

Lesson 30: Luke 9:37-50
“Back to Earth: the Kingdom in the World”

June 28th, 2009

Introduction

In the last 2 weeks of our study in Luke we've looked at 2 key passages which represent the fulcrum point, the pivot point in Luke narration. Perhaps it is easiest to understand what's going on if we imagine the Gospel of Luke as though it were a small mountain. Up until this point we have been climbing up the mountain. The persistent question that gets raised right at the very beginning of the story is 'who is this Child who is about to be born?' From that point we have been climbing the mountain and the intensity of this 'who is this' question has been building. 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' 'Who is this who commands the wind and the waves and they obey Him?' 'Who is this who talks to evil spirits and they obey Him?' 'Who is this who even raises the dead?'

Then in those 2 key passages where we've been living for the past 2 weeks we reach the peak of our mountain. In 2 clear and unequivocal declarations, the identity of Jesus is laid plain for all to see. First Peter says, 'You are the Christ of God'; and then Luke goes to the highest possible authority as God Himself steps into time and declares, particularly in the hearing of Peter, John & James, but now recorded in the words of Scripture so that we all may look and marvel... 'This is my Son, listen to Him.'

And so now there is no doubt. This is the Promised One; the Messiah of Israel; the Son of God; the Word made flesh.

Luke 9:51 sets a new course for the 'backside of our mountain'.

“As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”

From here on the journey to Jerusalem will take up our focus. It is a journey that Jesus takes with His disciples; it is filled with many lessons that are very applicable for us today and so we will look forward to taking in the fall, Lord willing.

Meanwhile, our text today consists of a collection of 13 verses or so that lie between the pronouncements of Jesus' identity and the beginning of the journey. What is Luke doing in this section?

I want to propose that what we see Luke doing here is once again opening up a window so that we can see into the hearts of the disciples. What we see isn't actually very pretty. The question being addressed here is, to what extent do these disciples really get the reality of who Jesus is? To what extent do they understand the nature of the kingdom of God which Jesus has been talking with them about for the past couple of years? Are they beginning to get the picture?

The answer to these questions is not terribly encouraging. The verses we will read just now show the disciples of Jesus being tested in 4 different areas – and in each area they fall short! Wow, you say, this should be encouraging! Actually, in a very dynamic way this is a passage of encouragement and challenge. It is encouraging if we put this passage in the larger NT context and realize that although these guys didn't get the picture here in Luke 9, they did get the picture later on in the book of Acts.

What this tells me is that God is OK working with people who fail. I don't know about you, but I am very glad for this fact. God is not in the market for perfect people who get the picture the first time around and who never do anything wrong or get messed up. The disciples of Jesus stand before us in our text today as failures whom Jesus will take on a journey. And on that journey He will teach and model the values of the Kingdom of God in any way He can. By the time He returns from being dead for 3 days, they are beginning to pick up some of the lessons.

So let us look at these four areas. Let's call them:

4 failed tests; 4 opportunities for growth and learning

- Faith / belief
- Understanding the role of suffering / death
- Humility
- Acceptance

Luke 9:37-43a – The Test of Faith

37The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. 38A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. 39A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. 40I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

41"O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here."

42Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. 43And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.

Let's make some observations:

1. "The next day..." ties this event to the mountaintop experience where Peter, John & James had had the privilege of catching a glimpse of the brightness of the Kingdom of God in all its blazing glory. It is a sharp contrast – the experience on the mountain with all its splendor and glory; the awful experience down below where this poor boy is tormented by the powers of evil.
 - a. In reality this becomes a down to earth opportunity for the glory of God to be made known.
 - b. Notice how this section finishes! When Jesus does His healing and cleansing work by delivering this boy from the evil spirit, the text tells us "...they were all amazed at the greatness of God."
2. Why does Jesus express such strong emotion here??
 - a. Luke 9:1 tells us, "*When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases...*"
 - i. Perhaps one reason for the emotion is that Jesus feels a level of frustration in the fact that so soon after being specifically given the power to cast out demons that the disciples had retreated back from the place of trusting fully in the power of God.
 - b. More likely it would seem that the level of emotion expressed by Jesus here accompanies His knowledge of what is coming down the road. He knows already that He is headed for Jerusalem and that His time on earth is limited. He also knows that His ministry will be picked up and carried forward into the whole world by means of these 12 disciples. When he sees the disciples here unable to put their faith into action He realizes that He has much work to do and therefore expresses with significant strength of feeling His frustration at how slow they are to pick up the ideas here; how slow to learn to simply trust in the power of God in these situations.
 - i. And so He graciously steps in and shows them how it is done. Over and over again on the journey to Jerusalem He will continue to show the disciples how to have faith.

- ii. It is encouraging to read the story in Acts and to see some of these same men exercising great faith and seeing God's powerful work accomplished.
- c. But here, in this story, they fail the test of faith quite significantly. How encouraging to see Jesus continue to work with them despite their lack of faith.

Luke 9: 43b-45 – The Test of Understanding

While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, 44"Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." 45But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

This is a clear statement of what we have suspected so far. The disciples at this point have no clue how suffering and death can play a part on the Kingdom of God. They have heard Jesus talk about the kingdom and the picture that is developing in their mind is full of images of Jesus the powerful and popular leader rising up against the Romans and establishing the throne of King David once again in Jerusalem. This talk of suffering and betrayal was totally off the radar screen!

They had forgotten the words Jesus had spoken about the nature of the kingdom back in ch. 6: *"Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man."* Their preconceived notions of power and glory created a huge blind spot for them and so they fail the test of understanding the nature of the kingdom of God and of the role of King Jesus especially.

We need to notice in the text here that Jesus tries hard to get this point across. While all the people were still marveling at what Jesus had done, the text tells us that Jesus pulls his disciples aside as says to them, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you..." Literally the words used here are "put these words into your ears".

Luke assures us, however, that they don't get it at this point. It is nonetheless encouraging to note that these 12 did finally gain this understanding following the resurrection of Jesus and became great preachers and influencers for the wonder of the Kingdom of God.

Luke 9:46-48 – the Test of Humility

"46An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. 47Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. 48Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest.""

This is one of those great ‘upside down kingdom’ passages where Jesus has to use an object lesson to catch our attention. We need to again try to get into the minds of the disciples and recognize that they are imagining a kingdom where Jesus begins to exert authority and power and where He also begins to appoint His cabinet and advisors. The Gospels record a number of occasions where the disciples get caught up in these arguments about who would be greater.

It is so easy for us to cast stones at them for being so petty and yet I believe we need to stop and ask the question of our own selves, have we really learned the lesson of humility in the kingdom of God? Or is it just a little below my ego to take on the task of cleaning someone else’s toilet, or helping them move, or being there for them in the difficult times of life?

Why does Jesus use a little child as an example? A young, young child approaches life with a simple and yet profound sense of dependence. Little children simply cannot hold positions of power and therefore does not have the ability to use their own power to abuse other around them. We need to remember that Jesus is speaking into a situation where the most powerful empire, the one with the most military power and ability to exert oneself was fully in control. In this environment that stronger have significant advantage over the weak.

The kingdom of God operates on an entirely different set of values. Jesus uses the language of welcoming here. Whoever welcomes and receives those who cannot help themselves, welcomes and receives Jesus. And whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes God Himself!

Luke 9:49-50 – the Test of Acceptance

49"Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us."

50"Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

There is a particular attitude that Jesus is addressing here with these words.

Notice John’s words here “...we saw a man driving out demons in Your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.” It is this attitude of proud exclusivity that Jesus is addressing here. We must realize of course that this was particularly difficult for the Jews at that time who had enjoyed most of the obvious limelight in the OT but who will later have to learn very directly that the kingdom that Jesus came to bring was and is for all nations of the world.

There are a number of ways in which we could apply this principle to our own context – let me do it this way. I get very perturbed when I hear people say ‘I’ve been here for years but I still feel like an outsider at Oaklands’. It hurts me a lot to hear people talk about an ‘in group’ in this congregation as though there was some sort of exclusive membership. And so I want to speak a word of exhortation to those who have been a part of Oaklands for many years and may be 2nd or 3rd generation families at this church. We need to be constantly on guard within our own hearts for any signs of a spirit of exclusivity. This scripture would challenge us to open our eyes and our lives to the people gathered around us. They may look different, smell different and think differently, but if they name the name of Jesus they are just as much part of the Body of Christ as we are and we must welcome and receive them into our lives to the extent that we are able!

To those who have been here for a while (maybe even a long while) and still feel like outsiders, let me exhort you in this way. I believe in the theoretical possibility of ‘reverse exclusivism’. In other words, it is possible for me to come to a group and to observe that many people have been there for a long time and to look at that crowd from a distance and in our own minds to form a line between me and them. I want to urge you to step forward and embrace the relationships that God opens up before you and to the extent that you are able put away from your minds any notion of some people being ‘in’ and others not.

Let us together make a commitment to eradicate any attitude of exclusivity! There is only one Body of Christ; it has many members. If you are a follower of Jesus, you belong here!

Once again, even though we can see the disciples didn’t get it right on this occasion we need to be encouraged by reading later in Acts how the believers were working together with other churches, sending letters back and forth and even reaching out to Gentiles.

Conclusion

And so we have the disciples here put to 4 tests and we discover they come up short in all of them:

- The Test of Faith
- The Test of Understanding
- The Test of Humility
- The Test of Acceptance

What a gracious God we have! A God who would take such a rag-tag, disobedient, self-centered lot and work with them; take them on a journey to Jerusalem and teach them many things about the nature of the kingdom of God.

Perhaps there is one of these areas of testing where you and I need to be challenged. If so, I urge you to let the Lord speak into that area of life and do His gracious work with you just as He did with the disciples. But most of all I want us to walk away from today encouraged to know that God uses broken pottery. He loves us to come to Him after we have failed in order that we might learn to love Him more and more and therefore give more and more of our lives to His control.

Ever since Christmas we have been 'walking alongside Jesus for a while'. Our title has been 'Discovering the Central Character of Salvation History'. I hope that you have been enriched by our study of this amazing Gospel. Lord-willing we will pick it up again at 9:51 and walk with Jesus and the 12 on the journey to Jerusalem. Meanwhile we look forward to hearing some different voices over the next while and enjoying life in the Psalms.