

JESUS

Portraits from the Gospels

KENNETH SCHENCK



Copyright © 2013 by Kenneth Schenck
Published by Wesleyan Publishing House
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN: 978-0-89827-676-3
ISBN (e-book): 978-0-89827-677-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schenck, Kenneth, 1966-

Jesus : portraits from the Gospels / Kenneth Schenck.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-89827-676-3

1. Bible. Gospels--Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Jesus Christ. I. Title.
BS2555.52.S395 2013
226°.06--dc23

2013015093

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CONTENTS

1.	Mark's Basic Story	7
2.	The Hidden Jesus	25
3.	The Virgin Birth	43
4.	The Sermon on the Mount	59
5.	The New Moses	75
6.	Good News for the Poor	93
7.	Good News for the World	109
8.	The Book of Signs	125
9.	The Book of Glory	143
10.	The Second Person of the Trinity	159
	Notes	175

4

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

JESUS IS THE NEW MOSES

The-best known of the five big sermons in Matthew is the Sermon on the Mount. We may miss some profound aspects of this grand sermon if we merely think of it as a sermon Jesus gave on one particular occasion. By the time you finish this book, you will agree, I hope, that the main goal of the gospel writers was not merely to record the things Jesus said and did, but also to tell us truths about Jesus by the *way* they presented the things Jesus said and did.

For example, some of the material in the Sermon on the Mount is in both Matthew 5–7 and Luke 6. Now, it is quite possible that Jesus preached similar things on more than one occasion, but that probably is not the best explanation for the differences we find in these chapters. We have good reason to conclude that

Matthew and Luke were drawing on a common source for this material.¹ If this theory is true, then the differences between the two are significant because they probably represent something Matthew (or Luke) was meaning to say about Jesus.

What is the significance of the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is on a mountain? Is it merely the fact that Jesus said these words on a mountain? Or has Matthew set these teachings of Jesus on a mountain in order to tell us something about Jesus? Again, this whole line of thinking can be a little troubling when you hear it for the first time. We are programmed merely to think of the Gospels as historical presentations without realizing that ancient writers felt freer to be creative in the way they presented history than we would expect.

So is it possible that Matthew wants us to think of another word from God that was given on a mountain in the Old Testament? Is it possible that the writer of Matthew wanted his original Jewish audience to think of Moses and the Law when they read the Sermon on the Mount? If so, then the key verses of the sermon, 5:17–21, take on a rich meaning.

Matthew 5:17 says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” The “Law and the Prophets” is shorthand for the entire Old Testament Scriptures.² But the next couple verses go on to focus on commandments in the Law, and the rest of the chapter shows how Jesus fulfills the Law.

The point is that the Sermon on the Mount gives Jesus’ authoritative interpretation of the Law. It implicitly compares Jesus to Moses as the lawgiver: Moses gave the Law, and in this sermon Jesus gave the fulfilled Law. The sermon closes with the people getting the point: “When Jesus had finished saying

these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (7:28–29). We will see further reasons to think Matthew intends us to think of Moses when we get to Jesus’ birth story recorded in Matthew in the next chapter.

WHO IS BLESSED?

The Sermon on the Mount begins with some famous verses called the Beatitudes or the “blesseds” (Matt. 5:3–12). For example, the first one is “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3).

I was once in a Bible study that was going through the Beatitudes. One of the first questions we asked was what does it mean to be blessed? The first suggestion was that it meant to be happy. That’s how one translation puts it: “Happy are people who are hopeless” (CEB). Somehow, though, *happy* seems like a pretty anemic translation of the word *blessed*. In that Bible study, it was suggested that the word might mean something like honored. I thought it was interesting that the idea didn’t really resonate with the group. I thought it probably came the closest.

Unlike North America today, the ancient world was an honor/shame world. Those of us in America prize things like thinking for ourselves and making up our own minds. We prize rugged individualism and the “self-made” person. Self-reliance and individual achievement are our values.

Not so in the ancient world. In the ancient world, the goal was to be honored by your group and not to bring it shame. So the person who was prized was the one who most fully displayed

the values of the group. Meanwhile, the thing most to be avoided was bringing shame to your group by showing outsiders that you were not measuring up.

To be blessed by God is thus to be honored by him. All the Beatitudes embody the contrast between now and what is not yet. Now, those who weep and are grieved do not seem blessed. They do not seem to be honored. But that is only now, for the moment. When God's kingdom comes, they will be comforted (Matt. 5:4). In that day, they will have reason to rejoice.

Those who are poor in spirit, who realize they are completely dependent on God, may not seem blessed now. They may not seem as prominent to others now because they do not stand in the marketplace and boast of their own righteousness, like the hypocrites mentioned later in the sermon (see 6:2). But they will be rich in the coming kingdom of heaven (5:3).³ It will belong to them.

The rest of the Beatitudes continue with similar contrasts. The meek do not usually gain high honor in this world, except perhaps at their retirements and funerals. More often, they go through life unnoticed, because they do not push themselves to the front. In this world, it is the assertive and ambitious who tend to advance. By contrast, the meek will inherit the earth in the coming kingdom (5:5).

God will fill those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, even in this life (5:6). Those who are merciful now will be honored with God's mercy on the day of judgment (5:7). Those who make peace now are especially honorable to God (5:9). Those whose hearts are pure in motive will have the privilege of being with God for all eternity (5:8).

Right now, those who are persecuted for serving God do not seem honored. Those who are mocked and insulted seem more

to be objects of shame than reward. But when God's kingdom comes, it will all be reversed. They will inherit a great reward from heaven then. They will receive the same honor that the prophets of God have, even though they were persecuted at the time (5:10–12).

These are great reminders to us. We should not go seeking persecution. There are and have always been some twisted souls who actually seek out persecution to get praise. They ironically are still functioning with earthly values, trying to receive honor only through putting on a godly show. They are the hypocrites of Matthew 6 we will talk about below.

The kingdom blessed are those who live out the Christian life because they are serving God. They do not do it to get acclaim. They keep doing it when they are mocked or persecuted. Their goal is simply to give honor to God, and God will reward them in the coming kingdom.

FULFILLING THE LAW

The second half of Matthew 5 is full of contrasts between what people of Jesus' day thought God wanted and what God *really* wants. Jesus gave a series of six “you have heard but I say” examples. The way many of us process these contrasts is that Jesus was upping the standard: You've heard not to murder, but I'm saying you can't even hate (Matt. 5:21–22). You've heard not to have an affair, but I'm saying you can't even lust (5:27–28).

This works for the first four, but the last two contrasts hint that something a little more profound is going on here. The key to all of them comes in the last contrast: “You have heard

that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (5:43–44). Our first reaction might be to say, “The Old Testament doesn’t teach anyone to hate his or her enemies. That came from the Pharisees. That may have been *their* interpretation of the Law.” But there are passages in the Old Testament that at least sound hateful. The most notorious is Psalm 137:9: “Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.” This is a verse about the captivity of Israel in Babylon, expressing joy at the thought of some future empire destroying it.

But Jesus gave the definitive answer on any attempt to apply the Old Testament in a hateful way. It is unacceptable. We must not only love our neighbors, those who are convenient to love, but we must also love our enemies. God shows us the way. He does not hide the warmth of the sun from the wicked. He does not keep the rain from the farmers who are evil. He sends the sun and rain on everyone, including those who hate him.

When an expert on the Law came to Jesus and asked him what the greatest commandment in the Law was, his answer was the love commandment: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:37–40).

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confirmed this principle again. All the Law and the Prophets are captured in the Golden Rule: “Do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (7:12). This is simply another version of the love command.

So love is the key to applying the Old Testament Law. Love is the filter through which Jesus passed each of the commandments in Matthew 5. The difference between what they “had heard” and what Jesus was saying is that Jesus ran each commandment through the love principle.

This is what Jesus meant by fulfilling the Law. Matthew 5:17–20 are the key verses of the entire Sermon on the Mount, and they give us a general statement that certainly plays itself out in the rest of Matthew 5. Jesus did not come to destroy the Law, but he came to give its “fulfilled” interpretation, its full application. This application means that the Law moves from the external to the heart, to the inner motivation.

The first example is murder (Matt. 5:21–26). It is great not to go through with murder, but the love principle says that a person should not even hate another person. This is not just a matter of a higher standard. It clarifies exactly what the right standard is. Murder is a manifestation of an evil heart. In a sense, it is not so much the act of murder that is wrong as the evil heart that causes it. The fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in this area thus calls for the reconciliation of enemies. If you know you have offended someone, go to that person and try to be reconciled. God has mercy on those who have mercy. And it’s actually in your best interest not to have enemies.

The principle holds true for adultery too (5:27–30). It is great not to commit adultery, but the real evil of adultery is not so much the act itself as it is the heart that leads to the act. The paragraph on divorce that follows is probably an extension of Jesus’ teaching on adultery (5:31–32). The person who gets divorced to be with another woman is just as guilty. Divorce of this sort is simply legal adultery.

The paragraph on taking oaths begins to show how Jesus' fulfillment of the Law shook up some things. The third of the Ten Commandments says not to take God's name in vain. This commandment means that if you swear by Jesus' name, you had better keep your oath. Jesus again got to the heart of the matter: The person who has a truthful heart does not need to take oaths in the first place.

The most striking revision Jesus made is to the "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" rule (Matt. 5:38; Deut. 19:21). This one Jesus rejected. While Deuteronomy 19:21 says to show *no* mercy, Jesus said to show mercy. Jesus went even further. He said to submit to persecution, even to cooperate with it. If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer them the other. If someone takes your coat, give them your shirt. If someone forces you to go a mile, go two miles. The servant does not need to get even, let alone get ahead.

All of these contrasts ultimately fall under this last one—the contrast between loving only one's friends and also loving one's enemies (Matt. 5:43–48). God loves everyone, even his enemies. So Christians hold themselves to a fuller, more complete standard than those who merely follow the letter of the Law. We are to go the whole way and be complete (the meaning of the word *perfect* in 5:48) like our heavenly Father goes the whole way by loving his enemies as well as his friends.⁴

So how did Jesus fulfill the Law and the Prophets? He fulfilled them by filtering the Old Testament through the law of love. The law of love causes one to go the whole way and to be perfect like our heavenly Father is perfect. We love our enemies as well as our friends. We do not look for revenge. The law of love orients us around our hearts rather than merely our outward actions.

TREASURES IN HEAVEN

Another aspect played out in these verses of the Sermon on the Mount is: “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). If someone hearing this verse actually knew some Pharisees, the verse would have been terrifying.

Pharisees were known for how carefully they kept the Jewish Law. They were so serious about keeping it that they had developed extremely specific rules that spelled out in concrete terms what it might mean to keep the Sabbath holy or not covet. While it’s easy for us to condemn or dismiss them as hypocrites, we often develop our own traditions about how to keep the rules too.

For example, when I was a young boy, I once visited a church on a Sunday evening that was strict on keeping Sunday as a Sabbath. Taking Exodus 20:6 seriously, they did not believe in working on Sunday. In the hour before the evening service, I visited a nearby playground and was swinging. An older person came up to me and told me I needed to leave the playground because it was the Sabbath. Her thought was that, as a kid, playing was my work. I should stop swinging—that is working—because it was the Sabbath.

It is ironic to me now to realize how similar this person was being to some of the ancient Pharisees. Being so zealous to keep the Law, they played out the rules in every area of life. The problem is not so much their eagerness to keep God’s Law—or even their strictness—but the fact that the rules became an end in themselves for some of them. Some apparently lost sight of what was much more important to God—loving people.⁵

So to say that you had to be more righteous than the Pharisees would have been terrifying to an average Jew. Although today we think of them as obvious fakers, Pharisees enjoyed great popularity among most Jews at the time. We have to make ourselves feel the shock of this statement.

When we get to Matthew 6, we begin to understand what Jesus was saying. The righteousness of Israel's teachers of the Law was a "this-worldly" righteousness. It was a righteousness for show. The stereotypical Pharisee Matthew has in mind was an actor, a hypocrite who was playing at acts of righteousness but did not truly have heavenly values.

The paragraph on laying up treasures in heaven rather than on earth gives us the key. The hypocrites or actors of Matthew 6 ultimately did not have the right values. Their hearts were not in the right place. Like the "you have heard" of Matthew 5, they were only thinking on a surface level rather than heart level. They were doing acts of righteousness for show.

So when you give to the needy, you shouldn't do it to be seen by others (Matt. 6:2-4). God is the one whose honor and reward you should be interested in, not that of others looking on. The Pharisees Matthew has in mind gave alms so that people looking on would see them and give them honor. Instead, Jesus said that the honor and blessing that counts is what God will give when the kingdom of heaven comes.

Similarly, other religious pretenders would apparently stand on street corners or in worship and pray with a lot of words so that others would think they were especially spiritual or wise. Luke's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) probably gives us a picture of what Matthew has in mind, people who thanked God that they were not like notorious

sinners such as prostitutes and tax collectors. Instead, we are to forgive others so that God will forgive us.

The Lord's Prayer models the appropriate attitude in prayer (Matt. 6:9–13). It is an attitude that asks God to forgive us our wrongs to him because we are forgiving others who have wronged us. It is an attitude of dependence on him, one that realizes he is the one who gives us our daily bread. We exalt him and ask for his help resisting temptations from his Enemy, the Evil One. It submits to his kingship on the earth over and above all others.

Some people also fast as a way to let others know how spiritual they are. This is the type of person who likes to trumpet the sacrifices he or she makes in the name of God. All these types of individual have the same thing in common: They are focused on getting honor now from those around them. They are religious for show, rather than from the heart for God.

It is fascinating how we can find ourselves doing similar things today, while at the same time being smugly critical of Matthew's Pharisees. How many times do people pray grand prayers in church with a secret hope that others will think they have a special knowledge or connection with God? How many times do people casually mention their devotions or the books they're reading or their prayer life or sacrifice?

I went to college with two sisters, who had grown up in a conservative church that placed a strong emphasis on not being showy. They felt criticized for wearing makeup or trying to make their hair look pretty. By contrast, they felt that another girl in the church was praised for coming to church looking like she had just rolled out of bed with uncombed hair.

I'm not in a position to know what style is more "correct," but I do believe that we sinful humans can even make homeliness

a matter of pride. It is insidious human nature that can make us become showy about not being showy! It is a matter of honest reflection. Do I ever try to get spiritual credit by showing off my spirituality in some way?

It's not that we have to go out of our way to hide our walk with God. It's that we need to keep our purpose and priorities in order. Giving to the needy, praying, fasting, and sacrificing—these are all great things God wants us to do, indeed commands us to do. He will reward us one day. But we shouldn't do them so we will get praise here and now.

Still worse is when we are hypocrites in the classic sense, when we condemn others publicly for things we do ourselves (Matt. 7:1–5). When Jesus condemned judging others, he was not saying we can't draw conclusions about sin. If a person admits to having an affair, it is not judging to say he or she has done something very wrong. Judging in the sense Jesus condemned is when we are guilty of the same things for which we condemn others. It is also when we are jumping to conclusions without really knowing the full story or without knowing a person's inner intentions.

We may also forget that our needs and struggles now are only temporary. If one type of person wants to get honor and blessing now, another type of person gets overly worried because times are tough now. This is the worrier of Matthew 6:25–34. This person wonders where food and clothing will come for tomorrow and the next day. There's nothing wrong with planning ahead or doing wise things today that will provide for you and yours in the days ahead. There is a great prayer that asks God to give us the peace to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to tell the difference.⁶

Ultimately, “Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:34). If we cannot do anything about what will come tomorrow, then all we can do is trust in God. Worrying doesn’t change anything. It only makes our blood pressure go up and our hair turn gray. We do all we know to do and then have to leave the rest to God. He is the one who will honor us in the kingdom, even if we are poor now.

The end of this section of the sermon invites us to ask God when we are in need. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7). Surely we should connect these statements with the advice not to worry about our future from Matthew 6, for God loves us and will provide our needs as he does for the sparrow and the fields (6:26, 28–30). God wants to give good gifts to his children. In turn, we should do to others what we would want them to do to us.

WISE BUILDERS

The Sermon on the Mount ends with a parable of sorts about wise builders. Some foolish builders tried to build a house on sand, and when the rains came down and the floods came up, it fell down. By contrast, some wise builders chose to build their house on rock, and when the rains and floods came, it stood firm.

This parable is about listening to Jesus’ teaching. If we are truly wise, we will hear everything in the sermon and apply it to our lives. If we live out this law of love, this life that treats others the way we want to be treated, then our lives will stand

firm when storms come. If we ignore Jesus' teaching, then our lives won't survive the storms that inevitably come.

Jesus was not optimistic that many would survive: "Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (7:14). There may be a little bit of the writer in some of the final words of the sermon, so that we are not just hearing Jesus' words, but also the writer of Matthew telling us about the situation of the church in his day. There will be false prophets (7:15–20). Jesus will not recognize all of those claiming that Jesus is their Lord (7:21–23).

In a sense, Jesus' teaching on false prophets is perfectly in line with what Jesus said about hypocrites in Matthew 6: You can recognize a false prophet not by the way he or she looks on the surface, but by the fruit of his or her life. This statement fits with the heart orientation of the sermon in general.

Matthew 7:21–23 is one of the most sobering paragraphs in the gospel of Matthew. It's right up there with the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46, where some people who think they are Christians in good standing suddenly find themselves facing eternal punishment. So it is here in Matthew 7. There will be some on the day of judgment who not only believed Jesus was the Messiah, but who performed miracles and even cast out demons in Jesus' name. But they will be rejected.

It is a reminder that God looks at the heart. God does not judge us by how good we look on the outside. He does not judge us by the spectacular things we do. He does not judge us by how fantastic our prayers are or how often we fast or have devotions. God is looking for a heart that loves its enemies and does concrete good for others.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What does the possible comparison between Jesus and Moses mean to you? If you are not Jewish, you may not feel the drive for continuity with the Old Testament that Matthew's audience did. So then how do you make use of the comparison?

2. Where do your loyalties lie: more with the here and now or more with the coming kingdom? Have you become too comfortable with the current age? Where do your treasures—and your reliance—lie?

3. Do you agree with the analysis of what Jesus meant by fulfilling the Law? In particular, what do you make of the claim that fulfilling the Old Testament by way of the love command may actually alter some instruction? As a test case, do you think God would command anyone today to annihilate a whole people in the way he did in Joshua's day?

4. Do you ever wear your spirituality for show? Do you ever sacrifice your heavenly reward in order to get the immediate acclaim of those around you?

5. Are you currently building your house on the rock of Jesus' instructions in the Sermon on the Mount?

7

GOOD NEWS FOR THE WORLD

GOOD NEWS FOR WOMEN

We spent the whole last chapter looking at one of the special emphases of the gospel of Luke, namely, its focus on Jesus' good news to the poor and downtrodden. We begin this chapter with some elements of Luke that fit within that general theme of God lifting up the disempowered and despised of society and the world. For example, Luke seems to elevate the status of women. We'll also look briefly at some of Luke's unique parables that show how Jesus broke down barriers between God and tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, and other prodigals.

We begin with the way Luke pays more attention to the role of women in the Jesus story than the other gospels do. We see this fact right away in the birth story. While Matthew tells

about a dream Joseph had, Luke takes considerable time to tell the story of Jesus' birth largely through the eyes of Mary his mother.

John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth, had been barren, and the fact that she miraculously became pregnant fits with Luke's theme of God's favor on the disempowered and dishonored. And Zechariah, John's father, actually became silent throughout Elizabeth's entire pregnancy. After Elizabeth became pregnant, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, and Luke provides her side of the story rather than Joseph's.¹ Mary visited the pregnant Elizabeth, and Elizabeth became filled with the Spirit. So a woman was the first person said to be filled with the Holy Spirit in the entirety of Luke and its companion volume, Acts.

By the way, one of the unique features of Luke is the inclusion of songs and worship in the birth story. Several individuals, including Mary, broke out into song. The angels also sang in worship in the skies.

We already mentioned in chapter 3 some of the other features of Jesus' birth story in Luke that fit with the theme of God's favor on those of low status. The angels appeared to shepherds, who were certainly on the lower end of society (2:8–20). A widow named Anna was there to witness Jesus' purification as a child. God's interest in someone like Anna brings out Luke's interest in the role women played in the story as well as God's interest in the downtrodden.

Luke is the only gospel to include the parable of the persistent widow (18:1–8). Again, several special features of Luke's gospel converge in this one parable. The woman in this story was a widow and thus part of the disempowered of society in Palestine. She demonstrated God's interest in women and their status.

Finally, this parable demonstrates another special emphasis of Luke to which we will return later, namely, prayer.

A final example of how Luke shows more interest in the women of the story is in Jesus' interaction with Mary and Martha (10:38–42). Luke does not tell us where they were from, but John says they were from Bethany (John 11:11). Jesus' interaction with them is quite remarkable given the kinds of barriers society placed between men and women at the time.

You probably know the story. Martha was busy worrying about preparations for Jesus' visit. She was likely concerned about food and such things. By contrast, Mary spent her time listening to Jesus. Martha complained that Mary wasn't helping. But Jesus said Mary's priorities were right. Jesus' message was far more important than getting ready for a meal that would come and go in the space of an hour or two.

What might we take away from the attention Luke gives to the role women played in the story of Jesus? First, it is quite striking. In the ancient world, women were often overlooked. Consider Paul's ongoing debate with "Judaizers" who wanted Gentiles to convert. The debate centered around circumcision—an issue that does not apply to women. Women were thus often forgotten elements in key discussions. It was a male-oriented society and women were seen more as a potential source of shame than as positive contributors.

But Luke includes them, and Jesus included them. When Luke wrote his second volume, Acts, he wrote that the coming of the Holy Spirit meant that women would prophesy in addition to men (Acts 2:17–18). The beginning of the gospel of Luke gives us Anna the prophetess. In Acts, we find women leaders like Lydia at Philippi and Priscilla at Corinth and Ephesus. Luke

knows nothing of some rule that says women can only minister in certain ways and says nothing about wives submitting to their husbands.

It only makes sense in the age of the Spirit that there would be “neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female,” because these are all matters of one’s body, not one’s spirit (Gal. 3:28). When the Spirit comes, all of these individuals are equally children of God. If the Spirit is the one who gives wisdom and discernment, then surely women can relay God’s Word just as well as any man.

GOOD NEWS FOR THE LOST

Luke 15 gives us perhaps the best-known parable of all: the parable of the lost son, also called the Prodigal Son (15:11–32). The parable is situated in a chapter where Luke links together three similar stories, all with a similar point.

The first is the parable of the lost sheep. A shepherd would leave ninety-nine sheep that were grazing so he could find and save one that had gone astray. In the same way, heaven gets excited when the person who has gone astray gets back on track. The introduction to the parable makes it clear who Jesus had in mind. He was being criticized for eating with “tax collectors and sinners” (15:1–2). These were the lost sheep, the ones who had lost their way. They were not even trying to keep the Jewish Law or serve the Lord. Jesus did not in any way pretend they were OK. They needed to repent (15:7), to turn their lives in a different direction. His message was that God is in the reclaiming business.

The next parable is similar, the parable of the lost coin (15:8–10). In it, a woman who had lost a coin didn't pay attention to the nine other coins she had but swept her home thoroughly to find the one that was lost. So, Jesus implied, there is great rejoicing in heaven when a lost person is reclaimed.

Both of these shorter parables set the stage for the parable of the lost son. This parable has two brothers, one of whom faithfully worked in the field for his father. He was like the sheep that didn't go astray and like the nine coins the woman had in hand. In Israel, the elder brother was like the Pharisees and teachers of the law, because they were at least trying to be faithful to God and to his covenant with Israel.

But the Prodigal Son treated his father as if he wished he were already dead. He wanted his inheritance so he could party in a faraway place. There were pigs there, so he had left Israel and Israel's God. He was the lost son whom the father welcomed eagerly at his return. He was like the tax collectors, prostitutes, and others who had wandered away from God.

This parable goes further than the other two. It goes on to address the attitude of the son who was not lost when the lost son returns. It is, in effect, a parable of reversal. As the parable begins, the elder brother is the healthy one. He is the righteous brother. At the beginning of the parable the younger brother is lost, far from God. But by the end of the story, the two have switched places. The younger brother has repented. He has returned to his father. By contrast, the older brother disgraces his father by refusing to go to the feast. He defies his father's will. By the end of the story, the one who started out righteous has become the one separated from God.

It is clear who these two represented. The Prodigal Son represented the same group that the lost sheep and lost coin did: tax collectors and sinners who were accepting Jesus' message and repenting. The elder brother represented the Pharisees and Jewish leaders who in the end largely rejected what God was doing to reclaim the lost sheep.

Luke reinforced this basic mission of Jesus throughout his gospel. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9–14), to which we will return later, God accepted the prayer of the truly repentant tax collector in contrast to the self-righteous prayer of the Pharisee. Even on the cross, Jesus recognized the repentance of one of the criminals there with him, while the other one showed no remorse at all.

How do we apply this basic message today? We probably know intellectually how to apply it. We probably get the application better than we do the original connotations in Israel. The hard part is doing it. God will take us back no matter how far from him we stray. And he will be waiting to welcome us with open arms.

We should not delay, thinking we will be able to find our way back. If we have been away too long, we may not remember the path. Still more, our hearts may be so hardened by then that we won't be able to take even the first step in the right direction. God will always welcome us back, will always *help* us back, if we can genuinely start the journey. But it is possible to distance oneself so far from God that it will never happen. Even if we remember the words to say, by that time they may simply be empty words we cannot truly say with our hearts.

The other lesson is for those of us who, by Christ's blood, have become healthy again. It is all too easy to forget that we

were once prodigals. If we have grown up in the church, we may not even have gone through a blatantly prodigal phase. Without realizing it, we can become the self-righteous older brother. We can begrudge the person who wants to return to the fold, even be annoyed if they inadvertently sit in our pew.

What's worse is when we have no compassion for the prodigal who has not returned. Rather than pray for them and hope for their repentance, like our Father, we can silently revel in the mess they've made for themselves: "They made their bed. Now they can lie in it." "Serves them right." "Our choices have consequences."

To be sure, there are lessons to be learned from our mistakes. But Christ weeps for the lost sheep. He doesn't relish the fact that they are getting what they deserve, their "just desserts." When the person addicted to drugs is back in rehab again, the Father hopes. When the person addicted to poverty is cold or in trouble again, the Father tries again. Jesus did not relish when the lost sheep was eaten by wolves or entangled in fences. He did his best to save them, even though he left the final decision to them.

GOOD NEWS FOR ENEMIES

The second best-known parable in the Gospels is the parable of the good Samaritan, and it is also in Luke (10:25–37). This startling parable about a Samaritan hints at the fact that the gospel is ultimately not just for Jews, but for the whole world. After the early Christians were scattered from Jerusalem in Acts 8:1, the first substantial mission was to the Samaritans.

The Samaritans were basically the people who lived in the area not far north of Jerusalem, in between Jerusalem and Galilee where Jesus grew up. When the Jews returned from their captivity in Babylon, they lived in Judea to the south, where Jerusalem was. Then under the leadership of people like Ezra, Judea began to follow the Jewish Law better than ever before.

But the people in Samaria never underwent any revival of that sort, and the people living there were the religious descendants of the northern kingdom. They had never agreed on the temple having to be in Jerusalem and had a slightly different version of the Jewish Law: the Samaritan Pentateuch. A hundred years or so before Christ, Galilee underwent a conversion to follow the Jewish Law of the south, but Samaria remained religiously and culturally distinct.

The basic point of the parable of the good Samaritan is that everyone is your neighbor, even your supposed enemy, like the Samaritans. A man came to Jesus and asked him what he needed to do to have eternal life. When Jesus asked him what *he* thought he needed to do, he gave the right answer—to love God and love his neighbor. But the man was clever, and so he wanted to define the word *neighbor* so he could justify the way he already lived and acted toward others. So Jesus told a story where the one who was truly neighborly was a Samaritan.

The parable is quite subversive. For one, Jesus made the hero someone the man might naturally dislike. The audience was forced to identify with someone they did not want to consider their neighbor. The individuals with whom they wanted to identify were the villains in this story, namely, a priest and a Levite. They were individuals who might have reason, because of the holiness codes of Leviticus, to avoid a bloodied man.

The gospel of John would later bring out a major point: In the new covenant, those who worship God do so in Spirit, and the old arguments with Samaritans over which temple or law is legitimate faded away. In Acts 8, the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit just like Jews did.

So how are we to apply this parable today? Several takeaways jump out at me. One is that God can use—and save—anyone, no matter where they come from or what they look like. In thinking about this parable, an American Christian might picture an Arab as the one who helps, with a pastor and televangelist passing on the other side. Or we might imagine a homosexual instead of a Samaritan. Basically, the person we don't want to love is the one Jesus has as the hero of the story.

A second takeaway is the realization that God is more interested in people than in rules, and God sees right through those who use the rules as an excuse not to do what they know God wants them to do. Both the priest and the Levite might have made the excuse that they were just trying to stay ceremonially clean. But there are situations where God wants us to make exceptions because of some higher principle. They declined to do so.

GOOD NEWS FOR THE GENTILES

Jesus' parables broke down barriers. The lost sheep were to be included again. Even Samaritans were to be included, apparently. But probably more important for Luke's overall project is the idea that the gospel is not just good news for Israel and its neighbors, but for the whole world. The gospel is for Gentiles as well as Jews.

This truth will become overwhelmingly clear in the second volume of Luke's series—the book of Acts. But we find hints of it in the gospel of Luke as well. Even when the baby Jesus was brought to the temple for purification, Simeon foretold that Jesus would grow up to be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32). We thus see where the whole thing is headed from the very beginning.

We might initially be deceived by how interested Luke seems to be in the Jerusalem temple. Only Luke talked about Jesus' presentation in the temple as a baby. Only he told about Jesus returning to the temple when he was twelve years old. For some reason, he completely omitted the return of the disciples to Galilee after Jesus' resurrection, choosing to focus on Jesus' appearances in Jerusalem instead.

Acts launches in Jerusalem, and the temple was a clear center of Christian activity throughout the book. Peter and the Jerusalem disciples met there regularly. Paul was arrested there in Acts 21 after participating in the temple worship. Paul also visited Jerusalem in Acts 9, 11, and 15. We get the impression from the way Luke told the story that Jerusalem was more or less the center of the Christian universe.

But the message kept spiraling out wider and wider as well. Acts gives us a picture of Jewish synagogues constantly rejecting the good news, pushing Paul out over and over again into Gentile territory. The book of Acts actually ends on a note that some interpreters have found puzzling. Almost shockingly, Paul announced climactically to the synagogues at Rome that God was turning to the Gentiles because of the Jews' rejection of Jesus (Acts 28:28).

Some—particularly those who are anti-Semitic—have wanted to see this statement as God's abandonment of the Jews as a

people forever.² But a careful reading of Luke 21 points in a different direction. Luke 21 is Luke's version of the end times sermon in Mark 13 and Matthew 24. It actually gives us the strongest evidence for the dating of Luke-Acts also.

It is likely that both Luke and Acts were written after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. Not only is it likely because Luke used Mark as one of its main sources (and thus would have to be written after Mark), but there are also some strong hints of it in the way Luke seems to paraphrase Jesus' prediction of the temple being defiled.

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus ambiguously predicted that an abomination that desolates would stand where it shouldn't be (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). But Luke's version is crystal clear: "When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near" (Luke 21:20). The best explanation for why Luke words it so clearly is that Luke was clarifying how the prediction came true after the fact.

It is therefore all the more interesting that Luke was the only one of the gospel writers to go on to say that the Jews "will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (21:24). In other words, Luke believed that we are currently living in the "times of the Gentiles." He ended Acts in such a way as to point in that direction, for Paul said these words less than a decade before Jerusalem fell.

But the times of the Gentiles would not last forever. Jerusalem would be trampled on *until* the times of the Gentiles were over. We see in these verses the same theology that Paul set out in Romans 11. Although the Jews had hardened hearts at the time of Paul (11:25), they were not beyond recovery (11:11). God had

broken off some of the natural branches (ethnic Israel, 11:17), but he was able to graft them back in (11:23).

Part of Israel was currently experiencing a hardening, but only until the full number of the Gentiles came in (that is, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled). At that point, *all* Israel would be saved (11:26).³ This is true because God's calling on Israel was irrevocable (11:29). They have become disobedient so that they may receive mercy later.⁴

The bottom line in all of this discussion is that not only is the gospel good news for Gentiles, but Luke was writing in the age of the Gentiles. If Luke was the author—and we don't know for sure because the text never tells us—as far as we know, he was the only Gentile to author a book in the Bible (see Col. 4:11–14). Accordingly, we have to consider the strong possibility that Luke was primarily writing for a Gentile audience.

I have addressed the question of what we should do with Romans 11 in another book similar to this one.⁵ Basically, it would be dangerous to assume that Israel in its current form is the restored Israel of promise. While Israel surely should always have a special place of honor for the Christian, the current Israel no more has believed in Christ than the Israel of Paul's day. Similarly, the Bible illustrates on more than one occasion that God's prophetic plan is alterable, depending on the obedience of his people.

There are other hints in Luke that the gospel is for the whole earth. For example, it is interesting that Luke's genealogy goes all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:23–38). Matthew's is strictly oriented around Abraham and David. Another hint comes when Jesus, in addition to sending out the Twelve to Israel (9:1–9), also sent out seventy-two on another occasion (10:1–24). The

number seventy in particular seems to have been symbolic of all the nations of the world.⁶

What a privilege it is for those of us who are Gentile believers to live at a time where the possibility of our salvation is no longer in question. The path has been well trodden before us, and we continue to spread the good news to the ends of the earth. We pray for a day when the natural branches might come to faith and be grafted back into the tree again!

THE AGE OF THE SPIRIT

So far we know that Luke emphasized Jesus' good news to the poor, with added attention to women and the marginal fitting smoothly with that emphasis. Luke also presented Jesus so we could see that the good news did not stop with Israel, or even with the Samaritans, but was a gospel for the whole world. If we were to extend our study into Acts, we would also see that Luke wanted his audience to see that Christians weren't troublemakers. We get the barest hints of this later theme when Pilate clearly declared Jesus' innocence in Luke 23:4.

There are two other themes that Luke and Acts bring out that should be mentioned before moving on to John. When taken together, Luke-Acts has a bigger emphasis on the Holy Spirit and prayer than the other Gospels.⁷ In Acts, prayer sometimes leads to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We have already encountered a number of the prayers in Luke. For example, the story of Jesus' birth is full of prayers. Mary praised God in song after Elizabeth greeted Mary as the mother of the Lord (Luke 1:46-55). John the Baptist's father,

Zechariah, praised God after John was born and his tongue was finally freed again to speak (1:68–79). The angels praised God in the fields (2:14) and Simeon sang to God when the baby Jesus came for purification (2:29–32).

Luke 5:16 tells us that Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray. If the verses were in the original version, Luke would also have a more dramatic session of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, with Jesus sweating drops of blood and angels ministering to him (22:43–44).

We've also mentioned already two of the parables in Luke that relate to prayer. The parable of the persistent widow (18:1–8) encourages us to persist in prayer, because God actually wants to bring justice for his people. The story is about a judge who didn't care about people at all. Meanwhile, a widow had been treated unjustly and pleaded for the judge to do something about it. Her persistence eventually wore him down, and he granted her justice. The point is surely *not* that God doesn't want to be bothered with our troubles. It is rather that we should never stop praying for injustice to end until God puts it to an end. Eventually, in his mysterious timing, God will bring justice.

The other parable I have already mentioned is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (9:9–14). Similar to Matthew 6, the Pharisee wanted to get honor and attention right now on earth for the supposed great things he had done. Meanwhile, the tax collector knew how great his need for mercy was, and he asked humbly because of his sins.

Any Jewish audience would have been shocked to hear that it was actually the prayer of the tax collector that God accepted. The Pharisees were held in such high regard and, especially after the destruction of Jerusalem, apparently became the dominant

power within Israel. Jesus made it clear what God is really looking for in prayer: complete honesty and humility in the light of our complete dependence on his mercy.

I will talk a little bit more about the central role the Holy Spirit plays in our lives as Christians when we get to chapter 9. For now, Luke gives us an excellent opportunity to reflect on the power of prayer and, just perhaps, how little we use its power. The idea of our praying might seem puzzling at first. After all, God knows everything. He knows our needs before we speak them (Matt. 6:8). And even when we know what we most long for, we need the Spirit's help to intercede for us (Rom. 8:26).

Then there is the problem of free will. God does not force others to believe, nor does he always manipulate what others do. Why should I pray for others to come to faith if, in the end, God insists that the final decision is theirs? These are some of the great mysteries of prayer.

Still God tells us to pray, and those who do will tell you that prayer changes things. In some mysterious way, prayer works. To some extent, we have to wonder if praying does as much good for us as it does in bringing about change. Maybe the most important reason to pray is because God uses prayer to change us and to draw us closer to him.

But maybe, just maybe, God also has decided to let us be part of his equation for when he does and does not intervene. Perhaps he has set up prayer in part as a great privilege for us to participate in the way he acts in the world. To be sure, he will not always say yes, and it would not be good for us if he did. But if our hearts are aligned with his heart, it may just be that our prayers will become a mirror of his will.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Reflect for a moment on the fact that Luke pays so much attention to women. As you did with the birth stories in chapter 3, bracket for a moment what you think you know the Bible says about women elsewhere in the New Testament. If you listen just to Luke, what role do you think women might play in the kingdom of God?

2. Are you a prodigal or an older brother? Maybe a returned prodigal? Put yourself into the parable of the lost son and look at yourself. Where are you in the story?

3. Who is your Samaritan? Who would you hate to be the hero of this parable? Who do you find it hardest to consider your neighbor? What are you going to do about it?

4. How is your prayer life? Are you persistent in your prayers for justice for the weak? Do you pray sincerely or put on a show for others? Do you believe that prayer can change things? How is God calling you to change?