

Study 27: The Gospel of Luke – The Good News to all People

The Gospel to the Gentiles. From all indications, it's apparent that St. Luke wrote his Gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles* to be read not just by Jews and Jewish Christians, but by the larger population of Gentiles. Throughout these two books, Luke stressed that the Good News is for everyone, not just the Jews. Not only that, but Luke also issued a special invitation to sinners. All are truly welcome. Luke wanted to strengthen the new Christian in his faith and lead the Gentile seeker to the truth of the Gospel and the promises of Jesus Christ. This is apparent in the opening words of his Gospel:

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.” [Lk 1:1-4]

...and so Luke proceeded to do just that.

Luke's Gospel, along with those of Matthew and Mark, is a Synoptic Gospel, each of which relates the story of Jesus's life from a similar perspective. But there are some interesting and important differences. Unlike Matthew and Mark who were Jewish, Luke was a Gentile, something that certainly colored his point of view. Luke also wrote two books, a double Gospel if you will, that took the story of Jesus and His Church beyond His Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension. The *Acts of the Apostles*, which we have recently studied, tells the story of the Holy Spirit's activity in the young Church as it begins fulfilling Jesus's command to “Make disciples of all nations...” [Mt 28:19] and spread the Gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Rome itself.

Authorship. Although some modern scholars argue the fact (and some modern scholars will argue almost anything), tradition and the teaching of the Church from its earliest days attribute the authorship of this Gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles* to St. Luke. Many of the early Church Fathers, including St. Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and St. Jerome, all declare Luke as the author.

Exactly when Luke wrote his Gospel is less certain. Here too some modern scholars, especially those who are firm believers in the historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation, disagree with the traditional view and assert Luke's Gospel was written sometime after 80 A.D. This view is based largely on their belief that Luke used Mark's Gospel for guidance, which they believe was written sometime after 70 A.D. But others (and I'm in agreement with these) date Luke's Gospel to sometime prior to 70 A.D. Luke ceases his narrative in *Acts* when Paul is imprisoned in Rome (62 A.D.) and there is nothing in either his Gospel or *Acts* that would demand a later date. Surely if Luke had waited another 20 years to write these two books, he would certainly have included some later material. This, by the way, was also the common belief of the early Church.

Who exactly was St. Luke? Luke was, in a sense, a second-generation Christian, one who had not accompanied Jesus and the apostles in Galilee and Judea. Indeed, he was a Greek, probably from Antioch in Syria. We know he was a physician and had likely received a classical Greek education. His skill as a writer is also apparent and his two books are certainly the most literary among the 27 books of the New Testament. Luke knew how to tell a story, and to tell it well. He wrote with a clarity and eloquence that hold the reader's attention. He was comfortable with the classical rhetorical language typified by the above excerpt from his Gospel's prologue, and could just as easily adopt the scriptural style of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). We can see his preference for dramatic contrast in the way he often relates the events he describes: Zachary vs. Mary; the Pharisee and the publican; the priest and the Levite versus the Samaritan; and Martha and Mary. Luke was also a serious historian who obviously spent a good deal of time questioning eyewitnesses to the events he describes in his Gospel.

Finally, Luke was a disciple and companion of St. Paul. He joined Paul on his travels and was quite likely with Paul during the apostle's imprisonments in both Caesarea and Rome.

The Gospel of Paul. As a close associate of St. Paul, one who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary travels, Luke was obviously greatly influenced by Paul's teaching, to the extent that some have called this book "Paul's Gospel." Throughout the Gospel we encounter several Pauline themes:

- The active role of the Holy Spirit. This is particularly apparent in the book's early chapters.
- The humility and simplicity of those who openly welcome the Good News; e.g., Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, Anna and Simeon, Zacchaeus...
- The great Pauline theme that Christian joy manifests itself everywhere, for example: the Magnificat of Mary; the Benedictus of Zechariah; the Gloria of the Angels at Bethlehem.
- And most fittingly for the companion of the Apostle to the Gentiles, Luke, in his Gospel, stressed the universality of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Luke wanted all who read his Gospel to understand that Christianity is for everyone, that Jesus came into the world for the salvation of all. Just as Jesus instructed the disciples with His Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20), Christianity is for all nations, all races, all people...no exceptions.

The Plan of the Gospel. Luke centered his Gospel in the city of Jerusalem which he presented as a symbol of all that was best in the People of God. Although the Jewish leadership of Jesus's time had profaned what the city had once represented, and had all but guaranteed its future destruction, Luke does not fail to recognize its importance. Luke knew that in the Old Testament the Holy City and God's People cannot really be separated, and the fate of one will involve the fate of the other. As the psalmist wrote:

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget. May my tongue stick to my palate if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem beyond all my delights [Ps 137:5-6].

and...

For the peace of Jerusalem pray: "May those who love you prosper! May peace be within your ramparts, prosperity within your towers" [Ps 122:6-7].

The exile of God's People in Babylon had given the city a renewed importance, and turned it into a different kind of symbol. Even though God had allowed Jerusalem's destruction, He did not abandon it or His People. Indeed, from the prophets we hear of a New Jerusalem that will be the center of the world. Isaiah, for example, stresses this from the start:

In days to come, the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it. Many peoples shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the LORD's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths." For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem [Is 2:2-3].

Later on Isaiah, in a somewhat apocalyptic passage, reinforces this symbolism:

Then the moon will blush and the sun be ashamed, for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, glorious in the sight of the elders [Is 24:23].

And toward the end of Isaiah's prophetic book, he gives us a glimpse of this New Jerusalem:

Instead, shout for joy and be glad forever in what I am creating. Indeed, I am creating Jerusalem to be a joy and its people to be a delight; I will rejoice in Jerusalem and exult in my people. No longer shall the sound of weeping be heard there, or the sound of crying... The wolf and the lamb shall pasture together, and the lion shall eat hay like the ox — but the serpent's food shall be dust. None shall harm or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD [Is 65:17-19, 25].

From Jerusalem the law will go forth to all the people of the world. And in the last days they will create a great assembly before God's throne. Reading Luke's Gospel one senses that he saw the journey to Jerusalem made by Jesus and the Twelve as a prophetic fulfillment.

But the people of the Holy City do not welcome Jesus. They do not receive their Lord as their eternal King, but instead draw Him into their midst only to kill Him. And by this act we come to understand that the New Jerusalem is not simply the City of David. No, the New Jerusalem is Jesus Christ Himself; it is His Body, the Church. It is Jesus who will be the light to all the nations of the earth.

The events described by Luke all seem to drive the journey of Jesus and the apostles forward to Jerusalem. The city's influence on the life of the Lord is evident throughout the Gospel, and we come to understand that Jesus's Passion, Death and Resurrection can occur nowhere else. In Luke, it all begins and ends in Jerusalem.

The setting of the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel is in or near Jerusalem, the City of David, and the city makes another key appearance in the third and final temptation of Jesus [Lk 4:9-12]. In chapter five we encounter "Pharisees and teachers of the law... who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem" [Lk 5:17]. Here we begin to sense the coming conflict between Jesus and those who would ultimately reject Him and call for His death; and, not surprisingly, they are from Jerusalem.

In chapter nine, however, we are presented with the first explicit reference to what is to come:

When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem, and he sent messengers ahead of him [Lk 9:51-52].

Here Luke, speaking of "his being taken up", refers to the climatic events that will soon take place in Jerusalem. From this point on, Luke presents us with events that focus on the inevitability of Jesus's final journey to Jerusalem, a journey that culminates in the events of Holy Week: the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus. Even after Jesus's death, Luke continues his narrative by describing the appearances of the risen Jesus that took place in or near Jerusalem [Lk 24], and completes his Gospel just as it began. He started with Zechariah praying in the Temple and concludes by telling us that the apostles "did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God" [Lk 24:52-53].

Now open your Bible. Although we will take the time to read and study *Luke's Gospel* in its entirety, as an introduction to our overall study I suggest that you read the following passages now. These passages contain much material that is unique to Luke's Gospel.

- ✠ *Luke 7:36-50* – The Woman with the Ointment
- ✠ *Luke 10:29-37* – The Good Samaritan
- ✠ *Luke 10:38-42* – Mary and Martha
- ✠ *Luke 11:1-13* – Teaching on Prayer
- ✠ *Luke 12:13-21* – The Rich Fool
- ✠ *Luke 12:49-56* – Interpreting the Times
- ✠ *Luke 13:1-5* – Sin, Disaster, and Repentance
- ✠ *Luke 14:15-34* – The Parable of the Great Supper
- ✠ *Luke 14:25-35* – The Cost of Discipleship
- ✠ *Luke 15:1-32* – Parables of the Lost and the Found
- ✠ *Luke 16:1-13* – Parable of the Unjust Steward

- † **Luke 16:19-31** – Lazarus and the Rich Man
- † **Luke 17:22-37** – The Coming of the Son of Man
- † **Luke 18:9-14** – Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican

Some Key Concepts in Luke.

- † **Good News for All.** Perhaps the grandest of grand themes found in Luke’s Gospel is the proclamation that salvation is for all. In Luke we are repeatedly reminded that the Good News of Jesus Christ is meant for all – for Gentiles and Jews, for men and women, for the rich and the poor, for the sinners of the world. We see this emphasized in the parable of the Good Samaritan [Lk 10:29-37] in which a man belonging to a group hated by many Jews is held up as an example of the kind of charity demanded by God. Not lost on Jesus’s audience is the depiction of a priest and a Levite as indifferent to the suffering of others. Jesus doesn’t pull any punches, especially when He encounters hypocrisy.
- † **Good News for Women.** Luke also underscores Jesus’s unique relationship with women, who receive special prominence in his Gospel. Not only do we see this in Luke’s description of Mary’s indispensable role in the Incarnation, but also in the roles played by Mary’s relative, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist [Lk 1], and Anna, who offers a prophecy about Jesus as the one who would redeem Jerusalem [Lk 2:36-38]. Women in much of the ancient world had very few rights and even fewer opportunities. Even among the Jews women sat in the balcony of the synagogue separated from the men, and were prohibited from entering the Inner Court of the Temple at Jerusalem. But Jesus doesn’t hesitate to include women among His disciples. Indeed, Luke’s account of Jesus’s visit to the home of Martha and Mary is a beautiful example of how He repeatedly teaches us that God’s ways often differ markedly from our ways. As St. Paul instructed the Galatians:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” [Gal 3:28].

- † **Good News for Sinners.** In Luke 15 we are presented with three parables, one after another, all focused on the theme of the lost being found: the lost sheep; the lost coin; and the lost son. These are, of course, parables of joy because they remind us of the Father’s enduring love for those He has created. God never stops calling us to repentance. These three parables remind us, too, that Jesus came as a physician for the soul of humanity:

“Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners” [Lk 5:31-32].

Once again Jesus went against the grain of His time and didn’t hesitate to associate with those who were considered the greatest of sinners. He offered forgiveness to any who would repent of their sin, and He brought the Good News into sharp focus through His parable of the prodigal son. Indeed, perhaps a better name for this parable would be “The Parable of the Forgiving Father.”

- † **Good News for the Poor.** The universality of the message of Jesus Christ, the Good News, is unrestricted in every sense. The Gospel is intended for all levels of human society. It may not be kept from the poor or from society’s outcasts. Luke relates two of Jesus’s parables in which this theme is clearly present. The parable of Lazarus, one of the poorest of the poor, and the rich man [Lk 16:19-31] takes the judgment scene described by Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel [Mt 25:31-46] and presents it to us as a parable which can hardly be forgotten. Its point is clear: we will be judged on how we love and serve others, especially the poor. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector [Lk 18:9-14] gives us a living example of poverty of the spirit in a man who recognizes his sinfulness and is repentant before God.

The Parables in Luke. Parables were and remain an effective way of teaching truths that are perhaps not so evident or contradict the cultural norms of a society. A parable takes something commonplace, something that the audience knows and understands, and compares it with something unknown. For example, in a parable a man who discovers a treasure buried in a field will sell all that he has to buy the field and possess the treasure. This action, which Jesus's listeners can certainly understand, is held up as similar to the sacrifice necessary to win entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. It piques the people's interest and whets their appetite to hear more in the hope of understanding the fullness of the truth Jesus is teaching.

Some parables, however, are far more complex, and are filled with symbolism and allegorical references. In these parables the details all have meaning and we are usually presented with multiple lessons. Typical examples would include the Parable of the Prodigal Son [Lk 15:11-32] and the Parable of the Sower [Lk 8:4-15].

- † **Parable of the Rich Fool** [Lk 12:13-21]. Here we find Jesus teaching that a life devoted to the accumulation of wealth and material goods is the height of foolishness. We see this same concept clearly expressed in the Old Testament Book of *Ecclesiastes*:

“The covetous are never satisfied with money, nor lovers of wealth with their gain; so this too is vanity. Where there are great riches, there are also many to devour them. Of what use are they to the owner except as a feast for the eyes alone?” [Ec 5:9-10]

And in *Sirach* it's issued as a warning to those who seek wealth:

Do not rely on deceitful wealth, for it will be no help on the day of wrath [Sir 5:8].

- † **Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man** [Lk 16:19-31]. In this parable we are offered multiple lessons. We are instructed on the reversal of values encountered in eternal life [see verses 19 and 26], and are also reassured that there is life after death [verses 27 and 31], a life with definite rewards and punishments. This latter lesson was addressed primarily to the Sadducees and their followers who did not accept the idea of life after death. Jesus condemns this error on several occasions.

The parable is unique in that it provides us with a detailed description of the afterlife, and dismisses the ancient idea of Hades (the Hebrew Sheol) which we sometimes encounter in both pagan literature and the Old Testament. This was thought to be a gloomy, shadowy place of misery in which the dead experience a significantly diminished existence. Such an end was thought to be the common fate of all men regardless of the quality of the lives they might have led. But as God increasingly revealed Himself and His plan for humanity, the later Old Testament books begin to introduce the doctrine of judgment, a doctrine that had gained fairly wide acceptance among Jews by the time Jesus came on the scene. Only the Sadducees, the priestly class, held to the old idea of no life after death.

- † **Parable of the Great Supper** [Lk 14:15-24]. As I mentioned earlier, some parables contain definite allegorical overtones, and in this parable we have a good example of this. Here we find Jesus again proclaiming the universality of the Kingdom, and doing so through the vehicle of a wedding feast. Wedding feasts and other festive gatherings are a common Old Testament image often used to proclaim the triumph of the Messiah [see Gen 26:28-31; Ex 24:9-11; 2 Sam 3:20-21]. Note, however, that Jesus proclaims this triumph will be experienced mainly by the lowly, the outcast, and the despised, and not necessarily by those who consider themselves religious.
- † **Parable of the Unjust Steward** [Lk 16:1-13]. In many of Jesus's parables we are encouraged to follow the example of one or more of the characters described; for example, the Good Samaritan. But in this Parable of the Unjust Steward Jesus does not call on His listeners to emulate a certain

type of behavior; rather His purpose here is to make a particular truth vivid and, therefore, memorable.

We are not asked to copy the dishonest “prudence” of the steward. Instead, we are encouraged to act boldly and decisively when the circumstances call for it. Like the steward who responds decisively when confronted by a personal crisis, we are called on to do the same in response to the proclamation of the Good News. We have heard the Word of God, and we must now decide how we will respond. Earlier Jesus had made this clear to His disciples:

“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”
[Lk 11:23].

There is no room for procrastination in the life of the Christian.

† **Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican** [Lk 18:9-14]. It’s important to realize that not all Pharisees were prideful, self-righteous hypocrites. St. Paul, although he regretted the errors he had made in the past, never rejected his identity as a Pharisee. And Nicodemus we are told was “a Pharisee... a ruler of the Jews” who came to Jesus looking for answers [Jn 3] and later, as a disciple, assisted Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus for burial. And yet, it’s apparent from the gospels that many Pharisees of Jesus’s time had become blinded by the minutia of the Law and forgotten its true purpose.

In the Jewish Talmud we are provided with many examples of Pharisees possessed of great humility. Interestingly, though, we have a rabbinic prayer from c. 70 A.D. that sounds very much like the prayer of the Pharisee found in this parable:

“I thank thee O Lord, my God, that thou has given me a place among those who sit in the House of Study, and not among those who sit at the street corners; for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early to study the words of the Law, and they rise early to engage in vain things; I labor and they labor, but I labor and receive a reward, and they labor and receive no reward; I live and they live, but I live for the life of the future world, and they live for the pit of destruction.”

Jesus, of course, turns the world of His time upside down when He makes the publican, or tax-collector, in the parable into the hero. Tax collectors were despised by the people as grasping and unjust and yet Jesus depicts this particular man as a repentant sinner who is loved by God. Luke doesn’t mince words when he introduces the parable by telling us:

“He then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else” [Lk 18:9]

As Christians we believe that salvation comes from God. We cannot save ourselves.

The Gospel of Joy. Luke’s Gospel is sometimes given this title because joy is so often expressed in response to the Good News. It is not only the joy that will reach fulfillment in the Kingdom to come, the joy of the angels which Jesus describes:

I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents [Lk 15:10].

But that same joy fills the pages of Luke’s Gospel as he describes God’s plan unfolding here on earth. When the angel appears in the Temple and tells Zechariah that his aging wife, Elizabeth, shall conceive and give birth to a son, John, the angel goes on to say:

“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth” [Lk 1:14].

Months later, when Mary visits Elizabeth, she is told by her cousin:

“For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy” [Lk 1:44].

And then, in the fields near Bethlehem, an angel appears to shepherds and proclaims from the very beginning, from the moment of the Incarnation, that the Good News is for all:

“The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people” [Lk 2:10]

In Luke we also encounter a kind of paradoxical joy, the joy that comes from affliction suffered in God’s name. Jesus mentions this explicitly when He concludes the beatitudes with:

“Rejoice and leap for joy on that day! Behold, your reward will be great in heaven. For their ancestors treated the prophets in the same way” [Lk 6:23]

And with these words He again takes the logic and ways of man and stands them on their head. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke describes this same joy in the face of persecution when he tells of Peter and the apostles being flogged after preaching the Good News in Jerusalem:

“So they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name” [Acts 5:41].

We also experience the joy expressed by those who first proclaim the Good News to others. When Jesus appoints 72 disciples to prepare the way by going to the towns in advance of His visit, they go out in pairs and preach the coming of God’s Kingdom. On their return they are filled with joy:

“The seventy [-two] returned rejoicing, and said, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name” [Lk 10:17].

But Jesus instructs them that their salvation, not the power God has given them, should be the cause of their joy:

“Nevertheless, do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven” [Lk 10:20].

And so Luke begins his Gospel with a message of joy and ends it the same way with the disciples joyful after witnessing the Ascension of the Lord:

“They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy” [Lk 24:52].

Interestingly, these same expressions of joy are found throughout the Old Testament and are an important element of the history of God’s Chosen People. We must always keep in mind that the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, is presented first, in a veiled form, not yet fully revealed, in the Old Testament. The promise of the Messiah is present in the Old Testament from its very beginning [Gen 3:15], and the people are instructed to be joyful because of God’s love for them, because they have been singled out and blessed by God. In Deuteronomy, for example, Moses tells them:

There, too, in the presence of the LORD, your God, you and your families shall eat and rejoice in all your undertakings, in which the LORD, your God, has blessed you. You shall not do as we are doing here today, everyone doing what is right in their own sight, since you have not yet reached your resting place, the heritage which the LORD, your God, is giving you. But after you have crossed the Jordan and dwell in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you as a heritage, when he has given you rest from all your enemies round about and you live there in security, then to the place which the LORD, your God, chooses as the dwelling place for his name you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and personal contributions, and every special offering you have vowed to the LORD. You shall rejoice in the presence of the LORD, your God, with your sons and daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as with the Levite within your gates, who has no hereditary portion with you. [Dt 12:7-12]

We find the same joyful sentiments expressed in the Psalms. Indeed, the Psalms are filled with expressions of joy for God's presence and for His saving acts. Here is just one example of the many expressions of joy that may be found in the Psalms.

Then all who trust in you will be glad and forever shout for joy. You will protect them and those will rejoice in you who love your name [Ps 5:12]

Yes, the joy expressed throughout the Old Testament is just a foretaste of the joy that accompanies the fullness of revelation in the Good News.

Luke in the Liturgy. Luke's Gospel is read on the Sundays of Year C. But the Church has always considered Luke's account of the Incarnation -- the Annunciation, the Visitation, the birth and infancy of Jesus -- as one of her most precious possessions. Tradition tells us that Luke's source for this material was the Blessed Virgin herself. And so it isn't surprising that we find Luke's Gospel proclaimed on many Marian feasts as well as those of John the Baptist.

Bringing Luke's Gospel to Life. It is a sign of the effectiveness of Luke's pastoral approach that his Gospel continues to speak to us today. Yes, Luke is a wonderful teacher who proclaims the eternal truths of the faith with a conviction that instills confidence in all who encounter his Gospel. Luke offers us a Gospel of Mercy, a Gospel of God's Love, giving us a message of hope in the midst of our often difficult lives. Luke encountered the same kind of problems that still face the Church today: persecution; false teachers; church leaders who fail and give scandal; the problem of the rich and the poor; how to live one's life as a Christian in a world increasingly hostile to its message.

We would do well to pay particular attention to the parables found in Luke's Gospel, especially the beautiful stories of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. These are among the noblest and most moving stories in all of Scripture. In one we are given a glimpse of the love of God for His People. We encounter a love that extends far beyond any human love. It is the love of a Father who looks at each individual, each unique created being, and calls him to repentance and complete forgiveness. In the other we are given an example of the kind of love we are called to extend to each other. Christian Love, we are clearly told, knows no boundaries of race or nationality or sex or religion. Whoever is in need of my love, that person is my neighbor and I am his. How do I respond to those God places before me, to those who call out to me as I travel along the busy roads of my life?