

## A Series of Surprises

Luke 17:11 - 19:27

You should keep in mind as you read the gospels that they are not a history of Jesus' life. They do not intend to tell us everything that Jesus said and did. We will have to wait for heaven to get the rest of the story. Instead, each of the gospels weave the teachings and works of Jesus into a story that reveals Jesus' message to us. Each gospel has its own message even though they have in common a core of the teachings that Jesus gave and the works that He did. When we notice a theme or literary device that ties a series of events or teachings together we should pay close attention because these are the keys to understanding the unique message of each gospel. Here in this section of Luke, we have come across such a device and so I want to bring it to your attention.

After identifying the literary device in the gospel, I found that the passage that was consistent with the use of the device kept growing. So, when I wanted to bring a message beginning with verse 20 in chapter 17 and ending with verse 14 in chapter 18 I have ended up with a passage that begins in verse 11 of chapter 17 and concludes with verse 27 of chapter 19. I doubled my verses and so I guess that means that I will have to double the length of my sermon... The literary device that we have identified is that of a surprise or unexpected turn in each otherwise independent story.

In the first, Jesus heals ten lepers who were in a group and who appealed to Him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Jesus told them to go to the priest and show themselves to him and on the way they were all healed. But, of the ten, only one returned to give God glory and to thank Jesus for his healing. And, surprise! it was the Samaritan among them who did so. All of the Jews who witnessed this would have been upset that such a thing had taken place. No one expected to find good manners or much less faith in one of those uncouth Samaritans.

Then the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come. The Pharisees never asked sincere questions. They never asked a question without

"knowing the answer." They were always trying to get Jesus to say something they could use against Him. No doubt, this was no exception. If Jesus had said that the kingdom has come they would have accused Him of blasphemy. If He had said that the kingdom was still future then they would have said that Jesus was clearly not the Messiah because if He were then the Kingdom would be here. Instead, Jesus warned them not to pay attention to the people who were declaring that this or that sign proved the kingdom was or was not here because... "the kingdom of God is within you." The Pharisees had never thought of it that way before and Jesus' statement suggests a question, If the kingdom of God were to be within you, would you know it?

The question asked was a point of great concern for the disciples and the answer given may have confused them and so Jesus expanded on His thought in a word He shared directly with the disciples. He told them that they would look back on the time that they were with Him and wish they could return but that they would not be able to do so. The day, He said, will come but first He would have to "suffer many things and be rejected by this generation." The day will be like the days of Noah and like that of Lot. In both cases, judgment fell suddenly catching the populations outside of the faith unaware and ill prepared. The surprising element was the add on. "There will be two men in one bed; the one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. Two men will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left." In a world where the Jews heard just themselves in Jesus' stories and when they assumed that the Jews were the people of God nearly without exception, how could half of their number be left behind?

Luke then tells Jesus' story of the persistent widow who got a favorable judgment as a lesson meant to teach "that men always ought to pray and not lose heart." The unjust judge in the story serves as a negative or as an opposite of God whose ear is not deaf toward the needy and who does care deeply about the distinction between right and wrong and between the righteous and the wicked. If the unjust judge can be persuaded to rule rightly, how much more our holy and righteous God? The story has the element of surprise because everyone knows that indigent widows never do well in court.

Another story with an announced message is the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went up to the temple to pray. That a Pharisee is found in the temple praying surprises no one but when the tax collector comes in to pray the collective reaction would have been something like, What's he doing in there? But Jesus honored the humble prayer of the tax collector, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" and rejected that of the prideful Pharisee.

And when the disciples were sure that Jesus did not want to be bothered by the parents who were bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing, Jesus rebuked them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of God."

When the rich young ruler came to Jesus, he looked good and asked all the right questions. (or so it seemed) But Jesus was offended by his audacious manner and by his fallacious assumptions and sent him away empty handed. He was the kind of new member every church seems to be looking for but Jesus had no time for him.

But, as the crowd with Jesus passed by a place near Jericho, the festivities were rudely interrupted by the screaming of a blind man who refused to shut up. People were trying to hear what Jesus was saying but who could possibly hear or enjoy Jesus' teaching over the screaming of the demented blind man. "Son of David, have mercy on me." "Son of David have mercy on me." "Son of David have mercy on me." The more they insisted that he be quiet, the louder he became. Here was a man that no one wanted in their church but Jesus stopped everything and asked him, "What do you want Me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, that I may receive my sight." Then Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has made you well."

Once in Jericho, Jesus singled out the short chief of the tax collectors. He brought him down from the tree and went with him to his house where they shared the afternoon. The people grumbled about Jesus choosing an unworthy tax collector when none of them would have darkened the man's door for any price. Then the tax collector confessed his sin and his faith in Jesus. Jesus called the man "a son of Abraham."

Finally Jesus told the story of a nobleman who went away to a far country and stayed a long time in order to correct those who thought that the kingdom of God would appear immediately. Upon his return the nobleman rewarded the risk takers and punished the cautious investor who just kept his money safe. The surprise is in incredulity of the investor who could expect so much of his servants.

Can we agree that we are no better than those who first heard these stories or than the people of the 1st century churches that were the first to read Luke's gospel? If so, then these surprises are meant for us. They challenge us to check our assumptions at the door and hear Jesus freshly. Notice who does not do so well in the stories; Jewish lepers, Pharisees, church folks, disciples, rich young men, the majority voice of the attendees at a Jesus rally. Notice who does do well: the Samaritan leper, those focused on what God is doing now, the persistent widow, humble tax collectors, children, a demented blind man, and those who actually were listening to what Jesus was saying about His own suffering.

What do you specifically hear Jesus saying that He values and that you have not?