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LUKE

THE NIV
APPLICATION
COMMENTARY

From biblical text . . . to contemporary life

DARRELL L. BOCK



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Luke 5:1–32



ONE DAY AS Jesus was standing by the Lake of Genesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, ²he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

⁵Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

⁶When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

⁸When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" ⁹For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." ¹¹So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

¹²While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

¹³Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.

¹⁴Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

¹⁵Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. ¹⁶But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

¹⁷One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. ¹⁸Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. ¹⁹When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

²⁰When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

²¹The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

²²Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? ²³Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?' ²⁴But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ²⁵Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. ²⁶Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

²⁷After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, ²⁸and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

²⁹Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. ³⁰But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

³¹Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ³²I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."



THIS LARGE LUCAN unit describes Jesus' gathering together a band of followers, the disciples (meaning "learners"), whom he will train. They come from various vocations of life: fishermen, tax collectors, political zealots, and ordinary folk. In these "call scenes," Jesus takes

sinners and transforms them into instruments for God's use.¹ Jesus also continues to exercise his authority, particularly in forgiving sins and doing good on the Sabbath—actions that raise opposition to his ministry.

Call of the First Disciples

THE FIRST CALL scene is Luke 5:1–11. Sometimes service for Jesus starts out rather innocently. Just ask Peter. In a text that is probably a distinct event from Matthew 4:18–22 and Mark 1:16–20, Jesus issues a call to Peter and some of his companions for their future in ministry.²

The entire episode is both surprising and revealing. The crowds are pressing around Jesus at the Sea of Gennesaret (Sea of Galilee). On the shore are some fishermen, cleaning their nets. To avoid the crush, Jesus decides to get on Simon's boat and pushes out from the shore a little so that he can address the crowds. Jesus' teaching has become popular. If this were an average ancient fishing boat, it would have been twenty to thirty feet long.³

After teaching, Jesus tells Peter to head out and go fishing. Note the irony. Here is a carpenter's son and itinerant preacher telling a fishermen it is time to fish! Conditions were certainly not right for fishing, as Peter notes. Not only is it still daylight, since Jesus has just finished preaching, but the previous night has been a waste. Nevertheless at Jesus' word, Peter agrees to cast the nets. This indicates potential in Peter, for he responds to Jesus' leading.

The effort is successful, almost too much so. The boat overflows with fish and begins to sink. Peter calls out to James and John for help. The nets are breaking, and fish are spilling out everywhere. In the rush, something profound dawns on Peter. What has taken place is no accident; only an agent of God could have produced such a catch in the middle of the day.

Knocked off his task of saving his boat and collecting his fish, Peter bows before Jesus. In words full of respect and awe, he asks Jesus to depart. The premise behind this remark is that a man of God surely would want to have nothing to do with an everyday sinner. Peter does not feel worthy of Jesus' blessing or of making such an acquaintance. He believes that God works

1. Call scenes appear in 5:1–11, 27–39; 6:12–16.

2. This passage's relationship to the calls in Matthew and Mark is not entirely clear. The Lucan event seems to be a distinct and confirmatory event, since the activity of the fishermen differs slightly (washing versus mending nets), the nets described are possibly different (Luke refers to deep sea nets, Mark to shallow fishing nets), and Andrew is not mentioned here. Luke's greater detail does indicate why a disciple felt Jesus' call was compelling.

3. Stein, *Luke*, 169; S. Wachsmann, "The Galilee Boat—2,000-Year-Old Hull Recovered Intact," *BAR* 14 (1988): 18–33.

with and uses only the pious. It is too dangerous to be a sinner and to be in God's presence.

What Peter does not realize is that admitting one's inability and sin is the best prerequisite for service, since then one can depend on God. Peter's confession becomes his résumé for service. Humility is the elevator to spiritual greatness. So Jesus replies by telling Peter not to fear. It is one thing to be a sinner and deny it. It is another to know who you are before God and humbly bow before him.

Thereupon Jesus notes that Peter will start catching men. Jesus does two things with this remark. (1) He issues a call to Peter to enter into the process of gathering people and rescuing them from the danger of a fallen world. Unlike fish, which are caught to be flayed and devoured, Peter will catch people and bring them into life. Boats and nets will no longer be his tools; instead, God's word will. Jesus reverses a normally negative figure and makes it into a positive one, just as he is transforming Peter's role of service. For Jesus, only sinners who know they are sinners in need of help can enter his service. Rather than being unworthy, Peter is ready to serve with him.

(2) The miraculous catch indicates how miracles are pictures or metaphors of spiritual realities. The miraculous catch of fish produces the metaphorical call to catch people. Jesus' prophetic leading and insight powerfully illustrate his call, indicating graphically the mission Peter has before him.

The disciples respond to Jesus' call by leaving all and following him. That was the last time they spent the day just as fishermen. Jesus changes people's priorities. A call to ministry transcends their previous vocation.

Two Healing Miracles

AFTER THIS INITIAL call, Luke relates two miracles that present further details about Jesus' authority (5:12–26) and compassion. By working with a leper and a paralytic, he shows how he can cleanse physical ailments as well as restore people to a walk with God. Both miracle stories illustrate the redemptive goals of Jesus' work, reinforcing his teaching. This section also records the first organized opposition of Jesus' leadership, which centers on Jesus' claim to forgive sin. Since only God can make such claims, the question of Jesus' authority becomes more central to the flow of events in this Gospel. Furthermore, just as the miracles in 4:31–44 set up Peter's response in 5:1–11, so these miracles serve as a backdrop to the call to Levi in 5:27–32.⁴ Jesus' ministry opens people up to be responsive to him. Finally, Jesus' ministry

4. C. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 63. The parallels to these healings are Matthew 8:1–4 and Mark 1:40–45 (for the leper) and Matthew 9:1–8 and Mark 2:1–12 (for the paralytic).

here also illustrates the nature of the times, since Judaism believed that healing would accompany the messianic days.⁵

Luke introduces the first healing by mentioning that Jesus is “in one of the towns.” He is venturing to other parts of Galilee, as he said he must do (4:43–44). A man full of leprosy approaches him. The term *lepra* can refer to a wide array of diseases.⁶ It produces lesions or other swollen areas on the skin. Sometimes it attacks the nervous system. It includes not only Hansen’s disease, but psoriasis, lupus, ringworm, and favus. The Old Testament gave specific instructions about identifying its presence and how to declare someone clean who had recovered from the condition (Lev. 13–14). To have the disease meant ostracism (Lev. 13:45–46; 2 Kings 7:3), for anyone with this condition had to announce it to others by shouting, “Unclean! Unclean!” Having this disease led to social isolation, not unlike what some AIDS victims experience today. Jesus’ ministry to a leper therefore reveals his attention to the outcasts of society, demonstrating that such people can have access to God’s blessing.

The man approaches Jesus with humility, bowing before him. His request raises the question of Jesus’ willingness to heal, not his capability.⁷ In fact, the leper assumes Jesus can do it. Perhaps he feels beyond the reach of God’s mercy, so he expresses himself timidly. The very fact that he has approached and addressed Jesus at all has taken great courage.

Jesus responds to the leper’s request by declaring his willingness and announcing that he is cleansed. Jesus also touches him, showing the tender touch of compassion and acceptance to a man who could not be touched by others (cf. Lev. 14:46; cf. *Mishnah, Nega’im* 3:1; 11:1; 12:1; 13:6–12), and he is restored whole immediately. The picture of redemption should not be missed. Those who turn to Jesus for cleansing receive it from him because he willingly gives it.

Jesus tells the man to go to the priest and not say anything to anyone. Understandably, the man must follow the legal requirements of Leviticus 14, but why the command to silence is given is not clear. Perhaps Jesus does not want anything said until the requirements before the priest are met, and he wants to discourage undue attention to his miraculous work (Luke 4:35, 41; 8:56; see also Matt. 9:30; 12:16; Mark 1:34; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26).⁸ According to the law, this testimony before the priest will take a week. The

5. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, 276; Jubilees 23:26–30; 1 Enoch 5:8–9; 96:3; 2 Esdras 7:123; 2 Baruch 29:7.

6. Michaelis, “λέπρα,” *TDNT*, 4:233–34.

7. Luke uses a third class Greek condition at the end of verse 12 to express the man’s uncertainty as to whether Jesus might act.

8. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 209; Plummer, *Luke*, 149–50.

ritual pictured the cleansing and removal of sin, so even the follow-up program for the leper reinforces the message of what Jesus has done. The fact that the testimony is for the priests is not surprising, given their need to understand what Jesus represents.

But despite Jesus’ efforts to control the news, reports go out anyway, spreading throughout the land. Though Jesus is in Galilee, news spreads as far south as Judea and Jerusalem. These reports explain why the Jewish leadership is present at the next event.

Luke bridges the two miracle stories and the hectic pace Jesus is leading by noting that he stops for prayer (5:16). In the quietness that comes privately after a rapid rush of events comes the solace and gaining of perspective that keeps Jesus close to God. Luke regularly notes such commitments to prayer (3:21; 6:12; 9:18, 28–29; 11:1; 23:46).⁹

The next healing is that of a paralytic man (5:17–26). Mark 2:1 tells us this miracle took place in Capernaum. Pharisees and teachers of the law (better known as scribes) have joined the crowd. The Pharisees were one of four religious parties in Judaism (Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes are the others). They were a nonpriestly, lay separatist movement that tried to stay faithful to the Mosaic Law. They developed many traditions and oral rulings to establish how the Law should be applied in their generation. Such judgments were made by the trained scribes who were a part of the sect.¹⁰ These leaders are now watching Jesus.

The Lord has power to heal (v. 17b). This small narrative note prepares Luke’s readers for what is coming. As Jesus is teaching, a group of men try to bring a paralyzed man to him for healing, but the crowd is too large. Therefore, they go on the roof, either by a ladder or built-in steps that allowed access to the top of an ancient house.¹¹ Working their way through the tiles, they lower the man before Jesus. Getting a hole in the roof would have involved working through a muddy layer above the roof beams.¹²

Jesus sees “their faith,” a remark that is easy to move past. Faith in this text must mean the visible expression of faith, not a mere attitude, since Jesus sees it in the actions of the men. As a result, Jesus acts, giving the man much more than he was seeking. He declares his sins to be forgiven.

A chain reaction follows. The Pharisees and scribes begin to think about the theological implications of what Jesus just said. They know that only

9. A. Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (New York: Harper, 1958), 124.

10. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 212; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 581.

11. S. Safrai, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, sec. 1, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 730–32.

12. Plummer, *Luke*, 153.

God forgives sin; so to claim to do what God does is blasphemy, a slander against God.¹³

Whenever Luke reports what someone is thinking, instruction from Jesus usually follows. Jesus asks the Pharisees to ponder a question that is really a dilemma. Is it easier to declare sins are forgiven or tell a paralytic to get up and walk? Logic tells us it is easier to say one's sins are forgiven, since that cannot be seen; but in fact that is more difficult, since one must have the authority to do that. Then Jesus links the two issues together. He acts so that the audience can know the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins.¹⁴ He tells the man to walk. He enables the hard thing—having the paralyzed man get up and walk—in order to show the even harder thing—the power to forgive sin.

The man gets up and walks away. If God heals only those who are free from sin and if he does not manifest himself through those who make false claims, then why did this man get up? That is the question his walking away poses for the audience. The success of the miracle has narrowed the options. The crowd praises God and recognizes that they have seen wonderful and amazing things through Jesus.

This event reveals one further picture. The ability of the paralyzed man to resume his walk of life is a picture of what Jesus does when he saves. His message is a liberating one.

The Calling of Levi

LUKE 5:27–32 ONCE again reveals a pattern in Jesus' ministry: He reaches out to those on the edge of society. In 5:12–26 it was to those suffering from physical limitations. Now it is to those who are perceived as social outcasts. Jesus calls a despised tax collector, an act that produces a reaction from the religious officials. In Luke 3:10–14, we considered how tax collectors were viewed in Jewish culture—as defectors from Israel and notorious sinners.

13. No Jewish text extant today shows a person forgiving sin. One text is disputed—*The Prayer of Nabonidus* from Qumran (4QPrNab 1.4). However, this text should not be interpreted to mean that the exorcist mentioned in the text forgave sin. See D. Bock, "The Son of Man in Luke 5:24," *BBR* 1 (1991): 109–21, esp. 117, n. 26.

14. A later Jewish text in the Talmud, *Nedarim* 41a reads, "No one gets up from his sick bed until all his sins are forgiven." The "Son of Man" title is debated and involves a series of complex questions. At this early point in Jesus' ministry, the term is simply a way for Jesus to refer to himself. It is Jesus' favorite title for himself, probably because it refers to a human figure who possesses supernatural authority. Later he will reveal that the imagery comes from Daniel 7:13–14. For more on the Son of Man title, see Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, excursus 6. The Son of Man image in Daniel describes a human figure who bears authority from God and who rides the clouds as God does.

The question faced here is whether Jesus and his disciples should practice a type of separatism like that of the Pharisees. This is a consistent issue of contention in Luke (15:1–32; 18:9–14; 19:1–10; also Matt. 20:13–16).¹⁵ What Levi represents is the successful outcome of a call to repentance summarized in the passage's commentary (5:31–32).¹⁶

Sometime after the healing of the paralytic, Jesus goes out and spots a tax collector at his toll booth, whose job is to collect the surcharge as people travel from city to city. Jesus initiates the entire encounter, a significant point since his taking the initiative with such people is controversial. He calls Levi to "follow" him, a frequent call of Jesus (9:23, 59; 18:22; cf. 5:10–11). In effect, Jesus is asking him to become a disciple. Just as sinners can enter into an intimate relationship with God (5:10–11), so can tax collectors. In other words, *anyone* who responds to Jesus can receive a blessing. Levi responds to the invitation, leaving his vocation and financial security behind to follow Jesus.

Levi then throws Jesus "a great banquet," a feast.¹⁷ Invited to the table are Levi's circle of notorious friends, "tax collectors and others," whom the Pharisees call sinners in verse 30. Levi has now turned his resources over to reveal his new relationship with Jesus to his friends. He points them to this different type of religious leader, one who seeks out those who have been separated from God.

The associations Jesus makes causes other religious figures to raise questions. They take their complaints to the disciples. The Greek term *egongyzon* ("complained") is a graphic, even emotive term, where one can hear the complaints even in the sounds of the word.¹⁸ The complaint is direct and clear: "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" In ancient culture, to sit at the table communicated an acceptance, thus frequently subjecting Jesus to a charge (5:33; 7:33–34). The Pharisees, on the other hand, avoided sinners in order to avoid the suggestion that they endorsed the sinner. The two perspectives cannot be more opposite. The Pharisees prefer a level of quarantine from sinners; Jesus prefers to aim for recovery of the

15. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 589; Michel, "τελώνης," *TDNT*, 8:105. Fitzmyer details how the Pharisees viewed such associations with contempt.

16. The parallel to this text includes Matthew 9:9–13 and Mark 2:13–17. The tax collector in Matthew is named Matthew. This has raised a question whether this is the same event. Most equate the two figures, since the accounts are so agreed in the details and since of the Twelve, only Matthew-Levi is a tax collector. Double names are also common in this culture; Acts 1:23; 4:36; 12:25; 13:9; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.2.2 § 35.

17. On the term "banquet," see Gen. 21:8; 26:30; Est. 1:3; Luke 14:13; Grundmann, "δοχή," *TDNT*, 2:54.

18. The Greek version of the Old Testament also used this word to describe Israel's complaints in the desert (Ex. 15:24; 16:7–8; Num. 14:2, 26–35; 16:11).

sinner. His action suggests that the separationism the Pharisees advocate does not honor God.

Jesus then gives the theological and missiological rationale for his actions. The image he uses is fundamental in pointing out the issues. Jesus notes that a healthy person does not seek a physician; the sick do. So Jesus' mission is not to call the healthy but the sick "to repentance." The picture of a doctor is a well-known ancient metaphor (2 Chron. 16:12; Isa. 3:7; Jer. 8:22; Sir. 10:10; 38:1–15).¹⁹

The image is strong. When I go to the doctor, I know several things: I am sick, I need help, and I cannot help myself. In other words, Jesus' call goes out to those who realize they need help. To seek out sinners is to go to people who recognize they are not all they can be. But Jesus does not go to offer placebos. Rather, he calls them to repent. As we saw in 3:7–14, repentance means a change of direction, a turning that manifests itself in a difference. So Jesus calls on those who are not well to get better by coming into the grace God offers them. If they desire to know God, the Lord will not reject them, but will begin the process that will make them well.

Jesus reaches out to sinners because he sees the potential for their being renewed through God's grace. Jesus knows such change does not happen when those who seek sinners isolate themselves. His mission is to regain the lost by going to them, as he does here with Levi.

Bridging Contexts

THE RESPONSES TO Jesus in this text lie at the heart of its teaching. We begin with Peter's response to the call of the Lord to cast his nets. Though humble in character, he misunderstands

how God works with those who understand their failings and turn to him. He feels that as a sinner he has no chance with God. Jesus shows him that this sense of being less than God and less than holy is precisely what God can work with. The important thing is what happens after one experiences a sense of helplessness upon confronting God. Jesus cannot have a disciple, a "learner," until one realizes there is much to learn!

The call and mission of Peter are no different from the call and mission of the church or of the individuals within the church. Peter is the representative disciple here, much more than he is one of the twelve. Though the call is issued to Peter, all those present leave their boats (v. 11). This literary shift from "you will catch men" to "they . . . left everything" shows that the call is not unique.

19. Schrenk, "δικαίος," TDNT, 2:189; Priesker, "μισθός," TDNT, 4:717.

The response of leaving everything, however, implies another question. Must all disciples leave their vocations to serve Jesus? How is the call to believers like and unlike this call to Peter? The answer to that question emerges in the history of the church. As the New Testament letters show, not everyone is called into full-time ministry. In fact, Paul kept right on working as a tentmaker as he ministered. The important element is that the call to walk with Jesus takes on a priority, so that we are prepared to be whatever or wherever God calls us to be. For some, like the healed Gerasene demoniac, it means staying home to testify to Jesus (8:38–39). For others it means traveling with Jesus. For some, it may mean the mission field; for others, it may mean the mission field at their daily job or in a parachurch ministry. The mission is "catching men." Sometimes one's work is the best place to find the fish, while church is not.

The import of Peter's three responses during the catch reflect emotions that span the centuries: casting out his net, bowing before Jesus, and leaving all to follow him. Peter shows the way to fruitful response to Jesus' call and presence. We should consider his responses carefully. The idea of a fisherman taking instructions on fishing from a teacher of religion would be humorous, if the surprising results did not end up so overwhelming. Especially insightful is to probe why Peter felt he was a sinner when the catch came in. Was it because, although he cast the nets, he did so with a lack of faith that a catch would really come? It is hard to be sure, but to Peter's credit, he did follow the Lord's direction. We should be willing to follow the Lord's leading, even if it looks on the surface as if we will have a difficult, unfruitful task.

The text also reveals Jesus' special insight and gifts. He understands and controls the mission he will launch. He does not need people who will direct him but people who will serve him. In addition, he is capable of directing them on how they can best serve him. If he can direct the disciples, he certainly is able to direct us through his Spirit as we depend on him (Eph. 6:18–20).

The fishing metaphor is an appropriate one for evangelism. Catching fish is by no means automatic, as Peter's outing the night before showed. Much preparation is needed in going out for the catch, and much labor is required, especially in the ancient world where fishermen worked with large nets. Often the kind of fishing Peter engaged in took teamwork. It is no accident that our Lord chose this metaphor to describe the task.

Regarding the two miracles in Luke 5:12–26, we have already argued (4:31–44) that performing miracles as a function of a gifted ministry is not to be sought today. Yet the compassion expressed here through these miracles does provide a meaningful bridge. Jesus heals outsiders and commends the faith of those whom he heals. That is, Jesus ministers to a wide segment

of the population, including those ostracized by society at large. In addition, though Jesus does not explain why he acts to forgive the paralytic's sin, the text reveals that the faith expressed by those who approached Jesus led him to act. This text is the first of several that will highlight the importance of faith. Faith here is not mere intellectual trust or a mere attitude; it expresses itself in the intent to get near to Jesus.

A major concern of the miracles is the question of Jesus' identity. What is significant is the way Jesus boxes in the options. He argues that the miracle shows he has the authority to forgive sin. The opponents insist that only God can forgive sin. If the man gets up and his sin is truly forgiven, then what does that make Jesus? The options are limited here and in 11:14–23. God is dishonored when someone claims to do something in his name they cannot do, but what if God vindicates their claim?

Issues of healing were important in the first century, because the ability to care for the sick was limited, given a lack of quality medical care such as we have today. Serious cases often appealed for the help of a prophet like Jesus. Interestingly, the care of doctors was discussed in Judaism. Was it an affront to faith to seek the care of doctors? The ancient Jewish book of Sirach 38:1–4 reads as follows:

Honor physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; for their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are rewarded by the king. The skill of physicians makes them distinguished, and in the presence of the great they are admired. The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them. (NRSV)

Yet later in the same chapter the text (vv. 9–15) brings in spiritual issues:

My child, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you. Give up faults and direct your hands rightly, and cleanse your heart from all sin. Offer a sweet smelling sacrifice, and a memorial portion of choice flour, and pour oil on your offering, as much as you can afford. Then give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; do not let him leave you, for you need him. There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of physicians, for they too pray to the Lord that he grants them success in diagnosis and in healing, for the sake of preserving life. He who sins against his Maker, will be defiant toward the physician. (NRSV)

Thus in Judaism, it appears as if sin and medical treatment were mixed together. Healing came from the Lord, but a major agent in bringing it was a doctor. When healing took place more directly and instantly, then a prophet was present. Given this background, it is not surprising that Jesus is regarded as a prophet and that the issue of the paralytic raises the topic of sin.

Mortality is a product of fallenness, both in the biblical view and in Judaism, and disease may relate to sin. Today we tend to leave sin out of the health equation, seeing it primarily as a matter of chemicals or biology. While John 9 warns us against always making a sin-health equation, sometimes we are not well because we have lived unwisely. Pushing ourselves hard, the presence of guilt, and escaping to substances are symptoms of deeper questions that lead us to ill health. Still the release from some conditions, like this healing of Jesus, comes only by the grace and sovereign work of God.

The call of Levi in 5:27–32 has one of the most direct bridges of any text in Luke's Gospel. As Jesus' mission was evangelism, so is that of the church. As Jesus possessed a message of salvation and healing for sinners in restoring their relationship to God, so does the church. It is crucial that the church come to see the importance of reaching out to others and initiating that contact. We can learn from how Jesus handled sinners, how sinners reacted to Jesus, and how the Jewish leadership reacted to both.

Concern for appropriate separation is important, but texts like Ephesians 5:7–14 help to sort out how proper separation works. We must separate ourselves from the "deeds of darkness," from the acts of sin, but we must not isolate ourselves from sinners. The function of light is to shine in the midst of darkness. Jesus himself had table fellowship with sinners, an important method of relating in ancient culture. In fact, the Pharisees later complained about these relationships (15:1–2).

The text also teaches us about humility. One danger of piety is the danger of separatism. An excessive form of separatism, such as the Pharisees called for, can kill mission. That is why Jesus responds to the Jewish leadership as he does. Certainly no one cares more about a life of righteousness and moral integrity as our Lord does, but he refuses to get into a type of "appearance of evil" that prevents him from relating to sinners in contexts where such associations do not produce moral compromise. In fact, Jesus takes the initiative in seeking out sinners and calling them to God. In a similar manner, we should be proactive in pursuing the lost.



THE MAJOR APPLICATION in the miracle of the catch of fish centers around Jesus' instructions and Peter's responses. In the midst of teaching many, Jesus calls a few people to more focused service. Peter is one example of such a call. Everyone has a ministry, and all are equal before God, but some are called to serve him directly. Peter has the three necessary qualities Jesus is looking for. He is willing to go where Jesus leads, he is humble, and he is fully committed.

(1) In his willingness to cast out the nets, Peter responds solely on the basis of Jesus' word (v. 5). His professional training told him that there was no chance for a successful catch, but Peter apparently knew enough about Jesus that the latter's insight might just exceed his own. This willingness to follow where Jesus leads may occasionally go against the grain of culture, custom, or common wisdom. Sometimes God takes us in surprising places in surprising ways to stretch us.

Several year ago I took a sabbatical leave in Germany. No one worried about me or my wife, but the standard question was, "What will you do about the kids?" Behind their question was the view that no one should take children of eight, seven, and five years and throw them into a fresh culture so early in their education, even if God calls us there for a time. Our position was different. God had called us to Germany, in part to experience Germany. So we did not look for an English-speaking school. We trusted that God would care for us in a new context. I make this point not to say that everyone who travels overseas should make such a cultural commitment, but to say we felt God was directing us in this decision.

It was amazing how God provided. At the little elementary school in a town of five thousand people where we lived, there was a second language class, so my children attended school not only with German children, but also with children from eight other countries—all learning German starting from the same place. We came during a time when refugees were flooding in from Eastern Europe. These classes were a new venture for this community. My middle daughter walked into a class that had a child from a bilingual family—the mother was from England and the father from Germany. Her teacher was the only one that our children had who did not know any English! But God provided a built-in translator, an eight-year-old bilingual child, who could get things started until my daughter could make it on her own. My older daughter, on the other hand, had to fend for herself. God did not provide in the same way for each child, yet he cared for both of them. In sum, God cared for us in different ways, as we went where he led, fully committed (well, mostly so) to trusting him. As a result of the experience, which was not easy but which taught us much about faith, my children have developed a fascination for people of different cultural backgrounds, something that will benefit them as they serve God in the future.

(2) Peter's humility is also exemplary. God could use Peter because he knew that he needed God, not the other way around. Some people in ministry give the impression God would really be struggling if it were not for them. But as Eliza's song to Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* goes, "The world will still be there without you." Peter understood that as a sinner he brought nothing to the table except what God was able to direct. That did

not make Peter insignificant, but his strength came from knowing his weakness and letting God direct the work. Paul expresses a similar attitude in Philippians 2:1–11, where he cites the Lord as exemplifying a humility that was willing to serve.

(3) Peter is willing to leave everything to follow Jesus. I know many seminarians who have given up what on the surface seems a lot in order to go into the ministry. Some have left lucrative business careers, others have sold their homes to finance their training, and still others have traveled thousands of miles to be better equipped when they step into the pulpit. In each case, their priority is to serve God and answer his call faithfully. When the fishermen leave their nets to become disciples, they embark on a three-year intensive internship program, with God directing them and supplying their needs. I often wonder what advice Peter would have received if, as a businessman and marine entrepreneur, he had had a personal financial accountant. Would his CPA have been pleased to see his boats on the shore?

Peter understood that there is no greater call than to cast nets for Jesus and minister to those who find their way into the saving net of the gospel. When he first encountered God's power, he thought Jesus must leave, because the teacher was in the midst of sinners. Jesus taught Peter that sinners who turn to God are the people God can use the most. So Peter simply followed Jesus.

The most significant lesson from the cleansing of the leper story is that even outsiders can experience God's healing grace. The church is called by this example to reach out to those on the fringes of society. Leprosy in its time was seen as reflecting the presence of sin, so reaching out to sinners is pictured here. I often cringe when I see how many in the church react to those who have AIDS (the closest parallel to leprosy today), as if they are beyond God's potential reach. The argument that AIDS victims are often engaged in serious sin is no excuse; Jesus came to save people from sin, any sin, no matter how serious. So the ministry of compassion he reveals here should be matched by the church's efforts with those that most of society have given up on. It is interesting how mission agencies in remote areas of the world accept this principle as a basis for their initial outreach, while we ignore it at home.

The leper's healing pictures Jesus making someone clean from sin. We tend to treat a leper as something ugly, but excuse our own sin as something that is a given. This text warns us not to take any sin lightly, for it makes us unclean. God took sin so seriously that he gave his own Son to purify us from its stain. Even if we stand on the other side of forgiveness, having been cleansed by Jesus' work, we should meditate on what this text implies about sin and Jesus' readiness to forgive anyone who comes to him with the attitude, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

Jesus' sojourn for prayer is an important note at this point in his ministry.

He teaches us how important it is to commune with God, especially when we tend to ignore him because things are so busy. Sometimes the best thing we can do in the midst of the rush of life is to slow down and listen to God. We err seriously if we argue that we do not have time, for what we need under pressure is God's presence and calming involvement in our lives.

The healing of the paralytic reveals that faith expresses itself in diligent trust. That is what the paralytic's friends show and what Jesus commends. This faith is active, going to great lengths to seek Jesus' presence. Such faith catches Jesus' eye and touches God's heart.

The challenge of the Pharisees reveals an emerging point in this Gospel. One senses that they have come to "check Jesus out." That certainly becomes their attitude. They risk closing themselves off from the revelation of God through Jesus by making judgments about him too quickly. Though we do not get their reaction in this text, subsequent texts indicate that they do not take to heart what happens in this healing. It even seems as if their mind has been made up beforehand. That is what hardness of heart can do. It may make us hasty in our judgment about what God is doing.

The notes of praise and wonder in verses 25–26 recall similar notes in the infancy narratives. God's work is surprising, and we should rejoice to share in it, even if getting there is sometimes hard and obstacle-ridden.

Several applications emerge from Jesus' encounter with Levi in verses 27–32. Note Levi's response in both following Jesus and hosting a banquet for him. Here is a sinner whose life takes a total turn because of Jesus and who cannot wait to share Jesus with the friends of his former circle. Frequently for a new Christian, evangelism is strongest in the first two years after conversion. Then the change of one's circle of friends cuts off further opportunity. Jesus, though he never lived in that former circle, extends himself toward others in such a way that they do hear his message. Perhaps in becoming overly sensitive about how association with the world might corrupt the righteous, we isolate ourselves as the pious Pharisees did and lose the opportunity of seeing someone's life turn around, as Levi's did.

Jesus' initiative is also revealing. He seeks sinners, keeping his eye out for them and making reaching out to them a priority. I have been in enough churches to know that Christians often avoid sinners. Rather than seek them out, we run from them, often filled with fear about what issues they might bring up or what types of situations we might find ourselves in. Evangelism is a countercultural exercise that will produce its awkward moments.²⁰ Some-

20. A helpful work on this topic that is balanced and full of wisdom is Joseph C. Aldrich, *Life-Style Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries to Reach the Unbelieving World* (Portland: Multnomah, 1981).

times language or jokes are not in the best taste. Topics of discussion may get uncomfortable. Favorite activities of the lost may result in invitations to be involved in things that may need to be graciously refused. Still, many opportunities can be pursued that are not awkward. This is why I admire many parachurch ministries that reach out to the lost, whether to high school kids through Young Life or to college kids through Campus Crusade and Navigators or to business people through Search ministries. These organizations do a great job in taking the initiative to reach out and develop relationships with the lost. For evangelism to be effective, the unsaved must be reached, since they are not looking to come into the church!

Many today debate the value of seeker-friendly services, but one thing can be said for the movement. It has made the entire church more sensitive to being creative about evangelism and the need to seize the initiative in reaching out to the lost. This effort thinks through how to build bridges to the lost and to develop interests that can become opportunities for evangelism. The goal of such ministries moves closer to the desire God has for all of us to function as those who point the way to the Great Physician. A few churches targeted to such audiences benefits the body at large and helps to fulfill the Great Commission.

The attitude of the Pharisees, in contrast, is censured in this text. They are so concerned with appearance that people are crushed or ignored in the process. Purity at the expense of serving people is not purity; it is isolationism—and sin. Jesus is against such an approach to engaging the world. Though the Pharisees have a piety, it is a destructive piety that ignores the needs of people.

Finally, our mission involves preaching a call of repentance to sinners. We must be careful not to only reach out to the attractive, to those who seem pretty well, but also to the ostracized and rejected, as Jesus does with Levi. Some of the most unsung ministries work in the dark shadows of the inner city among the unseen. But whomever we seek to reach, we must offer the hope of the call of the gospel. To give such a call involves humility in two forms. (1) The person issuing the call is reminded of how God's grace is an act of surgical care extended to the believer; the one who shares Jesus knows what it means to be where the lost person is. This should create a sense of empathy and humility as we seek to encourage others to find the Lord.

(2) But humility is also required in the responder, since to come to God for spiritual healing means to recognize one's need and inability to heal oneself. The world's call to take control of our lives is diametrically opposed to the call of God, which says to give God control over the direction and restoration of our lives. Often when we seek to take matters in our own hands, we compound our problems, because such a grasping for control

reflects selfish motives. In turn, these motives mean we are uncaring and insensitive to others. When God gives his saving grace to us and begins to work in our lives, he wants to make us more service-oriented and giving to others. Control is no longer our concern; loving others is. Levi's response to Jesus shows such a change of direction. The banquet he gives Jesus is not just an expression of thanks, but a recognition that since God gives graciously, so should we (Eph. 4:30–5:2).

Luke 5:33–6:5



THEY SAID TO him, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."

³⁴Jesus answered, "Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? ³⁵But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."

³⁶He told them this parable: "No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. ³⁷And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. ³⁸No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. ³⁹And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'"

^{6:1}One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. ²Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

³Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." ⁵Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."



LUKE DESCRIBES A series of controversies in 5:33–6:11 that explain the kind of opposition Jesus' ministry receives. The initial controversy concerns fasting, while the next two deal with the Sabbath. In each case, Jesus' authority is expressed or implied, either because of who he is or because it reflects the new era he brings. After these controversies the Jewish leadership begins to discuss what they might do to Jesus, showing a solidification in the opposition.