

Coming to Jesus **Luke 18:35-19:10**

This quarter, running up through Easter, we focus on the final section of the Gospel of Luke. The central topic of Jesus' teaching and ministry is 'the kingdom of God', or, better put, 'the reign of God.' The basic idea appears in the lines from the Lord's prayer: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven." Jesus took on flesh not only to die for our sin, but also to demonstrate what the kingdom looks like, what life will be like when God fully reigns, when his will is done on earth as it is already done in heaven. This reign of God has a dual time reference: it has 'already' begun in Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, but it is 'not yet' culminated until his return. So we look to Luke to ascertain what the reign of God looks like now, and what we can expect in future.

This week's selection actually comprises two incidents, not one. They form a matching pair, both situated near the city of Jericho (less than 20 miles from Jerusalem), and each making essentially the same points (albeit in somewhat different contexts). Together they provide case studies of the sorts of people who accepted Jesus' invitation in his day, and the sort whom Jesus might seek out in our day.

Day 1: Luke 18:35-43 Who is invited?

Two related features characterize this man: he is blind; consequently, he has no respectable means of self-support, but has to beg in order to survive. His location underscores his low status: excavations indicate that Jericho has some spectacularly wealthy elite at this time, so this man's poverty – and social disenfranchisement – would be all the more notable.

Luke has a special concern for the poor and disenfranchised, and notes Jesus' deep concern for them, as well. In fact, he cites Jesus' own vision statement as, "proclaim good news to the poor ... freedom for the prisoners ... recovery of sight for the blind, to free those in bondage, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19). This one act of healing fulfills two of these four commissions.

What does all this mean for us? Maybe not exactly what we suppose, but more than we may typically assume. Given that Jesus heals the physically blind, it is natural to infer that his followers might do likewise. That is a reasonable inference, but one not borne out by experience. As a graduate of the theology department at a university founded by a famous faith-healer, I can affirm that instantaneous physical healing of this sort occurs very, very rarely today. At the same time, this healing does hold

two positive implications for us. For one, given that the original healing comes immediately after the disciples' failure to understand Jesus' teaching, and results in a profession of faith, Luke likely intends to imply that Jesus heals not only physical blindness, but also spiritual blindness. This we do today, in preaching the gospel, through which the Spirit works to bring people to faith.

The other, and more direct, implication for us: this text illustrates Jesus' concern for the disenfranchised, the disabled, and the impoverished. He invites all into the kingdom of God, not least the poor and blind. In this respect, Jesus is a role model for us today, as well. The gospel is for all; at the same time, the powerless and peripheral warrant special attention, precisely because they are so often neglected in our world. Our forbearers among 19th-century evangelicals arguably lived this out better than we do now, with expansive ministries to the blind and poor, to the widow and orphan, and to the slave and imprisoned. Ministries of mercy and justice are not in competition with either evangelism or missions, but issue from the same source, the earthly ministry of Jesus, as he proclaimed and instituted the reign of God overall all of life.

Day 2: Luke 18:35-43 What's required?

What did this blind man do to warrant special attention from Jesus? Nothing meritorious. Instead, he merely cried out for help. And when the crowd tried to hush him up, he cried out all the louder. This plea for help, and this persistence, imply a hope – whether faint and desperate, or firm and confident – that Jesus could actually heal him. That cry for help was all the motivation Jesus needed.

This truth offers great hope to us today. All that Jesus requires for those who would come to him is to cry out desperately and determinedly for salvation: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Son of David, have mercy on me!” This plea holds two contrasting implications. For one, none of us is good enough to be above desperate need for mercy. For the other, any of us who admits the obvious and cries out desperately for mercy will receive it. Jesus responds to the blind man, and through him, to all who cry out for mercy today: “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” Notably, the word which the NIV legitimately translates ‘healed’ is actually a *double entendre*: it also means ‘saved’. Salvation comes to all who recognize their desperate need, and who cry out to Jesus.

Day 3: Luke 18:35-43 What is the appropriate response to grace?

Given the current state of American Christianity, and its widespread

distortion of 'grace', we do well to note that the account does not end with the healing, or with Jesus' announcement of salvation. Instead, Luke continues, recording the man's response to his healing and salvation: "Immediately he ... followed Jesus, praising God." Jesus offers no solace to presumptuous faith which greedily consumes divine blessing without reciprocating with love, worship, and obedience. He freely offers grace, forgiveness, and love; we do nothing to merit or earn his blessings. But it is deadly wrong to suppose, that grace permits us to consume blessing without reciprocation. A faith which produces no works is no true faith, both Protestant and Catholic forefathers insisted, but only a pale imitation and a dead pretense. Luke – and Jesus – concur.

Day 4: Luke 19:1-10 Who is invited?

The main character in the second case study differs from the first in one respect: he is rich, not a beggar. But in the other respect he is in even a worse situation: he is not just marginalized, he is despised. This second character is genuinely despicable for two reasons. First, he is a tax collector. That is far worse in ancient Palestine than in contemporary America. Though a Jew, he collaborates with the hated Roman occupying force, collecting taxes from his countrymen in order to finance their oppression. Secondly, in doing so, he has grown rich. Luke does not have to spell out the obvious, but, given our distance from those events we may need to do so: government officials who grow rich, in ancient times as in modern, are typically exploitive and corrupt. So we see that Jesus welcomes the blind and impoverished into the kingdom of God; he also welcomes the exploitive and corrupt. (This latter point may worry us some, but it is offset by tomorrow's reading.) Apparently the only people excluded from the kingdom of God are those who consider themselves in no need of it, or good enough to qualify for it.

This affords hope both to those who feel unworthy, and to those who are genuinely unworthy. Jesus explicitly comes 'to seek and save' not the virtuous, but 'the lost'. Ironically, recognizing one's own disqualification is actually the primary requisite for salvation.

Day 5: Luke 19:1-10 What's required?

What does Zacchaeus do to warrant salvation? Pretty much what the blind man had done: he extended himself to connect with Jesus. The blind man had shouted out, and then when hushed, shouted out all the louder. Zacchaeus is obstructed from Jesus for a different reason: he is not blind, but short. So he forfeits his own dignity as a wealthy adult, hitches up his

robe, and climbs a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus walking by. Jesus sees his interest and determination, and responds. Zacchaeus receives far more than he could ever hope: not only a glimpse of Jesus, but a visit from him, and an opportunity to play host, an undeserved honor for a person of dubious occupation and questionable ethics. Both blind man and tax collector pursue Jesus, despite natural disability and social disapproval. In short, the only prerequisite for a relationship with Jesus is acknowledging one's need and crying out for help.

Which all serves to reinforce – and to underscore – the lesson drawn from the preceding account. The blind man bore no culpability for his condition; the tax collector does. Still, whether due to misfortune or to unethical conduct, those who seek relief need only acknowledge their inability to save themselves, and turn to Jesus: “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” The tax collector's sole qualification was to be lost, to recognize it, and to turn to Jesus for rescue.

Day 6: Luke 19:1-10 What is the appropriate response to grace?

Once again, and all the more so, we find that those who receive salvation do not, and cannot, remain in their previous state of undeservedness. Grace is free, but it is not free from responsibility or ramification. Jesus offers forgiveness freely; Zacchaeus does nothing to merit or to earn his blessings. But it ends up costing him a great deal. He takes two concrete, significant steps in response to the grace he receives from Jesus. First, as a rich man, he pledges half his wealth to the poor. Secondly, as a tax collector, he resolves that anyone whom he has manipulated or exploited, he will now recompense four times as much (four times was the penalty for theft under Old Testament law).

It is wrong to suppose, with much of American Christianity, that salvation is all about mercy and grace, without further entailments. Relationship with Jesus entails more than the forgiveness of sin. It includes the transformation of character, the restitution of wrongs committed, and a compassion for those in need. A faith which seeks forgiveness without repentance or restitution is no real faith, but a pretense designed to condone sin. Grace brings us forgiveness, but more: it empowers us to turn from sin, to honor God, and to treat others rightly and generously.

How has coming to faith changed how you live?

How might it further seek to change how you live?