

Study 5 Luke 5:12-31

Context

Study 4 Luke 4:31- 5:11

Jesus begins his ministry which an extraordinary display of power. Satan had attempted to topple him (4:1-13) but Jesus shows he has command over demons (4:33-35). People are amazed at his authority (4:36 -37). It is not surprising that news about him spreads and many come for healing (4:40). The demons recognize Jesus but he does not want their witness or testimony (4:41). Despite the impact Jesus has and his popularity with the crowds he withdraws to focus on the purpose of his mission, 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God – that is why I was sent' (4:43). This repeats the emphasis that Jesus proclaimed in Nazareth - he had come to preach (4:18-19) and he sticks to that task.

In his encounter with Simon Peter the rescue mission that Jesus has come to fulfil becomes sharply focused. As Peter comes face to face with Jesus his response is not like the crowd who beg Jesus to stay instead faced with Jesus Peter knows he is a flawed, frail and fallen human being; in the presence of God Peter sees what his heart is truly like. The good news that Jesus proclaims to Peter is to tell him that despite this he need not be afraid (5:10). Peter is welcomed by Jesus and then told that he will in turn bring others to Jesus too. Even at the beginning of his ministry Jesus is planning and preparing for the good news of the gospel to be passed on to others.

Background bits

The leper within Israel

Leprosy within Israel meant much more than having a dreadful physical disease. It also meant a physical separation from the people of God. There were strict codes laid down in the Levitical law which meant that any one with a skin disease needed to see the priest, if the disease was considered to be 'unclean' that person would have to 'live alone; outside the camp' (Lev. 13:45). In order to return to life in the community a person would have to be declared clean by the priest.

The forgiveness of sins

Although the priest acted as a mediator between the people and God (Lev.16:15-16) it is clear in the Old Testament that only God can forgive sins (Exodus 34:7, Psalm 130:3-4, Is 43:25, Micah 7:18). God is the one that people need to turn to because ultimately it is against Him that sin is committed as David knew well (Psalm 51).

The tax collector in Israel

The tax collector in Israel was a social outcast, not because of Levitical law but by his occupation which declared him to be both morally and spiritually adrift. He had separated himself from God's people by working for the oppressors of God's people: the Romans. He may have been quite wealthy like Zacchaeus (Lk 19:2) but despite the abhorrence that religious and patriotic Jews felt towards him he was not without friends. Matthew had a social life, he could throw a party, he was popular amongst others who also did not take their religious identity too seriously and lived life as they pleased.

Difficult Bits

Is there a link between sickness and sin?

Two of these stories have an undercurrent that suggests that sickness and sin are linked; the leper is cast out of the religious community because of his sickness and Jesus sees the paralysed man and talks about sin. However, there is not a direct link between personal sin and sickness (usually) but sickness is part of the fallen world in which we live. The leper is a visual reminder that suffering, sickness, decay and death are realities in this world because it is under God's judgement because of our rebellion. Jesus came to deal with this rebellion and rescue suffering sinners so that one day we may be in God's new creation where there is no more sickness.

Which is easier to say...?

It may seem easier to modern ears to say 'your sins are forgiven' because in our society we often underestimate the horror of sin. We talk about forgiveness as though it were an easy thing and we fail to take the weight of it seriously. The Pharisees knew that to claim to forgive sin was an outrageous presumption; they understood that God alone could forgive sin. It might on the other hand seem easy to talk about forgiveness because there is no way of verifying the claim but Jesus is not playing that kind of game here. He is saying that both things are impossible things to do, forgive sin and heal the paralytic but He can do both. He proves it by his actions but he wants them to know that his priority is to forgive sin.

Do we have to leave everything to follow Jesus?

Jesus called Levi to follow him and Levi left everything. This is a description of what it meant for Levi to turn to Jesus. He needed to leave his life as a tax collector because it represented his rebellion against God. In order to turn to Jesus we must repent, change the direction of our life and follow him. The cost is everything in terms of a change in our allegiance (Luke 9:23). Instead of putting our concerns and ourselves first we will learn to put Jesus first. This will take many forms, being worked out differently in different lives; for the leper it meant going to the priest and back to his community, for Levi it was holding an evangelistic supper party and led eventually to his death for proclaiming the gospel. As we turn to Jesus in repentance and faith there is a cost but what he offers in return is priceless (Luke 9:24-25).

Reading this with a seeker

There are two types of responses to these stories. The first is from someone who is aware of his own sinfulness and distance from God. They may be tempted to say with Peter, 'depart from me for I am a sinful man'. They need to see that they do not need to be afraid because Jesus can forgive sin, he has the authority to do it, he is willing to do it and it is available now. There is no one outside of Jesus' grace; he offers forgiveness to whoever turns to Him.

There may be others who do not yet see their need of Jesus because he came to rescue sinners. If someone refuses to believe that they are spiritually sick just like the Pharisees, they will never turn to Jesus for mercy. Keep reading the gospel with them and pray that as they see more of Jesus they will begin to see their own sinful heart. Keep praying because it is a work of the spirit to open up eyes that are blind and to convict people of sin (John 16:8).

