

One Fewer Leper in the Camp (Luke 5:8-16)

Sunday school September 18, 2016

I want to call your attention to **READ Luke 5:1-11**. We did most of these verses last week, so let me just summarize and review. We noted that the event described here is not Simon Peter's first contact with Jesus, and the same is probably true for James and John. Simon's brother Andrew had first brought him to Jesus (John 1 tells us that), and Jesus had stayed at Simon's house and healed his mother-in-law probably only a few days earlier. So they had already met Jesus and figured out that He was the Christ before this incident. We noted in verse 3 that Simon owned his own ship, and therefore by fisherman standards he was a very successful commercial fisherman. That becomes important when we get down to the end of this block of text.

Then in verses 4-7 we have the great draught, or catch, of fish they obtained when they let down the net at Jesus' word. I commented last week that they had good reasons for not letting the net down: they had the wrong kind of net for day fishing, and by their experience the previous night there were not many fish to be caught in this area. They had fished all night with the right net for night fishing and caught nothing. But Peter says in verse 5, "nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net." That is, in spite of the very good reasons I have for not doing this, when you tell me to do it, I'll do it. This speaks to the authority of God's word. It had authority in Peter's life, and it should have authority in our lives too. If God's word says do it, nothing else matters, we do it. If His word says don't do it, nothing else matters, we don't do it. That's the last application I made last time.

Transition: So let's start by finishing up the last few verses, and then we will move on to some new text. Let me hand out outlines. Last item from this text...

III. A Great Choice READ v. 8-11 As a result of the great catch of fish, Peter's initial reaction in verse 8 is to admit his sinfulness. He says, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." That's a very normal reaction when you first realize how holy and powerful God is. In Genesis chapter 18, when Abraham is talking to God and "negotiating" on behalf of the people of Sodom, he says in verse 27, "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes:" Abraham was a wealthy man, but when he communed with God he realized that, relative to God, he was dust and ashes. Job, who Pastor taught on a few Wednesday nights ago, had a similar reaction. After God answered him out of the whirlwind, in Job 42:5, 6, Job said, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Job realized God was always right, and therefore he was wrong. There's also the case of Isaiah. After receiving a vision in the temple where the angels cried, "holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts," Isaiah responded in Isa. 6:5, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

Peter has that kind of moment here: he realizes the miracle that just happened and thereby realizes that he is in the presence of God. As a result, even though he is a successful commercial fisherman, he realizes his sinfulness. You've probably heard the phrase that you have to get lost before you can get saved. Most people have to realize their own inadequacy before they will trust Jesus. I was that way. When I was a kid, I thought I was good. I was an honor student, never got a lunch detention. Every teacher said, "I'd love to have entire class just like David." And several times at the end of a junior church service, the speaker would say, "with heads bowed and eyes closed, raise your hand if you just asked Jesus to come into your heart." I raised my hand on two or three different occasions because I had no idea what I was doing. Then in the summer after my fifth grade year I realized that, no matter how good I was, I am not holy like God is. Relative to God, I was a very sinful person. That's when I stopped trusting my own goodness and started trusting Jesus. Most people never come to that point until they realize how sinful they are.

After this realization, Peter, James, and John started following Jesus. There are two things at the end of this passage that indicate a clean break from what they were doing and the start of a new life following Christ. First, in verse 10, Christ tells Peter, "Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men." That is, from this point forward, you're not going to spend your life catching fish. You're going to spend it catching men, that is, leading people to me. Although that line is directly addressed to Peter, we see that because all three started following Him it applied to James and John as well, and it also applies to us. After we trust Christ, the main thing for us to do is not gainful employment or making a name for yourself. The main thing for us to do is lead people to Him. "Henceforth thou shalt catch men."

Second, notice the last phrase of verse 11, "they forsook *all*, and followed him." Remember Peter was commercially a very successful fisherman. He had to give up an entire successful career to follow Jesus. That's one of the great problems in the general church in the United States today. We are a very prosperous nation, not as prosperous as we were 10-20 years ago, but still very prosperous. A lot of Christians are not willing to give up that economic prosperity to follow Him. When I lived in Ohio, there was a young businessman in his late 20's who was a member of my church in Ohio. He was a very prosperous up-and-coming businessman. On the subject of alcohol, our church believed in abstinence from alcohol as we do, but he would say, "I only drink when I am entertaining clients." He was thinking, probably correctly, that he would advance his career by social drinking. He never really accomplished much for God because he wouldn't forsake his economic success to follow God. A few people can have both success in this world and be followers of God, but most can't. I Cor. 1:26 says, "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:" There are a few, but not many. Most people have to choose: do you want success in this world, or do you want to follow God?

I did kind of the exact opposite what that young businessman did. When I was in my early 20's working in accounting, I made a goal purely in the flesh to be a millionaire by age 40. I turn 40 next month, and I can say at this point with a high level of confidence that I won't be a millionaire by age 40. If I had stuck with accounting, I probably would be because I was a pretty successful accountant. Instead I spent 8 years in graduate school earning a fraction of what I did in accounting to follow God's calling on my life to teach math at a Christian university. I don't mean to put myself on a pedestal, but I am very proud of that decision: I wouldn't go back to full time accounting now even if I could. There's a famous song we sometimes sing that I am sure you all know: "I Surrender All." We sing it a lot at invitation time at the end of the service, but it's not really a song for the lost. It's mainly a song for the saved. Peter, James, and John forsook all to follow Jesus. We need to do the same.

One final thought on this text: Peter, James, and John knew Jesus before they started following Him. There's a difference between knowing God (being saved) and following God. Knowing God is a one-time decision. You choose one time to trust in His payment for your sins and you're saved forever. Following God is a daily choice to forsake all but Him. I don't want to just know God; I want to follow God, and I want you to do the same.

Transition: So now let's move on to some new text. **READ Luke 5:12-16** This event, which is also recorded in Matthew 8:1-4 and Mark 1:40-45, continues the string of healings that we studied a few weeks ago back in chapter 4. First we had the unclean spirit cast out in Luke 4:33-37. Then we had the fever departing Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Now we have the cleansing of a leper. This incident is a little different than the first two because leprosy is a disease about which much is written in the Old Testament Jewish law. All of these people around Him at this point were Jews, so to understand some of what goes on here, you first have to understand some things about leprosy in the Jewish law. So if you would please, keep a finger here in Luke 5, and flip back with me all the way to the Old Testament to Leviticus chapter 13. There are two chapters in Leviticus devoted to leprosy, chapters 13 and 14. Both chapters are long (59 and 57 verses, respectively), so I don't want to read all of them. But there are a couple of things I want you to notice.

- The key phrase in these chapters is "pronounce him unclean" and its conjugate "pronounce him clean." Those phrases describe the action of the priest, and they appear over and over again in these two chapters. For example, **READ v. 3, v. 6, v. 8**. The thing I am trying to get you to see is that all the priest is told to do is look on the leper's situation, and based on his observation make a pronouncement: clean or unclean. Nowhere is the priest ever instructed to engage in any kind of therapy or treatment to cleanse the leper of his leprosy. He just looks at the symptoms and makes a declaration, clean or unclean.
- The other thing I want you to see is **READ v. 46**. So lepers were social outcasts. They couldn't come into the camp and live with the rest of the people because leprosy was contagious. They had to live in alone outside the camp. There's a lot more about leprosy in these two chapters, but to understand what is going on in Luke, those are the two things you need.

So armed with that knowledge, let's attack our main text now back in Luke chapter 5. First, we have...

I. Cleansing the Leper READ v. 12-13 The fact that this event happened "in a certain city" is interesting because, as we saw in Leviticus 13:46, lepers were not allowed in cities. So by the letter of the law this leper shouldn't have been there, but Jesus doesn't seem to care. He just does His usual thing and makes the leper's life better. The leper says at the end of verse 12, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean." Notice he said "make me clean," not just "pronounce me clean." He's asking for a healing. Some of the liberals who want to deny that Jesus did any miracles try to make this into a pronouncement. They say, "Jesus didn't actually heal Him; He just pronounced that he was already healed." There are a few problems with that. First, the people ordered by the Jewish law to make that kind of a pronouncement were the Aaronic priests, and Jesus was not a priest after the order of Aaron. Also, look at the words. The leper asks in verse 12 "make me clean." In verse 13, Jesus responds, "I will: be thou clean." That's a command from God that effects the action, not an affirmation of his current state. At the end of the verse, you see the result: "And immediately the leprosy departed from him." This is a cleansing, not a pronouncement.

Transition: Next point...

II. Harmony with the Law READ v. 14 In this verse, Jesus charges him, or commands him, to do what the word of God says to do now that he is cleansed, namely to be pronounced clean by the priest. This is an example of how Jesus never taught contrary to God's word. Last Sunday evening, Pastor preached on the woman caught in adultery in John chapter 8. Do you remember what He told her at the end of their meeting? "Go, and sin no more." Jesus was always compassionate on sinners: He was compassionate on the woman caught in adultery, and He's compassionate on the leper (he should not have been in the city, but Jesus heals him anyway). But He never condoned sin, and He never commanded anyone to do anything contrary to God's word.

One last thing to note in that verse: notice the last phrase "for a testimony unto them." The Jews believed, correctly I would say, that only God can cure leprosy. In II Kings chapter 5, when Naaman the Syrian becomes a leper, the King of Syria writes a letter to Jehoram King of Israel asking him to heal Naaman of his leprosy. Jehoram's response was to rend his clothes and say, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy?" That's II Kings 5:7. So if Jesus cured this man's leprosy, and only God can cure leprosy, then Jesus must be God. That's the testimony unto them, the Jewish priests and leaders. Jesus spent a lot of time during His earthly ministry trying to convince the Jewish leaders who He was, and you see one such attempt here.

Transition: Last point for this week...

III. Interaction and Prayer READ v. 15-16 In spite of the fact that He had told the former leper to tell no man, Jesus' fame starts to spread. These two verses tell us about His interaction with the multitudes (verse 15) and His alone time in prayer with God. I mentioned before that Jesus praying is one of the major themes of Luke, and this is the second time that comes up. The first was at His baptism. This time He goes into the wilderness, which in this part of the world would be the desert. I also like to pray in the wilderness, though for me it's usually out in the forest on a hike. Yesterday after our outing at Caesars Head I went hiking in Jones Gap. I got out there along the Upper Saluda River, sat down on a rock, ate a granola bar, and just thought how beautiful God's creation is. I like doing that. I like to be up on this ridge, talking with God.

Conclusion

As a final thought for this week, we all need time to do both of the things Jesus does in verses 15 and 16: interact with people and time alone with God. Scripture commands both of these. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" is interacting with other people, in particular God's people. Praying without ceasing is time alone with God. Jesus needed them to accomplish His mission, and we need them to accomplish ours too.