

Jesus Among Luke's Marginalized

By

Jeffrey E. Miller

Date: 29 Nov. 2017

Approved:



J. Ross Wagner, Supervisor



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J. Warren Smith, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

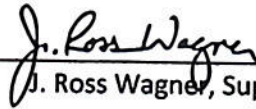
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Many first-century Jewish leaders considered the marginalized outside the reach of God's mercy. But Jesus seemed to challenge this social and religious value. This study explores the paths to restoration for society's outcasts in the Gospel of Luke, whether their outside status was the result of sinful "conduct" (prostitution, tax-collection, etc.) or a culturally-defined "condition" (blindness, leprosy, nationality, gender, etc.). I attempt to show that Jesus drew a distinction between the "conduct marginalized" and the "condition marginalized" and sought to meet their needs differently based on their proper classification. Jesus addressed the specific needs of these outsiders which avoided over-condemning on the one hand and premature restoration on the other hand. He did not regard the condition marginalized beyond the pale of redemption; he did not regard the conduct marginalized beyond the possibility of repentance. Both were worthy to hear the message of the gospel.

The Gospel of Luke provides unparalleled resources for my investigation. This Gospel emphasizes society's outcasts more than the other Gospels, especially Gentiles, lepers, the poor, and women. According to Simeon, the Christ child will be responsible for the rise and fall of many in Israel (Luke 2:34) reversing the status imposed by culture on the powerful and the weak alike. Jesus' warning that those who exalt themselves will be humbled while those who humble themselves will be exalted is repeated twice only in Luke's Gospel (14:11; 18:14). Jesus inaugurates his public ministry by citing Isaiah's liberating promises to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

The dinner table in Luke 14 is occupied by the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame, while the entitled powerful “will not taste of my banquet,” Jesus says (Luke 14:16-24). Jesus tends unconditionally to invite these outcasts to gather to him on the “outside” (away from Jerusalem, away from Jewish leaders, etc.). Instead of perpetuating the condemnation of the condition marginalized, Jesus seems to invite their restoration by confronting the myth that some sin lies at the root of their condition.

At the same time that Luke elevates these condition marginalized, he also places a greater stress on “repentance” for the conduct marginalized than we find in the other Gospels. It is Luke’s Jesus, after all, who famously adds “to repentance” in 5:32 to the expression, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” in Matthew 9:13 and Mark 2:17. It seems that some outcasts are victims of societal injustice while others are suffering the consequence of marginalization as a result of their own choices. To further complicate matters, we find Jesus dining with “tax collectors and sinners” throughout the Gospel of Luke. This table fellowship is noted and condemned by some Jewish leaders who find Jesus too welcoming. But Jesus rejects the insult that he is a “friend of tax collectors and sinners,” along with being labelled a glutton and a drunkard. Instead of unconditionally accepting the conduct marginalized, Jesus invites their repentance for community restoration.

Many additional questions are raised in the process of this research: Does the Gospel of Luke allow us to classify the marginalized as “conduct” or “condition” and, if

so, who might fit into those categories (alternative category labels might be “active” and “passive” marginalized—as in those who actively contributed to their marginalization through their behavior and those who were passively marginalized through no fault of their own)? Do these categories still exist today? How much cultural luggage is involved in the station of the first century’s outcasts? Was Jesus more accepting of people than his followers are today? Did Jesus consider himself a friend of tax collectors and sinners, unconditionally welcoming them? Did he use table fellowship as a means to drawing sinners into a relationship with himself? Is it culturally objectionable to refuse anyone inclusion today, as it seemed culturally objectionable to welcome everyone in Jesus’ day?

The path to restoration for society’s outcasts in the Gospel of Luke ran through Jesus. How they were restored by Jesus, however, seemed to take on different forms depending on why that person was marginalized in the first place. This study concludes that those who were marginalized through no fault of their own (condition outcasts) were unconditionally redignified by Jesus, whereas those who were marginalized due to sin (conduct outcasts) were offered forgiveness in exchange for repentance. Jesus did not hesitate to classify people as sinners. Those who thus repented were celebrated with large meals fitting those found who were formally lost. Furthermore, Jesus directly confronted self-righteousness and those who were guilty of oppression. If we seek to model ourselves after Jesus, we may require a measure of correction that aligns us with this portrait of Jesus presented in Luke’s Gospel.

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PART ONE
CONDUCT OUTCASTS

REPENTANCE IN LUKE

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Repentance

Those who were marginalized due to their conduct found themselves on the outside of society, and their unrighteous practices required a change in conduct before restoration could take place. Any study of these conduct outcasts must factor in the notion of repentance. Repentance assumes guilt. This distinguished the conduct outsiders from the condition outsiders. No change in conduct seems to be demanded or expected of those whose conduct did not make them guilty and render them marginalized in the first place. While Luke places a greater emphasis than the other gospels on those condition marginalized who required no repentance, he also employs the verb and noun form of “repentance” more than the other gospel writers combined.

According to Edwards, repentance (μετάνοια) “is a compound word meaning ‘to change one’s mind’ or ‘to alter one’s understanding.’ It combines both rational decision and willful act as opposed to emotive feeling alone.”¹ Vinson claims that repentance for the forgiveness of sins is “a summary of the gospel taught by Jesus to the apostles, to be spread to all nations.”²

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 108.

² Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 88.

But what was involved in this repentance? What did it look like? Did the repentance required by Jesus differ from that required by the religious leaders at the time? This is where matters get complicated. According to Sanders, repentance in first-century Judaism would have included a sacrifice at the temple and a turn to obedience to the law.³ If wrongdoing toward another was in play, restitution would also be required. It appears that the repentance required by Jesus and his followers looked different.⁴ It might have been this fundamental disagreement over the nature of repentance that led the religious leaders and Jesus to look upon the same “sinners” and draw different conclusions (the religious leaders that they were unrepentant, Jesus that they were repentant).

So how did Jesus imagine repentance? Repentance is designed for those who are guilty of sin (5:32). Certainly ceasing unrighteous behavior and living righteously was involved (6:27-38). This change in conduct is the expected response when miracles are

³ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Fortress Press, 1985), 207. Elsewhere, Sanders writes, “By normal Jewish standards offences against fellow humans required restitution as well as repentance....Other offences were atoned for by repentance alone. While the Temple stood, repentance would be demonstrated by a sacrifice” [E.P. Sanders, “Jesus and the Sinners,” *JSNT* 19 (1983), 26].

⁴ Along similar lines, Bock notes that Jesus’ declarations of forgiveness over certain people implies a path to forgiveness not recognized by the religious leaders of his day: “The offense appears to revolve around the fact that forgiveness comes outside any cultic requirements in a mere declaration, an approach that points to Jesus’ own authority” [Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, editors, *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 599].

performed (10:13) or when a prophetic voice confronts unrighteousness (11:32).

Judgment awaits those who refuse to repent (13:3, 5). Celebration results when even one person genuinely repents (15:7, 10). Restitution by the offender toward those who are wronged seems secondary to forgiveness generously offered by those who are offended (17:3-4; 23:34). On the other hand, Jesus never requires a temple sacrifice in connection with his call to repent.⁵

Finally, Jesus imagined repentance that was connected to him. His commission to his followers does not just prioritize the notion of repentance in general, but includes proclaiming repentance “in his name” (24:47). Any definition of repentance as Jesus imagined it must include those two central elements: turning away from unrighteous conduct and turning toward Jesus. The repentance Jesus proclaimed demanded an unfavorable response to one’s unrighteous lifestyle and a favorable response to Jesus such that a person’s inclination toward sin was replaced by an inclination toward Jesus.

Inclusion Before Repentance?

The relationship between repentance and inclusion in today’s discussion about Jesus takes one of two forms. Either Jesus fully included people first in the hopes that repentance would follow, or he expected their repentance as a condition for wholesale

⁵ In Luke 5:14, Jesus instructs the healed leper to go to the priest and offer a sacrifice. But this command is in the context of cleansing, not repentance.

inclusion. The chapters that follow will seek to establish my position as the latter.⁶ Indeed, the question of whether Jesus was a friend of unrepentant sinners will be an important one for this study. But let us first locate three representatives who hold to the former position.

Sanders more than downplays the role of repentance in Jesus' preaching and message; he contends that Jesus did not demand repentance from his followers at all. Instead, Jesus embraced people without expecting repentance while merely hoping that repentance might result from their unconditional inclusion. Summarizing his position, Sanders writes, "Jesus said, God forgives you, and now you should repent and mend your ways; everyone else said, God forgives you if you will repent and mend your ways."⁷ With regard to Jesus' relationship with tax collectors and sinners, Sanders asks (italics his), "Could it be that he offered them inclusion in the kingdom *while they were still sinners* and *without* requiring repentance as normally understood—renouncing a sinful way of life and turning to obedience to the law?"⁸

⁶ Granted, there exists a spectrum of interactions between Jesus and those he came seeking to save. Many stories in the Gospel of Luke show an iterative process that includes Jesus willingly interacting with those who exhibit interest in his offer of forgiveness. Repentance seems to be required, however, for any unrepentant person who wants to enjoy Jesus' full acceptance and embrace.

⁷ Sanders, "Jesus and the Sinners," 24.

⁸ Ibid., 23-24.

Carroll likewise interprets Jesus' mission as inclusion first followed by the hope of repentance. While commenting on Jesus' commission to his disciples with a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (24:47), he writes: "That view of the sequential and causal connection between forgiveness and repentance is not borne out, however, by the preceding narrative of Jesus' ministry....Jesus' ceaseless seeking out of the lost in his ministry suggests the priority of gracious acceptance, inclusion, and mercy."⁹

Finally, Carey writes, "Jesus brings sinners to repentance, but not through his words. Instead, sinners come to repentance simply by being part of Jesus' circle."¹⁰ Inclusion first, repentance later. Again, many chapters that follow will seek to demonstrate that repentance was a prerequisite for wholesale inclusion by Jesus rather than a wishful result.

Repentance and Power

Luke's Gospel describes the spectrum of cultural power and injustice. Those at the center of Jewish culture—the religious leaders—are often contrasted with those on society's fringes. When one looks at this power system through the lens of repentance, a few observations can be made.

First, power is often accompanied by a measure of pride. Perhaps the tax collector would have been in a position of power over the Pharisee in Jesus' parable had

⁹ John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library (Louisville: WJK Press, 2012), 493.

¹⁰ Greg Carey, *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 25.

the context been a financial seminar. But the Pharisee had home field advantage while praying in the temple, and his pride was evident as he compared himself to the spiritually-bankrupt tax collector (18:9-14).

Second, the “haves” on the inside tend not to desire change the way the “have nots” on the outside do. The Rich Ruler was reluctant to leave behind his power and position for Jesus’ sake (18:18-23), while the uneducated fishermen “left everything and followed him” (5:11). For some, their station of authority or perception as society’s “insiders” convinced them that change was not necessary.

Third, because of their pride and lack of desire to change, those with power tend not to respond favorably to Jesus’ message of repentance. Admitting fault would tarnish their reputation, potentially jeopardizing their influence and power over other people. Indeed, the very position of power held by the religious leaders seems to have convinced some of them that they had no need to repent in the first place. These are the ninety-nine “righteous persons” who needed no repentance (15:7). But the converse is also true: a measure of humility is exhibited by those with less social power—the outsiders—who in turn seem more willing to respond to Jesus through repentance. After all, what did they have to lose by following Jesus?

Finally, reversal. Jesus brought low those whose pride and power prevented them from repenting and he raised up those who repented in humility. Those “insiders” who have the currency today will have none (the Rich Man); those “outsiders” who have no currency today will have it all (Lazarus). Jesus is appointed for the fall and rise of

many in Israel (2:34) because “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (14:11; 18:14). This notion of reversal will be explored in great detail in a later chapter.

Repentance in Luke

The verb “repent” occurs nine times in the Gospel of Luke (10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10; 16:30; 17:3, 4). Along with five occurrences in the book of Acts, Luke’s two volumes account for fourteen of the verb’s thirty-four New Testament appearances, or forty-one percent.¹¹ Chorazin and Bethsaida are rebuked for not repenting in response to miracles performed in those cities (10:13). Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, but Jesus’ generation has not repented when he—someone greater than Jonah—arrived (11:32).¹² Perishing is a natural outcome for those who do not repent (13:3, 5). Positively, great joy in the presence of the angels of heaven is the natural outcome when just one sinner repents (15:7, 10). One might hope that someone returning from the dead might arrest the attention of sinners who need to repent, but that message would be rejected along with that of the prophets (16:30). Finally, Luke’s Jesus uses the

¹¹ The verb appears five times in Matthew, twice in Mark, once in 2 Corinthians, and twelve times in Revelation.

¹² Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 264, rightly notes that by connecting his message to that of Jonah, Jesus was showing that “repentance in the NT has OT roots.”

stronger “repents” in 17:3-4 for the brother who responds positively to loving correction than the softer “listens to you” found in Matthew 18:15-22.

The noun “repentance” occurs five times in the Gospel of Luke (3:3, 8; 5:32; 15:7; 24:47). Along with six occurrences in the book of Acts, Luke’s two volumes account for eleven of the noun’s twenty-two New Testament appearances, or fifty percent.¹³ Repentance is introduced in association with John the Baptist who preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3:3). He went on to instruct the crowds to “bear fruits in keeping with repentance” (3:8). In response to the Pharisees’ criticism that Jesus was dining at Levi’s house among “tax collectors and sinners,” Jesus claimed that he has “not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (5:32).¹⁴ In the same way that unlost sheep elicit no celebration, neither will there be joy in heaven over “ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (15:7). Finally, Jesus’ commission to his disciples just prior to his ascension includes “repentance for forgiveness of sins” for all the nations (24:47).

¹³ The noun appears twice in Matthew, once in Mark, once in Romans, twice in 2 Corinthians, once in 2 Timothy, three times in Hebrews, and once in 2 Peter.

¹⁴ The parallels in Matthew 9:13 and Mark 2:17 omit any reference to repentance here. It would appear that Luke was unsatisfied with Jesus merely “calling” sinners. He included “to repentance” to add both direction and force to this calling. More on this in chapter two in our discussion of Jesus calling Levi.

Repentance and John the Baptist

The notion of repentance in Luke is first introduced by John the Baptist, who gets more verses in Luke's opening chapters than in the other Synoptic Gospels. Prophetic overtones mark the introduction of this Elijah-like figure. His Jewish pedigree is untarnished, he arrives on the scene preaching, and his message is one of repentance. For good measure, Luke places an ominous quotation from Isaiah 40:3-5 just prior to John's first recorded words. Wrath is coming, John claims, for those who do not conduct themselves in a manner consistent with those who have rejected an unrighteous lifestyle. Actions speak louder than one's words or genealogy, so instead of hiding behind your father Abraham with unholy conduct, "bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" (3:8).

This generates an interaction between John and the crowd that is unique to Luke's Gospel (3:10-14). The people ask what actions might reflect genuine repentance: "What shall we do?" John's three answers show that his understanding of repentance reverses the separation between the "haves" and the "have nots" that their unjust actions have created. John responds with corrective behavioral measures toward others (not just toward God) that eliminate the abuse of power.

First, true repentance will mean not hoarding your possessions, but sharing your extra tunic and food with those who have neither (3:11). Second, if you are a tax collector, true repentance will mean not abusing your Roman-appointed office by collecting more taxes than you should (3:13). Third, true repentance for a soldier means

not abusing your Roman-appointed position of power by taking money from those who have no power to refuse you (3:14). For John the Baptist, repentance for the “haves” — the insiders—means to stop behaving unjustly toward the “have nots” —the outsiders.

Repentance As Actions, Not Words

Although Luke’s fourteen uses of the combined verb and noun forms of the word “repentance” amount to more than the other gospels, their relative paucity still requires explaining. For Luke, repentance is found in actions more than words. John the Baptist first establishes that genuine repentance will be evidenced by good deeds (Luke 3:8), a notion that Luke seems to underscore with the last occurrence of the word in his two volumes (Acts 26:20). Many stories of repentance in the Gospel of Luke, therefore, lack the appearance of the word itself. It seems that Jesus sounded the anthem of repentance broadly, and then received those individuals who demonstrated it with their actions. A few examples will suffice.¹⁵

Simon Peter first acknowledged his sinful condition to Jesus, and then he demonstrated his repentance by leaving everything to follow him (5:8-11). Likewise Levi, the tax collector, left everything behind to follow Jesus—seemingly without saying a word (5:28). Fasting, which was a sign of mourning and repentance, may have been part of the expected fruits of repentance John had in mind—a practice he was known for

¹⁵ Some of these actions I will seek to demonstrate as repentance in later chapters.

(see Luke 7:33).¹⁶ The repentance of the sinful woman was demonstrated when she anointed Jesus' feet with her expensive perfume (7:37-38). The lost son's repentance is seen in his return to his father while voicing his own unworthiness (15:20-21). The tax collector in Jesus' parable—rather than the respected religious leader—is the one who returns to his home justified, his repentance displayed in his physical posture and unentitled acknowledgement of his desperate need for God's mercy (18:13-14). The Rich Ruler's unwillingness to release the wealth that held him indicates his lack of repentance (18:18-23). Zacchaeus' creative effort to get a glimpse of Jesus hints at his repentance, which finds its clearest expression in his offer to give half of his possessions to the poor and to recompense fourfold anyone he might have defrauded (19:2-10)—in keeping with John's instructions that tax collectors deal fairly (3:12-13). Peter repents of denying Jesus by weeping bitterly (22:62) and, later, by returning as his follower (24:12). One "criminal" crucified with Jesus is welcomed by Jesus after he admits his own guilt and defends Jesus' righteousness (23:40-43). The word "repentance" does not have to be included in every story that describes a person repenting.

Repentance in Jesus' Commission

If last words are lasting words, then the closing speech that a writer chooses for his main character's exit is very important. Although not as famous as the Great

¹⁶ See Vinson, *Luke*, 89.

Commission included at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' commission at the close of Luke's Gospel packs a thematically-significant punch. Luke's message of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" begins on the lips of John the Baptist and ends on the lips of Jesus.¹⁷ The beginning and final proclamation provide tidy bookends for Luke, both explicitly naming repentance. "For Luke," Bock writes, "repentance is the summary term for the response to the apostolic message....People must change their minds about God and the way to him, especially their thinking about sin, their inability to overcome sin on their own, Christ's essential role in forgiveness, and the importance of depending on him for spiritual direction."¹⁸ One wonders, if Jesus did not require repentance for forgiveness of sins (per Sanders, Carey, Carroll, among others), why does he commission his followers with precisely that formula?

Repentance in Acts

Although we've limited the scope of our study to the Gospel of Luke, tracing the trajectory of certain themes into the book of Acts helps demonstrate the author's consistency and may possibly yield important insights. The verb "repent" occurs five times in Acts in addition to its nine occurrences in the Gospel of Luke. In Peter's first sermon in Acts, he invites listeners to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for

¹⁷ The trajectory continues into Acts (see 5:31).

¹⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1939.

the forgiveness of their sins (2:38). In Peter's second sermon, he invites his audience to "repent and return" for the sake of Christ (3:19). In 8:22, Peter invites Simon the magician to repent of the wickedness of thinking he could purchase God's power with money, and he would be forgiven. In Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, he states that God is presently inviting everyone to repent (17:30). Finally, Paul informs King Agrippa that he has declared to both Jews and Gentiles that they should repent (26:20).

The noun "repentance" occurs six times in Acts in addition to its five occurrences in the Gospel of Luke. In Acts 5:31, repentance and forgiveness of sins is granted to Israel because God has exalted Jesus to his right hand. Next, the Gentiles are granted repentance that leads to life (11:18).¹⁹ John was Jesus' frontrunner, preaching a baptism of repentance that would prepare people for the arrival of Jesus (13:24; 19:4). Paul reminds the elders of Ephesus at Miletus that his message to both Jews and Gentiles was "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (20:21). Finally, Paul claims that he declared to Jews and Gentiles alike that they should repent and turn to God, "performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (26:20).

And here we have come full circle. It was John the Baptist who first introduced the notion of repentance in Luke's two-volume work, and that true repentance would be demonstrated by fruits of righteousness (Luke 3:8). Luke concludes his discussion of

¹⁹ It should be noted that Gentiles were not being invited to repent of their "Gentile-ness," any more than Israel was being invited to repent of their Jewishness in 5:31. Instead, the Acts narrative is showing the enfolding of the Gentiles into God's merciful offer of forgiveness for unrighteous conduct.

repentance with Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, claiming that true repentance for Jew and Gentile alike would be demonstrated through righteous deeds (Acts 26:20).

Now that we have explored Luke's concept of repentance, we turn to consider the relationship between repentance and those who need it most in the Gospel of Luke—tax collectors and sinners.

TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS IN LUKE

CHAPTER TWO

Luke's Tax Collectors

The Greek word for tax collector occurs in the New Testament only in the Synoptic Gospels: eight times in Matthew, three times in Mark, and ten times in Luke. There is no mention of tax collectors in the book of Acts. According to Bock, "Every Lukan mention of tax collectors portrays them favorably."¹ Note, for example, the suggestive difference between Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain:

"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax collectors do the same, don't they?" (Matthew 5:46)

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (Luke 6:32).

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1513.

Luke's use of "sinners" in place of Matthew's "tax collectors" may indicate his effort to insulate them from criticism.² On the other hand, "tax collectors" and "sinners" often appear to be interchangeable terms.³ Both labels were used paradigmatically for anyone who seemed to lack a moral compass. Tax collectors in the first century had earned a negative reputation for their lack of ethics. Their profession was saturated with unscrupulous people who overtaxed others for personal gain. "The toll-collectors were in a profession that was open to dishonesty and oppression of their neighbor," writes Adams.⁴ After all, "The Roman tax system depended on graft and greed, and it attracted individuals who were not adverse [sic] to such means."⁵

Who were these people, and why were they especially hated among the Jewish people? The precise identity of the Gospel's tax collectors has been the subject of much debate. Most were probably rural tax collectors who were shunned by the Jews for their employment by—and therefore affiliation with—Rome and her client territories.⁶ Because they collected taxes that supported Rome, Jewish tax collectors were regarded

² Matthew records Jesus speaking disparagingly about tax collectors again in 18:17.

³ In the story of Zacchaeus, Jesus is said to have gone to be the guest of a "sinner" (Luke 19:7).

⁴ Dwayne H. Adams, *The Sinner in Luke*. The Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series (Wipf & Stock, 2008), 123.

⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 112.

⁶ Zacchaeus, as a chief tax collector, was probably an overseer of sorts to the rural tax collectors (see Luke 19). This also explains the description that he was wealthy.

as borderline treasonous reminders of the Roman domination. According to Edwards, “A Jew who collected taxes was a cause of disgrace to his family, expelled from the synagogue, and disqualified as a judge or witness in court.”⁷ He was rendered an outsider by his family, his religious community, and the legal system.

Tax collectors were considered among the worst that their society produced. They were regarded as irredeemable. According to Neale, “For Luke, toll collectors serve as archetypal ‘sinners’ beyond the pale of salvation.”⁸ But Jesus talked to them, invited them, and made himself available to them. Jesus regarded them as redeemable. His association with tax collectors brought a great deal of criticism. Some would question his own moral scruples based on his association with those who were notoriously unethical. Furthermore, Jesus’ table fellowship with tax collectors may have been frowned upon, in part, because the food and drink Jesus consumed would have been purchased using proceeds gained from allegedly unscrupulous taxation.

But neither he nor John the Baptist required them to abandon their profession. When a group of tax collectors asked John what repentance meant for them, he did not call for them to stop collecting taxes that supported Rome. Instead, he instructed that they not use their profession to treat others unjustly (3:12-13). It appears that some of them who were baptized by John found a way to live righteously within their tax-

⁷ Edwards, *The Gospel*, 112.

⁸ David A. Neale, *None But the Sinners*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 58 (Sheffield Press, 1991), 114.

collecting vocation (7:29). Furthermore, while Luke suggests that Levi left behind his career as a tax collector, the same suggestion is not made about Zacchaeus.

Luke's Sinners

The Greek word for “sinner” occurs forty-seven times in the New Testament. It appears in the Gospel of Luke eighteen times, more than all of the other Gospels combined. The term does not appear in the book of Acts. Because the word is noticeably generic, determining the precise identity of Luke’s “sinners” is even more difficult than identifying his “tax collectors.” In many ways, Neale is right: “The term’s meaning is always determined by the lips on which it is found.”⁹

According to Edwards, the Mishnah describes sinners as “gamblers, money-lenders, people who race doves for sport, people who trade on the Sabbath year, thieves, the violent, shepherds, and, of course, tax collectors.”¹⁰ Ritual impurity is probably not in view with the vast majority of the uses of the word.¹¹ The tax collector refers to himself as a sinner in Jesus’ parable, but he is pictured praying in the temple, something he would not have been permitted to do if he were regarded as ceremonially

⁹ Neale, *None*, 130.

¹⁰ Edwards, *The Gospel*, 171, citing the Mishnah Sanhedrin 3:3.

¹¹ But see Robert H. Stein, *Luke*. The New American Commentary, Vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 182, “Even as contact with lepers (Luke 5:12-16) brought ritual uncleanness, so in the minds of the Pharisees contact with tax collectors and sinners brought moral (as well as ritual) uncleanness.”

unclean (Luke 18:10-13). Even in the context of table fellowship, the appearance of “sinner” likely does not involve ritual impurity. Keener writes, “Some commentators have argued that ‘sinners’ may refer specifically to those who did not eat food in ritual purity, but the term probably refers to anyone who lived sinfully rather than religiously, as if they did not care what the religious community thought of them.”¹²

In Luke’s Gospel, the term “sinner” is sometimes applied to someone in a disreputable career. For example, the likely prostitute who anointed Jesus’ feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee was called a “sinner” (Luke 7:37, 39). Likewise, some who witnessed Jesus’ visit to the home of Zacchaeus the chief tax collector concluded that Jesus had gone to be the guest of a “sinner” (Luke 19:7).

In addition to Zacchaeus being branded a “sinner,” the expression “tax collectors and sinners” occurs three times in Luke (5:30; 7:34; 15:1). According to Michel, “The term ἁμαρτωλός [“sinner”], which is used along with τελώνης [“tax-collector”], is a comprehensive word for the man whose way of life is fundamentally and perpetually in contradiction to God’s demands.”¹³ Adams agrees: “The ‘sinners’ referred to in the expression ‘toll collector and sinners’ are those comfortable associating with toll-

¹² Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 141. See also Cecilia Wassen, “Jesus’ Table Fellowship with ‘Toll Collectors and Sinners’” (*Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14, 2016).

¹³ Otto Michel, “τελώνης,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, translated by Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 8:104.

collectors, who are immediately considered to be moral ‘scoundrels.’”¹⁴ Since tax collectors could use their position and power to overtax the poor, their occasional identification as sinners fits a definition that includes social injustice. Wassen writes, “We may conclude that ‘sinners’ denote people who transgress the laws and are therefore outside of the covenant, according to the specific perception of the writer. Among the general lawless deeds of the sinners, a frequent motif is their oppression of the righteous, often understood in terms of the rich exploiting the poor.”¹⁵

In order to repent, one must first acknowledge that one is a sinner. According to Vinson, “When Luke writes ‘sinner,’ he means someone who has done things for which he or she needs to repent, which includes pretty much everyone.”¹⁶ But does Luke classify all people as sinners? It seems that Luke primarily uses that epithet for those with disreputable careers or conduct. The label “sinner” is never self-applied in the other Gospels, but it is used twice this way in Luke’s Gospel—once by Peter (5:8, the first appearance of the word in Luke) and once by the tax collector praying in the temple in Jesus’ parable (18:13). Jesus regarded sinners as the spiritually sick, and he was sent to call them to repentance (Luke 5:32). And even one sinner repenting was cause for a large celebration (Luke 15:7, 10, 23, 27, 32). Could such elaborate celebrations over

¹⁴ Adams, *The Sinner*, 124.

¹⁵ Wassen, “Jesus’ Table Fellowship,” 148.

¹⁶ Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 150.

repentance have been misinterpreted by some as nothing more than questionable association with unrepentant sinners?¹⁷

Attraction of Sinners to Jesus

If unconditional acceptance was not Jesus' strategy for seeking and saving the lost, what was? The Bible teaches that Jesus was God made flesh. God chose to leave the glories of heaven and join humanity in Christ. This initiative taken by God himself put Jesus in direct contact with every variety of humanity. But Luke (and the other gospels) portrays notorious sinners in particular being attracted to Jesus. What was it about Jesus that held their attraction? Two answers come to mind.

First, Jesus attacked the self-righteous religious elite who regarded the tax collectors and notorious sinners as outsiders, beyond the pale of God's redemption. Marginalized sinners must have enjoyed hearing this popular teacher discredit and embarrass those who had forced them into the margins in the first place.

Second, Jesus took the initiative with people unconditionally and indiscriminately, teaching that even the worst sinner who was willing to come to God on his terms could be forgiven. Suddenly the door to God's grace and mercy was unlocked for the notorious sinner. He *was* forgivable. He *was* redeemable. God was *not* finished

¹⁷ See Edwards, *The Gospel*, 172, who writes, "His fellowship with the disreputable was an unforgettable hallmark of his ministry, and an enduring lesson to the church to embrace the socially marginalized or outcast."

with him. And this forgiveness was not extended with hesitation or resignation but eagerly from a God who longed to repair broken bridges. Jesus extended a hand to anyone willing to hear his message. The prospect of righting their relationship with God was very attractive to those who had been told that God was finished with them. When they heard a message of hope and potential redemption as Jesus spoke to the crowds, many were eager to hear more.

It should be noted that, like today, there were certainly many notorious sinners in Jesus' day who had no interest in Jesus' offer of forgiveness in exchange for repentance. Understandably, the gospel writers chose not to focus on these people. Instead, they chose to record the stories of those notorious sinners who seemed inclined toward Jesus' message, followed by his eager welcome of them as his followers. And predictably, those who regarded notorious sinners as irredeemable outcasts took issue with Jesus' association with them.

Five Accusations

Five passages in the Gospel of Luke record people calling into question Jesus' association with "sinners" in violation of cultural norms. In Luke 5:30 (cf. Matt. 9:11; Mark 2:16), it is the Pharisees and their scribes who grumble their complaint to Jesus' disciples while Jesus and his disciples are eating and drinking with tax collectors and others at the home of Levi. In Luke 7:34 (cf. Matt. 11:19), Jesus quotes the Pharisees and law experts who appear to be accusing Jesus of being "a friend of tax collectors and

sinners.” In Luke 7:39, Jesus’ prophetic ability is questioned by Simon the Pharisee when Jesus doesn’t respond appropriately to the touch of a known sinner. In Luke 15:2, while tax collectors and sinners are listening to Jesus teach, the Pharisees and scribes grumble their complaint that Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. Jesus’ answer comes in the form of three parables that occupy the rest of that chapter. In Luke 19:7, the people grumble that Jesus has agreed to be the guest of a sinner: Zacchaeus the chief tax collector. Only this passage records the crowd questioning Jesus’ relationship with sinners and tax collectors instead of the complaint coming from the religious leaders. These Jewish people may have learned how to complain about this by watching the Pharisees—without perhaps understanding why. They had probably also been overtaxed by their tax collector.

Each of these five passage involves tax collectors except for the sinful woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Each passage explicitly mentions food and/or wine in context except for the story of Zacchaeus who, in keeping with hospitality customs, likely provided Jesus with a meal in his home. Each passage specifies the presence of Pharisees except the story of Zacchaeus. In three of the stories the complaint is “grumbled.” This chapter will address the first and last accusation in Luke, which pertain specifically to Jesus visiting the homes of tax collectors. The next three chapters will carefully consider each of the other complaints in turn.

Levi (Luke 5:27-32 = Matthew 9:9-13 = Mark 2:14-17)¹⁸

The first passage in the Gospel of Luke that records people accusing Jesus of violating cultural norms by associating with “sinners” is the story of Levi. Levi was a hated tax collector. According to Cyril of Alexandria, “Levi was a publican, a man greedy for dirty money, filled with an uncontrollable desire to possess, careless of justice in his eagerness to have what did not belong to him. Such was the character of the publicans.”¹⁹ Jesus initiated with Levi by inviting him to become his disciple with the simple command, “Follow me.” Levi was ready to respond to Jesus’ welcoming invitation, and Luke depicts him acting immediately and thoroughly to become a follower of Jesus. After Levi left everything behind and followed Jesus, he hosted a sizeable reception at his house and invited a large group of tax collectors and other people to the feast.²⁰ The religious leaders who knew about this event criticized Jesus’

¹⁸ Assuming Markan priority, Luke includes the same string of stories here in the same order as Mark: healing of the paralytic who was lowered through the roof, the call of Levi, a meal in Levi’s home, the questions and answers about fasting, followed by the Sabbath controversy resulting from the disciples plucking grain from a field on the Sabbath. What Luke does to modify Mark’s story, therefore, will be important to note if we’re to understand Luke’s agenda.

¹⁹ Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 95.

²⁰ Matthew and Mark record that “tax collectors and sinners” were dining with Jesus and his disciples (Matthew 9:10; Mark 2:15). Luke sought to mitigate the insult to these dinner guests, preferring to call them “tax collectors and others” (Luke 5:29).

disciples for “reclining” with tax collectors and sinners.²¹ The Pharisees and scribes “grumbled,” echoing the entitled dissatisfactions of their ancestors in the wilderness.²² This Greek verb appears in Luke’s Gospel only here. Its companion verb with the same meaning appears elsewhere in Luke only in 15:2 and 19:7—all three occurrences expressing people’s disapproval over the company Jesus kept. The Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus’ disciples,²³ “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”²⁴

So, what’s the problem with Jesus eating at the home of Levi in the company of tax collectors? The controversy does not regard the risk of becoming unclean due to alleged table fellowship with sinners, since Jesus’ next three meal invitations in Luke come from Pharisees who would not have invited an unclean Jesus to their homes. The traditional explanation for why this was so controversial is that table fellowship was an intimate event in that culture. Eating and drinking with others “implied acceptance of

²¹ See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 296. Keener claims that “the term ‘recline’ indicates that this was no ordinary meal (Palestinian Jews normally sat on chairs) but a banquet (when people reclined), probably in the teacher’s honor.”

²² On whether these religious leaders were in the house of Levi and carefully avoiding certain tables occupied by these sinners, or merely in the village of Levi and aware of the company Jesus was keeping, see Vinson, *Luke*, 152.

²³ This is the first appearance of a group called Jesus’ “disciples” in the Gospel of Luke.

²⁴ According to Stein, *Luke*, 182, the use of the single article in “the tax collectors and sinners” indicates that Luke viewed them as a single group. Notice that these religious leaders have modified Luke’s description of “tax collectors and others” to “tax collectors and sinners.”

such people as one's 'brothers and sisters.'"²⁵ According to Keener, "The Pharisees (and the teachers belonging to their party) were scrupulous about their special rules on eating and did not like to eat with less scrupulous people, especially people like tax gatherers and sinners."²⁶ The traditional interpretation is that Jesus was sharing an intimate meal with unrepentant sinners, something others—especially other religious leaders—would not have done.

But does this traditional interpretation explain what is really happening here?" After all, Levi was not an unrepentant tax collector, although he was certainly included as one in the Pharisees' question about eating with "tax collectors and sinners." The religious leaders' accusation takes place immediately after Levi left everything and followed Jesus, becoming his disciple. This response to Jesus echoes that of Peter and the others who became Jesus' disciples in 5:11. Levi was no unteachable sinner, but rather a man who had been changed by his encounter with Jesus. Jesus answers the Pharisees' accusation with an interesting analogy in Luke 5:31-32: "Those who are well don't need a physician, but those who are sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."²⁷ In the metaphor, Jesus is the doctor and sinners are sick. The spiritual implications are then made explicit by Jesus: Jesus' cure for sick sinners is repentance. According to Bock, "His mission is to call the spiritually sick to be healed

²⁵ Stein, *Luke*, 182.

²⁶ Keener, *Background Commentary*, 203.

²⁷ The parallel passages in Matthew 9:13 and Mark 2:17 omit the phrase "to repentance."

through repentance.”²⁸ Levi is the present example of a formerly sick person who has been healed by Jesus the physician. Stein writes, “Repentance here corresponds to and is thus another way of expressing *leaving all and following Jesus* (5:28).”²⁹ To celebrate his spiritual healing, Levi invited Jesus and his friends to this large banquet in his home.

If Levi was a repentant, redeemed tax collector, what are we to make of the guests in his home—the “tax collectors and others”? Luke seems to omit this group’s spiritual diagnosis provided by Mark. Mark 2:15 says about these sinners and tax collectors: there were many of them, they were dining with Jesus, and they were following him.³⁰ Why did Luke not include this information supplied by Mark, that the other tax collectors who were guests at Levi’s table were followers of Jesus already? Because Luke wishes the reader to have the vantage point of the Pharisees, who either do not affirm the form of repentance acceptable to Jesus or were not aware that any such repentance has taken place.³¹ This will culminate in the Parable of the Lost Son, where the older brother represents the Pharisees. These Pharisees, who should be

²⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 248.

²⁹ Stein, *Luke*, 183.

³⁰ In Mark, the notion of following Jesus carries discipleship overtones.

³¹ Some of those who had gathered for Levi’s celebration feast may have been unrepentant sinners who were invited there to listen to Levi’s story and to meet Jesus. Certainly Jesus would welcome an opportunity to interact with those who might be inclined to respond to his offer of forgiveness like Levi did. This, too, would have been deemed objectionable behavior for the Jewish religious leaders.

joining the celebration over repentance, protest it instead because they are unaware or unconvinced that repentance has taken place.

Repentance warrants celebration. In Mark's version, Jesus is eating at the home of Levi. In Luke, there's a huge feast involved (the term is amplified by the modifier "great").³² This helps establish a theme in Luke: abundance of food and drink³³—certainly wine is meant here—are needed properly to celebrate repentance (see 7:34; 15:23-24). Carroll writes, "Levi is clear about one thing: joyous celebration is a fitting response to a life changed because of an unexpected invitation into the company of Jesus."³⁴

The abundance of food present at this celebration, along with Jesus' mention of repentance, then brought to mind the notion of fasting to the Pharisees and scribes. This story as a whole shows that the Pharisees felt something in common with Jesus. They have disciples, and so does Jesus. They fast, and so should Jesus. They don't eat with certain people, and neither should Jesus. Their questions betray genuine confusion

³² The word used for the "feast/banquet/reception" for Jesus at Levi's house in Luke 5:29 is only used in the New Testament elsewhere at Luke 14:13. There Jesus instructs the person who invited him to dinner that he should not host a large reception for those who have the means to repay him. Instead, invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" to the dinner—society's marginalized who could never repay such generosity. Those who do so will be recompensed by God at the resurrection.

³³ The Pharisee's use of "eat and drink" in 7:30 may be a Jewish expression known to signify a feast (see Jeremiah 16:8).

³⁴ John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library (Louisville: WJK Press, 2012), 133.

over how their practices differ from one another. All of this story's elements—John's fasting, Jesus' feasting, abundance of food, abundance of wine, the presence of "tax collectors and sinners," and condemnation from Pharisees—will reemerge in Luke 7:33-34.³⁵

Zacchaeus (19:1-10)

The story of Zacchaeus is unique to Luke's Gospel. He is described as a "chief tax collector"—one Greek word that appears in the New Testament only at Luke 19:2. One can imagine that if being a tax collector was frowned upon in first-century Jewish society, being a "chief" tax collector was lower still. Luke has spread his mention of tax collectors throughout his Gospel (in chapters 3, 5, 7, 15, and 18), but he saves the worst kind of tax collector for his closing discussion on their species. According to Carroll, "Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus once more displays his core mission: his ceaseless quest, as the bearer of God's reign to God's people, to restore the lost (cf. 5:32), extending God's saving embrace beyond the margins of the community."³⁶ Zacchaeus has a measure of power and influence in some circles, but within Jewish religious circles he was regarded as an outsider to be shunned due to his unscrupulous profession as a

³⁵ Along with its parallel passage in Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:34 records the only New Testament appearance of the expression "friend of tax collectors and sinners." This passage will be explored carefully in the next chapter.

³⁶ Carroll, *Luke*, 373-74.

vessel for Roman domination. And so we find Jesus restoring one type of outcast as he approaches Jericho (the blind beggar in 18:35-43), and another type of outcast as he enters Jericho (Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector).

Zacchaeus is curious about Jesus, but his small stature prevents his line-of-sight in the large crowd. So he climbs up onto the branch of a tree. This enables him to see Jesus. But it also enables Jesus to see him and take the initiative with him, addressing him by name. When he saw him, Jesus called Zacchaeus down from his perch in the tree and indicated his desire to stay with him. And Zacchaeus accepts. Here again we see Jesus' willing engagement with a notorious sinner who expresses interest in his offer of forgiveness. According to Bock, "The description of Zacchaeus's response does not explicitly mention faith, but his actions show that Jesus has made a deep impression upon him (19:8 confirms this impression)."³⁷

A delicate exchange takes place in this story between Jesus and Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus initiates the interaction by taking extraordinary measures to see Jesus, a teacher he must have heard about. Jesus takes the next step by calling Zacchaeus by name and inviting himself to his house.³⁸ Zacchaeus took the next step by obeying Jesus when he "hurried and came down and receive him gladly." Jesus takes the next step by going to Zacchaeus' home as his guest. Zacchaeus then responds to the accusation that

³⁷ Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1518.

³⁸ Whereas Levi invited Jesus to his home for a meal, Jesus seems to invite himself to be a guest in the home of Zacchaeus.

he is a sinner by voicing repentance in the form of righteous living (giving to the poor) and restitution (repaying fourfold anyone he might have defrauded). Zacchaeus' words here indicate what he intends to do, not a defense of some ethical lifestyle he's already been conducting. According to Bock, "It is far more likely that the verbs should be taken in the sense of present resolve, as a reflection of Zacchaeus's repentance and faith as a result of meeting Jesus."³⁹

When Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his home, the people expressed concern over Jesus' taste in hosts, saying, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7). Vinson writes, "Zacchaeus was a sinner. In fact, we know what his sin was: he used his power to extort money. That's how tax collectors got rich, and that would have been the path that Zacchaeus used to become a chief tax collector."⁴⁰ This is the only place in Luke's Gospel where the people, and not the religious leadership specifically, accuse Jesus of inappropriately associating with a "sinner."

Zacchaeus himself apparently heard the people's accusation against him, because he responds to it himself by addressing Jesus: "Look, Lord, half of my possessions I now give to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone of anything, I am paying back four times as much!" (Luke 19:8).⁴¹

³⁹ Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1520.

⁴⁰ Vinson, *Luke*, 589.

⁴¹ This might be the most insightful line in the story. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus only needs to be called a sinner to know what sins he's being accused of: greed and defrauding.

Zacchaeus clearly had a sense that he could approach Jesus even as others regarded this chief tax collector as an irredeemable sinner. At what point Zacchaeus repented is hard to tell.⁴² But it must have happened sometime between Jesus inviting himself to his home and Zacchaeus' verbal intentions to live righteously. According to Stein, "Although Zacchaeus's repentance is not specifically mentioned, Luke intended his readers to understand his statement in 19:8 as witnessing to a fruit in keeping with repentance (3:8); and although faith is not specifically referred to, 19:4, 6, 8 implies its presence."⁴³ After Zacchaeus evidenced repentance by his statement, Jesus attributed salvation to him, saying, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham!" Recall John the Baptist's words from 3:8. By his righteous actions, Zacchaeus is showing that he has become a faithful child of Abraham. Neale concludes, "Zacchaeus repents and his deeds win him the shepherd's praise."⁴⁴

This passage shows Jesus extending a hand to a tax collector who was already clearly interested in Jesus, as Zacchaeus' response to live righteously because of Jesus indicates. Because of his unscrupulous career, Zacchaeus was regarded by most in his culture as beyond the pale of redemption. But Jesus offered forgiveness in return for

⁴² In Just, *Ancient Critical Commentary: Luke*, 291, Augustine writes, "The Lord, who had already welcomed Zacchaeus in his heart, was now ready to be welcomed by him in his house....Christ who was already dwelling in his heart, is welcomed into his house."

⁴³ Stein, *Luke*, 467.

⁴⁴ Neale, *None*, 188.

humble contrition and repentance. Jesus presented a message of grace and mercy for those who were willing to start living on God's terms. Jesus was ready to accept anyone who was willing to accept him. Carroll reminds us that "rescue of a lost one is an act of divine initiative and grace....Zacchaeus, responding as he has to Jesus' gracious acceptance, has entered the domain of salvation."⁴⁵ Luke's Jesus closes this story like that of Levi, with a pronouncement about the purpose of his mission. Zacchaeus is the lost that Jesus came to seek and to save (19:10) just like Levi was the sick that Jesus came to heal, the sinner that Jesus came to call to repentance (5:31-32).

Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector

We conclude this chapter with a look at Luke's last use of the Greek word "tax collector" in his two volumes (18:10, 11, 13).⁴⁶ Neither the verb nor the noun form of the word repentance appears in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The self-descriptions by these two men, however, focus on acts of righteousness and sin. The two men have arrived at the temple to pray presumably around the same time. One of them is a highly esteemed religious leader who fits the temple scene—a religious man in a religious building performing a religious act. The other is completely out of context—an unscrupulous vessel of injustice in a religious building performing a

⁴⁵ Carroll, *Luke*, 373.

⁴⁶ "Chief tax collector" in Luke 19:2 is technically a different word in Greek than "tax collector." Neither term appears in the book of Acts.

religious act. The two could hardly be more different. Jesus sets out to show that these two men are regarded by God differently than the reader might first assume. Let's consider them each in turn.

The Pharisee in the parable seems at first glance to be following the instructions given by John the Baptist: instead of relying on his genealogical ancestry as a child of Abraham, he claims to be bearing fruit that is consistent with genuine repentance: He prays, he fasts, and he tithes. But his posture and his words betray a proud heart. He is standing in a seemingly central spot in the temple, perhaps to be noticed by others (derived from the location of the tax collector who stands some distance away). He likely looks up to God without shame, again derived from the description of the tax collector who can't lift his eyes to heaven. And the prayer he prays (to himself!) is dripping with self-righteousness. He credits God for making him a superior specimen to sinners, even superior to the lowly tax collector over there. He then draws God's attention to his acts of righteousness, confident that God is most pleased with him.

The tax collector, on the other hand, seems to know he is out of place. Whereas the Pharisee seemed too confident in God's presence, the tax collector appears completely uncomfortable. He stands some distance away—presumably away from a central location in the temple—for he wishes to remain unnoticed. His shame-filled eyes are unwilling to look up to God in heaven. And rather than presenting himself to God as a superior specimen, he beats his own breast—a gesture of contrition. The prayer he offers is simple and unsophisticated, six Greek words compared to twenty-nine words in

the Pharisee's prayer. In it, he addresses God, invites his mercy, and identifies himself as a sinner. And a sinner he likely was. Luke doesn't want us to conclude that this tax collector demonstrated false humility or that he was being too hard on himself. No, the acts of righteousness that were true for the Pharisee were certainly not true for this tax collector. He was a sinner.

And yet, it was this man who went home justified before God, Jesus says.

Adding, for a second time in the Gospel of Luke, that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (see 14:11). The parable is designed to contrast the tax collector's humility with the Pharisee's entitlement.⁴⁷

According to Bock, "Humility mixed with deep faith describes what Jesus praises."⁴⁸

Yancey surely misses the point when he writes, "Jesus was the friend of sinners. He commended the groveling tax collector over a God-fearing Pharisee."⁴⁹ The point wasn't that the tax collector was groveling, nor that the Pharisee was God-fearing. Instead Jesus seems to be making the point that brokenness, humility, and repentance are pleasing to God when worn on anyone (even an unscrupulous tax collector), whereas self-righteousness is displeasing to God when worn on anyone (even a highly respected Pharisee). Indeed, Luke tells us as much when he describes the people Jesus

⁴⁷ The same contrast appears in Luke's story of Jesus healing the Centurion's servant (7:2-10). Unlike Israel, this Gentile's expressions of humility and unworthiness earned praise and healing from Jesus.

⁴⁸ Bock, *Theology*, 247.

⁴⁹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 258.

told the parable to as those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and looked upon others with contempt” (18:9). Jesus shunned such self-righteous saints, but he welcomed repentant sinners like the tax collector in the parable.

Powerful is the nature of self-deception, in whose grip the Pharisee was clearly caught. He sounds a warning to us all, especially those of us religious leaders who perform religious acts in a religious building on a regular basis. As a pastor, I thank God that I’m not like that Pharisee.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ This surprise ending is credited to Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2007), 40. She concludes, “The irony is delicious.”

FRIEND OF SINNERS IN LUKE

CHAPTER THREE

The Consensus

Witherington observes the “tremendous diversity” among portraits of Jesus produced by historians. He writes, “There are almost as many portraits of Jesus now available as there are scholarly painters.”¹ That helps explain why it is rare to find scholars reaching an agreement on an aspect of Jesus’ life. Jesus accepting sinners into his company seems to be one of these rare subjects. According to Wright, “There is a more or less universal consensus among scholars – something as rare as snow in midsummer, and no doubt similarly transitory – that Jesus offered a welcome to, and shared meals with, ‘sinners.’”² Neale agrees, writing, “If there is a scholarly consensus about any feature of the life and work of the historical Jesus, it may well be this matter of his association with outcasts.”³ What is meant by sinners, of course, is that they were

¹ Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 77.

² N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol. 2 (Fortress Press, 1997), 264. An exception to this consensus is William O. Walker, Jr., “Jesus and the Tax Collectors,” *JBL* 97, no. 2 (1997). Walker proposes that the gospels’ record of Jesus’ association with tax collectors is historically suspect.

³ David A. Neale, *None But the Sinners*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 58 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 191.

unrepentant sinners that Jesus was sharing meals with in close association. In short, the consensus is that Jesus was a friend of sinners.

“Jesus! What a Friend for sinners.”⁴

“His name is Jesus, friend of sinners.”⁵

“Jesus, Savior, Friend of sinners.”⁶

“Jesus was the friend of sinners.”⁷

“All of this [pain and suffering] came upon the ‘friend of sinners.’”⁸

“His redemptive mission was revealed in his eating with sinners, repentant and unrepentant alike.”⁹

“Luke presents Jesus as a ‘friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (Luke 7:34).”¹⁰

“He was repeatedly criticized as ‘a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (Matthew 11:19) for associating with them and including them in his table fellowship, showing that no one was excluded from God’s reign.”¹¹

⁴ J. Wilbur Chapman, “Our Great Savior” (1910).

⁵ Petra, “Jesus, Friend of Sinners” (2007).

⁶ Lincoln Brewster, “All I Really Want” (2006).

⁷ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 258.

⁸ John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 69.

⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus’ Meals with Sinners* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), back cover.

¹⁰ Dwayne H. Adams, *The Sinner in Luke* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 69.

¹¹ Thomas P. Rausch, *Who Is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 190.

“His offer of table fellowship to all, including social and religious ‘lowlifes’ like toll collectors and ‘sinners,’ was meant to foreshadow the final eschatological banquet and to give a foretaste of that banquet even during his public ministry.”¹²

“He was the friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19).”¹³

“Jesus’ table fellowship with outcasts was an enacted parable of the grace of God, both expressing and mediating the divine grace.”¹⁴

“He does not gather together the holy and the good, but he is ‘a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’”¹⁵

“Jesus was, above all, a friend to ‘sinners’ and outcasts.”¹⁶

“It is thus striking...that Jesus welcomed ‘tax-collectors and sinners’ into table-fellowship with himself.”¹⁷

“Jesus has shown satisfactorily that He is at once a true friend of sinners, and from the heart an enemy of sin.”¹⁸

¹² John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:965-66.

¹³ F. Duane Lindsey, “Essays Toward a Theology of Beauty — Part III: The Beautiful Christian Life,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (1974), 314.

¹⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 102.

¹⁵ Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 78.

¹⁶ Neale, *None*, 191.

¹⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 267.

¹⁸ Johann Lange and Philip Schaff, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Hebrews* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 140.

“Jesus’ free and easy association with sinners was not the sort of thing that religious teachers in his day did.”¹⁹

“Again, Jesus’ life provides the example ‘In the New Testament culture, to eat a meal with sinners was considered an unholy act,’ says Tony. ‘But Jesus shared a meal with them at a common place.’”²⁰

“In sharing this meal with sinners, Jesus was visibly demonstrating that he accepted them, and that he did so *before* they repented.”²¹

“The authentic church is one that does not mind conversing with prostitutes and publicans and sinners, as Christ did.”²²

“Jesus came into the world to befriend sinners.”²³

“Although he came to earth ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh,’ lived among sinners, received sinners, ate with sinners, was known as the friend of sinners, yet he is set apart from sinners, ‘in a different class from sinful men’; and is now exalted above all the heavens to share the throne of God.”²⁴

¹⁹ Craig Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 50.

²⁰ Benji Bruneel, “Meeting Deep Needs,” *Kindred Spirit* (Summer 2007), 10.

²¹ Dan Hamel, “This Man Welcomes Sinners and Eats with Them: An Examination of Jesus’ Table Praxis,” online paper originally presented to Professor Mark Moore, March 29, 2006 for the class Doctrine of Christ, 19. Emphasis his.

²² Marie Dennis, Renny Golden, and Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero: Reflections on His Life and Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 35.

²³ John Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2014), 82.

²⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 176.

“And Jesus was a friend of tax collectors and sinners—not of former tax collectors and sinners....he ate and drank with the wicked and told them that God especially loved them.”²⁵

“Finally, we must note one of the most interesting aspects of Jesus’ ministry: he called ‘sinners’, and apparently he associated with them and befriended them while they were still sinners. In Matthew 11.18f., quoted just above, Jesus’ critics accused him of this behaviour. Jesus’ perfectionism did not make him shun the company of even the worst elements of society. On the contrary, he courted it.”²⁶

Where did the expression “friend of sinners” come from, and is it an accurate description of Jesus after all? In many ways this question gets to the heart of the matter regarding Jesus’ relationship with the conduct marginalized. According to Neale, “Few scholars...have sought to probe behind the assumptions and unquestioned images that have grown around the issue of Jesus and the ‘sinners.’”²⁷ Some of these assumptions and unquestioned images with regard to Jesus and sinners may be misguided. I hope to raise questions about the consensus that Jesus was a friend of sinners as a result of this study. Instead, it seems more accurate to conclude that Jesus had a *reputation* for welcoming and sharing meals with sinners—a reputation that he himself attempted to correct.

²⁵ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 233.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁷ Neale, *None*, 191.

Luke 7:29-35

It may come as a surprise to learn that the phrase “friend of sinners” is never used in the Bible. Rather, Jesus himself used the fuller expression “friend of tax collectors and sinners,” recorded only in the parallel texts of Luke 7:34 and Matthew 11:19.²⁸ Both tax collectors and Pharisees appear just prior to this passage, where the tax collectors who had been baptized earlier by John respond favorably to Jesus’ teaching while the Pharisees who had not been baptized by John respond unfavorably.

The Pharisees who did not respond properly to John or Jesus are then described by Jesus in the next verses in the form of a simile: they are like children who do not respond appropriately to the playing of a flute or the singing of a dirge. These two types of cultural music had natural responses they were expected to elicit in their audiences. The response expected from a child when he hears a flute is that he dances. The response expected from a child when a dirge is sung is that he weeps and mourns.²⁹ According to Jerome, “Because the Jews did not want to listen, the children not only spoke but shouted to them, at the top of their voices: ‘We sang to you, and you did not

²⁸ Jesus’ rebuttal of the Pharisees in this passage is part of the Synoptic Gospels’ double tradition, common to Matthew and Luke.

²⁹ Jesus continues this simile in 7:35, where he says, “But wisdom is vindicated by all of her children” (Matthew 11:19 has “by her deeds”). This concludes Jesus’ simile of the children responding to the flute and the dirge in that the truly wise will ultimately be revealed (and the Pharisees will not be among them).

dance.’ We challenged you to do good deeds at the sound of our song and to dance to our flute...and you did not want to. ‘We lamented’ and we challenged you to seek repentance, and you did not want to do even this.”³⁰ Instead of responding properly to John (probably pictured as the one singing the dirge), the Pharisees had accused him of having a demon. Instead of responding properly to Jesus (probably pictured as the one playing the flute), the Pharisees had accused him of being “a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”³¹

All of the elements in this passage appear also in Luke 5:29-33—John’s fasting, Jesus’ feasting, abundance of food, abundance of wine, the presence of “tax collectors and sinners,” and condemnation from the Pharisees. Could it be that, like in Luke 5, the abundance of food that led to the accusation of gluttony, and the abundance of wine that led to the accusation that Jesus was a drunkard, were both part of a celebration over the repentance of these “tax collectors and sinners”? The Pharisees in both passages seem to be unaware that repentance has taken place, or they simply refuse to recognize the legitimacy of it.³²

³⁰ Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 225.

³¹ The image of heavy eating and drinking bring to mind Proverbs 23:20-21.

³² Granted, the Pharisees also seem opposed to Jesus’ willingness to engage with notorious sinners and to offer them forgiveness in the first place. But they seem to protest the loudest once a sinner has repented and received Jesus’ complete acceptance and embrace.

The Accusations in Luke 7:33-34

Luke 7:33-34 records Jesus reporting four accusations from the religious leaders, one against John the Baptist and three against Jesus:

Accusation #1: John has a demon.

Accusation #2: Jesus is a glutton.

Accusation #3: Jesus is a drunk.

Accusation #4: Jesus is a friend of tax collectors and sinners.³³

Jesus is reporting the Pharisees' view of John the Baptist when he paraphrases them, saying, "He has a demon." Likewise, Jesus is reporting the Pharisee's view of himself when he paraphrases them as saying, "Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."³⁴ Whether these allegations were true or not is one thing; whether Jesus regarded them as true or false is within our reach. The Pharisees were certainly not complimenting John when they accused him of having a demon; neither, in Jesus' estimation, was it a true statement. Likewise, the Pharisees were not

³³ According to Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 683, "The charge is that Jesus associates with reprobates."

³⁴ Nowhere are the Pharisees recorded calling Jesus exactly this. But Jesus does not report this accusation in a vacuum. Rather, other Luke passages record the Pharisees expressing their disapproval over Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners (see especially Luke 5 and 15). These passages are carefully examined in other chapters.

complimenting Jesus when they called him a glutton and a drunk; neither, in Jesus' estimation, were they accurate descriptions. It simply doesn't follow that Jesus would regard the last label in this string of insults as true, namely, that he was a "friend of tax collectors and sinners." "Tax collectors" and "sinners" were pejorative terms describing those who were notoriously sinful. By calling Jesus their friend, the Pharisees were seeking to implicate Jesus as a sinner himself. Certainly Jesus was not agreeing with any of these accusations; instead he was defending himself (and John) against all of the Pharisees' insults. In effect, he was saying:

John did not have a demon.

Jesus is not a glutton.

Jesus is not a drunk.

Jesus is not a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

These reported accusations cannot be divided as though Jesus declined some and accepted others. Yet according to Blomberg commenting on Matthew 11:19, "Jesus was not 'a glutton and a drunkard,' but as a friend of tax collectors and sinners he ate and drank with them."³⁵ Other sources likewise seek to divide the allegations in an effort to deny three of the insults while maintaining that Jesus was a friend of tax

³⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, David S. Dockery, ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 190.

collectors and sinners.³⁶ Arlandson, for example, regards it as “Jesus’ announcement in 7:34 that he is a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”³⁷ But the accusations stand or fall together. Either Jesus was denying all of the accusations or he was denying none of them.³⁸ Jesus declined the inaccurate title of “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (along with “glutton” and “drunkard”) and refused to don it because it did not fit him. Notice that Jesus was not accepting their slur in some ironic reversal (“What you meant for evil, I’ll embrace for good!”). Instead, Jesus seemed to be saying, “You’ve reached the wrong conclusion about John; you’ve also reached the wrong conclusion about me.” He disagreed with their allegation that John had a demon, and likewise disapproved of their perception of himself. Since Jesus himself expressly denies the allegations, shouldn’t the burden of proof rest with anyone trying to claim he was a friend of sinners?

The Pharisees seem to have reached the wrong conclusion about Jesus’ relationship with certain people, and he wanted to correct this misperception. What

³⁶ No commentaries I consulted tried to show that John had a demon, or that Jesus was a glutton or drunk. But some, like Blomberg, use the accusation of Jesus’ friendship with sinners as an opportunity to comment on his practice of welcoming and eating with them. They seem to overlook the fact that, at least in this context, Jesus was denying the truth of this accusation.

³⁷ James Malcolm Arlandson, *Women, Class, and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 160.

³⁸ In some ways, Jesus was attempting to show how disagreeable the religious leaders were acting: they were unhappy with John because he withdrew from society, and they were unhappy with Jesus because he engaged with society. These people cannot be pleased!

was it about being called a friend of tax collectors and sinners that Jesus was denying? By denying the charge of friendship with “tax collectors and sinners,” Jesus was either denying that they were unrepentant sinners, or he was denying being their friend, or both. He was doing one of the following:

- a) Acknowledging that he was their friend but denying that they were unrepentant “tax collectors and sinners,”
- b) Acknowledging that they were unrepentant “tax collectors and sinners” but denying that he was their friend,
- c) Denying that he was their friend *and* denying that they were unrepentant “tax collectors and sinners.”

The misunderstanding that Jesus was a “friend of sinners” may stem from the limited observation skills of those who witnessed Jesus’ public ministry among the people. The religious leadership referred this way to Jesus because they were observing his participation at feasts from an outside, limited perspective—since they themselves refused to participate in these events that they seemed to know about. They saw him sharing large meals with people and assumed he was a glutton. They saw him enjoying wine during these feasts and assumed he was a drunkard. They saw repentant tax collectors and sinners reclining around the table with him and assumed they were still practicing the very sins they had turned from. In reality, Jesus was fellowshiping with

repentant sinners who still maintained the appearance of unrepentant sinners to the undiscerning eye.³⁹

Celebratory Feasts

It was Jesus' association with sinners at mealtimes that drew most of the criticism. Jesus' meal practices with others is known in scholarly circles as table fellowship. The theory that Jesus was willing indiscriminately to eat meals with anyone is the "open commensality" described by Crossan: "Since, moreover, Jesus lived out his own parable, the almost predictable counteraccusation to such open commensality would be immediate: Jesus is a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. He makes, in other words, no appropriate distinctions and discriminations."⁴⁰ Today's scholarly "consensus" holds that Jesus' table fellowship included people known as "tax collectors and sinners"—practicing sinners. Historians seem to occupy their time determining whether Jesus did so in keeping with or in violation of cultural meal practices. But we may be missing a third option: What if those Jesus dined with were actually repentant sinners?

³⁹ This conclusion will be made explicit by Jesus himself in Luke 15. The older son, representing the Pharisees, criticized his father's celebratory meal with his younger brother precisely because he was unaware of his younger brother's repentance.

⁴⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 69.

In three of the Lukan passages that record Jesus being accused of inappropriate association with so-called sinners, the stated offense was that he enjoyed meals with them (5:30; 7:34; 15:2). The intimate act of meal sharing in the Ancient Near East suggested friendship. According to Bornkamm, "Eating with others is for the Jew the closest form of intimacy."⁴¹ How did Jesus gain a negative reputation among some as a glutton, a drunk, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners? To the outsider looking in, Jesus was "eating" (leading to the charge that he was a glutton) and "drinking" (leading to the charge that he was a drunk) with "sinners" (leading to the charge that he was their friend). In other words, the accusations recorded in Luke 7:34 collectively describe a very specific setting: meals. Was Jesus eating with practicing sinners as part of a strategy to earn their commitment to him, or was he reclining with former sinners who had already chosen to follow him?⁴² Was Jesus' table fellowship with society's outcasts a means to an end or a celebration of a decision already made?⁴³ Did his table fellowship with sinners precede or follow their choice to follow Jesus?⁴⁴

Most scholars today, and certainly most lay people, believe that Jesus courted sinners by sharing meals with them, hoping to win them over. In the context of table

⁴¹ Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 80.

⁴² In the Gospel of Luke, it seems that Jesus was reclining with former sinners.

⁴³ In the Gospel of Luke, it seems that these meals served as celebrations over repentance.

⁴⁴ In the Gospel of Luke, it seems that these meals followed their decision to follow Jesus, though we will allow for the possibility that interested, unspecified, unrepentant sinners were present.

fellowship, Neale writes, “The stated purpose of Jesus’ fellowship with ‘sinners’ was always that they should repent.”⁴⁵ McKnight agrees: “The one thing clear from Jesus’ table fellowship is that his opponents wanted purity before fellowship, and Jesus created purity out of fellowship with him.”⁴⁶

But the association of “glutton” and “drunk” with “friend of sinners” in 7:34 suggests that these meals involved an *abundance* of food and drink—indicative of celebration. According to Bock and Herrick, “Philo uses the imagery of a banquet as a metaphor for the way God created the world and called man into existence to enjoy it. So a banquet pictures celebration of God’s provision.”⁴⁷ The excessive amount of food and drink that led to labels of glutton and drunk suggests an exceptional meal, not a normal one. A celebration seems to be taking place. According to David Jeffrey, the Pharisees behind the accusations of Luke 7:34 are observing that “the disciples of Jesus are celebratory, ‘eating and drinking’ (to excess, they imply).”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Neale, *None*, 125.

⁴⁶ Scot McKnight, <http://www.theopedia.com/scot-mcknight>.

⁴⁷ Darrell L. Bock and Gregory J. Herrick, *Jesus in Context: Background Readings for Gospel Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 133.

⁴⁸ David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 110. He does not make any observations about what they were celebrating. It is possible that some invited guests included interested, unspecified, unrepentant sinners. If they were present, Jesus certainly would be eager to engage with them. But the focus of the text seems to be on those recently repentant sinners who are being celebrated with abundant food and drink.

Luke chapter 15 is instructive here.⁴⁹ Following the final public criticism recorded in Luke's Gospel regarding Jesus eating with sinners (15:2), Jesus told a string of three related parables. These parables were not told arbitrarily; they contain Jesus' answer to the Pharisees on this very matter. The Pharisees had questioned his disciples for "eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners" in Luke 5:30. The Pharisees had labelled Jesus a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" in Luke 7:34. The Pharisees had grumbled that Jesus "receives sinners and eats with them" in Luke 15:2. Since Jesus was aware of their indictments, it should come as no surprise that he carefully explained his activity of eating and drinking with so-called sinners. Each parable follows the same defined pattern: something is lost, that something is found, and people gather to celebrate *after* what was lost has been found. The last parable explicitly mentions a meal as part of the celebration. In all three parables, people are gathered to celebrate *after* the lost item is found; they are not gathered to help look for the lost item. Concerning the parable of the prodigal son, Cyril of Alexandria writes, "This parable calls the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled over Jesus' table fellowship with sinners to rejoice over the repentance and restoration of sinners."⁵⁰

The title "friend of sinners" arose from a misunderstanding about the people Jesus celebrated these meals with. *The very occasion that was misinterpreted as*

⁴⁹ Chapter five of this thesis will contain more on Jesus' three parables recorded in Luke 15.

⁵⁰ Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 246.

inappropriate association with sinners was explained by Jesus as a celebration of their repentance. Hiding in plain sight, this connection was missed by Jesus' first-century critics as well as most of his twenty-first century followers.

Friendship in Luke

In order to unpack the Pharisees' accusation in Luke 7:34, we must consider the meaning of "friend" in Luke. Certainly, Jesus initiated, invited, extended a hand, and looked to welcome sinners, but friendship seems to describe a deeper relationship in the Bible. As we have seen, a few passages suggest that some were uncomfortable with Jesus "welcoming" and "eating with" sinners, but he is never described as a "friend" of any notorious sinner by any New Testament writer. Instead, in the story where Jesus denied the accusation that he was a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34; Matthew 11:19), it is Jesus himself who seems to translate such observations into the language of "friendship."

The word for "friend" (φίλος) occurs twenty-nine times in the New Testament. More than half of them—fifteen—appear in Luke's Gospel, with all but two of those appearing in Jesus' direct speech.⁵¹ With three more uses of the word in Acts, Luke's two volumes amount to sixty-two percent of all New Testament occurrences of the

⁵¹ The only occurrences of "friend" outside of Jesus' direct speech in Luke's Gospel are Luke 7:6, where friends are sent by the "unworthy" centurion to dissuade Jesus from coming to his house, and 21:12, where Luke reports that Herod and Pilate became friends.

word “friend,” reflecting Luke’s particular interest in the concept of friendship.⁵²

Matthew does not use the word “friend” at all outside of 11:19, which parallels Luke 7:34.⁵³

A few uses of the term “friend” in Luke’s Gospel help shed light on its meaning in 7:34, where Jesus denied being a “friend” of tax collectors and sinners.⁵⁴ In Luke 12:4, Jesus refers to his disciples as “my friends.” He includes friends in a list along with parents, brothers, and relatives in Luke 21:16, showing the strong relationship the term is meant to convey. Jesus drew a connection between friendship and table fellowship when he instructed some *not* to invite their friends to a meal in Luke 14:12 (since one’s friends would be at the top of most people’s guest list). It was a “friend” who was invited to take the seat of honor at the dinner table in Jesus’ parable of the guests in Luke 14:8-11.

But it is the appearance of the word “friend” in all three parables told by Jesus in Luke 15 that proves most instructive for our study, since these parables record Jesus’ defense of his practice of eating with so-called sinners.⁵⁵ The celebrations with “friends”

⁵² The word does not occur in any of Paul’s writings or in Hebrews.

⁵³ The term, therefore, occurs only once in the Synoptic Gospels’ double tradition common to Matthew and Luke—and that is here in our passage.

⁵⁴ Luke’s word order here places “friend” at the beginning of the Greek clause for emphasis, unlike Matthew.

⁵⁵ Chapter five is devoted to exploring these three parables in greater detail.

described at the conclusion of each parable in Luke 15:6, 9, and 29 are meant to represent Jesus' celebration meals with his friends recorded in Luke 15:2.⁵⁶ Thus Jesus himself is the one who translated his eating with sinners into language of "friendship"—both in Luke 7:34, as well as in these three parables. Jesus' words reflect the notion that he was, in fact, their friend; he was denying that they were the notorious, unrepentant sinners that the religious leadership supposed. Instead, the meal itself was part of a celebration over their repentance.⁵⁷

Insult Turned Compliment

The Pharisees seemed offended that Jesus would dine with unrepentant sinners as an expression that he had unconditionally accepted them. Many today seem offended that he would not. Today, the title "friend of sinners" is used by Jesus' followers as a compliment for him, a once offensive allegation turned into an endearing title. How did a first-century insult for Jesus become a twenty-first century compliment for him? Although a diachronic study of the church's view of Jesus' relationship with

⁵⁶ The chapter's first two celebrations over finding what had been lost presumably involved meals; the last one explicitly did.

⁵⁷ Note that abundance of food and drink are present at these meals, suggesting a celebration that fits with the celebration motif described in Luke 15 over finding what was lost. There may also have been others present who were still on their journey toward the forgiveness Jesus offered. If so, the text does not focus our attention on members of this group, rendering them secondary characters at best.

sinners is outside the scope of my thesis, a glimpse into some of this history might prove helpful.

The evidence we have for the use of the term “friend of sinners” for Jesus throughout church history is sketchy at best. The early church, commenting on the accusations recorded in Matthew and Luke, seems more interested in defending Jesus’ innocence against them; that is, whatever may have been going on, their priority seemed to be insulating the doctrine of Jesus’ sinlessness. Chrysostom, for example, lists a string of false accusations brought against Jesus to show that his opponents routinely drew the wrong conclusion about him. Prior to citing Luke 7:34, he writes that they “continually said these things against Him and called Him an adversary of God, and a gluttonous, and greedy man, and a drunkard, and a friend of the wicked and depraved.”⁵⁸ Augustine also cites Luke 7:34 before defending Jesus against the criticism of overindulging in food and drink. He uses this passage to illustrate men who practice natural sexual activity that are being falsely accused of lust and lewdness, concluding, “And yet as in Him that was not true, although it were true that He abstained not, even as John, from eating and drinking, for Himself saith most plainly and truly, ‘John came, not eating, nor drinking; the Son of Man came eating and drinking.’”⁵⁹

It seems clear that the early church viewed Jesus’ relationship with notorious sinners differently than today’s church does. Most scholars who defend Jesus’ practice

⁵⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 9* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996 reprint), 9:291.

⁵⁹ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998 reprint), 3:410.

of dining with unrepentant sinners as a means to win them over agree that the early church did not follow suit. Meier (among others) uses the criterion of discontinuity to support the authenticity of Jesus' association with sinners, since the early church did not seem to welcome them the same way. He writes, "A high tolerance for sinners was not a characteristic of the early church, as far as we can know it."⁶⁰ Indeed, friendship with all nonbelievers—not just notorious sinners—was often avoided by Christians in the early church. Under the heading "φίλος and φιλία in the Post-New Testament Period," Stählin writes,

A special problem was posed, for Christians by φιλία ἔθνικαί, i.e., friendships with non-Christians contracted either in pre-Chr. days or later. These often seemed to be incompatible with the principles of the Chr. life and carried with them dangers to the maintaining of a Chr. ethos. Hence Herm. m., 10, 1, 4 groups such φιλία ἔθνικαί with πλοῦτος etc. among the πραγματεῖαι τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου (cf. 2 Tm. 2:4) which burden an incomplete Chr. state and should thus be avoided by the advanced. This is why, e.g., Paulinus of Nola broke all ties with non-Chr. friends, esp. Ausonius, after his conversion.⁶¹

Augustine does write that tax collectors and sinners make up "the church of the just," but he does not go so far as to say that Jesus was the friend of unrepentant tax

⁶⁰ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 150.

⁶¹ Gustav Stählin, "φίλος, φίλη, φιλία," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, translated by Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 9:170.

collectors and sinners.⁶² Rather, “friend of sinners” does not seem to be used as a widespread compliment for Jesus until the era of the Puritans.

“Deepen in me a sense of my holy relationship to thee, as spiritual Bridegroom, as Jehovah’s Fellow, as sinners’ Friend.”⁶³

“Thus may my soul rest in thee, O immortal and transcendent one, revealed as thou art in the Person and work of thy Son, the Friend of sinners.”⁶⁴

The 1709 hymn by Isaac Watts, “Friend of Sinners Dies,” applied the term to Jesus as a compliment. This hymn was included in a nineteenth-century Methodist hymnbook which exploded its popularity. After this, John and Charles Wesley found creative expressions for the idea; the term “Friend of sinners” found its way into dozens of their poems and songs. They seem to be responsible for developing a sort of theology around the notion that Jesus was the friend of sinners.⁶⁵ The Puritan preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770) used the expression as a positive title for Jesus at least twice in his printed sermons, though the epithets are relatively innocuous.⁶⁶ He was a lover of

⁶² Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 120.

⁶³ Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁵ George Osborn, Ed., *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley, Vols. 1-13* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1870).

⁶⁶ George Whitefield, Sermon 27, “Blind Bartimeus” and Sermon 39, “The Resurrection of Lazarus.”

hymns, even composing one himself, and so may have borrowed the title from Watts' lyrics.

It was in the late nineteenth century that the inimitable Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached a famous sermon in the Metropolitan Tabernacle entitled, "The Sinner's Friend." The rest, shall we say, is history. Spurgeon's introduction included an explanation for how this title has evolved into a compliment:

The enemies of our Lord Jesus Christ thought to brand Him with infamy, hold Him up to derision, and hand His name down to everlasting scorn, as 'a friend of publicans and sinners.' Short-sighted mortals! Their scandal published His reputation. To this day the Savior is adored by the title which was minted as a slur.⁶⁷

In 1910, evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman launched the title into the twentieth century with the beloved hymn, "Our Great Savior," which begins with the words, "Jesus! What a Friend for sinners." While these hymn writers and pastors may have had repentant sinners in mind as the object of Jesus' friendship, the insult-turned-compliment could easily be misinterpreted and wrongly applied to all sinners—repentant and unrepentant alike. The unconditional soteriology held by Sanders and others discussed in chapter one has fueled the indiscriminate application of the title "friend of sinners" for Jesus. Today, the title complimenting Jesus appears on Christian T-shirts, in lyrics to popular Christian music, and in the writings of wildly famous

⁶⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, Sermon 556, "The Sinner's Friend." What Spurgeon fails to observe, however, is that even Jesus regarded the Pharisees' title as an insult—on the same level with being called a glutton and a drunk.

Christian authors. Many in the church have embraced the sacred truth that Jesus was a friend of notorious, unrepentant sinners as an incontestable fact.

Scholars claim that the early church departed from Jesus' practice of unconditionally welcoming notorious sinners. But was this actually a departure from Jesus' known practices, or did the early Christians interpret his practices differently than we do today? While the threat of persecution may explain the distance the early church kept from sinners, it can't account for the virtual wholesale departure from Jesus' practice of welcoming them, if in fact he did. A better explanation might be that those who were much closer to Jesus' time and culture understood perfectly that Jesus was no friend of sinners—so neither were they.

Semantics Matter

“But we're all sinners,” someone will say. “Even those of us who have repented and followed Jesus. We're like Abraham, who was a friend of God. We're like the disciples whom Jesus called friends. So logically, Jesus *is* a friend of sinners.”

Confusion over the term “sinner,” and whether it designated the unrepentant or the repentant, certainly played a semantic role in the evolution of the expression “friend of sinner” from an insult to a compliment. Yes, Jesus is a friend of repentant sinners—which describes every person making up the church today.

But Jesus' critics were accusing him of being a friend of unrepentant sinners. These religious leaders, who did not appreciate Jesus taking the initiative with “sinners”

in the first place, had either not witnessed the repentance of those who were following Jesus or they did not accept its legitimacy. Likewise, when most use the term “friend of sinners” today in describing Jesus, they intend unrepentant, notorious sinners as those that Jesus would unconditionally welcome.

THE SINFUL WOMAN IN LUKE

CHAPTER FOUR

The Context of 7:36-50

Jesus is anointed in similar fashion in Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; and John 12:1-8. Scholars are divided over whether Luke's anointing story is meant to describe the event that appears in the other Gospels' passion narratives, and a careful analysis of the similarities and differences in their details goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Luke tends to rework Mark's accounts with only slight variation in wording. The more radical changes to this passage, both in wording and in his placement of this story in the narrative, suggest that Luke did not modify this account from Mark as his source. Whether the Gospels are describing the same event, details of which were changed before they got to Luke, is another possibility.

Luke comments in 7:30 that "the Pharisees...rejected God's purpose for themselves." Six verses later it is "one of the Pharisees" who invites Jesus to a meal in his home (7:36). We learn later from Jesus that his name is Simon (7:40). The reader is not told whether this is one of Jesus' opponents or a potential ally. The reader is hopeful that this first meal Jesus shares in the home of a Pharisee might help bridge the gap between Jesus and the Pharisees collectively. And such might have been the outcome had the source of their strongest differences not walked into the meal setting to punctuate the divide between them.

The Pharisee and the Sinner

Vinson calls 7:36-50 the second of seven banquets Jesus attends in the Gospel of Luke.¹ This is the first of three consecutive dinner invitations issued by Pharisees to Jesus in Luke's Gospel (7:36; 11:37; 14:1), and each meal becomes an occasion for conflict. Luke later identifies Pharisees as "lovers of money" (16:14). According to Vinson, "Luke's Pharisees, then, were wealthy men of power, and so we imagine Simon the Pharisee as a man with a fine house who can spread a nice table."²

Jesus is important enough to be invited to a large meal ("recline" suggests a banquet setting) in this Pharisee's home, likely because of his reputation as a prophet.³ In telling this story, Luke will reveal some of this particular Pharisee's thoughts about Jesus, which include the notion that he was a "teacher" (7:40). According to Keener, "It was considered virtuous to invite a teacher over for dinner, especially if the teacher were from out of town or had just taught at the synagogue."⁴ This Pharisee seems to hold Jesus in very high regard, perhaps even hoping to test his status as a prophet—a reputation Jesus seemed to have acquired—during the course of this meal (7:39).

¹ Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 227.

² *Ibid.*, 229.

³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*. The Anchor Bible Commentary, Vol. 28 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 688.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 208.

Enter a sinful woman.

The door would have remained open, and uninvited guests—those with lesser social status, of course—would have been permitted at such a feast, though their social contract stipulated that they were not to disrupt the evening. This experienced woman would have been well versed in her culture’s strict social boundaries, which makes her highly disruptive actions all the more significant. Her desperate gratitude was uncontainable.

According to Schaberg and Ringe, “In Luke, women as groups and individuals are spoken to 15 times, 9 times by Jesus (to defend, correct, and praise them).”⁵ Luke refers to her simply as “a sinner” (7:37), one who had learned that Jesus could be found eating at the home of this Pharisee. Witherington writes that the term in context “most likely means ‘prostitute.’”⁶ The woman was likely a successful Jewish prostitute who was well known in her village and the surrounding area. According to Jeffrey, “She is a ‘public woman’ or prostitute. That she possesses ‘an alabaster box of ointment’ (KJV) is indicative not only of her trade but also probably of her success in it.”⁷

⁵ Jane D. Schaberg and Sharon H. Ringe, “Luke,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 368.

⁶ Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 51 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 54.

⁷ David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 112.

The woman never speaks, but her actions say a lot. Without saying a word, she begins to anoint Jesus' feet with perfume, wiping them with her hair and kissing them. Lenski writes, "We see the deepest gratitude in the woman's actions and yet must add the deepest humility and contrition."⁸ She was a sinner expressing brokenness over her sins. Jesus will later validate that her sins were "many" (7:47). To paint the picture of the scene, Keener writes, "That she stands 'behind him' and anoints his feet instead of his head has to do with the posture of guests reclining on the couches; he would have had his left arm on the table and his feet away from the table toward the wall."⁹

On whether the woman had met Jesus prior to this encounter, Witherington writes, "The presentation of her unsolicited act of anointing and her emotional outburst, however, makes it inconceivable that she had not at the very least heard of Jesus' message of forgiveness."¹⁰ It is Jesus' silence at the woman's actions that demonstrates his acceptance of her. According to Witherington, "Her act is one of loving devotion and possibly gratitude, for she sees in Jesus acceptance, rather than rejection, despite her past life of sin."¹¹ The Pharisee also senses Jesus' acceptance of her. He expects Jesus to reject her as an unclean sinner either with his words or his actions. Jesus says nothing,

⁸ Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 426.

⁹ Keener, *Background Commentary*, 209.

¹⁰ Witherington, *Women*, 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

and allows the woman to continue touching him instead. Simon couldn't think of a reason why Jesus would permit a sinner to do such things to him, so he concludes that Jesus must not be aware that she is a sinner. "For Simon, Jesus' conduct disconfirms his prophetic credentials," Carroll writes.¹²

The Pharisee became uncomfortable and said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). Although Simon had said these words "to himself," Jesus somehow knew what he was thinking. According to Bock, "When Jesus reads minds, a rebuke often follows."¹³ If the other guests were told that someone in the house was about to be rebuked, they would never imagine it would be the Pharisee. In Luke's Gospel, the Pharisees are the ones who need to repent—rather than the tax collectors and sinners—because of their unwillingness to acknowledge and celebrate the repentance of sinners.

The Parable

Jesus is the first person to speak in the story. Until he does, the reader knows the host only as "the Pharisee." But Jesus introduces us to his name with his first word, "Simon." Jesus addresses a brief parable to his host, though the text never calls it a

¹² John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library (Louisville: WJK Press, 2012), 177.

¹³ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 698.

parable. Three people are described, a moneylender and two debtors. One of the debtors owed the moneylender ten times more than the other one. When these debtors were unable to pay back what they owed, the moneylender “graciously forgave them both” (7:42). The parable ends with a question that Simon answers correctly: “Which of them will love him more?”

The point of the parable is that one’s response of grateful love toward God is proportional to the amount a person perceives they have been forgiven by him. According to Lenski, “They who sin least and least flagrantly often feel their sins far more than wicked men do. And sins like pride, selfishness, work-righteousness, hypocrisy, and unbelief are often not felt at all.”¹⁴ Those who do not sense that they are very bad might not feel that they have been forgiven much, and would be expected to respond with moderate expressions of love and gratitude to God. On the other hand, those who perceive they have behaved very badly might understand that they have been forgiven a tremendous debt, and would be expected to respond with overwhelming expressions of love and gratitude toward God.

To understand who the figures in the parable symbolize, we have to note the three comparisons Jesus makes between Simon and the sinful woman in 7:44-46. Each person’s actions toward Jesus described in these verses is meant to measure the amount of their love for him, which in turn indicates the amount of sin they perceive

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*, 429.

God has forgiven them. As for Simon, he gave Jesus no water, no kiss, and nothing to anoint his head. The sinful woman, on the other hand, has used her own tears and hair to wet and dry Jesus' feet. She has "not ceased" to kiss his feet and she has anointed them with perfume. These describe extravagant expressions of love for Jesus compared to expressions of love expected but not offered by the host himself. By describing the acts of love that the sinful woman has demonstrated toward Jesus—and comparing them to the absence of such gestures toward Jesus by the host—Jesus means to measure the amount of her love by her actions. According to Bock, "Because the woman was forgiven much, she loves much; her love is demonstrated by her actions, so that her great love reflects the presence of great forgiveness."¹⁵

By specifying certain loving gestures that were not offered by his host, Jesus does raise questions about the relationship he intends to communicate between the Pharisee and forgiveness. If the figure in the parable with the large debt is the sinful woman, is the one with the smaller debt this Pharisee? If so, does this mean Simon was forgiven, albeit only a small amount? According to Stein, "It should not be pressed to assume that Simon had also been forgiven but that his sins were less than the woman's, so that he did not need as much gratitude."¹⁶ This seems to be the right interpretation, given Jesus' description of the absence of the Pharisee's acts of love demonstrated toward Jesus. Jesus seems to be communicating that the Pharisee neither recognizes

¹⁵ Bock, *Luke*, 703.

¹⁶ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*. The New American Commentary, Vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 238.

the woman's great forgiveness nor his own need for it. While this occasion does not describe Jesus dining in the home of a notorious sinner, for under no condition would Simon be classified alongside "tax collectors" or "sinners" in the first century, the Pharisee's self-righteousness does render him (unknowingly) in need of repentance and forgiveness. Jesus is reimagining the traditional categories his culture has created for those who need forgiveness and those who do not. The woman's expressions of love show that she is on the other side of forgiveness for sins she is well aware of; Simon's failure to express any love shows that he is still in need of forgiveness for sins Jesus is bringing to his attention.

The Timing of Forgiveness

Luke 7:47 raises two important questions about the sinful woman's forgiveness. First, when was she forgiven? Did her forgiveness take place the moment Jesus declared her sins forgiven, or at some time prior to this? Second, was she forgiven *because* of her loving gestures toward Jesus? The language of the verse implies this when Jesus concludes that "her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, because she loved much." Did her expressions of love toward Jesus earn her forgiveness from him, or were they compelled by it?

As for when the sinful woman was forgiven, it is important to note the tense of three verbs in Greek: "have been forgiven" (7:47), "have been forgiven" (7:48), and "has saved you" (7:50). The perfect tense of each of these verbs may indicate that the action

of all three took place prior to Jesus' declaration. Edwards agrees, writing, "The Greek verb tense (perfect passive indicative, 'have been forgiven') indicates *prior* forgiveness."¹⁷ It is probably best to say that Jesus was not presently forgiving her sins in the moment, but declaring that her sins had been forgiven at some time prior. According to Parsons, "This is a public pronouncement of a previously established fact."¹⁸

Regarding whether her forgiveness came as a result of her loving actions toward Jesus, we must return to the parable itself. In short, the parable is Jesus' explanation for the woman's story. The order of events described in the parable sheds light on the sequence of events unfolding at the banquet where the parable is being told. In the parable, forgiveness of debt takes place first; expressions of love take place next as a response to the forgiveness of debt (and commensurate with it). Notwithstanding the possible interpretation of a cause-effect relationship between love and forgiveness in 7:47—and in light of the perfect tense of the verb "have been forgiven" therein—Carroll concludes that "in this woman's case mercy has preceded her demonstration of love."¹⁹ Marshall agrees, writing, "Luke will have regarded the woman's love as the

¹⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 230.

¹⁸ Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke*. Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 131.

¹⁹ Carroll, *Luke* 180.

consequence, not the cause of her forgiveness.”²⁰ And Lenski claims that “the woman’s love is not the reason or cause of forgiveness, but her showing this love proves in a visible manner that her sins are forgiven.”²¹

So the story does not describe Jesus unconditionally accepting a sinful woman by welcoming her. Rather than ignoring her status as a conduct outcast, Jesus himself highlights the cause of her marginalization: “her sins, which are many” (7:47). But by the time she reaches Jesus at the home of Simon the Pharisee, this woman is repentant and forgiven. Jesus is not saying to the Pharisee, “You need to accept people who are like this: notorious sinners.”²² Jesus asks, “Do you see this woman?” Simon had wondered if Jesus saw her for who she really was; Jesus asks Simon if he sees her for who she really is: a thankful woman who has been forgiven a tremendous debt. Jesus is saying to Simon, “You need to set aside your self-righteousness and accept people who are like this—repentant.” Jesus itemizes the woman’s loving actions toward him to teach the Pharisee how Jesus should be properly treated. At the same time he shows the Pharisee

²⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke. A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 306.

²¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*, 433.

²² There is a key rhetorical issue here regarding perception. The woman is perceived to be in one position by those around her who are unaware of her change of status. Jesus is obviously aware of her change of status—as her actions demonstrate—and so his view of her is different than that of the other invited guests.

that the proper way to treat this grateful, forgiven woman involves welcome and acceptance. She was not the unrepentant sinner that the Pharisee supposed. “If this man were a legitimate religious leader,” Jesus seems to be saying to himself, “he would know who and what kind of woman this is who is touching me, that she is showing grateful love for the forgiveness of her many sins!”

This story records Jesus receiving unsolicited gratitude from a sinner who had repented of her many sins and experienced forgiveness. The passage contrasts Jesus’ welcome of this forgiven sinner with the Pharisee’s rejection of her. The story also serves to honor the forgiven, shameless sinner and dishonor the prideful, self-righteous Pharisee.

The Source of Forgiveness

The parable told in 7:41-42 isn’t applied until 7:47-48, when Jesus declares that the woman’s many sins have been forgiven. According to Keener, “Although the priests could pronounce God’s forgiveness after a sin offering, Jesus pronounces forgiveness without the clear restitution of a sacrifice to God in the temple.”²³ This bold declaration was not lost on the other dinner guests, who seem to react to Jesus’ declaration of her forgiveness instead of Jesus’ insults directed toward his host. That Jesus was claiming the authority to forgive sins himself, and not simply making a declaration that her sins

²³ Keener, *Background Commentary*, 209.

had been forgiven by God, was understood by these guests who ask in 7:49, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

By the end of this conversation, could there have been any doubt in Simon’s mind that Jesus was a prophet? Jesus demonstrated that he was a prophet when his answer showed that he knew what Simon had been thinking. He further demonstrates that he was a prophet by identifying the nature of this woman’s occupation, the very thing that led Simon to question whether Jesus was a prophet earlier. So Jesus has revealed prophetic knowledge about the sinner and Simon. Furthermore, Jesus has attempted to create a new category in the Pharisee’s theology: A prophet of God who welcomes humble, repentant sinners. But he’s also saying something about himself as more than a prophet when he claims the ability to forgive sins. To understand the boldness of this declaration, we have to return to the parable Jesus told to Simon the Pharisee in 7:41-42.

By claiming to forgive the woman’s sins in 7:48, Jesus identifies himself as the moneylender in the earlier parable. It was the moneylender who was owed the debt; it was the moneylender who had the power to forgive the debt; it was the moneylender who would receive the expressions of love in return for his gracious forgiveness of the debt. By forgiving the woman’s sins, Jesus is claiming that her huge sin debt was against him, that he alone could forgive it, and that the magnitude of her love shown for him in 7:44-46 reflected the magnitude of her many sins that he, himself, had forgiven.

Status Reversal

The status reversal is made explicit by Jesus when the marginalized sinful woman is the one identified as pleasing to Jesus rather than the powerful, “righteous” Pharisee. It is the sinful woman who receives praise instead of the expected rejection and the Pharisee who receives rejection instead of the expected praise. It is the sinful woman who unwittingly becomes Jesus’ hospitable host rather than the Pharisee who provided the invitation and the meal. “The woman who crashed the party has been Jesus’ true host,” writes Edwards.²⁴ Because of this, Jesus does not shrink back from disgracing even his host in his own home when that host refuses to “see” a humbly contrite, repentant sinner for who she really is. Edwards calls Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisee’s lack of hospitality a “blistering denunciation.”²⁵

York captures the wholesale reversal that Luke’s story produces:

In the beginning the Pharisee is the host, the woman is a sinner. He is inside; she is outside. He has honor; she is shameless. As the story develops, she acts hospitably; he fails to show any special kindness towards Jesus. She understands him to be a prophet; he rejects Jesus’ prophetic character. She is forgiven much and loves much; he is forgiven little and loves little....She now has honor; Simon is shamed. The outsider has become an insider; Simon, the supposed insider, has become an outsider.²⁶

²⁴ Edwards, *The Gospel*, 230.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 229.

²⁶ John York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke*. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* (Sheffield Press, 1991), 125-126.

It may be this reversal that has caught artists' imaginations for centuries, as the biblical scene of the sinful woman washing Jesus' feet in the home of Simon the Pharisee has seen more than its representative share of canvases. The woman is the recipient of many pointing fingers or other directional gestures in art. Most of the gestures are judgmental, but Jesus' is different. The artists prefer to capture Jesus' outstretched hand right at the moment he asks, "Do you see this woman?" Art students are invited to reflect on who this humble outcast might represent in their own lives, and if we really do see them for who they truly are. Or better, reverse stations with her yourself. As Lenski observes, "No name is given; someone has said well: 'Put your own name down for hers.'"²⁷

²⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, 423.

CELEBRATING REPENTANCE IN LUKE

CHAPTER FIVE

The Setting of Luke 15

The audience gathered to hear Jesus teach in Luke 15 contains a curious combination of people—a cross section of culture. The seemingly irreligious tax collectors and sinners are present listening to Jesus, but so are the Pharisees and scribes, the religious elite. Stein identifies the “sinners” in 15:1 as “‘the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame’ of 14:21.”¹ But this tends to confuse the two categories of conduct and condition outcasts. Tax collectors and sinners were certainly marginalized, but it is their conduct rather than a particular condition outside of their control that is to blame. It seems better to identify these “sinners” as those whose lives did not align with the righteous living prescribed by the Law. Jesus will make this abundantly clear when he introduces the younger son in the third parable as his example of such a “sinner.” He is not featured as blind, for example, but immoral.

When the religious leaders observe these conduct outcasts among those listening to Jesus, they again question his affiliation with them. They grumble that Jesus “receives sinners and eats with them.” The Greek word for “receives” appears fourteen times in the New Testament. Five of those are in Luke and two more occur in Acts. In

¹ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*. The New American Commentary, Vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 402.

each appearance of the verb in Luke's two volumes, an event is eagerly anticipated, but that which is being "welcomed" has not yet arrived. A possible translation of Luke's use of the term in 15:2, therefore, might be "looks to welcome" sinners—something those accusing Jesus refused to do.

Does Jesus "look to welcome" unrepentant sinners? Does he eat with them? Luke 15:1-2 contains elements we've seen before in this Gospel. Luke 5, 7, and 15 all feature "tax collectors and sinners,"² Jesus eating with them, and the Pharisees criticizing this practice. Luke's readers are meant to connect these three passages. The trilogy of parables in Luke 15 is spoken in response to yet another complaint regarding the nature of Jesus' relationship with conduct outcasts. Luke 15 records Jesus' final word and clearest interpretation of his table fellowship with sinners in the Gospel of Luke.

Parable #1: The Lost Sheep

The trilogy of parables begins with a story of a lost sheep.³ Should a sheep owner happen to lose one of his hundred sheep, Jesus claims, he will go searching for it until it is found. Upon finding it, he rejoices. And when he has brought it safely home, he calls

² The Greek expression "tax collectors and sinners" occurs in Luke's Gospel with only slight variation in 5:30; 7:34; and 15:1.

³ Of these three parables, only this one appears outside of Luke, with some variation, in Matthew 18:12-14.

his friends and neighbors to rejoice together with him. Several key terms are introduced in this first parable that help establish a pattern for the two that follow. Appearing in all three parables are the words “lost,” “found,” “friends,” and “rejoice” or “rejoice with.” The shared pattern and lexical connections among the three parables will be carefully explored later in this chapter.

Certainly, the tax collectors and sinners identified in 15:1 are the lost sheep Jesus has come to find. Jesus himself identifies the one lost sheep in the parable as a “sinner” (15:7).⁴ Jesus later states that he has come to seek those who are lost (19:10). While commenting on Luke 15:1-2, Bock writes, “He is interested in befriending such undesirables, regardless of what others may think. His rationale is simple: he wishes to draw them to God.”⁵ This is certainly true, and Jesus routinely reaches out to them in the hope that they might be drawn to God by Jesus’ offer of forgiveness. Although Jesus is directing his words to the Pharisees during this scene, these lost sheep (tax collectors and sinners mentioned in 15:1-2) are also present and listening. Aware of this, Jesus seems to be placing a vision in front of them that where they started is not where they

⁴ Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 505, “Sinners in Luke are persons who need to repent; in Luke, at least, it does not mean ‘poor’ and has nothing to do with being unclean or prohibited from the temple or synagogue.”

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1299.

have to end up. He has not given up on them. In fact, the entire mission of God works from the premise that Christ died for the ungodly to bring them to God.

Seeking is the essential starting point in this parable; community celebration that occurs after what is lost has been found is its important climax.⁶ That is, once the lost sheep is no longer lost, he is no longer an unrepentant sinner. This is made clear when Jesus concludes the actual parable with a note of application: “I tell you that in the same way, there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents rather than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”⁷

Parable #2: The Lost Coin

The parable of the lost sheep is followed immediately by the parable of the lost coin, with a similar punch line: “I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” The two leading parables in this chapter share many similarities that help establish a pattern: an important item is lost by its owner, the item

⁶ According to Vinson, *Luke*, 504, the community celebration the owner hosts would have taken the form of a banquet that would “quite likely require cooking animals from his flocks and herds.”

⁷ The ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance certainly refers to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about Jesus’ association with sinners in 15:2. As in Luke 5:32, today’s Jesus might have used air quotes when he mentioned these “righteous persons” who do not need to repent. In this case, these Pharisees and scribes who considered themselves righteous did, in fact, need to repent.

is found, and friends and neighbors are called to rejoice with the owner over that which has been found.

Although food is not mentioned explicitly in the first two parables as part of the rejoicing, the reader is meant to assume that the neighborhood parties over finding what was lost involved meals. Vinson agrees, labelling the community celebration at the end of this parable a “festive meal.”⁸ According to Downing, “Such rejoicing, however, implies a party. She therefore may have spent more than one coin celebrating her discovery of the one she had lost.”⁹ And these meal celebrations are meant to remind the reader of the charge against Jesus of “receiving sinners and eating with them” in 15:2. Commenting on 15:9, Green writes, “As in v 6, the motif of eating is not explicit, but the act of inviting friends and neighbors (in this case, female) over to share in her joy implies a festive repast—tying this parable more securely into the content of the charge levelled against Jesus in vv 1–2 and preparing for the banquet-motif in vv 23–24.”¹⁰

Tremendous joy is the resounding note at the conclusion of both of the first two parables, as well as in Jesus’ application verses following each one. Craig Evans writes

⁸ Vinson, *Luke*, 505.

⁹ Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 255.

¹⁰ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 576.

about the response to finding the lost coin, “This joy stands in sharp contrast to the Pharisees and other ‘respectable’ religious people who grumbled because Jesus spent time with those whom the Pharisees would regard as ‘lost.’”¹¹

Parable #3: The Lost Son

The stakes increase dramatically when Jesus introduces the third and final parable in the series with, “A man had two sons.” The first two parables involved expendable property that was lost. Based on the pattern established by those parables, the listener knows that something is going to be lost. This parable promises to engage the emotions of Jesus’ hearers while they hope that this most important item is likewise “found” and a celebration is enjoyed at the end of the story.¹²

The younger son was, well, prodigal. To be prodigal is to be reckless and wasteful; a squanderer. Instead of treasuring his heritage, he disrespects it by demanding his inheritance early and then squandering it in reckless living.¹³ The timing

¹¹ Craig A. Evans, *New International Biblical Commentary: Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 232.

¹² The careful reader will also note the increasing proportional value of the lost items in the parables. In the first parable, the owner loses one percent of his sheep. In the second parable, the owner loses ten percent of her coins. In the final parable, the father loses fifty percent of his sons.

¹³ The accusation later by his older brother that he had spent his wealth on prostitutes (15:30) is not made explicit here. It was probably true, however, and marks a rare occurrence of men being condemned for using prostitution in the New Testament.

of a famine in the distant land after the younger son ran out of money meant even employment was difficult to find. Everyone's resources were carefully guarded, and the Jewish boy found himself longing to eat the food that was served to unclean animals. It is at this point that the younger son "came to his senses" and began to devise a plan humbly to return to his father with contrition. He memorizes a speech that includes confession of sin, unworthiness of family rights, and a modest plea for employment in his father's service.¹⁴

The sequence of next events is very important. First, the younger son returns to his father and finds that his father has been looking to welcome him—even though the father does not yet know the condition of his son's heart and soul as he returns.¹⁵

Before the returning son is able to say a word of his memorized speech, the father has seen him, felt compassion for him, run to him, embraced him, and kissed him.¹⁶ The son—probably after collecting himself after the father's unexpectedly warm greeting—is

¹⁴ According to Bock, *Luke*, 1313, "The confession pictures his repentance, coming to the father bearing nothing but his need."

¹⁵ It is important to note that, unlike the owners in the first two parables, the father did not leave his estate and go in search of his lost son. He waits longingly for his return, but he did not chase after his rebellious son. This shows that Jesus was using hyperbole when he described abandoning the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to search for the one that was lost in 15:4. The father does not abandon his estate to go looking for his lost son. He longingly anticipates his return, but he stays at home.

¹⁶ The father running in 15:20 and his command to his slaves to act "quickly" in 15:22 represent rare instances in the Bible where God is pictured in a hurry to do something.

the first to speak. He gets halfway through his speech, which includes confessing both his sins and his unworthiness, before his father cuts him off in order to bark orders at his servants. The younger son's last words in the parable are completely undone by the father's first words in the parable. It was true that he was no longer worthy to be called his father's son, but his father completely reinstates him as such with the best robe, a ring, and sandals. The fattened calf is killed and they eat and celebrate because "this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found" (15:24). Downing notes, "Like the shepherd and the woman in the preceding two parables, the father does something fiscally irresponsible: he throws a party!"¹⁷ And the party is thrown for his younger son who had demonstrated fiscal irresponsibility, squandering all of his inheritance on partying.

The younger son in the parable is meant to represent the tax collectors and sinners mentioned in 15:1-2. Recall that the tax collectors and sinners presumably were listening to this parable. Jesus pulls no punches in describing the rebellious heart and unrighteous conduct that characterized the younger son who is meant to represent them in the parable. They also hear that if they humbly return to their father with contrition, like the younger son in the parable, they will be welcomed by him.¹⁸

¹⁷ Downing, *Changing Signs*, 256.

¹⁸ Twice in the Gospel of Luke Jesus tells a story that describes tax collectors as sinners—here and the Parable of the Tax Collector and Pharisee praying in the temple (18:9-14). In both instances he depicts them as humble and contrite over their sins. The Pharisees are also described by Jesus in both of these

Jesus is also teaching theology to the religious leaders who were listening to him. He's conveying to the Pharisees how God the Father feels about the restoration of tax collectors and sinners, applying pressure on the Pharisees to respond in kind. The "joy in heaven" (15:7) and "joy in the presence of the angels of God" (15:10) over one sinner who repents is here described in the form of a father's undignified embrace of and celebration over his penitent child. The parable seems to be over, since the story has completed the loop established by the first two parables. Jesus has more to say, of course: an extension to this final parable that is directed specifically to the religious leaders who registered the complaint in 15:2 that required these three parables in the first place. But before we get to the conclusion of the Parable of the Lost Son, let's pause to consider the pattern that has been established by these three parables and some of its implications.

The Pattern

Stein, while commenting on the parables recorded in Luke 15, writes, "In Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners, God was at work offering his kingdom to outcasts."¹⁹ Likewise, summarizing the parable of the Prodigal Son, Bock writes, "It is the hope of restoring the lost and leading people back to the joy of the Father that causes

stories—here appearing as the Prodigal Son's older brother. In both instances Jesus depicts them—in contrast to the tax collectors—as aloof and pridefully self-righteous.

¹⁹ Stein, *Luke*, 409.

Jesus to receive sinners and dine with tax collectors.”²⁰ But is this the conclusion we’re meant to draw from Jesus’ final and most thorough explanation of his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners? It seems that Jesus may be offering a different interpretation of his relationship with these conduct outcasts.

These have been called the “lost and found” parables for good reason.²¹ The Greek word for “lost” occurs ninety times in the New Testament, eight of which appear in these three parables (15:4[2x], 6, 8, 9, 17, 24, 32). No other New Testament chapter includes as many uses of the word “lost” as Luke 15. Likewise, the Greek word for “found” occurs 175 times in the New Testament, eight of which appear in these three parables (15:4, 5, 6, 8, 9[2x], 24, 32). And likewise, no other New Testament chapter includes as many uses of the word “found” as Luke 15. In answer to his critics about eating with sinners, Jesus is explaining that after seeking that which was lost, what was lost has now been found.²²

Jesus wants the Pharisees not only to know that these lost sinners have been found, he also wants them to know how to respond to this news. Indeed, the climax of each parable is that, after taking the initiative with tax collectors and sinners, a

²⁰ Bock, *Luke*, 1320.

²¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 431, titles his chapter on Luke 15 “Lost and Found.”

²² The two occurrences of the theologically related expression “was dead and is alive” (15:24, 32) reinforce this notion.

celebration ensues that is worthy of their repentance that results. Seeking these lost ones is the critical starting point in the hope that they may respond to Jesus' generous offer of forgiveness. But the high point and principle thrust of all three parables is the celebration that follows the finding. The language bears out this emphasis. The Greek verb "rejoice" is used in the first and third parable to describe the response when what was lost has been found (15:5, 32). When the owners in the first and second parable find what was lost, they invite their friends and neighbors to "rejoice with" them (15:6, 9). Jesus concludes these first two parables with his own interpretation, claiming there is "joy" in God's presence over one sinner who repents (15:7, 10). Finally, the third parable introduces and repeats the verb "celebrate" to show the proper response after the younger son has returned (15:23, 24, 29, 32). Music and dancing can be heard (15:25). To further emphasize the joyful nature of the festivities, the fattened calf that is slaughtered for the feast celebrating his repentance is mentioned three times (15:23, 27, 30). According to Bock, "The parable shows that God is pleased to have the penitent at his table."²³

It is in this context of this celebration that Jesus introduces the term "friends" in all three parables (15: 6, 9, 29). Luke's reader will recall the accusation reported by Jesus himself in Luke 7:34, "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" The

²³ Bock, *Luke*, 1306.

obvious setting for this accusation was a festive meal. Abundance of food led to the impression that Jesus was a glutton and abundant wine led to the impression that Jesus was a drunk. The presence of tax collectors and sinners at this festive meal led to the impression that Jesus was their friend. In other words, the Pharisees saw these meals as the location of sin rather than the location of celebration. It seems that in this final and most thorough explanation of his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15), Jesus is acknowledging that he is, in fact, their friend who is celebrating with them over their repentance.²⁴

The three parables share the same clear pattern.²⁵ Something important is lost and then that something is found. In all three parables, people are gathered to celebrate *after* the lost item is found; they are not gathered to help look for the lost item. In all three parables, “friends” are mentioned in the context of celebration. Rather than defending his practice of pursuing unrepentant sinners through festive meals (15:2), as the traditional interpretation goes, Jesus seems to be correcting assumptions by

²⁴ The symbolism in the first two parables mustn't be taken too far. Those who participate in the celebration are not the formerly lost, as will be the case in the last parable in the trilogy. But Jesus is celebrating with the formerly lost tax collectors and sinners when he feasts with them.

²⁵ The inseparability of the three parables may explain why Luke introduces them with the singular “parable” in 15:3 which may, according to Edwards, refer to the three collectively (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 433-34).

explaining that he is eating in celebration of people who have repented—those now found who were formerly lost, those now alive who were formerly dead: his friends.

If Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners as a means to win them over, we would expect these parables to be told using a quite different pattern. Our view of Jesus as a friend of sinners attempting to woo them during a meal is equivalent to inviting all of the guests over to eat first. Then after everyone is satisfied, they are divided up into search parties and assigned search grids, where they embark on a search for the lost sheep and coin. But in none of the parables are the lost invited to a party in order to be found. Neither do the owners in the first two parables gather their friends and neighbors for a meal-slash-search party. In none of the parables is there a feast while the lost item is still lost, just as there is no rejoicing in heaven over “one sinner,” but over “one sinner who repents.” Instead, it was decidedly after the “finding”—and *because* of the finding—that the celebration commenced.²⁶

After the celebration over the lost son’s return begins in 15:24, the careful reader expects Jesus’ parable to be over. The pattern established by the first two parables is now complete: What was lost is now found, and a celebration has begun. But

²⁶ This does not eliminate the possibility that some unrepentant sinners might have been present during some of the meal celebrations Jesus attended. But the primary purpose of the feasts remains a celebration over finding what had been lost—as Jesus seems to explain with the three parables in Luke 15.

Jesus has a special message for the religious leaders who started this conversation when they criticized Jesus' table fellowship with sinners in 15:1-2.

Parable #3: The Older Son

Stein describes "the rule of end stress" in the context of this parable. He writes, "This means that in a parable, as in most stories, the climax comes at the end. What comes at the end of the Parable of the Prodigal Son involves the antagonism of the older son toward his father."²⁷ It turns out that the older son in the trilogy's closing parable is not just a foil for the rebellious younger son. He takes center stage as Jesus brings this story to a convicting conclusion. This makes sense. After all, the older brother in the parable represents the religious leaders whose criticism of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners instigated these three parables in the first place. Their likeness was not symbolized in the first two parables, but Jesus adds an addendum to this third one that includes them. They started it by grumbling their disapproval of Jesus' conduct; Jesus will finish it by very publicly voicing his disapproval of theirs.

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1609—1669) painted the famous "The Return of the Prodigal Son" on canvas using oil. The three main characters from the parable are all featured, capturing the very moment the returning son makes contact with the merciful father. The returning son kneels before his aged father with his back to us. His face is

²⁷ Stein, *Luke*, 402.

mostly concealed, buried as it is in his father's thickly-robed bosom. His clothes are worn, his head is shaved, and his bare feet symbolize his poverty. The father faces us while embracing his kneeling son with both hands, the tilt of his head a gesture of his compassion. Standing aloof with his head painted higher than them both is the older brother, robed in wealth like his father. But his hands are clasped in front of him, a gesture that he is not welcoming back this prodigal with open arms. The painting moves us, but its static nature forced the artist to include a significant inaccuracy.

In the parable, the older son was not present when the younger son returned.

The text emphasizes this by noting that he had been in the field (15:25) and had to ask a servant what the commotion was all about (15:26). The servant's reply included nothing about the younger son's words or contrition, only that he has come back safe and his father has killed the fattened calf (15:27).²⁸ The older brother is nothing short of outraged about this celebration. He chooses to protest with his absence. Recalling that the older brother represents the powerful Pharisees in a culture of the powerful versus the outcasts—the insiders and outsiders—Edwards writes, "The irony of the scene is unmistakable: the offended insider is himself a resentful outsider."²⁹ When the older

²⁸ The servant reports to the older son that his brother has "come" (ἦκω). Had he said that his brother had "returned" (ἐπιστρέφω), for example, Luke might have been suggesting to the older brother that the younger brother had repented.

²⁹ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 445.

son refuses to join the celebration, the father leaves the party to plead with him.³⁰ The older brother's words to his father in 15:30 are meant to remind the reader of the Pharisee's accusation of Jesus in 15:2, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

At this point, the older brother—like the Pharisees regarding the sinners Jesus is accused of eating with in 15:2—is unaware that repentance has taken place. All he knows is 1) his brother has squandered his inheritance by living a sinful lifestyle, 2) his brother has returned broke, and 3) his father is celebrating his return. That the older brother was not present to witness the repentance itself is a very important detail in the parable. Like the religious leaders—who either did not know that the tax collectors and sinners dining with Jesus were repentant or did not consider their form of repentance legitimate—the older son sees only part of the picture and draws a conclusion based on incomplete information. He still considers his younger brother a rebellious, irresponsible, no-good outsider. The older son has a Jonah complex that believes that dirty sinners do not deserve to be saved the way he does, and he's disgusted that his father regards his brother's return as an occasion to celebrate. According to Downing, "The older son thinks according to an economy of exchange: celebration should signify reward for obedience."³¹

³⁰ Luke probably intends to suggest that the older son has now become the lost one for whom the father goes to search.

³¹ Downing, *Changing Signs*, 256.

And the older son is right: the father *is* demonstrating more joy over the younger son than over the older son. Jesus had already explained that the Father expresses more joy over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent (15:7). The older son represents the self-righteous Pharisees who, in Jesus' tongue-in-cheek assessment, are the "ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (15:7). And now, repent is precisely what Jesus is inviting these "righteous" Pharisees to do, in the form of humbly joining in the celebration over finding what has been lost.³² The beginning of the chapter saw one lost sheep in need of repenting; by the end of the chapter, we're left with another lost sheep in need of repenting, and it's not the younger of the two brothers. "Thus the father's concluding appeal addresses primarily Pharisees. Will they join the party?"³³

What we have in Luke 15 is not a *defense* of Jesus' table fellowship with unrepentant sinners, but an *explanation* and an *appeal*. His explanation is that after seeking these lost sinners and looking hopefully for their return, Jesus is eating with them as a celebration that they have been found. The sinners he eats with have, in fact, repented (15:7, 10, 21, 24, 32). His appeal is for the Pharisees to join the celebration. Imagine how the Parable of the Prodigal Son would be told differently if Jesus were defending his table fellowship with unrepentant sinners, using it as a means to draw them in. The first portion of the parable would likely remain unchanged. There would

³² He is also inviting them to follow his example in taking the initiative with "sinners" by seeking them.

³³ John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library (Louisville: WJK Press, 2012), 319.

still be a man with two sons. The younger son would still demand his inheritance prematurely and travel to a distant land where he would still spend it all on selfish, reckless living. But the father would not stay at home, and neither would he chase after his younger son without imploring his older son to come along. The dialogue between the Father and the older son would take place while the younger son was still living his free and reckless life in a distant land. The father would be pleading with the older son to accompany him on a journey to find the younger son, to join him there in the location of his sin, to fellowship with him, dine with him, and invite him to return.

Based on Jesus' explanation of his association with tax collectors and sinners in Luke 15, Jesus routinely "looked to welcome" sinners. He also routinely celebrated with repentant sinners—eating food and drinking wine with them. But the very meals that the Pharisees misinterpreted as inappropriate acceptance of sinners were in fact celebrations over their repentance. Since the older brother represents the Pharisees and experts in the law, the story was still being written when Jesus spoke it. Jesus is inviting these "older brothers" to imitate both his engagement with these "sinners" and to join the celebration of their repentance. This invitation marks a new element added to the pattern that the first two parables lack. "You quite misunderstand," Jesus seems to be saying. "You are accusing me of eating meals with unrepentant sinners when in fact I am celebrating their repentance with an extravagant feast. Please come, and join the celebration over finding what was lost." Will these religious leaders rejoice with heaven over one sinner's repentance; or will they continue to sulk in their self-

righteousness, never so much as glancing at these inferior, unworthy sinners? The parable ends with Jesus leaving the decision to them.

PART TWO
CONDITION OUTCASTS

CONDITION OUTCASTS IN LUKE

CHAPTER SIX

Condition Outcasts: A Separate Category

The “sinners” that Jesus attracted were considered social outcasts by others because of their conduct. But while all notorious sinners were outcasts, not all outcasts were notorious sinners. Certain infirmities that would render a person unclean, such as leprosy, paralysis, or blindness, would also render that person an outcast. To a Jew, these conditions would often indicate God’s judgment and some need for reconciliation. According to Sanders, “People who transgressed the law should make reparations if their misdeeds harmed other people, repent and bring a sacrifice. Transgressions that did not harm other people (such as inadvertently working on the sabbath) required repentance and sacrifice. God would always forgive the repentant sinner. Those who did not repent were subject to divine punishment, which was manifested, for example, in sickness.”¹

The last line in this quotation from Sanders hints at an important cultural understanding at the time of Jesus. The notion that a lack of physical wholeness might be the direct result of an unrepentant sin in a person’s life is addressed infrequently in

¹ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 34.

the New Testament,² but this foundational Jewish belief seemed to create a measure of confusion among the Jews between the two categories of conduct and condition outcasts. More focus will be given to whether unconfessed sin ultimately generated sickness in the next chapter, but it is important to note here that such a theology was prevalent among those who witnessed Jesus' miracles and heard him teach.

Many first-century religious people placed the sinners and the sick into a single category of "outsiders." As we will see in Part Two that follows, even many of the Jewish leaders that receive attention in Luke's Gospel seemed to make no meaningful distinction between paralytics, tax collectors, lepers, sinners, and the blind, regarding each of them as beyond of the pale of God's redemption. But was this blurring of lines an appropriate response to these groups, and did Jesus blur the same lines? There seems to be a categorical difference, after all, between a prostitute and the poor, between a sinner and a paralytic.

And it wasn't just notorious sinners and those with special needs who were collectively considered outsiders in first-century Judaism. According to Borg, "the effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor,

² In John 5:14, for example, Jesus suggests that some sin explained the condition of the paralytic whom Jesus healed by the pool of Bethesda. But in John 9:2-3, Jesus denied that another man's blindness was caused by his sin or that of his parents.

Jew and Gentile.”³ These pairings seem to yield two categories of marginalized: those on the outside because of their own conduct, and those on the outside due to a situation beyond their control.⁴ Notorious sinners were outcasts as a result of moral decisions they had made; Gentiles, the blind, women, and the poor (among others) were outsiders through no fault of their own.

Have we wrongly included all of these groups among those that Jesus welcomed unconditionally? If Jesus’ merciful offer to conduct outcasts was forgiveness in return for repentance, did he make the same offer to the condition outcasts? Or did Jesus regard the condition outcasts as a separate category and offer them mercy unconditionally? To answer these and other similar questions, we must look carefully at several passages in the Gospel of Luke that record Jesus teaching about or interacting with those outsiders whose condition was beyond their control (whether changeable or not).

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 52.

⁴ And those outsiders due to situations beyond their control can be further divided into those whose situations are able to change (such as the blind who can be healed) and those whose situations cannot be changed (such as Gentiles and women). Chapter seven of this thesis will look carefully at the first group that Jesus restores through healing, and chapter eight will look carefully at the second group that Jesus seeks to dignify despite their unchangeable situation.

Sermon at Nazareth in Luke 4:16-22

According to Edwards, Luke 4:16-30 is “the earliest known account of a Jewish synagogue service.”⁵ The scene depicts Jesus, whose popularity was growing in the region (4:14-15), entering the synagogue of his hometown on the Sabbath “as was his custom.” His popularity must have made him the obvious choice for speaker that day, and when he stands up to read sacred scripture, a synagogue attendant hands him a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He finds and reads a brief passage from Isaiah 61 (and a line from Isaiah 58), rolls the scroll up and hands it back to the attendant, then he sits down. In response to the worshipers’ fixed gaze, Jesus claims that the passage he just read has been fulfilled today, while they heard it read. The worshipers love this. They exchange compliments about Jesus with one another, seemingly proud that their town produced someone who was now famous for his words of grace (4:22).

What were these words of grace that Jesus spoke? To find our answer, we have to look carefully at the passage from Isaiah that Jesus chose to read. By claiming that the scripture was fulfilled, Jesus seems to be applying the passage’s opening refrain to himself. He is the one upon whom the Spirit of the LORD rests. He is the one who has been anointed to preach. He is the one who has been sent. In order to understand how Jesus interpreted his own ministry, we have to consider what it is he was “anointed” and “sent” to do.

⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 132.

The scripture Jesus read contains five important missions for the person it describes:⁶

- 1) Preach the gospel to the poor.
- 2) Proclaim release to the captives.
- 3) [Proclaim] recovery of sight to the blind.
- 4) Set free those who are oppressed.
- 5) Proclaim the favorable year of the LORD.

We begin by asking, Who are the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed? Are these terms meant to be understood as literal or metaphorical? Some might highlight the *spiritual* definition of these terms to the virtual exclusion of a *literal* meaning, emphasizing the spiritual poverty and spiritual blindness of Jesus' audience, for example. But Bock offers a corrective note to this tendency when he writes, "These texts cannot be spiritualized. The poor and the blind in these texts do not exclude the poor and the blind!"⁷ And Luke's Gospel seems to bear out both literal and metaphorical meanings for these terms. According to Parsons,

In Luke's writings, the poor are the economically disadvantaged (6:20-21; 7:22) *and* the spiritually impoverished (cf. 1:52-53, in which the hungry and humble are in contrast with the rich and proud). The captives are those who have been enslaved because they cannot pay their debts *and* those who are enslaved to sin (Luke 7:43). The blind are those who are physically *and* spiritual without sight (cf.

⁶ The clear similarities with Luke 7:22 will be explored later in this chapter.

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 401.

Luke 7:21; 18:35). The oppressed are those who are subject to unwelcome forces of restraint *and* unwanted demons (cf. Luke 8:29).⁸

By borrowing a line from Isaiah 58:6 and adding it to his Isaiah 61:1-2a quotation, Jesus finds a way to repeat the important notion of “release” twice in his short reading. The dual literal and spiritual significance of the passage is further reinforced by the repetition of this Greek word. Stein writes that this single Greek word that refers to the “release” of captives and “freedom” of the oppressed in 4:18 “always refers to forgiveness of sins elsewhere in Luke-Acts.”⁹ According to Vinson, “Freedom, then, means freedom from sin and freedom from the oppressive powers of evil.”¹⁰ The passage’s closing mention of the year of Jubilee likewise underscores the theme of release. This fiftieth year was supposed to see debts cancelled and slaves freed—both representing release from bondage.

The placement of this passage in Luke is extremely important. According to Edwards, “Both Mark and Matt set Jesus’ visit to Nazareth near the midpoint of his career, but Luke, in his most striking departure from Mark’s narrative sequence, places the sermon in Nazareth at the outset of Jesus’ ministry.”¹¹ By doing so, Luke seems to be

⁸ Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke*. Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 81.

⁹ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*. The New American Commentary, Vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 156. The passages he cites are Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18.

¹⁰ Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 120.

¹¹ Edwards, *The Gospel*, 134.

creating a ministry blueprint out of Jesus' experience at the synagogue in Nazareth. According to Bock, "Luke 4:16-30 is a representative sample of Jesus' ministry, a paradigm for his ministry."¹² But this story isn't just the paradigm for Jesus' ministry in Luke; the passage also previews the Jewish response to it. Fitzmyer agrees, "Luke has deliberately put this story at the beginning of the public ministry to encapsulate the entire ministry of Jesus and the reaction to it."¹³

There are two interpretive guardrails that help us identify who Luke had in mind with the four groups mentioned in Jesus' inaugural sermon. The first is Jesus' immediate interpretation of the text that nearly got him killed; his application to female and leprous Gentiles—both condition outcasts—is telling. The other is Jesus' interpretation of his ministry to two disciples sent from John the Baptist in Luke 7:22 which has strong lexical ties to Jesus' reading from Isaiah in Luke 4:18. Both of these passages will now be examined.

Rejection at Nazareth in Luke 4:23-30

Jesus' sermon, and especially his quotation from Isaiah, places outsiders in the center of Jesus' mission: the poor, captives, the blind, and the oppressed. To Jesus' audience in Nazareth, the groups listed in Isaiah still described outsiders, even though

¹² Bock, *Luke*, 394.

¹³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*. The Anchor Bible Commentary, Vol. 28 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 529.

they were presumably descendants of Abraham. As Israelites who were subject to Roman domination, perhaps Jesus' audience identified themselves as the poor, captives, and the oppressed. In any case, nothing in the text suggests that the synagogue worshipers rejected Jesus at this point. Instead, it is Jesus who instigates the conflict with his audience. According to Edwards, "The NIV subtitles this unit 'Jesus Rejected at Nazareth,' but the text suggests that Jesus also rejected Nazareth....The text suggests that Jesus, not the villagers, provoked the crisis."¹⁴ Jesus begins provoking them by suggesting that now that they have heard him teach, they will demand to see his miracles, like those they've heard about him performing in Capernaum.¹⁵ Bock agrees, "The message produces the crowd's desire for visible signs of the new era, though it is Jesus who expresses the thoughts of his audience."¹⁶ Jesus goes on to declare that his visible signs and miracles will not take place in his hometown, but among people that the citizens of Nazareth regard categorically as outsiders. According to Parsons, those listening to Jesus "are ready for deliverance, but they are not prepared to share it."¹⁷ So Jesus reaches for the most outside outsiders he can imagine in order to communicate the radical nature of his mission.

¹⁴ Edwards, *The Gospel*, 139.

¹⁵ Though Luke has not recorded any miracles of Jesus in Capernaum to this point in the narrative.

¹⁶ Bock, *Luke*, 415.

¹⁷ Parsons, *Luke*, 83.

For his application of the Isaiah quotation, Jesus cites two Old Testament stories in which God chose to bless Gentiles and not Israelites. Jesus doesn't mention notorious sinners in his application, but refers to those whose situation came about through no fault of their own, one who was aided by Elijah the prophet and the other who was healed by Elisha the prophet. According to Stein, "Luke may have had a special interest in Elijah/Elisha because of their ministry to Gentiles."¹⁸ The first example Jesus sites takes place during the three and a half year famine when Elijah was God's prophet. Although there were many Israelite widows that God might have sent Elijah to, God chose to send him to the aid of a Gentile widow instead. Commenting on this widow from the land of Sidon, Bock writes, "This Gentile is an exception to the rule, and she is the last person one would expect would be blessed by an Israelite prophet."¹⁹

The second example Jesus cites involves the only mention of Elisha the prophet in the entire New Testament (4:27). Although there were many Jewish lepers who were candidates for healing in the time of Elisha, God chose to send him instead to cleanse Naaman who lived in Syria. Both of Jesus' examples involve God's mercy extended to Gentiles instead of Israelites—and a *widow* and *leprous* Gentile at that! According to Cyril of Alexandria, "By these he refers to the church of the heathen, who were about to

¹⁸ Stein, *Luke*, 159.

¹⁹ Bock, *Luke*, 418.

accept him and be healed of their leprosy, by reason of Israel's remaining impenitent."²⁰

But the text doesn't seem to suggest that it was because of rejection by the Nazareth worshipers that Jesus turned to the Gentiles. Instead, it seems to say that it was Jesus' inclusion of the Gentiles that caused the Jewish worshipers to reject him! According to Edwards, "The widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian emphatically indicate that the divine mercy announced in the Isaiah quotation is extended to Gentiles as well as Jews....The extension of the gospel to Gentiles was not an afterthought because Jews rejected Jesus; it was the result of divine election of Gentiles."²¹

Their reaction was not positive. Edwards writes, "The Nazarenes' response to Jesus is a microcosm of the chronic hardness of Israel's heart to the prophets."²² The notion that God would forego preferential treatment for Israel and begin to bless Gentiles instead was received as erroneous teaching deserving of death.²³ The citizens of Nazareth—some of whom had presumably known Jesus for many years—reacted by attempting to kill him for suggesting that they might be passed over for God's blessings in favor of Gentiles. Jeffrey writes, "Jesus is here reminding his hearers pointedly of the

²⁰ Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 82.

²¹ Edwards, *The Gospel*, 140-141.

²² *Ibid.*, 140.

²³ Keep in mind that we learn this story from the only Gentile New Testament writer, who happens to have written more of the New Testament than anyone else.

same thing John did in the previous chapter (3:8-9): if Israel thinks its special covenant relationship with God is all that matters, their disobedience notwithstanding, they have not been paying sufficient attention to either the Law *or* the Prophets.”²⁴ This warning to the insiders of Israel had the opposite effect it should have had. Instead of contrition, they responded with prideful self-righteousness based on their nationality. Instead of humbly reaching for the blessings of God, they demonstrated entitlement to them. According to Vinson, “The worshipers at Nazareth want to keep God’s blessings for themselves, and Jesus prophetically denounces their attitude.”²⁵

So, while the Isaiah passage that Jesus read in the Nazareth synagogue may seem to contain a dual meaning that includes condition outcasts (the poor and blind, for example) *and* conduct outcasts in need of “release” = “forgiveness,” Jesus’ application of his reading focuses exclusively on those whose outcasting condition was not the result of sin: a widow and a leper who were Gentiles.²⁶ “The presumption that salvation

²⁴ David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 71.

²⁵ Vinson, *Luke*, 123.

²⁶ Granted, Jesus’ audience may have classified all Gentiles as idolaters, and thus sinners *par excellence*. But his audience would likely have been familiar with the stories referred to by Jesus. They would know that the widow appealed to Israel’s God by name and that Israel’s God had given Naaman’s army victory, perhaps inclining him to seek healing from a prophet of the God of Israel. Jesus’ selection of these Gentile examples, then, seems to be less about idolatry and more about their non-Israelite heritage.

is the exclusive privilege of Israel is revoked in both illustrations,” Edwards writes.²⁷ And this was not welcomed news in Jesus’ hometown.

Answering John in Luke 7:20-22

After John the Baptist was arrested, he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was, in fact, the expected one. Noting a rare interruption by Luke, Roth writes, “The narrator literally interrupts the conversation between Jesus and John’s disciples to point out that Jesus has been curing diseases, exorcising evil spirits, and healing the blind. This rhetorical device...invites the audience to answer the questions posed to Jesus before Jesus does, yet answer it in the same manner Jesus will.”²⁸ Jesus instructs these two messengers to report back to John what they themselves have “seen and heard.”²⁹ According to Carroll, “He lets his actions speak for themselves, and they authenticate his identity and mission from God.”³⁰

Jesus then lists six kinds of miracles that he suggests have characterized his ministry: healing of the blind, the lame, lepers, and the deaf, raising of the dead, and the

²⁷ Edwards, *The Gospel*, 140.

²⁸ S. John Roth, *The Blind, the Lame, and the Poor: Character Types in Luke-Acts*. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 174.

²⁹ Actions tend to speak louder than words in the Gospel of Luke and for John the Baptist, who said, “Bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8).

³⁰ John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*. *The New Testament Library* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2012), 170.

gospel proclaimed to the poor.³¹ Regarding this list in Luke 7:22, Edwards writes, “These six claims, all direct quotations from Isaiah (29:18; 35:5-6; 42:18; 26:19; 61:1; and Sir 48:5, respectively), are also conspicuous fulfillments of the messianic prophecy of Isa 61:1-2, on which Jesus based his ministry (4:18). Each claim is a claim of *healing*.”³² Edwards is right. This passage is designed by Luke to remind the reader of Jesus’ sermon inaugurating his ministry. We’re meant to agree that he has done exactly what he set out to do. According to Roth, “The first and last benefactions Jesus lists, ‘the blind see again’ and ‘the poor are preached the good news,’ repeat benefactions promised in Lk. 4.18. The importance of the echo of 4.18-19 in 7.18-23 can scarcely be overestimated.... The scene with John’s disciples (7.18-23) recaps Jesus’ ministry to this point and connects it to Jesus’ reading in the synagogue.”³³

Jesus offers hope to the otherwise hopeless outsiders described in these verses. Regarding 7:22, Keener writes, “Some teachers compared the blind, lame, and lepers to the dead because they had no hope of recovery.”³⁴ Why Jesus does not mention explicitly here the release of captives and freedom for the oppressed is difficult to know,

³¹ The Gospel of Luke has recorded instances of Jesus performing all of these literal miracles except healing a deaf person.

³² Edwards, *The Gospel*, 221. Italics his.

³³ Roth, *The Blind*, 174-75.

³⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 208.

since these were part of the Isaiah passages he quoted during his inaugural message in Luke 4:18. Luke might have such release in mind in 7:21 when he describes those who are cured of diseases, afflictions, and especially evil spirits. Note, however, that Jesus' answer was prompted by a literal prisoner who had not been set free. That John the Baptist had remained a captive may explain his confusion and the reason he sent this delegation to Jesus in the first place.

Luke 7:21-22 provides us with two important pieces of information. First it is meant to summarize the ministry of Jesus from his inaugural sermon in Luke 4 up to this point in his career. Carroll concludes that "this scene presents an impressive recapitulation of Jesus' ministry of release."³⁵ Second, it serves as another interpretive grid for Jesus' use of Isaiah in his inaugural address. So, in addition to interpreting his inaugural message immediately in Nazareth by citing the missions of Elijah and Elisha to female and leprous Gentiles, here Jesus reflects on ministry that he's already done which includes tell-tale signs that he is the expected messiah. He came for the social outcasts; in particular, those who were marginalized through no fault of their own.

Curiously missing from Luke 7:20-22, then, is any explicit mention of forgiveness—either as a summary of Jesus' ministry or as an interpretation of 4:18-19. If

³⁵ Carroll, *Luke*, 170. Carroll tends to see the theme of release in many places in Luke, including Jesus' commission. According to Carroll, Jesus' mission "again and again delivered 'release' from oppression, debt, and sin—extending a gracious welcome and forgiveness that then opened a reordered life built on transformed perception and understanding" (Carroll, *Luke*, 492).

Jesus' inaugural sermon with quotation of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4 was meant to set the tone for his ministry, and if this sermon was in some measure about forgiveness of sinners, then why isn't forgiveness or release for sinners prominent in this mid-year review?³⁶ Each "condition" healed in 7:21 is some physical condition outside of the control of the one affected. Luke 7:22, recording Jesus' reported speech, is likewise a list of conditions outside of each person's control. Bock agrees about 7:22, writing, "The remarks in this summary verse are intended to refer to literal acts of healing and restoration."³⁷ With no mention of conduct outcasts in Luke 7:21-22 whatsoever, this passage seems to deal exclusively with condition outcasts who were rendered outsiders through no fault of their own. Forgiveness was not their particular need; mercy and restoration were.

The Great Banquet in Luke 14:16-24

Jesus seems to be a guest at a large banquet in Luke 14. He first comments on those who seek seats of honor, suggesting that guests should select the less important seats that might get them promoted to more respectable ones instead of opting for the more honorable seats that might cause them embarrassment when they are asked to move down (14:8-10). Next, Jesus instructs the banquet host that he should invite the poor to dinner rather than friends who are able to reciprocate his kind gesture, for this

³⁶ Admittedly this is an argument from silence. But the reader of Luke's Gospel should note that not only is the notion of forgiveness not prominent in this Luke 7 summary, it is absent entirely.

³⁷ Bock, *Luke*, 668.

will secure him rewards at the resurrection (14:12-14). This is followed by a parable about a banquet that Jesus tells to another invited guest at the dinner party. In the parable, each of those who were invited to an elaborate banquet give an excuse for why they are unavailable to attend (14:16-20). The host gets angry when he learns that none of his social equals will make time to come to the feast he has provided, and so he sends his servant into the streets to invite “the poor and crippled and blind and lame” to enjoy his elaborate meal. He goes to great lengths to fill up his house with those who will appreciate such abundant food, vowing that he will not allow those on his initial invitation list to enjoy any of it (14:21-24).³⁸

The four groups Jesus mentions in this parable are meant to remind us of those mentioned in Jesus’ inaugural sermon in 4:18 as well as those Jesus described to John’s disciples in 7:22. The same four groups are mentioned by Jesus in 14:13-14 with only slight variation in order. These are society’s powerless who are unable to repay favors

³⁸ Granted, the parable in Matthew 22:2-14 is similar to the one recorded by Luke. For my purposes, the primary difference in detail is that Luke’s parable only invites condition outcasts to the banquet, whereas Matthew’s guests include “both evil and good” guests (Matthew 22:10). That is, conduct outcasts (notorious sinners) seem to be among those invited to the banquet in Matthew’s version of the parable. However, it should be noted that Matthew’s parable goes on to identify a guest at the table who is not properly attired. He is consequently not only dismissed from the feast, but bound and thrown into darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13). This suggests that not everyone at Matthew’s banquet is unconditionally welcomed like the outcasts in Luke’s version who were outsiders through no fault of their own.

such as the gift of an expensive meal. Parsons agrees, “In his anger, the host commands the servant to bring in the ‘poor and crippled and blind and lame,’ that is, those who are in no socioeconomic position to reciprocate the invitation (cf. 14:13-14) yet who are the focus of Jesus’s healing and teaching ministry (7:22).” In the parable of 14:16-24, the insiders—those powerful enough to purchase land and oxen—decline the invitation to the feast. What’s another feast to those with plenty of resources to eat as much as they want? It is precisely the outsiders—those shunned by their culture who lack abundant resources—who gladly accept the invitation to the feast. If not for such an invitation, after all, they would never be afforded such a privilege.

Roth provides a helpful list of important words associated with the condition outcasts that Jesus encounters in the Gospel of Luke, along with the number of occurrences of each word in his Gospel: the captive (1x), the blind (8x), the deaf mute (4x), the lame (3x), the leper (3x), the maimed (2x), the dead (14x), and the poor (10x).³⁹ All four of the descriptive words in 14:21 are among the words in Roth’s list.

More importantly, Jesus’ sermon at Nazareth and his quotation from Isaiah shares linguistic connections with this parable of the great banquet in Luke 14. The “poor” and “blind” are introduced together in Jesus’ inaugural sermon quotation of Isaiah in Luke 4:18. Elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel, they are only mentioned together as bookends to Jesus’ summary of his ministry to John’s disciples in Luke 7:22, as bookends

³⁹ Roth, *The Blind*, 19.

to those who should be invited to a feast because of their inability to repay in 14:13, and among those who will be invited to the parable's banquet instead of those who declined the dinner invitation in 14:21. In all four contexts, the list of those Jesus ministers to are those rendered cultural outsiders due to conditions outside of their control (as opposed to notorious sinners).

LEPERS, PARALYTICS, DEMONIACS, AND THE BLIND IN LUKE

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lepers in Luke

The Greek word for “leper” occurs in the New Testament nine times, all of which are in the Synoptic Gospels: four times in Matthew, twice in Mark and three times in Luke (4:27; 7:22; 17:12). The term leprosy occurs an addition four times in the New Testament: once each in Matthew and Mark and twice in Luke (5:12, 13). “By definition, the lepers are ritually unclean, unholy, outcasts from the people of God,” writes Jeffrey.¹ Their strict separation from society “outside the camp” is well-documented in the Gospels, in obedience to Leviticus 13:45-46. In the context of describing leprosy, Vinson reminds us, “Uncleanness is contagious, transmitted by touch or by secondary touching. If an unclean person touches a clean person, or in some cases if a clean person sits on a

¹ David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 209. The lepers in Luke’s Gospel are not depicted as morally unholy per se, but ritually unholy and unfit to enter the presence of God or his community.

chair or bed where an unclean person sat, then the clean person contracts uncleanness.”² This contagion was especially respected in cases involving leprosy.³

The healing of the leper in Luke 5:12-14 is recorded also in Matthew 8:2-4 and Mark 1:40-44. According to Luke, this unnamed leper who was in one of the cities demonstrates a great deal of respect for and confidence in Jesus. He falls on his face before Jesus and begins to beg for healing. He expresses his knowledge that Jesus has the ability to do so, if he were only willing. Jesus responds in kind, first with a physical gesture followed by his affirmative answer. Although touching a leper would make a person unclean, to do so was not an act of disobedience. Jesus touches the leper before commanding him to be cleansed of his leprosy. His healing is immediate. Although he no longer bore symptoms of the disease, the leper was not technically clean until pronounced so by a priest, which explains Jesus’ instructions to him in 5:14. This passage echoes the story of Elisha healing the leprous Naaman the Syrian told by Jesus in the previous chapter, but does not share the number of similarities with that story as does the later healing of the ten lepers.

The healing of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19 is not told in the other Gospels. Unlike the healing in Luke 5, this healing is performed by word only instead of touch and

² Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 137.

³ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 53, writes that the leprosy described in the Bible “could afflict clothing, houses, and furniture as well as persons.”

involves ten lepers instead of one. Furthermore, it doesn't take place in firmly-established Jewish territory, but someplace near the border of Samaria and Galilee. It is there that Jesus enters "a village," an ambiguously-rendered term that leaves the reader wondering if this town was occupied by Jews or Samaritans. According to Vinson, "Luke puts Jesus into a liminal space, a twilight zone, a space where boundaries are fuzzy."⁴ This includes social boundaries and cultural norms of human contact.

Unlike the leper in Luke 5 who approached Jesus and bowed down before him, these ten leprous men "stood at a distance" from Jesus but together voiced the same confidence in Jesus' ability to heal them. The particular term for "master" used by the men to address Jesus in 17:13 appears in the New Testament only in Luke's Gospel, where it is used seven times and only addressed to Jesus. According to Parsons, this is the only place a non-disciple refers to Jesus with this title in Luke.⁵ They request mercy from Jesus, which certainly meant healing. Unlike the healing of the leper in Luke 5, Jesus does not heal them immediately, but does so as they travel to show themselves to the priests in obedience to Jesus' instructions. Upon realizing that they have been healed, one of them returns to express his gratitude toward Jesus, who notes that it was

⁴ Vinson, *Luke*, 545.

⁵ Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke*. Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 257.

this leper's faith that was the key factor in bringing about his cleansing (17:19), just as the sinful woman's faith in Luke 7 was noted as the key factor in her forgiveness (7:50).⁶

The details that are included after the healing itself are critical for understanding that Luke intends the reader to relate this healing to that of Naaman the Gentile, whom Jesus mentioned during his inaugural sermon in Luke 4. Jesus' leper was a Samaritan;⁷ Naaman was a Gentile. Both men had heard about a prophet who had the power to heal. Neither leper was healed immediately in the present of the prophet, but sent away and healed after they had obeyed the prophet's instructions. And after they were cleansed of their leprosy, both men returned to express their gratitude to the one responsible for healing them. Commenting on the cleansed leper falling on his face to give thanks to Jesus in 17:16, Jeffrey writes, "Thus, the one who could never have worshiped in the temple, here overcome with gratitude, worships Jesus."⁸

After reading about outcasts from the Isaiah passage in his Luke 4 sermon, Jesus went on to apply that passage to the most outcast outcasts he could imagine—a female

⁶ "Your faith has saved you" occurs in Luke only at the conclusion of the story of the sinful woman (7:50), the hemorrhaging woman (8:48), this Samaritan leper (17:19), and the blind beggar (18:42).

⁷ Luke 17:16 calls him a Samaritan. In 17:18, Jesus refers to him as a "foreigner," a word that occurs only here in the New Testament. This is meant to reinforce his status as a non-Jewish outsider. Whether all of the other nine lepers were Jewish we're not told, though Jesus singling out this leper as a "foreigner" suggests that at least some of the others were Jewish.

⁸ Jeffrey, *Luke*, 210.

Gentile and a leprous Gentile—to the great disturbance of his hometown Jews. The Luke 17 story about Jesus healing a Samaritan leper who, among all ten who were healed, alone returns to express his gratitude to Jesus is meant to show the reader that Jesus’ ministry includes those very outside outsiders that he originally claimed he was sent to.

Paralytics in Luke

The Greek word translated “lame” appears in the New Testament fourteen times, three of which are in Luke’s Gospel (7:22; 14:13, 21). The Luke 7 passage includes the word in a list of condition outsiders that Jesus claims that he has healed, along with the blind, lepers, the deaf, and the dead.⁹ Both Luke 14 verses include the lame in a list of condition outsiders that are invited to a large banquet, along with the poor, the crippled, and the blind.¹⁰ The Greek word meaning “paralyzed” or “paralytic” is used twice in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 5:18, 24), in the only explicit story of Jesus healing a paralytic in the third Gospel.

The healing of the paralytic in Luke 5:18-26 retells the story recorded in Matthew 9:2-8 and Mark 2:3-12. A paralytic was carried on a bed by some men (Mark tells us there were four of them), presumably to locate Jesus for healing. This man fits Borg’s “not whole” condition that would certainly have rendered him an outsider in his culture,

⁹ The poor are also mentioned as those who have had the good news preached to them.

¹⁰ The Greek word for “crippled” appears in the New Testament only in these two lists in Luke’s Gospel.

on the wrong side of the social boundary.¹¹ The substantial crowd that had assembled to hear Jesus teach that day prevented the men from accessing Jesus. It was probably their desperate albeit creative solution to dig a hole in the roof and lower the paralytic to Jesus that explains “their faith” that Jesus saw in 5:20. Jesus first pronounces the paralytic’s sins forgiven. By claiming that the man’s sins were forgiven, Jesus was probably touching on the deep-seated cultural notion that sickness and illness result from sustained unrepentant sins.¹² No one in the room would have questioned that the man was sinful, nor would they have wondered how Jesus knew that the man was sinful—his inability to walk was proof enough.¹³ Although Jesus is certainly interested in this man’s forgiveness, Luke seems more interested in demonstrating to this critical audience the boundless nature of Jesus’ authority to render it.¹⁴

Since only God has the authority to forgive sins, the scribes and the Pharisees considered Jesus’ claim blasphemous. Jesus, knowing what they were thinking, decided to prove that his authority extends even to forgiveness of sins. Proving that he had just

¹¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 52.

¹² More on this later in this chapter.

¹³ This may be a rare instance in which Jesus is making a direct connection between the man’s unrepentant sins and his physical condition. See James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 166.

¹⁴ The paralytic, on the other hand, was certainly interested in walking again. Perhaps Jesus’ pronouncement of forgiveness struck a note of disappointment in him, since that was not the reason he came to Jesus in the first place.

forgiven the man's sins will require a miracle. After all, claiming to forgive someone's sins is a non-falsifiable statement—it can't be proven false. That's why it is easier "to say" that the man's sins are forgiven than it is "to say" that the man is healed. Jesus would have to give a falsifiable statement to prove that his non-falsifiable statement was true. He does so when he commands the paralytic to "get up, and pick up your bed, and go home" (5:24).

The paralytic obeys. To the astonishment of the huge crowd who had been listening to Jesus teach when the paralytic interrupted by being lowered through the hole in the roof, the healed man got up, picked up his bed, and went home "glorifying God (5:25)."¹⁵ Was this man a guilty outcast whose condition was the result of his sins, or was he an innocent outcast whose paralysis was not his fault—who received unconditionally the mercy of Christ? Jesus is the one who injects the notion of sin and forgiveness into this otherwise straightforward healing scene. Did he do so to make clear a point about the nature of his authority to forgive sins to certain religious leaders who were hostile to him? Did he do so to connect this paralytic's physical condition to his unrighteous conduct? Or did he do so to deconstruct the cultural notion that unrepentant sins are always at the root of a person's infirmity? Because Jesus is

¹⁵ The large crowd also began glorifying God in Luke 5:26. In Luke, glorifying God is the response recorded of the shepherds after they visited the newborn baby Jesus in 2:20, those who witnessed the raising of the widow's only son from the dead in 7:16, the woman given the ability to straighten up in 13:13, the grateful leper who returned to Jesus in 17:15, and the blind man who was given sight in 18:43.

responsible for introducing the notion of forgiveness in the scene, this story may be a case where the two categories of conduct and condition overlap in one person: a sinful paralytic. If this is the case, the exception seems to prove the rule that Jesus treats the two categories differently, offering forgiveness to the sinner and healing to the paralytic—who happen to be the same person. That the paralytic was not immediately able to walk following Jesus' pronouncement of his forgiveness, however, suggests that his paralysis was not the result of some unforgiven sin. Furthermore, the appearance of the word "lame" and "crippled" only in lists among clearly innocent outcasts elsewhere in Luke's Gospel suggests that paralytics were not themselves responsible for their paralysis due to unrighteous conduct.¹⁶ It seems better to conclude that Jesus regarded this man's sinful conduct and his physical condition as mutually exclusive, requiring two separate solutions: forgiveness for his conduct and healing for his condition.¹⁷

¹⁶ The text does not describe this man in a way that would render him a notorious sinner as I've defined the category. He was a sinner like anyone else, perhaps, and Jesus was teaching his audience that there are more important blessings Jesus can offer than the ability to walk again. Namely, forgiveness.

¹⁷ Jesus does do something pretty shocking in this story that is unusual in Luke's Gospel: he offers forgiveness without any call to repentance. There is clear evidence, however, of the man's openness to Jesus in the story. It is this openness to seek Jesus out that somehow earns him the response of Jesus' forgiveness.

Demoniacs in Luke

The Greek work for demon occurs eleven times in Matthew, thirteen times in Mark, twenty-three times in Luke, and six times in John. In the Gospel of Luke, “unclean spirit” appears in Luke 4:36; 6:18; 8:29; 9:42; and 11:24; “unclean demon” in Luke 4:33; and “evil spirit” in 7:21; 8:2 (see also 11:26). Among all of these mentions of evil spirits, Luke includes five personalized narratives that describe Jesus casting out demons.

In Luke 4:33-41, a man in a synagogue reveals himself as “demonized” when he instructs “Jesus of Nazareth....the Holy One of God” to “Let us alone,” fearing that Jesus has “come to destroy us.” The reader is meant to understand that it is the demon—and not the man possessed—who is addressing Jesus. After Jesus rebukes the demon by silencing him and commanding him to come out of the man, the demon exits the man—but not before throwing him down one last time.¹⁸ The reader is meant to understand that the demon had a measure of physical control over the man’s body that the man was unable to prevent. The placement of this miracle shortly after Jesus’ inaugural sermon is strategic. By citing the Isaiah passage in Luke 4:18, Jesus claims that he was sent to proclaim “release to prisoners.” This man’s speech and conduct had been controlled by demons until Jesus provided him release. As a result of this exorcism, Luke wants the reader to focus on Jesus’ authority and power to do so (4:36).

¹⁸ Where the demons go when they leave is not a concern to Luke except in the story recorded in Luke 8:27-39 (see also Luke 11:24-26), where they enter a herd of pigs and subsequently perish in a nearby lake.

In Luke 8:27-39, Jesus encounters a nude man living among the tombs who is possessed by demons who are later identified by the name “Legion.”¹⁹ Again Jesus has a conversation with “the unclean spirit” (8:28-29) rather than with the man possessed by it, indicating that the man’s speech was not under his own control. And again the man’s physical activity was controlled by the demons who chose not to cover the man’s body with clothing. To reinforce the notion that those who are demon possessed are among the prisoners intended by the Isaiah 61 passage read by Jesus during his inaugural sermon, this demoniac is literally bound with chains and shackles and kept under guard (8:29). He is a prisoner in desperate need of release from these spirits who are holding him captive. And Jesus provides that freedom. Once the man is released, he regains control of his faculties. We find him clothed and in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus (8:35), and wishing to accompany Jesus when he departs (8:38).

In Luke 9:38-43, we find a father pleading with Jesus on behalf of his only son who is possessed by a demon. The father describes the physical symptoms he’s observed which include screaming, convulsions with foaming at the mouth, and physical mauling. Clearly this boy does not have control over his own speech or actions. The demon does. Again, this boy is a prisoner in need of release from this demon. Jesus rebukes the “generation” represented in the crowd—a group that included those whose unbelief and perversion had prevented Jesus’ disciples from being able to remove the

¹⁹ The man is a Gentile, which will be examined more carefully in the next chapter under in the section on “Gentiles in Luke.”

demon (9:41). Jesus then healed the boy, but not before the demon threw the boy to the ground and caused one last convulsion (9:42). Jesus then returned the boy to his father, without indicating whether the boy or his father were members of that “unbelieving and perverted generation” that made the exorcism especially difficult.

In the Luke 11:14-20 exorcism, the focus of the story is on the subsequent accusation that Jesus is empowered by Satan to cast out these demons, along with Jesus’ lengthy defense in 11:17-26. Still, we can learn insights from the brief description of the miracle itself. The demon again exercised control over the man by taking away his ability to speak. After the demon “had gone out,” the man was able to speak, to the amazement of the crowd. Luke mentions no other physical symptoms that accompanied this particular possession. Jesus’ healing had released the man from the demon and restored the man’s freedom to control his own faculties.

Luke 13:10-17 records the final personalized narrative of Jesus casting out a demon in this Gospel. Luke introduces a woman with some sort of a spinal condition that he refers to as a sickness caused by a “spirit” (13:11). Jesus names “Satan” as the one who has caused her to bend double without the ability to straighten up for these eighteen years (13:16). Although the primary reason Luke includes this story is to showcase the Sabbath controversy between Jesus and the synagogue official, a few important details should still be noted about the exorcism itself. It is Jesus who initiates the encounter with the disabled woman—not the other way around—and this took place inside of a synagogue. Nothing in the text suggests that her condition was the

result of sin; on the contrary, Jesus refers to her as a faithful daughter of Abraham (13:16) and blames Satan for this condition which was outside of her control. Jesus also does not attribute her healing to her faith, although she does give glory to God after she is restored. In every respect, this seems to be an innocent victim of Satan whom Jesus heals unconditionally. Finally, when Jesus says, “Woman, you are freed from your sickness,” he uses a word for “release” that occurs fourteen times in Luke’s Gospel. Although it is not the same word that Jesus quoted from Isaiah for the “release” of prisoners in his inaugural sermon in Luke 4:18, five of this word’s fourteen appearances in the Gospel of Luke do pertain literally to release of prisoners (Jesus’ release in 23:16, 20, 22; Barabbas’ release in 23:18, 25).

The demon-possessed people in Luke’s Gospel seem to be the prisoners of Luke 4:18 that Jesus was sent to set free. Furthermore, they are condition outsiders whose situation came about through no fault of their own. Sin, repentance, and forgiveness are not part of their narratives. The person’s sin is never identified or implied as the cause of their possession by unclean spirits. Neither is faith mentioned as the cause of their healing by Jesus.²⁰ These people are presented to us by Luke strictly as victims of forces outside of their control. These are condition outcasts through no fault of their own, and

²⁰ It should be noted that Luke’s version of Jesus’ healing the boy with the unclean spirit in 9:38-43 omits the boy’s father’s words recorded in Mark’s story, “I do believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). The result is that Luke’s record of the healing is not predicated on the father’s faith.

Jesus mercifully and unconditionally restores them to their prior stations in life when he heals them.

The Blind in Luke

The word blind appears fifty times in the New Testament and eight times in the Gospel of Luke (4:18; 6:39[2x]; 7:21, 22; 14:13, 21; 18:35). It is first mentioned when Jesus reads the Isaiah 61 passage of his inaugural sermon. “A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he?” Jesus asks in 6:39, using literal blindness to illustrate the important role that teachers play in the lives of those they “guide” (6:40). Jesus gives sight to many blind people in the presence of John’s disciples (7:21), and then instructs these disciples to report to John that “the blind receive sight” (7:22). Both Luke 14:13 and 21 include the blind in a list of condition outsiders that are invited to a large banquet, along with the poor, the crippled, and the lame. The only personalized story of a blind person being healed by Jesus in Luke’s Gospel occurs in chapter 18.

The story of Jesus giving sight to the blind man in Luke 18:35-43 is told also in Matthew 20:29-34 and Mark 10:46-52. Luke introduces him begging outside of Jericho. When he learns that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by (on his way to Jerusalem), the blind man shamelessly pleads for mercy from the “Son of David”—cries which others attempted but were unable to silence.²¹ This is the first appearance of this title for Jesus

²¹ According to Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1508, “The need for mercy is often associated with sin, and

in Luke's Gospel, but it calls to mind the connections Luke made between Jesus and David in his birth narrative.²² Regarding this title for Jesus, Edwards writes, "It would have been a rare Jew who would have heard or used this title without messianic connotations."²³ This shows remarkable insight regarding the identity of Jesus whom this blind man could not see. And this insight existed prior to his meeting Jesus. This is meant to contrast with the disciples, who were remarkably obtuse about Jesus' mission in the verse prior to Luke introducing the blind man (18:34). Regarding the healing of this blind man, Roth writes, "'Blind' does not equal 'pious.' Likewise, 'seeing' does not equal coming to faith, for the blind man has confidence in Jesus before Jesus restores his sight."²⁴

Jesus responds to the man's persistence and directs his attention toward him. As a blind man of poverty, this person had many forces working against him. Perhaps that's why Jesus lets the man himself interpret what "mercy" might mean in his life when Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord, in order that I might see again," is the man's response. Jesus answered with a one-word command, "See again,"

sometimes mercy is needed because the plight is particularly desperate." This story seems to be an example of the latter.

²² See especially Luke 1:27, 32, 69; 2:4, 11.

²³ Edwards, *The Gospel*, 525.

²⁴ S. John Roth, *The Blind, the Lame, and the Poor: Character Types in Luke-Acts*. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 201.

followed by an explanation for the mercy he was extending: “your faith has saved you.” His sight is “immediately” restored and he begins glorifying God as a follower of Jesus. According to Jeffrey, “This is the last miracle recorded by Luke in his Gospel, and it is an epitome.”²⁵ That’s because it depicts a model for dependence upon Jesus and the great rewards that come as a result. “In this blind beggar are we all figured, even though already disciples,” writes Jeffrey.²⁶ The healing of this condition outcast parallels many details in the healing of the ten lepers in the previous chapter of Luke. The lepers and the blind man address Jesus by his given name, followed by a title of respect; the request from both is for “mercy”; the one healed “glorifies God”; and Jesus concludes that it is each person’s faith that has saved them.

Luke intends his readers to regard this healing story as evidence that Jesus was the Davidic Messiah who was successfully accomplishing the mission to outsiders that he had outlined in his inaugural sermon. According to Roth, “The almost monotonous repetition of the term ἀναβλέπω ensures that the audience will recall 4.18 and 7.22 and recognize this episode as further fulfillment of Jesus’ messianic calling.”²⁷ There is nothing in this healing story to indicate that this blind man’s condition was caused by some egregious sin. Neither is there any mention of the notion of repentance in the story. Rather, this man was a condition outcast who was marginalized through no fault

²⁵ Jeffrey, *Luke*, 224.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Roth, *The Blind*, 200.

of his own. By returning to him the ability to see, Jesus was removing the stigma that his culture had placed on him. As is often the case, this man's blindness had probably caused his poverty, for Luke introduces him to us as a beggar (18:35).²⁸ Until this healed man can find a way out of poverty, he will remain an outsider.²⁹

Representative Healing

Jesus' healing ministry does create problems. First, Jesus didn't heal everyone. Luke 4:40-43 indicates that Jesus left unhealed many who were seeking him for healing in one town in order to go to another.³⁰ Although Luke 6:17-19 attempts to summarize Jesus' healing of "all" who had needs during one occasion when Jews and Gentiles alike were assembled, Luke 5:15-16 suggests that Jesus would sometimes slip away for seasons of solitude while people were coming to be healed by him. Jesus does not remove every condition from every outcast he meets. Are we meant to applaud the

²⁸ The blind man can be seen in contrast to the Rich Ruler in Luke 18:18-23. The blind man had insight into Jesus that the Rich Ruler, though able to see, lacked. The blind man was poor; the ruler, rich. The blind man knew his need for mercy; the Rich Ruler thought he needed none. The blind man had faith; the Rich Ruler had none. The blind man's story ends with him following Jesus and glorifying God; the Rich Ruler's story ends when he departs very sad.

²⁹ The category of "poor" will be addressed in the next chapter.

³⁰ Note that the text does not describe Jesus rejecting people's requests to be healed by him. His ministry required that he keep moving from one town to the next with his message, and so leaving some behind unhealed was a practical necessity.

restoration of those he heals, but regard those he didn't as marginalized still? After all, healing that results in a person becoming "whole" suggests that they were "not whole" prior to being healed. And that would mean that all of those left unhealed by Jesus remained "not whole." Mitchell and Snyder may overstate their case in this direction when they write, "Just as the hordes of cripples on the outskirts of the biblical mainstream seek alleviation of their corporeal fates through miracle cures rather than social accommodation of their differences, the healing touch of Christ devalues disability as that to be alleviated rather than valued."³¹ It may be more accurate to conclude that Jesus valued the person and not their disability. Disabilities in themselves were certainly not regarded as benefits to be celebrated at the time of Jesus, but his culture seemed to devalue the person who had the disability along with the disability itself. Divine displeasure rested on the whole person who had an infirmity, which was regarded merely as the symptom of the problem with the person, it was thought. By valuing the person—even dignifying them by talking to them, touching them, and healing them—Jesus was offering a representative sampling and a foretaste of restoration for humanity. By removing the illusion of the divine displeasure toward those he healed, he may have been making the statement that God was likewise not displeased with those who were left unhealed.

³¹ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "'Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance': Disability and Redemption in Biblical Literature, in *This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 179-80.

Another potential problem with Jesus' healing ministry is that it might have reinforced an unaccommodating society. According to Mitchell and Snyder, "If a community of disabled people finds itself excluded from a temple or other site of cultural privilege, then an accommodation is in order—even in biblical times....in cure/resurrection/redemption scenarios bodies are fixed to fit an unaccommodating environment."³² To address this potential problem we must first ask, Why was the environment unaccommodating to disabled people? What was the problem with the person that their infirmity was thought symptomatically to reveal? Those with disabilities were not accommodated for their disabilities because those disabilities were regarded as evidence of unrepentant sin. But although all notorious sinners were outcasts, Jesus did not regard all outcasts as notorious sinners. Jesus' representative healing of these condition outcasts was not predicated on their repentance, as we'll see in the next section. In other words, Jesus healed many people without suggesting that some sinful cause had rendered them disabled in the first place; he likewise left many people unhealed due to traveling necessity, causing everyone to question their presumptions that these unhealed disabilities resulted from sin. Perhaps Jesus was sending a message to his culture that those who remained unhealed should also be regarded with dignity rather than denigration.

³² Ibid., 179.

A Sinful Cause?

There is a qualitative difference between prostitutes and the poor, between a sinner and a paralytic. In general, the former were marginalized because of their conduct; the latter because of some condition outside of their control. But many in this first-century Jewish culture seemed to confuse the two categories. While explaining some of the Jewish teachings behind the disciples' question to Jesus about who sinned in John 9:2, Bock and Herrick write, "Two texts record the tradition that sin causes death and suffering."³³ The second of those texts reads, "There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity."³⁴ It seems as though many first-century Jews had taken this principle that connects sin with suffering/death and particularized it to individual cases of disability. Certainly, those who regarded the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative would conclude that had sin not entered the world in the first place, blindness and leprosy (for example) would not exist in a sinless paradise. And certainly it is possible that in *some* cases an individual's disability was directly caused by their sin. But it seems as though many in Jesus' culture had concluded that a sinful cause directly was responsible for many disabilities, sicknesses, conditions, and diseases. Does Jesus' ministry clear up this confusion or add to it?

³³ Darrell L. Bock and Gregory J. Herrick, *Jesus in Context: Background Readings for Gospel Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 227.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, citing the Babylonian Talmud Shabbath 55a.

Only two personalized stories appear in the Gospels in which Jesus heals a paralytic: the man lowered through the roof by his friends (Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 2:3-12; Luke 5:18-26), and the man by the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15). It is Jesus himself who introduces the notion of sin into both of these stories. When the paralyzed man was lowered through the roof, Jesus pronounced his sins forgiven. No one in the crowd wondered how Jesus knew that this man was a sinner in need of forgiveness—a man Jesus certainly had never met. Both the crowd and the religious leaders assumed that his condition had been caused by some unforgiven sin and Jesus, aware of his inability to walk, would recognize this. Jesus would go on to forgive the paralytic, whose faith Jesus had earlier “seen” (5:20), and heal him. This oblique reference to sin in the context of a healing story that was designed to showcase Jesus’ authority is difficult to interpret. Was Jesus connecting this man’s paralysis to some specific unforgiven sin? Was Jesus offering forgiveness to someone who was a sinner like everyone else, whose condition was merely the result of the principle of sin that has left the world fallen? Was Jesus simply using the man as a visual aid to prove his impressive authority to forgive sins by using his less-impressive authority to heal him? By introducing the notion of sin and forgiveness into this story, was Jesus reflecting his culture’s connection between sin and suffering, or was he reinforcing it?

Less oblique is Jesus’ injection of the notion of sin into the story of the man he healed by the pool of Bethesda in John 5. Like the paralytic lowered through the roof, this man was seeking healing. Unlike the other paralytic, John’s disabled man was not

seeking healing from Jesus. It is Jesus who singles him out for a miracle that day. Jesus heals him without an audience, and the man picks up his pallet and begins to walk. But this took place on the Sabbath. And when other observant Jews saw this man who had been lame for thirty-eight years carrying his pallet, they rebuked him for violating the Sabbath. He redirects their judgment onto Jesus by pointing him out as the one who both healed him and told him to carry his pallet on the Sabbath. But it is Jesus' words to the man later in the temple that warrant our consideration: "See, you have become well. Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse might happen to you" (John 5:14). Whether Jesus was attributing his thirty-eight year paralysis to an unrepentant sin, or simply warning that a worse condition might befall him if he commits a sin going forward, is unclear. For our concern, it doesn't really matter. With these instructions Jesus clearly states that—at least in some cases—sin can directly cause suffering and disability.

But these two stories mark exceptions to the norm. And in neither case does Jesus reinforce the notion that a person's specific sins are always the cause of their suffering and disability.³⁵ On the contrary, Luke's record of Jesus' other healings that were discussed in detail earlier in this chapter includes no mention or suggestion of sin, repentance, or forgiveness either by Luke, Jesus, or the disabled. Neither does Luke record a celebration following any of those healings, which we would expect if what was

³⁵ John 9:3 records Jesus expressly denying that the blind man's condition was the direct result a sin, whether his own or that of his parents.

lost had been found, if what was spiritually dead was now alive (Luke 15:32). Instead, we are meant to conclude that these were outcasts through no fault of their own rather than being blameworthy for some sin that resulted in divine displeasure that caused their condition.

WOMEN, THE POOR, GENTILES, AND SAMARITANS IN LUKE

CHAPTER EIGHT

The condition outcasts described in chapter seven faced debilitating infirmities that were reversed by Jesus without the narrative connecting their situation to a sinful cause or requiring them to repent. Another class of condition outcasts were outsiders due to situations that could not be changed or reversed. Jesus encounters these people with merciful, counter-cultural respect. He left them in their station while seeking to redignify them against a society that had robbed them of it.

Women in Luke¹

It takes Luke only five verses to introduce us to his first female character: Elizabeth. Jesus likewise wastes no time including women in his mission, specifying a widow in the application of his inaugural sermon (Luke 4:25-26). According to Prior, “[Luke’s] portrayal of Jesus’ concern for women is striking, when one remembers the patriarchal nature of the society.”² It is striking because women, due to their gender,

¹ Entire monographs have been written about Luke’s characterization of women in his Gospel. What follows is meant to be merely a representative display of Jesus’ attempts unconditionally to redignify women in his strongly patriarchal culture.

² Michael Prior, *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 50.

were not particularly prized in Luke's day. After summarizing the extra-biblical literature that furnishes the cultural backdrop of the New Testament regarding gender, Witherington writes, "In conclusion, it is fair to say that a low view of women was common, perhaps even predominant before, during and after Jesus' era."³ Luke's Gospel mentions women forty-one times, the same number of occurrences as 1 Corinthians (no other New Testament book comes close). Many of the author's stories about women are designed to elevate their status against a devaluing culture.

We learn that Elizabeth's outside status as a woman was exacerbated by her inability to have children, even though Luke goes to great lengths to convince the reader of her righteous blamelessness (Luke 1:6-7).⁴ When she is able to conceive because of supernatural intervention, Elizabeth is vindicated by God and her dignity is restored: "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when he looked upon me, to take away my disgrace among men" (1:25). It is to Mary that God sends his angel Gabriel. It is she who is favored by God, such that God chooses to entrust his only son to her (1:28-35). The reader is not surprised to find righteous Simeon in the temple at the dedication of Jesus (2:25-35). But Luke matches Simeon with the widow Anna, a

³ Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 51 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 10.

⁴ As the first explicit outsider described in Luke's Gospel, is Elizabeth meant to parallel Jesus—the last explicit outsider Luke describes? Both are innocently marginalized; both are righteous. And both are vindicated by God without any need for repentance (Elizabeth by conceiving and Jesus by being raised).

prophetess whose righteous devotion to God is meant to be impressive. She is presented by Luke as having the perfect response when meeting the Christ child (2:36-38). Immediately following his inaugural sermon, Jesus heals a man possessed by an unclean demon (4:33-36). One doesn't have to wonder long whether Jesus' healing ministry is offered to men only, for the very next story records Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law in Luke 4:38-39.⁵ Immediately after Jesus heals the Centurion's servant in 7:2-10, Luke tells us that Jesus brings back to life the only son of a widow in 7:11-15. The reader is meant to conclude that Jesus' healing ministry is available to men and women alike.

Jesus' choice to illustrate the Father's quest for the lost by using a woman who loses a coin in Luke 15:8-10 provides helpful insight into Jesus' view of women. Commenting on the pairing of this parable (which is unique to Luke's Gospel) with that of the lost sheep preceding it, Witherington says that "it illustrates in a pointed fashion that both the activity of the man and the woman are equally admirable and important,

⁵ Jesus is willing to receive support and service from men and women alike, such as Simon's mother-in-law serving after she was healed. In a passage unique to Luke's Gospel, 8:2-3 lists a group of women who accompanied Jesus and contributed financially to his mission. Women who witness Jesus' burial were the first to visit the empty tomb, attempting to serve him by preparing his body with spices (23:55-56; 24:1-11). But women weren't only relegated to serving Jesus. In another story unique to Luke's Gospel, it is Mary listening to Jesus' teaching who is praised instead of Martha who was busy serving (10:38-42).

and may equally well serve as analogies to the activity of God in Jesus' ministry."⁶

Likewise, Jesus' parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8 provides insight into Jesus' defense of women who find themselves fighting against their oppressive culture. Witherington agrees, writing, "Jesus' choice of a *woman* in need of help as an *example* for His disciples perhaps indicates Jesus' sympathy and concern for this particular group of people in a male-oriented society."⁷ Jesus singles out the poor but generous widow in Luke 21:1-4 as a righteous example to be imitated by men and women alike because she, in contrast to the rich, offered all that she had to live on. Luke 23:27-31, which is unique to Luke's Gospel, records Jesus' compassionate response directed pointedly to the women who were grieving over his unjust sentence of crucifixion. Witherington writes, "Even in the waning minutes of His earthly ministry, Jesus shows His concern for women by identifying with their plight."⁸

Jesus did not "cure" these women of their femininity—indeed, such was certainly not needed for these people to experience wholeness. Neither does he attribute their gender to a sinful cause that requires repentance. Instead, Jesus dignifies women unconditionally. Luke sometimes enjoys doubling up the conditions that have

⁶ Witherington, *Women*, 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37. Emphasis his.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

rendered people outsiders, as a way of enhancing the severity of their plight.⁹ This is especially the case with women in Luke, such as women who are barren or who are also widows—a double strike against them.¹⁰ The sinful woman in Luke 7 who was forgiven of her sins that caused her status as a conduct outcast was not for that reason suddenly an insider; she was still a woman. But Jesus dignifies her above the Pharisee hosting the meal. The hemorrhaging woman in Luke 8 who was healed of one cause for her station as a condition outcast (her flow of blood rendered her perpetually unclean) was not “cured” of another cause of her outside status: being female. But Jesus dignifies her. The woman in Luke 13 who was bent double due to a spirit was healed of one cause of her station as a condition outcast, but she remained female. And Jesus dignifies her above the ruler of the synagogue, who was male. Summarizing Jesus’ actions toward and words about women, Witherington writes, “All of this reveals Jesus’ attitude that women were God’s creatures, even daughters of Abraham, and thus as worthy as men to receive the benefits of God’s love and salvation.”¹¹ It is this attitude that Jesus was inviting his culture to adopt.

⁹ The most extreme case may be the woman to whom God sent Elijah mentioned by Jesus in Luke 4:25-26 who was 1) female, 2) a widow, 3) poor, and 4) a Gentile!

¹⁰ Widows are mentioned twenty-six times in the New Testament, nine of which appear in Luke’s Gospel (with three more mentions in the Book of Acts).

¹¹ Witherington, *Women*, 79.

The Poor in Luke

According to Pilgrim, “There is a continuous tradition running throughout the Old Testament that regards possessions as a sign of God’s blessings...possessing wealth, even great wealth, is interpreted as a sign of God’s favor.”¹² By the time of Jesus, the rich were often thought to be in favor with God as recipients of his blessings while the poor were regarded as objects of divine displeasure due to their lack of visible blessings. Economic oppression was prominent in this culture, and becomes a prevalent theme in the Gospel of Luke. The Greek word for “poor” occurs thirty-four times in the New Testament, and ten of those instances appear in the Gospel of Luke (4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:3). According to Pilgrim, “The poor belonged essentially to two groups: those who sought to earn their own livelihood, and those who lived off subsidy. Among the former were slaves and day laborers...Even worse off, however, was the second group of poor, who lived either partially or fully on relief. Lowest on the scale were the beggars.”¹³

Certainly Jesus had the poor in mind when he added Isaiah 58:6 to his quotation from Isaiah 61 during his inaugural sermon. Isaiah 58:6 reads, “Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?” So, in the context of Isaiah 58:6, who are

¹² Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1981), 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

the oppressed that are to be freed? Jesus knew exactly who he intended when he quoted this verse. They are the economic poor. Isaiah 58:7 reads, “Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” Jesus’ strategy for fulfilling his mission to “set free those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18) was to confront their oppressors. It is along these lines that Volf observes that “[Jesus] showed an extraordinary sensibility to the fact that people suffer not only because they commit sin but also because sin is committed against them.”¹⁴ For that reason, any discussion of the poor/oppressed in the Gospel of Luke must also factor in the rich/oppressors. According to Prior, “It is of interest to investigate whether the emphasis in Luke on the poor reflects Luke’s real concern for their economic betterment, or whether it is more in the form of a polemic against the rich. Is Luke an invitation to make a preferential option for the poor, or is it more an invitation to abandon one’s riches—is Luke for the poor, or is he merely against the rich?”¹⁵ The answer, it seems, is both.

God’s favor on the poor instead of the rich in Luke’s Gospel is first introduced by Mary when she says, “He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent away the rich empty-handed” (1:53). John the Baptist continues to address economic injustice when he is asked by those who were seeking his baptism what repentance might mean for

¹⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 114.

¹⁵ Prior, *Jesus The Liberator*, 177.

them. He instructs those with more than enough food and clothing to share with those who have none (3:11). Tax collectors are not to abuse their power over the powerless by collecting more taxes than they have been ordered to (3:13). And soldiers for Rome are not to use their power to take money by force (3:14). Economic justice begins, according to John, with oppressors applying righteous standards to their treatment of the poor and defenseless.

Jesus continues this plea for economic justice. Luke's version of the Beatitudes begins, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20).¹⁶ And those who hunger now will later be satisfied, according to Jesus (6:21). But Luke's Jesus includes a string of woes following his Beatitudes that is unique to Luke's Gospel. "Woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full," Jesus warns (6:24). And those who are well-fed now will later be hungry (6:25).¹⁷ The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke is surely meant to illustrate these principles (16:19-31). The rich man who enjoyed all of the comforts in this life finds himself in Hades where all comfort is removed. Although Jesus identifies no specific sin in his life, certainly we're meant to conclude that he earned his riches through oppression or neglect of the poor, like Lazarus. Lazarus, on the other hand, had no comfort in this world but enjoys all of it in

¹⁶ Whether it was Matthew who added "in spirit" or Luke who omitted it when they borrowed from their common source is difficult to tell. Although disputed, Matthew's version seems to emphasize the metaphorically poor while Luke's seems to emphasize the economically poor.

¹⁷ Furthermore, Jesus says, you should give to everyone who begs from you (6:30).

the next. “Poor” leads off the list that includes the crippled, the lame, and the blind in 14:13 and in Jesus’ parable of the great banquet in 14:21. The latter list is meant to contrast with those whose riches have prevented them from attending the feast. The Rich Ruler in Luke 18:18-23 is not only instructed to sell all that he has, but he is supposed to distribute the proceeds to the poor. Jesus praised Zacchaeus because his encounter with Jesus reversed his economically oppressive tendencies (Luke 19:8). In the story of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple in Luke 19:45-46, we would expect Luke the Gentile to underscore Mark’s version that claims that the temple is a house of prayer *for all the nations*. But Luke—of all people—omits “for all the nations” so that the result is emphasis placed on turning the temple into a “robber’s den.” For Mark, the injustice seems to involve nationality primarily; for Luke, the injustice seems to involve economics primarily. That God favors the poor is again underscored in Luke 21:1-4 when Jesus praises the poor widow who gives all she has to live on. Of course, Acts famously continues this trajectory by describing economic justice when the Christian community voluntarily sells their assets and shares everything in common, so that no one is left with unmet needs (Acts 4:34-35; 6:1-7).

Luke never explains poverty in terms of sin. Neither does Jesus introduce the notion of sin, repentance, or forgiveness when he encounters the poor in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus also doesn’t employ any miracles to “cure” their poverty (e.g., he did not

directly alter the economic status of the blind beggar that he healed in Luke 18).¹⁸ In remarkably powerful ways, Luke's strongest case of reversal may be that the rich who oppress the poor are the sinners on whom divine displeasure rests rather than on the oppressed poor who seem to bear signs of divine displeasure by the absence of visible blessings.

Gentiles in Luke

If it took Luke five verses to introduce the first woman, it takes him only three verses to introduce the first Gentile: Theophilus.¹⁹ The Greek word translated "Gentiles" or "nations" appears thirteen times in the Gospel of Luke. It occurs forty-three more times in Acts (more than any other New Testament book). Context must dictate whether the word is referring to a particular nationality, all nationalities, or specifically non-Jewish nationalities (Gentiles). Luke includes five unambiguous uses of the term that is rightly rendered "Gentile(s)" in context (Luke 2:32; 18:32; 21:24[2x]; 22:25). As

¹⁸ Granted, this formerly blind beggar would now be in a position to reverse his own poverty through gainful employment, but Jesus himself did not directly or instantly reverse his poverty using a miracle.

¹⁹ According to Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 64, although his name is used by both Jews and Gentiles, Theophilus' "social station suggests that he is probably a Gentile, as does the amount of energy Luke spends in Acts defending the Gentile mission."

this section will show, he prefers to identify Gentiles instead according to the name of their non-Jewish city or region.

John the Baptist gives a generous nod to Gentiles when he rebukes his entitled Jewish audience for using their Abrahamic ancestry as an excuse to avoid repentance (Luke 3:8). Although this warning against complacency does not necessarily open the door to Gentiles, it does suggest that one's heritage alone does not determine one's susceptibility to God's judgment. Vinson writes, "John warns that the covenant with Abraham will not be enough to escape judgment; instead, his audience must bear 'fruits worthy of repentance.'"²⁰ This Jewish sense of entitlement seems to be behind references in Jesus' inaugural sermon to Elijah and Elisha being sent to Gentiles instead of Israel (4:25-27). Likewise, Jesus compares the faith of a Gentile with that of Israelites following his interaction with the Roman Centurion in Luke 7:1-10. Regarding this Centurion, Keener writes, "Gentiles were generally synonymous with pagans, with no faith in Israel's God."²¹ Jesus seeks to problematize this overgeneralization among some of his contemporaries when he not only praises the faith of this Gentile, but also introduces the topic of nationality when comparing the Gentile's great faith to the comparatively weak faith of Israelites. A pious Gentile? Jesus' contemporaries hardly

²⁰ Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 88.

²¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 207.

recognized this seemingly untenable category.²² According to Bock, “Luke shows that pious pagans can understand Jesus, who offers the path to God.”²³

In Luke 8:26-29, Jesus heals a Gentile demoniac.²⁴ It should be noted that it was Jesus’ idea to “go over to the other side of the lake” into this predominantly Gentile territory (8:22). Jesus brings healing to this man, who had been severely tormented by demons. The response to Jesus among the Gentiles in this story is mixed. On the one hand, all of those as far as the surrounding region were asking Jesus to leave their district. They seem frightened and confused by these turn of events, and perhaps even unhappy about the herd of swine that had been lost in exchange for this one man’s release from demonic oppression. But the healed man wanted to become Jesus’ follower, begging that he might accompany Jesus on his journey. This Gentile’s demonic oppression is not said to be the result of sin, neither is his release from it a result of his faith. It seems that Jesus’ miracle on behalf of this Gentile was entirely unconditional, a memorable display of his compassion for this man who was not a child of Abraham.

²² According to Paul’s later theology, the category didn’t exist (see Galatians 2:15). A Gentile who converts to Christianity, for example, is a *former* Gentile (1 Corinthians 12:2). Luke’s Jesus does not seem to maintain this same rigid classification. The term “Gentile” may suggest an idolater, but its primary referent is the non-Hebrew.

²³ Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 246.

²⁴ The details surrounding the man’s demonic possession and exorcism were examined more closely in the previous chapter.

The mission of the seventy in Luke 10 is unique to Luke's Gospel. It seems that Luke includes it here to show that Jesus included a mission to the Gentiles in addition to sending the Twelve on a mission to the Jews in Luke 9.²⁵ According to Keener, "If Jesus chose twelve disciples to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, he may have chosen the number of this larger group to represent the seventy (sometimes seventy-two) nations of Jewish tradition, prefiguring the mission to the Gentiles."²⁶ That this was a mission to Gentiles is further strengthened in 10:3 because, Keener writes, "Jewish people sometimes viewed themselves (Israel) as sheep among wolves (the Gentiles)."²⁷ What is particularly noteworthy is the contrasting response to the two missions. Luke 9:10 records the results of the mission of the Twelve to the Jews: "When the apostles returned, they gave an account to Him of all that they had done." And Luke 10:17 records the results of the mission of the seventy to the Gentiles: "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name.'" Jesus then joins in their celebration of a successful mission. Luke intends this contrast to show that

²⁵ Jesus' willingness to heal the Centurion's son in Luke 7:2-10 and his commission to "all the nations" in Luke 24:47 might also be cited as evidence that Jesus' mission included the Gentiles. Certainly, this Gentile inclusion finds its fullest expression in the book of Acts, but Luke certainly means to describe its beginning in his gospel.

²⁶ Keener, *Background Commentary*, 216.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Gentiles were generally more eager to receive Jesus' message of good news by faith than Jews.²⁸

The Gentiles that Jesus and his disciples encountered were not "cleansed" of their Gentile nationality.²⁹ Rather, by recording these stories, Luke was seeking to shift his readers' negative perspective of Gentiles so that they might not continue to regard them as outsiders due strictly to their nationality. Gentiles were the focus of Jesus' application of his inaugural sermon in Luke 4:25-27, and Jesus' commission in Luke 24:47 specifies that "all the nations" should hear the proclamation that repentance for forgiveness of sins is available in Jesus' name. Gentiles were included as part of Jesus' mission from the beginning to the end, and they continue to be included in the mission of the church in the Book of Acts.³⁰

²⁸ Note Jesus' praise of the Gentile Centurion in Luke 7:9, "Not even in Israel have I found such great faith."

²⁹ Certainly those who wanted to follow Jesus would have to give up any idolatry that was culturally associated with being a Gentile. What Luke's Jesus was seeking to reverse, it seems, was their denigration solely for having a non-Jewish heritage. Gentiles who abandoned their polytheism to follow Jesus were welcomed by him as non-Hebrew followers.

³⁰ Acts 1:8 supplies a basic geographical trajectory for the Book of Acts, which begins in the thoroughly Jewish city of Jerusalem and concludes in the thoroughly Gentile city of Rome.

Samaritans in Luke

Luke tends to classify Samaritans as a separate group from Gentiles that was particularly despised by the Jewish people. The word for “Samaritan” appears only nine times in the entire New Testament, and only in the Gospels and Acts. It appears once in Matthew, four times in John, and once in the book of Acts. It is used three times in Luke’s Gospel (9:52; 10:33; 17:16).³¹ The Samaritans are not portrayed in a strictly positive light by Luke, for it was a village inhabited by Samaritans that refused to accommodate Jesus because—according to Luke—Jesus was journeying to Jerusalem (Luke 9:53). James and John were all too eager to call down fire from heaven to smite these despised Samaritans, but Jesus rebuked them for this suggestion (Luke 9:55). James and John were likely present during the two very positive portrayals of Samaritan’s which are unique to the Gospel of Luke: The parable of the Good Samaritan and the healing of the Samaritan leper.

The parable of the Good Samaritan only occurs in Luke’s Gospel (10:30-37). Jesus tells the story of an unidentified man making the one day journey from Jerusalem to Jericho when he encounters robbers who strip and beat him, leaving him severely injured. We’re not told whether this man is rich or poor, a Jew or a Gentile. But after he is robbed, he is characterized as someone in great need. The first traveler to discover this man in great need on this relatively uninhabited stretch of road is a highly respected

³¹ The region of Samaria is mentioned in Luke’s Gospel only in 17:11 in order to establish the location where Jesus would heal the ten lepers, at least one of whom turns out to be a Samaritan.

Jewish priest, who chose not to give assistance to this desperate man. The second traveler Jesus portrays encountering this needy man is a Jewish Levite, who likewise chooses not to give assistance to this injured man. These insulting images by Jesus are meant to strike at the heart of the Jewish leadership at the time. They are self-righteous, self-interested men who are not properly caring for those God has entrusted to their care. Finally, Jesus introduces a third traveler—a Samaritan. According to Bock, “For a Jew, a Samaritan was among the least respected of people.”³² Although those familiar with Jesus’ teachings might expect the Samaritan to display righteous behavior at this point that disgraces the priest and Levite, Luke’s audience will recall that the previous chapter describes “Samaritans” rejecting Jesus (9:52-53). So when Jesus idealizes this Samaritan as supremely righteous—in contrast to the righteous priest and Levite—the reader is caught off guard. And the contrast is stark. The detail Jesus offers for the care that the disrespectable Samaritan extends to this stranger is remarkable: he felt compassion, went to him, bandaged his wounds, poured oil and wine on his wounds, lifted him and placed him on his animal, transported him to a hotel, and took care of him there. He went even further to make provisions for his extended stay under the care of the innkeeper. The contrast between the righteous response of care offered by this disrespectable Samaritan and the unrighteous response of neglect shown by the two Jewish religious leaders is designed to be nothing short of shocking. The point is

³² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1031.

that someone completely unexpected—a Samaritan—gave generous assistance whereas the reader would have expected one of the highly religious Jewish leaders to do so. By telling the story, Jesus was attempting to shift his audience’s negative perspective of Samaritans so that they might not continue to regard them as outsiders due strictly to their nationality’s views on worship.

Jesus’ healing of the ten lepers recorded in Luke 17:11-19 is also unique to Luke’s Gospel.³³ The ambiguity of the village Jesus enters “between Samaria and Galilee” (17:11) is meant to leave the reader wondering whether Jesus would side with the non-Jewish Samaritans or the Jewish Galileans. As it turns out, Jesus isn’t the one who chooses whose side he takes. After Jesus heals ten lepers of unspecified nationality, only one of them returns to give him thanks. In a model gesture of reverence, he fell on his face at the feet of Jesus to do so. It is then that Luke alerts the reader that this man was...a Samaritan. Like the parable of the Good Samaritan, this Samaritan is singled out because of his exemplary response to a situation—in this case, his own healing. And the story would lose its force if Luke were to leave his nationality unstated at this point in the story. Jesus’ response in 17:18 is to express a measure of surprise that only one of the ten lepers whom he had healed has returned to him: “Was no one found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?” Perhaps it was a Jewish village in Galilee that Jesus had entered after all. This would explain his surprise, since noting the

³³ Careful treatment of this story was presented in chapter seven under the section, “Lepers in Luke,” with particular attention given to the leper’s innocent condition of leprosy that was healed by Jesus.

nationality of the returning leper suggests that at least some of the absent nine were Jewish. The point is that someone unexpected—a Samaritan, a “foreigner”—returned to give thanks rather than one of the Jewish lepers that Jesus cleansed. It should be noted that Jesus healed his leprosy, but he was not “cleansed” of his Samaritanism. Jesus reinstated this outcast to his station in life, but he remained a Samaritan. Also, the text never attributes the leprosy to a sinful cause.³⁴ On the contrary, the actions of the Samaritan leper who returns to Jesus are depicted as righteous. Like the parable of the Good Samaritan, this story is included by Luke to problematize his readers’ unfavorable opinion of Samaritans.

Reversal in Luke

Reversal as a narrative theme in Luke refers to the author’s tendency to introduce two people or groups by characterization and then switch their stations.³⁵ Bornkamm supplies a couple of examples from Luke’s Gospel when he writes, “The tax

³⁴ Admittedly this is an argument from silence. But in a culture that ascribed some sinful cause to infirmities such as blindness and leprosy, the reader might wonder why a specific sin is not specified in association with this condition. Or more to the point: how could the leper experience healing apart from forgiveness for its sinful cause? The narrative seeks to show that what is needed is not forgiveness, but unconditional mercy from Jesus.

³⁵ For examples of reversal in Jesus’ teachings recorded in the other Gospels, see Craig C. Hill, *Servant of All: Status, Ambition and the Way of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 48-52.

collector despised by every Jew as the classic example of a traitor and turncoat is justified, and the Pharisee goes empty away (Lk. xviii. 9-14). The no less hated Samaritan, considered unclean by every Jew, wins God's favour and shames priest and Levite (Lk. x. 30-37)."³⁶ But the theme of reversal is much more prevalent in Luke's Gospel than a first impression might lead one to conclude.³⁷ In his chapter titled, "The Fall of Men and the Rise of Women," Arlandson describes in Luke-Acts "six women whom Luke chose to exalt at the expense of wealthy, powerful, and prestigious men."³⁸ He goes on to identify their qualities that Luke seems to be contrasting when he writes, "The women's innocence and the men's presumption about the things of the kingdom made for dramatic and ironic reversals."³⁹ Luke's Gospel especially underscores the reversal of his culture's insiders and outsiders. That's because many of the culture's outsiders were oppressed by the culture's insiders, who sometimes served as the oppressors. Where Luke can identify the oppressor when he encounters an innocent victim of oppression, he seems to find a way to establish social justice by reversing their situation—to the delight of his gospel's readers for centuries. We'll look at four pairings

³⁶ Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 78-79.

³⁷ See John York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke*. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* (Sheffield Press, 1991).

³⁸ James M. Arlandson, *Women, Class, and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 185.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

in Luke that are expressly inverted in order to establish this theme of reversal: Rich and poor, men and women, Jew and Gentile, and proud/self-righteous and humble/repentant.

The reversal of the rich and poor is introduced early as a theme in Luke's Gospel, articulated by Mary in association with Jesus' mission. According to Mary, God has "filled the hungry with good things, and sent away the rich empty-handed" (1:53). The beatitudes in Luke 6:20-26 begin by blessing those who are poor and hungry. But unlike Matthew, Luke's Jesus follows his blessings with woes that decry the rich and well-fed. The privileged are uninvited to the banquet while the outcasts take their place at the table, sitting in the very seats that had been reserved for the insiders and eating the very food that had been prepared for them (14:16-24). Lazarus was the invisible beggar who gets a name in Luke 16:19-31 while the rich man remains anonymous. Although the rich man enjoyed all of the currency in this life and Lazarus none, Lazarus will enjoy all of the currency in the next life and the rich man none. Within the same chapter of Luke's Gospel (18), the Rich Ruler went away sad along with his great wealth while remaining spiritually blind, but the blind man went away rejoicing while still in his poverty because he had regained his sight. The widow who gave the feeblest offering is praised by Jesus instead of the rich who contributed far greater amounts (21:1-4).

The theme of reversal in Luke can also be seen between the pairing of powerful men and oppressed women. The sinful woman becomes the praised host for Jesus in the home of Simon the Pharisee who received Jesus' rebuke instead of praise (Luke

7:36-50). The healed daughter of Abraham stands taller than the ruler of the synagogue, whom Jesus harshly rebukes in Luke 13:15-16. Certain women are present to observe Jesus' burial and they return to be the first to witness his empty tomb, while the Twelve (all men) are shamefully absent from both stories.

Reversal of Jew and Gentile is introduced during the application of Jesus' inaugural sermon. It was not just that God sent Elijah and Elisha to Gentiles, but that God chose *not* to send them to Israelites who had the same needs (4:25-27). The highly respected priest and Levite are characterized negatively in Jesus' parable while it is the outside Samaritan who is characterized as good (Luke 10:30-37). That the commended Samaritan leper who returns to give thanks to Jesus is identified as a "foreigner" suggests that other lepers who were healed by Jesus were ungrateful Jews (17:15-18).

The reversal of the proud and humble is also introduced early in Luke as part of Mary's *Magnificat*, where it appears just prior to the reversal of the rich and poor (noted already in this section). According to Mary, God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts...and has exalted those who were humble (Luke 1:51b, 52b). Twice Luke's Jesus reminds us that God doesn't just exalt the humble, he also humbles the proud (14:11; 18:14). The humble and contrite prodigal son is the center of the celebration hosted by his father and not the older, self-righteous son who refuses to join the celebration (Luke 15:11-32). After praying in the temple, the highly-religious but self-righteous Pharisee is not pleasing to God while the irreligious but contrite tax collector goes back to his home justified before God (Luke 18:9-14).

In addition to the four categories above, other examples of reversal are introduced in Luke that cannot be so easily classified. In Luke 2:34, Simeon predicted that Jesus would cause “the fall and rise of many in Israel,” a reversal of power. Jesus instructs his disciples in Luke 22:26, “Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves,” a reversal of station. After all, “He who is least among you is he who is great” Jesus says in Luke 9:48. Most of these cases of reversal in Luke are meant to establish social justice for the innocent outsider who is being oppressed by a guilty insider. Luke’s “insider” reader is invited to reflect on his treatment of outsiders, while recognizing that his inside position may not be as secure as he hoped. Luke’s “outsider” reader is surprised to find that Jesus is sympathetic to his plight, while delighting that his outside position may not be as secure as he feared. Finally, all four Gospels name Barabbas as the convicted criminal that was released in place of Jesus (Luke 23:18-25)—a guilty outsider set free while an innocent outsider replaces him for execution. Jesus’ status as one of Luke’s outsiders is the subject of the next chapter.

JESUS AMONG LUKE'S MARGINALIZED

CHAPTER NINE

Insiders and Outsiders

In Part One we learned that conduct outcasts in Luke's Gospel were not beyond the reach of God's redemption, but offered forgiveness by Jesus in exchange for their repentance. In Part Two we learned that Jesus' mission included unconditional acceptance of the outcasts who were marginalized through no fault of their own, such as the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18). But Jesus' mission to his culture's outsiders takes an unexpected shape when he himself becomes an innocent outcast, a prototype of hope for those who find themselves unjustly oppressed. Jesus himself would be counted among Luke's marginalized at his crucifixion.

There are many spheres in which to measure one's location and determine whether you are on the inside where the action is or on the margins.¹ In the economic sphere, the powerful insiders have and control the money while the defenseless outsiders survive on very little, and changing their situation is beyond their control. In the political sphere, the insiders have the power, and the laws they pass can sometimes prove advantageous for only them, while the outsiders might be subject to oppressive

¹ Luke's Gospel tends to minimize the middle—where a person is neither powerful nor oppressed—preferring to underscore in binary fashion the dramatic tension between his culture's haves and have nots. Another possibility is that Luke's culture had very few people that constituted the middle.

laws that they have no power to change. In the religious sphere, the insiders receive the respect and have the power to interpret God’s words, while the outsiders are shunned and left to the mercy of the religious leaders’ (often self-serving) teachings. Much of the Gospel of Luke was written using this religious sphere as the measuring stick for a person’s inside—or outside—status.²

By every measurement, Jesus began his public ministry as a religious insider. The Pharisees thought Jesus an insider like them,³ which is why they were puzzled by his interactions with outsiders—something other thoroughly insiders did not make a habit of doing. Jesus is certainly an insider when he preaches in synagogues, a privilege not given to religious outsiders. Following Jesus’ baptism and temptation, Luke 4:14-15 tells us that he “returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through all the surrounding region. And he was teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all.” By the time Jesus arrives in Nazareth in the next verse, it has become Jesus’ “custom” to attend synagogue on the Sabbath, read scripture, and teach.

² Luke may have been striving for a consistent image of the insider and outsider when he adapted Mark 4:11 in Luke 8:10. While explaining why Jesus speaks in parables, Mark reads, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but *those who are outside* get everything in parables.” Luke reads, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but *to the rest* in parables.” Luke may have wanted to avoid the suggestion that the interested crowds gathered to hear him teach were outsiders.

³ In Luke 13:31, a curious passage unique to Luke’s Gospel, some Pharisees seem genuinely concerned for Jesus’ welfare when they warn him that Herod is seeking his life.

According to Edwards, “The ruler of the synagogue did not preach or expound Torah, however, which meant that Sabbath teaching and exposition fell to the laity, and on this occasion to Jesus.”⁴ Despite the title of Meier’s rightly celebrated three-volume work referring to Jesus as “a marginal Jew,” in the religious sphere at least Jesus is thoroughly an insider at this point.⁵ So how did he wind up in front of other religious insiders who were ready to sentence him to death by the end of Luke 22? As the rest of this chapter will seek to show, Luke’s Jesus was welcomed by religious outsiders, but he was not so well received among religious insiders.

Jesus Goes Outside

Jesus’ predecessor chose the geographical outside as the stage for his ministry. Luke describes the crowds “going out” to be baptized by John (Luke 3:7). In Luke 7:24-26, when Jesus questioned the people about John, he would ask three times, “What did you *go out* to see?” It was “in the wilderness” that the word of the Lord came to John (3:2), outside of culture and away from religious centers.

⁴ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 135.

⁵ The suspicious circumstances surrounding Jesus’ conception do not seem to emerge as an obstacle to Jesus’ influence in Luke’s Gospel like they do in John 9:34. It seems that the town of Nazareth regarded Jesus as fully the natural offspring of Joseph (see Luke 4:22), making Jesus’ virgin birth one of the best kept secrets in Nazareth.

During the course of his ministry, Jesus moves inside and outside both geographically, socially, and religiously—all on his extended journey to become the prototypical outsider at his crucifixion. It was the Holy Spirit who first led Jesus outside in Luke 4:1—far outside of the social and religious sphere, into the wilderness to encounter Satan.⁶ But Jesus doesn't stay outside as the stage for his ministry. We next find him on the inside of the religious sphere teaching in synagogues. The same Spirit who led him into the wilderness is now upon Jesus and is credited for sending him to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed in Luke 4:18. From then on, Jesus marginalized himself from time to time, showing that he was comfortable ministering on the inside and the outside of the religious sphere. Jesus seems to be the one who instigates the synagogue crowd in Nazareth after their initial response to him seemed positive. The method he used to rile them was to describe the nature of those outsiders his mission called him to reach: Gentile widows and lepers—both clearly residing at the margins of the religious sphere. The result is that the townspeople escort Jesus back outside when they “forced him out of town” (4:29). Jesus' self-marginalization was what made much of his teaching and miracle-working ministry unique—and controversial.

⁶ Notwithstanding the long tradition in Judaism of wilderness as a place to encounter God, in Jesus' day the temple was recognized as the religious center. Synagogues served as local religious centers in villages that had them. The wilderness, especially where Jesus went without nourishment for forty days while encountering the devil on multiple occasions, would have been regarded outside of the Jewish social and religious sphere.

From a strictly geographical point of view, Jesus moved in and out of the religious sphere. After starting his public ministry, Luke's Jesus is not seen in Jerusalem—the geographical center of the religious sphere—until the triumphal entry.⁷ But he frequents synagogues, and he visits many Israelite cities to minister to the needs of his Jewish people. He doesn't stop there, though. Luke's Jesus travels to the Gentile region of the Gerasenes in 8:26-39. He finds himself in Samaria and is rejected by the people there because he is en route to Jerusalem (9:52-53). Later, Jesus is near the border of Samaria and Galilee. It is unclear which region's village he chooses to enter, but he encounters at least one Samaritan who is grateful for Jesus' healing (17:11-19). Finally, the geography of Jesus' crucifixion becomes important. Jerusalem is the center of the inside of the religious realm.⁸ Jesus himself notes in Luke 13:33 that "it cannot be that a prophet would perish outside of Jerusalem." Certainly, Jesus is condemned by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem—the foremost insider religious people in the foremost religious city.⁹ He is also sentenced in Jerusalem by that city's political power. But Jesus and the

⁷ Luke places Jesus in Jerusalem only four times: at his dedication when he was in infant (2:22), during his visit when he was twelve years old (2:41-42), during his temptation by Satan (4:9), and Passion Week (19:41-45).

⁸ By using the term "religious realm," we're thinking particularly of degrees of religious power within Judaism in Jesus' day. Those with the power to define and enforce the laws of religion would be insiders, while those for whom these laws needed defined and enforced would be the powerless outsiders.

⁹ Certainly the Sanhedrin was recognized as a political as well as a religious body, but its civic authority was limited—and superseded—by Roman appointed rulers.

two criminals are “led away” outside of Jerusalem where they are crucified (23:32).

Jesus stands in a long tradition of prophets who find themselves on the religious outside because the religious center has shifted away from God.

Jesus would also depart from the people and take himself outside from time to time. He enjoyed the solitude of a deserted place in Luke 4:42 until the crowds quickly found him. He “frequently” withdrew to the wilderness to pray, Luke writes in 5:16. Jesus is seen praying on a mountain in Luke 6:12 and again in 9:28. And of course, Luke 21:37 states that Jesus would “go out” (of the temple, of Jerusalem) and spend the night on the Mount of Olives.

Luke continually highlights where the paths of insiders and outsiders cross, often featuring outsiders who have made their way into “insider” religious space. This is especially true of the synagogue, which was clearly regarded as insider space in the religious sphere. It is inside of synagogues that Jesus encounters and heals outsiders such as a demon-possessed man (Luke 4:33-36), a man with the withered hand (6:6-10), and the woman with the spirit who caused her to be bent double (13:10-13). Bringing outsiders into insider space seems to be the point of the parable of the banquet in Luke 14, where the invited guests represent the religious insiders and those who ultimately attend the feast are the religious outsiders. Twice in the parable the master issues the command to “go out” in order to find guests, bringing them inside where they will occupy the seats left vacant by the culture’s insiders (14:21-23).

The story of the paralytic in Luke 5:18-25 shows how challenging the plight of the outsider can be. This outsider is attempting to get to Jesus for healing of a condition that he cannot control. But when he tries to get inside of the house to Jesus, he is kept physically outside by the large crowds. The crowds are not deliberately keeping him from Jesus, but Luke's scene causes us to picture the paralytic constantly facing forces that keep him on the outside. Finally, he and his friends devise a clever way to bypass the impeding crowds and make it inside to Jesus. Their creativity is matched by Jesus' creative display of authority in which his pronouncement of the paralytic's forgiveness is then validated when he heals the man in the presence of all. By doing so, Jesus sided with this outsider rather than with the religious insiders who were present to question Jesus' authority. In like manner, Jesus sides with the sinful woman anointing his feet instead of the religious insider who hosted him (7:36-50). He also sides with the bent-over woman whom he healed on the Sabbath instead of the religious insider who ruled the synagogue in which the contested miracle took place (13:10-17). Jesus' affinity for the outsiders led him to welcome them to the inside; it also caused him to drive oppressive insiders out of the inside. This might be clearest when he "drove out" those who were selling things in the temple precincts (Luke 19:45).

Jesus Becomes an Outsider

Jesus was a man. He was a Jewish man. He was a Jewish man without any disabilities or notorious sins that we know of. He was a respected religious teacher, such

that official religious leaders would often gather to hear him. His economic status may have rendered him an outsider in some circles, but all of the texts available to us suggest that he was securely on the religious inside of his first-century Jewish culture. So what went wrong? How did a thorough-going insider wind up sentenced for execution by other Jewish insiders, rendering him a thorough-going outsider?

Jesus' compassionate interactions with outsiders and his confrontational interactions with insiders certainly made him controversial. But the self-marginalization that inclined Jesus to outsiders is not what ultimately got him killed. In Luke 22:71, members of the Sanhedrin render Jesus an outsider when they say, "For we have heard it ourselves from his own mouth." What was the "it" they claim they heard? Blasphemy. That Jesus claimed to be the Christ and the Son of God was considered blasphemous.¹⁰ It was this charge of blasphemy that rendered Jesus an outsider in the religious realm, and outsiders of this magnitude fall under the curse of God. The Sanhedrin's verdict took place inside the city of Jerusalem, the geographical center of the inside of the religious sphere. It was there that Jesus was legally declared a religious outsider guilty of

¹⁰ Immediately after Jesus answered in the affirmative when asked if he was the Son of God (which question and answer are included in Luke's version but not in that of Matthew and Mark), the religious leaders claim that no further testimony is needed to render Jesus worthy of execution (Luke 22:70-71). According to Edwards, *The Gospel*, 661, "It was no sin to claim to be Messiah. It was blasphemous, however – and blasphemy was one of two sins (along with idolatry) for which Jews reserved capital punishment – to claim divine sonship."

blasphemy.¹¹ Jesus is now a convicted criminal. And another important criminal is introduced into the text by name: Barabbas.

With the introduction of Barabbas, we have reached new heights in the category of notorious sinner. Nothing in the text suggests that he was wrongfully accused; we're meant to conclude that he was guilty as charged. He was a murderer, guilty of staging an insurrection in Jerusalem. His name suggests that he was a Jewish male, and he has violated a central tenet of the Law during his attempted insurrection: he has taken a life. Barabbas was thoroughly an outsider. Nevertheless, the fickle crowds demand that Pilate release Barabbas and send Jesus away to be crucified (23:18-25).

After reading about Jesus' mission to proclaim release to captives in Luke 4:18, the reader has been looking for this aspect in Jesus' ministry. Until now, the only captives who have been released have been demoniacs. At last we find a literal captive "released" because of Jesus.¹² Although Barabbas is mentioned in all four Gospels, none

¹¹ Clearly, the charge against Jesus is blasphemy (see Matthew 26:65-66 and Mark 14:63-64). Bock notes that Luke does not include the specific charge of blasphemy against Jesus by the Sanhedrin because the driving goal of the Sanhedrin is to have Jesus executed by the Romans who would not act on such a charge. "The leaders are now free to go to Rome so that foreigners can execute this religious agitator, while allowing the leadership the opportunity to deny ultimate responsibility for the death." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1803.

¹² Five of Luke's fourteen uses of the word "release" in his Gospel appear in this passage pertaining to the release of Jesus (23:16, 20, 22) and Barabbas (23:18, 25).

of them ascribe repentance or forgiveness to him, only release from captivity. In the same way, none of the Gospels ascribe sin or guilt to Jesus, only captivity. A guilty “son of the father” (the name “Barabbas” is Aramaic and means “son of the father”) becomes a released captive while the innocent Son of the Father takes his place as a sentenced criminal. Guilty outsiders can experience release! But not without Jesus. Jesus has taken the place of a notorious, convicted criminal—on the outside. Jesus himself has become one of Luke’s marginalized.

Jesus the Innocent Outcast

For Luke, Jesus’ innocence is paramount. That Jesus was unjustly labelled a guilty outsider in the realm of religion is important in order to make Jesus the embodiment of all those who have been unjustly labelled outsiders by the same insiders. But Luke wants to underscore the unjust nature of Jesus’ conviction by the Sanhedrin and execution by Rome. To do so, he lines up unbiased eyewitnesses to proclaim Jesus’ righteousness.

Pilate was the fifth prefect assigned by Rome to govern Israel, which he did for eleven years.¹³ Although his official residence was in Caesarea, his presence was required in Jerusalem during Jewish festivals. According to Edwards, “Pilate’s three chief responsibilities as prefect were command of Roman troops in Palestine, supervision of judiciary functions, and administration of financial affairs.”¹⁴ His supervision of judiciary

¹³ Edwards, *The Gospel*, 663.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

functions gave him Roman authority to execute criminals. Luke portrays Pilate as a disinterested defender of Jesus. He has nothing to gain or lose by executing Jesus; he is unbiased when he considers the evidence brought against this “king of the Jews.” Three times he claims that he has found “no guilt” in Jesus (Luke 23:4, 14, 22) while attempting to dissuade the people’s cry for his execution, adding that “nothing deserving death has been done by him” (23:15).

In a passage unique to Luke’s Gospel, Herod also examines Jesus (23:7-11). Herod was the Roman-appointed tetrarch over Galilee which, with regard to matters occurring in the region of Judea, placed his authority beneath that of Pilate who governed Judea.¹⁵ When Pilate heard that Jesus was originally from Galilee, he sent Jesus to Herod, who was also in town for the Jewish feast of Passover. But the plan to delegate this judicial matter to Herod fails when Herod sends Jesus back to Pilate after not receiving the entertainment he was looking for. According to Pilate in Luke 23:15, Herod returned Jesus because he, too, failed to find guilt in him.

After Pilate gives in to the cries of the people, he delivers Jesus for crucifixion along with two criminals. Only Luke records dialogue among these criminals (23:39-42), and he does so to render another innocent verdict on Jesus by another disinterested party. On one side of Jesus hangs a criminal who has joined in with the crowd and is mocking Jesus. But the criminal on the other side of Jesus rebukes this first criminal. He

¹⁵ Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1818.

admits their guilt, claiming that he and the other criminal are condemned justly. Jesus' innocence, however, is defended by this criminal, who says, "But this man has done nothing wrong" (23:41).

Finally, the centurion who witnessed Jesus' death is presented in a unique way in the Gospel of Luke. Matthew and Mark both have the centurion saying (with slight variation), "Truly, this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39).¹⁶ Luke, on the other hand, has the centurion declaring, "Certainly, this man was righteous."¹⁷ Why this change in Luke's Gospel? Because Luke found another disinterested eye witness to these events who could declare Jesus innocent. Pilate and Herod did so before the crucifixion; the criminal hanging next to Jesus did it during the crucifixion; this centurion does it immediately following Jesus' death. The reader gets the point: Jesus was innocent.

Jesus Vindicated by God

Jesus has been declared innocent by many unbiased witnesses, but only one opinion about his guilt or innocence really mattered. So what was God's verdict

¹⁶ In Matthew, the centurion is frightened by the earthquake and other events when he speaks these words. In Mark, he is attributed no emotion when he says these words. Luke's centurion is "praising God" when he speaks.

¹⁷ Both Mark and Luke mark the timing of the centurion's statement immediately after Jesus breathed his last.

concerning Jesus? The answer in Luke's Gospel is voiced by two men wearing dazzling clothes standing near an empty tomb that was thought to be occupied by Jesus' corpse. They ask the terrified women why they are seeking "the living" in the place of the dead (Luke 24:5). Jesus had voluntarily gone outside to gather outsiders to himself. He was rejected by the insiders and cast outside, being executed as a cursed criminal on a cross outside of the city of Jerusalem. Jesus, the innocent marginalized who was crucified, has now been vindicated by God through resurrection (24:6-7). By raising him from the dead, God not only vindicated him and reversed his outside status, he also made Jesus the measurement for inside status in the religious realm: the closer one is to him the closer one is to the inside; the farther from him the more of an outsider one becomes.¹⁸ The stone which the builders rejected—by casting it outside—has become the chief cornerstone against which all other stones must be aligned.

Not only was Jesus raised from the dead, he was also welcomed back into heaven from which he came. Luke is the only Gospel writer who records the ascension of Jesus (Luke 24:51).¹⁹ The ascension returns Jesus to his exalted place at the Father's right hand (see Acts 2:33; 5:31), closing the loop on the incarnation when he left the glory of heaven to join humanity. The story of Jesus includes his incarnation, his life, his

¹⁸ Paul seems to use this very terminology, calling those who don't follow Jesus "outsiders" in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13; Colossians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:12; and 1 Timothy 3:7.

¹⁹ Mark 16:19 is regarded as a later reading, likely added by a scribe who was attempting a happier ending than Mark 16:8 was thought to provide.

death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his return. The ascension of Jesus is meant to complete his vindication and situate him at the Father's right hand, prepared for his eventual return.

The message of Luke's Gospel is meant to foster hope among any readers who might find themselves on the margins of the religious sphere. Jesus has blazed the trail for all of those who, like him, have been unjustly oppressed and marginalized. Just as Jesus was vindicated by God, so also those who find themselves unjustly outcaste will be vindicated in due time. Jesus—the Christ, the Son of God himself—had them in mind from the very beginning of his mission: the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18). Jesus unconditionally restored those whose outside status came about through no fault of their own. Jesus extended his hand to notorious sinners and offered them forgiveness in exchange for repentance—they were not beyond the possibility of God's loving redemption after all. Jesus dignified those who were oppressed by confronting and shaming their oppressors. But Jesus went to greater lengths than anyone imagined: he submitted himself to oppression by these oppressors, becoming an innocent outsider himself. And when God looked upon the injustice done to his Son, he righted it and reversed it in glorious fashion through Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

PART THREE
CONCLUSIONS

EXTENDING MERCY TO THE MARGINALIZED

CHAPTER TEN

This study may have implications for a possible imbalance in the way today's Christians view sinners and the marginalized. Some conservative traditions tend to over-condemn the notorious sinner while under-helping the marginalized. In certain other traditions, the sinner is unconditionally accepted while disproportionate resources are given to liberating the marginalized. Is there a way forward that might better reflect the manner of mercy extended to these different groups by Jesus?

This study has found that one way to classify the marginalized in Jesus' day is according to their blameworthiness. Those who were marginalized due to notorious sins we've called conduct outcasts; those who were marginalized through no fault of their own we've called condition marginalized. We've also found that Jesus generally extended mercy to outcasts differently based on their category. Jesus unconditionally initiated with both groups, opening dialogue that sought to build bridges that his culture's insiders were normally not willing to do. His generous offer of mercy for the conduct outcasts, however, invited their repentance in exchange for Jesus' own wholesale forgiveness, inclusion, and embrace. For the condition outcasts, on the other hand, Jesus' generous offer of mercy usually meant unconditionally redignifying them. Let's consider these and other implications based on our study of Jesus' offer of mercy to the marginalized in the Gospel of Luke.

Engaging and Initiating

The starting point when discussing how Jesus engaged and initiated with culture must be the incarnation. God became flesh in order to meet us where we are—and that includes unrepentant sinners. The Apostle Paul teaches that God took this initiative even when we were enemies and sinners (Romans 5:8-10). Naturally, then, we don't expect Jesus to go to such great lengths to reach us only to remain aloof and detached once he's living among us. Instead, his initiative stands in contrast to the aloof detachment of the religious leaders of his day. The initiative Jesus took with conduct outcasts was unconditional; he reached out to them, extending his hand with an offer of complete forgiveness in exchange for repentance. This practice was confusing for the Pharisees and other Jewish leadership who learned that Jesus, though a teacher like them, had many practices that differed from theirs. Their objection to the initiative Jesus took with those they regarded as irredeemable played a significant role in their rejection of him.

From his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, Jesus initiated with the condition outcasts. He claimed that the Spirit had anointed him to preach and had sent him to proclaim. He applies this passage by reminding his audience that Elijah and Elisha were "sent" by God to Gentiles. Jesus sent out the twelve and then the seventy-two to initiate and extend his hand to those who were going to hear his message. It is Jesus who initiates the encounter with the disabled woman, extending his hand to heal her. When the first list of invited guests all decline his invitation, the host takes the initiative by

sending his slave to the poor and crippled and blind and lame, inviting them to dinner instead.

Followers of Jesus must learn to reengage with our culture the way Jesus modelled for the disengaged Pharisees. Perhaps what should characterize our relationship with unrepentant sinners and the marginalized more than anything is invitation and engaging. We should look to welcome notorious sinners, such that they understand that unbridled forgiveness and uninhibited welcome will be theirs in response to their repentance. We should look to unconditionally redignify the innocent outcasts, such that they understand that they have inherent value and are blameless with regard to the lower status our culture has placed them in.

Evangelizing with Equal Eagerness

The Pharisees and other Jewish leaders seemed to consider some outsiders as irredeemable. But Jesus regarded no one as beyond the pale of God's redemption. Even though Jesus did not unconditionally accept notorious sinners, he nevertheless was not hesitant to extend his offer of mercy to them. For Jesus, no one was unsavable. Evans agrees, writing, "It seems that Jesus believed that forgiveness could be readily and quickly extended to those who violated or neglected the law of Moses. But this forgiveness required repentance and faith."¹ Jesus goes to the outsiders, and meets

¹ Craig Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 231.

them where they are. He welcomes outcasts whether they are inside or outside and extends a hand to them. But he does not offer wholesale inclusion to the conduct outsiders unconditionally. There are prerequisites to his friendship, it seems, and repentance is the most important one. The very core of Jesus' teaching, according to Volf, was the message of God's unconditional love and the people's need for repentance."² He goes on to write, "What disturbs us, of course, is not the unconditional love, which we have come to expect, but the call to *repentance*."³ Jesus' commission in Luke is not a command to go to a certain type of person over against a different type of person, but a command to preach repentance to all with equal eagerness; to the social outcast and the social elite, to the poor and the privileged, to the downcast and the dominant.

Followers of Jesus today should be eager to scatter the seed of the word broadly, evangelizing all people with equal eagerness. We must not be intimidated to go to the powerful residing on society's inside; we must also steer clear of regarding the weak who reside on society's outside as a waste of our time. We must evangelize all eagerly, and our equal opportunity evangelism must include the message of repentance. No one is beyond Jesus' reach; no sinner is irredeemable. In our culture or church, who rests beyond pale of redemption by God, beyond his reach? For the townspeople of Nazareth,

² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 112-13.

³ *Ibid.*, 113. Emphasis his.

it was Gentiles—especially those of the female and leprous variety. For the Pharisees, it was tax collectors and sinners. Who is it for us? Our self-righteousness will be exposed when anyone comes to mind.

Acknowledging Sin

While Luke does depict people rejecting Jesus and walking away from him unchanged, what we fail to find in Luke is the notorious sinner who refuses to accept Jesus' merciful offer of forgiveness in exchange for repentance. Certainly they existed in Jesus' day—sinners and tax collectors and others who rejected Jesus' message and offer of mercy. But Luke focuses instead on those notorious sinners who found Jesus' message and mercy irresistible, humbly responding to what they likely felt—and had probably been told by their religious leaders—that they didn't deserve. This makes Luke's presentation appear somewhat binary. He doesn't include the complete range of responses to Jesus present in our day, and therefore the range of treatments by Jesus that we might expect.

Nevertheless, when Jesus encounters someone whose life has been characterized by sin, he readily acknowledges it instead of downplaying or denying it. Peter claimed to be a sinful man, and Jesus takes him at his word. By concluding that he has come to call sinners to repentance, Jesus is readily acknowledging that Levi was that sinner. Jesus himself points out that the woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee had sins that were "many." The lost sheep and the lost coin that were found each depict

“one sinner who repents.” While presenting the lost son, Jesus describes his loose living and reckless spending in vivid detail; he doesn’t soften the prodigal son’s offense to his father. The tax collectors and sinners symbolized by the prodigal son and the Pharisees symbolized by the self-righteous brother were also present to hear Jesus describe them as such. The tax collector praying in the temple needed mercy because he was a “sinner”—and Jesus didn’t dispute that label. The rich ruler was blind to the fact that money was his master, and so Jesus points out this sin to him. By claiming that he has come to seek and save the lost, Jesus is readily acknowledging that Zacchaeus the chief tax collector was one of them.

Followers of Jesus today should not understate the seriousness of sin—either our own or that of others. Helping bring others’ attention to their own sin should probably start with our humble confession and acknowledgment of the sin present in us. The reason repentance is worthy of such elaborate celebration is precisely because the sin from which we repent is elaborately offensive to God.

Celebrating Large(r)

Jesus’ message to the sinner is merciful forgiveness and wholesale approval for any who are willing to accept his terms. Accepting his terms included repenting from sins such as dishonesty, crime, violence, impurity, oppression, abuse of power, and greed, and then following him. Jesus was on a mission. Fredriksen reminds us that “the chief message of this mission, according to Luke, is that God forgives repentant

sinner.”⁴ Stein agrees, writing, “God accepts all repentant sinners, no matter how outcast they may be.”⁵

But what we find in Jesus is not mere dispassionate acceptance. He welcomed repentant sinners with enthusiastic celebration, and they received his wholesale embrace. Jesus’ participation in the celebratory feast following Levi’s repentance was regarded as scandalous among the Jewish leadership. He gained a reputation for attending such celebratory feasts, which included abundant food and drink. As a result, some mistook Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard. What they misunderstood was that many tax collectors and sinners were becoming his followers, and the feasts he attended were celebrations over the repentance of these people he now regarded as friends.

But Jesus’ clearest message that repentance warrants celebration comes in the form of three parables found in Luke 15. In the first two parables of the lost sheep and lost coin, their owners celebrate with their friends after diligently searching for and finding the lost items. Jesus likens this celebration to that which takes place in heaven when even just one sinner repents. The final parable goes into great detail about the elaborate celebration the father hosts over his returning son, whom he regarded as “lost” and dead.” The father commands his slaves to act “quickly” to kill the fattened

⁴ Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Christ*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 29.

⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*. The New American Commentary, Vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 409.

calf, a rare instance in the Bible where God is pictured in a hurry to do something. In this case, he wishes to waste no time in celebrating repentance. The older brother who refuses to join the celebration represents the Pharisees and scribes who disapprove of Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus reserved his harshest words for such self-righteous people who were protesting the loudest about his celebration over repentant sinners.

Part of the beauty of Jesus' relationship with moral outcasts was his seeming inability to recall their past after they had humbly repented. Today, anyone willing to come to God on his terms should be unconditionally welcomed, publicly celebrated, and thoroughly incorporated into their new believing community. Churches and followers of Jesus should create better opportunities to publicly celebrate every instance of genuine repentance, whether found in a new believer or a returning one.

Confronting Self-Righteousness

Jesus was a whistleblower against self-righteous religiosity. Some of his harshest rebukes in the Gospel of Luke are directed toward those self-righteous people who refuse to extend the hand of fellowship to humble, repentant sinners. After all, God scatters the proud but exalts the humble, according to Mary. Self-righteous detachment from lowly sinners was certainly at the heart of Simon's distaste for the uninvited sinful woman who found Jesus at his dinner table, and Jesus confronted him. Luke's Jesus likely had self-righteousness in mind as the motive for the priest and Levite refusing to

assist the wounded traveler, since both are described by Jesus in terms of their religious offices. The older son felt morally superior to his brother, and finds himself on the outside of the celebration where he is rebuked by his merciful father. The motives of such people who refused to take the initiative with conduct outcasts and celebrate their repentance were not pure, but self-righteous. For that reason, it was not the notorious sinner on the outside who found himself on the receiving end of Jesus' rebukes in the Gospel of Luke, but the self-righteous insider. The Pharisee we find praising himself during prayer time in the temple is perhaps Jesus' ultimate depiction of self-righteousness. And this Pharisee does not leave the temple justified before God; the humble tax collector does instead.

Followers of Jesus today should guard against pride and remain highly sensitive to any hint of their own self-righteousness. We should remain open to other followers who claim that they've detected signs of haughtiness in us and confess it as sin. Followers should also humbly confront examples of self-righteousness that we find in others today. But we must do so with extreme caution, recognizing that confronting pride in others opens up tantalizing opportunities to become self-righteous ourselves.

Challenging Oppressors

Jesus fought social injustice primarily by condemning those who were responsible for oppressing—those insiders who were abusing their power. Before him, John the Baptist did the same when he instructed tax collectors and soldiers not to use

their positions of power to take advantage of the defenseless. Twice Jesus invited the oppressors to consider the ultimate outcome of self-exaltation: those who exalt themselves will be humbled. Jesus' Sermon on the Plain in Luke uniquely includes woes that decry the rich and well-fed (the rich man who finds himself in Hades separated from Father Abraham is later Jesus' example). Other oppressors in Luke who fail to use their positions of power to elevate others include Simon the Pharisee, the priest and Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the synagogue ruler, the older son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and the self-righteous Pharisee praying in the temple. Finally, Zacchaeus is praised by Jesus after he voices his intention to refrain from using his position for the purpose of overtaxing and to make restitution instead.

Followers of Jesus today who find themselves in positions of power should look to use their influence to elevate the defenseless. Isn't this an important component of the incarnation? Instead of using his position of power for personal gain by taking advantage of the defenseless, God used his position to come to the aid of the helpless in Jesus. Finally, all followers of Jesus should look for ways to respectfully identify instances of oppression and boldly challenge those who are using their positions of power to exploit others rather than serve them.

Dignifying Social Outcasts

But Jesus didn't just challenge the powerful insiders guilty of oppression. He also promoted the powerless outsiders above their oppressors. Jesus reversed the station of

many social outcasts; others he attempted to dignify without changing their station. He publicly praised and defended the sinful woman while publicly denigrating and embarrassing the host, Simon the Pharisee. He used the travelling Samaritan who gave lavish aid to the wounded traveler as the example we should follow instead of the respected priest and Levite. Jesus painted poor Lazarus as spiritually rich and the rich man spiritually bankrupt. He elevated the Samaritan leper above the other Jewish lepers with his praise. He voiced approval over the praying tax collector in the temple instead of the highly-esteemed Pharisee. He dignified the poor but generous widow who gave more than all the others. The rich are confronted, but the poor are also praised and exalted. Power-abusing men are challenged, but marginalized women are also redignified. Self-righteous Jews are rebuked, but Gentiles and Samaritans are also painted in a positive light.

Churches and followers of Jesus need to become outspoken about the way God views those who have been marginalized through no fault of their own. Every person is created in the image and after the likeness of God, and so retains inherent dignity. This includes our culture's elderly, for example, whose usefulness to us is often not recognized. We must also be willing to risk being counted among our culture's marginalized like Jesus was when we side with them or attempt to redignify them.

Jesus as Our Ministry Model

Everyone seems have their own ideas about the way Jesus did things. Crossan writes, “It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography.”⁶ For this reason, we might do well to use caution when citing Jesus as our model for ministry. Many of our cultural ideas about him may be misinformed. We should do our research first and always think twice before claiming Jesus as our ministry model.

In his famous *kenosis* passage, the Apostle Paul exercises great care in holding Jesus up as an example that we might follow in our interactions with each other. Our attitude toward one another should be like the attitude Jesus had toward us. Jesus’ unselfish attitude, Paul writes, took him down from heaven to earth. He met us where we are by adding full humanity to his full deity. But he didn’t stop there. Jesus’ unselfish attitude, Paul writes, took him down from the earth to the grave. He willingly gave his life for us, using his position of power to meet the needs of defenseless humanity. But he didn’t just die; Jesus’ unselfish attitude also took him outside where he was hung on a cross, a cursed death. Jesus was innocent like the condition marginalized, but his culture regarded this kind of death as a mark of divine displeasure. Jesus was counted among the marginalized. That he willingly went to such lengths to humble himself so

⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), xxviii. Crossan calls the stunning diversity of published conclusions about the historical Jesus an “academic embarrassment.”

low for us also shows that he was leaving his reward of exaltation in the Father's hands.

Whatever ministry we seek to model after Jesus should probably contain these elements.

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