

October 25

Luke 5-6

Mark 2 and 3

Matthew 9 & 12

John 5

Right from the outset of Luke's account of Jesus' ministry, it has been apparent that He was more popular with the outsiders and outcasts, than with some of the most religious (at least apparently righteous people) of His day. Over and over again He ran into trouble with the Pharisees. Now who are these folk?

The name "Pharisee" means "the separated one" -- and these people had separated themselves from ordinary people and ordinary life in order to try to keep the law. They were the theological "purists" of the day. With all kinds of pagan pressure being exerted upon them to compromise their faith, the Pharisees (the separated ones) developed an almost fanatical identification with the law of God, and they were bound and determined to keep it and themselves pure. Where the principles of the law were not clearly determinative for specific situations of life, as for example with reference to the Sabbath Law, the Pharisees would seek to make and enforce a law to cover the ambiguity. It was clear enough that "work" was prohibited on the Sabbath, of course, but what constituted work? When the scribes, the students of the law, settled each troubling question, the Pharisees then dedicated themselves to keeping it perfectly. The scribes decided, by the way, that to rub a kernel of grass between your fingers was "threshing" -- work - and therefore prohibited on the Sabbath. They also determined that walking more than 2/3 of a mile on the Sabbath was work and that tying knots on the Sabbath was work (you had to get them pre-tied the day before) and that carrying a bundle with your hands was work, but if you could carry it with your teeth -- that was okay. They were masters at separating flyspecks from pepper and classifying them by weight and smell.

Inevitably this policy of separation led to disdain for all lesser mortals, and a 'holier than thou attitude' was the result. Many of these people became the enemies of Jesus Christ. He loved God. He did wonderful things, but He would not keep their separatistic rules. Our word today for 'Phariseeism' is "legalism." Every single word of Scripture stands, and wherever the Bible clearly takes a stand, it must be binding for us -- even if we don't like it! Every Biblical principle demands our attention, but sometimes now, just as then, in a sincere effort to keep the law, people start making new rules. The Bible says, "Keep the Sabbath" -- so some extrapolate; therefore children ought never to play games on Sunday! The Bible says, "Do not give an appearance of evil" -- so some extrapolate: therefore you must never go to the movies and any Christian who does is sinning. Do you see the danger? Jesus never broke God's law, but He didn't keep the Pharisees' rules and that made them so mad that they plotted to kill Him! It was so wrong in their eyes for Him to heal the man with the withered arm on the Sabbath Day that it was all right for them to plot His murder on the same day! What's wrong with this picture?

After Jesus had spent a whole night in prayer, He chose His twelve apostles. Again Luke is the only gospel writer who notes the connection between prayer and action. But it's always there -- in Chapter 1, Zachariah was at prayer when the angel came. In Chapter 2, Anna was at prayer when she recognized the Messiah. In Chapter 3, Jesus was praying at His baptism and God spoke and the Holy Spirit descended. In Chapter 4, after that amazing day in Capernaum, the multitudes and disciples can't find Him. He's out in a lonely place praying (Luke doesn't specifically tell us He was praying -- but Mark does in Mark 1:35). In Chapter 5, His popularity is spreading and the pressure on Him for ministry is increasing, but Luke says, "He Himself would often slip away to the wilderness to pray" (5:16). Now in Chapter 6, He spends a whole night alone in prayer with His Father, before He chooses the Twelve Apostles, one of the most important decisions He will make in His whole ministry. Is there a pattern here? You and I had better believe that there is.

Where does Jesus, the man, get His guidance?...from prayer.

How does He handle pressure?...by praying.

What determines His agenda?...prayer.

How does He handle conflict?...He prays.

Question...if Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God incarnate...if He needs to pray that much, what about you and me?

After a night of prayer, He chooses the 12, and look at the men He chooses. They are not necessarily the 12 men that I would choose if I knew I had just two or three years to train a group of men to change the world. I would have looked for people with a little less commonness, people who were a little better educated, a bit more sophisticated, well traveled, and polished. Jesus chose 11 Galilean men, some of who had recognizable potential, but who were by any standard very rough indeed. The qualities that Jesus was looking for were evidently fairly simple; they had to be faithful, available, and teachable. If that was the kind of person Jesus chose, is it reasonable for us to expect that He is still looking for the same characteristics? Those are qualifications that anyone can meet -- if they want to..

If you are very familiar at all with the other Gospels, you will have noticed the marked similarity between the remainder of Luke chapter 6 and the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7.

Let me read you what William Barclay says about this sermon. "There are differences between the versions of Matthew and Luke but this one thing is clear -- they are a series of bombshells. It may well be that we have read them so often that we have forgotten how revolutionary they are. They are quite unlike the laws which a philosopher or a typical wise man might lay down. Each one is a challenge.

As Deismann said, 'They are spoken in an electric atmosphere. They are not quiet stars but flashes of lightning followed by a thunder of surprise and amazement! They take the accepted standards and turn them upside down.' (Barclay, Daily Study Bible, p. 76)

In John chapter 7, an incident is recorded regarding what happened when the high priest and Pharisees sent officers out to arrest Jesus. They came back without Him. When pressed for a reason, all they could say was "No one ever spoke the way this Man does." When you read this sermon, you begin to understand their astonishment. Unlike the Pharisees, He doesn't refer to external authorities such as Rabbi This or Rabbi That. He doesn't even sound like an Old Testament prophet with the ever present, 'thus saith the Lord.' Jesus says, "I tell you..." He doesn't need anybody else's authority. He speaks with His own divine authority. He couldn't do that if He wasn't consciously claiming to be divine.

Perhaps the most revolutionary part of this sermon is Jesus' teaching about "loving your enemies." Moses' law forbids revenge "against your people." Love your neighbor as yourself applied only to fellow Jews -- and not even all of them! But Jesus extends the Old Testament law to include even your enemies, and He does it on His own authority. "Love your enemies -- bless the ones that curse you. Pray for the ones who mistreat you."

John 5-6:24

Today we continued our journey through the gospel of John. The material found in chapter 5 is unique to the gospel of John and is intended to help us understand how John came to the conclusion that Jesus Christ really is the Son of God. (Remember, the purpose for which this whole Book was written is laid out at the end of chapter 20: "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.")

Let's look at what I believe to be the main point John is making. The real reason he includes in his gospel this story that the other gospel writers do not tell: John wants us to be crystal clear about the fact that Jesus Christ boldly -- audaciously claimed for Himself prerogatives that belong to God alone -- and to no one else! He healed the invalid on the Sabbath Day provoking the inevitable conflict with the religious leaders who were more offended by the day on which He did it than they were impressed by the power and authority by which he did it. And it was in the midst of this controversy that Christ self-consciously made claims that could only be interpreted in one way -- He was claiming equality with God -- He was claiming to be God -- to their credit His enemies understood exactly what He was doing, and their response would have been entirely appropriate except for one thing -- He really was God!!

Jesus Christ never made a claim He did not back up with some concrete physical action. I am certain the major reason for the resurrection miracles He performed with Jairus' daughter, the son of the widow of Naim and finally with Lazarus was so that we might give greater credibility to His claim to be able to provide spiritual life to all who seek it in Him.

Nearly all the miracles or "signs" reported by the Apostle John are unique to His gospel. That is fair enough because he was writing after the other gospels to fill in the gaps. Nevertheless he like Matthew, Mark and Luke describe the feeding of the 5,000. This is the only miracle, apart from the resurrection of Christ himself that gets treatment in all four gospels. There was something so awesome about this miracle that, even though the story has already been told three other times, and even though most of John's emphasis falls upon things that happened in Jerusalem rather than Galilee, John could not bear to leave it out. Characteristically, however, he gives us some details missing from the other accounts. He tells us it was near the time of the Passover. It is from John we learn it was Philip that Jesus engaged in a conversation about how to care for all those hungry people. John tells us Christ's purpose in the conversation was to "test" Philip because the Lord already knew exactly what He was going to do. John tells us too that 12 basketful of leftovers were collected after the meal and he alone notes the mood and mind of the people afterward which was to make Christ king by force. That is the reason Jesus withdrew into the wilderness after performing the miracle. Their idea of kingship was very different from His.

Matthew and Mark along with John tell this connected story of Jesus walking on the water on the night following the feeding of the 5,000. In this case, however, it is Matthew who gives us the fullest account including the part about Peter climbing out of the boat in order to join the Savior. Feeding huge crowds of people was not exactly something the disciples had ever been called upon to do before, so I can well imagine they would have found it simple enough to excuse themselves from any responsibility for failure in that area. But rowing across the lake was in their area of special expertise -- after all most of them were professional fishermen. Even when they were doing what they knew best, they were impotent without the presence of Christ with them!! And so, are we.