

Luke 5:17-39: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 5 verses 17 to 39. On one of those days as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem, and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.

And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralysed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus. But finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. And when he saw their faith, he said, Man, your sins are forgiven you. And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?

When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven you, or to say, rise and walk?

But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He said to the man who was paralysed, I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.

[1 : 08] And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on, and went home, glorifying God. And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, We have seen extraordinary things today.

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, Follow me. And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his house.

And there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

And Jesus answered them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. And they said to him, The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.

And Jesus said to them, Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days. He also told them a parable.

[2 : 20] No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins.

If he does, the new wine will birth the skins, and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one, after drinking old wine, desires new. For he says, The old is good. In the second half of Luke chapter 5, Jesus performs a healing, followed by a series of confrontations with and questions from the religious authorities.

The same sequence of events is found in Matthew chapter 9, and also in Mark chapter 2. And here, for the first time in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' conflict with the religious leaders is coming to the foreground.

It's the first time that we see the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in the context of Jesus' ministry. While Jesus is teaching and healing, some men bring to him a paralytic on a bed.

[3 : 19] And the crowd is so great that they cannot approach him, so they have to remove the tiled roof above him and lower the man down to him. They overcome the obstacles of the crowd and the roof to reach Jesus.

Their faith in this instance is seen in their persistence and their confidence that Christ has the power and the willingness to heal, and their refusal to let anything stand in the way of reaching him. Jesus responds to their faith by declaring the sins of the paralysed man forgiven. To this point in Luke, we might have even got the impression that Jesus' ministry was primarily about healings and exorcisms.

But here we see an act of forgiveness. And in that act of forgiveness, some aspect of Jesus' ministry that goes beyond healing and exorcism is revealed.

There is a far more powerful work of salvation that's taking place here. The scribes and the Pharisees, however, think that he's blaspheming. He's claiming a prerogative that is God's alone. To forgive sins, surely that's only something that God can do.

[4 : 19] Who can forgive sins but God alone? And Jesus recognises what's in their hearts. And his response is to demonstrate his authority by healing the man. That healing is not the greater act.

The greater act and the central act is the act of forgiveness. And that is part of the surprise of this chapter. We think that the central event will be the healing of the paralysed man.

But the healing of the paralysed man takes place almost as an afterthought, as a demonstration of the deeper healing that has taken place within. That two-stage healing is an inward, then an outward healing.

The outward healing as a sign of the inward healing. And this helps us to understand Jesus' ministry more generally. Jesus' ministry of external healing, of exorcism, and these sorts of things, are signs of the coming kingdom.

A kingdom that reaches far deeper in the salvation that it brings. Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of Man. The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

[5 : 18] Jesus is acting in this particular capacity. The Son of Man is a figure of eschatological significance. But he's not just a judge. He's also someone who brings forgiveness. The Son of Man in Daniel chapter 7 was one given great authority.

One who would judge and rule. But Jesus presents the establishment of the kingdom and the authority of the Son of Man as being exercised in part through forgiveness. The physical healings demonstrate Christ's authority and are signs of the deeper healing that's taking place.

The work that Jesus is accomplishing, however, is not just that of an itinerant healer. Rather, he is the one who is the Son of Man bringing the eschatological kingdom and bringing forgiveness to God's people.

And the response of the people is that they are filled with amazement and awe. That they glorify God for the works that he is doing. That they are witnessing. Some time after this, Jesus sees Levi sitting at the tax booth as a tax collector.

In Matthew's Gospel, we're told that the tax collector was Matthew and presumably Levi is another name by which he goes. The tax collectors were despised for collaborating with the Romans and also for their injustice.

[6 : 28] They dealt closely with the Gentiles and they dealt with an imperial oppressor. And they would be seen as complicit in that oppression. An oppression that had a religious significance not merely in the way that it mistreated the poor but also in the way that it held the people of God in bondage.

And so for Jesus to eat, not just with Levi, but with a great company of tax collectors, would be seen as a matter of considerable scandal. One of the themes that will become apparent as we go through the book of Luke is the importance of meals and the events that happen at tables.

Jesus is redefining Israel around the meal table. The meal table is, among other things, an anticipation of that great wedding feast. And as in the story of the paralytic, we need to see some of the deeper themes of Jesus' ministry come to the surface here.

In the story of the paralytic, it's the importance of forgiveness and the way in which the healings are pointing towards a deeper healing that Christ is accomplishing. Here we need to see the way that Christ is gathering the lost sheep of the house of Israel, those who need a physician, those who are sinners and sick, and he is bringing restoration and forgiveness to them.

Following this, Jesus is questioned concerning fasting. Fasting would be a standard religious practice of Jewish groups and the fact that Jesus' disciples abstain from it is surprising.

[7 : 47] Surely a great rabbi like Jesus would teach his disciples to fast regularly. But fasting is a matter of timing. You fast in preparation for the feast. And when the bridegroom is on the scene, fasting would be a great failure to realise what time you're in.

Christ is the bridegroom. God has visited his people in Christ and those who appreciate this visitation will feast and celebrate. The time, however, will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them and then they will fast.

While there were anticipations of Christ's death in the statement of Simeon in his presentation in the temple and also on the occasion when his parents lost him in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover, here, however, it is turning up in Jesus' own teaching.

Jesus' teaching concerning the new and the old garments and the new wine and the old wineskins expresses something of the insufficiency of the old structures containing the new work that he is bringing about.

Jesus' teaching is not that the old is bad or to be rejected, but rather that it cannot contain the new thing that he is bringing. Christ fulfills the law, but in a way that goes beyond the constraining structures of the law.

[8 : 57] If you try to contain the new wine of Jesus' ministry in the old wine of the practices of the disciples of John the Baptist or the Pharisees and the other practices of the law, it would burst those old wineskins.

Likewise, if you took the fabric of the kingdom and used it to patch the old reality of Israel, it would tear and both would be the worst for it. No, Jesus is bringing something new that cannot be reduced to, contained by, or constrained by the reality that has gone beforehand.

It fulfills it, but it cannot be circumscribed by it. The final statement of this passage, and no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says the old is good, is probably an ironic statement.

In this statement, Jesus is probably commenting upon the way that people are rejecting him and the new wine of the kingdom because of their failure to see beyond the old wine of the old covenant. A question to consider, how might Jesus' miraculous turning of the water into wine in the wedding in Cana in John chapter 2 shed light upon this particular passage and vice versa?