

Sunday School Lesson
Luke 4:16-30
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Rejection at Nazareth



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The emphasis of this passage is on the rejection of Jesus by the people of the little village of Nazareth, where Jesus had grown up as a boy and young man. A depiction of the same event is also found in [Matt. 13:53-58](#) and [Mark 6:1-6](#). Some attention will be given to them as well in order to gain additional insight into this event in Jesus' public ministry.

Verses 16 through 30 comprise the natural boundaries of this unit of scripture material (= pericope), rather than vv. 21-30, as is listed in the Sunday School materials. The reasoning behind the lifting of these verses out of their natural setting defies understanding, and to me reflects a trend toward an unfortunate shallow proof-texting of scripture. Thus we will honor the shape of the scripture text itself by giving attention to the natural limits of the text material.

I. Context

Both the historical setting and the literary setting of this event in Jesus' ministry need to be explored, if we are to understand the basic point and purpose of the inclusion of this episode in the gospel accounts.

a. Historical

Two levels historical exploration are important to the interpretative process. *First*, we need to explore the composition of the gospel document this passage occurs in, and second we need to locate the occurrence of this event in the public ministry of Jesus. Both of these issues pose challenges, but honest study of scripture needs to learn as much as can be legitimately gleaned. This knowledge helps prevent distorted interpretation of the meaning of the scripture passage.

Regarding the compositional history of the Gospel of Luke, let me summarize a lot of Lukan scholarship by the following. William Beard in the *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach online) summarizes the basic issue this way: "According to tradition this gospel was written by Luke, 'the beloved physician' and travel companion of Paul (Col. 4:14; Philemon 1:24; 2 Tim. 4:11). Actually the tradition is not very old. It appears first in the writings of Irenaeus, who was a theologian living in Gaul during the latter part of the 2nd cent. The Muratorian fragment (ca. A.D. 200), a document which presents an official list of Christian scriptures, supports the same conclusion." With the acceptance of this early church tradition -- although not all do and since the gospel itself makes no effort internally to identify its author -- then the issue becomes trying to locate a setting for the writing of this gospel. Again Bill Beard summarizes quite effectively these questions:

"The exact date and place of the writing of this gospel cannot be ascertained. Since the author uses Mark as a source and since he seems to have accurate knowledge of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (19:41-44; 21:20-24; see pp. 1029-31) he evidently wrote after A.D. 70. He must have written before 140, when his gospel was included in the canon of the heretic Marcion. Since the situation of the church reflected in the gospel fits well the political situation of the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81-96), a date from about 85 to 95 is most likely.

According to one tradition Luke wrote his histories in Rome. Another locates his writing in Greece. Since there is a correlative tradition that the evangelist died in one of the Greek provinces, this latter tradition has better support.

Any of these locations assumes the traditional authorship and bears the same burdens. Perhaps all we can say is that the gospel was written from some locale where Greek was the primary language and where cultured readers like Theophilus (1:3) would be at home.”

According to [Luke 1:1-4](#), this gospel -- and subsequently the book of Acts (cf. Acts 1:1) -- were dedicated to a Theophilus who as a patron supported the cost of producing these documents as well as the making of copies of them for distribution to various Christian communities in the late first century world. Evidently [Theophilus](#) was a wealthy Roman who had become a Christian and wanted to contribute to the spread of Christianity by supporting Luke’s writing of these two documents. The gospel preface ([Lk 1:4](#)) suggests the purpose of the document was “so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts together stand as a two volume testimony of the beginning of the Christian religion with its founder, Jesus Christ, and the first three decades of the beginning of this movement in its spread from Jerusalem to Rome from AD 30 to AD 61. The author was closely associated with the apostle Paul. For the gospel account Luke made use of a variety of sources, as he indicated in [Lk 1:1-3](#), since he was not personally present with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Modern scholarship generally concludes that among these sources are the gospels of Mark and perhaps also Matthew, although more likely the material in Luke, that is also found in Matthew, may very well be drawn from a common, unknown source. That is generally called the Q document from the German word Quelle meaning source. Thus with at least Mark and Q in front of him, along with notes from interviews with various people around the earthly Jesus, Luke set out to tell his story of Jesus in a way that would enhance understanding of the enormous significance of this Jewish carpenter from the little village of Nazareth in the northern Palestinian province of Galilee. As best as we can determined, this happened sometime in the 70s or perhaps early 80s of the first Christian century, possibly while Luke was living in Rome.

The *second historical concern* emerges from inside the scripture passage itself. The nature of 4:16-30 is that of a narrative text describing a specific event that happened during the public ministry of Jesus, which extended from about AD 27 to AD 30. The exact time frame for this event is somewhat difficult to determine. For certain, it took place during the larger period of ministry in Galilee, which took up the bulk of the three year public ministry of Jesus before crucifixion in Jerusalem in the south. The difficulty of whether at the beginning of that Galilean ministry, or well into that period of ministry surfaces through a comparison of the three synoptic gospel accounts, as is illustrated by the [summary chart](#) posted at Cranfordville.com:

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
II. Galilean ministry	4:12-18:35 (51%)	1:14-9:50 (53%)	4:14-9:56 (24%)	4:46-7:9 (15%)
A. Phase One: To the Choosing of the Twelve	4:12-12:21	1:15-3:19a	4:14-7:50	4:46-5:47
B. Phase Two: To the Withdrawals from Galilee	12:22-14:12	3:19b-6:29	8:1-9:9	-
C. Phase Three: To the Departure to Jerusalem	14:13-18:35	6:30-9:50	9:10-56	6:1-7:9

Luke (4:16-30) sets the occurrence of the event in the beginning part of this ministry period by locating it in chapter four of his gospel account (above outline II.A.), whereas Mark ([6:1-6](#)) and Matthew ([13:53-58](#)) locate it at the end of the time that Jesus spent in concentrated ministry in Galilee (above outline II.B.). For Luke the placing of the event at the beginning of ministry in Galilee allowed him to highlight the tone of ultimate rejection of Jesus that became an important theme in Luke’s story of Jesus. Mark and Matthew, on the other hand, by their placing of the episode at the end of the time in Galilee, highlight that ultimately even the people who knew Jesus as a boy would reject his claim to being the divinely anointed Son of Man after having had the opportunity of up to two years of exposure to his teaching and ministry. This difference of placing of episodes is not uncommon in the three gospels. Most of the time when two or three of the synoptic gospels describe the same event, they will place it pretty close to the same spot in the sequence of stories in their account of Jesus’ ministry. But occasionally, evidently for their own thematic purposes they will shift the sequence, sometimes dramatically from where it shows up in the other gospel accounts.



Thus, honest study of the gospels will always be cautious about over confidence in locating the exact time frame in Jesus' public ministry for a specific episode. The approach that I've followed over the years is to locate it as precisely as the scripture text will allow, and then explore possible reasons for the gospel writers shifting the sequence when such is found.

In either historical setting the location of the event is clear. This event took place in the small village of Nazareth located in southwest Galilee. Nazareth is mentioned some 29 times in the New Testament, hardly ever in a positive light. A very small village in Jesus' time, the modern city "is situated among the southern ridges of Lebanon, on the steep slope of a hill, about 14 miles from the Sea of Galilee and about 6 west from Mount Tabor. It is identified with the modern village en-Nazirah, of six or ten thousand inhabitants. It lies 'as in a hollow cup' lower down upon the hill than the ancient city. The main road for traffic between Egypt and the interior of Asia passed by Nazareth near the foot of Tabor, and thence northward to Damascus" ([Easton's Dictionary of the Bible](#), online). The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (iPreach, online) provides some additional insight: "In Jesus' day it was a

small village, secluded, and not on any main highway, although it was near Sepphoris, an important city which was just S of the main road from Tiberias to Ptolemaïs." Most of Jesus' public ministry took place in this northern part of Palestine in the Roman province called Galilee. It encompassed most of the territory of the old Northern Kingdom of Israelites during the OT era, and was thickly populated in contrast to the sparse population of Judea in the south where Jerusalem was located. The religious traditions of the Jewish people in Galilee were more diverse and progressive minded typically than those in Judea. Thus Jesus generally found a much more sympathetic audience in Galilee than in Judea. This narrative describing the negative reaction of his hometown people dramatically emphasizes how people can turn their back on someone, even someone they know well. This is an important point to remember in studying this passage.

b. Literary

The issue of the literary setting of 4:16-30 is very similar to the historical setting discussed above. Again Bill Beard summarizes the literary setting issues well in the *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach, online): "In presenting the mission of Jesus as beginning in Nazareth, Luke departs from the order of Mark. Although his account has a few points of contact with Mark's later report of a ministry in Nazareth (Mark 6:1-6), the source of this narrative is basically Luke's special material, L. However, Luke is aware of the fact that Jesus did not really begin his ministry in his home town; in vs. 23 he makes it evident that previous work had been done at Capernaum. Luke's order therefore must have been shaped by some purpose other than the historical. It attempts to present a kind of prefiguring of the whole mission of Jesus. Although accepted by others, Jesus is rejected by his own. Luke's story is a comment on Mark 6:5 — a passage omitted by Luke — which says that Jesus 'could do no mighty work' in Nazareth. Luke points out that Jesus has done mighty works elsewhere after his own people have rejected him and because this mission to others was of the very purpose of God."

The literary pattern of the scripture texts in the synoptic gospels somewhat follows what has been called a 'hero story.' Here Jesus is cast in heroic tones by each gospel narrator, but the negative reaction of the people in the story serves to make an important point that being important doesn't necessarily mean that others will accept that importance. He speaks in OT prophetic tones with authority and insightful understanding of the OT scriptures. Yet, the hometown people had an image already formed about him from watching him grow up in their midst. This preconceived notion would not allow them to recognize Jesus in the full significance of being God's Messiah and Savior. This type of ancient story is found in the recorded lives of many of the outstanding leaders in ancient Greece and Rome. Most had to overcome rejection sometimes by people who knew them well in order to achieve prominence. That certainly was the case with Jesus as all three gospel writers declare.

II. Message

Luke's version of the episode naturally falls into two segments: vv. 16-21 and vv. 22-30. Although not necessarily the same pattern in Mark and Matthew we will follow the Lukan pattern, since Luke's account is the central focus of the study.

a. Sabbath Reading of Scripture, vv. 16-21

Matt. 13:53-58 (NRSV)

53 When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place. 54 He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded...

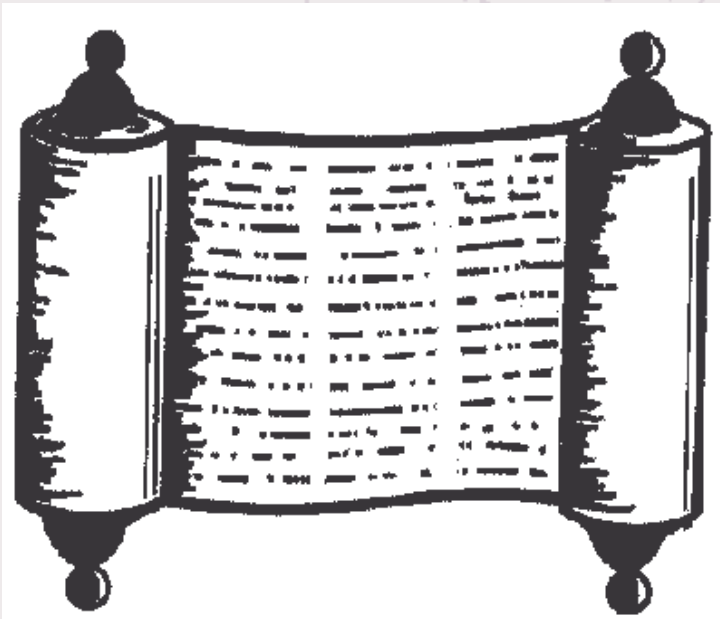
Mark 6:1-2a (NRSV)

1 He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 2 On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded.

Luke 4:16-21 (NRSV)

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."



Comments

Quite obviously from a causal glance at the three gospel texts, Luke has incorporated many more details from his sources beyond Mark, while Matthew mostly followed Mark in his account.

In all three gospels, the specific occasion for the event is the sabbath service in the synagogue in Nazareth. This was the 'church' that Jesus had known as a boy when his family would worship every Friday evening at the beginning of the Jewish sabbath. The sabbath began at sundown Friday and ended at sundown Saturday, then as well as in our day. This was very likely the place also where Jesus as a young Jewish boy had gone to school, since the Jewish synagogue was a multipurpose building: school, worship center, city hall, town meeting place etc. Mark and Matthew paint very broad strokes, describing simply that Jesus, accompanied by his disciples, was attending the sabbath service and doing some teaching as a guest speaker. The initial, general reaction of the people was great surprise. This carpenter's son was a powerful teacher like the rabbis as well. Evidently, they had not heard Jesus do this sort of thing while he was growing up there.

Luke, in writing to an audience unfamiliar with Jewish customs etc., goes into much greater detail about exactly what Jesus did in teaching at the synagogue. Several items worthy of note surface in Luke's account.

Alan Culpepper in the *New Interpreter's Bible* commentary on Luke (iPreach, online) provides the following helpful summation of ancient synagogue worship patterns:

Jesus stood to read, as was customary. He would then sit while he taught (4:20; 5:3). Although we do not know exactly what transpired in the worship of a Jewish synagogue of that time, the following elements seem

to have been present: the Shema, recitation of the Decalogue, the eighteen benedictions, the reading of Scripture, the Psalms, the exposition, and the blessing. Various people might have been asked to lead in reading and praying. Luke reports only part of the event. The Hazzan, or assistant, would have handed Jesus the scroll. By the first century there was a fixed triennial cycle of readings from the Torah, but arguments that the readings from the Prophets were also fixed by this date are inconclusive. Presumably Jesus was able to read the Scriptures in Hebrew and then interpret them in Aramaic, as would have been customary. (The practice of giving a translation and exposition of the text can be traced to [Neh 8:8](#).) There was usually more than one reader, and each was expected to read at least three verses. The readings from the prophets were probably chosen because they had substantial or linguistic affinities with the reading from the Torah. Luke's description of Jesus' finding the place where the verses quoted from Isaiah occur probably means that Luke understood that Jesus himself chose this passage.

Jesus attended the sabbath service in the synagogue, "as was his custom" (4:16). The Greek phrase *κατὰ τὸ εἰωθὸς αὐτοῦ* (as was his custom) shows up one other time in reference to Jesus' actions, in Mark 10:1 (NRSV), "He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them." The point being in both places that Jesus was careful to use every opportunity to share his insights about the Kingdom of God with everyone who would listen. There's a lesson for us who are his followers.

A second distinctive point in Luke's account is how he did his teaching. In the sabbath service of Jewish worship both then and now the reading of the sacred scriptures is central to worship, along with the offering of prayers. A sermon, often called a homily in Jewish tradition, is helpful but isn't as important as the reading of God's Word and prayer to the Lord. Jesus was given the opportunity to do what was considered very significant: read the scriptures. As a visitor with the reputation of a rabbi he would be free to make some interpretative comments on what was read as well. In ancient tradition, every Jewish male present could rise to make comments on the scripture text that was read, if he felt the need to do so, and felt the leading of the Lord. The point of all comments was to connect up the sacred text to present needs and applications in the lives of those present. The trained rabbis of Jesus' day had developed specific interpretative methods for doing this. Jesus knew those methods and sometimes followed them, but on this occasion he would choose a different approach. One that would prove to be very controversial to those present in the sabbath service in Nazareth that day.

The scripture text Jesus read came from the prophet Isaiah. It is taken from 61:1-2. This creates the opportunity to take a look at another interesting facet of scripture study: how the NT writers used the OT

Luke 4:18-19 (NRSV)

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me

to proclaim release to the captives
and **recovery of sight to the blind**,

to let the oppressed go free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Isaiah 61:1-2 (NRSV)

1 *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because
the Lord has anointed me;*

he has sent me

to bring good news to the oppressed,

to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and *release to the prisoners;*

2 *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*, and the
day of vengeance of our God;

to comfort all who mourn;

3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion — to give
them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness
instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of
a faint spirit.

texts in citation; it's different from modern standards.

Quite clearly Jesus paraphrased the Isaiah passage, rather than exactly quoted it. Whether Luke included all that Jesus said, or merely selected the most relevant parts for his own writing purposes is difficult to determine. The latter is more likely, since in ancient story telling the writer normally recounted events from the past and reshaped them to accomplish his own purposes in telling the story from the past.

Prof. Robert Tannehill in the Luke volume of the Abingdon New Testament Commentary (iPreach online) shares some insights about the way the Isaiah text is used here:

Although the quotation follows the LXX of Isa 61:1-2 fairly closely, some editing has taken place. One phrase has been omitted and another has been inserted from Isa 58:6. The inserted phrase is translated "to let the oppressed go free" in the NRSV. This phrase also contains the word "release" (aphesis). (We might translate more literally, "to send out the oppressed in release.") The insertion was evidently made in order to reemphasize this concept. The captives who are to be released probably include at least three groups. The preceding reference to the poor suggests that the captives may be people imprisoned for debt. They may also be people with physical ailments that are regarded as the result of Satan's bondage (13:16) or the devil's oppression (Acts 10:38). Finally, the term "release" is used in the phrase "release of sins" (usually translated "forgiveness of sins").

Also, Alan Culpepper in the Luke volume of the *New Interpreter's Bible* (iPreach online) has helpful comments:

The phrase translated "he has sent me" (ἀπέσταλκέν με *apestalken me*) can be taken either with the preceding line or with what follows. Luke has also changed the verb in Isa 58:6 to an infinitive so that it fits the context and results in a sequence of four infinitives: to bring good news, to proclaim, to let go free, and to proclaim. The threefold repetition of the pronoun *me* also underscores the role of this passage as a description of Jesus' ministry. Significantly, Jesus does not go on to read the next phrase in Isa 61:2: "and the day of vengeance of our God."

The reference to the anointing of the Spirit connects these verses with the baptism of Jesus (3:22), and the description of the work of God's anointed prophet serves as a positive counterpoint to the temptations. It does not signal a separate anointing. The first part of the quotation explains the significance of the Spirit at the baptism and serves as a confirmation of Jesus' authority when later we read of activities that illustrate Jesus' fulfillment of the four infinitive phrases in this text. In Matthew, this same text underlies the first two of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount.

Significantly, Jesus' work will be good news to the poor. The Magnificat praises the Lord for lifting up the lowly and sending the rich away empty (1:52-53). Later, Jesus announces God's blessing on the poor (6:20) and then refers to the fulfillment of the charge to bring good news to the poor in his response to John (7:22). The poor also figure more prominently in Jesus' teachings in Luke than in any other Gospel (14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 21:3).

The term used here for "captives" (αἰχμαλώτοι *aichmalōtoi*) does not appear elsewhere in the NT, and elsewhere Luke uses the term "release" (ἀφεσις *aphesis*) only for forgiveness of sins, but various events later in Jesus' ministry can be understood as illustrating the fulfillment of this aspect of his commission. The word for "release" recurs in the line from Isa 58:6, inserted here by Luke: release for the oppressed. Jesus released persons from various forms of bondage and oppression: economic (the poor), physical (the lame, the crippled), political (the condemned), and demonic. Forgiveness of sin, therefore, can also be seen as a form of release from bondage to iniquity (Acts 8:22-23).

The restoration of sight to the blind was closely associated with the prophetic vision of the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel (Isa 35:5; 42:6-7). When Jesus restores sight to the blind (as he does in Luke 7:21-22; 18:35), he is figuratively fulfilling God's work of salvation as foreseen by the prophet Isaiah. Jesus is dramatically fulfilling the role of the one who would be a "light for the nations" (see 2:32; Acts 13:47).⁶¹ Like Jesus, his followers are to be light for others (Luke 8:16; 11:33).

The proclamation of the "year of the Lord's favor" in Isaiah 61 is connected with the Jubilee year legislation in Leviticus 25. Following a series of seven sevens, the fiftieth year was to be a time when "you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (Lev 25:10). It has occasionally been suggested that Jesus was actually proclaiming the observance of the Jubilee year through his reading of Isaiah 61, but this is far from certain. More likely is the interpretation that Jesus related the figure of "the year of the Lord's favor" to the kingdom of God (cf. Luke 4:43). Jesus' ministry signaled that the time for the liberation of the impoverished and oppressed had come, and in that respect at least his work would fulfill the ideal and the social concern of the Jubilee year.

The importance of the reading of Isaiah in this scene can scarcely be exaggerated. For Luke it proclaimed the fulfillment of Scripture and the hopes of Israel through Jesus' ministry as the Son of God. It stated the social concern that guided Jesus' work and allowed the reader to understand all that Jesus did as the fulfillment of his anointing by the Spirit. What Jesus understood by these verses, however, differed sharply from what those gathered in the synagogue assumed they meant.

In some ways the most astounding part of these verse comes in vv. 20-21(NRSV): 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The reading of the scripture from Isaiah was merely the prelude to what Jesus wanted to say. In manner typical of a Jewish rabbi he sat down when he began teaching. Luke's leading sentence is that Jesus told his hometown listeners that they were witnessing the fulfillment of a centuries old prophecy. Their initial response appeared positive, but that wouldn't last.

What can we learn from these verses? Several very important things come to mind, but I will stress only two. (1) The importance of worshipping with the people of God. Even though a hostile place for Jesus most of the time, he continuously went to the Jewish synagogue to deliver his message. It would have been much easier for him to have taught the people in the open countryside or the town marketplace and avoided the synagogue. But he didn't. At times we all struggle with what an acquaintance of mine sometimes calls the "ecclesiastical warts" that show up on the face of the church. When those failures of church people hurt us in some way, it would be easy to walk away and never come back. This Jesus could have done, but didn't. Neither should we.

(2) Jesus had a clear sense of the direction of his calling to ministry and it was grounded in OT prophecy. The central focus of that ministry was to help the helpless. Notice that each of the groups mentioned in Isaiah as objects of ministry represent helpless people in ancient Jewish society. This help included ministry to the whole person, not just to the spiritual side. Physical difficulties needed solution just as readily as the spiritual side. Jesus came to touch people in whatever their need in order for them to enjoy restoration to both physical and spiritual wholeness. The Lord's calling has become ours with His ascension back to Heaven. Our ministry to people should also target their wholeness. Neglect of either aspect is to fail to walk in the steps of Jesus.

b. Jesus' Interpretation of that Scripture, vv. 22-30

Matt. 13:54b-58 (NRSV)

...and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? 55 Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? 56 And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" 57 And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house." 58 And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

Mark 6:2b-6 (NRSV)

They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. 4 Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." 5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6 And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching.

Luke 4:22-30 (NRSV)

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 23 He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." 24 And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25 But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in

Sidon. 27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." 28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Comments

In a manner already noticed in the comparisons of this episode among the synoptic gospels, Luke provides substantially more details than either Mark or Matthew. Matthew follows his Marcan source quite closely, but Luke again adds many more details in his version.

The radical shift from acceptance to hostility by the synagogue worshippers that day is more difficult to understand in Luke. But Mark provides a clue in his account with the statement (6:3, NRSV): "And they took offense at him." The level of the hostility shot through the ceiling in Luke's narrative with each of the two examples of God's selective ministry from the Old Testament history. First, he quoted two common proverbs to them, "Doctor, cure yourself!" Then, he alluded to the fact that God cured the non-Jew Naaman during Elisha's ministry rather than the many leprous Jews who were alive at that time. Both these declarations were received with hostility as Luke described in 4:28 (NRSV): "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage." This led to an effort to execute Jesus on the spot, but he avoided their evil intentions by leaving Nazareth.

As Prof. Culpepper mentions (Luke, New Interpreter's Bible, iPreach online),

Verse 23, in which Jesus quotes the proverb "Doctor, cure yourself," is the crux of the difficulty. The alternatives facing the interpreter are (1) to take it as a retort or insult directed at Jesus personally. This is the natural sense of the proverb and is consistent with how it is used elsewhere, but it does not explain the sharp shift in tone from the preceding verse. (2) The proverb may be read as an extension of the preceding response to Jesus, if one takes the singular "yourself" as a reference to Jesus' hometown, as in the request that follows. The singular more appropriately refers to Jesus than to Nazareth, but the story flows more smoothly if one follows the latter reading of the proverb. The meaning of the proverb Jesus quotes to the crowd is explained by the rest of v. 23. Jesus has understood the crowd's positive response; they are eager for him to begin to do the works of God's grace among them. They are ready to share in the benefits that might accrue to the prophet's hometown and miffed because he has already done wonderful things in Capernaum.

The second proverb occurs four times in the Gospels, each time in a different form:

Mark 6:4 "Prophets are not without honor [ἄτιμος atimos], except in their hometown [πατρίδι patriði], and among their own kin, and in their own house."

Matthew 13:57 "Prophets are not without honor [atimos] except in their own country (patriði) and in their own house."

Luke 4:24 "Truly [ἀμήν amen] I tell you, no prophet is accepted [δεκτός dektos] in the prophet's hometown [patriði]."

John 4:44 "A prophet has no honor [τιμήν timen] in the prophet's own country [patriði]."

In both instances the proverbs point to the inability of the people who knew Jesus best to accept him as more than a carpenter's son. These very people would quickly turn on him with the intent of killing him, since they took his words as blasphemy. Then the reference to God blessing Gentiles as well as Jews in Elisha's day was highly offensive. Also, the mention of divine blessing on the peasant widow was insulting as well. In the 'health and wealth' religious teaching popular in Jesus' day, material accumulation was the sign of divine blessing which in turn was the sign of significant righteousness. The opposite signaled God's displeasure with the punishment of poverty. Jesus used these two examples to make a powerful point that his ministry would be focused on these kind of people, whom they were rejecting.

Once more, Prof. Culpepper (Luke, *New Interpreter's Bible*, iPreach online) has some relevant insights:

This scene is more significant than its brevity might suggest. Its position at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, its emphasis on the Spirit and Scripture, and its depiction of themes that will dominate the rest of the Gospel all point to its paradigmatic character. Readers of the Gospel now understand that all Jesus does in the coming chapters occurs by the power of the Spirit. Jesus teaches, preaches, heals, and casts out demons. He moves among the poor, the outcast, the sick, and the blind. His actions fulfill the Scriptures, especially the Prophets, but even those who awaited the fulfillment of the Scriptures took offense at Jesus and eventually put him to death. This scene suggests that the basis for their hostility toward Jesus was a difference in the way they read the Scriptures. The people of Jesus' hometown read the Scriptures as promises of God's exclusive covenant with them, a covenant that involved promises of deliverance from their oppressors. Jesus came announcing deliverance, but it was not a national deliverance but God's promise of liberation for all the poor and oppressed regardless of nationality, gender, or race. When the radical inclusiveness of Jesus' announcement became clear to those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth, their commitment to their own community boundaries took precedence over their joy that God had sent a prophet among them. In the end, because they were not open to the prospect of others' sharing in the bounty of God's deliverance, they themselves were unable to receive it.

Not only is this scene paradigmatic of Jesus' life and ministry, but it is also a reminder that God's grace is never subject to the limitations and boundaries of any nation, church, group, or race. Those who would exclude others thereby exclude themselves. Human beings may be instruments of God's grace for others, but we are never free to set limits on who may receive that grace. Throughout history, the gospel has always been more radically inclusive than any group, denomination, or church, so we continually struggle for a breadth of love and acceptance that more nearly approximates the breadth of God's love. The paradox of the gospel, therefore, is that the unlimited grace that it offers so scandalizes us that we are unable to receive it. Jesus could not do more for his hometown because they were not open to him. How much more might God be able to do with us if we were ready to transcend the boundaries of community and limits of love that we ourselves have erected?

Setting boundaries on whom God wants to bring into His family is dangerous. Jesus courageously stood up to this narrow mindedness and paid a price for it: the rejection and hostility of those with whom he had grown up. Mark has some interesting insights here (6:5-6, NRSV): "5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6 And he was amazed at their unbelief." Matthew echoed Mark with a similar declaration (13:58, NRSV): "And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief."

What an indictment on the people of Nazareth! The nagging question then comes at us: Are we in some way setting limits on God's grace through Jesus? I've taught many seminary students over the past three decades who were willing to serve God, if...? If He would lead them to a church less than an hour's drive from their parents. If He would put them in a large church with a comfortable salary. If His calling didn't involve becoming a foreign missionary. All of us struggle at times with giving God a blank check in handing over our lives to Him. Yet, the pattern of Jesus' life and ministry as set forth by Luke at the beginning of his public ministry provides an ongoing challenge to each of us to truly let God lead us, wherever and to whomever. All stand in need of His saving grace.

The theme of the Sunday School lesson in the Formations series on this passage is "Telling the Truth." Although a very secondary emphasis in these verses, nonetheless Jesus did courageously declare God's truth to these people. It wasn't what they expected or wanted to hear. When the full impact of the gospel message gets through to us, it typically isn't what we expected or possibly wanted to hear. But when God speaks, His people are obligated to hear and obey, no matter what the cost.