped during Jesus' lifetime. He was, in fact, Israel's God in the flesh.

As he was sleeping, a violent storm came up. This one came on so suddenly and was so severe that it caused even seasoned fishermen to worry that they were going to drown. The disciples were wavering in their faith in Jesus and their full grasp of who he was. They did, however, have enough sense to run to Jesus and wake him up. We should not miss the echoes of the account of Jonah that run through this short little account. Jonah also fell asleep on a boat and was awakened in the midst of a terrible storm by a crew that thought they were going to die. But Jonah had to be thrown into the sea so that YHWH (the personal name of God in the Old Testament Hebrew) himself might quiet the storm. Jesus would do something quite different.

That different action of Jesus is an interesting thread running through this passage that would have been much more apparent to first century readers than it is to us. In the Jewish mind it was YHWH, the God of Israel who had the power to control the sea (Ps. 65:7; 69:2-3, 15-16; 74:13-14; 89:9; 104:4-9; 106:9; 107:23-30). Only of YHWH could it be said that "You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them" (Ps. 89:9). But there were many pretenders to the throne that either claimed themselves to have the power to control the sea or others claimed that power for those they wished to worship. The Roman mythological god, Neptune, was said to be the ruler of the sea, and at least one Roman general, Sextus Pompey, claimed in the first century BC, to be the son of Neptune with the power to control everything in the sea. It became increasingly popular throughout the first century, as Roman emperors were more and more deified, to claim that one of the powers they had was to overcome the sea. The book of 2 Maccabees claims that Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV "had thought in his superhuman boastfulness he could command the waves of the sea" (2 Macc. 9:8). They all claimed the power that only YHWH held, but now Jesus had actually shown that he had that power. Here was yet another incident where Jesus had done what only YHWH could do. He had stilled the waves and ruled over the surging sea. The others had tried to fit the slipper and failed but Jesus has slipped it on effortlessly.

The immediate question on the minds of the disciples, then, was "who is he?" Who is it that could do what only YHWH could do? Luke is likely not contending that the disciples were slowly beginning to have suspicions that Jesus was Israel's God in the flesh. It would take them much more revelation, thought, and reflection come to that conclusion but surely Luke expects their question to echo in the ears of his readers, and he no doubt expected us to begin to realize the full implications of that question.

Luke has been stressing the need to recognize Jesus' authority and to fully grasp the need to hear and obey Jesus' message. Now he has made clear that Jesus had the very authority of YHWH himself to still the storm. The underlying thought seems to be that if nature itself, including, the winds and waves, obey Jesus' authority, who are we to not obey him? How silly would it be to deny the authority of the one who can rebuke nature?

For us, this scene can go beyond just a great reminder of the power that Jesus had during his earthly ministry. We can often identify with the disciples. We can often feel that we are going through a storm in life and that God is asleep and completely unaware of our problems. Jesus asked his disciples where their faith was and the same question should ring in our ears. Is the God who spoke the universe into existence not aware of or not capable of dealing with our trials? Being Jesus' disciple and confessing Jesus as the Lord of our lives means that he is not just in control of nature but is also in control of our lives. He knows what is going on. He is there just waiting for us to turn to him. He is waiting for us to develop a faith that goes beyond the circumstances that are out of our control. He is waiting for us to see that all of the other pretenders, whether they claim have power over the sea or the power to bring us peace and satisfaction in our lives, are just that, pretenders.



Display

What are the winds and waves that are kicking up in your life right now? Are you tempted to feel that God is somewhere sleeping or uninterested in your problems. Where is your faith? Do you believe that Jesus really does have authority to let you go through the trials that you need to go through but also has the power to stand up and calm those waves when you turn to him in faith? When we turn to him in faith he will usually amaze us just as much as the disciples were amazed when he calmed the storm.



Discover

1. Why did the disciples lack in their faith when the storm came up?
2. What was so amazing to them about the fact that Jesus calmed the storm at his spoken word?



Luke 8:26-39

Jesus Restores a Demon-Possessed Man

26 They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, [b] which is across the lake from Galilee. 27 When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" 29 For Jesus had commanded the evil [c] spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

30 Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"Legion," he replied, because many demons had gone into him. 31 And they begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.

32 A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission. 33 When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

34 When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, 35 and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. 36 Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured. 37 Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left.

38 The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39 "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.



Display

There seemed to be no hint from this young man of feeling slighted or treated unfairly by Jesus because he told him to go back home. We can certainly feel that way at times, though, when God calls us somewhere or to do something and we'd rather do something else. Is there anything that God has called you to do that you feel is unfair or that you'd rather not do? What can you learn from this demon-possessed man for your situation?



Discover

1. What is the significance of pigs in this incident?
2. What is the irony of the demons asking for mercy?
3. In what way might God be calling you to "return home" and tell everyone what God has done for you?



Dig Deeper

I don't think you'll ever meet a human being in your entire life that is more concerned with "fairness" than a six year-old. They are consumed with justice. If someone else got three cookies, you had better not give them two. If someone else got to play a video game for twenty minutes then they feel it is their God-given right to have an equal amount of time. If an older sibling gets to go to bed at a certain time, it is a constant struggle to get them to accept that they should have an earlier bed time. It seems nearly everything in their little lives comes down to a matter of justice and fair treatment. They just cannot seem to easily grasp the fact that "fairness" does not mean that everyone does everything in exactly the same way at exactly the same time. There are often times purposes for the difference in treatment that they may not see or understand but are perfectly legitimate and still quite fair. But it's hard for them to see that.

This is one of those biblical accounts that can be confusing and distracting as Jesus confronts another case of demon possession. Yet, we have to be careful to not get caught up in the many questions we might have and in the fascination that so many people have with the demonic and focus on the important things that Luke wants us to see here. There are probably two important things that Luke wants his readers to see. The first has to do with the destructive power of evil. The second thing has to do, in some sense, with varying missions that Jesus calls people to. Jesus has a different mission for each person when it comes to following him, but those differing calls are fair for everyone. Some will be called to follow Jesus in one way, some will be called to follow him in other ways. The point is that whatever the call, we need to be ready to follow Jesus in whatever he calls us to do even if it is in a different way than someone else is called to follow him.

Luke tells us that Jesus and the disciples sailed to the region of the Gerasenes which has caused a bit of confusion. There was a town in Jesus' day called Gerasa but that town was about 30 miles from Lake Gennesaret (Sea of Galilee) which is featured in this story. That means it would have been quite a marathon for the pigs that were sent into the lake. It seems that because of this difficulty, some scribes must have thought it a copying mistake and fixed it by changing the text to read either Gadara (which is only a few miles away) or Gergesa (which is right on the banks of Lake Gennesaret). But none of that was necessary when we read the text carefully because Luke did not say that Jesus was in the town of Gerasa but was in the wilderness in the region of Gerasa. The "region" of Gerasa, in Luke's day, could easily have stretched as far away as the lake 30 miles away.

The important detail, though, is that Jesus has entered a region that had some Jews living there but was primarily a Gentile area. The fact that this was a Gentile region is further evidenced by the herd of swine. Jews saw pigs as an unclean animal according to the law of Moses and neither ate, handled, or kept the porky perpetrators in their midst.

Jesus had just shown his authority and power as he calmly faced a violent storm out on Lake Gennesaret and now he was about to face a demonic storm that was just as potentially dangerous. Almost immediately Jesus was met by a demon-possessed man that was living like an animal among the tombs of the death. In the Jewish mind (although it is unlikely that he was Jewish) this would have made him unclean on almost every level possible as even stepping on a tomb made one unclean (between demons, tombs, and pigs, you would have a difficult time inventing a more unclean scene for a Jew than this one). Again Luke does not feel it necessary to give any of the juicy details concerning demon possession that we might want but that is not his concern here. The demons seem to recognize the identity and authority of Jesus immediately just as the other demons that Jesus has encountered in Luke's Gospel. The demonic force had tortured this young man, causing him to be violent to himself and to completely destroy any semblance of human dignity and behavior but still has the temerity to ask Jesus for the mercy of not being tortured itself.

As the demonic force had recognized Jesus and declared his identity, Jesus orders the identity of the demonic to be revealed. The response is not so much a name as a description. At the question of his name, the demonic force replies through the young man that it is "Legion" because they were many. A Roman legion could consist of as many as 5,600 soldiers but there is no telling how many demons were in this young man. They knew the authority of Jesus though, and again ask for the mercy of not being sent into the Abyss. The Abyss is apparently the place of destruction for demons (This contrasts the fate of Satan and his angels who, according to Matthew 25:41, will find their fate to be the eternal fire of Gehenna. Many people today think that the fallen angels and demons are one in the same but the early church was quite adamant that they were not the same). We should not lose sight in all of this, though, that Jesus has faced the storm of not just one demon, but an army of demons and has calmed them with the same authority with which he quelled the storm.

Many are confused about why the demons would ask to be sent into a herd of pigs and why Jesus would possibly grant such a request. There are further questions as to why the herd would immediately rush down the bank and into the water, and even more questions about what happened to the demons when the pigs drown. But as Luke does not answer these questions, we won't attempt to speculate, as fun as that might be to do. In all likelihood, Jesus was making a point. The demons had asked to not be sent into the Abyss and Jesus granted that request but only so that he could demonstrate several things. Pigs were the classic symbol of unclean animals and unclean animals were an Old Testament symbol of sin. So Jesus sent the ultimate in evil forces into the ultimate symbol of sin. He then showed his authority over both as the herd of pigs immediately ran into the Sea of Galilee (Lake Gennesaret) and died. The sea was common Old Testament imagery. Going back to the dark abyss of pre-creation and the Egyptians drowning in the Red Sea, the sea became a symbol for evil and destruction. It was the place where evil came from or would be sent to be destroyed. (Isa. 17:12; Isa. 23:4, 11; Isa. 27:1; 42:10; 57:20; Jer. 6:23; 50:42; 51:42; Ezek. 26:3; 27:32-34; Dan. 7, etc.; See also Rev. where the Beast comes from the sea and things like the great millstone are cast into the sea to be destroyed.) Jesus has once again shown his authority; this time he has demonstrated his authority over evil and sin and the ability to completely destroy it. He may also have foreshadowed the ultimate destruction in the Abyss that the demons would face one day.

At its core, this is a scene of resurrection and new life for this young man. He had been completely dehumanized by the demonic and was truly among the dead, cut off from society in every way and separated from God. He is, in many respects, a picture of our own selves dead in sin and separated from God. But after encountering Jesus, we see him as the perfect picture of restoration. He was wild, naked, dangerous, and full of evil but after Jesus freed him he is clothed, docile, respectful and sitting at the feet of Jesus in the standard position of a learner and a disciple. He has been brought from sin and death among the tombs and been restored to life once again. This is what Jesus wants to do for everyone who will recognize his true identity (as ironically only the demons did in this incident). It doesn't matter how sinful or evil someone might be, Jesus has the authority and power to release them. The other option is to remain in the power of evil and sin and to go the way of the pigs, a short run to destruction and death.

But now that this man has been freed, he wants to do what so many others had been called to do; he wanted to follow Jesus as his disciple and go with him. Many would be called to such a vocation but not this man. This was not his calling. But it's not a matter of Jesus being unfair or punishing him. It was just not his role to be one of Jesus' immediate followers. He would be given a different sort of way to follow Jesus. He would stay and go back home to tell people how much God had done for him through the work of Jesus (no doubt Luke intended for his readers to see that whatever Jesus was doing, God himself was doing).

This was no easy task. The immediate response of the people was to be so fearful of the display of Jesus' power and so closed to such a power that they didn't want Jesus to stay among them. To add to that, it would have been a major challenge for this man to be accepted back into his society as a normal person that could be trusted. But that is likely the very reasons that he has been sent back by Jesus. If he left to follow Jesus, he would become little more than a legend, but in staying, the folks of his community would be awed and challenged each time they saw him and heard him speak of the incredible act of emancipation that God had brought into his life. His experience is not only a foreshadowing of the mission to proclaim the gospel to the Gentile people around the world but is also a stark reminder for us to not follow Jesus by closing ourselves off in church events all day, everyday. We must go back "home" and tell everyone about the freeing power of Jesus Christ in our life. We must be witnesses and tell people what Jesus has done for us.



Luke 8:40-56

Jesus Raises a Dead Girl and Heals a Sick Woman

40 Now when Jesus returned, a crowd welcomed him, for they were all expecting him. 41 Then a man named Jairus, a synagogue leader, came and fell at Jesus' feet, pleading with him to come to his house 42 because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying.

As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. 43 And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, [d] but no one could heal her. 44 She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

45 "Who touched me?" Jesus asked.

When they all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you."

46 But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me."

47 Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. 48 Then he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace."

49 While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," he said. "Don't bother the teacher anymore."

50 Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed."

51 When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child's father and mother. 52 Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. "Stop wailing," Jesus said. "She is not dead but asleep."

53 They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. 54 But he took her by the hand and said, "My child, get up!" 55 Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. 56 Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.



Display

Can you identify with Jairus and the fear that he must have been feeling? When you are faced with fear what is your response? Do you return to Jesus and his word to increase your faith? What biblical examples (or even modern-day examples of faith) do you turn to for inspiration and encouragement when your faith is drowning in fear?



Discover

1. Why was this woman so ready to remain unnoticed?
2. Why did Jesus call her out into public?
3. Why did Jesus stop and heal the woman on the way to Jairus' house rather than dealing with her after he had healed the little girl?



Dig Deeper

I had seen high diving before on television many times but I had never before seen a real 10 meter platform before in person until the day I walked into the Schroeder YMCA. Even standing from the pool deck and looking up at the platform, it didn't seem that bad. It seemed very high, don't get me wrong, but it certainly seemed like it wouldn't be that big of a deal to jump off of it. So, I climbed up rung after rung and passed by several lower platforms of this diving structure and finally arrived at the top level, the ten meter platform. I was the director of the teen camp for the summer at the YMCA and we were having a day at the indoor pool. Normally they didn't allow people to dive off the platform but they had given only the teen camp special permission to jump off. As I made it to the end of the platform and looked down, I realized that it seemed a whole lot higher from up there than it had seemed from down on the deck. As I peered down, I began to reconsider the thought of actually jumping down. I could think of a whole litany of excuses but when it came down to it, it was fear that stopped me. Just then I looked behind me and climbing up onto the platform was a small seventh grade boy that was a great kid, but was considered a bit of a "nerd" by the other kids. He asked if he could jump and I said "sure, go ahead," but I was sure that he would get scared and back down once he saw how high it was. Much to my dismay, he didn't hesitate for a moment. He took a deep breath and ran to the edge and leaped off. I watched him hit the water, disappear for a few moments and then bob up to the surface and swim off. I knew right then, that this little guy had taught me a lesson in courage. I needed to simply take a deep breath, run to the edge, and jump off. He had shown me what I needed in that moment.

It's amazing how often we are stopped from doing things because of fear. Fear, it seems, can often be the biggest obstacle to our faith in God. Fear of the unknown, fear of what might happen, fear of what others might think, fear of being wrong. Fear can come in many forms but it almost always stands as an obstacle to fully loving God by truly trusting in him. Yet, just as amazing as all that can be, it is equally amazing at how many times we can be inspired to overcome fear from the unlikely of sources. We are inspired to jump because a young teen did it. We are inspired to trust God with our finances because we see someone with far less than us doing it. We are inspired to share our faith in public because we hear of someone who is painfully shy has trusted in God and boldly proclaimed the word of God and brought someone into Christ. Or, maybe the inspiration to overcome fear could come from a woman who was ceremonially unclean and who had every reason to say on the outskirts of her society in fear, yet who had so much faith that she overcame her crushing fear. Maybe that one has never happened to you, but it happened for Jairus.

Jairus was, by almost every measurable standard, an important man in the daily life of his community. He was the man who oversaw all aspects of worship at the synagogue which was, in many respects, the center of any given local Jewish community at the time of Jesus. He was the one that would see to it that the laws of Moses and the proper worship of God were upheld. He would have been greatly respected by all of those in the community. He certainly would not have been the type of man that people would have expected to humble himself before Jesus. In fact, doing so to such a controversial figure could significantly lower his esteem in the community.

Yet, none of that seemed to matter much when his twelve year-old daughter lay in her bed, on the verge of dying. When you are afraid for your child almost all decorum seems to go out of the window. Things that you wouldn't have considered doing before now seem to be rather reasonable. The only thing you can think of is getting them well again and most parents are willing to grasp at any straws in order for that to happen. For Jairus to go to Jesus to heal his daughter may have seemed like grasping at one of those straws, but the only thing that mattered now was saving his daughter. He was willing to throw himself at Jesus' feet and humble himself if Jesus would only have mercy on his daughter.

Jesus immediately agreed, although Luke doesn't tell us exactly what Jesus said, and they were on their way. Jairus had certainly shown a measure of faith in Jesus but little did he know that he still had one more lesson to learn before this was all said and done.

Put yourself in Jairus' shoes and imagine his hopeful expectation as they made their way to his daughter. Would they get there in time? Would Jesus really be able to heal her? Was risking his reputation as synagogue leader by going to Jesus going to be worth it? He must have been filled with fearful hope. Continue to imagine, though, as they are stopped on their way by this woman who had been suffering from a bleeding problem for twelve years, the same amount of time his daughter had been alive. What would you feel at this moment? Would you be angry with her? Would you be frustrated with Jesus? Would the fear start to overtake the hope? Did this have to happen now? Couldn't it wait? Why would Jesus stop at this moment when time was so much of the essence?

It must have taken great courage for this woman to even make her way into this crowd. She had been suffering from some unnamed problem for twelve years. She was not physically contagious but she was certainly ceremonially contagious (Lev. 15:25-30). Merely to touch her or have her touch you would leave you unclean. Yet she had such great faith that it was worth risking social ridicule and punishment just to touch the edge of Jesus' garment. Perhaps it was a result of a common messianic belief among some Jews of Jesus' day that the Messiah would have healing powers in the corners of his garment but that is just a bit of speculation. (This belief came from Malachi 4 which spoke of the Messiah rising with healing in his wings. The word "kanaf" or wings could also mean the "edge" of a garment and so many Jews believed that when the Messiah came one could be healed by simply touching his cloak.)

As she touched Jesus, she was healed physically through the power of the Spirit in Jesus and he knew immediately that someone had touched him in faith. It seemed ridiculous to inquire about who touched him with a pressing thought all around him but Jesus had a very intentional purpose. She had faith but wanted to remain unnoticed and in the background. This woman was unclean and isolated in society but Jesus knew that her quiet faith needed to be seen by others. Jairus needed to see it above all. This woman was surely afraid at being rebuked for touching Jesus and making him unclean but her desperate faith overcame over her fear. With Jesus asking who touched him, she had one more mountain of fear to climb. Her flickering faith needed to be fanned into a full blaze. Her faith in Jesus overcame her fear one more time and she stepped forward with every eye on her. As she did so, Jesus declared her fully healed for all to hear. She had been made whole by not only being healed physically but also by the fact that she could now be accepted back into her community as clean and healed. Now Jesus had completely restored her.

Surely, though, as this was happening, Jairus' head was spinning and he must have been torn. This was all wonderful and touching but time was running out on his daughter. Then came the crushing news that it was too late, his daughter had died. It was even suggested that he could now leave Jesus alone and not bother him anymore. We can only imagine what he felt, but surely any seedling of faith that he might have had was flooded with a tsunami of fear that washed over him at that moment. He feared the worst and now it had apparently happened.

But at his worst moment, Jesus drew him immediately to what he had just seen. He was important in this community and the woman who had just delayed them getting to his daughter was nobody. She was unclean and marginalized, yet she had demonstrated an incredible amount of faith. She would have had every reason to give in to her fear and not reach out to Jesus, let alone to come forward after she was called out in public by Jesus, but she did it. She had exercised her faith over her fear and that is precisely what Jairus would need to do right now. This insignificant woman had shown him how. He needed more faith than fear. He needed to realize, as the old saying goes, "courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to overcome it." He would overcome it with faith, the kind of faith he had just seen in that brave woman. This stop wasn't an inconvenient delay but a necessary lesson. Now it was his turn to take the leap.

As Jesus arrived, the one thing that everyone there knew was that people do not come back from the dead. These people had no fear, but they had no faith either, so they wouldn't be going in to see what was going to happen. Only those who had faith and needed it increased would accompany Jesus. Just as Jesus had calmed the storm at his word and it had obeyed, and just as the demons had obeyed Jesus at his word, so did death obey him at his word. There was no incantations or flashy ceremonies. It was simply a matter of his authoritative word being obeyed. As in many other previous instances, though, Jesus ordered them to keep quiet about what had happened, although surely word about a girl that was dead and was now alive was bound to leak out. Jesus, it seems, wanted the focus to be not on his miracles but on his teaching and the proclamation of the kingdom of God, a message which Jesus was about to make fully public (Lk. 9:2).



Luke 9:1-17

Jesus Sends Out the Twelve

1 When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, 2 and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. 3 He told them: "Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. 4 Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. 5 If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them." 6 So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

7 Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, 8 others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. 9 But Herod said, "I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?" And he tried to see him.

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

10 When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida, 11 but the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing.

12 Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here."

13 He replied, "You give them something to eat." They answered, "We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd." 14 (About five thousand men were there.)

But he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." 15 The disciples did so, and everyone sat down. 16 Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to set before the people. 17 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.



Dig Deeper

When I was a kid I had a dream of what I wanted to be when I grew up just as most kids do. But instead of wanting to become a fireman or a professional athlete, I always wanted to be an Egyptologist. Believe it or not, that dream went back to about the 3rd grade and stayed with me until college. When I got to college my father wisely counseled me on the wisdom of getting a degree in history education and becoming a teacher which would enable me to go and be an Egyptologist later if I so chose to. So I went to college to get a degree in education and become a teacher. We had many classes that dealt with the theory of education, the specifics of education, and classes that taught us how to teach. We had classes on our subject area and even classes that taught us how to use the technology of the time. Yet there was one thing that seemed to be missing during my first year. I had never actually shared in the work of teaching. So regardless of how many classes I listened to on the topic, I still did not really know how to do it. In my second year, however, I had the opportunity to take part in a practicum. This was a very early experience in the education process where education majors actually spent a few weeks with a teacher and then get to take over a class and teach it themselves for a week (this is still a couple of years before the student teaching semester that education majors go through). For the first time, I began to really understand what it would take to teach a class. I still needed more training and I wasn't ready to completely go it on my own, but the experience of sharing in the work and teaching on my own prepared me to become a teacher in a way that just listening to lectures or reading books could never have done.

The Twelve have done little more since their calling to follow Jesus than walking with him and learning his way of life. They have listened, they have observed and absorbed, but that only takes one so far. It was certainly necessary for them to walk in the steps of Jesus and learn what the kingdom of God was and what it looked like to announce it to people that were locked in slavery to the many other competing kingdoms of the world. But the time had come for them to begin to share in the work. They had learned the importance of obeying Jesus and putting his word to work in their lives and they had witnessed his unbridled authority as it smashed in on the predictable reality of the physical world, but now they needed to take the next step in their apprenticeship. They needed to share in the work and get their first taste of what it would be like to carry on Jesus' ministry on their own, the very thing that they would be called to do one day.

It is, I suppose, one thing to have a certain amount of authority or ability in and of yourself, but it is a whole different level of authority that one has when they can simply transfer their authority to someone else, whether in part or in whole. It demonstrates a complete authority over that particular area. Jesus has not only shown the authority and Spirit-driven power over the demonic world and diseases and illnesses but he also now will show that he can pass some of that authority on to his closest followers. They have seen Jesus declare and demonstrate the kingdom of God, as his miraculous actions confirmed and illustrated the power of his words, but now they were being called to share in the work. As they did so, they would learn some valuable lessons from the present mission that would carry over into invaluable experience in their mission to come.

The first thing Jesus expected of them was to change their mindset from the normal practice of traveling teachers of their day. They would not take supplies and they would not take anything with which they could collect money and support from others as they traveled and proclaimed the truth of the kingdom of God. They would trust in God and rely on nothing more than the unexpected hospitality of those who shared in their repentance and longing for the values of the age to come. Once they found like-minded people who would bring them in and treat them like members of the family, something that Jesus was continuing to show that the kingdom of God was, they should stay with those people. They should not be like the traveling teachers of their day and move from house to house, constantly looking for more and looking to move up into better accommodations. But if people rejected this message, they should not stay and waste time trying to convince them. They should simply shake the dust from their feet, a testimony against their rejection.

They were certainly sharing in Jesus' mission, but we should note the fact that this seems to have been a specific mission that Jesus sent them out on. Nowhere in the book of Acts or anywhere in the life of the early church do we see this type of ministry approach duplicated or encouraged. They were sharing in the specific and urgent call for Israel to respond to the coming of the promised Messiah before being judged as a nation (an event that Jesus will speak of in detail in Luke 21 and which would take place with a crushing finality in AD 70). The actions were part of Jesus' urgent call to Israel to repent and put their faith in him as the true Son of God but the principles of sharing in and declaring the authority of Jesus, trusting in God's provision, and proclaiming the kingdom of God were things that they would need and would carry with them for the remainder of their lives.

One of the things that trainees and apprentices need to learn, however, is that not everything is always victories and positive things. Just as Jesus faced storms of all kinds, Luke reminds us that there was a storm brewing around Jesus and his followers as well. As they were out experiencing the first hand the power and authority of the kingdom of God and the ability to proclaim its coming, the dark cloud of Herod the tetrarch was growing blacker by the minute. Jesus' ministry had gone firmly public now that the disciple were spreading out and declaring the message and it had made it all the way to Herod. The question that was brewing in Herod's mind is the very question that Luke has been urging his readers to consider over and over again. Who is Jesus. The possibilities that were raised, John come back from the dead, Elijah, or one of the other prophets, all point to the fact that Jesus was no ordinary person. The very fact that he was so extraordinary help explain the level of threat that Herod felt in Jesus' ministry. No one fears the ordinary but we do fear that which is obviously beyond our grasp or ability to explain.

After coming back to Jesus and reporting all that had happened to them, Jesus knew that it was time for them to hear further about the kingdom of God but also to have another opportunity to share in his work. They had another lesson to learn. Just as Jesus had commissioned them to spread the news about the kingdom, they also needed to continue to learn the dual lesson of taking part in Jesus' ministry and authority while at the same time relying on the power of the Spirit as the true source of whatever they did.

As with so many other incidents in the life of Jesus as recorded by Luke, the miraculous feeding one is full of echoes that both look back to the Old Testament and look forward to the life of the church as well. This miracle certainly brings to mind the provision of God for his people through manna (Ex. 16:1-36) and quail (Num. 11). God's people, because of their obedience, were in a position where they could not provide for themselves but had to rely on God's provision. Those listening to Jesus were in the same situation. But there are also parallels with 2 Kings 4:42-44 where Elisha miraculously fed one hundred men with a less-than-adequate amount of bread saying "the LORD says: 'They will eat and have some left over'" (2 Ki. 4:43). Those were mighty events where God invited his people to eat with him at his table of provision, but Jesus has now recapitulated and even surpassed those miracles. He has the very authority of God and has provided for his people in the wilderness just as God had so long ago. The Psalmist had asked: "Can God really spread a table in the wilderness... Can he supply meat for his people?" (Ps. 78:19-20). In this miracle, Jesus had answered "yes" just as God did for the Exodus generation. This is yet another picture of Jesus doing what only God can do.

But this wasn't just another demonstration of Jesus' power, authority, and provision for his people. Jesus invited his disciples to take part in this work. They would distribute the loaves of bread and fish to five thousand men which means, if we include women and children, that the crowd could have been as much as 20,000 or more. (Many commentators have tried to offer up logical explanations for this miracle but the fact is we don't need logical explanations when it comes to God's creative power breaking into the present age. The very point of miracles like this is that there is no logical explanation.) This was looking ahead to the time when these men would distribute the provision of God to his people throughout the world. They had learned the lesson that there was more need than they could possibly provide for on their own but if they would simply trust in Jesus, rely on God's provision, and take part in the work, that the need would be met.

Certainly God would provide for his people and one of those means of continued provision is almost surely foreshadowed here in Jesus' actions. As he gave thanks to God, took the bread, broke it, and distributed it, Jesus uses language that is highly reminiscent of his words as he instituted the Lord's Supper (Lk. 22:19; see also 1 Cor. 11:23-24). The Lord's Supper is the weekly reminder to God's people that we are called to take part in his work but that we must remember him and first rely on his provision before we can possibly hope to feed a hungry world.



Display

Do you ever feel, when God calls you to do something, like the disciples must have felt when they were staring at a crowd of 20,000 hungry people and only a few scraps to feed them with. John tells us a detail that Luke omits, which is that the five loaves and 2 fish that they had came from a young boy. It's amazing what Jesus can do with so little when we turn it over to him. Turn over what little you might feel like you have today and see what God does with it.



Discover

1. Why did Jesus forbid his disciples from taking any provisions with them on their kingdom announcing journey?

2. Why do you think that all of the Gospel writers (this is the only miracle included in all four Gospels) included the detail that there were more leftovers than what they began with?



Luke 9:18-27

Peter's Confession of Christ

18Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"

19They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life."

20"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "The Christ[a] of God."

21Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. 22And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

23Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. 25What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? 26If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. 27I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."



Dig Deeper

For years I thought my wife was rude. I loved her, though, and was willing to just bear with that but I really did think that she could behave quite boorishly in certain situations. Little did I know that she thought the same of me. It took several years but it finally hit me one day as I was reading a book on cross cultural communications. It wasn't that either of us were rude or even wrong in our behavior, it was that we were operating from different cultural backgrounds. These cultural backgrounds determined how we interacted with one another and how we perceived the actions of each other. The specific issue was that if my wife wanted a favor of me, should would just ask directly and straightforwardly. I didn't know why that bothered me so much over the years but I just knew that it did. I, on the other hand, would tend to drop a hint and wait for her to pick up on the hint and offer to help me out. We were both acting according to our cultural training. The problem came in that I perceived her actions as being too straightforward and rude and not giving someone an opportunity to willingly do the favor without any obligation being placed on them. At the same time, she thought that I was rude by hinting and not just asking. The problem wasn't necessarily with either course of action but the difficulty came in when either of us could not correctly understand or interpret the cultural context of the other.

That type of potential problem is just as present as we read the Bible. The word of God is living and active and able to be relevant to us even today, but the fact is that we are separated from the authors of the various books of the Bible by a large cultural gap. Most of us read the Bible according to our Western individualist mindset. We see everything as though it primarily pertains to us as individuals first. This can be demonstrated by a simple task. When you read the word "you" in the Bible, to whom does it refer? Most of us would say "you" refers to our own self as an individual reader. Yet, most of the usages of the word "you" in the Bible are in the plural form and actually refer to "you all," as in the corporate church family. The fact is that the ancient culture in which the Bible was written tended to think collectively rather than individually. They thought first in groups of people and community rather than in individual terms.

With cultural differences like those described above, simply being aware of those differences is an important step to identifying them and working through those misunderstandings. When we read passages in the Bible, we do well if we remind ourselves that the authors and first readers generally approached things from this group-focused mindset rather than our me-first thought process. When we do that, we can begin to dig in and discover the full depth of what the author intended.

Jesus is about to take part in a pivotal conversation as far as his ministry is his concerned and we see him, as was his custom, to retreat into prayer before the conversation. Jesus truly knew that the source of his ongoing connection with the will of the Father was to commune with him in prayer and that serves as a constant reminder to us that if Jesus thought constantly going in prayer was necessary before he took action, so should we.

Jesus had an important question for his disciples. He wanted to know who people were saying that he was. Were they perceiving him to be the Messiah or not? The answers varied but they all had one thing in common. No one was thinking of him as Israel's promised Messiah. A great prophet of some kind, surely, but the way he was acting was just too different from their messianic expectations. Israel wanted a great king that would lead Israel out of oppression and defeat her enemies, but they thought that Israel's chief enemy was Rome rather than her true enemies of sin and death.

In his question and their response, though, Jesus has accomplished two things. He has verified that no one in Israel has perceived his true identity and vocation. At the same time, he has very subtly, but importantly, established that his disciples are a separate group from the masses. Jesus has created a category of the others that think he is nothing more than a prophet.

But the real question right now is who they think he is. Have they seen enough to realize that rather than downgrade Jesus, they must adjust their expectations of the Messiah? To this point in Luke, only the demons have identified Jesus as the Messiah (the Christ). No human being has perceived what God has revealed to the disciples. Peter, answering for the group, declares that Jesus is the Messiah. They have affirmed Jesus' action in distinguishing them from the rest of the people in Israel. They know that he is the Messiah that God has sent. This doesn't mean that they now grasp everything that Jesus is doing in inaugurating the kingdom of God or that they even fully grasp all of the implications of his identity but they do understand that he is the Messiah.

Now that the disciples understand that Jesus is the Christ of God, he will be able to begin to teach them the true nature of his vocation and what it means to follow Jesus. The Messiah would not be an exalted and celebrated figure. He would, like the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, suffer and be rejected by the religious leaders of Israel. This was so different from what anyone would have thought would be the fate of the Messiah that they had to come to the conclusion of Jesus being the Messiah on their own. The expectations of the Messiah were so entrenched that for Jesus to simply say that he was the Messiah would have been misleading. This is why Jesus never simply told Jewish people that he was the Messiah. If asked, he always pointed people to his actions. They had to see what he was doing first and then realize that this was what the Messiah would be like. This is why he asked his disciples to keep quiet about his identity as Messiah. If they went and simply declared that Jesus was the Messiah it would lead to mass confusion and many people would follow him for the wrong reasons. People simply had to understand what Jesus was doing in introducing the healing power of the kingdom of God for all people first, then they could come to the conclusion that this is what God's Messiah would look like after all. They had to follow him because they embraced the values of the kingdom that he was calling people to rather than following him because they thought he was going to do what they expected of the Messiah. They had to be willing to follow God's Messiah not Israel's Messiah.

Those who truly understood that he was the Messiah would be ready for his further re-working of the Messiah's vocation. This is why he immediately began to teach them that to follow him meant that they needed to be ready to go the way of death and suffering just as surely as he would. Verse 23 is one of those passages that we will read in the tone of our Western individualistic cultural mindset if we're not careful. We tend to read that verse as though Jesus is saying that we must deny ourselves, meaning that we must deny our own desires and wants and follow Jesus' way. Although that's true, Jesus' call here, in it's cultural context, is far more demanding. The call for denial would have been heard by the people of Jesus' day in a more collective mindset. To deny oneself meant to deny your identity within your community and family. The Jews believed that their family identity is what made them who they were as a people so Jesus is calling them to be ready to lay that down. They must deny their claim to being the people of God based on their standing as Jews. They must concede that they had no claim to being the people of God on their own at all. Thus, rather than just denying their own personal wants and desires, Jesus was calling his disciples to forfeit their very lives. They must give up everything that gave them security, identity, and status as God's people.

They must die to all of that and go the way of the cross, which was an instrument of death alone in the first century. If they wanted to hang onto their identity and their own life, then they would find the irony of losing it. If they embraced the concept of dying to themselves, their identity, and their own will, then they would surely find life in Christ.

The Jewish belief was that when the Messiah returned that Israel would be freed from oppression and would be exalted to rule over the entire world. That would certainly happen but not in the way or in the timing that any Jew expected. But what a shame it would be to gain the whole world and think one was going to rule over it with the Messiah, only to find the deeply bitter irony that they had forfeited their soul by trusting in their own life rather than that of Jesus. We shouldn't think that Jesus was teaching the entirety of the need to die to self and enter into the life of the Messiah, but he was laying the foundation. At the very heart of following Jesus was the need to understand that we have to deny our entire identity and see our need for a completely new way to reconcile with God. We need to embrace the life and way of the Messiah regardless of how embarrassing or counter-culture it might be. To be ashamed of the life of a Messiah who would suffer and be put to death would be to incur his being ashamed of them at the day of final judgment.

Yet, this death that Jesus was speaking of for them was not a literal death. They didn't need to literally die on a cross in order to be part of the kingdom of God, that was his role. They needed to die to themselves but this would not be a physical death like his would be. Some of them (not all of them, for Judas would not see the kingdom of God come fully) would still be alive when the kingdom of God came at Pentecost. In the same way, we do not have to wait until our physical deaths in order to enter into the kingdom. We can do that right now through the very principles that Jesus described, by denying ourselves and trusting in the life of Christ rather than trusting in our own lives.



Display

Have you truly made the decision and stayed with the decision to completely deny the totality of your life in order to live the life of Christ? Read Galatians 2:20. Does that verse truly describe your heart or do you find yourself living for yourself much more often than you would like?



Discover

1. Why did Jesus ask what the crowds thought of him before asking the disciples what they thought of him? Why did he specifically put his disciples into a separate group from everyone else?

2. How does reading this verse outside of our Western individualistic mindset make it even more challenging?



Luke 9:28-36

The Transfiguration

28About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. 29As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. 30Two men, Moses and Elijah, 31appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. 32Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. 33As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) 34While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." 36When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.



Dig Deeper

As a former history teacher, there are so many things that have taken place in the history of the world that I would love to be able to somehow go back and see the event happen. There are conversations that I would love to hear and things that I just want to see so badly. I would love, as the old saying goes, "be a fly on the wall" during those times. There are certain things that just sound so incredible as you study them out that, no matter how many eyewitness accounts you hear or how many books you read, it just doesn't quite do the scene justice. It's one thing, for instance, to study out battles of the Civil War and learn about them, but it's an entirely different thing to have actually been there. There would be sights, sounds, smells, and just over-all experiences that you simply cannot fully duplicate in written accounts. All I can think of when I read about things like that is how wonderful it would be if I could have been there.

The Bible is full of moments like that. What must it have looked like to have been present when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea? What did it sound like when the walls of Jericho crashed down around the city. What would it have been like to see David defeat Goliath and watch the great Philistine warrior fall before the eyes of his horrified fellow-soldiers? Oh to be present the night that Jesus was born and see everything for myself, and then to be able to see just one miracle that Jesus performed during his ministry. Of all the biblical moments that would be beyond words to actually see and experience, I'm not sure if any of them would be more stunning and more incredible than the scene that Luke describes here. This is truly one of the most incredible, puzzling, and stunning moments in Jesus' entire ministry. Yet to just be there for a moment. Now that would be incredible.

Once again Luke informs us that before an important even takes place in Jesus' life that he went to pray. This time he took the inner circle of three from within the Twelve up on the mountain with him. Some have speculated about which mountain this was but since Luke and the other Gospel writers make no attempt to tell us, we can safely conclude that there is no significance in that detail. Luke has already depicted Jesus as one who operated in the manner of Moses and Elijah but who surpassed them as well. This event will only cement that reality.

As we read about this event, there seems to be obvious echoes of Exodus 24 and 33-34, passages in which Moses' goes up into the mountain to meet God and comes down with a shining face after having been in his presence. In both accounts we find a cloud that covers the mountain (Lk. 9:34; Ex. 24:16). God's voice is present in both accounts (Lk. 9:35; Ex. 24:16). Both accounts single out three companions that accompany Jesus and Moses respectively (Lk. 9:28; Ex. 24:1, 9). And a Transformed appearance is important to both events (Lk. 9:29, 31; Ex. 34:30).

As Jesus was praying, Luke tells us that a dramatic change took place in the appearance of his face and clothes. Suddenly Jesus became "as bright as a flash of lightning." We can only imagine what that would have looked like and it certainly recalls and surpasses the description of Moses in Exodus 34:29-34. But what is even more amazing is the revelation that Jesus is not alone. Moses and Elijah appear in glorious splendor with him. Imagine the shock of dozing off while Jesus was praying, to be shaken awake by the sight of the man who had just climbed up the mountain with you, appearing as normal as anyone else, only to see him bright and splendorous as lightning and standing with the equally glorious Moses and Elijah. It was no mistake that these are two great figures of the Old Testament, who typified the two major divisions of God's word, that appeared. Moses was the representative of the Law, while Elijah represented the prophets of the Old Testament.

As they stood there, the three men began to discuss his departure which he would "bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem." The word translated "departure" is the Greek word "exodos," which is literally the word "exodus." It is the same word used in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) to refer to Moses' Exodus. It could also refer simply to one's death but it seems almost certain that it is used here to refer to Jesus' Exodus. He is about to begin a journey (see Lk. 9:51) that will certainly end in his rejection and death but through which the New Exodus will begin. This would be the New Exodus when God would finally bring about the freedom of his people from their slavery, the thing that he had always promised. It would entail the march to Jerusalem and ultimately, his death on the Cross which would be the culminating point of that exodus. If ever I had wanted to be a fly on the wall to hear a conversation or to be present at an historical event, it would be this moment. That is simply a conversation that I would love to have witnessed.

Peter and the others were still shaking the sleep from the skulls when the moment appeared about to end as quickly as it began. Peter, in a mixture of excitement and confusion, asks if he should build three shelters for the three glorious figures. That he even had the presence of mind to speak at all outweighs, in my mind, any of the criticism that Peter gets for his somewhat amusing statement. But his question wasn't as random as it might seem. This event likely took place during the Feast of Tabernacles (Feast of Harvest), an event which recalled God's provision of Israel in the desert during the Exodus and which looked forward to the arrival of the age to come when God would finally return to be with his people (see Ex. 23:16; 34:22; Lev. 23:34; Deut. 16:13). Did the return of Moses and Elijah during this very festival signal that the time of fulfillment had come? He doesn't want this moment to slip away. As much as he thinks this may be the time of fulfillment, he probably was hoping that it was. Yet, he wanted to build three booths as though these three figures were equal in rank. He didn't know what he was saying.

While Peter was still speaking, the glory cloud of the Shekinah presence of YHWH enveloped them. The glory cloud in the Old Testament was a symbol of the divine presence of YHWH himself and now it was here. During Jesus' baptism the divine voice signaled that Jesus was in fact the unique Son of God, but it is quite likely that only Jesus heard the confirmation of his identity as the Messiah, as God's special Son. Luke has made much of the fact that Jesus knew his identity but that was still something that those around him must discover for themselves.

Now that Peter and the others had come to the realization that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, God confirmed it for them in a stunning way. This is God's Son. That he is the chosen one comes from Isaiah 42:1. He would be God's chosen servant to represent God's people, but that also means that he would be the one to be rejected, suffer, despised, and be put to shame and death (Isa. 53). The exhortation to "listen to him" comes from Deuteronomy 18:15. Jesus was the unique prophet that was prophesied about. He was the culmination of all of the prophets; the one who should be listened to above all others. The disciples needed to listen to Jesus carefully as he led them into the new family that God had always promised. They didn't need to build booths, they needed to listen to the word of Jesus. When God's word goes out from his mouth, "it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). If they would listen to God's chosen and unique son, his words would bear fruit in their lives. We shouldn't think that the call to listen to Jesus only stretched to the men present on that mountain. Those words are as true for us today as it was for them on the mountain. We must decide whether or not we will listen to God's Son.

Just as surely as God's glory had appeared on Mt. Sinai and caused the face of Moses to shine, now God's Son had appeared on this mountain in all of his glory and his entire body was transfigured. He didn't just reflect God's glory as Moses had, he was the very embodiment of it. Herod had asked in 9:9 who this man was, and here was the dramatic and definitive answer to Peter and the others. He is the Son of God appearing in his glory. They weren't able to fully understand the glory of God on that day. Years later Peter was still reflecting on it (2 Pet. 1:16-18). Neither, though, would they be able to immediately grasp that the fullness of Jesus' glory would soon enough be displayed in Jerusalem on a very different hill in a very different way.

This passage is so instructive for us today in that we will probably never have an experience quite like this but there will be many times we will have no clue what God is doing in our lives. We will stand their completely bewildered and unsure of what action to take next, completely unaware of the full implications of our situation and what God can do through it. Yet, the same word of God that comes to through the Scriptures beckons us to the same humility and the same call to leave everything behind and follow Jesus. This is God's Son, "Listen to him."



Display

Are you struggling with something confusing in your life right now, or do you know someone else who is? How does God's exhortation to listen to his son challenge or comfort you? How can you use those words to challenge or comfort someone else today?



Discover

1. Why did Moses and Elijah, of all Old Testament figures appear to Jesus?
2. Why did Peter need to confess Jesus as the Son of God before this event took place?
3. Why did Jesus tell them to keep this moment silent until later?



Luke 9:37-50

The Healing of a Boy With an Evil Spirit

37The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. 38A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. 39A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. 40I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

41"O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here."

42Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the evil[b] spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. 43And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.

While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, 44"Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." 45But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

Who Will Be the Greatest

46An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. 47Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. 48Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest."

49"Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us."

50"Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."



Dig Deeper

A few years ago I saw a video that has become increasingly popular in certain segments of the Christian community. In this video a leader in the sect of Emergence Christianity captivantly paints a picture of Jesus approaching a boat in the Sea of Galilee. The boat is filled with his disciples. He recounts the incident where Jesus then urges Peter to come out to him on the water. Peter begins to walk on the water just as Jesus is but then he begins to sink. He had taken his eyes off of Jesus and immediately began to sink. He began to believe the sight of the wind and waves around him more than he believed in Jesus once he took his eyes off of the perfecter of faith. But this teacher doesn't mention that he. Instead he adds his own interpretation to the event, one not found in Scripture. He claims that Peter's problem was that he lacked faith in himself. He goes on to passionately describe how God has faith in us and our ability. He urges his watchers to think about that and to dwell on how much God believes in us. He then attempts to demonstrate this point by appealing to the idea that Jesus had faith in the disciples to change the world after he was gone and he points out triumphantly that they did so. If we just have faith in ourselves and know that God has faith in us, claims this leader, then we could change the world as well.

Admittedly, the video is extremely passionate and it is inspiring on some levels. I have personally witnessed a room full of wonderful Christians sitting and watching this video and being initially moved by the inspiring thoughts of trusting in ourselves, having faith that we can accomplish great things, and believing that God has faith in us. The problem with that is that it's false. The ideas presented by this leader are not just false but actually downright dangerous, I believe. What he presents is thinly veiled humanism, which is the over valuing of human beings. Besides reading into the text of walking on water, the non-existent idea that Peter lost faith in himself, and ignoring the obviously stated problem that he took his eyes off Jesus and begin to worry about the waves, he also fails to mention an infinitely important point about the world-changing activities of the disciples. Jesus did not believe in the disciples at all. In fact he told them clearly to stay put in Jerusalem until they had been clothed in power by the Holy Spirit. Jesus didn't have faith in them but he trusted in the Holy Spirit. God doesn't have faith in us but he trusts in the Holy Spirit. We shouldn't recklessly and dangerously put faith in ourselves but in the Holy Spirit.

In fact, the problem of putting too much faith in themselves, and not yet fully relying on Jesus and operating by the values of the new kingdom he was unleashing into the present age, is exactly the issue at hand in this section here. The inability of the disciples to work according to their own means and operate according to their own understanding is exactly what Luke puts on display here.

Immediately as Jesus returns from the most incredible communion with God that left him momentarily displaying his full glory rather than just reflecting glory as Moses did, we see that things will be even tougher from now on. The enemies will be fiercer, the opposition stronger, and the need for the disciples to rely on God will be even greater.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus had sent out the disciples and given them the authority over demons but, evidently, that authority only extended as far as Jesus specifically defined their mission. They should never begin to think that they had authority that was independent from him. They should never begin to have faith in themselves. When they did, they failed. The demons that they faced in this boy were the perfect object lesson.

In essence, Luke gives us a picture of contrasts. Jesus has been up in the mountain in the very presence of the Father, while the disciples were down at the base of the mountain relying on their own strength and not waiting for a word from God. This contrast brings to mind clear echoes of Mt. Sinai where Moses ascended the mountain to receive God's word and commune with God while the Israelites engaged in base idolatry and self-reliance at the bottom of the mountain. They could not cast out the demon because they needed to learn to rely on God's word and Jesus alone. And if they were going to act like the rebellious wilderness generation then Jesus would rebuke them like the children of that generation (Deut. 32:4-5). How long would Jesus stay with them until the One would come who could truly transform their hearts, the Holy Spirit? That would, of course, happen after his death in Jerusalem. In the meantime, they needed to learn in no uncertain terms and until they clearly understood that "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you" (Isa. 46:4).

The situation for this father was crucial. If his only son was not healed his family line would come to an end. Once again, though, Jesus, in a now familiar pattern, exercised his authority over the demon with nothing more than a spoken word. Jesus, fresh from powerful prayer and communion with the Father, had done what they could not do on their own.

Jesus didn't stand around and bask in the glory of praise that came from the crowds, though. He turned to teach his disciples a very important concept. The very Messiah whom they had just seen demonstrate incredible power and authority would be betrayed and eventually killed. They understand his words to a point or they wouldn't have been afraid to ask. But it had been hidden from them. Not by God, but by their own lack of fully embracing the new kingdom reality and worldview that was the very substance of Jesus' message. They could not envision a world where marching straight into suffering and shame could actually fulfill the will of God for his servants rather than being a sign that they had drifted from that will. They simply could not yet comprehend how a person that they had just recognized as the Messiah could be betrayed and rejected. God's servant should be exalted not despised. They had yet to embrace Jesus' kingdom view of the world and because of that they could not yet fully understand the nature of their own discipleship, as is displayed in verses 46-50.

The later argument amongst the disciples (Luke does not give any indication of how long of a time, if any, passes between verses 45 and 46) is a clear demonstration that the disciples still had to change their worldview and trust in Jesus' vision of the new reality that was coming rather than operating by the old patterns of the world. It would have been quite normal in the world in which they lived to be quite concerned with the status and rank with the group and appropriate behavior based on that status and rank. It would have been quite logical even, to argue about it. But that is only if they were still operating by the old way of thinking, which they were. The very fact, though, that they were having such an argument was a clear indication that they had failed to fully internalize and embody the turning-the-world-upside-down nature of Jesus' message. They were not being called to merely follow another great teacher or be really religious and pious. They were being called to embrace, live, and proclaim an entire new reality and way of living that permeated every aspect of one's life. They were being called to live in the new creation.

Despite their shortcomings, Jesus patiently taught them an incredible object lesson. He took a little child and brought him forward. He put the child in a position of honor and said that he should be welcomed, which meant to extend full status and social relations to someone. To "welcome" someone in that culture meant to treat them with the full measure of hospitality and honor. This would be a strange request because one would normally only welcome someone of equal or greater status, never someone lower, and there was no group lower on the social strata of that day than a child. There was no benefit and no value to welcoming a child or affording them a social status of any kind and it simply would not have been done under normal circumstances. Children might be expected to perform acts of hospitality but never to receive them as the objects of honor. Jesus had just taken the social pyramid of his day and turned it upside down in a shocking fashion. He had undermined the very ground on which the disciples stood when they engaged in an argument over relative greatness and status. Such a concept had no place in God's new reality, his kingdom. It is important, then, to note that this was an object lesson that Jesus was clearly teaching his disciples about the need to do away with cultural preconceptions of status and greatness. He was not, as some have claimed, demonstrating that small children could enter into the kingdom of God at an age before having reached an appropriate level of accountability and cognizance. To arrive at that conclusion would be to completely divorce verse 48 from the surrounding context. In the kingdom, the least is the greatest, which means that all are the greatest. There is no status hierarchy in the kingdom of God.

John's question, then, can actually be seen as a challenge to Jesus' statement that there is no hierarchy in the kingdom of God. How can that be? Surely they are part of the inner circle and have the ability and authority to quiet someone who was trying to work in Jesus' name but who was an outsider. He did not belong to their community and must be put in his place. The irony was that this man had been successful in the very area that the disciples had just failed. He had cast out a demon in Jesus' name. Jesus' response should not be taken out of context and applied to every false teacher, effectively giving anyone a pass on their behavior, regardless of the truth of their teaching. Jesus' point was that the kingdom of God would not be limited to the Twelve or the small band of insiders. There would be many would be sent out to carry on the work of reconciling the world to the kingdom of God. This would be an important lesson years later as an outsider named Paul would seek to be welcomed by the apostles as one of their own.



Display

Take an honest look at your own heart. Do you fully rely on Jesus for everything you do or have subtly began to trust in your own strength and have faith in yourself? What do you need to do today to return to full reliance on Jesus Christ?



Discover

1. What is the point of Jesus comparing the disciples to the Exodus generation?
2. Why were the disciples unable to cast out the demon?
3. How do the two short incidents in vv. 46-50 demonstrate the same point of the disciples inability to cast out the demon?



Luke 9:51-62

Samaritan Opposition

51As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. 52And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; 53but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. 54When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them[c]?" 55But Jesus turned and rebuked them, 56and[d] they went to another village.

The Cost of Following Jesus

57As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 58Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

59He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

60Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

61 Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family."

62Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."



Dig Deeper

I just recently completed watching a fascinating documentary film about LeBron James, an American professional basketball player. The movie was focused on James' rise as a youth basketball player and a high school phenomena who appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated while still a junior in high school. The film shows footage from James and his best friends playing in an 8th grade AAU game for the national championship, a game which James and his teammates lost. From that point on, James and his friends decided that they were going to focus on nothing else than winning a national championship together. Everything they did and every decision that they made was done in the light of that march towards a national championship. They made a surprising decision to go to a high school together that was outside of their neighborhood, for instance, because even though it made some other things tougher on them, they felt that it gave them the best opportunity to win the high school national championship. As the film progresses through their lives it shows how they stayed focused on that goal despite several hiccups, twists, and turns along the way. In fact, I realized that if someone came into the film late and didn't catch the early information that they were so singularly focused on winning a national championship, many of the decisions that they made in their lives and many of the things that they did as a team just wouldn't make a lot of sense. The national championship was their mission and their destination, one that they would finally reach at the end of James' senior year.

In a very real sense, Jesus is setting out on his own mission. It's one that's far more significant than winning a national championship in basketball. Yet the analogy of James' mission is instructive because it demonstrates a bit of the focus that is necessary to stay committed to a mission of this nature. Like the film, we must understand from here on out that Jesus is setting off on a specific mission to work his way to Jerusalem. Everything else that Luke will tell us must be interpreted and understood in the light of his march towards his own death. Jesus is not being swept along by a swirl of events that will snatch him up and carry this poor, helpless figure towards a cruel end. No, Jesus is about to turn his face towards Jerusalem and march straight into the forces of evil and darkness that have amassed themselves against God. He is not being swept along at all, he is making war on death and evil. That is his mission and it will end in Jerusalem.

During his transfiguration Jesus had communed with Elijah and Moses and they had spoken of his coming Exodus. This was his journey to assault death itself and destroy man's cruelest enemy. He would march towards Jerusalem and, as he made clear to his disciples in the previous passage, would meet rejection and ultimately death. But he would not be conquered by that foe as it might have seemed at the moment. Luke can sit back from the perspective of hindsight and realize that Jesus wasn't just marching towards his death. He was marching towards his assault on death, his resurrection, and his ascension to heaven. The time for his mission had come and it would end with him being taken up to heaven, an allusion to Elijah whose ministry ended in a similar manner.

So, he "resolutely set out for Jerusalem." This passage literally reads, "He set his face to go to Jerusalem." What a great figure of speech. To set one's face was a figure of speech that is used several times in the Old Testament (Gen. 31:21; Jer. 21:10; 44:12). It carried the idea of being absolutely determined in your action. It was something that one said when they were undertaking an endeavor from which they would not be deterred. But there was a second connotation to this phrase as used here as well which had to do with the preaching of repentance. It is likely that Luke intended his phrase to be an allusion to Ezekiel 21:3 which says, "Son of man, set your face against Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuary. Prophesy against the land of Israel and say to her: 'This is what the LORD says: I am against you. I will draw my sword from its scabbard and cut off from you both the righteous and the wicked.'" Ezekiel was sent with a message of condemnation and judgment for those that did not heed God's word. Jesus will do the same. His kingdom message will be one of invitation and hope for those that will embrace God's covenant family accessible through the life of the Messiah but it will be a message of judgment for the nation of Israel that would reject the Messiah as a whole. When Jesus finally arrives in Jerusalem, he will weep for a city that has rejected the long-awaited return of Israel's God and this judgment will be upon them.

Malachi 3:1 spoke of God sending messengers on ahead before he returned to his Temple in Jerusalem and that is precisely what Jesus does as he sends messengers ahead of him as he begins his mission. Luke also continues the heavy Elijah allusions in this passage as he describes the outset of the mission. Jesus wanted to go through a Samaritan village but they refused. Samaritans did not like Jews, especially Jews who were on religious missions and so they refuse him entry into their town. If they are going on a mission of proclamation and judgment with one who is greater than Elijah, then surely the rejection of the Samaritans should be met with a response in the vein of Elijah's calling down fire from heaven to destroy his opposition (2 Ki. 1:9-16). But Jesus' mission to Jerusalem is not about condemnation but salvation. The disciples show once again that they have still not fully embraced or understood the new reality that Jesus was proclaiming.

It is probably no mistake that Luke has chosen three questions to discuss the difficulty of following Jesus. This was going to be a hard road. He was marching straight into his death and those who would follow him should not expect any sort of comfortably rewarding journey. The three-fold aspect of the call to follow Jesus likely echoes the three-fold call of Elisha to follow Elijah found in 2 Kings 2:1-6. At each turn in that passage, Elisha affirms that he is committed to stay with Elijah despite Elijah's attempts to deter Elisha from doing just that. This call is different, though, in that, just as Jesus is greater than Elijah, so following him in discipleship is a much more difficult task than was following Elijah. It will take uncommon commitment to follow Jesus in his mission.

The first question involved a man who likely wanted to follow Jesus in a rabbi-student type situation where he would follow Jesus and learn from him. But the nature of discipleship of Jesus is much more than that. Following Jesus would be more like following an itinerant prophet who traveled from town to town with no obvious means of support. Following Jesus is not a sure endeavor. It calls one to faithfulness to God rather than a sure existence in this age. It means to turn your full attention to God's kingdom and trust in him to provide for the necessities of life.

The second conversation is initiated by Jesus' call to a man to follow him. The man's request to first go and bury his father was a reasonable request in Judaism as honor for parents and burying one's parents was absolutely expected. When Elijah called Elisha to follow him Elisha requested and was granted the right to go and say goodbye to his parents. This man's request was not an example of him trying to weasel out of following Jesus. It was, rather, an opportunity for Jesus to teach him the true nature of following him. To follow Jesus in this mission was much more demanding than following Elijah. It meant ultimate commitment and focus. It meant putting the kingdom of God above all else. The important task of family funeral customs paled in comparison to the importance of following Jesus.

The third exchange again demonstrates that Jesus is not necessarily laying down timeless rules of what it means to follow him but he was stressing the primacy and demand of following him over discipleship to the archetypical mentor, Elijah. The demands are a bit exaggeratory but make the point of the difficulty of the mission. When Elijah called Elisha to follow him, Elisha specifically requested to return and set affairs with his family, including burning his plow. Picking up on that imagery, Luke includes Jesus' conversation with a man who wanted to go back and do precisely what Elisha did. But in this context, Jesus views this more along the lines of looking back while plowing. The kingdom of God demands priority over everything else in life. Just as one cannot plow in a straight line while looking back, so one cannot hang onto to the old reality of life and still embrace the new reality of Jesus' kingdom. Above all else, this is an Exodus journey and the demands of an Exodus journey are extreme. Following Jesus would be rigorous and demanding.

We can get into trouble with passages like this if we don't carefully consider the context. Jesus was speaking of the specific task of following him on his Exodus mission. Time was short and the mission was demanding. We get into trouble if we pull his words out of context and try to apply them directly to following Jesus today. Yet, we should not think that following Jesus is any less demanding. Although we are not called to follow Jesus on his specific Exodus journey to Jerusalem we are called to follow him and the demands are no less challenging, although different. We still need to consider that following Jesus means a willingness to spurn comfort. It means putting nothing above him in priority. It means putting our hand to the plow and constantly looking forward to the new reality of the kingdom rather than being like Lot's wife and looking back to the old way. Jesus had set his face to march straight into his own death. Being his disciple today means doing the same. Jesus is still calling us to set our face towards the age to come and take on the journey of dying to self and following him. As his disciples we must always be prepared to follow him wherever he goes. That's what a disciple does.



Display

Take a moment to think of Jesus' image of putting one's hand to the plow and looking back. In what ways are you tempted to look back since you have put your hand to the plow? What would be the effect of that? How do Jesus' exhortations here help you to stay resolved to not look back?



Discover

1. Why does Luke draw such attention to the fact that Jesus was setting out on a specific mission?
2. Why was Jesus opposed to the idea of destroying the Samaritan village?
3. How does the obvious Elijah imagery help us to understand Jesus' calls to discipleship?



Luke 10:1-16

Jesus Sends Out the Seventytwo

1After this the Lord appointed seventy-two[a] others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. 2He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. 3Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. 4Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. 5"When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' 6If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. 7Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.

8"When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. 9Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.' 10But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 11'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.' 12I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

13"Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. 14But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. 15And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths.[b]

16"Who listens to you listens to me; who rejects you rejects me; who rejects me rejects him who sent me."



Dig Deeper

I learned many lessons over the years while playing sports but one of the important lessons that I learned is that things change when time is running short. There are a lot of players who can play calm and collected when its early in the game and there is no pressure but the number of players who can still play in the same controlled manner shrinks significantly when the game is in its last few minutes. When the clock winds down things are simply more urgent. You tighten up a little more, things get more intense, and each and every play matters a whole lot more than it did at the beginning of the game. As a game starts it seems like you have all day to make plays and so a failed play or two don't matter that much but near the end of a game that all changes. A failed play seems huge and can even cost you the entire game because that clock is quite unforgiving. When the clock is up, its up. Actually the whole tenor of a game changes in the last few minutes. Teams play with an intensity and effort that simply could not be sustained for a whole game. In other words, there are actions that are specifically taken when time is running short that you would not necessarily take during normal times.

This all seems like a fairly common-sense idea but it actually does relate to this opening passage in chapter 10 quite nicely. Luke has informed us in 9:51 that Jesus has resolutely set out on a mission of New Exodus to Jerusalem. He has also given clues that this new mission would involve finalizing the verdict on a Jewish nation that was on the verge of rejecting the very Messiah that they had waited for and whom God was now sending. As we follow Jesus on this final Exodus we will notice that he will constantly redefine the people of God around himself and those who reject him will find themselves outside of the family of God. This would be disastrous for the nation that once took their status as the people of God for granted. The definition of what Israel was, was about to be redrawn and this mission was the last-ditch effort to warn the people of Israel that the time was running short. Just as a game changes in the last few minutes because of the urgency of the situation, so would things be different as Jesus sent out his messengers to warn the people of Israel. The situation was urgent and time was quickly running out.

This chapter opens with a bit of a puzzle. There was obvious and intentional symbolism behind Jesus' choice of the Twelve, as that related to the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus' seemingly obvious point was that he was forming the new Israel, the new family of God around himself. Now he sends out seventy-two in a mission that is quite similar to the mission that he sent the Twelve on in the previous chapter. So, are we to see a significant symbolism in that number? To make matters more difficult, about half of the manuscripts that we have read "seventy-two" while the other half read "seventy." So what's the deal with that? Given the pattern of important symbolism in Luke, it is a fair bet to assume that Luke did see important symbolism in the number of disciples that were sent out. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT), Genesis 10 identifies the nations of the world as numbering seventy-two. The Hebrew version, the Masoretic Text, however, has seventy listed which probably led to the confusion in Luke's later manuscripts. What seems to be the most likely scenario, then, is that Jesus was sending out a number that related to the symbolic number of Gentile nations in the world. [Although some prefer to attach the symbolism of this story to Numbers 11:16-25 where Moses chooses seventy elders, plus two "intruders" who were not part of the original group, to lead. In that scenario then, Jesus would be choosing these men as symbolic leaders of his New Exodus. Either option is perfectly acceptable and it is possible that allusions to both scriptural concepts was intended.] The sending of the seventy-two were an important prefiguring of universal mission of the gospel that would eventually take full form in the book of Acts and beyond.

Although this was symbolic of that time, their mission here was specific and temporary. There is no evidence that the early church saw missions like this as a model or paradigm to be copied. No, this was a specific mission. The harvest was plentiful, the fruit was ripe and when the fruit is ripe that means there is usually only a very short time to bring it in before it spoils. Their job was to go from town to town and announce that the time was short. The time for Jesus' work to come to a completion was rapidly approaching and when it did the door for Israel as a nation to join in on God's new kingdom movement was drawing to a close. After Jesus' death, individual Jews could certainly still come to salvation in Christ but the time for the nation of Israel as a whole would be over. In fact, it seems that from here through Luke 18, Luke will intentionally follow the pattern of Deuteronomy to show that one of the major aspects of Jesus' kingdom message had to do with being the new people of God. There are certain parallels in this passage with Deuteronomy 1-3:22 as Moses leads Israel away from the mountain where they encountered God and began the wandering period of the Exodus as they made their way toward the promised land.

Jesus was radically reconstituting what it meant for Israel to be God's people. He was redefining the boundary markers that identified the people of God and he was reconstituting their hope for the coming of God's resurrection age. Much of Israel was waiting for war. They were waiting for a great military leader that would lead them to throw off Roman oppression. That's who they wanted for a Messiah. That's who they saw themselves as the people of God. But Jesus' way was different. It was a way of peace. It was an Exodus, not from a political oppression but from sin. It was the defeat, not of the enemy of Rome, but of the enemy of death. This New Exodus would not end in some great historical moment like the crossing of the Jordan and entrance into the promised land. It would end in Jesus' death and those who wanted to follow him going to their own peaceful deaths in baptism and entrance into his life.

The emissaries of this mission should go out two-by-two so that they would provide a biblical witness (Lev. 19:17; Deut. 19:15). This would not be a mission of pure victory like the previous mission of the Twelve seems to have been (Lk. 9:1-10). This was a mission of pronouncing the peace of God through the Messiah, but this message would be largely rejected. They would be like lambs among the wolves so they shouldn't think of this as a mission where they were going to go out, be well-received, and make a living by moving from place-to-place. They would rely on God to provide as he provided through the few who did embrace their message. If they were embraced in their message that the kingdom of God was perilously near for those who rejected it, then they would be able to unleash a sampling of the kingdom by healing and bringing the wholeness of biblical peace to those who welcomed them. But those who rejected Jesus by rejecting their message would receive the symbolic act of judgment as they dusted off their feet and moved on.

This was not a gentle invitation into a new religious option. This was a last-ditch effort to get people to turn to the Messiah and away from Israel's path to ruin and destruction. They were going the way of destruction, the way of Sodom. Sodom had refused to properly welcome God's messengers and chose instead to cling to their evil lifestyle and was rightly judged by God as fire and brimstone rained down on the city. The ultimate destruction of Israel rejecting the Messiah and choosing the way of violence would end, not in fire from heaven, but in the utter destruction of the Temple and the entire city of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman army in 70 AD (a topic which Jesus will specifically warn of and prophesy about in chapter 21).

Jesus' disciples were carrying a message of invitation and warning. Those who would accept would be welcomed into the family of God but those who rejected it were courting disaster. To reject this message would be to head in the opposite direction of God's kingdom. If towns like Korazin, Capernaum, and Bethsaida continued in their rejection of the kingdom message of the Messiah's people then they would find themselves in worse shape than Sodom. Even the classic examples of cities opposed to God, Tyre and Sidon, would have repented had they seen the miracles that Korazin, Capernaum, and Bethsaida had. If the people of Israel wanted to act like the enemies of God then they would be treated like the enemies of God, or even worse. Jesus was walking straight into a final showdown to make war on the forces of evil. To reject his messengers now, was to reject him, and to ultimately reject God and take up sides with the forces of evil.

We are not part of the same urgent message to Israel to turn from their path of rejection of the Messiah, yet we do have a message that is just as urgent. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:14-21) to call the world back to the family of God by having faith in the Messiah and entering into his life. This message is just as urgent in many ways and to reject it is just as dangerous. We are to call the world to be part of God's great reconciliation project. This is a challenge to those who want to reduce salvation to an individual experience and then think that they have all the time in the world. God wants each of us to pick up the transforming work of his kingdom now and take part in the reconciliation of the world through Christ. This message is urgent and the workers are few. There is no time to waste.



Display

Do you view the message of the gospel as being an urgent one for your friends, family, and neighbors to hear? Do you approach the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ as something that needs to be heard by all urgently? How can you go about being more urgent in your evangelism?



Discover

1. In what specific ways does this mission not apply to us today?
2. In what ways do the principles of this mission apply to us today?



Luke 10:17-24

17 The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."

18 He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. 19 I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. 20 However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

21 At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."

22 "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

23 Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. 24 For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."



Dig Deeper

When I was a kid I participated in many different kid's sports leagues, especially in baseball and basketball. They were always fun but there was a big focus back then on winning. That was really considered to be the point of playing sports even for those of us who were very young. Our understanding of success did not stretch any farther than whether we won the game or not. Now that I am older and have my own children playing in sport's leagues in many different sports including soccer, football, and basketball, I have seen a dramatic shift in the purpose of kid's sports leagues. No longer is the focus on winning. The primary purpose of the kid's sports leagues now is to have fun. Everyone is a winner, they tell them, just for participating. I tend to think that they've gone a little overboard in all of that. Winning certainly isn't the only thing, but they exaggerate it to the point where they don't even keep score anymore, which seems a little pointless to me, I have to admit. A few weeks ago, though, my six year old's basketball team had won their game convincingly. How do I know they won, you might ask if no score is kept? Because, as I explained to my wife, every man in the gym knows the score of the game whether they put it up on the scoreboard or not. As the kids were coming off of the court celebrating their win, I heard the kids being corrected several times by the workers at the league, reminding them that the important thing was that they all had fun not that they won the game.

Sometimes we, as humans, have a tendency to celebrate the wrong things (although I have to admit, I'm not sure that the above example actually does fall into that category—I'll leave you to decide that for yourself). We can easily get focused on the things that don't really matter that much and over-emphasize them. We celebrate the external looks of someone over their internal spiritual beauty. We judge people's success by how much money and possessions they have rather than by how consistently they do the will of God in their life. It just seems to be part of our fallen human state to focus on the wrong things and miss what is truly important. Despite the incredible privilege of following Jesus on a day-in-day-out basis, the disciples were just as prone to that error as any other human being. As they continue their crash-course in true discipleship of Jesus, they will learn that great victories are not the true spiritual measure of success.

The time for Jesus' kingdom announcing mission to Israel was running short. As part of the urgent nature of his mission, Jesus had selected seventy-two disciples (a likely symbolic number for the traditional number of Gentile nations) to take part in proclamation of the coming kingdom. Strangely, Luke never records the success or failure of the mission itself. The disciples themselves seem to want to celebrate the fact that they had exercised incredible authority that came from Jesus over the demonic. The Twelve had been given authority over demons and then seen failure in casting out demons when they failed to rely on God alone. So, it's not difficult to understand why they were so enthralled at having authority over the forces of evil. But if the disciples had gotten a bit off track in the true nature of their mission and what defined success for them on this mission, then why doesn't Luke himself record whether they were well received or not? He simply never tells us whether or not they succeeded.

Perhaps this was no oversight on Luke's part but was, instead, part of the whole point of his reporting of this section. Whether or not the audience listens to or responds positively to God's chosen mouthpiece is never the measure of success. As God warned the prophet Ezekiel, "Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though thorns and briars are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you" (Ezek. 2:4-8). The measure of success for the disciples, as for Ezekiel, was whether they had obeyed God in spreading his message not whether people listened to that message.

The fact that they had made an assault on the demonic forces was not inconsequential. That was part of Jesus' mission. He was not just spreading a new religious message, he was indeed making an assault on Satan himself. He had come to defeat Satan, sin, and death itself and their conquest over the demonic was a very real demonstration of that. It was, in fact, a continuation of the conquest and defeat of Satan and his demonic forces that Jesus had begun in the wilderness, resisting the temptations of Satan. In their continued assault on the forces of evil, Jesus says that he saw "Satan fall like lightning from heaven," an obvious allusion to Isaiah 14:12. It seems unlikely that Jesus was just throwing in an odd bit of information that he was around and had seen Satan cast out of heaven, an incident to which Isaiah 14 seemingly refers. More likely was that Jesus' point was that as the kingdom advanced, Satan was losing power. He was being cast out of strongholds just as he had once been cast out of heaven. But ultimately this was Jesus' fight and it wasn't yet over. It was not the primary focus of their mission and so they should not celebrate it as such.

The real source of joy, the real thing that they should be celebrating was the fact that they were among those who were obedient to God's word. They were speaking the words given to them and showing that their names are written in heaven, a reference to the Book of life where the righteous will be named (Ex. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3; Dan. 7:10; 12:1; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 20:12, 15; 21:27).

The very act of them going about and declaring Jesus' message and sharing in his authority was the point. The defeat of the demonic was not the primary thing to focus on, it was that they were aligned with God's will that was truly important. This is what brought Jesus an incredible burst of joy and was what they should be celebrating. The wise and the learned were not the ones that were embracing the kingdom message, they were rejecting it.

Yet God showed his glory through these disciples, these little children (the word is literally "infants" but was often used as a metaphor for one who was untaught or unskilled). This is the nature of the gospel. "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27). The coming kingdom would result in the great reversal that Mary had spoken of before Jesus' birth (Lk. 1:51-53). God always chooses the weak, unskilled, and unimpressive to declare his message so that there will be no mistake made between the power of the message and that of the messenger (see 2 Cor. 4:7). God honors, uses, and ultimately exalts those who humbly rely on him fully.

It is those who rely on Jesus alone who will have the Father revealed to them. The authority of the Father is placed in the Son and it is the Son alone who reveals the Father. This is reminiscent of Jesus' declaration in John 14:6 that he is "the way, the truth, and the life," and that no one can come to Father except by the Son alone. There is, then, an important chain that Luke has linked together in this passage. In verse 16, Jesus declared clearly that whoever listened to their message listened to him and whoever rejected their preaching likewise rejected him. Now Jesus has confirmed that he is the only way to the Father. Thus, those who rejected the message of the disciples were rejecting any access that they might have to God. Jesus alone is the way and in rejecting the preaching of the disciples, they were rejecting that one way.

Luke, we should note, seems to continue to follow the pattern of Deuteronomy in his quest to show that this journey to Jerusalem is primarily about revealing the true people of God. In Deuteronomy 3:23-4:40, Moses thanks God for his perfect law which had given to his people and which caused the other nations to look and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deut. 4:6). The disciples were blessed, not through any work or effort of their own. They didn't need to celebrate in anything more than that they had been allowed to hear the message of the kingdom, to see its coming, and to become God's people through the Messiah. Many prophets and kings had longed for the coming of God's kingdom and had never seen the day. In recounting the lives of the great heroes of the Bible who had never seen the kingdom of God for themselves, the writer of Hebrews proclaimed "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39-40).

Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem where he would make his final assault against Satan, evil, and death itself but the results of that victory were already beginning to take seed. Jesus would go into death and lay down his own life like a seedling, but the result would be the defeat of death and the flowering of a new creation of people who would come to know the Father himself through the Son and would become the very family of God that he had always promised.



Display

Is God enough for? Is obeying his word and drawing close to him enough for you to celebrate or do you need constant "spiritual victories" in order to feel validated or that you are close to God? Do you celebrate at the fact that your name is written in heaven rather than whether you are "successful" in other ways or not?



Discover

1. Why do you think the disciples were so eager to celebrate their authority over demons?
2. Why did Jesus not want them to focus on that?
3. What was Jesus' point in saying that they were seeing what so many others had wished to see?



Luke 10:25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' [c]; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' [d]"

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii [e] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."
Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."



Dig Deeper

As Christians we all should be rather familiar with the call to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We are equally familiar with the call to love our neighbor as ourselves and we well know that Jesus said that the identifying mark of his true disciples would be the way that we love one another. We know that in our head, but that can be much more challenge to actually live that all out. One of the things that can slowly creep into our hearts is the idea that we really only need to love our fellow Christians. Surely the call to love others as ourselves only applies to those who love God and are pleasant to be around. It cannot apply to a Middle Eastern terrorist or a neighborhood prostitute can it? Surely Jesus didn't mean for us to love the drug dealer on the corner who is slowly bringing our neighborhood into worse and worse living conditions? Don't get me wrong, I'm not talking about hating or mistreating anyone, just the logical realization that Christians are members of the family of God and, thus, worthy of the self-giving love that Jesus called for. All others are deserving, perhaps, of a different kind of concern and care but certainly they are not the ones that Jesus was referring to when he called us to love our neighbors. Did Jesus really mean that we should love criminals, terrorists, drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes and the like in the same way that we love ourselves? Did he really mean that the way we love those kind of people would demonstrate how we truly love him?

But imagine that a man was walking home one night after his car broke down. The only way to get home was through the worst and most dangerous road in his town but he had no choice. Along the way, a gang of teenage thugs, who were well known in the neighborhood for dealing drugs and violent behavior, jumped this man, robbed him, and left him for dead. As he was laying on the side of the road, near dead, a car appeared in the distance. Driving the car was a local pastor from a nearby church. He slowed his car down, saw the man and his condition but decided that the best thing for him to do was to drive on and say a prayer for the man. He had a cell phone with him but didn't call 911, thinking that it was best to not get involved, especially since he wasn't entirely sure if the man was dead or if he was alive would make it before help could arrive. And besides, he was late for the midweek service anyway. A few minutes later, a lawyer who was a deacon from another church came by on a motorcycle. He too looked at the man but decided to leave him. After all, this was a dangerous neighborhood, but even more importantly, he was in a hurry, being that he was late for his men's Bible study group that evening already. He was supposed to give the opening prayer for the group that evening and to stop might mean he miss fulfilling his responsibility. So, he made the choice to drive on and say a little prayer for the man as he continued on to church.

Just then, a local gang member came by. The young man had been in and out of jail his whole young life despite the fact that he had grown up Muslim. In fact, not only was he connected with local crime, he had used much of the money from his drug dealing to launder through various routes so that he could support Muslim terrorists in the Middle East. He also had five children with four different mothers and was not married to any of the mothers. But this man came by and took compassion on the injured man. He went over to him to see if he was okay. He picked him up and carried him to a nearby neighborhood clinic and took him in. Since the injured man's identification was gone, including any insurance documentation, the young man offered cash for his care and said he would come back in a few days and take care of any expense that went beyond what he had already given.

Now, here is the important question. Who really loved the injured man? Who acted in a way that was truly the way that God would want his people to act? Whose actions looked more like the kingdom of God? Who loved the injured man the way God wants his people to love everyone?

Before we fully consider those questions, let's look at today's passage in Luke. The expert in the law that stood up to Jesus seems to have wanted to trap Jesus into making a controversial, if not heretical statement. His question as to what he needed to do to inherit eternal life was a standard Jewish question, but as the scene develops, it becomes clear that his intent was to expose what he thought was Jesus' errors in his implications that God's kingdom would be available to all equally.

First, we have to understand that when inquired about eternal life, he was not speaking of getting to heaven and living there eternally in a spirit-like state. "Eternal life" was literally "the life of the coming age." He wanted to know how Jesus would define the boundary markers of those who would take part in the resurrection as God's people and live in God's age to come. Jesus' answer was also not particularly unique by appealing to the law. Surely this was not what the expert expected from Jesus, but he gave the standard answer which was to love God in the manner described by the Shema (an important Jewish daily prayer that comes from Deuteronomy 6:4) and to love your neighbor in the manner described in Leviticus 19:18.

Apparently Jesus wasn't going to fall into a trap and say something that could be misused against him, but this expert wanted to make sure that his conception, the popular Jewish one, was correct. The belief was that God had called his people to love their neighbor but many defined the term "neighbor" down to mean those in Israel who were righteous. Surely the rest were sinners who should rightly be avoided. If Jesus were to contradict this tightly held belief he would, no doubt the expert thought, discredit himself. But just as Jesus would not directly state that he was the Jewish Messiah and so feed into misconceptions (he instead answered questions about his messianic identity by directing people to look at what he was doing and thus redefined their notions about what the Messiah would be like), he would not directly answer this man and feed into his preconceived notions. He would instead answer through what has become one of the most famous and beloved parables of all time.

One of the problems with stories that are so well known and well-loved are that they can lose much of their original punch and intended meaning because of our familiarity with them. This has certainly happened to this parable. We must be careful not to reduce this to a pithy little story about our need to be a "good Samaritan" and help those in need. This story would have been powerful, even to the point of being distasteful in Jesus' day. He purposefully set the story on one of the most dangerous roads in Israel, a road that he was soon to take himself. The expectation would have been that the hero of the story would have been the socially acceptable and respected priest or Levite. But Jesus blows the story up by having a Samaritan be the hero. It would have been difficult in Jesus' day to manufacture a more hated protagonist than a Samaritan. It would be on par with telling this same story in Israel today and having a Palestinian or Iranian take the role of hero.

To fully appreciate and understand this story, we have to try to enter into it and put it in our own cultural context. This is why I tried to re-tell the story above and do just that. The opening question that the expert had was who exactly his neighbor was. Who did he have to treat with love and respect? Who would be in God's age to come? The hero in our version was someone who runs afoul of many of our cultural boundaries. He was a drug-dealing, Muslim terrorist-supporting, illegitimate child-producing, street thug. It would be hard for an American, from our cultural perspective to invent someone more deserving of being left out of God's kingdom, someone less deserving of being loved as our neighbor. And that is just the point. Everything in us tells us to despise this person. The question is not whether or not the man by the side of the road is our neighbor and whether or not we should help him. That's what we often reduce this story to and that would be to miss the point. The point is that the Samaritan was the neighbor. The drug-dealing terrorist was a neighbor.

What Jesus did in essence was to turn the question upside-down and indeed he upended the entire worldview of the questioner. The priest and the Levite lived in a world where they were regarded as righteous because of who they were regardless of their actions. They were sure that their status as descendants of Abraham automatically made them the people of God (cf. Lk. 3:7-9). Many who were standing in Jesus' presence would probably have even applauded the decision of the men to avoid the injured man. (Sirach 12:1-7, a popular Jewish non-canonical book of wisdom of the time, said "If you do good, know to whom you do it. . . Give to the one who is good, but do not help the sinner.") What set apart the Samaritan was nothing more than his compassionate love, which stood in stark contrast to their inaction.

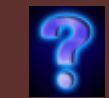
Jesus didn't answer the question of who was the expert in the law's neighbor but flipped the question to ask who acted as a neighbor. The expert in the law would have wanted to know if the injured man was really his neighbor and really required help. Jesus makes that a non-issue. Jesus' presupposition is that everyone is already a neighbor, the question is whether we love like God's people or not. He has successfully undermined the entire worldview of this man by making clear that a new reality has come. The issue is not one of assessing people and determining who is worthy of God's radical love but of being a kingdom person yourself. Rather than worrying about who is your neighbor, Jesus calls us to be a neighbor to all. If even the Samaritan can act like a neighbor to someone he didn't know, then why wouldn't someone who wants to be part of God's people?

This scene ends with a bit of a mystery, though. Has the point gotten through to the expert in the law? Jesus has turned his entire world of what it means to be God's people, how one is to view others, and his justification of prejudice completely on its head. He has made the most reviled of all people a symbol of what God's people should be like. Jesus assaulted every stronghold this man had in a few short sentences and sometimes things like that take time to sink in. He still so reviles the idea of a Samaritan being exemplified that rather than speaking of his nationality, he simply calls him "the one who had mercy on him." Jesus' rebuking challenge is not to try to determine who is a proper neighbor to love but to go and be a neighbor, a loving kingdom person to everyone. He has heard the word of God, but the question remains. Will he do it? Will he go and do likewise? And even more importantly for today; will you?



Display

Can you identify with the expert in the law? Do you sometimes find yourself drawing boundaries on who you will love and accept? What is Jesus' radical call to love others and be a neighbor to all calling you to do today? Where do you need to change your mind? How does this parable challenge your worldview?



Discover

1. What was the point of the expert asking how he might have eternal life?
2. How is the question that Jesus answers different from the question that the expert actually asked about who his neighbor was?



Luke 10:38-42

At the Home of Martha and Mary

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. [f] Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."



Dig Deeper

When I first became a Christian, there were certain aspects of learning to follow Jesus that were difficult but for the most part, as I look back on that time now I realize that, things were pretty easy. I didn't have much to do when it came to my walk with God other than to just take care of my own personal time with God. Other disciples were constantly serving me and helping me to grow and all I had to do was to quiet myself and worship God, whether it was for a personal quiet time, or a worship gathering at church. I could just sit with Jesus and focus on my relationship with him. It never crossed my mind at the time that there would be a time when just doing that could become a challenge. Surely if I did ever think that just quieting myself in devotion, reflection, and worship of God would become difficult, I would have thought that it was because I was struggling in my faith. What I don't think I ever imagined at that time was that as I became more spiritually mature and more devoted to God, it could actually become harder to devote myself to quiet worship of him.

As I became a more mature disciple I realized that I couldn't just sit back and let everyone else serve me. I had to step forward and begin to serve others. I had to go about the work of teaching, training, and discipling other Christians. I had to start engaging in the necessary work of the church and carry my share of the load. As time went on I found myself serving in God's kingdoms in ways that constantly demanded more time, more energy, more effort, and just more of me all around. I eventually found myself where I am today, serving as the minister of one of God's churches and teaching his word.

That all sounds wonderful and it is. I cherish the opportunities that I have had to serve and work in God's kingdom. It seems with each passing year that the responsibilities I have had have grown and that can be a wonderful thing. But with increased responsibility comes increased demand. I now find it more challenging than ever before to sit and just worship God sometimes. Every time I open the Bible I can feel a crush of needing to get another lesson or study prepared. Every time I go to a Sunday worship gathering I can get so focused on all of the things that need to be done that I can actually forget to stop and sit at Jesus' feet and learn from him and be his disciple. I can get so busy doing the things that a disciple does that I can actually overlook the need to be a disciple of Jesus. Serving Jesus in his kingdom is a wonderful task, but it is just a harsh reality that I can get so busy doing that that I neglect to sit down and be with Jesus.

Luke connects this incident involving Mary and martha with the previous scene by pointing out that it took place as Jesus and his disciples continued on their journey. Yet, it seems clear, based on the location of this account in Bethany, that either Jesus took a weird zig-zagging pattern on his journey, coming close to Jerusalem and then working back farther away and then coming close again, or that Luke has ordered his account in a way other than chronological. Luke told his readers in the opening verses that he ordered his account thoroughly but only a modern Western mind would assume that that meant it must have been a chronological ordering. Luke is depicting Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem and is showing how he redefined what it meant to be the people of God. In the previous passage, Jesus made clear that his kingdom people must be people who are not focused on sizing up the worthiness of others to be loved, served, and shown compassion but rather we are to be people who concern ourselves with being loving, serving, and showing compassion to all. The responsibility for love and service is on us not on others to be worthy of that status.

But there is a real danger in becoming people of love, compassion, and service. We can get so focused on doing those "good things" that we can forget why we are doing them. The long history of the Christian road is littered equally on one side with those who just wanted to love and adore Jesus and enjoy their own relationship with him and ignored the call from the previous passage to radically love and serve others. But there are also those on the other side who became so focused on loving and serving others that they lost sight of Jesus and his teaching and purposes to reconcile the whole world to God. The previous story was an illustration of the need to love and serve. This story, however, stands in perfect tension with the previous one. Serve and love, yes, but don't forget the all-important relationship with Jesus.

As they prepared for the meal, Martha was busy doing what was the normal role for women in that culture. She was preparing everything. She was working hard and serving others. Martha got so distracted and busy with all the work that needed to be done that she minimized the need to sit with Jesus and just "be" his disciple.

The fact that Martha's heart needed redirecting is made clear by her question to Jesus. Her service had ceased to be about pleasing God and became about her. She was serving but Mary was not. Mary was not doing what she should be. In fact, it went beyond just that. Mary was not just neglecting her culturally-expected role to help prepare the meal, she had moved into the role that traditionally only men took. She was sitting at Jesus' feet and learning from him as though she was a disciple on the same level with the men. This crossing of the gender lines would have been a small scandal in those times and that was no doubt irritating Martha as well. Only a woman of questionable reputation would do such a thing. Mary didn't know her place and she was leaving all the work to Martha to get done. Her question is asked in such a way in the original Greek that Martha was expecting a positive answer from Jesus (in English it would be something like, "You care about this and want her to help me and not leave me to do the work alone, right?").

Jesus gently rebukes Martha, however, rather than agreeing with her as she expected. He starts, though, by calling her name twice, a sign of closeness and affection in their culture. Jesus, we should note, doesn't really rebuke Martha for her activities of serving. His rebuke is for getting things out of balance and judging Mary by her own standards. She was evidently outraged by the fact that Mary had crossed out of the realm that was proper for a woman and that had left Martha to do the work by herself. Just like he did with the expert of the law in the previous passage, Jesus wants to transform Martha's thinking. She had become so focused on serving and doing that she lost sight of what her true motivation was to be in the kingdom and what was really important.

The fact is there is a danger that when we forget to sit at Jesus' feet that our service can get to a point where it is no longer out of love, it is out of duty and we get quite frustrated with those who are just sitting at the feet of Jesus. The problem is not with them but with us as we have become unplugged from the source of our love, service, and devotion.

Jesus didn't denounce Martha for her heart to serve but he was showing her that service is no good if it consumes us and we reduce discipleship to doing things. Mary had chosen the better way of devotion to Jesus. There was a time and place for preparation but this wasn't that time. In addition to that, the very fact that Martha was upset by Mary's actions demonstrated that something in heart was out of whack. Thus, the fact that she was upset with Mary and the fact that she was too busy to come sit at Jesus' feet and take the position of a learner stood as dual witnesses to the truth that Martha had either forgotten or had yet to find the real reason for her discipleship. Only when we are truly devoted to sitting at the feet of Jesus and having a relationship with him can we really serve with a heart of compassion that pleases God.

But we should note that there is truth to the fact that Jesus was also radically redefining the role of women in his kingdom movement. When Mary took her place at Jesus' feet she was not just taking the position of a learner and student, but was doing so because she wanted to be able to teach the word of God as well. There would have been no thought of learning for the sake of learning. She was taking the position of a disciple, and disciples learned so that they could then pass on what they learned. The role of women would be equal to that of men in the kingdom of God. Women in the family of God were every bit as much disciples as men. Jesus would have nothing of the idea that there was a space for women and a space for men and that, by and large, the space for men was in the realm of learner and disciple while the women should serve their role and function which did not include learning and teaching the word of God. In God's new family there would be no distinction in status between men and women (Ga. 3:26-29). This is not to say that there were not biblical limitations to the scope of the equal roles of men and women because there certainly were (1 Tim. 2:12), but Jesus made it clear that women were as welcome at his feet as men were (the fact that the early Christian church was viewed as a family helps us to understand the different roles of men and women within the church family, including the expectation that men would have the role of leading the family).

Some commentators, like C.F. Evans, who see an intentional parallel between Deuteronomy and Luke 10-18, note that this passage seems to contain allusions to Deuteronomy 8:1-3 where the idea is to realize that "people do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut. 8:3). This is what Martha needed to learn as do we all need a reminder from time to time. When life gets hectic or the demands on us get heavy, it seems that often the first thing to go is our time with God. This story is a stark reminder that there is never so much to do that we don't have time to just sit at the feet of Jesus.



Display

One of the ironic elements of this account is that Martha was so worried about what Mary was doing and was sure that Jesus was going to deal with Mary but he instead rebuked Martha. This is a great reminder for us to focus on our relationship with God and find the balance that God desires for us rather than worrying about what others are doing. Usually when we get all worked up about what others are doing and we want to see them get rebuked, we can let that serve as a sign that we are, in fact, the one in need of some correction. Look at your own life. Do you need to stop worrying about what others are doing and just sit at the feet of Jesus for awhile?



Discover

1. Why does it appear that Martha was annoyed with Mary?
2. Why did Jesus rebuke Martha rather than Mary?



Luke 11:1-13

Jesus' Teaching on Prayer

1 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

2 He said to them, "When you pray, say:

" Father, [a]
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come. [b]

3 Give us each day our daily bread.

4 Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. [c]

And lead us not into temptation. [d] "

5 Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; 6 a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' 8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity [e] he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

9 "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened.

11 "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for [f] a fish, will give him a snake instead? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"



Display

Do you really rely on prayer the way that Jesus urged? Do you reduce your need for prayer in your life and approach it almost as a nice extra rather than an absolutely vital aspect of your life as following Jesus?



Discover

1. What are the connections between this prayer and the generation of the Exodus?
2. Summarize the point of the first example that Jesus gave.
3. Summarize the point of the second example that Jesus gave.



Dig Deeper

I simply don't remember where I was or how old I was the first time I learned the pledge of allegiance. It almost seems like one of those things that I've just always known, but I'm sure I had to learn it somewhere at some point. I do remember, going all the way back to kindergarten, however, standing with my hand placed solidly over my heart each morning and facing the American flag while reciting those now familiar words, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." If you're American you know this pledge. You even know the familiar cadence which is universally used when reciting the pledge. I can say that pledge in my sleep without even thinking about it, and I'm sure that my American friends can as well. So, why do we say that pledge? I think a big reason is because it captures the essence of what we mean when we say we're American. America was one of the few countries in the history of the world, if not the only one, that was built solely on an idea of personal liberty. You don't have to necessarily agree with that statement, though, to realize that the point of the pledge is to capture, in an easily repeatable and memorable format, the basic ideals of the American movement. That's certainly not to say that the pledge contains everything that we think being an American means, but it certainly serves as a great slogan-like reminder of where our loyalties are supposed to lie, and what type of people we, as Americans are supposed to be.

To be honest, I don't even know if other countries have pledges of that nature but I know that small recitations like that are quite common among different groups, organizations, and even religious communities. These types of scripts bind us together with others in our chosen group. They not only acknowledge our common identity but take part in creating it. But we shouldn't think that this is a new phenomenon and it certainly isn't something that began with the American pledge of allegiance, as much as Americans like to think that we invented everything. Going back to Jesus' day and beyond, it was not uncommon for religious groups, especially within Judaism, who saw themselves as unique and different from everyone else around them, to have a small group identifying prayer. John the Baptist evidently had one and so would the followers of Jesus.

As Jesus was following his normal habit of praying, we learn that this commitment to go to God in prayer was not lost on the disciples. They want to learn to pray as Jesus does and to have their own community-identifying prayer. The prayer would serve as both a model for how they should pray and would also serve the purpose of providing them a slogan-of-sorts that would quickly sum up who they were as God's people and what they valued. They were already beginning to grasp the reality that Jesus was forging them into a new community different than one that had existed before. They were being crafted into the new family of God.

When they went to God in prayer, they should approach him as their Father. Jesus was not just creating a new community that saw itself as a family, he was bringing to fulfillment the family that God had promised Abraham. This would be God's own family, a people who could approach him affectionately as their own father (cf. Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). The disciples were becoming a family of those who did God's will and who would be adopted into God's family through the life of Christ as co-heirs. This community would always go through Jesus to join the family. As Jesus had declared, "No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Luke 4:22). Jesus was not only introducing a new element of relationship with God, he was continuing his constant and repeated assertion that his followers were becoming the true Israel, the fulfillment of the family that God had promised and that Israel had only pointed to (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:16).

They would be a people that truly hallowed the name of God. The Jews had made an attempt to do this and had so hallowed the actual name of God that they would not utter except for perhaps one time a year. Yet, this is not what God desired. If we remember that "name" was not just a title or word but referred to the whole reputation, character, authority, and life of an individual, we can see that Jesus wanted a community that truly hallowed God's entirety, not just a word. Today, groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses make the same mistake as the Jews. They revere his name (although they go the opposite route of the Jews and claim that his name must be used all the time—they continue to use the term "Jehovah" even though experts now realize that God's name in the Old Testament was likely YHWH and that Jehovah was never an actual name or term) but distort who he is. The name or life that Jesus came to reveal was his own. God would be revealed through the life of Jesus who in turn revealed the aspect of God as the Father of the covenant family. Living the life of Christ with God as our Father, then, is the primary way that Christians revere the name of God.

The prayer would demonstrate that they were a family who lived in such a way as to bring God's kingdom on earth. They would do his will as his people and would, like the Israelites who lived on the daily portion of manna, would rely on God for their daily bread. In Exodus 16:19-21, the Israelites were warned to trust God each day for his provision rather than engaging in activities of hoarding that fostered greed and demonstrated a lack of believing in God's continued provision. The Messiah's family would be people who trust God each day for their spiritual provision.

Part of that provision would be to rely on God's continued forgiveness of sins. Those in Christ no longer live in the realm of condemnation as part of the family of fallen humanity (cf. Rom. 8:1) but are the promised family of many nations through whom sin would finally be dealt with and all people of the world could be blessed. It would be inconsistent as God's people to expect something from God that we are not willing to give ourselves. So, as we breathe in God's forgiveness, we must continue to breathe it out to others in order that we might continue to breathe in God's love and forgiveness.

Another aspect of that provision is to realize that without God we would walk straight into temptation and succumb to it every time. We would follow the example of Israel in the wilderness rather than that of Jesus who was led into the wilderness by the Spirit but did the will of God. The prayer, then, calls for God's continued provision in keeping us from giving into temptation the way we would if left to our own provision.

To make the point clear that God wants to provide for his Messiah-shaped family Jesus gave two helpful illustrations. The first was a common situation in his day but with an ironic twist. If a friend needed bread, the cultural expectation was that he would be given the bread despite any inconvenience. His hearers simply couldn't imagine someone who would actually refuse to provide hospitality on the basis of friendship. But Jesus wants them to go along and imagine such a case. In that unbelievable event, the man would still give the bread because of the persistent asking by the one in need. If humans would give the bread in any situation then how much more can they be assured that God will answer their persistent prayers. They need not hesitate to come to their father and pray persistently. If they ask, God will certainly answer their prayers. The Father will provide the needs that his people have. We would be abusing the context of the story to claim that Jesus was saying that we could ask for whatever we desired and expect to get it. His point was that we can rely on God for the things that we need.

The second example uses the same line of thinking as the first. This situation would surely not happen with humans, so why would you ever think that God would act that way? How can you not trust in the promises of God? What kind of father would give his son a snake rather than a fish or a scorpion rather than an egg? The answer would self evident. No kind of father would do that. If imperfect people give good gifts to those they love then would not our perfect Father in heaven do so all the more. Snakes and scorpions were common symbols for evil and the demonic so it is possible that Jesus was making a further allusion beyond just a bad or dangerous gift rather than a helpful one.

The fact is clear that Jesus was creating a kingdom people, a new family who had God himself as their Father. The way of breaking God's will and his kingdom into the present age could be a tough go and the only way to do it is to rely fully on God. They would become a family that was devoted, among other things, to prayer and reliance on God as their Father. The new exodus had already begun and Jesus was providing bread, forgiveness, and the ability to not give into temptation to his followers. They would need to continue to rely on his provision for them to complete this lifetime journey, and so do we.



Luke 11:14-28

Jesus and Beelzebul

14 Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed. 15 But some of them said, "By Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons." 16 Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven.

17 Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. 18 If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. 20 But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

21 "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. 22 But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder.

23 "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

24 "When an evil [g] spirit comes out of anyone, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' 25 When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. 26 Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first."

27 As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you."

28 He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."



Display

In John 8, Jesus said that the Jews showed themselves, by their actions, to not be part of God's family but to be part of Satan's. If someone were to look at your life right now, what signs would they see that you were part of the family of God? Would they see the family resemblance of the Father in your life?



Discover

1. Why would some Jews claim that Jesus was operating by the power of Satan?
2. What was the significance of Jesus claiming that he worked by the finger of God?
3. What was the point in Jesus' redirection of the standard blessing that the woman yelled to him?



Dig Deeper

There is a remarkable scene in the movie, *Amistad*. It is a movie about Joseph Cinque and his amazing journey as he was captured by another tribe, sold to slave traders, taken to a slave auction in Cuba, and then escaped and took over the ship that was taking him to lifelong slavery. He and the other Africans on the ship were eventually captured and there was a trial that had to determine whether they were free Africans and would be released or would be put into slavery after all. The movie covers real events but it is to a fictional scene in the movie that I want to refer. In it, Cinque's lawyer asks him, while he is still in jail, about rumors that Cinque had killed a lion with his bare hands while still in Africa (the event actually happened but the scene of discussing it with his lawyer is historical fiction). The lawyer was deeply impressed as were all of the Africans who had relayed the story to him. But Cinque thought it was nothing for which he should be honored. He went on to tell the lawyer that he been hailed as a great man in his village for killing this lion who was threatening his village but he shouldn't have been. He then quietly tells his legal representative about how afraid he was and that he picked up a large stone in near desperation and threw it at the lion. The stone hit the lion just right in the head and actually killed it. He was no hero, said Cinque, because it all happened by sheer luck.

We often times, I think, tend to have that view of Jesus. No Christian doubts that he was brave and courageous and went through incredibly harrowing circumstances. But it seems that we often depict Jesus as a great preacher and teacher who was caught up in terrible opposition and awful circumstances during his final week and had to really keep his chin up and be brave as things swirled around him and violently blew him towards a tragic death, one that he, to make matters even worse, knew was coming and couldn't avoid. That is just not the reality. Jesus was no Cinque. He didn't get thrust into a fight that he didn't want and then make it through with luck. That's not the picture that the gospels give us of Jesus. Instead, we find a warrior. We find a Messiah that knew that his vocation included an assault on death, sin, and evil. And because of that we find a Jesus who made war wherever he went. He made war with the demonic. He made war with Satan. And ultimately he would make war death. No, he wasn't a tragic figure who bravely faced a tragic end. He was a warrior who came to pick a fight.

As we look at this passage it becomes obvious that Luke is not so interested in this particular exorcism as he is the response to it. Jesus had won an initial victory over Satan after walking into the wilderness, the place of Satan's victory over Israel in the war to get them to grumble against God, and had continue to make war with Satan's demons ever since. There was no denying that Jesus had demonstrated some kind of incredible authority over the demons that could not be simply explained away or denied. This left two options. Either Jesus was working within the power of God or he was somehow in league with Satan. Some of his opponents claimed that he was working through the power of Beelzebul (a derogatory term for Satan that meant "Lord of the flies"). Others wanted a specific sign from heaven. Luke doesn't tell us what that sign might be, but it may be the specific sign described in John 6 where we see that many Jews were expecting that when the Messiah returned he would bring back the provision of manna (which may have been the connection in Luke's mind between the Jews asking for that sign and the previous passage which alluded to the daily bread of manna).

Jesus knew their thoughts though, something that tips his readers that he was far more than some charlatan operating under the dark forces of Satan. He then answers the objections that were being thrown out against him and shows the lack of logic and strength to those arguments. How could Jesus be operating by the power of Satan? His ministry was one of freedom and making people whole, calling them to do the will of God. Satan is certainly a counterfeiter and a trickster but surely he wouldn't be engaging in the types of activity that were bringing down his own little kingdom. Satan's strength comes through slavery, robbing people of their humanity, and persuading humans to do their own will rather than God's. If Jesus was working with Satan, then Satan would be engaging in bringing down his own kingdom. This was war language that Jesus was using. A kingdom or a royal house that went to war against itself would make no sense but it would also be destroyed.

No, Jesus was not operating under the power of Satan. That should be obvious. And if they wanted a sign they wouldn't get one. That was the whole problem was that they would not drop their preconceived notions of what the Messiah should be. The only sign they would get right now would be his word that he was driving out demons by the finger of God, a clear allusion to Exodus 8:19. The Pharaoh's magicians conceded that Moses was doing things that their dark magic could not reproduce. It was only the finger of God that could do such things. But Pharaoh rejected that. His heart was hardened further by claim that this was the almighty God at work. The choice was now up to Jesus' opposition. Would they accept the obvious point that this was the finger of God at work or would they harden their hearts like Pharaoh to the new exodus that was breaking forth as Jesus continued his march towards Jerusalem?

Make no mistake, though, this was a war that Jesus was engaging in. Satan had his own kingdom that he had set up on earth but Jesus was here to make war. Satan might be a strong man that was fully armed and prepared to guard his own house but a strong man can do nothing when a stronger man makes war on him. Jesus was that stronger man. He was attacking and overpowering Satan. This was a war. This was fight that Jesus was intentionally picking. Yet, he knew that this fight would end in his own violent death. That is what his disciples had such a hard time understanding. How could one defeat their enemy by dying? That didn't make sense, of course, until they could grasp that Jesus was not just attacking Satan but was going to rob him of his most potent weapon, death itself.

With any war, sides must be carefully chosen. There is no sitting on the fence in this fight. One is either with Jesus, working to bring the kingdom of God into the world and continuing the assault on Satan's stronghold or they are working against him, scattering what he is trying to gather. At first glance, this might seem at odds with Jesus' words in 9:50, "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you." Yet, his point there was that the disciples should not try to limit the kingdom to a small group of insiders. If someone was doing the work of the kingdom then they should be accepted as part of God's people. The point here is not contradictory but complimentary. Those who have not taken up with Jesus in his fight will be fighting against him by default.

Jesus was on a mission to cleanse Israel and subsequently the whole world from the influence of evil and to reconcile the ruptured relationship between the family of fallen humanity and God. He was calling people to join God's promised family and engage in the work of brining the kingdom of God to every part of Israel and the world. But before that could truly happen Jesus would engage in the fight. He would sweep the house clean and defeat the foes that Israel could not on their own. But that was also a serious warning. Jesus was fighting the evil that was in Israel and exercising authority. He was giving Israel the chance to follow him and find the salvation that they had waited for so long but if they didn't truly embrace him there would be trouble. The time was short. He was sweeping the house so that they could see what God's kingdom looked like but they needed to realize, in a sense, that they need not a cleaned house but a new one altogether. They needed to realize that the house of Israel was doomed and that Satan and his minions would come down upon Israel in a much more complete and final way than they were now after Jesus was gone. They needed to abandon their path and realize that the relief that Jesus was brining to Israel was only temporary. If they stayed where they were, things would be far worse than were originally.

As Jesus was wrapping up his remarks, a woman cried out to him a standard Jewish blessing upon his mother. If a son was acting in a honored way, then the honor and blessing extended to the whole family. The family, after all, was the source of their identity as the people of God. Yet, Jesus used this as an opportunity to make the point again that he was redefining family. Physical descent was not what showed one to be blessed or the people of God. The family of God were those who heard the word of God and obeyed it. They were those who engaged in the war. This is a stern reminder for us who can so easily slip into the comfortable thought that what we do doesn't matter as long as we're part of the right church and have the right doctrines. Those things are important, but the real question is this: "are we engaging in Jesus' work"? Are we with him or against him? Are we truly acting like his family?



Luke 11:29-36

The Sign of Jonah

29 As the crowds increased, Jesus said, "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. 30 For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. 31 The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom; and now one [h] greater than Solomon is here. 32 The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now one greater than Jonah is here.

The Lamp of the Body

33 "None of you lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead you put it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light. 34 Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are healthy, [i] your whole body also is full of light. But when they are unhealthy, [j] your body also is full of darkness. 35 See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. 36 Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be just as full of light as when a lamp shines its light on you."



Dig Deeper

Imagine a scenario where a father walks into a messy playroom. His oldest child and their friend were playing in the room but failed to clean it up so he wants his child and their friend to take care of that situation. He doesn't have the time to go upstairs where they are hanging out so he sends one of his younger children up to the room to tell them that Dad wants them to go back to the playroom and clean up. The guest immediately realizes their error and goes down to the playroom to begin cleaning up the mess that they made. After a while the Dad realizes that the guest has listened and sprung into action but his own child is still sitting upstairs and has disregarded the warning of the younger child. So, the father decides that he needs to go up and have a talk with this wayward child himself and give him an opportunity to obey. He goes up and personally asks the child to go down and clean up the room along with his friend who is down there already cleaning up. The father goes away to work on something else thinking that this will clear things up, yet when he returns a few minutes later, he finds that the guest is still downstairs cleaning and the son has done nothing. This is outrageous and unacceptable. The very behavior of the guest has made the disobedience of the son look even worse. There is simply no excuse. The guest sprung into action at the word of a small child but the father's own son has rejected his own far more authoritative word. In this hypothetical situation, the heart of the son has been exposed not only by his own action but even more so by the action of the guest.

Luke is continuing to describe Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem and his urgent mission to warn the Jewish people that the time is short. They must make the choice to either embrace or reject the Messiah. With each passing scene and moment, though, it is becoming increasingly clear that the leaders of the Jewish nation, representing the entity of the nation of Israel, are rejecting Jesus' kingdom message. They were completely rejecting the notion that something was asked and needed to be put to rights. They are showing their true colors and their true humility before God, but there is something that is making matters even worse; the behavior of the guest. Israel was God's son but was not obeying his call to come to the Messiah. When the guest behaves and the son doesn't, it speaks volumes about the heart of the son, especially when the guest responded to one with far less authority than the father.

As the crowds increased, they asked more and more for a sign. This was no act of honestly seeking truth, however. They were not asking for a sign because they hadn't been given opportunities for faith. They were more like children who are asked by their parents to clean their room but don't want to so they claim later that they didn't start cleaning because they weren't sure that's what the parents wanted. Everything Jesus had been doing and saying were signposts showing them the way to God's will. He was simply not the kind of Messiah that they wanted which meant that if he really was the Messiah that God was not working in the way that they desired. But rather than humbly and radically changing their expectations, as the disciples were having to do, they simply rejected what Jesus was doing and demanded signs that more fit their perceptions of what he should be doing.

Jesus stated plainly that their continued request for signs were showing their true hearts. To fully understand this section it helps to understand that the basic understanding of the physiology of the body in the Greco-Roman world was that the eyes did not function by allowing light to come into the body, rather they allowed the body's own light to go out from the body. Thus, whether one's eyes were full of light or darkness had everything to do with what was already in their hearts. If they had wicked and dark hearts then their eyes would be full of darkness and spread it everywhere they went. If they had good hearts that were full of light then their eyes would be full of light and their actions would follow.

This is the line of thinking that runs behind this whole passage until Jesus says it outright in verses 34-36. They were a wicked generation because their hearts and eyes were wicked (Jesus used the same word, "poneros" for both the "wicked" generation and the "unhealthy" eye). The only sign, then, that they were going to get beyond what Jesus had already been doing was the sign of Jonah. There were likely two points of contact that Jesus intended by saying that they would be given the sign of Jonah. The first was that Jonah had preached to Ninevah about their wickedness and their need to repent prior to their judgment. So would Jesus proclaim the wickedness of the Jewish generation of his day and their need to repent prior to their impending judgment. The second was that just as Jonah, by spending three days in the belly of a great fish, had become a sign to the people of Ninevah for their dire need to repent and the overwhelming power of God, so would Jesus, by spending three days in the heart of the earth, become a sign to the people of this generation of their need to repent (cf. Matt. 12:38-42).

Jonah's sign and his preaching caused the extremely wicked people of Ninevah to repent. In the same vein, the Queen of the South, the Queen of Sheba, came from far away to see if Solomon really was the agent of YHWH, Israel's God. She had many reasons to doubt but instead she found that Solomon was indeed God's agent and that she needed to recognize that. The one thing that the Queen and the people of Ninevah had in common, besides their recognition of their need to humble themselves before God, was that they were both foreign pagans. Just as Jesus had used examples of faithful pagan aliens in 4:24-27, he does so again here. The rightful son was ignoring the Father by rejecting the son. It would be those who were foreigners and aliens who would recognize the Father's call to action just as Ninevah and the Queen of the South had.

They were testing Jesus as the Queen had come to test Solomon but were not recognizing his wisdom as she had recognized Solomon's. They were listening to Jesus just as the people of Ninevah had listened to Jonah but were not repenting as the Ninevites had. Jesus had wisdom that far surpassed that of Solomon but they would not submit to it. Jesus was far greater than Jonah but they would not recognize him. On the day of resurrection and judgment both the Ninevites and the Queen would rise with Jesus and that very action would condemn the Jews who had turned his back on God's promised family.

It would, of course, be ridiculous to light a lamp and then hide it under a bowl. That would make no sense. Yet, this is precisely what they were doing with the light of his teaching. Rather than putting it on a stand and realizing that through his teaching Israel would become the light of the world that it was always intended to be (Isa. 49:12), they were rejecting his kingdom message. This was about as wise as putting a lit lamp under a bowl. It was foolish, make no mistake.

But why would they be doing this? Why would they be shrinking back from the light? For the same reason that so many do in our own time. They had dark eyes. Their eyes, in fact, were simply letting out the darkness that was welling up within them. If they were full of light then their eyes would be healthy and light-filled but they were not. They were not only full of darkness and self-will but they were shrinking back from the true light, going farther and farther back into their caves. This is important because light was also a fundamental biblical image for one who had embraced God's presence while darkness indicated one that was removed from God. They were rejecting God's ways because their hearts were full of the darkness of their own will. One cannot embrace God's will while clinging to their own will anymore than a room can be dark and full of light at the same time.

The die had not yet been cast, though. They could still choose to have the light shine on them and to well up from within them. They could turn from their wickedness as the people of Nineveh had and be forgiven. There was still a chance for repentance but they had to stop looking for the types of signs that they wanted and simply look for the light. They had to come to the realization that their true hearts were continually being broadcast through their outer actions.

This is a stern reminder for us that there is no such thing as the idea that our actions don't really reflect what's in our heart, despite how often we would like to tell ourselves that. What comes out through our eyes, our actions, does reflect the light, or the darkness that we have embraced in our inner self. Actions, then, cannot be dismissed as unfortunate but insignificant moments. What we do reflects who we are in our hearts. Who do your eyes say you really are?



Display

Have you found yourself in a situation recently where your behavior was worse and less "godly" than some non-believers around you? How does that challenge you to make sure that you are always committed to doing the Father's will in every situation? What can you do on a daily basis to ensure that the virtues the Father values will shine forth in your life at the right times?



Discover

1. Why were the crowds dissatisfied with the signs that Jesus had been giving?
2. What is Jesus' point regarding the Ninevites and the Queen of the South?
3. What is the connection between our hearts and actions in this passage?



Luke 11:37-54

Woes on the Pharisees and the Experts in the Law

37 When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. 38 But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.

39 Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. 40 You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? 41 But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

42 "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

43 "Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.

44 "Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it."

45 One of the experts in the law answered him, "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also."

46 Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

47 "Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them. 48 So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. 49 Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' 50 Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.

52 "Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering."

53 When Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, 54 waiting to catch him in something he might say.



Dig Deeper

In the past few years in the United States a new movement has arisen that just did not exist when I was younger. It is called the "green" movement. This is an interesting phenomenon because it's not really a formal or official organization (although there is a rather insignificant political group called the green party but that's not what we're talking about here). This is not a formal group and yet it seems to be everywhere and wield a great deal of influence and power. The group is also interesting because they are not a religious group of any type and yet they are a mixture between political and moral influence. To disagree with or go against their influence is seen to be a moral violation that can take on a religious fervor in many ways. I am simply amazed at the influence that this group has gained in the last few years. The idea of "going green" is now everywhere from my kid's schools to television advertisements for many companies.

The reality of that movement is that it is very influential and to go against it can bring one a great deal of negative reaction. Many people that are part of that movement are very sincere about it. They genuinely believe that human beings are ruining our planet and causing it to spiral into an irreversible typhoon of climate destruction. Many do live sincere and consistently environmentally conscious lives. There are two aspects of this movement, however, that are a bit concerning. One is the incredible opposition faced by those who are of a sincerely different opinion. They are treated as though they are the cause of all that is wrong in the world and that they must be eliminated. The other problem is that many of the leaders of this movement have been shown to be rather hypocritical. They chide others for using too much energy whilst they jet about all over the globe. They put massive pressure on others to change their lives for the benefit of the global environment but usually investigations into their own lives show a rather lavish lifestyle that doesn't match up to what they propose to put on everyone else. There are some good things about this movement, surely. But there also many things which are very concerning.

I say all of this, not because I'm particularly political or because I have an agenda one way or the other with the green movement. I bring it up because there are many points of contact that I see between this movement and the Pharisees of Jesus' day. There tends to be a perception of the Pharisees as a legalistic religious movement that simply called for everyone else to a very rigid form of religious fervor but were themselves not at all following their own rules. A study of the actual history of the time, however, shows that this was not entirely the case. The Pharisees were not a formal religious group. They were more of a pressure group. They were a mixture of politics, legal guardians, and religious behavior. They had become extremely influential although they had no specific role or power. They firmly believed that following God's law was the way to show themselves to be God's people. So they created more and more rules so that people could correctly follow God's law in any situation that might arise. They firmly believed that this would save the world and God's people by bringing about the kingdom of God on earth and make the way for God to return to Jerusalem. To oppose them brought a great deal of criticism and pressure. And just like the green movement, there were good and sincere Pharisees but they also had the dual problem putting heavy loads on everyone else and making them appear to be the problem, as well as the problem of many of them not really caring about anything more than their own advancement and opportunity. Their hypocrisy wasn't so much a case of saying one thing and doing another, but of focusing on small issues to the neglect of the more important things (a charge similar to that made against the green movement as well) that God cared about.

The common meal was an important aspect of the Jewish life and culture. It was viewed as a constant reminder that everything comes from and belongs to God. Because a feast together was often always seen as a symbolic proclamation of the great feast that would be the age to come (it was often spoken of in terms of a great banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), it was of particular offense to the Pharisees to neglect aspects of the ceremonial laws that had been created so as to help people follow God's law to the smallest detail. The Pharisee took notice that Jesus had not taken part in the ceremonial pre-meal washing. Knowing their hearts, however, Jesus took this as an opportunity to deliver one of the harshest rebukes in all of the gospels.

There was actually a sharp debate between factions in Jesus' day as to whether a dish needed to be ritually cleansed once or whether two ceremonial washings had to take place for both sides of the cup. In bringing up the argument, Jesus was really rejecting all of that kind of nonsense. The real issue was not how they washed the dish but whether they were focusing on external rules as the uniform of God's people rather than having hearts and lives that were truly transformed from within. Loving others, especially in the context in that culture, by being generous to the poor, would demonstrate that they were embracing the kind of heart that God wanted his people to have.

After laying that down as an opening salvo, Jesus turns to offer up three specific challenges to the Pharisees and three to the teachers of the law, so as to not leave them out.

First for the Pharisees. They would meticulously count everything they had right down to small amounts of spice so that they could tithe on it and show themselves to be God's people but they neglected the true heart of being part of God's family which was to be people of justice and love. It's not that they shouldn't have tithed but to do all of those external things without being transformed internally by the love of God was worthless (see 1 Cor. 13:1-3). Their motivation to meticulously follow God's laws, however, went beyond their devotion to God. They loved to be important. They loved to use the position that they had to be noticed and to receive special attention. They had lost sight of the fact that God's true family was focused on serving not on being served.

This made them very much like an unmarked grave. Pilgrims would come from all over Israel to worship at the Temple. Just outside of the Temple walls, a few hundred yards away, were tombs. These tombs would be whitewashed each year so that they could be easily seen. Otherwise someone could trip over one without seeing it and make themselves unclean. Jesus' point was a directly confrontational one. They were like these tombs that made people unclean because they were full of putrid death on the inside. They thought they could save the world by calling people to be conformed to a series of ritual behaviors but they were neglecting the truly important task of being transformed. Only the kingdom could do that.

The compatriots of the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, were no better. They tied people down with all kinds of burdens and rules but never offered anything that would actually help them to achieve that. His point was not that they were burdening people with more and more rules and sitting back and looking down on them while they failed. His point was that they were giving more and more rules claiming that they were helping them to truly be God's people. But the reality was that they were not lifting a finger towards actually solving the problem. People needed transformation not conformation.

In fact, they were taking part in the long tradition of the rebellious people of Israel in rejecting the prophets that God had sent them. They were like their ancestors who built tombs for prophets but also put them in those tombs. They wouldn't accept it, but the fact was that they were just like their forefathers who rejected God's word through his spokesmen. This was clearly demonstrated by their rejection of Jesus. They were continuing in the long line of the family of fallen humanity.

What was far worse was that not only did they not have God's ways in mind, they were actually keeping others from finding God's kingdom. Teachers influence others and will always be judged more strictly than others (see James 3:1). They believed that they possessed the key to knowledge that would bring about the kingdom of God on earth but the truth was quite the opposite. Not only were they not entering into the door to the true life that God has in store for his people, they were barring the way for others to enter in as well. There is no greater charge against teachers of God's word than this, so this would have had a particularly sharp sting to it.

In the previous passage, Jesus spoke of their need to repent and embrace the light that was coming through his message. The door was left open for them to repent and this message was part of that final plea. Would they realize that they were unmarked graves that were barring the door for themselves and others to find the true path to being God's people? Sadly, the woes did not lead to their repentance but to a further hardening of their heart. That's the way the truth is. It softens the hearts of some while the same truth hardens the hearts of others.

Warnings like this are an important reminder for us. Christianity is living a life. It is learning to embrace the will of God and cling to Jesus' life as our own. Christianity is not and can never be about a list of rules that take away our need to choose and the demand to think through what we do and make the right choices. We so often get frustrated because we want a religion that is easy and shows us exactly what to do in each and every situation. That type of thing will never lead to transformation. When we partner with the Spirit and work towards our true transformation into the life of Christ we realize that those times when we're unsure of what God wants and we have to search, pray, think, and wrestle; those are the times when we are truly transforming.



Display

Do you really prefer a walk with God that transforms rather than conforms? What are ways that you fall into a pattern of spiritual life that is more about conforming than genuine Spirit-led transformation?



Discover

1. What was the problem with all of the laws and rules that the Pharisees espoused?
2. Why do you think that Jesus usually reserved some of his harshest words for those that were religious leaders of the day?