

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART SIX

Huge crowds were now following Jesus around in the hope of receiving help for their problems. Meeting their individual needs depended on training a small group with whom He could work while He was on earth, and through whom He would work from Pentecost onwards. Jesus looked for a way to reach the crowds and train His team at the same time. The disciples' fishing boat became His pulpit so that a large crowd could hear Him across a short stretch of water. After His message was ended He turned to the crew, tired and frustrated after a fruitless night's fishing, and proposed catching fish. It did not make sense to take fishing advice from a carpenter/preacher, and Peter said so – but then did what Jesus said. The vast catch of fish threatened to sink both that boat and a second boat called in to help. Peter was overwhelmed not just by the catch but by the realization of his own unworthiness to be in the service of his Lord. Jesus explained the parable in action. Fish represent people who need Him. Fishermen are His followers committed to fulfilling His calling to make disciples even in unlikely fishing spots. The sea then is presumably the world in which we live, the nets are the equipment, the Bible, we use to bring people to Christ, and the boats are the little fellowships of believers who work together and support each other. Back on land the future choice was clear, catch fish or catch people. They chose to follow Jesus and learn to fish for men. This meant leaving everything else which they gladly did.(5:1-11)

A man with severe leprosy provided the first illustration of what is involved in catching men. Leprosy portrays a powerful picture of sin in our lives. Leprosy is an infectious disease which attacks the nerves of sensation in the skin, allowing damage when the normal protection of pain is removed so that the sufferer becomes more and more grossly deformed. Throughout history lepers have been isolated by their societies, as sin makes us more and more ugly and lonely. The first step to becoming a disciple must be having our sin cleansed at the cross of Christ. Jesus touched the man no-one else would come near, curing his disease. He then sent him to the priest to offer sacrifice in thanks to God as commanded in Lev.13:49;14:2. The leper was not supposed to announce his cleansing until the priest had confirmed that the leprosy had gone and until God's work in doing this had been acknowledged. Until we have really come to the cross in repentance we do not know what we are talking about as new believers. However this man was so convinced and excited, he could not keep quiet. The crowd became bigger than ever! Jesus was never too busy to have time alone with His Father. Nor should we be.(5:12-16)

The paralysed man gave a compelling picture of the second step in a 'fish' being brought into a relationship with Jesus. His problem was that his legs could not work to allow him to walk. Sin has prevented us 'walking' as Christians in the way of life God wants for us. 'As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in Him.'(Col.2:6) He simply needed to come into the presence of Jesus but the crowd in and around the house hindered him, as the crowd of so-called Christians around Jesus can still stand in the way of those who are searching. He had good friends with a single-minded determination, which Jesus called faith, to move him past the barriers, in this case the roof of the house. Just as Jesus had cleansed the leprosy so He now removed the paralysis. Having forgiven our sin Jesus comes as His Spirit to live in us and be our strength to stand up and start living. To make the link clearer, Jesus began with forgiveness. The Pharisees were outraged because they knew only God could do that. But then Jesus did what only the power of God could do and caused the man to jump to his feet and go off with the stretcher he would never need to lie on again. Ordinary people were thrilled and got the point. They knew he must be God.(5:17-26)

Next Jesus gave a practical demonstration of 'fishing for men' when He walked into Levi's tax office and commanded him to follow Him. Levi was also known as Matthew.(Matt.9:9) As a tax collector for the Roman conquerors Levi must have been a greedy cheat and a shameless traitor. He was certainly a spiritual 'leper' who could not walk the way God intended men to do. But in a simple act of turning his back on his old life, Levi got up and walked out, clean from sin and empowered to live with Jesus. The first evidence of his new life was in his desire to open his home to Jesus and to have his family and friends meet the Lord for themselves. An open home to Jesus was compelling evidence of an open heart to the Lord. Everyone crowded in to Levi's home to listen. What an exciting opportunity Jesus had!(5:27-29)

Immediately the religious people began criticizing instead of rejoicing at Levi's conversion. Their first objection was to the company Jesus and His followers kept. Surely the Son of God would not mix with people like these? Jesus' answer was simple. Why go to the doctor if you are not sick? The only starting point for a relationship with God is to admit our spiritual sickness, which the Pharisees clearly did not.(5:30,31)

The next objection of the religious was that Jesus' disciples were not showing their spirituality by fasting, and making a show of giving something up. They saw faith in terms of what we do not do. Jesus' friends seemed to be living ordinary lives. Jesus responded this time with three colourful questions. First He asked whether looking miserable belonged at a wedding or a funeral. His coming into the world as the 'bridegroom' of His church was a matter for celebration.(Eph.5:23-33; Rev.21:2) Secondly He wanted to know whether it would be sensible to patch old clothes with a new patch which would look out of place and soon come off. Knowing Jesus is a totally new life, not the old one patched up. Thirdly He drew on the practice among the people of those days of storing wine in a goat skin. As the wine matured, the skin stretched. Would it be sensible to attempt to reuse the skin for a second batch of wine which would end in disaster when the old skin burst? His new life inside us produces a whole new outside which grows as our knowledge of Him matures.(5:32-39)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What two objections did the Pharisees raise to Jesus' activities on the Sabbath? Did Jesus' disciples have the right to pick some grain from their neighbours' fields and eat it?(Deut.23:25) What motive might the Pharisees have for resenting this? How do we also use religious rules as an excuse for neglecting the needy? How did the Lord answer them? How should His response make us stop and think carefully whether we might be making the same mistakes?(6:1-11)
2. What did Jesus do before making one of the most important decisions of His ministry? Why did He do this? What do we already know about some of the 12 whom He chose? What is so remarkable about the choices He made? Why did He want to use such an unlikely group?(6:12-19)
3. Do you think that the rest of this chapter was just another version of the Sermon on the Mount?(Matt.5-7) What were the 4 'blesseds' and the 4 'woes'? How do they contrast with each other? What command did Jesus give which went far beyond the Old Testament instruction in Lev.19:18? How did He illustrate this working in life? Are we capable of living this way? If not what was His purpose in giving such a 'standard of measure'?(6: 20-38)
4. What 5 pictures did Jesus give His disciples to show what would first have to happen to them before they could begin to help others? What clue did verse 40 provide? How are each of these pictures taken up elsewhere in His teaching to lay a basis for our understanding of the Christian life?(6: 39-49)