

Luke 1:5-15

Sermon: **God's righteous ones**

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1. In my previous sermon, I pointed out that the Gospel of Luke is grounded in evidence and facts, where Luke seeks to explain to us what faith truly is. Luke wants to prove to us that Jesus will indeed come and be our King in the future. This is not just a beautiful story—it is an objective reality.

PRIEST

2. **(Luke 1:5)** King Herod ruled over Judea—which included Samaria and Galilee—between 40 and 4 B.C. In **(Matthew 2:1)** the text says: “**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.**” Here we see confirmation of his reign during that time.

2.1. The text goes on to say that there was a certain priest from the division of Abijah, named Zechariah. But what exactly does “from the division of Abijah” mean? If we look at (1 Chronicles 24:1–18), it is written there that during the time of King David, the priestly line was divided into divisions. One could only be a priest if he came from the line of Aaron, from the tribe of Levi (Aaron was the brother of Moses). Aaron’s descendants were divided into 24 divisions, and the division of Abijah was the eighth in order.

2.2. The Levites, from the tribe of Levi, performed other duties in the Temple—they cleansed the Temple, sang in the choir, prepared it for the ceremonies, and so forth. But one could only be a priest if he was from the line of Aaron. The text further tells us that Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, was also from Aaron’s lineage, which means that both parents of John the Baptist came from the priestly line—a striking detail indeed.

RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD

3. **(Luke 1:6)** Here Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God and lived blamelessly according to God's Law and commandments.

Let us pause here for a moment—what does this truly mean? There are two main views in world religions on how the human soul is saved:

- a) through good works,
- b) through the grace of God.

3.1. Here I will focus on the Catholic and Protestant perspectives.

3.2. Protestant theology teaches that no one was ever able to fully keep the Law of Moses (the Moral Commandments). That is why Jesus had to come—to offer Himself as a sacrifice pleasing to God, so that those who believe in Him may be pardoned (justified) before God and receive eternal life as a gift.

If we look at the passage mentioned in (§ 3.) through the lens of Protestant theology, we are faced with either ignoring it or questioning it. Why? Because Zechariah and Elizabeth at that time did not yet know Jesus—He had not been born. In other words, they had no chance of being saved.

3.3. The Catholic Catechism, on the other hand, teaches that through the sacraments (external ritual observances), good works, and Christ's sacrifice, we receive salvation. The issue that lies within these external observances I will explain further on in the text.

4. If it was impossible to keep the moral Commandments of God, then how do we read here that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God? If we carefully study the Bible, we find nowhere that the authors explicitly state the Law of Moses to be unkeepable.

4.1. The truth is that none of us loves our neighbor as ourselves. We are morally imperfect beings, who will always first take care of our own needs. The very core—the essence—of the Law of Moses, which is moral goodness, we can never fully achieve.

PURPOSE OF THE LAW

4.2. The Law was given to the Jews so that they might recognize who they truly were, and through that realization come to a decision—to repent deeply in their hearts and understand that they were in need of God's grace.

5. Now, let me step into the shoes of a Jew. What does it actually mean to keep God's Commandments?

As a Jew, if I wanted to keep God's Commandments, to observe the Law of Moses, I first had to truly believe that there is a God who made a Covenant with my people Israel. That means

that, as an Israelite, I would take God's Law seriously and live it out. I would devote myself to worship, to studying the Torah, to learning who God is. I would love His Law, because I knew who I was—and that only God could save me from myself.

5.1. When I, as a Jew, realized through the Law of Moses that I was not a good person—yet with a sincere desire to become such a person—then, by the sacrificial offerings prescribed in the Law, with a contrite and repentant heart, I would come into God's Temple before Yahweh. Through that outward ritual I would show that I was seeking mercy and forgiveness from my God. I would pray that throughout my life He would change me and shape me into a person who, with all his heart, loves and cherishes the moral goodness and perfection of the Law of Moses.

5.2. I believe this is exactly what Zechariah and Elizabeth were doing. They did not do this because they "had to." They loved and strove to live out the Law of Moses. They treasured it in their hearts as the most precious possession they had¹.

5.3. They were not like other Jews who did it merely because they "had to," because culture and tradition demanded it. Many Jews did indeed love the Law of Moses, but as they kept it, they believed that in doing so they were earning God's favor: *"God, don't You want to give me what I deserve? I fast regularly, I offer sacrifices in Your Temple, I live according to Your Laws, I pray X times a day. I am not like my neighbor—the tax collector, drunkard, or adulterer. I am better than him. I deserve for You to bless me!"*

5.4. Did this mean: *"Alright, God, now I will stop being evil and start being good"*? No. The Bible clearly teaches that the very core of our being is "morally corrupt." No other book in the world goes as deeply into this problem—the very problem that destroys humanity. The God of the Bible wants to confront us with this reality because He loves us—not to humiliate us or take delight in it.

6. The Bible tells us, in both the Old and the New Testament, that we cannot "earn" God's favor. We are saved by God's grace—it is a gift from Him. - I would say that we "qualify" through a repentant heart, in order to receive the gift of dwelling in God's Kingdom. –

A SAD REALITY IN OUR LIVES

6.1. If we apply this to us Christians today, I want to say this: in our proud hearts there is something corrupt—a heart that is rebellious toward God, toward His goodness and His grace. We simply do not want God's grace and forgiveness; we want to earn it! It even offends us that God would give it to us as a gift.

¹ (Matthew 13:44–46; Psalm 37:30–31)

6.2. I see more and more of this even in my own life: *"I want to earn it. I don't need forgiveness. I am good!"* The sad reality is that I see the very same thing in our Christian circles—whether we are Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant—the majority of us carry precisely this kind of attitude toward God.

6.3. We all have our outward rituals and observances (sacraments) through which we want to present ourselves to others as better than them, and thus as though we deserve God's favor.

ROTTEN WITHIN

7. In the time of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the apostles, the Pharisees were doing the very same thing.

They taught a doctrine that claimed by keeping the Law of Moses they were earning God's favor. But Jesus, John the Baptist, and the apostles opposed this. Why? Because it was an unbelievable lie—a deception of their own minds.

The apostle Paul, in his letters, declares:

"If you think that through these ceremonial rituals you become righteous before God, you are utterly foolish! The only thing these rituals were ever meant to show is a heart that acknowledges its moral corruption, and through that ritual seeks God's forgiveness and grace²."

7.1. But no. The Pharisees walked through the marketplaces, patting each other on the shoulder and saying: *"Look at how good and righteous we are."*

They displayed this outwardly by their deeds—and they did it perfectly. To them it was more important to appear righteous before people than to truly love and keep God's Law.

Jesus said to the Pharisees: *"On the outside you are a polished cup, but inside you are full of dead men's bones³."* Their thoughts were corrupt, full of deceit and envy. Yet outwardly—they appeared perfect and righteous. Their attitude was: *"Look at these sinners around us, but we? We are God's people."*

And sadly, they became righteous only in their own eyes, deceived by their own delusion. The concept of the Pharisee, against which Jesus and the apostles warned the Jewish people back then, is still valid today—universally.

7.2. The Jews could take the Law of Moses seriously and walk righteously before God. They could not keep it perfectly, but the very desire to want to keep it perfectly—that made them righteous in God's eyes. In other words, if deep within your heart you truly wanted to be such a person, then in God's eyes you were righteous. And few did this. Among them were Zechariah and Elizabeth.

² (Galatians 3:1–3; Romans 2:25, 28–29; 3:28; Philippians 3:2–3)

³ (Matthew 23:27)

7.3. Thus, both Catholics and Protestants contain a partial truth in their teaching. Yet, because they failed to fully understand the Jewish mindset, they twisted and reshaped God's teaching according to their own liking—sadly.

THE LOT

8. Alright, let us continue. In **(Luke 1:7)** we read that Elizabeth was barren.

In **(Genesis 30:22–23)** it says: *"Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, 'God has taken away my disgrace.'"*

The text goes on to say that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were advanced in years. This theme repeats itself as in the Old Testament—Abraham and Sarah were also old before they received Isaac.

8.1. **(Luke 1:8)** Most likely, the 24 divisions (§ 2.1.) rotated among themselves in order to serve in active priestly duty in Jerusalem. While one division was on active duty, the others remained on reserve, living throughout Palestine with their families. When their turn came for active service, they had to leave their homes and families and go to Jerusalem to serve in God's Temple for a set period of time.

Here Luke tells us that Zechariah was serving in such a duty at that moment.

8.2. The text further tells us that Zechariah was chosen by lot for a special service. Let me try to explain the layout of the Temple so we can better visualize the event. The Temple was surrounded by outer walls, like a fortress. Inside those walls were two large courtyards in the shape of a square, separated by a massive wall and a gate of passage.

In the first courtyard were the women, who were not allowed to enter the second part, where the men gathered. There sacrifices were offered, and this duty was performed by the priests. That area was separated by a low wall, and the men could follow the events visually. Behind the altar were stairs that led up into God's Temple, which contained two rooms. The first room had a large opening without a door, so that Jews from outside could see inside. The second room was separated by a great curtain and was called the Holy of Holies.

Only one priest could enter inside—the one who had been chosen by lot. He would offer incense there twice a day in the Holy of Holies.

8.3. Zechariah was chosen by lot. But why by lot? This is speculation on my part: if a priest failed to perform his service properly, he would in some way be punished. To offer incense in the Holy of Holies was at the same time the greatest honor and the greatest responsibility. — In other words: you had better do it right. No priest would have taken it lightly to enter the Holy of Holies and offer incense. *"Better that someone else goes in today, I'd rather not."* And that is why the lot was used. —

ENCOUNTER WITH THE ANGEL

9.1. In **(Luke 1:11–12)** we read that Zechariah was terrified. The angel most likely appeared in the form of a man. In verse 19 we see him introduce himself by name: Gabriel. The name Gabriel appears once more in Luke. In **(Daniel 8:15–17)** we also read that Gabriel appeared in the form of a man.

Why was Zechariah afraid? Imagine being a priest offering incense in the Holy of Holies—the space where no one is allowed to enter except you—and suddenly a man appears, ready to speak with you. Would you not be frightened? I certainly would!

9.3. In **(Luke 1:13–14)** we read that the angel said to Zechariah: **“Your prayer has been heard!”** Which prayer? Later in the text the angel tells him that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a son. Most likely, the prayer of Zechariah and Elizabeth was exactly that—that they might have a child. But was Zechariah praying that very prayer at the moment when he was offering incense? I don’t know. I am inclined to believe he was not. Why? Because the text clearly says they were advanced in years. I would assume that after many years of praying for a child, once they had grown old, they said to themselves: *“Clearly, God will not answer this prayer.”*

9.4. What I would emphasize here is this: because they were righteous before God, they continued to worship and honor Him—even though He had not given them a child.
— In other words, in their hearts they said: *“Let Your will be done, Yahweh!”* —

9.5. And then the angel says: *“You will have joy and gladness.”*

I believe this refers to a personal joy—the joy between Zechariah and Elizabeth, who through God’s blessing had now received what they had long desired.

SPIRIT OF TRUTH

10. In **(Luke 1:15)** we read that many will rejoice at his birth and that he will be great before the Lord. Here the angel says: *“You, as parents, will have incredible joy, but not only you—the whole nation of Israel will rejoice as well.”*

10.1.1. Before which Lord would John the Baptist be great? We know that Jesus Christ, as Lord, had not yet come onto the scene, so in Zechariah’s mind the Lord was Yahweh, their God. If I am right, then the angel here is saying that John the Baptist would be great before Yahweh Himself.

10.1. Further in the text we read that he would drink no wine or strong drink. The angel is giving them instructions rooted in the distant past, in the time of Moses. Back then, some parents dedicated their children to Yahweh. These children had a special service before Him and were called Nazirites.

The outward symbols by which they were recognized are described in (Judges 13:2–5).

10.2. The text then says: **“He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.”**

But what does this truly mean? In the Gospels we see that John the Baptist never performed miracles. He did not heal the sick, raise the dead, or give sight to the blind. Yet in the Old Testament some prophets did exactly those things. So why was John the Baptist considered great before the Lord?

What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

10.2.1. In the Gospel of John the expression “Spirit of Truth” is often used, and I believe this is exactly what Luke is emphasizing here. John the Baptist, from birth, was completely open to truth. He longed to understand and passionately sought the revelation of God’s truth. And what he knew and understood was in harmony with the resources he had: the Scriptures, the time in which he lived, the revelation available to him, and, of course, the intelligence God had given him. John the Baptist had a prophetic insight that the Messiah was coming. But I would say he did not have insight into the fact that the Messiah must go to the cross—that Jesus must first die, then rise again, and only afterward return to establish His Kingdom on earth. John had part of God’s revelation, but certainly not the fullness that we have today.

10.3. The difference between John the Baptist and us is this: the rebellion against truth, which we carry within ourselves, did not hinder him. He had received the Spirit of Truth even from his mother’s womb. From his earliest days, he had an extraordinary understanding of what God was doing, who God is, and what His plans were. And he dedicated his entire life to that calling. Jesus Himself said of him that John was the greatest among those born of women. — The very same power of the Spirit of Truth we see also in the life of Jesus from His youth—for example, when He remained in the Temple and spoke with the teachers for three days⁴. Everyone marveled at His wisdom and His understanding of the Scriptures. —

11. This is crucial for us to understand: the New Testament teaches that there are different gifts of the Spirit, but one Spirit. There are gifts of teaching, preaching, prophecy, and service. But for these gifts to be realized, we must first receive the Spirit of Truth—that is: eyes to see and ears to hear. To understand. To grasp. That “aha” moment that repeats itself again and again in the life of a believer.

11.1. That “aha” moment leads us to the realization where we say to ourselves: *“This is truth—this is the only truth!”*

11.2. Our entire life—where we grew up, how we were raised, what we learned, what we experienced, and the decisions we made—the Spirit of Truth uses all of it to open our hearts. And then we finally begin to understand why we are here, who God is, and what His plan is for us.

⁴ (Luke 2:47)

And with that realization, we choose to personally surrender to God. We bring our life, our desires, our passions, and our convictions under the authority of His Son, Jesus Christ. He becomes our teacher. We long more and more to think, speak, act, and love as He did.

— And then we realize that we have received from God an extraordinary gift. And that realization fills us with great joy. —