

JESUS' MINISTRY IN LUKE BRINGING SALVATION TO ALL

I have decided to use just one theme to help you begin to become familiar with Luke's Gospel, a beautiful theme, Jesus reaching out to all those on the margins of society. The scribes and Pharisees and customs of society had erected barriers between people but Jesus broke down those barriers. He wanted to reveal the love of God for all people and show all people that God loves them equally. Therefore Jesus did not pay heed to social taboos or the restrictions of society of his time but he broke down barriers between God and sinners, tax collectors, Samaritans and women. All the references here will be to Luke unless otherwise indicated.

1 Jesus Broke Down Barriers with Sinners

Jesus forgave the paralytic man his sins, and to show that he had authority to forgive sins Jesus healed him of his paralysis (5:17-26). In response to the Pharisee's complaints against Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners, he pronounced, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:32). In 7:36-50, Luke relates the story of the woman who was a sinner and received forgiveness from Jesus. This is a most beautiful story, especially 7:47-50. Here, as in the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector (18:9-14), Jesus contrasts the behaviour of a sinner with the behaviour of a Pharisee, and again the sinner is justified before God. Luke 15 is a most beautiful chapter which we will read in detail in a later lesson. The tax-collectors and sinners drew near to Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes complained (15:1-2), so Jesus told three parables about finding the lost; the lost sheep (15:3-7), the lost coin (15:8-10) and the lost son (15:11-32). These parables are a response to the complaints and a vindication of Jesus' associations with sinners. Luke is the only Gospel to record a saying of Jesus that there is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner, than over ninety-nine who have no need of repentance (15:7). The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost (19:10). We could say that 19:10 is a summary of Jesus' ministry.

2. Jesus Broke Down Barriers with Tax Collectors

I should point out that tax collectors did not collect income tax but tolls along trade routes so we might more properly call them toll collectors. The toll collectors paid these tolls to Rome yearly in advance. Rome never checked the toll-collectors' accounts so people suspected they overcharged the tolls. Since 63 BC Palestine was under the control of Rome, naturally a cause of much resentment to Palestinians who wanted self-rule and independence. Although the toll collectors were Jews, they were treated by their fellow Jews as Gentiles, not only because of paying tolls to Rome but because they were working for non-Jewish employers. Jesus worked to break down that barrier in his ministry. One of the disciples whom Jesus called to follow him is Levi, a toll collector (Mark 2:13-15; Luke 5:27-29), called Matthew in Matthew 9:9-10. Levi offered Jesus a feast in his house and the guests included a large crowd of toll collectors (Luke 5:29).

The tax collectors and sinners drew near to Jesus to hear him (15:1). On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus lodged with the tax collector Zacchaeus, who was a sinner in public eyes (Luke 19:7) and Jesus proclaimed that salvation had come to his house (19:9). This was even more serious than eating with Levi because Zacchaeus was a chief toll collector (therefore a very big sinner in the eyes of his fellow Jews). See also Luke 7:34-35.

3. Jesus Broke Down Barriers with Samaritans

The Samaritans lived in Samaria which was between Jerusalem in the south and Galilee in the north. Samaria was invaded by the king of Assyria and finally captured in 722 BC. The Samaritans intermarried with the foreigners. You can read an account in 2 Kings 17:5-41. Therefore they were not regarded as fully Jewish, but half-Jews (See John 4:9). The Samaritans built their own temple in Samaria in opposition to the one in Jerusalem. It was destroyed in 128 BC and since then there was continuous hatred between Jews and Samaritans. At the time of Jesus there was a lot of hatred between them. Jesus' dealings with them show him breaking down barriers between Jews and Samaritans. In Luke 9:52 on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus sent messengers ahead of him to a Samaritan village to prepare for his visit. Although Jesus was not made welcome in the village (9:53), it is significant that Jesus intended to visit a Samaritan village because it is in stark contrast to Jesus in Matthew who forbade the Twelve to enter any Samaritan village (Matt 10:5).

In response to the lawyer's question as to who is his neighbour, Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:30-35). A priest and Levite pass by on the other side of the road disregarding the man who had been beaten up by robbers and left for half dead. But a Samaritan took pity on him, bound up his wounds and paid for his keep in the inn. In Israel a common trio would have been priest, Levite, Israelite. But in the parable Jesus did not give an Israelite as an example of loving neighbour. Instead he gave a Samaritan as an example! Imagine the shock. Jesus is teaching that love of neighbour has no limits.

Only the Samaritan leper out of the ten who were healed came back to thank Jesus (17:16). In this incident, as well as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, the Samaritan is portrayed in a good light. It is significant that a Samaritan is depicted as an example of someone open to salvation in contrast to the Jews. Once again Jesus is trying to break down barriers.

4. Jesus Broke Down Barriers with Women

To understand Jesus' ministry to and treatment of women in Luke properly we need firstly to examine how women were treated at the time of Jesus. Women were segregated from men both in synagogues and in the Jerusalem Temple. Women had to remain behind a screen in the synagogue. They were not counted in the number ten which was the minimum required to hold a synagogue service. The Temple forecourt was divided in two by a wall, the western half and the eastern half. The eastern half was called the Women's Forecourt, because women were also allowed access there and only male Israelites had access to the western half of the Temple, which was the Temple proper.

A self-respecting Jew would not talk to a woman in public, a point evident from John 4:27 when Jesus' disciples marvelled that he was talking to a woman. Women's witness had no validity in law courts. By the time of Jesus, segregation of women had become harsher. It was generally considered bad to teach the Torah (Jewish law) to women.

Women in Luke

The paralleling of men and women in Luke is well-known. Luke is obviously portraying women and men having equal dignity before God, shown by the paralleling of events involving men and women. This does not mean that women have the same vocations; it is showing that men and women have equal dignity before God. Look at the following parallels:

- annunciation to Zechariah (1:8-23) and annunciation to Mary (1:26-38)
- Mary's Magnificat (1:46-55) parallels Zechariah's Benedictus (1:68-79).
- Simeon praising God for seeing the baby Jesus (2:25-35), Anna praising God (2:36-38).

The references above are Luke's portrayal of Jesus' infancy. The examples below are in Jesus' ministry.

- During his sermon in Nazareth, Jesus spoke about widows (4:25-26) and lepers (4:27).
- Jesus healed a man who was possessed (4:31-37) and Simon's mother-in-law (4:38-39).
- Jesus forgave the paralytic his sins (5:17-26) and the woman who was a sinner (7:36-50).
- The healing of the centurion's slave (7:1-10) is followed by the raising of the widow's son (7:11-17).
- The healing of the Gerasene demoniac is matched by the raising of Jairus' daughter (8:40-42a,49-56) and the healing of the woman with the issue of blood (8:42b-48).
- Jesus offered Jonah as a sign to his generation (11:30) and the Queen of the South (11:31).
- The Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven are paired; the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which a man took...(13:18-19) and like leaven which a woman took...(13:20-21).
- The healing of the woman on a Sabbath, bent double with a spirit of infirmity (13:10-17) is paired by the healing of the man with dropsy on a Sabbath (14:1-6).
- The parable of the man with the lost sheep (15:3-7) is paralleled by the parable of the woman with the lost coin (15:8-10).
- Of two men in bed, one will be taken and the other left (17:34) and of two women grinding together, one will be taken and the other left (17:35).

The high standing of women in Luke's Gospel is evident from the beginning with two women playing enormously important roles in the history of salvation - Mary and Elizabeth, as well as Anna - roles which are described in such detail only by Luke 1-2. In addition, it is also evident that there is concern for widows in the Gospel; they are mentioned occasionally (2:37; 4:25-26; 7:12; 18:3; 20:47; 21:2). Mark 15:41 and Matt 27:55 relate that women accompanied Jesus during his ministry but only Luke mentions that they provided for him out of their own means (8:1-3). Martha and Mary received Jesus into their house and Mary sat at Jesus' feet, the position of a disciple (10:38-42). The angel said to the women in the tomb, "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee..." (24:6), yet the three passion predictions in 9:22,44 and 17:25 were spoken to the disciples, thus confirming 8:1-3 that women accompanied Jesus since the time he was in Galilee.

Jesus Disregards Taboos about Women

I want to deal with three passages in which Jesus overturns taboos about women but to understand them we need to know what is meant by being ritually unclean. The book of Leviticus contains various rules about clean/unclean. The concepts of clean and unclean for the Jews may be seen under four categories which you can read in the book of Leviticus.

1. Food: Clean animals are those with a cloven hoof which chew the cud, otherwise they are unclean. Further details are in Lev 11. If you ate unclean food you became unclean.
2. Leprosy and skin diseases made one unclean. The purity laws are in Lev 13-14.
3. Contact with a corpse made one unclean. Details in Num 19:11-19.
4. Sexual functions also made a person unclean, man or woman (Lev 15). For the purity laws concerning childbirth see Lev 12.

The length of the impurity varied according to the cause. The details are given in Lev. One remains unclean until one undergoes purification. As seen in Lev, most purifications can be achieved by bathing. The point was that if unclean you were forbidden from taking part in worship, so therefore called ritually unclean.

Now let's read the three passages in Luke. Jesus healed the woman who had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17). Not only did he do it on the Sabbath when work was forbidden but he also called her a "daughter of Abraham" (13:16). Elsewhere in the NT, people are called son of Abraham or children of Abraham but nowhere else is a woman called a daughter of Abraham. Jesus is making it clear that she is as good a participant in God's covenant as a male. It should be noted that being said to be bound by Satan would have made her ritually unclean. The crippled woman can stand for all whose faith never wavers despite misfortune which befell them; although deformed she spent her Sabbaths in the synagogue.

The story of the raising of the little girl to life forms a sandwich around the story of the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage for twelve years (Luke 8:40-56; Matt 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43). According to Jewish law, anyone who touched a corpse would be ritually unclean but nevertheless Jesus took the little girl by the hand. Concerning the haemorrhaging woman, Jesus would have been ritually unclean after being touched by her. But Jesus doesn't observe the law and does not undergo purification.

Jesus raised the son of the widow from Nain in 7:11-17. Widows were especially vulnerable. A widow did not inherit her husband's estate, it passed to a son, or if there were no children it went to the nearest male relative. Thus a widow with no children would be penniless. Jesus violated custom by speaking to the woman on the street and then broke ritual purity by touching the bier which carried the corpse.