

The RICH Course

The publication of *RICH: The reality of encountering Jesus* (Christian Focus, 2010), provided our congregation with a tool which we could use in commending the gospel to friends and family, and to others within our parish. We decided to follow the book with a six week course which would invite participants to engage directly with the key issues raised by the book and to think further about the answers which Luke's Gospel provides.

Each evening adopted a simple format of a meal together, followed by a short talk, discussion around the meal tables, with a chance for questions to the speaker at the end.

We developed a **Study Guide** and **Leader's Guide** for the course and are pleased to make each of them available online for free download and distribution in either PDF or Word format. The latter allows edits to be made, and we give permission for adjustments to the material so long as they are keeping with the ethos of *RICH* and the aims of the course. Indeed, the talk outlines in this document are provided only in skeleton form so as to encourage further development. The style of questions in the Study Guide are geared to our specific context, and so may be adapted accordingly for use elsewhere.

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TALK OUTLINES

1. What's wrong with the world?

Introduction to the course

Whatever your beliefs, background re faith, church experience etc – you are welcome.

No question is off-limits and we (leaders) will do all we can to provide or find real answers.

Books and reading and preparation.

My hope is that you will find these 6 weeks important and interesting enough to do the reading and study the questions – that will certainly help the others on your table.

Each evening has one big theme – and if at any stage in discussion we go wandering off and lose our way, that is where to go to steady the ship and avoid a capsizing.

Tonight – theme is debt - not financial but spiritual – as we encounter Jesus for the first time doing the kind of thing he does – creating a fury!

At the back of the RICH book in chapter 9 you will discover that what matters at the end of the day is not so much what I think of Jesus but what he thinks of me.

There are some very skewed, false and unhelpful ideas about Jesus out there in today's spiritual market place. What matters to us here is that we are really understanding the Bible's view of Jesus.

- a. What Jesus says about himself.
- b. What Jesus says about us.

This is where it gets uncomfortable. Sometimes it is not easy to hear true things that people say about us.

I may overhear a conversation at work where I am the subject of the conversation and where I can recognise that what they are saying about me being grumpy or short-tempered is actually true. I may receive an unwelcomed medical diagnosis where what the doctor is saying about me is unwelcome, but true. Is it better to hear the truth about myself in such situations or not?

Jesus, in the passage we read this evening, places centre-stage the need to have a proper understanding of the Scriptures.

What he says is explosive. People in the synagogue thought his sermon was lovely – until he explained to them that he would get nowhere with those who thought they were actually rich but were actually poor, like them!

Be honest and real – there is little point in being anything else!

Dig in and enjoy the discussion!

2. Who does Jesus think he is?

Just a reminder for those who were here last week and a word of explanation for those who weren't. You are very welcome on this course and as we talk together, any question and comment is permissible. No question is off limits. We want Luke's gospel and your own questions and thoughts to collide!

Last week we saw Jesus tell some fine upstanding members of the community in Nazareth that God viewed them as blind, imprisoned, debtors. His direct and personal way of talking caused so much anger that they tried to kill him. And when people actually listen to what Jesus says this is the kind of thing that can happen. People get offended. Some of us may be offended by him before the 6 weeks of this course is up – but that's OK as long as we have really understood him properly.

That is tonight's big theme – who does Jesus think he is? Not who do we think he is. But who does *he* think he is?

I imagine that Her Majesty the Queen, when watching television programmes which speak about her and the Royal family, must sometimes think: 'what would they know!' Indeed there must be many famous sports and arts personalities who must laugh at the false portrayal of them by the media. Made up stories – rather than facts.

If you are familiar with Chapter 2 in *RICH* then the two made-up stories about God that tend to circulate are:

- a. God is too distant. If he were here there would not be any suffering.
- b. God is too demanding. If he were loving he would ignore my sins.

Luke's Gospel says – why don't we let Jesus tell us who he is? Why don't you put to one side who we think he is and look at who he really is?

Luke 1:30-33: words to Mary: God is coming near, not distant.
Luke 2:11. God is coming as Saviour to provide us freedom from sin.

God is distant – No, says Luke.

God is demanding – No, says Luke.

If Jesus were to be arriving in Aberdeen for a week and you were in charge of his itinerary, what would you get him to do?

- councilors
- hospitals

Luke 4 reveals his priorities to us.

Jesus tells us who he is and what he has come to do. As with the people of Nazareth this may surprise us – but it is what he says.

In our groups we are going to be looking at the stated priorities of Jesus.

After our group discussions we'll come back and I'll take any questions.

If you have a question but don't want to ask it – just get your table leaders to ask it for you. I can almost guarantee that your question will be the same as someone else's.

3. Who does Jesus think I am?

When people have asked me how our little course is going on Thursday evenings – as they inevitably do ... I reply by saying:

Everything is tremendous, we have 200 people, we sit down to a 6-course meal and had fillet steaks last week.

No, of course not. The truth about us is far more interesting and far more significant.

The truth about us is that we're a bunch of ordinary people – some of us think we're much better than we are and some of us think we're not worth tuppence. That's bound to be true because all people are like this.

“I'm a good person”

Or “I'm not good enough” – 2 basic types.

The big idea this evening is that Jesus actually knows what we are like. He knows us inside out.

Jesus doesn't say to one person 'you're good', and to another 'you're not good enough'. But what he says to everyone is 'you're bankrupt'. And it doesn't matter if you are ten pounds

or ten million pounds in debt. If you have no means whatsoever of paying your debt then you're bankrupt.

Actually what I do say when people ask me how the course is going is this: I think people are being incredibly honest and open about what they think, and that is very encouraging because there is very little point in being anything other than open and honest.

In tonight's Bible passage we meet two people. One, Simon, is in the "I'm good" category. The other, a nameless woman, is in the "I'm not good enough" category. Luke 7:36-50 (read).

So if Luke is writing the truth – he is not only telling us that Jesus views us all as bankrupt – he also proves that he knows all about us. And this is something we have already seen in Luke's gospel.

Remember in week 1, Jesus claims that he is the one who has come from God to set the prisoner free, bring sight to the blind and to cancel debts. And then, last week, we saw Jesus prove that this is so by demonstrating his power through his miracles.

It could be quite uncomfortable to have someone come up and say I know something about you & I know all your thoughts. – well, if you are normal that would be uncomfortable.

But actually it all depends on how the person then treats us.

A father discovers that his child has done something absolutely terrible. The truth is out. Is it good or bad that the father knows? It depends what the Father is like. In the case that I heard about this week, the dad wrote to his son assuring him, that despite everything, he loved him no less.

Jesus isn't actually interested in exaggerated claims or nervous hiding – he likes to deal in what is true & Luke says – ask Simon and the woman about that.

4. What does Jesus want from me?

We have a problem building up on this course week by week. We are amassing a list of claims that Jesus made and we have a growing pile of evidence about what he did. Our problem then is this: What do we do with all this stuff? Can we trust him? If all this is true, (big IF) then there are very big implications.

Tonight's session is designed to take those implications seriously. Tonight we ask the question: What does Jesus want from me? I wonder, at this stage in the evening, what you think the answer is? What does Jesus want from me?

We're going to read a slightly longer part of Luke this evening but this is the question to have in mind as we do: What does Jesus want from me? Let's read Luke 12:13-48.

3 things which dominate our thinking come right to the fore here as Jesus speaks.

- a. Our possessions.
- b. Our worries.
- c. Our future.

I wonder what percentage of our total thinking in life is about these three areas? Jesus, remember from last week, knows

what we are like – so no wonder he knows how to speak in a way that gets right to our hearts.

Recently, someone who hasn't been a Christian for that long said to me after church, "2 minutes into your sermon I thought: here he goes again, speaking directly to me, as if he has been following me around all week long." And actually we get comments like that all the time from people in church.

Well, let me tell you two secrets to get the facts straight. I am not some kind of ministerial mystic – and neither is any other preacher or church leader. The truth is it's not the preacher who has been following you around all week – it is God. So if God speaks through the pages of the Bible we should expect it to be relevant.

Here's the second secret. There are two types of people in church. One – like the person I just mentioned. People who listen and who know that God is speaking. The second type are people who are bored to tears. They look as if they are receiving a general anaesthetic and maybe feel as if that's what's happening.

So here are Jesus' 3 hot topics in this passage:

- a. My possessions – many people think that this is the sum total of life. Jesus says it isn't.
- b. My worries – many people say that God doesn't care about the things that trouble them – Jesus says he does.

- c. My future – people assume that the future is the same for everyone. Jesus says it isn't and that when he comes back to the world we will realise that.

Q. What does Jesus want from me?

He wants me to know him – not to be preoccupied with possessions

He wants me to trust him – not to be paralysed with worries

He wants me to wait for him – not to be presumptuous about the next life

That is real Christianity.

5. What does Jesus offer me?

We finished off last week with one of these staggering claims that Jesus makes. You may remember that story of the servant and the master. Remember the one where Jesus says he is like the master who will one day return and expects to find us waiting and ready.

The list of claims which Jesus makes in the gospels grows the more you read these 4 short books.

Do you remember back to week 1? How immense these claims are!

- a. Jesus claims to be the one who will set the prisoners free and give sight to the blind.
- b. Jesus claims to be the one who can forgive us our sins.
- c. Jesus claims to be the one who will cancel my debt to God.
- d. Jesus claims to be the returning Lord who will judge the whole world.

And in the first three cases Jesus went on to prove that what he claims to be he is.

So – would we be wise to believe him when he says he will, one day, judge the entire world & all human beings will be taken into heaven or banished to hell.

Now I know that talk of hell is unpopular, distasteful. Many would advise you – church is OK but don't take it too far. I mean don't get involved with one of those churches that actually believes in hell – that's just horrible.

Well, of course, we do have to brace ourselves if we are going to really think about this properly. But what we must remember is that this is the teaching of Jesus – not the made-up theories of any church.

As we turn to Luke – we will meet people who think they are fine, but they are not. We will meet the religious who think they are fine – but they are not. Let's read Luke 15:1-7.

You will be reading other parts of Luke at your tables and tonight all the passages are making the same point.

To those who say: "I'm good, I'm fine, I've never done anything wrong and I certainly don't deserve to go to hell. Jesus says fine – you have it your way. You, if you are fine – you can face the future judgment by yourself – you have been given an invitation to a banquet – and you are in danger of tearing it up.

To those who say I've blown it. I've not done that well, I need your help, Jesus. I'm like a lost sheep. Jesus says – I'm on my way to pick you up and carry you home.

When Jesus says to us in the gospels – I can assure that you will be safe with me forever. There are two responses to that.

You remember how the parable of the prodigal son ends. The younger brother who had squandered his money gets treated like a king. Ring, fattened calf, great banquet.

The older brother is in the huff outside. This is outrageous. He goes and wrecks his life and wastes his money and this is the treatment he gets. Disgusting.

Go up to that elder brother and tap him on the shoulder and say – 'look, why not go in – and enjoy the banquet.' 'No!' 'OK then.'

'You'd rather be out here in the cold?' 'Yes!' 'OK then.'

'I'm right – he's wrong and he gets a banquet.'

'You could be in there too.'

'No! No way!'

That's how it is with Jesus' teaching on hell.

6. Why did Jesus have to die?

There are two scenes that I want us to picture this evening as we start. They are scenes which will help us understand this evening's theme from Luke's Gospel.

However, before I describe the two scenes – please feel under strict instruction to keep up the good work of absolute honesty & complete openness in discussion.

It may be that as we talk this evening about why Jesus had to die that some loose ends can be tied together. It may be that you reach some kind of conclusion and feel that, by the end of tonight, you have already begun to follow Jesus – whom this course presents to you. If so, few things would give those of us running the course more pleasure.

What is, perhaps, more likely, is that you are left this evening with some remaining questions, some loose ends still untied in a messy manner - & what we do assure you of is as much help as we can give beyond tonight in continuing to help you find answers from the Bible.

Scene 1. The courtroom has been sitting for many hours and all the evidence has been heard. The summary has been given & the person accused of murdering your child through drink-driving is in the dock. The jury returns. The judge asks for a

verdict. The verdict is unanimous. The judge asks: innocent or guilty? Guilty. Then everyone gets up & leaves & no sentence is passed. How would you feel?

Scene 2. Your wife, or husband, or mum, or child, or someone who loves you very much announces that they want to show you just how much they love you. And then to demonstrate the sheer scale of their love they throw themselves off a cliff. How would you feel?

When Jesus dies on the cross & rises again from the grave he pays for our debts, a sentence is passed, and he provides forgiveness. It is not a mere demonstration of love

READ Luke 22:19-23; 23:13-25.

Why is Jesus dying? For us.

What he has achieved? He has taken our sentence.

Remember Jesus' claim – that he would proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Debts could be cancelled.

Here at the end of Luke we see him paying the price.

So this is the terrific reality for those who follow Christ.

- My debt is wiped out.

- My sins is forgiven.

Jesus' death was not a demonstration of love, it was a transaction. He took the judgment – others receive life.

In the last chapter of Luke's Gospel we have three scenes where the Lord Jesus Christ is with people who are bewildered & confused & in each case – they realise that he is alive & that they are with him.

It is this – a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who has cancelled my debt and enabled me to know God – which real Christian faith provides.