

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Luke's Gospel: Sending out the twelve, Herod and the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:1-17)

Today we resume our systematic study of Luke's Gospel. This new mini-series will consist of three talks on Luke 9:1-45. I'll speak on Luke 9:1-17, in which Luke covers three events. I'll read the verses for each event from the English Standard Version before making some comments.

1. Luke 9:1-6: The Twelve sent out to announce the kingdom of God

"And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. And he said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. And whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart. And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.' And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere" (Luke 9:1-6).

In autumn 2016, Scripture Union launched a new resource called *201CDiary of a disciple: Luke's story*. It's a contemporary children's Bible, which retells Luke's Gospel. Have you noticed that there's a lot of teaching about discipleship in Luke's Gospel? In talk T0953, I spoke from Luke 6:12-26 about the Lord's choice of the Twelve from all of the rest of His followers. You might think they were special because He also named them apostles (Luke 6:13). But that name simply means "one who is sent out, a messenger who is commissioned to do a job for Christ". The Twelve are important in the sense that they accompanied the Lord throughout His earthly ministry and thus became pioneers of the Christian Gospel. However, they had a different kind of job to do here in Luke 9:1-6. It was to announce the kingdom of God. The Lord sent out these twelve disciples for the first time, but as early as Luke 10, He'd also enlisted the help of seventy two others because Israel's great need demanded it! (See Luke 10:1-12). Today the Master continues to call His followers to serve Him by taking the Gospel message to a sinful world. He also requires us to *pray earnestly to "the Lord of the harvest"* (see Luke 10:2) to provide and send out Gospel labourers, for although the harvest is plentiful, there's always a scarcity of workers. These are the first of many challenges that confront us in this talk.

The Twelve were sent out to proclaim that the kingdom of God had arrived in the Person of the Son of God from heaven. Sometime later, the Lord himself explained this change in dispensation: *"The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it"* (Luke 16:16). The government of the world from God in heaven became a distinct possibility because its King was present in Israel: *"Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you"* (Luke 17:21). This good news preached by the Twelve was accompanied by visible signs of the kingdom of God. They exercised their Divine-given power and authority over demons; and they healed huge numbers of people of their many diseases. They obediently set out in faith without any provisions or resources. They relied upon God's providential care for dinner, bed and breakfast in each place where they resided overnight. They preached the Gospel of the kingdom wherever they went. If any town refused their message, they left a visible testimony against it - they shook off the dust from their feet as they left town (cp. Acts 13:51). And so they fulfilled their mission. They returned and reported back to the Lord. He saw that they were emotionally exhausted by the whole experience so He took them away to a quiet place in the vicinity of Bethsaida.

Was their mission a success? Well, yes and no! Yes, in the sense that they were able to demonstrate what they had announced in word by signs of the power and authority they had received from the Lord. In other words, these outwards signs of the kingdom of God were so unmistakable that none could deny the truthfulness of their witness. After all, Isaiah 61:1 predicted Messiah would preach to the poor and heal the sick. But also no, because later it became evident that the nation, as a whole, would not accept Jesus to be their long-promised King. Israel's spiritual leaders attributed His power to the Devil and said: *"He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons."* The Lord's response exposed the evil of their thoughts: *"Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they*

will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (see Luke 11:15-20). Yes, the actions of the disciples and the Lord proved that the kingdom had arrived. Later on, Israel's rulers persuaded the ordinary people to reject their King and to call for His crucifixion (see Luke 23:1-15).

2. Luke 9:7-9: Herod's reaction to the ministry of the disciples and the Lord

"Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. Herod said, 'John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?' And he sought to see him" (Luke 9:7-9)

We're so familiar with Israel's occupation by the ruling world power of Rome that we tend to forget that the nation also had false kings during the Lord's lifetime. Herod was of Edomite descent and therefore had no legitimate claim to the throne of Israel. Otherwise known as Herod Antipas, he was the son of Herod the Great who had tried to destroy Jesus at His birth (see Matthew 2:1-22). Herod the tetrarch succeeded his father as king but only in Galilee and Perea. Perea was the southern Transjordan part of Israel.

In Luke 9:7, Luke records Herod's reaction to the missionary activities which took place in the Galilean part of his territory. When he learned of them, he became very agitated about Jesus' fame. Both Matthew and Mark attribute this fear to his conclusion that it was John the Baptist who was doing all these miracles (Matthew 14:1-2, Mark 6:14-16). You would have thought that he would have dreaded meeting a resurrected John, after all a resurrected man has unique powers! But Luke 9:9 states that he actually wanted to see Jesus! The Lord granted him no such audience because he had silenced God speaking to him by beheading John. Matthew 14:13 states that Jesus immediately withdrew from the area, when He learned of Herod's intent. Israel's true King also knew that Herod's carnal desire was for Him to perform some miracle especially for his benefit (see Luke 23:8). But the Saviour had come to seek and to save sinners such as Herod, not to entertain them! How utterly cunningly selfish Herod was! And what an impostor of a king! Anyone with any moral fibre would have urgently sought out the miracle Healer in order to profusely thank Him for the great blessings He'd brought to, and upon, his subjects.

3. Luke 9:10-17: The Feeding of the Five Thousand

"On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing. Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, 'Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place.' But he said to them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said, 'We have no more than five loaves and two fish - unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.' For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, 'Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.' And they did so, and had them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces." (Luke 9:10-17)

Whilst Matthew 14:13 records that Jesus sailed away from the public eye because Herod was seeking an interview with Him, Luke 9:10 states that the Lord took His tired disciples apart from the crowds - presumably so that they could recover from their arduous missionary work. Our Master is aware that we all need time alone with Him: to speak about all that we have done in His Name; to ask for His continued blessing of it; and to renew our spiritual strength.

However, the Lord's movements soon became public knowledge (Luke 9:11). The peace of Bethsaida was soon broken when the people ran there on foot and arrived before Him. Even though the Twelve needed a well-earned rest, Jesus did not turn the crowds away: *"He welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing"* (Luke 9:11). He busied Himself all day long because their spiritual needs were so great. Mark 6:34 comments: *"When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."* That, in itself, was such an indictment of Herod, the impostor king!

As evening time drew near, the Twelve became anxious about the physical well-being of the crowds who were so thoroughly engrossed with the Master that they didn't notice the passage of time. *"Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we're here in a desolate place"* the Twelve advised the Lord. *"You give them something to eat"* replied the Lord. *"We have no more than five loaves and two fish. What are they for so many?"* protested the disciples. *"Just have them to sit down in groups of about fifty each"* the Lord retorted and then gave thanks to God for these meagre provisions. Actually, all the synoptic Gospel writers record that He said a blessing over the five barley loaves and the two fish (Matthew 14:19, Mark 6:41 and Luke 6:16). In His hands, it was the blessing of multiplication. He used His disciples to distribute the blessing to the hungry people.

Every one ate. Everyone's hunger was satisfied. All the left over broken pieces were collected by the disciples - twelve baskets full. There was no environmental impact: no waste and no litter left behind.

Have you ever thought why it is that this miracle is the only one which is recorded in all four Gospels? (See Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 6:10-17 and John 6:1-14). It's because it's a sign of the Messiah. The Jews should have recognised their King had come. *"Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd"* (Isaiah 40:10-11). But the Jews wanted a shortcut into kingdom blessings. John ends his account of the feeding of the five thousand with these words *"When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone"* (John 6:15). They deliberately ignored the way of repentance for the forgiveness of sins into the kingdom previously prescribed by John the Baptist (see Luke 3:2-18). It's no coincidence that Luke 3:19-20 continue with the actions of Herod who silenced this messenger by jailing the fiery preacher!

But today's men are no different in heart to those Jews. In general, mankind only wants the Jesus who solves the world's material problems. Mankind doesn't want the prerequisites of repentance towards God and faith in the same Jesus as Lord and Saviour, which are demanded by God. Therefore, all of the world's needs, including feeding the hungry, which is pictured in the feeding of the five thousand, will only be satisfied in the future when the Lord Jesus returns in power and great glory. It will be then that God's kingdom is physically established upon earth. That message of hope in Christ alone should be included in our Gospel preaching. We present an altogether different person to any of today's, or future, power-craving Caesars. Like Paul and Silas we can turn the world upside down by preaching *"that there is another king, Jesus"* (see Acts 17:6-7).

Finally, some issues arising from today's talk

To summarise Luke 9:1-17, there are three sections, all concerning the kingdom of God.

1. The Twelve were sent out with the Gospel of the kingdom. They preached that Israel's King was amongst them in Person. Mark 3:13-15 succinctly recounts: *"He ... called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons."* They demonstrated the reality of their preaching by performing miracles and signs. The Jewish nation refused to believe their message. However, 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 states that signs stand as a testimony against all unbelievers who refuse the message of the Gospel.
2. Herod the tetrarch was disturbed by the Lord's fame, which was brought about from the spread of the Gospel of the kingdom throughout Galilee.
3. The healing and feeding of the five thousand were further miraculous demonstrations of the power of God's King. They picture the blessings of the coming Messianic kingdom of God, when the Lord Jesus will reign as *"KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS"* (see Revelation 19:16). The administration of that worldwide kingdom will be via the Twelve apostles. That's pictured in their distribution of the food and their authority over the massive crowd. Every blessing for mankind's material needs will be supplied in abundance in that coming day of glory, when the Lord Jesus reigns out of Zion and satisfies the poor with bread (see Psalm 132:15).

Many practical issues and challenges arise from this passage of Scripture:

1. All believers are called by the Lord Jesus to follow Him as His disciples. Luke's Gospel contains much teaching about Christian discipleship, which Luke adds to in his accounts of the Acts of the Apostles. In our series so far we have seen the Lord call His first disciples: Peter, James and John (Luke 5:1-11). Each had life - changing encounters with the Saviour. Then in Luke 6:12-16, the Lord chose the Twelve. Luke 6:20-49 follow on with the challenges and 'rules' for Christian disciples. From Luke 8:1-3, and Luke 8:40-56) we learned that many women also became His disciples. They had different gifts and duties when compared with the more prominent men folk. Over the next weeks, God willing, we'll learn more about the realities of discipleship as we continue our studies in Luke's Gospel.
2. The main point of Christian discipleship is that the Lord sends us out into the world with the Gospel message. In this Christian dispensation we preach the Gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24). It's a message of salvation from sin and its consequences. During the initial days of Christianity, the Gospel preaching was often accompanied by *"signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will"* (Hebrews 2:4) similar to the miraculous signs of the Gospel of the kingdom preachings in Luke 9:1-6. We may feel inadequate in comparison to them. But, like the boy with the loaves and fishes, we

must place whatever resources we have into the Lord's hands knowing that He'll use them for His own glory. And we should never say, "*But what are they for so many?*" (See John 6:9)

3. Christians belong to the Lord Jesus who was rejected by His people and then crucified by the world. Neither Israel nor the world wants Him to reign over them as King. In general, the Jews didn't repent and believe that He was their Messiah. This became evident when they later delivered Him to be crucified and then "*sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us'*" (Luke 19:14). This is very much the reaction of people in today's world. The world doesn't want to be subject to the King of kings. In general, He's no more acceptable now than He was then. He continues to be rejected by mankind. Therefore the task of spreading the good news about Him is difficult. There's much opposition to God and His word. Nowadays in the western world there's aggressive philosophical hostility to the Scriptures and to the Gospel facts of sin, death and eternal judgment. In other parts of the world there's open persecution of Christians and the real threat of death. Our Lord demands that we remain true Christian disciples. That means complete loyalty to Him and to His word, as we shall learn in later studies of Luke's Gospel.
4. Christian believers are sent out into a hostile world with the message of the Gospel of God's grace not the Gospel of the Kingdom. However, we do have appropriate resources from our risen and glorified Lord, who said: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:18- 20). Therefore every one of us must be actively engaged in His service until He comes again for us. Following the Rapture of both resurrected and living believers, He will bring us with himself to establish His kingdom upon earth. Then we shall reign together with Him. And, like the Twelve in the feeding of the five thousand, we shall administer the Kingdom for Him.

So I finish today by asking:

- Are you a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ?
- Have you responded to His call to repentance and faith you've heard in the preaching of the Gospel?
- Have you given your life over to serve Him faithfully until He returns?

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