



LESSON 18

Luke 17:1-18:30

Information for Teacher

There are many more stories from Luke 17:1-18:30 that just can't be covered in one class period. This lesson has selected three somewhat-related stories so you can spend your time on manageable units of text.

Opening Discussion

- *Name an example of extreme pride you've seen recently.*

Introduction

Luke will remind us quickly that Jesus and his disciples are still on their way to Jerusalem. In the stories we'll study today, we see people asking for help and receiving it. We see others who ask for input from Jesus and reject it. Overall, we see a God who listens to his people when they cry out, and we learn that sometimes the unexpected people are the ones who find favor with God, while the nice, upstanding members of society are left in the cold.

The Biblical Text

Luke 17:11-19 (The Thankful Leper)

- For several chapters now, the journey toward Jerusalem seems to have been put in the background. However, in 17:11, Luke reminds us that Jesus and his disciples are still on their **way to Jerusalem**.
- They are going along the **border with Samaria – no man's land** if one is a good Jew.
- At one of the villages, **ten lepers** see Jesus and cry out, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" (17:13).
 - Lepers faced several **obstacles** and had to follow specific commands.
 - They had to **stay away** from the uninfected people, and if uninfected people approached, lepers themselves had to **announce their condition** as a warning (Lev. 13:45-46; Num. 5:2).
 - They formed their own **colonies** (2 Kgs. 7:3).
 - If they were ever healed, they had to **present themselves to the priest** to verify the healing (Lev. 14:2-32).

- Leprosy was viewed not simply as a **disease**, but as a **social stigma** and perhaps even a sign of **disfavor from God** (similar to how AIDS has been viewed in recent history).
- Jesus doesn't heal them immediately. He tells them to go **show themselves to the priest**, which is what one did *after* a healing had happened.
- Despite **not being healed** yet, all ten lepers begin their **journey to the priest**.
- On the way, presumably they are **healed**.
- One of them **turns around** – it seems he does this **before seeing the priest** – and **heads back to Jesus**.
- He assumes a **posture of humility** at Jesus' feet and thanks Jesus.
- Luke points out that this man was a **Samaritan**. Perhaps the other nine were **Jews**. Regardless, a Samaritan would not normally have this kind of contact with a Jewish person.
- Jesus rhetorically asks **where the other nine are**, assuming they, too, should have returned in thanks.
 - Jesus would rather them come back and offer thanks than continue their obedient journey to the priest.
- Jesus points out that the **"foreigner"** is the one who returned to praise God.
 - This is another instance of Luke's **"reversal of fortunes"** theme. The **Jews don't return** to thank God, but the **Samaritan foreigner does**.
- Jesus tells this leper that his faith has **"made him well."** The word for **"make well"** is the same word often translated **"save"** (see Luke 7:50, 8:48, 18:42).⁴²
 - In other words, Luke, and others in the first century, didn't see this big separation between what helps people in this life and "eternal salvation" – both are works of God. **Salvation wasn't just "what happened to you after you died."** Salvation was happening *here* and *now* when things like healings happened.

- ***What's the shock in this story?***

Luke 18:1-14 (The Widow and the Tax Collector)

- This story comes immediately after a section where Jesus discusses **difficult days** that disciples must live through while they wait for the day when the Son of Man is revealed. Now, Jesus tells a story about the need to **pray and not lose heart**.
- Both main characters – a widow and a tax collector – would have been on the **margins of society**. Widows were vulnerable, and without a man in their life, they had no one to speak up for them. Tax collectors were universally hated by their own people for working with the Roman government to extort the Jews.
- First, Jesus tells a story about a **widow** who is continually **petitioning a judge**.
 - A judge would have two **motivations to do justice**: a **fear of God** and a **respect for humanity**. This judge has neither (18:2).⁴³

⁴² Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: WJK Press, 1995), 220.

⁴³ Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 202.

- A widow keeps **asking the judge for justice** against her adversary.
- The judge is habitually **refusing** to hear her plea.
- However, one day, he decides to **give her justice** for two reasons:
 - She keeps **bothering** him.
 - He is afraid she will **retaliate** against him (18:5).
- Jesus **compares this judge to God**, but we need to be careful how far we apply the analogy.
 - It's not "this judge doesn't care about mercy and compassion, but finally he got annoyed and answered the request. In the same way, God may not really care about your condition, but if you **pester him enough**, he'll get annoyed and relent."
 - Rather, it's "if this scumbag judge, who doesn't have a lick of mercy and compassion, can grant justice, **how much more will God**, who *does* have mercy and compassion, **grant justice**."
- Next, Jesus tells a story to "some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else" (18:9).
 - A **Pharisee** and a **tax collector** go to the temple to pray.
 - The Pharisee smugly **thanks God** that he is **not like the "bad people"**: robbers, evildoers, adulterers, and even tax collectors!
 - He also reminds God that he **fasts** twice a week and **tithes**.
 - The **tax collector**, however, can't even look up, but rather simply asks God for **mercy**, because he is a sinner.
 - We must be careful to see these two men in their proper social and theological context.
 - The Pharisee is one of "the **faithful, dependable, tithing type** who pay the salaries of the ministers so they can preach on the parable of the Pharisee and the [tax collector]." ⁴⁴
 - "**The Pharisee is not a venomous villain and the [tax collector] is not generous Joe the bartender or Goldie the good-hearted hooker.**" ⁴⁵ If that were the case, then each one got what he deserved, and what's the big news in that? Instead, in this story, the outcome is a shock!
 - Jesus tells his audience that the **tax collector went home justified**, even though they would have expected the Pharisee would have been justified.
 - The Pharisee "won't be justified by using piety and religious practices to consider himself better. And even the tax collector who acknowledges sin and shortcomings will be justified." ⁴⁶
 - They each **receive their result in spite of, not because of, their actions**.

⁴⁴ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: WJK Press, 1991), 211.

⁴⁵ Craddock, 211.

⁴⁶ Justo L. González, *Luke*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: WJK Press, 2010),

- Remember, Jesus is telling this story to self-righteous people. He's surprising them with the result: their self-righteousness will bring condemnation, not blessing.
- Jesus ends with a timeless principle: people who **exalt themselves will be humbled**, and vice versa.
 - Again, Jesus hits the **reversal of fortunes** theme.

- **What kinds of people are we glad we are not like? Some examples:**

- **Sinners**
- **Conservatives/liberals**
- **Spiritually shallow/ultra-deep?**
- **Homosexuals**

- **In what ways does our self-righteousness manifest itself?**

Luke 18:18-30 (The Rich Ruler)

- A rich ruler asks Jesus what he needs to do to **inherit eternal life**.
- Jesus answers by reminding him of the **commandments**: don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't give false testimony, honor your parents – basically, the Ten Commandments.
- The ruler says he has **kept these commandments**.
- Jesus gives him one more command: **sell everything** you have and **give to the poor** (18:22).
- The ruler reacts with **sadness**, because he is **wealthy**.
- Jesus says it is **hard for the rich to enter God's kingdom**.
 - It's easier for a **camel to go through the eye of a needle** than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.
 - In an attempt to **lessen the severity** of this statement, people throughout history have sought to **explain it away**.
 - Some have pointed to a hole in the wall of Jerusalem called "the needle's eye," and when camels came through, they had to unload their packs just to fit through.
 - This story actually makes it possible for camels to enter the needle's eye.
 - The problem? There is **no historical evidence to support this theory**.
 - Let's just let Jesus' statement stand on its own, as **severe** as it is: camels can't go through the eye of a needle. It is, indeed, **impossible**.
- Because wealth was thought to be a **sign of God's favor**, the audience wonders who can be saved, if not this rich man? In other words, we're all in bad shape if *this* guy isn't saved.
- Jesus gets to his point: one **cannot earn this salvation**. It is a **gift from God**.
 - This is where he was heading all along.
 - The ruler pointed to his **commandment-keeping** as reasons for his salvation.
 - Jesus just stacks more requirements on to show the ruler, and his audience, that you **can't do enough to earn your salvation**.

- Keeping/breaking the commands is like holding onto a chain over an alligator pit. It doesn't matter which link in the chain breaks – you're getting dropped!⁴⁷
- None of us can keep the commands completely. Therefore we rely on God, not the strength of our chain, for our salvation.
- Salvation is **impossible for humans but is possible for God** (18:27).

- ***Can rich people go to Heaven?***
- ***Discuss this statement: "wealth is particularly susceptible to becoming an idol that displaces God."⁴⁸***

Application

- ***What are ways we can express our gratitude to God?***
- ***How do we avoid being like the self-righteous Pharisee without being glad we're not like the self-righteous Pharisee (and thus, falling into the same trap he did)?***
- ***Are there any specific actions required of us in the story of the rich ruler?***
- ***How does the story of the rich ruler encourage us? How does it rebuke us?***

Next Week's Text

Luke 18:31-19:27

⁴⁷ Card, 207.

⁴⁸ Ringe, 228.