

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Luke's Gospel: Jesus by Galilee

### Introduction

In Luke 4, Jesus has been led by the Spirit, after His temptation, into the area of Galilee, and He has been *“preaching in the synagogues of Galilee.”* Now we find Jesus by the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret. This is more frequently called the Sea of Galilee in the Gospels, or occasionally, the Sea of Tiberias. It is a large, freshwater lake in the north of Israel, in what was then the area of Galilee. Galilee consisted of the tribal regions of Zebulun and Naphtali. Matthew, quoting Isaiah 9:1, refers to the area as *“Galilee of the gentiles”* (see Matthew 4:5), presumably because this area was one of the first to be conquered by the invading nations, and consequently had a mixed population of Israelites and people of Assyrian descent. In Jesus' time it was a despised northern region, far from the capital Jerusalem and the area of Judea surrounding it, and separated from it by the even more despised Samaria. Galileans could be distinguished by their accent (Matthew 26:73, Mark 14:70), and were little valued by the religious elite from around Jerusalem. But it was in this area that Jesus did most of His preaching and healing ministry, and most of the disciples were born around here. The people would be mostly fishermen, or agricultural or manual labourers. Of course the Lord was known as Jesus of Nazareth<sup>1</sup> (a town in Galilee) and was Himself a carpenter.

With that background, let's read Luke 5:1-7. *“So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them, and were washing their nets. Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat. When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, ‘Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch.’ But Simon answered and said to Him, ‘Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.’ And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.”*

### A Novel Pulpit!

By now the Lord is well known and has an active following in the area, so much so that the *“multitude pressed about Him”* (Luke 5:1). It is rather difficult to preach to a large crowd that is pressing in on you. Only the people close by are likely to see and hear you. So Jesus needs a better way to address the crowd effectively. The best solution is to leave the crowd on the lake shore and go a little way offshore, where the crowd will have a clear view of the preacher and yet He will still be able to make Himself heard easily. A small boat would make the perfect pulpit! And there are two small boats by the lakeside that the fishermen who own them have left empty while they wash their fishing nets in the lake.

### Peter is Singled Out

It is no coincidence that Jesus steps into the boat belonging to Peter. The Lord has already been introduced to Peter by his brother Andrew (see John 1:40-42), and Jesus is about to call Peter to be a committed disciple. Christ steps into the boat and asks Peter to move the boat a little way off shore. Thus, Peter sits nearby the preacher as the day's teaching is delivered. Having spoken to the multitude, Jesus now turns and addresses Peter individually, requesting him to take the little boat further offshore for a fishing trip.

### A Reluctant Fisherman

You might have thought that such a suggestion would be well received, but Peter is feeling rather tired and dispirited today. He and his partners have apparently spent the preceding night fishing, and not caught a thing. Presumably, Peter is reluctant to waste any more time and energy in a search for the fish that appear to have gone into hiding, particularly at the request of a carpenter-cum-preacher who knows nothing about boats and fishing. Nevertheless, either politeness, or some growing respect for the authority of the preacher, causes him to agree to the attempt, perhaps with some reluctance and scepticism. What follows is totally unexpected.

They suddenly have so many fish in the net, that the strong fishermen cannot pull it on board, and the net they have recently finished cleaning is threatening to break under the strain! (Luke 5:6) Peter and Andrew signal to James and John in the other boat to come to their assistance. The four men, along with any servants they may have, start loading fish from the straining net into the two boats (Luke 5:7). They keep loading fish into the boats until they are both in danger of sinking under the weight of fish! (Luke 5:7) Nobody has ever seen a catch on this scale before, and all after a night when the expert fishermen had not been able to catch a thing!

Now let's read Luke 5:8-11: *"When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!' For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.' So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him."*

### **Tales of the Unexpected**

Unexpected things continue to occur. Peter might have had many reactions to this incredible catch, but saying, *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"* (Luke 5:8) is not one of the more obvious responses! Peter speaks these words from a position of lying down in the boat at Jesus' feet. Peter is more struck with the Man before him than the incredible quantities of fish, and it is not so much Christ's power as His holiness that seems to strike Peter. In contrast with Christ's holiness, Peter feels his own sinfulness, and senses that it is inappropriate for such a sinful man to be in the presence of One so perfect.

His remark is not so much a request for Jesus to leave, as a confession of the huge gulf in character between the two of them. Jesus response, *"Do not be afraid"* (Luke 5:10), underlines the sense of awe and fear that Peter was feeling. Peter is directed away from his current profession and towards discipleship by the Lord's next sentence: *"From now on you will catch men"* (Luke 5:10)

### **A Surprising Lack of Enterprise!**

You might have expected Peter and his partners to have seen huge possibilities in this amazing catch of fish. Not only was there the prospect of a very healthy profit from the sale of two brimming boat loads, surely enough to make things comfortable for a few weeks to come, there was also the possibility of similar catches in the future. Why not take this preacher into partnership and offer Him a share of all future catches? With His fish finding powers, Peter, Andrew, James and John could become the most successful business men in Galilee! This was the kind of thing that went through the minds of the people who were present when Jesus fed the five thousand (John 6:1-14). They later followed Him, hoping for more free meals. Peter and his partners had a totally different response. They *"forsook all and followed Him"* (Luke 5:11). What made the difference? It was the fact that they valued the person of Jesus Christ much more than they valued the things He might give them. The question for us is, which do we value most? It is very easy for us to slip into regarding the Lord Jesus as somebody who can give us what we want, and our relationship with Him as something that we need to nurture, so that He is more likely to give us what we ask for. There is nothing wrong with appreciating all the good things that the Lord may provide for us. Indeed, being unthankful would hardly be scriptural! The problem begins when we start valuing the things Christ gives, in a way that is separated from our appreciation of Christ Himself. That quickly turns into valuing the gifts more than the Giver.

These men were in no danger of this trap at the moment, and they proved it when they came to land. Having beached the boats, they left all the fish, the boats and their livelihoods and families and *"they forsook all and followed Him"* (Luke 5:11) The challenge of those six words, *"they forsook all and followed Him"*, still echoes down the years to us. Just at the point they had more goods and prospects than they ever had before, they were prepared to walk away from it all to follow Jesus. They weighed up the value of what they had, against what they would gain by remaining close to Jesus, and they had no hesitation in choosing Jesus. That's something we can all contemplate carefully this morning!

Time for our final section, Luke 5:12-16: *"And it happened when He was in a certain city, that behold a man who was full of leprosy saw Jesus; and he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, 'Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.' Then He put out His hand and touched him saying, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' Immediately the leprosy left him. And He charged him to tell no one, 'But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded.' However, the report went around concerning Him all the more; and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities. So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed."*

## A Man with a Big Problem

Luke fails to specify exactly where the next event took place, telling us only, “[Jesus] was in a certain city” (Luke 5:12). It seems the people were more important than the location. There is a man there with a big problem. He is described not just as being a leper, but being “full of leprosy” (Luke 5:12). Here is a man with one of the most dreaded diseases of the time, a disease that marked people out as unclean and not suitable for contact with non-lepers. It would cut him off from family, temple, commerce and all social contact, except with other lepers. It would mean that people would run in the other direction when they saw him, and it was not just an early infection, or a mild case. He was “full of leprosy”. He was in quite a different position from the fishermen at the Lake of Gennesaret, but he too saw Jesus, and he too fell on his face. We might think he had more reason than Peter to ask Jesus to depart, but the lepers request is, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean” (Luke 5:12). He appears to have no doubts about the Lord’s **ability** to cure his leprosy, he only questions His **willingness**. I can recognise that mind set in myself. I know very well Who the Lord Jesus is and what He is capable of. As God, of course He can do anything. As an amazingly gracious Lord, of course He can forgive. What I am not so confident of, is that He will do something wonderful for **me**, or that He will forgive **my** latest sin. Why should He? What I have I done to deserve it? Perhaps those were the questions in this poor man’s mind. Whatever his doubts, the Lord did not leave him to worry for long! In a beautiful gesture, Jesus puts out His hand and touches the man. The spotless Christ touches the man disfigured and ostracised by leprosy, and at the same times speaks words that chase away any doubts, “I am willing; be cleansed” (Luke 5:13).

## A Biblical Illustration

We are often rightly reminded that leprosy is a biblical picture of our sinfulness. It is a disease that is naturally incurable. It disfigures and causes degeneration, and it separates us from God, and often from other people. We need a miraculous intervention from outside to cure us. Whether we are coming to Jesus as Saviour for the first time, or we are returning to ask for forgiveness as a believer for the one thousand and first time; it is wonderful to hear Christ’s words to ourselves, “I am willing; be cleansed” (Luke 5:13). The impact, now as then, will be instant, “Immediately the leprosy left him” (Luke 5:13).

## Don’t Mention It

The Lord’s command to the healed leper is the next unexpected thing. “He charged him to tell no one.” This is one spectacular miracle! A man with an advanced case of an incurable, and highly visible, disease has been completely cured, instantaneously. This would make sensational news across, the region, indeed across the country. If you were a teacher seeking hearers and followers, or a man seeking to make his case as God’s chosen Messiah for the nation, you might want to have this fantastic proof of your powers shouted from the housetops. Jesus commands the man to tell nobody! If anything, this seems even odder in our generation. We are used to a culture of celebrity, where people with very little talent or distinction are prepared to do almost anything to make themselves famous for a short while. Jesus was almost the complete opposite.

The Lord wanted true followers rather than shallow sensation seekers. He didn’t want to be hailed as a political leader, or exploited as a source of miracles and free gifts. He didn’t have anything to gain from popularity, in fact it would only get in the way of the work He had come to do.

## Doing the Right Thing

But Jesus was concerned that God’s laws be respected and that the priests should have clear evidence of the work God was doing in His world. He instructs the man to show himself to the priest and make the relevant offering that the Law of Moses prescribed. Leviticus 13 and 14 set out in some detail, the offerings to be made when leprosy is cleansed. It is not clear how often these offerings were ever made, given the incurable nature of the disease. It was certainly not an everyday event that a leper presented himself to a priest with one of these offerings, especially someone who had been “full of leprosy”! (Luke 5:12). The priest should have asked questions about who had done such a thing, and seen that the Hand of God was at work. The fact that no such response appears to have occurred, says everything you need to know about the spiritual condition of the priests at that time!

## Unhelpful Crowds

Despite the Lord’s instructions about not publicising the healing (Luke 5:14), the event became more and more widely known so that great crowds flocked after Jesus (Luke 5:15). The phrase “great multitudes” (Luke 5:15), is one that is characteristic of Luke’s gospel. We might have thought the word multitude (singular) signified lots of people quite adequately. Luke regularly refers to multitudes (plural), or even ‘great multitudes’, as here. He seems keen to emphasise the large numbers of people that thronged around Jesus.

Whether because they made it hard to connect with the genuine hearers, or because they risked making Jesus popular for the wrong reasons, or because they might arouse the opposition of the Roman authorities; Jesus did not want to encourage these 'great multitudes'. "So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness" (Luke 5:16), implies that the Lord's withdrawing to the wilderness was deliberately to avoid the large crowds. This might be unexpected enough. I find the final clause even more unexpected, "So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness, **and prayed**" (Luke 5:16).

### Unexpected Prayer

Now I know I shouldn't find it unusual that Jesus prayed, but I do! There is some part of my brain that tells me the Son of God should not need to pray! One Who is co-equal with the Father, knows all things, and has all power might be thought to be completely self-sufficient, and the self-sufficient have no need of prayer. Once I spell it out like that, I can start to see the flaws in my reasoning. For a start, prayer is not just about asking for things; any more than communication with my wife is always about asking for things! Prayer is part of an ongoing, healthy and sustaining relationship with God. Viewed this way, of course the Son of God was in regular conversation with the Father through prayer. Father and Son were in constant communion in heaven throughout eternity, so it is no surprise that this continued while the Son was here on earth. The other major flaw in my reasoning is that I have defined self-sufficiency in a way that makes it equate to complete independence. Of course, the Son never acted, or even thought, with this kind of self-sufficiency.

He had what I might call the self-sufficiency of God, in that He had no need to depend on the support or giving of others, being the Creator and Source of everything. When you are God, you do not have to ask permission, defer to another power, or rely on somebody else, for what you cannot achieve or acquire yourself. But the Son never acted in independence of the Father; it is one of the reasons that every single thing He ever thought, said or did brought pleasure to God. If it might put it very simply, the Lord's active prayer life helped to maintain that complete unity between Father and Son while the Son was on earth as a man. Now that I mention it, the fact that the Son had also become, eternally, a man is another good reason why a healthy prayer life was appropriate.

### Lessons for Me

Contemplating Jesus' prayer life always makes me review my own rather critically. If the Son of God needed to regularly withdraw and pray, how much prayer might be appropriate in my life? We have seen Jesus praying after an impressive miracle and when His popularity is on the increase, so it is clear that prayer is not just appropriate when there are problems, or when we have big decisions to make. Like many people today, I lead a very busy life and always seem to have more things to do than I have time available to do them. Yet, Jesus had constant pressures on Him from people desiring, healing, teaching etc. and He always made time for prayer, often going to a quiet place to do so. I guess it tells us a great deal about His priorities, and asks some searching questions about the priorities we live our lives by!

### Closing Prayer

*Lord Jesus, we have thought today about people who fell down at your feet, and then got up and followed You. Please give us the courage to forsake the things that are preventing us from doing the same. We have seen many reactions that were unexpected to us. Adjust our expectations, so that we value the same things that You do and start to see the world through Your eyes. We've also seen how You transformed a night of fruitless labour into superabundant fruitfulness, when a disciple acted in obedience to You. Please teach us to listen to Your voice and allow us to see what You can do in our lives. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> References to "Jesus of Nazareth" - Matthew 21:11, 26:71; Mark 1:9, 1:24, 10:47, 14:67, 16:6; Luke 4:34, 18:37, 24:19; John 1:45, 18:5, 18:7, John 19:19; Acts 2:22, Acts 3:6, 4:10, 6:14, 10:38, 22:8, 26:9.

<sup>2</sup> References to "multitudes" in Luke's Gospel - Luke 1:10, 2:13, 3:7, 5:1, 5:3, 5:15, 6:17, 6:19, 7:24, 8:4, 8:37, 8:40, 8:42, 8:45, 9:11, 9:12, 9:16, 9:37, 9:38, 11:14, 12:1, 12:54, 13:17, 14:25, 18:36, 19:37, 22:6, 22:47, 23:1, 23:27.

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