

## 8 - MORE CHALLENGES TO JESUS' AUTHORITY

Luke next narrated two incidents that once more raised the issues of Jesus' authority and his growing popularity. Again moving about Galilee, he was confronted by a leper who pleaded to be cleansed. Note the difference in this man's attitude from the way Simon had reacted: he believed instinctively that Jesus could heal him.

In those days, any skin affliction was seen as leprosy, not just the true form we now know as the disabling and disfiguring *Hansen's disease*. Having such an affliction meant being immediately ostracized from family and community. Jesus touched him and he was immediately healed. To touch a leper was to make oneself also diseased and become impure in the sight of the law of Moses. What happened next was the point of this incident in Luke's mind.

Jesus demanded secrecy until the man had showed himself to the priest and offered an appropriate sacrifice, as the law of Moses required. Obviously Jesus was aware that his ministry of teaching and healing had social implications. The religious authorities would be the first to challenge him. The attempt to keep the incident quiet failed completely. As the news of Jesus' power spread far and wide, more and more people flocked to hear him and have their diseases healed.

A major turning point in Jesus' ministry was at hand. So he retreated for a time to pray. Luke frequently used such a withdrawal as a warning that a new series of conflicts was about to begin. The challenge would come from the Pharisees and scribes, (i.e. teachers of the law). They were not a significant party in Jesus' time, and more like religious reformers. By Luke's time fifty years later, they had come to dominate Judaism.

The incident Luke related next not only reflected the determination and faith of the sick man's friends, but more importantly raised the question of Jesus'

authority to forgive sins. Nothing was said about the nature of the man's illness, but the implication is that it was due to some unstated sinfulness. We might call it a psychosomatic illness arising from a deep sense of guilt. The healing of the man stands alone as an act of mercy. The consequences of Jesus' action caused immense controversy.

The religious authorities charged Jesus with blasphemy for forgiving the man's sin. In the Hebrew tradition, blasphemy involved abusing God's name (Lev. 24:10-11, 14-16, 23); attacking something belonging to God (2 Kings 19:4, 6, 22; Ezek. 35:1-2). In this instance, the issue was usurping God's unique power to forgive. To the religious authorities, by healing the man and forgiving him, Jesus had violated God's very being, as their challenge revealed. Jesus claimed to be doing what only God was capable of doing. Did he have such authority?

Luke conveyed his understanding that Jesus indeed did have such authority in the phrase he put into Jesus' response using the familiar term, *the Son of Man*. To Luke the term meant something more than "the Human One," an ordinary mortal, as in the Hebrew tradition of Ezekiel and Daniel.