

Study 8: Thinking straight

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Please prepare for our meeting by reading **Luke 10:25-11:36** and thinking about the following questions. If you haven't time for everything, just do whatever you can – no one will check up on you. If possible, please bring a Bible with you to the meeting.

Questions marked with an asterisk are about your personal spiritual life, and intended mainly for personal meditation – you should not feel any pressure to talk about personal things unless you wish to.

In the context of Our Lord's final journey to Jerusalem, St Luke records a series of episodes (not found in St Mark's account) in which Our Lord corrects various kinds of muddled thinking.

It is characteristic of St Luke that he often presents Our Lord's call to salvation and discipleship as something that should appeal to anyone who is prepared to use a bit of common sense. We will see many more examples in future studies as we look at other great teachings from this journey (e.g. 12:20, 12:56; 15:17; 16:8). Our Lord did not come to call only people of the deepest wisdom and purest motives. Just a bit of everyday self-interest will do as a start – if only people would take a little trouble to see where their best interests really lie.

1. The good Samaritan (10:25-37)

The Aramaic word for neighbour, 'chaver', was the word which Pharisees used for each other. Pharisees could be reluctant to associate with non-Pharisees for fear that contact with people who did not observe strict rituals might contaminate them, so the question of who their 'neighbours' were was an important one to them. But it would then be easy to slip from this concern for ritual purity into the error of thinking that the commandment to love one's neighbour only applied to ritually pure people.

- i) In Our Lord's story, is the neighbour presented as (i) someone whom the lawyer should be prepared to help or (ii) someone from whom even a good Jew might *want* help?
 - Does this make the lawyer see the 'Who is my neighbour?' question differently?
 - Does he still think that people who prize ritual purity above all else are really the neighbours most worth having? (The priest and the levite were heading for Jerusalem and would have been barred from their turn at serving in the temple if they had had contact with a corpse.)
- ii) Does this parable have an important message for the mixed communities of Jews and gentiles for whom Luke was writing?
- iii) *If you were in difficulties or dangers, from whom would you be willing to accept help? Are there any limits? Would you be willing to help all of those people if they were in difficulties and dangers?

2. Martha and Mary (10:38-42)

- i) Do you get the impression that Mary normally left Martha to do all the work?
- ii) What exactly did Martha get wrong?

- iii) Can you think of situations in your own life where attending to spiritual, moral or emotional needs would be more important than providing reasonable physical comfort for your family, friends or visitors?

3. How to pray (11:1-13)

- i) Sometimes Our Lord prayed all night (e.g. 6:12). Is it surprising that he gives his disciples such a short prayer?
- ii) The prayer begins with praise and continues with petitions, but it includes no thanksgiving or meditation. Can you think of any places in the Bible where thanksgiving and meditation are recommended?
- iii) The tiresome botherer and the reluctant giver don't seem like the kind of examples we should copy. Why do you think that Our Lord used this story to encourage people to pray as they should?

4. Beelzebul (11:14-26)

Beelzebul was originally a Philistine god, but was often associated with the Canaanite god Baal. After their exile in Babylon, the Jews became increasingly interested in angels and demons, constructing complex lists and hierarchies for them, and they identified Beelzebub as the prince of demons. The meaning of the name is uncertain, but one possibility is 'Lord of the flies'.

- i) In Mark's Gospel this episode occurs much earlier, with a stern warning that anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit (that is, against the power by which Our Lord defeats demons) can never be forgiven. Can you suggest any reason why St Luke omitted that warning?
- ii) *When people seem to be exercising power to do good, are you too ready to suspect them of dubious motives or methods?

5. Family and faithfulness (11:27-28)

See 8:19-21 for a very similar passage which was discussed in Study 6.

6. Seeing the signs (11:29-36)

Verses 29-32 recall 10:13-16 (see Study 7). Again Our Lord expresses his huge frustration that the people continue to demand signs although they have brushed off the many great signs they have already been given. Signs are no use to those who will not see.

Verses 33-36 are very similar to 8:16-18, but seem to be making a different point. In the earlier passage, the apostles were warned that they, like a lamp, will always be on display and cannot hope to hide any failings; in the later passage, everyone is told to keep their eyes clear so that the light (of the Gospel) may enter and they may see the Our Lord's signs for what they are.

- i) Can you understand how people can see great signs without acting on them? Are there signs in our own times which are being ignored?
- ii) *Have you experienced signs in your personal life? What difference did they make to you? How can you make sure that you have understood them correctly?