

Series: Who is Jesus, According to the Gospel Writers
#3: “Who is Jesus, According to Luke?”

Luke 19:10

By Rev. John Gill

Which of the four Gospels is your favorite Gospel? Have you ever asked yourself that question? Even though most all of us appreciate aspects of each of the Gospels, there is usually one that particularly resonates with us, for one reason or another – the Gospel we turn to first when we want to read the story of Jesus. Which Gospel speaks most powerfully to you?

In preparing for my message today, I looked up several on-line surveys of people’s preference - and they all were about the same: John was the most favorite, followed by Matthew and Luke (about tied). Mark was consistently the least favorite. Those differences are caused by many factors, of course. It may be that the stories of Jesus’ life that are included by our favorite Gospel writer are especially meaningful to us. Or, we might love the parables and other teachings of Jesus that particular Gospel contains. It could be it’s the way the Gospel writer chooses to tell his story that gives it special meaning. Or, as we are considering during this sermon series, it may actually be how our favorite Gospel writer answers the question: “Who is Jesus.”

Three weeks ago, we looked at Mark, the first Gospel written. Mark is the shortest of the four, beginning his story with Jesus’ baptism by John, and ending with the empty tomb. If Mark is your favorite, maybe you appreciate the way Mark presents Jesus as very human, displaying the full range of human emotion - a Jesus who displays a sense of urgency in carrying out his mission, moving relentlessly toward the cross, willingly accepting suffering in order to bring us redemption. Mark’s answer to “Who Jesus Is” is that Jesus is the Suffering Servant, by whose death, we are given the opportunity for eternal life. Not surprisingly, Mark’s Gospel is a favorite of folks who are going through trials and tribulations, who need to be assured that God understands their suffering and can offer us hope of a new life. It might be that Mark might speak to us in this time of trials and tribulations during this challenging time for our nation and our world. Maybe that is why you like Mark.

Or perhaps your favorite is Matthew, the subject of the message two Sundays ago. Basing his Gospel on Mark’s outline, Matthew went out of his way to present a Jewish Jesus, one who’s life, death, and resurrection proves he is the long-anticipated Messiah of Israel. Matthew’s view of Jesus is just as we sing in the Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem:” “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Jewish scriptures – the one expected for centuries. Matthew’s Jesus is the King, the heir to the Throne of David. But Jesus’ kingdom extends beyond the Jews to encompass the whole world. – He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And as our Lord and King, he calls us to acknowledge his sovereignty and to obey his Word. If your favorite Gospel is Matthew you appreciate the orderliness of God’s plan of salvation, and the way his Gospel spells out what it means to follow Jesus – to be a disciple.

If Luke is your favorite, you’ll want to listen closely over the next few minutes since his Gospel is the focus for our message this morning. And if, like lots of people, you especially love John, I guess you’ll just have to tune in to worship next Sunday!

Today our subject is the Gospel of Luke. Notice that I didn’t tell you which Gospel I like best, because I love each one for different reasons. But if I were forced to choose one, I guess I’d have to say “I love

Luke.” And I’m not alone. In studying for this message, I discovered that I’m in good company – the great bible scholar, William Barclay, was also partial to Luke. This is what he wrote: “If I ever had to choose to keep one book of the New Testament, and one book only, the book I would choose would be Luke’s Gospel, for in it I believe that we have Jesus at his most beautiful and the Gospel at its widest.”¹ (p. 17) For me, the Jesus of Luke is the picture of Jesus I fell in love with.

So, let’s take a look at Luke’s portrait of Jesus. But before we do that, we need to know a little about Luke himself, and why he wrote his Gospel.

Who wrote this Gospel? Like the others, the answer to that question isn’t totally clear. Nowhere in the text is the author’s name given, but there are clues that led people early on to assign it to the Luke we find mentioned in the New Testament. There are scholars who accept that tradition to be accurate, and others who don’t (and they have their reasons). But I choose to side with tradition, and accept that Luke wrote this Gospel.

So who was Luke? He was not one of the 12 Disciples – no “Luke” is listed among the disciples of Jesus. The New Testament indicates that he was a companion of Paul. In his little letter to Philemon (vs. 24), Paul calls Luke “my fellow worker.” In Colossians (4:14), Paul mentions that Luke, “the beloved physician,” sends his greetings to that church. We know that, toward the later years of Paul’s travels, Luke accompanied him on his journeys, serving Paul’s needs – perhaps even caring for Paul’s physical ailments. Luke was extremely loyal to his friend and mentor. After Paul’s arrest, Luke willingly went along with Paul to Rome to assist him as Paul was placed under house arrest and awaited his trial and his eventual martyrdom.

A few weeks ago I explained that Mark was a protégé of Peter, and therefore, his Gospel reflects Peter’s influence. Well, it seems the same type of thing is true here: Luke was a protégé of Paul, and so his Gospel probably reflects Paul’s perspective on who Jesus is.

So, that’s what we know about Luke from what the Bible itself says about him. But there are a few other things we can surmise. For instance: Luke is a Greek name, so we have reason to believe that he was a Gentile believer. We can assume as much because he writes in the most beautiful and elegant Greek we find in the New Testament – clearly he is well-educated and Greek is his native tongue. Another reason we assume he is a Gentile is that occasionally in his Gospel, he gets little technical details of Jewish life and religious practice slightly wrong, things a practicing Jew would know. A further reason to think Luke was a Gentile is his concern to record stories and teachings of Jesus that show his compassion for the poor, the sinner, the outcast, and the non-Jew. As you can imagine, Luke would love the fact that Jesus cared as much for people like him as he did for God’s chosen people! I suspect that’s why you may love Luke, too.

While Luke was not an eye-witness to the events of Jesus’ life (at least as far as we know), Luke took great pains to make sure he recorded as faithfully as he could the story of Jesus. To do so, he (like the writer of Matthew, you’ll recall) studied Mark’s Gospel and other writings that recorded the memories of those who were witnesses to the events. In his travels with Paul, Luke undoubtedly was able to interview the Apostles, and others who had been present during Jesus’ life and ministry. And, since he is the only gospel writer that includes intimate stories of Jesus’ birth and childhood – the kind of things only a mother would know, we believe that he was also acquainted with Mary, the mother of Jesus.

We know Luke carefully did his homework because he tells us as much in his opening to his Gospel: “Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been informed.”

Luke says his intention was to set down “an orderly account...” Like the great historian he was, Luke took pains to verify every detail of his Gospel. And Luke the historian didn’t just stop with the story of Jesus – he continued, writing the history of the early church in the Book of Acts. Even though the Gospel of John is positioned between them, Acts is actually Volume 2 of Luke’s writings. This means that 27% of our New Testament was actually written by a Gentile, more than any other single author in the New Testament – even more than Paul!¹ Without Luke, all we would know about the early history of the Christian movement would be what little we could infer from the Letters we find in the New Testament – very little indeed. Thank God for a Gentile man of faith, named Luke!

So that’s who Luke was, as best as we can tell. But what prompted him to write his Gospel, and who was it written for?

As I read a moment ago in Luke’s introduction to his Gospel, he specifies for whom he had written it – the “most excellent Theophilus.” (By the way, Luke addresses the Book of Acts to him, as well.) Who was this Theophilus guy? The short answer is “we don’t know.” However, there are some interesting theories, each of which might point to a different reason for the writing of Luke and Acts.

The name “Theophilus” means “one who loves god” – now, whether “the god” he loves is the God of Israel or one of the pagan god’s of Rome, we can’t tell. Some scholars suggest that “Theophilus” was not a person at all, but a composite identity for all “lovers of God,” that is – Luke is addressing his Gospel to all believers. Others believe that Theophilus was a prominent Gentile Roman believer in Jesus who commissioned the writing of the history of the faith. That seems reasonable.

However, William Barclay and others have a different theory. He proposes that Theophilus was a pagan Roman official known to Luke who had an interest in the Christian religion, and Luke is writing to make a case for Christianity, and to correct misinformation that was circulating about this new faith.

You might recall three weeks ago, I said that Mark was written around 70 A.D. at a time of great persecution under the Emperor Nero. Eventually that cycle of persecution subsided and Christians were more free to practice their faith. Luke was writing his Gospel some ten to twenty years later, between 80 and 90 A.D., at a time when a new cycle of persecution was on the horizon. There was a rising level of suspicion – “charges and slanders and threats were flying around.”¹ Christians again were suspect.

So, Luke takes it upon himself to carefully write an “orderly account” of Jesus’ life and the early church, not so much to convert, but to “set the record straight.” Luke was writing the Roman official, Theophilus, to convince him that the followers of Jesus were no threat to the Roman Empire, and therefore ought to be allowed to flourish, free from persecution.

If that is true, that means that both Luke and Acts were written by a Gentile believer for a Gentile audience. No wonder the Jesus we find in Luke is a universal savior, not just for the Jews – a Savior who

has compassion on all people, no matter their class, nationality, or station in life. Luke's Jesus is a Jesus even the Gentiles could believe in.

Which brings us back to the question, "Who is Jesus, according to Luke?" If for Mark, Jesus was the "Suffering Servant," and for Matthew, Jesus was the "Messiah King," for Luke, Jesus was the "Son of Man."

Now, we don't have time to go into all that this title, "Son of Man," means, only to say that in Luke, Jesus is both the Son of God (conceived immaculately by God), yet also a Son of the Human Race, (born of a woman). As the "Son of Man," Luke's Jesus identifies with our human condition, and has compassion for us as his brothers and sisters.

All this is reflected in the three major themes we find in Luke's writings. What are they?

First, as the Son of Man, Luke's **Jesus was a "friend to the friendless."**

As you read along in Luke's Gospel, it becomes clear that Jesus had a soft place in his heart for the poor, the outcast, and the sinner. For Luke, the reason Jesus came was (we read it in our scripture) - to "seek out and to save the lost."

We see it over and over. When Mary rejoiced in her pregnancy, she sang this: "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." And, who was it that received the first word of Jesus' birth? Kings? No. Lowly shepherds. Luke tells of Zacchaeus the hated tax collector whose sin is forgiven and is restored to the community. Luke is also the only one to share the story of the sinful woman of questionable reputation who anoints Jesus' feet and receives compassion and forgiveness. Luke includes parables found nowhere else that show concern for the marginalized – the story of a great banquet that is filled with the crippled, the blind, and the lame; a parable about a rich fool; a story Jesus told about a wealthy man and a beggar named Lazarus.

And it is only Luke that tells us about the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus – one of whom was granted entrance into Paradise.

And of course, it is only Luke that gives us the beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son, about a rebellious son who was lost to sin, but restored to his father. Indeed, those of us who feel strongly about justice issues and ministry to the poor, the outcast, and the sinner love the Jesus of Luke's Gospel. Because, there we see that Jesus is the Friend of the Friendless.

Second, Luke's Gospel emphasizes that Christ came to **offer salvation to all people.**

As I mentioned two weeks ago, Matthew was written by a Jewish Christian for a Jewish audience. For Matthew, Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, who only opened his kingdom to Gentiles at the very close of his Gospel when the Risen Christ gave his Great Commission, to "go make disciples of all nations." Not so in Luke. Luke was a Gentile believer who wrote for a Gentile audience. From the beginning of Luke's Gospel to the end, it's clear that the Kingdom of God is open to everyone.

For instance, when Luke gives the genealogy of Jesus, he doesn't begin with Abraham, the father of the Jews, like Matthew does. Luke traces Jesus' ancestry all the way back to Adam, the father of the human

race. When Simeon, that old man in the Temple, lays eyes upon the infant Jesus, and takes Jesus into his arms, he sings that this baby will be, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” In all four gospels, John the Baptist calls on people to “prepare the way of the Lord” by quoting Isaiah 40:3. But only Luke continues that quote from Isaiah with these words, “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Luke’s Jesus goes out of his way to demonstrate that the Good News he brings is meant for everyone - for ALL people. When making a point about those with exceptional faith, Jesus cites two Gentiles mentioned in Old Testament stories, the widow of Zerephath, and Naaman the Syrian. In his own generation, Jesus pointed to the faith he saw in a Roman Centurion as the standard of faith that his Jewish listeners should strive to achieve.

What’s more, in Luke, Jesus suggests that even hated Samaritans were welcome to share in this Kingdom. When Jesus healed ten lepers, only one returned to thank Jesus. And Luke adds, “Now, he was a Samaritan.” Of course, it is only in Luke that we have the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus holds up a Samaritan as the hero of the story.

And no other Gospel emphasizes Jesus’ appreciation of and love for women more than we find in Luke. William Barclay wrote of the status of women in the days of Jesus this way: “In Palestine in the time of Jesus a woman was merely a thing, with no legal status whatsoever, with no education and no part in public life. But Luke’s Gospel again and again draws loving portraits of the women who came into contact with Jesus:”¹ Yes, I suspect that in Luke we hear the voice of Paul, his mentor, that “in Christ there is neither Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.” Jesus opens the way for all to come.

So, Luke’s Jesus came to offer hope to all people. Which brings me to perhaps the most important emphasis of Luke’s Gospel: That **Christ’s mission is now our mission.**

In all the Gospels, (of course) there is an acknowledgment that God’s Kingdom has both a present and a future aspect – that we can live in the Kingdom in this life, even as we also look forward to a future day when the Kingdom of God will come in all its fullness.” And yet, the Gospel-writers differ in the way they describe the coming of this Kingdom. For instance, in Matthew and Mark, the coming of the Kingdom is imminent.

For example: when Jesus stood trial before the religious leaders, and was asked if he was the Messiah, both Mark and Matthew record Jesus as saying this: “I am. And you will see the Son of Man, sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” You will SEE it! Interestingly, when Luke tells of this same conversation, he reports Jesus saying this: “From now on, the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” Period. In Luke’s version of this story Jesus says nothing about his coming again in Glory.

Here is what makes Luke so different from the other Gospels. The earlier two Gospel writers thought the end of time was coming immediately. They were watching for Jesus to return to judge the earth and to establish his Kingdom. But Luke doesn’t seem to be very concerned with the end of time or the Second Coming of Christ – at least that’s not a major theme. Instead, he seems to be announcing the beginning of a new era of time, “the age of the Church,” to which Christ has given the mission to bring the Kingdom of God on earth.

A clue to this shift in emphasis is how Jesus speaks of the cost of discipleship. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus says that to follow him you must “take up your cross.” In Luke, Jesus adds the word “daily” – “take

up your cross DAILY and follow.” For Luke, to follow Jesus doesn’t mean simply being willing to die for him – but to live daily for him, to live faithfully each and every day.

For the first two Gospels, Jesus was the end of history – for Luke, Jesus was the beginning of a new history, a salvation history, offered to the world through his Church (the story of which Luke tells in the Book of Acts).

Which makes Luke the perfect Gospel to reflect on every time you and I approach the table for Holy Communion. Because, for Luke, Jesus lives – through his Church. As one of the liturgies we sometimes use for communion expresses it, when speaking of the bread and cup, “May they be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the Body of Christ, cleansed by his blood.” Jesus gives us his spirit to empower us to carry forward his mission through the Church to the world, to be a friend of the friendless, and to offer salvation to all people, no matter who they may be.

In other words, the Jesus of Luke is calling us to live our lives every day as Kingdom people, so that one day the Kingdom of God might come upon the earth. Friends, when we pray Jesus’ prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying the theology of Luke.

The question Luke would ask us is, “do we really mean it – and if so, do we live it?”

¹Barclay, William. The Men, the Meaning, the Message of the New Testament Books. Westminster Press. c. 1976