

INSIDE LOOKING OUT

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, November 8, 2009

Luke was the only Gentile among all the writers of the New Testament. He was probably converted under Paul's ministry, with whom he traveled several times. Luke recounts many of the same events and teachings as did Matthew and Mark. But, with the perspective of an outsider, he also gives the Gospel message an emphasis of inclusion that the other writers could not.

Luke emphasizes the stories of people who knew what it meant to be standing on the outside looking in. Elizabeth, the wife of a country priest, who could never conceive a child. Mary, a young Jewish girl, who found herself pregnant by the Holy Spirit before her wedding day. Luke tells the glorious birth announcement of Jesus from the perspective of sheep herders. He lists the genealogy of Jesus (as did Matthew), but Luke's list traces the ancestors of Joseph, the step-father of Jesus, yet traces his line all the way back to God Himself! Luke alone records Jesus' own rejection in His hometown of Nazareth. Only He records the raising again to life of a widow's only son who had died. It is Luke who recounts the tender compassion of a woman of the streets and of the other women who provided for Jesus' ministry. He gives us the story of the kind Samaritan man who took care of a Jew who had been mugged and robbed. He urges persistence for those who feel like their prayers are not being heard. He recounts the healing of the crippled woman in the synagogue. He tells the story of the prodigal son who was restored. He shares Jesus' saving visit to the home of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector.

Luke also hits religious hypocrisy hard, for nothing erects so great a barrier to outsiders as the self-righteousness of insiders. He tells of the forgiven servant who refused to forgive his friends. Of the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus, whom the rich man scarcely noticed. Luke tells of Jesus' disappointment with the nine lepers whom He healed, who did not return to give thanks. And of Christ's comparison between the haughty Pharisee and the penitent tax collector.

For various reasons, many of us have found ourselves on the outside looking in on life (and which of us has not at least felt such pain at some point?). But Jesus flings the doors open wide, calling us all and welcoming us all into God's saving presence.

The danger, of course, is that once on the inside we may also become self-righteous and exclude others, saying in effect, "Us four, no more." Jesus is not soft on such spiritual hypocrisy. Yet even He does not seek to exclude people (not even the hypocrites) but to restore them through repentance and renewed faith. In Christ, anyone can change for the better!

NLT Luke 6:46 "So why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say?"

"Lord" means "master." To call Him "Master," yet do your own thing is blatant hypocrisy, or delusion. And it is desperately foolish.

NLT Luke 6:47 "I will show you what it's like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. ⁴⁸ It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built. ⁴⁹ But anyone who hears and doesn't obey is like a person who builds a house without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins."

Jesus is not concerned for His own prestige; he seeks no man's approval. It matters not at all to Him what people on the earth may think of Him. He is not thin-skinned. But He was very concerned, in the short time that He was here, to help people escape from the grip of spiritual pride, prejudice, and hypocrisy.

It happens everywhere. Just about everyone has been there at one time or another. Eugene Peterson captures it well in the same passage of *The Message*:

MSG Luke 6:46 "Why are you so polite with me, always saying 'Yes, sir,' and 'That's right, sir,' but never doing a thing I tell you?"⁴⁷ These words I speak to you are not mere additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundation words, words to build a life on.

⁴⁸ "If you work the words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who dug deep and laid the foundation of his house on bedrock. When the river burst its banks and crashed against the house, nothing could shake it; it was built to last."⁴⁹ But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a dumb carpenter who built a house but skipped the foundation. When the swollen river came crashing in, it collapsed like a house of cards. It was a total loss."

We quickly learn how to say the "right things" in order to please or placate people, to smooth the ruffles. We say what we need to say to keep our jobs. We say what we need to say to get what we want. But such words don't impress the Lord. The One who has real authority is not seeking to be appeased, but to be obeyed. So He asks us to listen and carefully work His words into our lives, like a baker works yeast into the dough.

Beware that the slack you give yourself — in terms of judging your own thoughts, words, and actions — does not turn into hypocrisy. We all need slack at times — you *and* others. Grace gives latitude for extenuating circumstances, but not for any-and-every reason or whim. There are times when we simply need to tighten our belts and cinch our shoelaces and run for the Lord — whether it is convenient or comfortable, or not.

Christ's words are true and purposeful — they are not just for Bible studies, or intellectual sparring; they are for practical living.

Luke emphasizes this theme, addressing the subject of spiritual foolishness in two accounts: this story about home builders (6:46-49) and a story of a greedy farmer (12:13). It is foolish to take in the words of the Son of the Living God, yet do nothing with them besides admire them. It is foolish to trade our opportunities of service (ministry) for earthly pleasures or things that cannot last.

*Only one life, 'twill soon be past;
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

Are you letting your spiritual life, and the time that you have to build it up, slip through your fingers?

It would be better for you to never pick up or read a Bible, than to read it and do nothing with what you've read. Can you see that?

Nothing is as fatal as moving from the inside to the outside, drifting away from one's faith, rejecting God's plan of salvation. Luke emphasizes how Jesus confronted the hypocrisies of the religious Jews, who thought that keeping the Sabbath was about what they *disallowed* instead of their devotion to God and His purposes.

Luke was very concerned (as is Jesus) for the many people who feel marginalized, who feel like they don't fit in, who feel unwelcome. Most, if not all of us, have tasted that.

Don't wear your religion like a badge. We must let God's words into our lives to shape us. We must let them into our gut to motivate us. You won't do it perfectly or consistently (that's not even the point) — none of us do. But you can be persistently open to receive them.

Let His words correct you, and respond with repentance and renewed faith, instead of excuses. Let His words guide you, instead of assuming you know what's best for your life. Let His words in. And His words will bring you *inside* His Kingdom and His love and His purpose, and turn your heart *outward* to the lost and troubled of your world.