

A REFLECTION ON LUKE'S GOSPEL

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ABSTRACT

At a time when the Roman emperor Nero was brutally persecuting Christians, Theophilus, a high ranking official in the Roman government, chose to support and patronize Luke the evangelist. It perfectly corroborates this paramount truth – **True faith leads to good works**. Luke comes across as a meticulous writer who has minutely listened and striven hard to notice and understand from eyewitnesses, all what Jesus had taught through word and example. His diagnostic skills as a physician have been deployed excellently in his gospel. Through the examples of how Jesus saw women, non-Jews and the despised (prostitutes, taxmen, Samaritans, lepers), Luke's gospel stands out as **universal good news for all humanity** and reveals how well and deeply he has understood Jesus' message. Probably, it was Luke's gospel that inspired Paul to proclaim with joyful conviction – *There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Gal 3:28).

EXCERPTED TEXTS

Scripture quotations are all taken from the World English Bible which is available in the public domain, www.ebible.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Simeon recalling what Isaiah had prophesied (2:29-32) and the way he exclaims it, touches me most beautifully and I'm sure it must have touched countless other gentile converts too. But the most heart-warming and inspiring part is when Jesus reads Isaiah 61:1-2 from the scroll and announces: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* (Lk 4:21b).

An excellent feature in Luke's gospel is the portrayal of Jesus, **not only** reaching out most lovingly to the non-Jews **but also** showcasing them as role models: THE ROMAN CENTURION – *When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude who followed him, "I tell you, **I have not found such great faith, no, not in Israel**".* (Lk 7:9) and THE GOOD SAMARITAN – *Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?" He said, "He who showed mercy on him."* Then Jesus said to him, "**Go and do likewise**". (Lk 10:36-37).

Luke reveals a complete teaching on '**how to believe**' or rather '**how to gain and grow in faith**'. Luke's exhaustive treatment of this theological virtue is unmatched and he wonderfully extols the virtue. In his portrayal of the centurion's humility and that of Jesus' amazement at the Faith of the centurion followed by generous praise (7:1-10), Luke is actually revealing that Faith is truly the fruit of humility. The sustained importance accorded is deciphered here from the sequence and content in chapters 11, 15, 17 and 18 and we can infer easily, how well Luke expounds Jesus' message that **humility is indeed the key to gaining and growing in Faith**.

Jesus begins by teaching the disciples how to pray with a most beautiful and complete prayer: "*Our father*" (11:2-4).

In an effort to draw them deeper into the subject, our Lord follows it up with this parable – of the man who rushes to his friend at midnight to borrow some bread to set before his unexpected guest (11:5-8). Our Lord's suggestions sound strange for a moment. Why does He say that 'friendship will not come to man's aid in an hour of need'? Why does He expect us to go on pestering till we get what we want?

It is not too difficult to deduce the message: Who likes to be disturbed at midnight? No, not even a friend. Expecting the friend to act favourably as a 'matter of right' indicates pride. Pride is easily hurt and hence bound to fail. Persistent pleading comes from 'gravity of need' and indicates a humbled state. Humility endures and is sure to win. Prayer is for dire needs; this may be inferred from Proverb 30:8 for the meaning of 'daily bread' and what to pray for. Patience, perseverance, humility, contriteness and longsuffering are all foundations of prayer. Our faith in prayer grows as we taste the fruits.

Now, Jesus urges his disciples to ask, knock and seek and assures them that they will certainly receive (11:9-10). He reinforces the teaching with three short parables on how, we who are evil respond when our own children ask us for worldly gifts (11:11-13).

Again, in the Parable of the Lost Son (15:11-31), there is a subtle and yet profound message that suffering helps us to shed pride and come to our senses, which is in fact, restoration of lost vision – Faith.

The message is completed in 17:5-10, when Jesus responds to a specific plea for increasing faith and cites a practical example – “*Even so you also, when you have done all the things that are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants. We have done our duty.’*” (Lk 17:10).

The teaching is revisited in the parable of the persistent widow (18:1-8) and the concluding words provoke the reader to ponder deeply: “*Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?*” (Lk 18:8b).

As mentioned at the outset, Luke is admirably meticulous – the teaching on '**how to gain and grow in faith**' is complemented with sporadic but precise insights on **what is NOT Faith, what is obstinate unbelief** and **what is Faith**, and we also get to know their respective consequences:

Veneration and adoration do not imply Faith: “*Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and don't do the things which I say? But he who hears but doesn't do, is like a man who built a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream broke, and immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.*” (Lk 6:46, 49)

Spiritual blindness is the result of stiff-necked pride – obstinate unbelief is terribly disastrous: “*When he came near, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had known today the things which belong to your peace! But now, they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, surround you and hem you in on every side, and will dash you and the children within you to the ground. They will not leave in you one stone on another, because you didn't know the time of your visitation.*” (Lk 19:41-44)

Suffering, is really a Godsend opportunity to shed pride and gain spiritual vision which is Faith – a humbled contrite heart, He will not spurn: *But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Don't you even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” He said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” Jesus said to him, “Assuredly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” (Lk 23:40-43)

Our Lord taught with radiantly divine authority and revealed vital truths about sin and forgiveness with brilliant clarity. Luke's account of these teachings is by far the best and most exhaustive. The following examples prove the point rather simply:

He said to the disciples: “It is impossible that no occasions of stumbling should come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, rather than that he should

cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be careful. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him. (Lk 17:1-3ab). Our Lord is not suggesting an apt punishment for those who lead the innocent to sinning, but forewarning us of the imminent end of such sinners which is worse than being drowned with a millstone round the neck. To put it plain and simple, becoming an extended arm of Satan is the worst degree of degeneration and a fatal sin that maims the ability to undergo a change of heart and repent. The purpose of punishment is correction and NOT penal compensation and timely correction alone can prevent the futile stage.

If he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in the day, and seven times returns, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him." (Lk 17:3c-4). Neither punishing nor forgiving can end a sinful habit in an instant. To stop sinning, is a long walk to freedom and it is pointless to put a cap on the number chances to be given.

Luke has done an excellent job of capturing Jesus' teachings on riches and poverty. The word 'rich' is first introduced in *the Magnificat* (1:53b) not really as a synonym of 'wealthy', but deployed specifically to describe what we commonly understand as 'mean, miserly, selfish and greedy'. This is most clearly evidenced in the parables of the Rich Fool (12:13-21) and the Rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31).

Our Lord's spontaneous appreciation of the widow's mite, is a quick and yet sharp observation that offers such a deep lesson: *He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow put in more than all of them, for all these put in gifts for God from their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, put in all that she had to live on."* (Lk 21:3-4)

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Steward in some versions) in chapter 16, is a rather difficult parable which stands out as the most stunning example of how the corrupt and dishonest are moved to conversion, while the self-righteous remain unmoved. I believe that our Lord used the terms 'children of this world' and 'children of the light' deliberately to target two prominent groups of people among the audience. They are identified here respectively as the worldly Publicans (taxmen) who were branded as 'ruthless and corrupt' and the Pharisees who fanatically kept the Law, believing it to be the 'Light of Life'.

Both groups shared this common love— money. The taxmen had no qualms about adopting dishonest means but were known for their liberal spending habits and for using ill-gotten wealth freely to gain favors and friends. They are commended for their worldly shrewdness and wooed to give up dishonest ways and receive their own heavenly treasures by proving trustworthy with what belongs to others. The Pharisees amassed wealth through legally right ways but were known to be tightfisted with their hard-earned money. They are commended for their honesty and advised to freely use money to gain the friendship of saints who would welcome them into 'eternal dwellings', when their legalistic righteousness fails to gain them salvation. Both are exhorted to break free from the love of money and seek God with an undivided heart.

Our Lord is impartial and equally appreciates their good ways but frowns upon their bad ways. He gives the two groups a crisp insight of each others' good so that they may learn from each other and also try to break-free from their common weakness. Surprisingly, it is the detested Publicans who were moved to conversion while the highly honored Pharisees mockingly rejected Jesus' teaching: *The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they scoffed at him* (Lk 16:14).

Though there is no mention of how the taxmen responded, we have reasons to believe that the likes of Levi (also called Matthew) and Zacchaeus, were indeed converted by this teaching – *After these things he went out, and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax office, and said to him, “Follow me!” He left everything, and rose up and followed him* (Lk 5:27-28). Elsewhere we read: *When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and saw him, and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.” He hurried, came down, and received him joyfully. Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.”* (Lk 19:5-6, 9-10).

The two parables in chapter 16 – the Dishonest Steward and the Rich man and Lazarus, are not mere teachings on riches and poverty, but also contain a rather **crucial truth about the saving power of gratitude: no saint can ever be ungrateful and they are all undoubtedly bound to intercede with God in favour of sinners to whom they are indebted**. Therefore, it is truly wise to gain friends by freely using our wealth in the service of the needy, who, more often than not are saints in disguise. This is the advice which our Lord gives in the former parable, which the Pharisees mockingly rejected. Again in the latter, we see the Rich Man desperately seek consolation in Purgatory, but has none to intercede only because he had failed on this count all his life. If only the Rich Man had shared his surplus food with Lazarus, then he would have gladly interceded in favour of the Rich Man for gratitude's sake.

Luke's gospel has been invariably understood and explained as a depiction of God's preferential option for the marginalised and the oppressed. I see much more than that – **it is a very clear and stern message against exclusive pretensions which is the bane of many scribes and religious teachers including Jews and Christians**.

In these examples, Jesus candidly demolishes the idea that Jews are the exclusive and favorite children of God: *But truly I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land. Elijah was sent to none of them, except to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed, except Naaman, the Syrian.*" (Lk 4:25-27)

Later, Jesus would also forewarn Jews rather sternly, saying: *“There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets in God's Kingdom, and yourselves being thrown outside. They will come from the east, west, north and south, and will sit down in God's Kingdom. Behold there are some who are last who will be first, and there are some who are first who will be last.”* (Lk 13:28-30)

I see an important application of Luke's gospel that is most relevant to the Indian context. It is the best guide to enlighten, liberate and empower people to reject all forms of racism and discrimination – caste, religion, ethnicity, gender and many other, including those based on scriptures of whichever religion.