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A Theology of Ministry in the Gospel of Luke

Ben Langford

There are perhaps as many perceptions about ministry as there are ministers in the world. A variety of themes and ideas about ministry exist in the gospel of Luke. I have chosen to look at three particular areas as I identify a basis for ministry based on the third gospel. Perceptions about ministry are altered when one views ministry through the lens of knowing that nothing is impossible with God (1.37). With this in mind, three theological questions will be asked:

1. Who does ministry in Luke?
2. Who are the recipients of that ministry?
3. What does ministry entail?¹

Luke's birth narrative sets the context for the entire gospel. Luke writes a unique narrative of the births of John and Jesus that provides readers a theological framework for service to God. It begins with the stories of Zachariah and Mary when they receive visits from the angel Gabriel. Zachariah, upon receiving the news that his barren wife, Elizabeth, will give birth to a son, asks the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (1.18). The angel Gabriel tells Zachariah that it is God who sent him to announce this good news. Essentially, Gabriel says that it is God who will make this dream for this aged, righteous couple a reality.

Similarly, Mary is approached by the angel Gabriel and told that she will give birth to a son and name him Jesus. Her response is like Zachariah's; it comes in a question, "How will this be since I am a virgin?" (1.34). Gabriel tells her that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will conceive a son. He also tells her that Elizabeth, her kinswoman, will also bear a son in her old age. The context by which one should view ministry is found in Gabriel's statement in verse 37—nothing is impossible with God. Up to this point the question has been, "How can this be?" However, Gabriel sets aside any doubt as to what God can do and what he will do through Jesus's life and ministry; nothing is impossible with God. This is Luke's ultimate guiding theme. Now let us turn to the three questions posed above.

Who Does Ministry in Luke?

Luke's answer to the first question is that God chooses unexpected persons and reverses role expectations that were prominent within the larger society—"nothing is impossible with God." Accordingly, God chooses women, outcasts, the unqualified, the unclean, and the poor to carry out the kingdom's ministerial tasks. This reality is found throughout the writing, but it begins in the birth narratives of John and Jesus.

From the very beginning, God chooses a barren woman to give birth to the one who will prepare the way for Jesus. Both Zachariah and Elizabeth are upright in the sight of God, but Elizabeth is still barren. In the first century and even before Jesus's birth, to be a barren woman is shameful. In Luke 1.25, Elizabeth

1. My views are by no means comprehensive and do not deny any other ministry themes or ideas found in the Lukan message.

reacts to God's gift of a child by saying, "The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." Her childlessness is socially disgraceful. Still, God chooses Elizabeth. He takes away her shame so that she might bear and raise the one who will prepare the way for Jesus.

This theme is also seen in the story of Mary. True, she does not bear the reproach of being barren, but as an unmarried virgin she probably is the last person that Israel would anticipate to be the mother of the Messiah.

It is ironic that God uses both Elizabeth and Mary. Being women, they do not have a place of social prominence in the first century. God does not just use women to advance the kingdom, but he uses these particular persons. In contrast, for example, Matthew features the role of Joseph. But in Luke, Elizabeth and Mary are the central characters of the birth narratives. Luke gives them a place of prominence.

Another way God uses marginalized women is found in the story of Anna, a female prophet (2.36–38). When Joseph and Mary present their son to the Lord, Anna—a widow who fasts and prays day and night in the temple—praises God and speaks about the child to any who are seeking "the redemption of Israel" (2.38). Thus in the birth narratives three named women—Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna—answer respectively in their own capacities the question about who God uses in his service. This is striking in light of a culture that views women as social inferiors. Luke establishes their essential roles as vital in bringing salvation to a lost world.

Further, as God chooses Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna to further the scheme of redemption, he chooses socially outcast shepherds to witness Jesus's birth, a feature only remembered by Luke. Shepherds come to Jesus from fields full of sheep. Shepherds too often are romanticized. Most always, however, they are considered outcast and bottom dwellers in society's social pool. They are people cut off from society due to their tasks. They live with and care for smelly, dirty sheep. Shepherding sheep has little or no honor. So why does Luke tell us about the shepherds visiting Jesus? Probably it is because God chooses outcasts to spread the word about this child (2.17).

Additional examples of how God does the unexpected and uses the marginalized are seen in the calling of Peter and the parable of the Good Samaritan. Peter—a fisherman, a blue-collar worker and businessperson—is, at best, rough around the edges. Fishing is not a bad occupation, even in the first century, but of all the people Jesus could choose, he selects a fisherman (5:10b) in a call scene comparable to that of Moses (Exod 3), Gideon (Judg 6), and Isaiah (Isa 6). Jesus does not choose a civic leader or a teacher of the Law, but a fisherman. Luke indicates that Peter was not qualified by human standards to be chosen by Jesus. In fact, in the end of the account, Peter falls to his knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (5.8). By his own admission, Peter does not feel qualified to be near Jesus, let alone be chosen by him to participate in his ministry.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus illustrates the meaning of being a neighbor. He tells of a man who has been robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the road. A priest and a Levite pass by without offering help, but a Samaritan man takes pity on him. He bandages the beaten man's wounds, takes him to an inn, and pays someone to watch over him. The illustration helps set a precedent that God will use Gentiles to bring about his purposes despite Samaritans being despised by the Jews and considered unholy. Only Luke tells this story and makes clear that ministry is not linked to nationality or past spiritual ties. God calls the people he wants for his service. And in this case, the person chosen is the last person a teacher of the law would have expected (10.25–37).

In Luke's view of ministry, God does not see Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna as just women; he sees them as bearers of salvation and proclaimers of that salvation. God does not see shepherds as outcasts, but as part of God's own crowd. God does not see Peter as unqualified, but as highly qualified because of his confession of sin. God does not see the Samaritan as a pariah, but as one who was available to do good to a person in distress. God does not see Joseph and Mary as poor; rather, "he has filled the hungry with good things" (1.53) because "he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (1.48). God's view of these people is different than the way the world views them. He does not see them as outcasts, unqualified, unclean, or poor but as prospects for engaging in ministry. When one holds to the reality that nothing is impossible with God, that truth changes perceptions about the world and how God will act among humanity.

Who Receives Ministry?

Having illustrated those whom God chooses to carry out his ministry, we now examine the objects of that ministry. First, Luke sees all of humanity as worthy of God's salvation. After Jesus's resurrection he appeared to his disciples and opened their minds to the truth that "repentance and forgiveness of sins" would be preached in his name "to all nations" (24.47). God is concerned for all of humanity; "the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost" (19.10). Jesus affirmed, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (5.31). While Luke proclaims that God's salvation in Christ is for all, Luke acknowledges and emphasizes God's overwhelming concern to save the poor, the downtrodden, the hungry, and the oppressed. Luke sees ministry as given to, first and foremost, those who recognize they have a deep need—a need they cannot fulfill on their own. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus read from the book of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (4.18–19).

Those who do not enjoy the comforts and pleasures of this earth are the objects of Jesus's ministry. Luke's beatitudes are for the actual poor, the hungry; for those who grieve; and for those who are persecuted. Luke sees Jesus's ministry to "the lost" as being not just for those who are spiritually lost, but also for those who are in some sense lost within this world. The lost are those who do not have the privileges and the advantages that society offers. They are not only spiritually destitute, but they are also economically, socially, physically, and emotionally deprived. Jesus in Luke's view ministers to those who are lost in the most complete way.

An example is found in the parable of the great banquet (14.15–24). A banquet is prepared that represents the kingdom of God. Those initially invited make excuses about why they cannot come. They have to attend to things that bring profit or joy in this world. One man insists that he must attend to the land he has just bought. Another person has to attend to his recently purchased five oxen. Still another cannot come because he has recently married. So the owner of the house orders his servants, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (14.21). The servants return reporting that their task was completed but there was nevertheless room in the house. So the master tells his servants, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full" (14.23).

Luke provides abundant scenes in which those who are socially, physically, economically, and emotionally stable receive kingdom invitations. But too often these persons are too preoccupied with their own comforts to focus on the kingdom of God. Often it is the underprivileged that respond to the gospel with the greatest enthusiasm. Conceivably it is because they are in a position to see their need.

Perhaps the greatest illustration is the story of the person who was cared for by the Samaritan. Jesus tells this parable to answer a teacher of the law who asks, "Who is my neighbor?" (10.29). The lawyer's question arises out of a quest to summarize the entire law—that is, love God and love your neighbor. In the parable the traveler has been robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the road, but a Samaritan man takes pity on him. The beaten man's wounds are bandaged, he is taken to an inn, and someone is paid to watch over him. The ministry of mercy is offered to the one who is lost physically, emotionally, socially, and economically.

Another significant passage regarding ministry is the parable of the lost son and the loving father (15.11–31). In this passage God makes a definitive statement about the recipients of ministry and the good news. The father gives the younger son his share of the inheritance. Subsequently, the son travels to a faraway land and squanders all that he has received. A famine occurs and the young man finds himself feeding pigs and longing to fill his stomach with the food he is feeding them. He has hit rock bottom both spiritually and socially, so he decides to go back to his father. The father sees his son from afar and runs to welcome him home. As a person who was once lost and now found, once dead and is now alive, this son is an example of those to whom Jesus came proclaiming good news. He is both socially and spiritually disadvantaged. Even though his predicament was his own, he is still the object of the father's love. The father offers the same invitation to the older brother who never left home; however, the younger brother was the first priority because he once was

lost but now is found. According to Luke, our priorities should be God's priorities. We should never lose sight of the socially disadvantaged. Simply put, Jesus came to save the lost.

Luke also includes examples of God choosing to minister to the physically hurting. One Sabbath day when Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, he sees a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years. She had a hunched back and cannot straighten up. Jesus calls for her to come to him and he heals her (13.10–14). This story of healing and others like it set a precedent for us to also minister to those who are sick, to bring them news of hope and healing.

What is Ministry?

The final theological question Luke answers is, what is ministry? What does it look like? For Luke, mercy is the defining point of ministry as seen in the story of the Good Samaritan. If we are to understand Luke's theology of ministry, we must learn the way of mercy. The way of mercy is a ministerial lifestyle. It is more than just doing good works! It is changing the way we think about the world.

Showing mercy as a lifestyle is expressed through a theology of receiving and welcoming. An example is 9.46 when Jesus responds to the disciples' argument about who is the greatest in the kingdom. He says, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me" (9.48). Similarly, this idea is seen in 14.12–14 when Jesus makes the following statement to a Pharisee who has invited him to dinner:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbor; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.

The idea of welcoming and inviting is closely associated with how each of us sees ourselves in God's kingdom. Welcoming and inviting is the way of mercy. Generally, children—along with those mentioned in 14.13—are seen as socially insignificant in Jesus's time. Nothing could be gained through such associations. Therefore, welcoming and inviting children, the poor, the cripple, the blind, and the lame into fellowship means that we would have to change our thinking about what is valued in life. If welcoming and inviting are the way we live, it means that we are engaged in the lives of the underprivileged. It means that our lives are a constant invitation to be poured out into the lives of those who are poor, hungry, and mourning. Such actions do more than convince them to come into the kingdom of God: welcoming and inviting compels them to come and be a part of the kingdom.

Although the underprivileged are given priority in ministry as seen in 7.22, the welcoming and inviting way of life also applies to those who are privileged. An example of calling the privileged can be seen in Jesus's life as he engages and attempts to pour himself into those who have a good life on this earth, such as the Pharisees (14.1).

The basis for ministry centers on the fact that "nothing is impossible with God" (1.37). Thus, for Luke, the invitation, the welcome, the message of ministry is always good news. It must be good news for everyone, rich and poor alike, because Christ died for all. However, this good news is often difficult for the rich to accept. The story of the rich ruler reflects this truth. The rich ruler has kept all the commandments since he was a little boy, but cannot depart with his wealth when Jesus asks him to give it away and follow him. Jesus then states that is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Those who hear him say this reply, "Who can be saved?" (18.26) Jesus's answer echoes the language of the angel in 1.37, "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (18.27). The story of the blind man (18.35–43) and the story of Zacchaeus (19.1–10) stand opposite to that of the rich ruler.

The story of the blind man centers on the ministry of mercy. As Jesus walks along the Jericho road, a blind beggar sitting beside the road calls out to Jesus to have mercy on him. While those traveling with Jesus rebuke the blind man and tell him to be quiet, Jesus calls for the man and asks him a question. It is a question that opens the door for the ministry of mercy. Jesus asks the blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?" (18.41) This question is vital for ministry. It welcomes and invites the lost to experience the mercies of God.

While some may say that this is too much to ask of a person in ministry, this is precisely the question that should be asked—not in the sense of being the constant supplier of a consumerist society, but rather offering the mercies of God to those who are lost. Our lives should be attuned to the needs, both spiritual and physical, of those who are ignored and rebuked. As Jesus carries out his ministry among those considered to be within the mainstream of society, he never loses sight of his mission, which was to people like the blind man on the side of the road. Ministry involves mercy. Mercy is lived out in life when a person is willing to take time to ask the question, “What do you want me to do for you?”

The story of Zacchaeus also plays an important role in ministry. While Zacchaeus contrasts the rich ruler, he is similar in the sense that he too is very wealthy. He is probably not highly favored by society because he is a tax collector; tax collectors are known for cheating people on their taxes and abusing power. Zacchaeus is not poor physically; nevertheless, he is poor spiritually and recognizes his need for something better than the life he is presently living. When Jesus comes to town, Zacchaeus does all he can to see Jesus. Not only does he see Jesus, but Zacchaeus is also seen by Jesus and called out from among many. Luke records that Jesus wanted to stay at Zacchaeus’s house that day (19.5). Ministry is not merely lived out in inviting and welcoming, but in calling people out. The idea is to call people out of their sin in order to invest the mercies of God in them.

Ministry involves recognizing people who understand their own spiritual needs and intentionally invest in them. Jesus recognizes Zacchaeus’s need and intentionally invests himself in Zacchaeus. The time Jesus spends with Zacchaeus changes the way the tax collector thinks about his life. The story of Zacchaeus is central to Luke’s message because it reflects Jesus’s mission that “the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (19.10). Our mission in ministry should be the same as Christ’s own mission to seek and save the lost. We do this by recognizing those who understand, or perhaps don’t understand, their spiritual need and invest the mercies of God into them so that they may eventually be found in Jesus.

Luke’s theology of ministry is one of surprise and compassion. Ministry is carried out by the people least expected, given to those who don’t deserve it, and is characterized by mercy, because it is precisely God’s mercy that initiates the whole process. If we take seriously the answers Luke gives to each question and apply them to our lives and ministry, we might truly discover that “nothing is impossible with God.”

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