

Luke Chapters 5-8: The Galilean Ministry

JESUS HEALS THE LEPER

1. Jesus' call of Peter (5:1-11) and the healing of the leper (5:12-16) have an important commonality: shame. Peter, realizing he was facing a theophany, the miraculous catch, was overcome by the shame of his sinfulness, to the point of begging Jesus to leave him. Leprosy was a shameful affliction, consistent with the attitude of obeisance taken by the leper in beseeching Jesus. Peter and the leper left their encounters freed of their shame.

We don't learn more about the leper, but we certainly see Peter bearing a tremendous burden of shame after denying Jesus (Mt 26:75), shame he undoubtedly again laid at the feet of the Lord. This is typical of Christian life: we are freed by grace, fall again into sin, and are set free from shame again as we approach the throne of God in the name of Jesus.

Yet we don't always lay all we can at Jesus' feet, and like an old ship collecting barnacles hide shame in our hearts, often without being fully conscious we are doing so. This shame makes us reluctant to trust God or draw near to him. Though brothers and sisters of the second Adam we behave more like the first.

Not in our discussion, but in your own times of quiet meditation, search your heart for the shame which you bear, but which you have gotten so used to that you no longer notice.

JESUS AND THE SABBATH

2. Jesus allows his disciples to glean on the sabbath (Lk 6:1-5). The law allowed the "poor and aliens" to glean on the edge of someone else's land. However, the law also required observance of the sabbath even during times of plowing and harvest (Ex 34:21), which was taken by the Pharisees as forbidding road-side gleaning. Jesus does not respond to this criticism by debating sabbath law per se. Instead, he refers to 1 Sam 21:1-6, where David convinced a priest to give his soldiers the bread of the presence, normally reserved for the priests, on the grounds that his soldiers, being chaste, were ritually clean.¹

Which of the following best represents Jesus' defense of his actions?

- a) Human need trumps restrictions of the law, in this case sabbath observance; just as David's men were hungry, and were permitted to eat bread typically forbidden them, so Jesus' disciples should be allowed to glean on the sabbath.
 - b) Jesus, the Messiah (and Son of David), is claiming the same authority David apparently exercised as king.
 - c) Jesus isn't trying to make a general statement that hunger, or humanitarian concerns, always trump the sabbath. He is showing how Scripture itself allows violation of the strict observance of the law. i.e., "God's design in giving the Sabbath for his people's good is overthrown when human behavior is subjected to rules developed in the casuistic interpretation of the Law" (DJG).
3. Lauren Winner, in her *Mudhouse Sabbath*, quotes the following passage from Nan Fink's *Stranger in the Midst*:

On Friday afternoon, at the very last minute, we'd rush home, stopping at the grocery to pick up supplies. Flying into the kitchen we'd cook ahead for the next twenty-four hours. Soup and salad, baked chicken, yams and applesauce for dinner, and vegetable cholent or lasagna for the next day's lunch. Sometimes I'd think how strange it was to be in such a frenzy to get ready for a day of rest.

Shabbat preparations had their own rhythm, and once the table was set and the house

¹The IVP *Bible Background Commentary* asserts the priest was within his rights to make this decision. Darrel Bock (in his lectures on Luke—haven't checked his commentary) disagrees.

straightened, the pace began to slow. “It’s your turn first in the shower,” I’d call to [my fiancé] Michael. “Okay, but it’s getting late,” he’d answer, concerned about starting Shabbat at sunset.

In the bathroom I’d linger at the mirror, examining myself, stroking the little lines on my face, taking as much time as I could to settle into a mood of quietness. When I joined Michael and his son for the lighting of the candles, the whole house seemed transformed. Papers and books were neatly piled, flowers stood in a vase on the table, and the golden light of the setting sun filled the room...

Shabbat is like nothing else. Time as we know it does not exist for these twenty-four hours, and the worries of the week soon fall away. A feeling of joy appears. The smallest object, a leaf or a spoon, shimmers in a soft light, and the heart opens. Shabbat is a meditation of unbelievable beauty.

Winner, raised Jewish, summarizes the sabbath restrictions with the rabbinic phrase, “do not create,” just as God rested from creation. The result is that, according to a rabbi she quotes, “When we cease interfering in the world we are acknowledging that it is God’s world” (7). She describes liturgically welcoming the sabbath as a husband would a bride, with reverence. Further, she is sad at its ending. So important is the shabbat to many Jews that it “shapes all the rhythms of calendar and time; the entire week points toward the shabbat.” Winner describes the Shabbat as “without question, the piece of Judaism I miss the most” (3).

Winner represents the best of the rabbinic tradition which grew out of the Pharisaic movement of Jesus’ time and before. Sabbath observance, found in the ten commandments, is described as follows in Scripture:

- Israel was permitted to rest on this day (Deut 5:12-15)
- The day was considered holy (Deut 5:12) and a delight (Isa 58:13-14)
- A portion of the day was consecrated to God (Ex 20:10; 35:2), in the manner of a tithe
- It was a sign of the covenant (Ex 31:12-17; Ex 20:12, 20), an imitation of God’s rest after creation (Gen 2:2-3; Ex 20:11) and a reminder of the relief following escape from Egypt (Deut 5:15)
- Fires were not to be lit (Ex 35:3); nor burdens carried (Jer 17:21-22); nor travel (Ex 16:29); and sowing and reaping were prohibited (Ex 34:21)
- Sabbath regulations could be set aside when human life was at stake (1 Macc 2:29-41), for temple service (Num 28:9-10) and for circumcision (1 Chron 23:31)

The Jewish sabbath was well known in the ancient times, arousing responses ranging from admiration to scorn (DJG and references). Jesus observed the sabbath, but also presented a new understanding so objectionable as to induce the Pharisees and Herodians to plot to take his life (Mk 3:1-6):

- **Humanitarian concerns take precedence over sabbath observance**, as seen in the disciples’ gleaning (Lk 6:1-5; Mk 2:23-28) and strict attention to the written code can distort this principle; “the sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath” (Mk 2:27)
- **Compassion is to guide our sabbath observance**, as seen in the healing of the man with the withered hand (Mt 12:10-13), and the woman with the chronic deformity (Lk 13:10-17). Doing “good” can never be wrong on the sabbath (Mk 3:4), and if it is lawful to show compassion to an animal on the sabbath, it must be okay to show compassion to a human

As the “Lord of the Sabbath” (Lk 6:5) Jesus does not enter into arguments over the definition of “work.” In fact, Jesus acknowledges “working” on the sabbath, on the grounds that “My Father is still working” (John 5:2-17). Just the same, Jesus does not tell his disciples to abandon the sabbath, but rather provides a renewed understanding of it. These guidelines from the Lord are consistent with Jesus’ spirit-of-the-law approach in the Sermon on the Mount, well expressed in Paul’s advice from Col 2:16, “Therefore do not

let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.”

With that sabbatical refresher, consider the following:

- a) While acknowledging that “occasionally Shabbat gets dull,” Winner speaks in glowing terms of the blessings gained by strict adherence. What part of your sabbath observance do you find most rewarding?
 - b) Do you ever look with longing over the fence at the sabbath practices of other communities, Jewish or Christian, contemporary or traditional?
 - c) What sabbath duties are you obliged to work around?
 - d) For Christians the sabbath has additional meaning as a celebration of the resurrection. Traditionally it has been viewed as a “little Easter,” during which, for instance, Lenten fasts were suspended. What might you do with your family to inject some resurrection joy into your sabbaths?
4. Just before the sabbath controversy of 6:1-5, Jesus teaches about fasting (5:33-39). To explain why his disciples don't fast, Jesus delivers the brief parables of the old and new garments and the old and new wineskins. At a basic level these parables assert the incompatibility of the old and the new. These parables are presented in a way which suggests they are a general principle which Jesus is applying to the practice of fasting. The “old” is typically seen as the old traditions or patterns of thought (Craig Evans, 96) with its man-made legalism (Carson, *NBC*), or life according to the old covenant law (Cyril of Alexandria), or even simply fasting (Ambrose), and the “new” is Jesus' way of practicing the law. A more specific interpretation is elusive. Some interpretations include:
- The old is Jesus' practices, which Luke takes pains to show are consistent with OT prophecy, and the new are the Pharisees': “Jesus interprets his behaviors, which are questionable and innovative to some onlookers, as manifestations of God's ancient purpose coming to fruition, while the concerns of the Pharisees are rejected not only as innovative but also as quite inconsistent with God's program.” (Joel B. Green, *NICNT*, 250)
 - “Take one element of Jesus' new work, and you miss the whole; and you can't, in any case, fit that one element into the old ways of thinking [e.g. John's movement or the Pharisees']. You have to take the new thing whole or not at all.” “The real challenge of this passage is to see where... people are living today as though the old age was still the norm, as though the new life of the gospel had never burst in upon us. The task then is to live out the new life, the new energy, which was at the heart of Jesus' teaching and work.” (N. T. Wright, 65)
 - In context, the old wine is the old covenant; the old wineskin is rabbinism; the new wine is the new covenant; the new wineskin is perhaps “emphasis on relational union and sharing God's love with others”. The old wineskins now represent the formalisms and religious practices of the church, including language (church speak), music (songs from previous centuries), dress (dressing up for church), architecture (steeple, pews, etc.), taboos and rules (e.g. against bars, dancing, rock concerts, alcohol, movies, etc.) The general principle is to reject formalisms when they have outlived their usefulness. (Dennis McCallum)

How do you read these parables? What's forbidden, what's encouraged?

JESUS HEALS THE CENTURION'S SLAVE

5. In 7:1-10 Jesus heals the slave of a Gentile Centurion who was well respected by the local Jewish community. The Centurion never meets Jesus face-to-face. Can you guess the nature of the crisis Jesus likely generated by his immediate willingness to go to and enter the Centurion's house?
6. The Jewish elders who make the request of Jesus are trying to draw him into the midst of a patron-client relationship. Such relationships were not uncommon in the ancient world. They were “grounded in inequality between the two principals. 'A patron has social, economic, and political resources that are

needed by the client. In return, a client can give expressions of loyalty and honor that are useful for the patron."²

Joel Green asserts that Patron-client relationships were not necessarily compatible with the picture Jesus has just drawn in the Sermon on the Plain of his kingdom, wherein the blessed are the poor, the persecuted, etc., and woe to the rich and powerful. Of the centurion incident, Green writes,

...the centurion has placed the Jewish council (and indeed the Jewish populace in this town) in his debt by building the synagogue; that obligation is serviced by the laudatory tone the Jewish elders use when speaking of their benefactor and, it is hoped, by Jesus' assistance in healing the centurion's slave... If this is an accurate representation of the scene, however, this would be a strange way to demonstrate the embodiment of Jesus' message in daily living. After all, he has just undermined the whole system of patronal ethics by abolishing the distinctions and inequities on which that system is based. (Green, 284)

- a) Is Jesus choosing to work within a system notorious for its asymmetric power balance? What in the passage provides clues one way or the other?
- b) Where can patron-client relationships be found in modern church contexts, whether local or national? Are they unhealthy, or at odds with the ethics of the kingdom?

JESUS AND THE SIGNS OF JUBILEE

7. In his inaugural sermon (4:16-22), Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1-2a,

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor

Later when John the Baptist is in prison he begins to doubt and receives this message from Jesus:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them

In Jesus' Galilean ministry, the gospel is sent not just through (verbal) evangelism, but also through what could be called the "signs of Jubilee", to which Isa 61 (and 58) point.

- a) What phrase immediately follows the passage Jesus quotes from Isa 61? Why doesn't Jesus read *that*?
- b) Pastor Chris recently described an organization, Rolling Jubilee, which, very much in the spirit of the year of Jubilee, pays off debts. Where do you see the signs of Jubilee in the modern church and/or its ministries?

Ω

Fun Fact: Jesus calls Simon, telling him "from now on you will be catching people" (5:10). The verb here is *zogreo*, "to take alive" (2 Tim 2:26), and was used in the LXX for saving persons alive from danger (Nu 31:15, 18; Dt 20:16; et al.)" (I. Howard Marshall, *New International Greek Testament Commentary, Luke*).

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 202, quoting Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations," 242.