



The Gospel of Luke

Luke 6:12-8:55: Jesus Begins to Teach

Jesus has now been established as a prophetic preacher and, like prophets of old he has the power to heal. Yet something more than Elijah or Elishah is involved in the work of Jesus. From the first days of his ministry he called disciples to his side (5:1-11, 27-32) and distinguished them from other known groups, the disciples of John or the Pharisees (5:33). The next section of the Gospel continues the story of community formation and begins to sketch a new picture of Jesus. In addition to proclamation and healing, he is also a teacher of a distinctive way of life into which his disciples are being initiated.

The first major block of teaching consists of a sermon delivered by Jesus "on a plain" (Contrast Matthew's setting of a similar sermon, "on a mount," Matt 5:1). The first section of the sermon consists of "beatitudes" balanced by a series of prophetic judgments or "woes." The beatitudes here, unlike their counterparts in Matthew which focus on the way people behave (Matt 5:3-11), comment on the conditions that people face. If people are now in a sorry state, poor, hungry, mourning, they will experience a change for the better. If people are now rich, full, and rejoicing, their situation too will change, for the worse. When? How? The gospel does not offer a definite answer. Matthew's Jesus speaks more as a teacher of virtue. Luke's teaching Jesus begins his lecture in a prophetic mode, but when and how the prophecy is to be fulfilled remains an open question!

What follows in Luke's version of the great sermon parallels sayings recorded in Matt 5:36-48, without Matthew's organizing structure. Perhaps reflecting more accurately the common source he shared with Matthew, Luke's gospel focuses on the direct and challenging calls of Jesus to love in the most trying of circumstances, to pray for enemies, to respond to violence with non-violence, to give aid without question. Following these calls to radical love and non-violence, Jesus challenges his disciples to love without regard to the worthiness of the beloved, to love even enemies. All of this exhortation reaches its climax in the admonition to be merciful as God is merciful (6:36), a marked contrast to Matthew's parallel call to perfection (Matt 5:48).

The sermon continues with other known sayings, not to judge, to give, to remove the beam from one's own eye rather than the mote from the neighbor's. The sermon culminates with images of the fruitful tree (6:43-45) and the sure foundation (6:46-49).

Luke is probably not responsible for the collection of the sayings of Jesus assembled into this homily, but he puts his own stamp on the collection with the summons to be merciful. That may even be the way in which the evangelist tries to rationalize the Teacher's extreme claims.

After the sermon Jesus continues his activity of healing, treating the son of a centurion who utters a famous expression of humility (7:6). The healing ministry is carried to an extreme in the miraculous resurrection of the widow of Nain's son (7:11-17), one of the three such reports in the gospels (cf. Mark 5:21-43 for Jairus' daughter; John 11 for Lazarus). For Luke, traditional stories of miracles are important, but of equal importance is what Jesus teaches, including teaching about himself. The next passage shows Jesus responding to questions from followers of the Baptist. After clarifying the role of John in the grand scheme of things (7:28), Jesus' final response (7:35) suggests that he, like John, is a "child" of divine Wisdom. Here Luke gestures toward a major way in which early Christians understood the significance of Jesus (cf. John 1:1-18; Heb 1:1-3), as an embodiment of divine wisdom, one who is indeed worthy to teach.

The story that concludes this section of our study (Luke 7:36-50) offers a teaching through example of a principle at the heart of Luke's gospel. In this story Jesus encounters an anonymous sinful woman. That woman will in the tradition of the Church be identified with Mary Magdalene, mentioned in the following passage (Luke 8:2). A similar story is told of Mary of Bethany in John 12:1-8 and tradition and popular imagination will conflate the two. Luke's interest, however, is not in the identity of the penitent woman, nor even in the type of her sin (cf. the story of the adulteress in John 8:1-11). Luke rather highlights the attitude of Jesus, willing to forgive and welcome this "sinner" despite the judgmental attitude of Simon the Pharisee. The parable that Jesus tells Simon about the two debtors (7:41-42) suggests how Luke understands parables to work in general, to challenge the hearer reach a deeper insight into fundamental principles. The story as a whole confronts the reader with a similar challenge: what are the limits, if any, of a forgiving welcome to the repentant "sinner"?