Landas 36:2 (2024) 1–21

IMITATION OF THE COMPASSIONATE GOD: LUKE'S THEOLOGY OF MERCY

C. Sunil Ranjar, S.J.

Abstract. Beginning with the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17–49), the article analyzes key passages that depict both the teachings and actions of Jesus, emphasizing God's mercy and compassion in the Gospel of Luke. Furthermore, by examining various parables, the article explores the ethical dimensions of mercy, including the importance of generosity and the risks associated with self-righteousness. In addition, it highlights the significance of repentance and the rewards of demonstrating mercy while warning of the adverse consequences of a lack of compassion.

Keywords. Mercy; Compassion; Parables of Mercy; Gospel of Luke

Introduction

That mercy is a theme that permeates the entire Gospel of Luke has already been demonstrated convincingly.[1] Occurrences of the nouns "mercy." "compassion" or the adjective "merciful" are numerous in the Gospel (Luke 1,50.54.58.72.78; 6,36; 7,13; 10,33.37; 15,20; 16,24; 17,13; 18,38.39). Luke has inserted material about mercy, adapted from his special source, at key moments of the

[1] See C. S. Ranjar, *Be Merciful Like the Father: Exegesis and Theology of the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6,17-49)* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2017).

https://publications.lst.edu/

Gospel narrative. It is for this reason that the well-known Italian poet Dante Alighieri calls Luke *scriba mansuetudinis Christi,* the scribe of the gentleness of Christ. Commenting on the portrayal of Jesus by Luke, Fitzmyer rightly notes that "the qualities of mercy, love, charm, joy, and delicacy that are part of the Lucan portrait of Jesus in the Third Gospel tend to soften the starker reality that is at times portrayed in the other Gospels. This aspect of the Lucan Gospel perhaps deprives it of some of the radical and critical character associated with Jesus in the other Gospels, but it is part of the picture Luke wanted to paint."[2] For Luke, therefore, Jesus is the manifestation of the profundity of God's mercifulness.

1. Lucan Vocabulary on Mercy

Luke, more than other Evangelists, uses varied vocabulary to denote mercy: the noun ἔλεος and its verbal form ἐλεέω; the noun σπλάγχνον and its verbal form σπλαγχνίζομαι; and the adjective οἰκτίρμων.

The neuter noun ἔλεος and the corresponding verbal form ἐλεέω[3] refers to the feeling of compassion in the face of misfortune. In the LXX, ἔλεος translates the Hebrew *ḥesed* which is used in the context of covenantal love. This love is faithful and unmerited on the part of the loved, and by extension is also denoted as divine grace and mercy. In the passages where either the noun or the verb occurs, mercy is not a mere feeling between God and his people, but it is a sentiment that motivates the well-being of others.

Another word that Luke uses is the neuter noun σπλάγχνον and its corresponding verbal form σπλαγχνίζομαι. This term primarily refers to the internal organs, the entrails, and the heart as the seat of affections, and has the significance of a deep interior movement

[2] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: I. i-ix* (AB 28; Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1981), 257-258.

[3] Luke 1,50.54.58.72.78; 10,37; 16,24; 17,13; 18,38.39.

https://publications.lst.edu/

of compassion.[4] The verbal form σπλαγχνίζομαι occurs in three key Lucan passages: in the episode of the raising of the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7,13); in the parables of the good Samaritan (Luke 10,33) and of the merciful father (Luke 15,20). Luke also uses the combined expression "merciful compassion" (σπλάγχνα ἐλέους; Luke 1,78). The verbal form expresses an interior attitude towards the suffering person, an attitude that leads to action. The noun σπλάγχνον translates the Hebrew *raḥamim* ("womb").[5] In the Hebrew Scriptures, the entrails of the person and, especially, the womb, are considered the seat of emotions (see Exod 33,19; Hos 1,7; Isa 14,1; 54,8; Jer 33,26). The best example is the prophet Hosea who dramatically describes how God's heart skips a beat and his entrails are moved to imply God's passionate love for human beings. The adjective *raḥum* appears in the Psalms in the context of the forgiveness of sins (Ps 78,38), the protection from enemies (Ps 86,15), the remembrance of the great acts of the Lord (Ps 111,4), and the praise of God (Ps 145,8). In the background of

[4] See Frederick W. Danker et al, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 834. There is an interesting redactional feature in the use of the verb σπλαγχνίζομαι. It occurs only in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 5x; Mark 4x; Luke 3x), with Jesus as the subject in most of the occurrences. Mark uses it twice to report Jesus' compassion for the crowd before feeding the multitude, and Matthew follows Mark verbatim (Mark 6,34 // Matt 14,14; Mark 8,2 // Matt 15,32). Two more occurrences in Mark, which Matthew omits, are in the context of healing (Mark 1,41 // Matt 8,1-4) and exorcism (Mark 9,22 // Matt 17,14-21). Matthew adds the verb in 9,36, again to report Jesus' compassion for the crowd. In the healing of the blind man (Matt 20,29-34 // Mark 10,46-52), Matthew adds the verb to the Marcan source (Matt 20,34). The final occurrence of the verb in Matthew (18,27) is in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18,23-35), which is unique to Matthew. Even though Luke retains from Mark the reports on the healing of the leper (Luke 5,12-16 // Mark 1,40-45), on the feeding of the multitude (Luke 9,10-17 // Luke 6,32-44), and on exorcism (Luke 9,37-43 // Mark 9,14-29), he omits the verb from the Marcan episodes. All three occurrences of σπλαγχνίζομαι in Luke are from his special source, and he uses them in the context of healing (Luke 7,13; 10,33) and forgiveness (Luke 15,20).

[5] See Celas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol 3 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 1409-1412.

https://publications.lst.edu/

these texts, the instances of σπλαγχνίζομαι and σπλάγχνον point to profound emotions and subsequent action.

The adjective οἰκτίρμων is found only in Luke. He uses it twice in the Gospel (Luke 6,36), in a key phrase in the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus invites his disciples to be merciful like the Father who is the foundation and norm of human mercy. The adjective translates primarily the Hebrew *raḥum*, and appears very frequently in the Psalms, and is often used as a synonym of ἔλεος. Like the other terms, this adjective also means "compassionate," or "merciful."

2. The Call to be Merciful (Luke 6,36)

For several decades, the major theme of the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6,20-49) was considered to be the "love of enemies." However, a recent monograph proposed a concentric structure, in which the imitation of the mercifulness of God is shown as the central theme, and the love of enemies is an important constituent of God's mercy.[6] The entire Sermon is constructed around the invitation to "be merciful as your father is merciful" (Luke 6,36). Moreover, various aspects of mercy such as forgiveness, generous giving, and unconditional love are also elucidated in the Sermon. That Luke intended this as the theme is further evident from the fact that he retains from Q, the rare adjective οἰκτίρμων (twice in Luke 6,36), while Matthew seems to have changed it to the more familiar *perfect* (τέλειος, Matt 5,48).[7]

It is also interesting to note the Sermon on the Plain is the first official teaching of Jesus. Luke emphasizes its significance by placing the invitation to be merciful at its center. Furthermore, the theme of mercy is central not only in the sermon but also in the entire Gospel

[6] See Ranjar, *Be Merciful*, 44-49.

[7] It is to be noted that the adjective τέλειος occurs only in Matthew. See Matt 5,48 (2x); 19,21. It is not found in the other Gospels and Acts. In the rest of the New Testament literature, it appears 16 times. Manson observes that "in the Old Testament, the epithet 'merciful' is given to God, hardly ever to man; and the epithet 'perfect' to man, never to God." See Thomas W. Manson, *Sayings of Jesus as Recorded in the Gospels According to St. Matthew and St. Luke* (London: SCM Press, 1937), 55. Therefore, it is likely that Matthew redacted the Q text.

https://publications.lst.edu/

narrative is evident from the fact that the teachings of Jesus regarding mercy and his merciful deeds are placed at key points of the entire Gospel narrative. All these (teachings and episodes) are taken from Luke's special source.

3. Mercifulness of God in the Introductory Chapters (Luke 1,5–4,13)

With characters such as Zachariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna, the Lucan infancy narratives not only remind the reader of the several Old Testament passages but also the entire material functions as a bridge between the two testaments.[8] It is in this context, that the mercifulness of God is portrayed in various ways in these two initial chapters of the Gospel.

First and foremost, Luke not only draws a parallelism between John the Baptist and Jesus but also presents both these children as agents of God's salvation and mercy. The angelic announcements in the narrative are replete with this theme. John is depicted as the one who "will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God," and he "will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1,16-17). Jesus "will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1,32), and "of his Kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1,33). In the announcement of the angel, unlike Matthew (see Matt 1,21), Luke does not draw attention to the profound salvific significance of the name Jesus (God saves).[9] Jesus' identity and function as savior will unfold in his life and ministry. Nonetheless, Luke does

[8] For details see Salvador Muñoz Iglesias, *Los evangelios de la infancia: I. Los canticos del Evangelia de la Infancia segun san Lucas* (Madrid, 1990), 25-60; S. Farris, *The Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives: Their Origin, Meaning and Significance,* OSNTS (Sheffield, 2015).

[9] See the discussion in Fitzmyer, *Luke*. I, 347; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 67.

https://publications.lst.edu/

refer to the salvific aspect of the name in the angelic announcement to the shepherds (Luke 2,11).

3.1. *Magnificat* and *Benedictus*

Two important units within the Infancy Narratives that describe God's mercy are the two canticles (the *Magnificat* of Mary and the *Benedictus* of Zechariah) which Luke inherited and redacted from his special source. Both these canticles present a concise synthesis of the theology of the Old Testament—the allusion to the Old Testament promises to the ancestors, the covenant, the people, Abraham and his descendants, the house of David, and the prophetic attestation of the birth event.[10] Furthermore, the canticles praise the magnitude of God's mercy which is disclosed in the fulfilment of the promises.

In the *Magnificat* (Luke 1,46-55), Mary glorifies God whose "mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation" (Luke 1,50) and who "remembers his mercy" (Luke 1,54). Furthermore, the *Magnificat* accentuates one of Luke's preferred themes: the reversal of fortunes. God "has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away" (Luke 1,51-53). God's preference for the poor and the afflicted, mentioned in the *Magnificat* is elaborated in the entire Gospel narrative: the beatitudes and the woes (Luke 6,20-26);[11] the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16,19-31), the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax collector (Luke 18,10-14).

The *Benedictus* (Luke 1,68-79) is the praise of God who "has visited and redeemed his for His people" (Luke 1,68). The use of ἔλεος in *Benedictus* reminisces God's *ḥesed* towards his people (Luke 1,72). The

[10] See Pedro Cabello Morales, "Como vuestro Padre es misericordioso: La misericordia en el evangelo de Lucas," *Isidorianum* 25:50 (2016): 295.

[11] Note that several terms used in the *Magnificat* are also found in the pericope on the Beatitudes and the Woes: "he has filled" (ἐνέπλησεν; cf. Luke 6,25a) "the hungry" (πεινῶντας; cf. Luke 6,21a.25a), and "the rich" (πλουτοῦντας; cf. Luke 6,24).

https://publications.lst.edu/

Greek expression ποιῆσαι ἔλεος (to show mercy; literally, to do mercy with) is linked to God's act of "salvation" (**σωτηρία**) from the enemies (Luke 1,71), the God who has raised up a "horn of salvation" (κέρας σωτηρίας; Luke 1,69).[12] Furthermore, Luke 1,77 clarifies the mission of John the Baptist: "to give knowledge of salvation (γνῶσις σωτηρίας) to his people in the forgiveness of their sins (ἐν ἀφέσει ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν)." The close relationship between the merciful compassion of God and the forgiveness of sins highlights God's *raḥămîm*,[13] along with the covenantal *ḥesed*. Therefore, God's salvific action is the result of his "merciful compassion (σπλάγχνα ἐλέους θεοῦ)."

3.2. Preaching of John the Baptist

The ethical dimensions of mercy are expanded in the injunctions of John the Baptist (Luke 3,10-14). The first part of John's preaching is from Q (Luke 3,7-9//Matt 3,7-10), where Luke redacts the addressees as "multitudes" (Matthew has "Pharisees and Sadducees," see Matt 3,7). In John's preaching, Luke associates repentance with deeds of justice, which are further elaborated from his special source.

The demands proposed by John are reasonable: "he who has two coats, let him share (**μεταδότω**) with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" (Luke 3,11). The primary feature of mercy is the essential openness to sharing. This aspect is narratively illustrated in the common life of the early Church (Acts 2,44-45; 4,32-35). The tax collectors are exhorted to "collect nothing more than what is prescribed" (Luke 3,13). The soldiers are advised not to "extort money by violence or by false accusations" (μηδένα διασείσητε μηδὲ συκοφαντήσητε; Luke 3,14). The narrative illustrations of these ethical injunctions are recorded in the other parts of the Gospel narrative (the Centurion in Luke 7,1-10; Zacchaeus in Luke 19,1-10; Cornelius in Acts 10,1-8).

---

[12] See Fitzmyer, *Luke: I*, 384.

[13] *Raḥămîm* is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek σπλάγχνον.

https://publications.lst.edu/

4. Mercy in Jesus' Ministry in Galilee (Luke 4,14–9,50)

Following the Marcan source, Luke transposes the episode of Jesus' visit to Nazareth (Mark 6,1-6a // Luke 4,16-30) to the beginning of the Galilean section of his ministry and expands it. If Mark's emphasis in the episode is the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth and the subsequent inability to do mighty works (cf. also Matt 13,53-58), Luke presents the Nazareth episode as Jesus' programmatic discourse that guides the rest of the Gospel narrative.[14] Using the Isaianic lens, Luke presents Jesus as the anointed prophet of God, who announces the "favorable year of the Lord" that is exemplified in the "proclamation of good news to the poor" (εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς), "recovery of sight to the blind" and "liberty (**ἄφεσις**) to the captives and the oppressed" (Luke 4,18-19; cf. Isa 61,1-2). This prophecy of mercy, already prophesied by Isaiah, is fulfilled in the person of Jesus (Luke 4,21).

The so-called "Little Interpolation" (Luke 6,20-8,3) inserted into the Marcan order is another significant redactional modification effected by Luke. This block of material includes the teachings of Jesus in Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6,20-49) and the episode of the healing of the centurion's servant (Luke 7,1-10 // Matt 8,5-13).[15] There are also the episodes of raising the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7,11-17) and the forgiving of the "sinful" woman (Luke 7,36-50) which are from Luke's special material "L."[16] All these episodes further reveal Jesus as the agent of God's mercy.

---

[14] Several commentators highlight the 'programmatic' character of the Nazareth episode; see, for example, Darell L. Bock, *Luke: I. 1,1–9,50* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 420; Marshall, *Luke*, 178-180; Fitzmyer, *Luke: I,* 526-530; John Nolland, *Luke: I. 1–9,20* (WBC 35A; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 195-202.

[15] While the material of the Sermon on the Plain is largely derived from Q, the rest of the material in this section is from Luke's special source 'L'. Scholars also sustain that the episode of the healing of the centurion's servant is also derived from Q which both Matthew and Luke elaborate; see the discussion in Fitzmyer, *Luke: I,* 648.

[16] There are source-critical difficulties in this episode. Some scholars argue that Luke is reporting the same event as in Mark (14,3-9) but redacts it thoroughly. A few others sustain that Matthew, Mark, and John report one single event (Matt

https://publications.lst.edu/

Luke's redaction of the story of the healing of the centurion's servant (Luke 7,1-10) gives it a new meaning. In Matthew, the centurion himself comes and pleads with Jesus to heal his servant; in Luke, on the other hand, he sends the elders of the Jews, who describe him as the one "who loves the nation" and who "built a synagogue" for them (Luke 7,4-5). The centurion's generosity, coupled with his faith and humility (cf. Luke 7,6-8), is rewarded by Jesus when he brings back to life the centurion's servant. In the episode, there is an implicit illustration of the exhortation of John the Baptist to the soldiers (cf. Luke 3,14). The healing of the Centurian's servant is followed by another gripping episode of the healing of the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7,11-17), in which the compassion of Jesus is expressed through the verb **σπλαγχνίζομαι**. The narrator's comment, "the Lord (ὁ κύριος) was moved with compassion (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη)," underscores Jesus' divine quality of compassion, which makes the people recognize "God's visitation" in him.

Notwithstanding the source-critical difficulties, the episode of forgiving the sinful woman (Luke 7,36-50) is another captivating story in the Gospel. Here Luke's perspective differs from that of the other evangelists (Matt 26,6-13// Mark 14,3-9; see also John 12,1-8). The context in Matthew and Mark is different from that of Luke. The episode in Matthew and Mark is recounted in the last part of the narrative when Jesus is in Jerusalem just before his passion and death. The focus, therefore, is to prepare his body for burial (Matt 26,12 // Mark 14,8). Moreover, the woman is reproached for wasting money on the expensive ointment (Matt 26,8 // Mark 14,5; cf. John 12,3,5). Luke, on the other hand, presents the episode early in the ministry of Jesus when he is still in Galilee. He, unlike Matthew and Mark, insists that the woman was a sinner. Whereas the focus in the other Gospels is the waste of money, in Luke the focus is the negative attitude of the Pharisee who had invited Jesus (Luke 7,39), and a greater emphasis is on the woman's remorse for her sins and on Jesus' forgiveness. This is made explicit by the verb in the passive, ἀφέωνται (Luke 7,47,49),

26,6-13; Mark 14,3-9; John 12,1-8), whereas Luke reports a different event. See a brief discussion in Fitzmyer, *Luke: I,* 684-688.

https://publications.lst.edu/

implying divine agency of forgiveness. A clear contrast can be noticed in the attitude of the woman and that of the Pharisee in the second part of the episode. The woman shows remorse for her sins, and she is instantly forgiven. The Pharisee, on the other hand, shows self-righteousness by dismissing Jesus as a false prophet (Luke 7,39). The story shows that the self-righteousness of the Pharisee is not rewarded, and this narratively illustrates the commands laid down in Luke 6,37: "Do not judge and you will not be judged; do not condemn and you will not be condemned."

Thus, Luke's redactional modifications in the Galilean section of Jesus' ministry serve to emphasize the theme of mercy. Jesus not only teaches about mercy but also performs merciful deeds such as forgiving sins, healing the sick, and raising the dead. Nolland's comment is pertinent here: "The concern of the great sermon (6,17-49) with disciples and discipleship gives way in the next major section (7,1-50) to a concern to portray Jesus' ministry as the eschatological visitation of God heralded by John."[17]

5. Mercy in Jesus' Journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9,51–19,48)[18]

The long section of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, which includes the so-called "Big Interpolation" (Luke 9,51–18,14), also demonstrates Luke's emphasis on mercy. All the episodes that deal with this theme are from Luke's special source.

5.1. Merciful Response

While rejection of Jesus and his ministry is part of the Gospel narrative, it is striking that the Journey Narrative commences and concludes with Jesus' merciful response to rejection. When the Samaritan village refuses to receive Jesus, "because his face was set

[17] Nolland, *Luke: I,* 318.

[18] There is no consensus among the scholars regarding where exactly the journey to Jerusalem ends. A group of scholars argues that it ends in Luke 19,27, while others hold that it continues till Luke 19,48. This article considers valid the latter position.

https://publications.lst.edu/

toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9,53), James and John want the village to be destroyed. Jesus rebukes them, exemplifying the commands of the Sermon (Luke 9,54-55). Similarly, as Jesus is approaching Jerusalem, he weeps over it (Luke 19,41-44). He knows that the city has rejected and killed the prophets, and it will reject and kill him too. Jesus' response, however, is of compassionate lament, since Jerusalem "did not know the time of God's visitation."

That mercy and "doing good" surpass the mere pious observation of the Sabbath is more evident in Luke than in the other Synoptics. Already in the section on the Galilean ministry of Jesus, Luke shows Jesus' compassionate response by healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath (Luke 6,6-11).[19] Moreover, in the Travel Narrative, Luke reports two more healings on the Sabbath: the healing of the crippled woman (Luke 13,10-17) and the man with dropsy (Luke 14,1-6). These are further illustrations of Jesus' mercy and "doing good" that take precedence over Sabbath observations.

5.2. Teachings on Mercy

The ethical instructions presented in this section are similar to those in the Sermon on the Plain and are unique to Luke. Jesus already overturns the ethic of reciprocity in the Sermon (Luke 6,32-34), and now he explicates it further: "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just" (Luke 14,12-14). Expounding

[19] In the episode of the healing of the man with the withered hand (Luke 6,6-11// Matt 12,9-14 // Mark 3,1-6), Luke follows Mark closely, retaining the question to the Jewish authorities: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6,9 // Mark 3,4; cf. Matt 12,12b). However, he omits Mark's reference to Jesus' anger and thus presents Jesus as merciful and compassionate rather than angry. Houlden writes: "While Mark's Jesus proclaims among sinful men the stark challenge of the Kingdom, Luke's Jesus is the exemplar of generous and effective compassion for all in need.". see J. L. Houlden, *Ethics and the New Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 1992), 55:

https://publications.lst.edu/

further the teaching on forgiveness (Luke 6,37), Jesus exhorts his disciples to develop it as an attitude: "Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive (**ἄφες**) him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent' you must forgive (ἀφήσεις) him" (Luke 17,3-4; note the different formulation in Matt 18,15.21-22).

Renunciation and almsgiving are important components of mercy. The disciples are invited to give generously without expecting anything in return (Luke 6,35.38). Jesus cautions them about covetousness: "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12,15). Instead, the disciples are not to be anxious about the future but to rely on God's providence (Luke 12,22-30). They are further instructed to seek God's kingdom which necessitates selling one's possessions and giving alms (Luke 12,33; 18,22). An essential characteristic of discipleship is the renunciation of everything (Luke 14,33).

5.3. Parables on Mercy

The journey narrative also presents Luke's impressive organization of the parables concerning mercy. Deriving from his special source, he places the parables at strategic points in the narrative: the parable of the good Samaritan at the beginning (Luke 10,29-37), the parable of the prodigal son in the middle (Luke 15,11-32), and the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax collector at the end of the Travel Narrative (Luke 18,9-14). He inserts two more parables, between these three, to warn the disciples of the consequences of not following the ethical instructions of Jesus: the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12,16-21) between the first and the second parable, and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16,19-31) between the second and the third.

i. The Compassionate Samaritan

Luke presents the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10,29-37) as an illustration of the great commandment: love of God and

https://publications.lst.edu/

neighbor.[20] The Samaritan is also an example of doing good and showing mercy. Luke breaks the stereotypes in this parable. He does not identify the injured person. On the other hand, he does identify those reluctant to help him—a priest and a Levite, who are expected to show compassion. Their religious obligation, however, prevents them from showing mercy and doing good. After the priest and the Levite, the hearer of the parable would expect a Jewish layperson as the third person on the road. However, it is a Samaritan, who is "moved with pity" (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη), and instantly helps the person and proves to be the neighbor.[21] The Samaritan, who is an outsider to the covenant community, demonstrates covenantal compassion. He "shows mercy" (ὁ ποιήσας τὸ ἔλεος; literally "does mercy") by binding up the wounds of the injured person and by donating money to the innkeeper for his sustenance. Jesus does not only redefine the neighbor as the one who is in need but also exhorts the disciples to "go and do likewise" (Luke 10,37).

ii. The Merciful Father

Luke 15 which comprises the parables of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15,3-7), the Lost Coin (Luke 15,8-10), and the Lost Son (Luke 15,11-32), is called the "Gospel within the Gospel," since it vividly exemplifies God's mercy and compassion. Scholars view the parable of the Lost Son

[20] The episode on the great commandment of Love (Luke 10,25-28 // Matt 22,34-40 // Mark 12,28-34) and the subsequent parable of the Good Samaritan have several redactional features that reflect the ethical mindset of Luke. While in Matthew and Mark, the lawyer (a scribe in Mark) enquires about the great commandment in the law (Matt 22,36 // Mark 12,28), in Luke the lawyer's question is similar to that of the rich ruler (Luke 18,18): "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10,25). Jesus' response is a counter-question: "What is written in the law?" It is the lawyer, not Jesus, who formulates the great commandment of love. Jesus commends him for the answer and reckons that the great commandment is sufficient to live (Luke 10,28). See Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 34-45.

[21] Furnish, *Love Command*, 41: "The command to love the neighbor breaks down all barriers which divide men. Neighbor love means helping the man who needs help, regardless of who he is in relation to oneself."

https://publications.lst.edu/

as the "heart" of Luke's Gospel, placed strategically at the mid-point of the narrative. Fitzmyer regards it as "the greatest of all His (Jesus') parables,"[22] while Bock calls it the parable of "the Gracious Father."[23]

Even though traditionally it is called the parable of the prodigal son, the focus here is more on the father than the son. First and foremost, the father does not show any hesitation in dividing the property between his sons, even though what the younger son was asking was not legitimate. Moreover, when the younger son returns after squandering all his property, the father feels "gut-level" compassion for him (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη). He hurries towards him with open arms and accepts him. The sins of the son are instantly forgiven and forgotten. He is welcomed with a banquet and showered with gifts. The restoration of the ruptured relationship takes place with the initiative of the Father.[24] The parable presents the unconditional love and mercy of God towards the repentant sinners and impressively "portrays the message of Jesus, the Kingdom-preacher, especially with the Lucan stress on the divine willingness to accept the repentant sinner into that Kingdom."[25]

iii. The Justified Tax-Collector

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18,9-14) is primarily addressed to those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others" (Luke 18,9). Scrupulous observation of the Law is the primary concern of the Pharisee, and that makes him unpalatably self-righteous. His prayer is a thanksgiving for he is not like others, and especially like the tax collector. He brags with God about his good deeds. In contrast, the tax collector acknowledges his sinfulness and pleads for God's mercy, and consequently he "goes home justified." What Jesus emphasizes in the prayer of the tax collector is that "the attitude of the heart is ultimately what matters,

[22] Fitzmyer, *Luke: II,* 1083.

[23] Bock, *Luke: II,* 1306.

[24] Cf. Marshall, *Luke*, 610.

[25] Fitzmyer, *Luke: II,* 1085.

https://publications.lst.edu/

and justification depends on the mercy of God to the penitent rather than upon works which might be thought to earn God's favor."[26]

The above three parables are illustrative of God's mercy, and at the same time, an invitation to imitate the merciful God. Father's large-heartedness in accepting the strayed son back into his family, reflects God's forgiveness and compassion. The tax collector is justified by God's mercy because of the acknowledgment of his sinful state. The Samaritan is not only portrayed as merciful but also as an example to emulate.

5.4 The Outcome of an Unmerciful Attitude

Two uniquely Lucan parables in the Travel Narrative highlight the results of not accepting God's invitation to be merciful. Placed in the context of the teaching on possessions, the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12,16-21) is an illustration of what happens when one trusts in one's material goods rather than God's goodness. The man is the solitary figure in the parable. There is no mention of family, friends, or acquaintances. The problem of the rich farmer is neither his riches nor the abundant crops. His problem is what he does with the yield from his fields. His question "What shall I do?" (Luke 12,17) should have evoked a positive response by sharing his goods with others.[27] Sadly, however, he thinks only about his own welfare and enlarges his barns. His self-love is evident in his speech where he does not go beyond 'my crops,' 'my barns,' 'my grain' and 'my goods.' It is at this point that he is called a fool because he thought the material goods would give him eternal happiness. He is a fool because he was concerned only about his welfare and "he was not rich towards God" (Luke 12,21).[28]

---

[26] Marshall, *Luke*, 681.

[27] The question, "What shall I do" (see also Luke 3,10-14; 18,18) is not a mundane question in Luke. It is a question concerning salvation. See John Gillman, *Possessions and the Life of Faith: A Reading of Luke-Acts* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 75; M.J. Wi, *The Path to Salvation in Luke's Gospel: What must we do?* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019).

[28] Ps 14,1: The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."

https://publications.lst.edu/

Situated once again in the context of teaching on material wealth, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16,19-31) demonstrates vividly the consequences of not being merciful. The parable presents a sharp contrast in the socio-economic conditions of the characters: the rich man[29] is clothed with luxurious purple robes, and he feasts sumptuously every day (Luke 16,19); Lazarus, on the other hand, is a poor beggar, full of sores, longing to be fed (Luke 16,20-21). It is not said that the man became rich by fraudulent means. It is quite possible that he worked hard to become rich, and that is not at all the problem. The problem is that the rich man is so engrossed in his wealth and luxury that he fails even to notice Lazarus who is at his gate. In the ancient world, including the biblical times, the gate was the place where the judges and the elders of the city gathered, and the people had their grievances addressed. That the rich man fails to notice Lazarus (or intentionally ignores him?) highlights his self-centeredness and self-absorption, which is injustice, according to Luke. The reversal of fortunes happens at death. While Lazarus is comforted in the bosom of Abraham, the rich man is left to suffer in the hades. "Because of his chosen inactivity in time, the rich man is deprived of what could have saved him, the sacrament of the poor man's touch. Without it, he was walled up inside his own wealth and all that it procured for him. His comfort and wealth numbed him to the discomfort and grave need of the other which he could have alleviated."[30] The rich man should have paid heed to "Moses and the Prophets" (Luke 16,29) and should have shown mercy by feeding Lazarus. He fails to do so, and in turn, he is not shown mercy.[31]

[29] In Luke's parables, the rich people have no names. The only person who has a name is the poor Lazarus.

[30] John C. Haughey, *The Holy Use of Money. Personal Finances in Light of Christian Faith* (New York: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 13.

[31] This is an evident illustration of the first beatitude and the first woe: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.... but woe to you rich, for you have had your consolation" (Luke 6,20.24).

https://publications.lst.edu/

5.5 Two Contrasting Personalities

Most of the parables in Luke seem to implicate the rich. However, Luke is not against riches in themselves. His purpose is to demonstrate that unwarranted attachment to riches could divert one's attention from God (Luke 12,16-21) and one's fellow human beings (Luke 16,19-31). Towards the end of the journey narrative, Luke presents a positive model of Zacchaeus, "a chief tax collector and wealthy" (Luke 19,1-10), to show that the primary problem is not with riches in themselves but with the attachment to them.[32]

Zacchaeus' conversion is immediate as he is overwhelmed by Jesus' presence in his house, and he makes a public declaration of his conversion: "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give (δίδωμι) to the poor; and if I have defrauded (ἐσυκοφάντησα) anyone of anything, I restore (ἀποδίδωμι)[33] it fourfold" (Luke 19,8). John the Baptist's call to "bear fruits that befit repentance" (Luke 3,8), and his instructions to the tax collectors (Luke 3,13) see a narrative fulfillment in the Zacchaeus episode. By declaring his intention to repent and to share his goods with others, Zacchaeus not only practices the deeds of mercy but also opens himself to God's mercy. Jesus's affirmation that "today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19, 9), indicates in clear terms that repentance leads one to benevolent action, which, in turn, results in attaining salvation.[34]

---

[32] The Beatitudes and the Woes (Luke 6,20-26) implicitly exhort the disciples to be free from attachment to riches. By presenting the Beatitudes and the Woes as Jesus' first and important teaching, Luke emphasizes the great reversal of conventional values and discards the false security of wealth. Cf. Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 17-19.

[33] Scholars hold that both verbs in the present tense, δίδωμι and ἀποδίδωμι, should be taken as futuristic present, expressing Zacchaeus' resolve to help the poor. Hamm, for example, argues that "Zacchaeus shows himself to be a true son of Abraham in just the sort of conversion John the Baptist was calling for in Luke 3,10-14". See Dennis Hamm, "Luke 19,8 Once Again. Does Zacchaeus Defend or Resolve?," *JBL* 107 (1988) 431-437.

[34] There are further examples of generous giving in Acts. Tabitha is described as "full of good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9,36) and, as a reward for her

https://publications.lst.edu/

Placed immediately before the Zacchaeus episode, is the unedifying example of the rich ruler (Luke 18,18-23). In the former, it is Jesus who takes the initiative to dine with Zacchaeus, which consequently results in his conversion. In the second episode, it is the ruler who enthusiastically asks Jesus what he must do to attain eternal life. However, his enthusiasm is shattered when Jesus asks him to sell everything and give to the poor. He goes away sad because "he was very rich" (Luke 18,23). Salvation comes to Zacchaeus; in contrast, it becomes difficult for the rich man to enter the Kingdom of God because of his attachment to riches.

The journey narrative, therefore, is full of sayings and the parables of Jesus concerning mercy. All these are from Luke's special source and placed at important points in the narrative with the result that this theme is communicated effectively to the reader.

6. Climax of Mercy: The Passion and Resurrection (Luke 20,1–24,53)

Luke presents Jesus as merciful and compassionate even during the last stage of his life–his passion, death, and resurrection. Just as Jesus responds mercifully to the rejection by the Samaritans (Luke 9,52-55) and the Jerusalemites (Luke 19,41-44), so does he also during his Passion. He demonstrates total non-resistance when at his arrest and also reproves those who show opposition (Luke 22,47-52).

Scholars note that throughout the Gospel narrative, Luke avoids any negative characterization of the Apostles.[35] He does the same also

behavior, she is raised to life by Peter (Acts 9,37-43). The centurion Cornelius, a Gentile but a prospective follower of Christ, is "a devout man who feared God with all his household" and who "gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God" (Acts 10,2). The generosity of the disciples in Antioch towards famine-affected Judea is another example of giving (Acts 11,27-30; cf. Acts 12, 25). Paul, citing Jesus' words, "it is more blessed to give than to receive", exhorts the Ephesian elders to "help the weak" (Acts 20,35). Paul himself is presented as a model of almsgiving (Acts 24,17).

[35] See the discussion in Ranjar, *Be Merciful*, 21-26.

https://publications.lst.edu/

in the passion narrative, by presenting them as models of dedication in the ministry of Jesus. During the Last Supper (Luke 22,24-30), Jesus commends his apostles for persevering with him (οἱ διαμεμενηκότες μετ᾽ ἐμοῦ) in his trials, and assigns them the Kingdom (Luke 22,29), recalling the promise made in the beatitudes. The perfect participle of the verb διαμένω implies that this constancy of the apostles occurred during the entire earthly ministry of Jesus and that it included a willing response to his ethical demands.[36]

The fidelity of the Apostles is further demonstrated in the scene of the arrest of Jesus. While Matthew and Mark report the flight of the Apostles (Matt 26,56 // Mark 14,50), Luke omits it. Noteworthy is also the omission of Jesus' foretelling of the apostles' flight during his arrest (cf. Matt 26,31 // Mark 14,27). Instead, Luke makes a redactional modification to the text by inserting Jesus' promise of prayer for Peter that the latter's faith may not fail (Luke 22,31-32). Even though Luke retains Peter's denial from his Marcan source (Luke 22,34), he makes a further redactional change in the episode. When the cock crows, Luke has Jesus turn and look at Peter (Luke 22,61). The merciful glance of the Lord reminds Peter of the words of the Master and he weeps bitterly. Therefore, even in his Passion, Jesus shows compassion for his disciples.

The Apostles are rewarded for their endurance by the appearance of the Risen Lord (Luke 24,36-53). This scene, which is unique to Luke among the Synoptics (cf. John 20,19-23), ends with Jesus commissioning them to preach repentance (**μετάνοια**; cf. Luke 3,3.8; 15,7) and the forgiveness of sins (ἄφεσις ἁμαρτιῶν; cf. Luke 3,3; 4,18; Acts 2,38) to all nations (Luke 24,47). The command recalls the Messianic announcement of Jesus at Nazareth (Luke 4,18-19), which the apostles continue in the early Church (Acts 2,38; 5,31; 10,43; 26,18).

Healing of the sick is an important element of mercy in the ministry of Jesus. This is seen also in his Passion. All Gospels report that one of those with Jesus cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant

[36] See Bock, *Luke: II,* 1739; E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Nelson, 1974), 256.

https://publications.lst.edu/

(Matt 26,51; Mark 14,47; Luke 22,50; see also John 18,10). However, it is only Luke who reports the healing of the servant by Jesus (Luke 22,51). Jesus' mission of mercy continues even on his way to Calvary, where the suffering and beleaguered Jesus consoles the weeping women of Jerusalem (Luke 23,27-31). This episode, which is unique to Luke, recalls another Lucan report about the women followers of Jesus (Luke 8,1-3).

Luke also presents Jesus as the example *par excellence* for the disciples in their quest to love their enemies and to pray for them. In the crucifixion scene, only Luke reports Jesus' prayer for his persecutors: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23,34a).[37] Furthermore, the promise of salvation to the repentant robber is found only in Luke (Luke 23,42-43).

Conclusion

A well-known fact about Luke is that he is the patron of physicians. However, there is also a less-known fact: Luke is also the patron of artists. It is because he paints Jesus as warm, merciful, and compassionate.

Luke chooses judiciously the episodes and sayings from his special source to illustrate the merciful nature of God and Jesus. Through the covenantal attribute of God's mercy in the Infancy Narratives, Luke emphasizes God's salvific intervention in history. This intervention takes place through the person of Jesus, which results in salvation from the enemies. Furthermore, the "merciful compassion" of God results in the forgiveness of sins. It is the same compassion that Jesus also possesses in his healing ministry.

[37] The prayer of Jesus (Luke 23,34a) is absent in many major NT manuscripts. However, since the prayer of Stephen (Acts 7,60) is also similar to that of Jesus, Luke must have been aware of this tradition. As Marshall argues, it is more likely that the prayer of Stephen is modeled on Jesus' prayer than the other way round; cf. Marshall, *Luke*, 868.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Luke also presents Jesus as the one who practices his teaching and, thus, is a true model to be imitated. Jesus resists condemning but instead forgives and heals, and he also exhorts the disciples to do so. Luke also links mercy with forgiveness, love, and giving. He also provides sufficient examples in the Gospel (from his special source) to demonstrate this relationship.

About the Author. **Sunil Ranjar, S.J.**, is a Jesuit priest from the Karnataka province in India. He serves as an associate professor of New Testament Greek and Exegesis at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, where he also holds the position of secretary. Additionally, he is a visiting professor at the Loyola School of Theology in Manila, Philippines, and the Jnanadeepa Institute of Philosophy and Theology in Pune, India.