

June 19, 2022

JESUS' CONFRONTATION WITH THE WORLD

Luke 5:1-6:11

(11 of 13 in a series through Luke 1-7)

One key way the Scripture shows us the identity of Jesus is by noting what he does. And one key place we see Luke doing that is Luke 5:1-6:11. In this text, we see Jesus' identity and deeds coming through as he calls his disciples and confronts the world. Luke groups the call of Jesus' disciples together in this section with Jesus' confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees in order to show us more who Jesus is.

The scribes and Pharisees were a group of Jews whose stated purpose was to bring Israelites back to obedience to the law. But they had a few problems. One, they often went beyond the law with their commands, teachings, and expectations. They were known to put a fence around the law. For example, if the law said you weren't to eat catfish, then they could theoretically forbid the eating of any fish at all. After all, if you didn't eat any fish, you certainly would never be guilty of eating catfish. But, as you can see, that's going above and beyond the law. Second, they weren't themselves wholly committed to obeying the law of God. We know that because Jesus says to them at one point, "You load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers" (Luke 11:46). Finally, they didn't recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of the law, and consequently were constantly in conflict with him.

So, as Jesus calls his disciples to himself, and confronts the scribes and Pharisees at seemingly every turn, Luke continues to show us who Jesus is, and he shows us what Jesus does. And I want to highlight the ways he does that this morning, beginning with noting that Jesus is the gracious Lord who calls sinners to himself.

Jesus is the gracious Lord who calls sinners to himself

Luke begins our section with the calling of Simon Peter and James and John. Jesus was teaching the Word of God, while the crowds were pressing in to hear him. Therefore, seeing a couple of boats by the lake where some fisherman were washing out their nets from having been fishing the night before, Jesus asked one of them—Simon Peter—if he'd put his boat out into the water a bit and allow Jesus to preach from there. Simon agreed, and this allowed Jesus to teach the crowds more comfortably and where all could hear him.

But it's when he finished speaking that things get real interesting. Jesus turns to Peter and tells him to let down the nets into the water for a catch of fish. And Peter notes to Jesus how futile this would be since they'd been fishing all night, having caught nothing. "But," he says, "at your word I will let down the nets" (5:5). And Luke tells us that as they did this, so many fish were caught in their nets that their nets were breaking, and putting them in the boats, the boats started sinking.

At that moment, Peter knows that Jesus is not simply a gifted teacher, so he turns to Jesus and says, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (v. 8). Now, this confession of being sinful could be Peter acknowledging that he’d just been doubting whether or not he’d catch any fish when Jesus told him to lower his nets into the water, but I think it’s more. And one reason I think it’s more is because Peter refers to Jesus as “Lord.” Luke has used the term “Lord” throughout his gospel to this point primarily to refer to God, but Peter is the first person to apply this title to Jesus.¹ It seems that Peter is recognizing more of who Jesus is. What’s more, Peter is exhibiting the same kind of response here that Isaiah had when he appeared before the Lord in Isaiah 6. He instantly recognizes his sinfulness, even asking Jesus to depart since he is not worthy to be in the presence of the Lord and truly deserves to face the judgment of death in the Lord’s presence. Thus, Luke once more reminds us that Jesus is the Lord. But note how he is the *gracious* Lord in how he deals with Peter.

With Peter’s confession that he is a sinful man and request for Jesus to depart, Jesus could have said, “You’re right,” and left. But that’s not what he does. Rather, he said, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men” (5:10). In other words, not only does Jesus not flee from Peter, he calls Peter to himself and tells him that he’ll use him to recruit other sinners to turn and follow Jesus.

Luke makes clear that Jesus is the gracious Lord who calls sinners to himself. And I want to pause and reflect on this reality more, but I think it’s best to let Luke’s testimony build first because he continues to show us who Jesus is and how he acts toward sinners. Next, for example, we see that Jesus is the Redeemer who shows compassion to outcasts.

Jesus is the Redeemer who shows compassion to outcasts

In the next episode of Jesus’ ministry that Luke focuses on, Jesus is ministering in a city when a man with leprosy approaches him, saying, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean” (5:12). Now, this is daring because there were specific instructions concerning men with skin diseases like leprosy. According to Leviticus 13:45-46, this man was required to wear torn clothes, let his hair hang down long and loose, and every time he’s within earshot of someone, he would have to cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean,” while living alone, outside of the camp. It is hard to imagine being more of an outcast than this man. And yet it is this man who reflects great faith, not only being willing to approach Jesus but noting that he is certain Jesus *can* heal him if indeed he wants to.

Now, once more, let’s anticipate what could have been Jesus’ response. Just as he could’ve said to Peter, “You’re right you’re sinful, get away,” so he could now say to this leprous man, “Get away from me. Why do you think you should even be approaching me?” But he doesn’t. He doesn’t rebuke him whatsoever. He speaks to him gently. And not only that. He *touches* the man. Luke tells us that Jesus “stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ‘I will; be clean’”

¹ David Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 228.

(5:13). And immediately the leprosy left the man, and Jesus told him to walk through the prescriptions in the law for the priest to deem him clean. And this led to so much interest from the crowd, that the sick kept coming to him until Jesus withdrew to pray.

But note here how Jesus utterly restored this man's life. Everything changed in that moment, with that touch from Jesus—which would have been the first human touch this man would have known since his skin disease—and his declaration, "Be clean." Jesus is the redeemer. But note as well how Jesus expresses his compassion. He not only speaks, but touches the man. He, once again, is the savior who does not flee from us but reaches out for us with grace and compassion. But once more, let's continue before pausing and reflecting. Next we are reminded that Jesus is God the Son who forgives sins.

Jesus is God the Son who forgives sins

The next story we may find ourselves even more familiar with because it unfolds in a dramatic way. Jesus is teaching in a house, but the crowds are so drawn to him that they're crowding in and surrounding the house. But there were some men who have a paralytic friend, and they believe that if they can just get their friend to Jesus, he'll be healed. The problem, of course, was that they can't get through the crowd to Jesus. Therefore, they hatch a plan to get their friend to Jesus. They go up on the roof of the house, chip away until they create a hole in the roof, and then lower their friend to Jesus. Obviously this is an act of great faith in Jesus and his willingness to heal their friend.

And sure enough, they pull off their plan. But when they lower their friend to Jesus, Jesus doesn't look at the paralyzed man and pronounce a word of physical healing. Rather, he says, "Man, your sins are forgiven you" (5:20). This was no doubt shocking to the friends who were hoping their friend would be healed. But it's not the friends' reaction that Luke focuses on. Instead, he tells us that Jesus' words caused no small stir among the scribes and Pharisees who began to say to themselves, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (5:21). And they were right about that. Indeed, only God can forgive sins.

C. S. Lewis has the best comment on how crazy it is that Jesus announces a man's sins are forgiven. He writes, "Now, unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offences against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? . . . Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. . . . This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken."²

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 51-52.

Lewis is right, isn't he? The scribes and Pharisees are therefore right to think that Jesus is making a claim that he is acting as God. And, Jesus knows what they're thinking, so he speaks to them. And if you were a first century observer, you might expect that he'd say something like, "Look, I know what you're thinking. Only God can forgive sins. And you're right. So, let me make something clear: I'm not announcing forgiveness as if I have the authority in and of myself to do so. I'm just announcing that God forgives them," or the like. Right? You'd expect him to clear everything up. But he doesn't. Instead, Jesus doubles down. He asks them, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or say, 'Rise and walk'? (5:23). Now the reality is that either is just as easy to say. The problem is that if you say, "Rise and walk" and the person doesn't, you're going to be exposed as someone who speaks, but your words have no power. But this is precisely what Jesus is going to show them, that his words do indeed have power. So he says to them, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . . I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." (5:24). And immediately the man does just that and goes home glorifying God.

Thus, Jesus doesn't avoid their assumptions about him, but confirms them. He is indeed God the Son and thus acts with the authority of God. And as such, he forgives sins. Therefore, we can say that to this point Luke has shown us Jesus is Lord, Redeemer, and God, who calls sinners to himself, shows compassion to outcasts, and forgives sins. But let's note one more bit of Jesus' identity before we settle in and apply these truths. Next we see that Jesus is the savior who seeks out sinners.

Jesus is the Savior who seeks after sinners

Next Luke tells us of the calling of Levi (or Matthew) who was a tax collector. Now, you'll notice that much of what we have mentioned about Jesus' actions revolve around showing grace to sinners, forgiving sinners, and calling sinners to himself. And the reason why, of course, is because I think that's largely the focus of these stories, but the story that makes that most clear is this one dealing with the calling of Levi to follow Jesus.

The specific focus on Levi is interesting. This calling and controversy section started with the calling of Peter, James, and John, which makes sense since they become Jesus' closest disciples. And right after our section we'll get a summary in 6:12-16 of Jesus' disciples. And then, right in the middle of this section, we have a story about the calling of Levi to follow Jesus. But why? I mean, he doesn't come to stand out really in any special way compared to the others, necessarily. If I ask you to name the most impressive of Jesus' disciples, I don't know how many leap to name Levi (or Matthew). It seems, rather, that Luke brings up Levi's calling because he wants to emphasize this point that Jesus makes when he brought Levi to follow him, namely, that he's come to seek after sinners.

The call of Levi itself is told quite briefly. Jesus sees Levi the tax collector, sitting at the tax booth, and he tells him, "Follow me," and he does. But what comes next is a big deal. Levi throws a party, hosting a bunch of his fellow tax collectors—no doubt so that he can introduce them to Jesus. But when the scribes and Pharisees see this, they are upset that Jesus could be eating and

drinking with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus doesn't need to be around such sinful people, they think. But Jesus responds, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (5:31-32).

Now, with that, Jesus makes clear that he's not just hanging out with sinners. It's not as if he just enjoys that crowd more than those seeking to obey the Lord. He's there to call them to repentance. But he also makes clear that he's coming to seek after sinners because they're the ones in need of repentance. Those who see themselves as righteous—like the scribes and Pharisees—don't see any need for a savior. That's Jesus' point. He has come to save sinners. Therefore, he is seeking after them.

By this point, then, Luke has made this point over and over again. Jesus doesn't flee from sinners. He calls them to repent, forgives them, shows them compassion, and utilizes them to do his will. Therefore, if you recognize your sin today, don't believe the lie that Jesus wants nothing to do with you. See who he is. See who Luke is showing us he is. And run to the one who is our savior, redeemer, Lord, and gracious God. And finally we see that Jesus is the bridegroom and Lord who exposes men's hearts.

Okay, now surely we've seen enough to feel the weight of what Luke is showing us. Jesus is the Lord, God, Redeemer, and Savior who calls sinners to himself, shows compassion to outcasts, seeks after sinners, and forgives sins. And the reason this testimony about Jesus is so important for us to see is that we don't naturally think of our Lord this way. We often think of the Lord responding according to how Peter anticipated. We think that when we recognize and confess our sins, he wants to flee from us, hold us at a distance, and remind us that we aren't worth much or are a great burden for him to deal with. And so often we compound our sins by acting like Adam and Eve in the garden and fleeing from the Lord in shame, eventually allowing our hearts to grow cold, hard, and calloused toward him. This is the devil's design. But look who Luke is clearly showing us that Jesus is here. Therefore, if you came in this morning with your sin weighing you down, repent, and then run to Jesus who is running toward you with compassion and mercy. Those who come to him he will by no means cast out. And remember after today that this is who Jesus is. Therefore, respond to your sin by confession, repentance, and walking with him and never by running from him.

But if your heart is cold toward sin today and you are unwilling to turn from it, then notice Luke's last image he provides for us of who Jesus is. He shows us that Jesus is the Bridegroom who exposes men's hearts.

Jesus is the Bridegroom who exposes men's hearts

In the last three episodes, we see that Jesus is the Bridegroom and Lord. First, we see he's the bridegroom as he has yet another showdown with the scribes and Pharisees. They come and question Jesus saying, "The disciples of John fast often and offer their prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink" (5:33). Now, fasting was done in part as a cry for deliverance, a cry for God to come to his people and bless them. With that in mind, then,

Jesus' answer makes sense. He says, "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?" (5:34). In other words, Jesus is saying that God has come to his people. Jesus is here. This is especially clear when you consider that the Old Testament would refer to the Lord's people as his bride. Thus, if Jesus is referring to himself as the groom, he is claiming to be God.

And now that God has come to his people, Jesus says, things will change. Some of the old traditions will pass away. New wine is here, and you can't put it in old wine skins because once the new wine begins to ferment, then the old wine skins will burst. Jesus' disciples will indeed fast when Jesus is taken away from them in death, but they'll never fast again as if the Lord hasn't come to them. And yet, some will still prefer to deny this reality, Jesus notes. Thus, he declares that he is the bridegroom, but he is also exposing men's hearts.

And the exposure of men's hearts gets really clear in 6:1-11. Twice the scribes and Pharisees look to condemn Jesus for a Sabbath violation. In the first, Jesus' disciples would pluck heads of grain as they walk through a field, rub them together, and then eat them. But the disciples had decided to label that action as "work." Therefore, when they see Jesus' disciples doing that one Sabbath, they accuse him of letting them violate the Sabbath.

Now, Jesus could have said, "That's not work," but he wants to say more. First, he shows his opponents that they can't even account for what the Bible teaches. Jesus notes that David came into the tabernacle in a moment of need and ate the bread of presence, even giving some to his men, though it is unlawful for anyone but the priests to eat. Thus, already the Pharisees can't account for why that was okay. And it appears Jesus is saying that David rightly interpreted the law. He knows that the law allowed for meeting human need, even on the Sabbath. And just in case they realized what Jesus was saying and thought, "Well, David was exceptional though," Jesus responds, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (6:5). Jesus is not just a right interpreter of the law. He's the law giver.

And finally, on another Sabbath the scribes and Pharisees were watching Jesus just to look to accuse him of wrong and attack him. And Jesus knew their hearts, so when he sees a man with a withered hand, he has the man come to him and then asks his opponents, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" (6:9). His point is that they're so focused on their man-made rules that they're ignoring that they want to do harm and evil while Jesus wants to do good and heal, and somehow they've convinced themselves that it is Jesus who is violating God's law. And, thus, Jesus heals the man while exposing their hearts.

In this section of Luke's gospel, Jesus gets the best of his opponents every time, revealing their wicked ways—though they claim to be righteous. So it will be on the day of judgment. Do not think that you can cover your sins before the Lord and prosper. If you're his child, he'll expose your sin so that you will deal with it. He loves you too much not to. And if you're not his child, he'll expose it on the day of judgment as you face his wrath. So, bow the knee to him now. After all, he is gracious toward repentant sinners. And let us remember as we come to the table. Amen.