



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

The Day Jesus Scandalized the Neighbors

Mark 6.1-6; Luke 4.16-30

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A Favored Son Welcomed Home

On June 21-22, 1945, the old cowtown of Abilene, Kansas welcomed home a hero. They named and dedicated a park in his honor. They had a parade, organized to tell the story of the boy who had gone from a child from (literally) the wrong side of the tracks to commander of the mightiest of armies. He was a man adored by millions around the world. And he was their native son. In the eyes of the people of Abilene, Dwight Eisenhower was now bigger than Wild Bill Hickok.¹

There's no record of a parade, but it's not hard to imagine similar pride and excitement in Nazareth when the people learned Jesus was back home. The local boy had done well. He was famous throughout the country, and his fame just kept growing. The crowds were overwhelming and the people would sit and listen to him for hours. Nothing good could come from Nazareth, some had said (John 1.46). Well, Jesus had come from there, and he would be speaking at the synagogue on the Sabbath. It might be wise to arrive early.

The service started well. But then something changed. "They took offense at him" (Mark 6.3); the word is *σκανδαλίζω* (*skandalizō*), used in the sense of "to shock through word or action, *give offense to, anger, shock*."² In his hometown, Jesus the prophet had no honor (v. 4). He could do only a few mighty works there; his neighbors did not believe (vv. 5-6).

What went wrong? Mark and Matthew (13:53-58) leave us wondering, but Luke tells us more.

Luke's Longer Telling

Luke takes fifteen verses to tell what Mark covers in six. We learn several details from Luke.

1. The prophetic text Jesus read (4.17-19).
2. How he connected that text with his work (4.21).
3. That the questions about his relationship with Joseph and the rest of his family were raised with an approving spirit (4.22).
4. That he cited two other Old Testament texts, recalling memorable events from the days of Elijah and Elisha (4.25-27; cf. 1 Kings 17.8-16; 2 Kings 5.1-14).
5. That "when they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath" and drove him out of town, intending to "throw him down the cliff" (4.28-29).

When we read Luke's account, it is apparent that Jesus said something that provoked his neighbors. What was it?

His text was from Isaiah. Most of it was from 61.1-2 (from the LXX), though he omitted part of v. 2 about "the day of vengeance of our God" and replaced it with language from 58.6. The passage was messianic, and Jesus applied it to himself. But that did not offend the people, for "all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth" (v. 22). There's even a hint of pride in their tone. "And they said, 'Is this not Joseph's son?'"

Jesus' sermon continued, and became more focused. He told them they would be disappointed if they expected works like those he had done in Capernaum. "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown" (v. 24). Then, he reminded them of the episodes from the ministries of Elijah and Elisha where each man helped a non-Israelite (vv. 25-27). It was then that "all in the synagogue were *filled with wrath*" and sought Jesus' demise (vv. 28-29).

What Troubled Them

Why had those illustrations angered the people? It was probably not the telling of the stories themselves; Jesus accurately depicted the respective events (1 Kings 17:8-16; 2 Kings 5:1-14). So, the problem must have been with what he meant by telling them.

Bear in mind that the Elijah and Elisha references are still part of the same sermon that quoted Isaiah. Jesus' use of them must be understood in that light. The focus of the Isaiah text is that the Messiah would proclaim good news to the poor, give liberty to the captives, restore sight to the blind, and free the oppressed. "Liberty" (ἄφεσις, *aphesis*) is an especially important word, used in the LXX translation in both Isaiah 58.6 and 61.2 and twice in Luke 4.18. Here it is used to refer to "the act of freeing from an obligation, guilt, or punishment, *pardon, cancellation*" (Bauer, 155). It was also used in Leviticus 25.10 relative to the year of Jubilee and the return of property sold to obtain relief from hard times, in effect the forgiveness of a debt.³

As we've already seen, citing the Isaiah text is not what angered the people. Nor did they seem bothered when he applied the messianic expectations to himself. It was only when he tied the teaching from Isaiah to the specific stories from Elijah and Elisha that they reacted. Why?

1. Jesus referred to the time Elijah was sent to a foreign widow, not an Israelite (vv. 25-26).
2. He recalled that Elisha healed a leper who was a wealthy Gentile commander of an enemy's army (Syria) (4.27), not one of the many lepers in Israel.

In citing Isaiah, Jesus declared the mission statement for God's reign. While the people might have agreed with it in general, they apparently had limits God did not have. Jesus was saying that the poor, captives, blind, and oppressed—the outsiders Isaiah expected would be welcomed by the Messiah—would also include Gentiles (and all others) outside the Jewish fold and disparaged by some who thought themselves so righteous. Their ways of viewing people, how God would work, and who he will accept were being overturned. As Joel Green wrote,

Unlike . . . the wider Jewish world of Luke's Gospel people are not to be predetermined as insiders or outsiders by their sex, family, heritage, financial position, location in the city or in rural environs, religious purity, and so on. The message of Jesus is that such status markers are no longer binding. . . . Anyone may join the community of Jesus' followers. All are welcome (Green, 82).

Life In Our “Synagogue”

First, and most obviously, our text reminds us of the nature of Jesus’ mission. As Luke positioned this story, Jesus announces from the outset that he was about seeking, inviting, and welcoming the nobodies. The early church followed his example. We should, too.

Why we sometimes struggle to do that despite knowing better is explained by the second thing we notice as we think about our text, namely the significance of its synagogue location. Jesus was not by the seaside, in a house, on a mountain, or walking along the road—places where all manner of people would be among his listeners. He was in a synagogue, delivering a Sabbath exposition. Perhaps some who attended that day were just curious about the new teacher. But, most would have been regular attenders. And these good religious people were scandalized.

1. Were they among those who thought restoration of the kingdom to Israel would exclude the outcasts and relegate them to their proper, judged-by-God place? That would fit Luke’s emphasis—as stories like the one told to Simon the Pharisee (7.36-50), the Good Samaritan (10.30-37), the prodigal son (15.11-32), and the Pharisee and tax collector (18.9-14) illustrate (all are unique to Luke).
2. Did they notice Jesus’ omission of “the day of vengeance of our God” from Isaiah 61.2 and fear that somehow those who were God’s enemies (or at least theirs!) would not be punished? That’s not hard to imagine; the scribes and Pharisees certainly had such a view, and even disciples displayed it on occasion (see Luke 9.51-56, also unique to Luke).
3. It’s easy to focus so much on the fact that God will hold the impenitent accountable that we lose sight of the joy God has when just one repents (Luke 15:7, 10). Once we do that, it’s not a big step to reach a point where we stop welcoming sinners and offer our services to God as judges (but see Matt 7.1-5; Jas 4.11-12).

Seeing Through the Eyes of a Disciple

None of the gospels names the disciples in the Nazareth synagogue that day. But we have good reason to believe the twelve were there, including Peter. He would not immediately grasp the significance of what Jesus was saying. In fact, well after Pentecost it took three visions of a sheet filled with all kinds of foods and repeated direct commands from God before he finally got it.

But, by the time he got to Cornelius’s house, he understood: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10.34-35). That reminds us of our mission in his name. It also reassures us that, no matter what we have done, he will accept us, too. If you need to turn to him, come now.

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Notes

¹ Pvt. James P. O’Neill, “Ike in Abilene,” *Yank* (July 22, 1945): 12-13, http://www.oldmagazinearticles.com/Abilene_Kansas_Welcomed_General_Dwight_Eisenhower. Accessed June 17, 2014.

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Frederick W. Danker, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 926.

³ For discussion of this connection, see Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 80-81.