

6 August 2023

Luke's Good News: On the Way to Jerusalem

Luke 17-19

Luke sits at his desk.

My dear Theophilus,

I am glad that you are appreciating the surprising nature of Jesus' teachings, but as I think I said earlier, we Christians do not follow his teachings; we follow the man. He is more to us than just a great moral teacher or a novel philosophy that we've adopted. As Jesus and his friends approached Jerusalem, he began trying with increasing urgency to communicate that them.

As he was passing through one of those small Judean towns on the Jerusalem road, complete with the usual street urchins and beggars, Jesus said, "Let me tell you a story. Once there was a rich man in a town just like this. He lived high, dressed in silks, and ate fine foods all day. Meanwhile, at his outer gate was a beggar named Lazarus who lay there amid the flies and the stray dogs, hoping for a few pennies. In due time, as will happen to all, both men died. Lazarus was received into the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man went to the pit of fire, where he sat among the embers longing for a sip of water. One day, looking up, he saw Lazarus in the arms of Abraham and called out, 'Sir! Please send Lazarus down with just a taste of water for me! I *often* thought about giving him alms in the days when he sat at my gate!'

"Abraham said it was not possible to bridge the gap between them, so the rich man called out again, 'Then at least let me go back to my family on earth to warn them!'

"But Abraham said, 'They've already been warned – by the law and the prophets, as you were. I'm afraid your relatives are so stuck in their ways they wouldn't even listen if someone rose from the dead.'

One of Jesus' friends said, "Whoa! So, you mean you can see hell from heaven?"

Jesus put his head in his hands. "That's what you got out of the story? Seriously?"

Later, in another village, ten lepers approached him. Now in Judea, no one is so unclean as a leper, so they band together for support. They began crying out, "Jesus! Have mercy on us!"

Jesus let them draw close, then said, "All right, go to the priests and tell them that you've been healed." They looked at each other – obviously *not* healed – then turned sadly and went away. A few minutes later, though, one of the ten came running back. His skin showed no trace of leprosy, and he threw himself at Jesus' feet, sobbing his thanks and praising God. Jesus said, "Where are the other nine? They were healed, too, weren't they?"

"Yes, Lord," said the man, speaking in a pronounced Samaritan accent. "But I don't know where they are."

Jesus looked at his friends. "Have faith like this man, this Samaritan. And now, you: go in peace; your faith has delivered you."

One day, on the road, Jesus was questioned by a Pharisee as to when the kingdom of God would come. As you can imagine, his friends pricked up their ears at that. It was just what they

were wondering, too. But Jesus said, “All I will tell you for certain is that is not coming on your schedule, so stop looking for signs of its approach. Indeed, the kingdom of God is not just something that is coming; it is already here, among us, within us. Yes, there will come a time when the kingdom is made clear on earth, when it will be undeniable and unstoppable, but it won’t be when any of you expects it, nor will it take the form that any of you are preparing for. So stop looking *out there* for the kingdom. Start by looking for where it is already at work all around us.”

The Pharisee protested, “But surely we can bring the kingdom on by our prayers! Do you not believe that God hears and answers our prayers?”

Jesus said, “That depends on how you pray. Let me tell you a story. Once there were two men who went to the temple to pray, one was a Pharisee and one a tax-collector. The Pharisee stood and raised his arms and prayed loudly, “God, I give you thanks that I am a Pharisee! Let me remind you that I fast twice a week! I keep the law! I tithe! You have blessed me by making me unlike this tax filth before me, so bless me yet again!’ Meanwhile the tax-collector prayed a much simpler prayer. He said, ‘Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.’

Jesus looked hard at the Pharisee. “I tell you, the tax-collector was the one whose prayer was answered that day.”

Just then a group of children broke through the crowd and ran up to Jesus. Their parents had brought them to be blessed by the new prophet. Jesus’ friends did their best to block them, but Jesus called out, “What are you doing? Let the kids come. Have you heard nothing I’ve taught you? This is what the kingdom of God is made of.”

Then Jesus sat on the ground and began talking to the children, asking their names and listening to their chatter, which is to say, blessing them as children understand blessing. Meanwhile an important-looking man in expensive clothes approached. “Good teacher,” he said. “What must I do to inherit this eternal life you speak of?” Jesus barely glanced at him, then went back to the children. “Good teacher –” the man began again, more loudly.

“Why do call me good?” Jesus interrupted. “Only God is good.” He sighed and looked at the man. “You know the commandments. Keep your promises. Don’t kill. Don’t steal. Don’t lie. Honor your parents.”

The man said, “I’ve done all these things from my youth.”

“Excellent,” Jesus said. “You’re almost there. Now, go sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you’ll be in.”

The man swallowed, started to speak, then walked away. Jesus watched him sadly. “Say a prayer for the rich,” he said. “It’s *so* much harder for them to find the way to the kingdom.”

One of his friends said, “But I thought riches were God’s blessing!”

“Hmm. Bet you heard that from a rich man.”

“You make it sound like it’s *impossible* to enter the kingdom!”

“It is. Fortunately, what’s impossible for a man is possible for God.”

Just outside Jericho, the last city before Jerusalem, Jesus pulled his friends aside and sat them down. “We’re almost there,” he said. “I need you to know what’s about to happen to me. I

do not go to be exalted. I will be cursed, betrayed, beaten, and killed. But remember that God is stronger than death; on the third day I will rise. Do you understand?" They looked at each other and said nothing. Jesus sighed, and said, "Will you at least remember that I told you this so that one day you might understand?"

They entered Jericho, where a blind man sat by the city gate begging. When the man heard the crowd and that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began calling out, "Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me!" over and over. Several of Jesus' friends rushed up to the man to stop making all that noise, and Jesus said, "What is it with you people? Why do you try to stop children and hurting people from seeing me, but let every knob in a fancy suit right through? You're doing it wrong. Do better!" Then he turned to the blind man and said, "I'm Jesus. What do you want?" He replied, "Lord, I want to see." Jesus said, "And you think I can do that?"

"I do. I do think that."

Jesus smiled. "Then see." And the man's eyes were opened.

A little farther down the street, Jesus looked up above the crowds lining the way and saw a man sitting in a tree. Jesus stopped and looked at the man speculatively. Someone beside him said, "You don't want anything to do with him. That's Little Zacchaeus the taxman. He's up there because no one would let him through."

Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, what are you doing in that tree? How am I supposed to have dinner with you tonight with you playing around like that? Come down here. You there! Step aside and let my friend through." That night, while the city outside grumbled about it, Jesus ate with the most hated man in town. When they were done, Zacchaeus asked, "Why did you do it? Why did you befriend me?"

"Because no one else would?"

"I might not be worthy of your friendship."

Jesus nodded. "Based on my experience of people, that seems a safe bet. Have you used your position to cheat people?"

"Yes."

"Don't do that anymore."

"I won't. In fact, I'll pay back all I've cheated. With interest. And I'll give half my fortune to the poor." Jesus smiled. Zacchaeus said, "I heard you healed a blind man today."

"Blind men are easy," Jesus replied. "Rich men, now there's a challenge. Welcome to the kingdom, Zacchaeus."

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So much of what Jesus taught surprises me still, Theophilus. I do not claim to understand everything. But there are lines that run through it all that never change, things like compassion for the hurting, attention for the ignored, friendship for the friendless. Even when I am most confused, I cling to those and know I am home with him.

Your friend, Luke.