The Journey to Jerusalem Week 5
Luke 16:19 – 18:30

29) “A beggar named Lazarus”

Read Luke 16:19-31

This story illustrates what Jesus has just taught: “Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (9). That saying led on to further comment about “worldly wealth” (11-13). The Pharisees, “who loved money” (14), are typical of the rich man in this story who has no care for those who are poor and insignificant.

After death we will all see things differently (Mk.10:29-31; James 2:5). This view from beyond isn’t literal but uses Jewish imagery to convey some core truths about the after-life: Heaven is a place of bliss and gain. Hell is a place of anguish and loss. A great gulf is fixed between them. And there will be a reversal of earth’s fortunes based on very different values. It’s hard for the rich to enter heaven (Mt.19:23-24; Lk.4:18; 6:20).

The problem isn’t in being rich - Abraham himself was wealthy (Gen.13:2) But this man didn’t use his riches well. In contrast, the beggar had no earthly helper, but his name (Lazarus means helped by God) points to his faith that his name was written in heaven (Lk.10:20). Both men provide the eternal perspective which calls us to live justly and by faith.

30) “We have only done our duty”

Read Luke 17:1-10

In this collection of four teachings, Jesus speaks first about “things that cause people to sin” (1-2; Mt.18:6-7; Mk.9:42). There are many stumbling-blocks for Christians and often they are caused by other people. Hence this strong warning that such behaviour will incur a severe judgement (Rom.14:13).

One major obstacle is a refusal to forgive those who wrong us. Such people can be rebuked and urged to repent (3; Mt.18:15) but even if they don’t we must still keep on forgiving them, just as God keeps on forgiving our sins against him (4; Mt.18:21-35; Mt.6:12; Eph.4:32).

We can all identify with the prayer, “Increase our faith” (5-6; Mt.17:20). But prayer is about reliance on God and a mustard seed was “the smallest of all seeds” (Mt.13:32) so Jesus is saying that even the tiniest amount of faith is enough. It’s not the greatness and strength of our faith which matters but the greatness of the one we trust in and the strength of his promises (2 Pet.1:3-4).

So we live by faith and forgiveness in a sinful world. We are his children but there is no room for any pride or presumption. Whatever we do for him, we are only doing our duty as unworthy servants (7-10; 1 Pet.4:10).
31) “One came back and thanked him”

Read Luke 17:11-19

Leprosy referred to a wide range of skin diseases, all of which meant that lepers were both sick and also considered unclean. The result was permanent social distancing, as seen here when these ten approached Jesus to ask for his mercy and healing (11-13). Usually Jesus instructed those he healed to tell no one, but lepers had to be pronounced clean by a priest before they could return home (Lev.14:1-32; Lk.5:14).

So Jesus sent all ten of them to see a priest, even before any healing had taken place. “And as they went they were healed” (14). They had acted in faith, doing what Jesus told them to do (in contrast to Naaman the leper 2 Kgs.5:10-12). But the main point here is not their faith or even their healing. Rather it’s a story about gratitude — and the lack of it — in response to God’s mercy.

Of the ten who were healed only one of them returned with praise to God and thanks to Jesus (15-18). That one was a Samaritan. Once again, it’s the foreigner rather than the Jews in the story who demonstrated God’s kingdom values (Lk.10:33-37). Here that value is thanksgiving. Being thankful for the mercy we’ve received is a sure sign of saving faith (19; Rom.7:14-15; 2 Cor.9:15).

32) “The day the Son of Man is revealed”

Read Luke 17:20-37

Many people wanted to know when God’s kingdom would come and that’s the question put to Jesus here (20-21). His answer is best translated “the kingdom of God is among you”. In his own person and ministry the kingdom had already arrived (Mk.1:15). There will be a day when he returns and will be revealed for who he is (30; Dan.7:13-14) but it’s more important to be ready for his coming than to focus on its timeline.

Out of enthusiasm, there’ll be plenty of false announcements that Jesus has returned already (22-23) but they can be ignored because when it happens it will be obvious to all (24). And it will happen in the midst of the ordinary stuff of life, with people going about their daily lives (26-35). The situation will be urgent but many will remain complacent about their need to be ready.

These verses (26-35) are also in Matt.24:37-42, as part of the longer section about the Lord’s return (Mt.24:1-51; Lk.21:5-36). There the punchline is, “Therefore, keep watch” (Mt.24:42). Here Luke makes a different application about the future revealing of Jesus — it’s those who lose their lives for his sake now who will be saved when he comes (33; Mt.10:39; Mk.8:35; Jn.12:25).
33) “Always pray and not give up”

Read Luke 18:1-8

Prayer is a mystery. Sometimes we pray hard and long and nothing seems to change. We wonder too if it's right to repeat that prayer – after all, Jesus both promised that if we pray with faith then it will be done (Mk.11:24; Jas.1:5-6) and he also warned against empty repetition of words because our Father knows what we need before we ask him (Mt.6:7-8).

But that saying is followed by the Lord’s prayer, a pattern to guide our regular praying (Mt.6:9-13) and in Luke the Lord's prayer leads on to the parable of the friend at midnight, making clear that persistence is necessary, not because God is unwilling but because he is our Father (11:1-13). Likewise in this parable, Jesus isn't suggesting that God is like the unjust judge, reluctant to answer until he gets nagged into it (4-5). Rather, if even an unjust judge will respond to persistent pleading then we can be very sure that God will hear and answer us (7).

So prayer is a mystery, an act of faith, trying to discern God’s will and his time so that our prayers align with that (8; 1 Jn.5:14-15; 2 Pet.3:8). As his children (“his chosen ones” 7), “we live by faith not by sight” (2 Cor.5:7). So we “should always pray and not give up” (1).

34) “God have mercy on me, a sinner”

Read Luke 18:9-14

This is the final passage in Luke’s long section of material mainly unique to this Gospel which began in 9:51 with Jesus setting out on his journey to Jerusalem. Along the way he has had several strained encounters with the Pharisees whose self-righteous religion stood in sharp opposition to the good news of God’s kingdom (11:37-43,53; 12:1; 14:1-3; 15:2; 16:14).

Jesus had already challenged their desire for honour and prestige, a conversation which ended with the words used to conclude the parable he tells here: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (14; 14:7-11; Mt.23:12). There is no point in being persistent in prayer (18:1-8) if the heart attitude behind our prayers is wrong.

Legalistic self-righteousness (9) results in boastful and self-centred thoughts and prayers (11-12). But rather than being better than others such people are in fact in the greatest need. True righteousness is given to those who are in “poor in spirit” (Mt.5:3) as seen in this tax-collector’s prayer (13). Mercy and forgiveness are God’s gift to those who know they are sinners with nothing to boast of before God (Ps.51:17).
35) “The kingdom of God belongs to...”

Read Luke 18:15-30

God’s kingdom belongs to those who receive it “like a little child”, not because children are sweet and innocent but because they are humble and trusting, dependent on others to meet their needs (16-17; Mt.18:13; 19:13-15). They typify those who are “poor in spirit” (Lk.18:14; Mt.5:3). In contrast to that, this ruler illustrates “how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God” (24; Mt.19:16-26, Mk.10:17-27).

Both his question and morality were sincere (18-21) and Jesus “loved him” (Mk.10:21). But he lacked what he most needed – to trust in Jesus rather than his “great wealth” (22-23). Jesus exposed that by telling him to give all he had to the poor. The command was specific to this situation but all who follow Jesus must have the same total commitment to be his disciples however costly that might be (14:25-33).

It’s impossible to walk in the “narrow way” while carrying bulky baggage (25; Mt.7:13-14). Salvation is only possible for us all by God’s grace (26-27). In this reversal of first and last it’s those who lose “everything” for Jesus and God’s kingdom who will receive his rich blessing now – “and in the age to come eternal life” (28-30; Mk.10:28-31).