

The Sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:14–30)

A Living, Daring Confidence in God's Grace

We come this morning to the literary beginning of Jesus' ministry. Now, the reason I call it the *literary* beginning of Jesus' ministry is that it is not the *historical* beginning of Jesus' ministry. Luke does not follow a strictly chronological order in his retelling of the inauguration of the three-year ministry of Jesus; rather, Luke is following a thematic structure. Though Luke places Jesus' sermon at Nazareth at the front of his account of Jesus' ministry, it actually occurred somewhere near the middle of His ministry. Matthew places this event near the midway point of His Gospel in Matthew 13:53–58, some ten chapters into Jesus' ministry. Similarly, Mark locates it in Mark 6:1–6, six chapters into Jesus' ministry. Luke's narrative itself implies that this event, despite its placement at the beginning, occurred later in Jesus' ministry, for vv. 14–15 speaks of a prior ministry of indeterminate length, and in v. 23 Jesus quotes the Nazareth congregation as saying, "What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well" (4:23); yet according to the flow of Luke's Gospel, Jesus does not minister in Capernaum until after this event in Nazareth (the events Luke describes in that Capernaum visit both Matthew and Mark place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry [Mt 4:13; Mk 1:21–34]).¹ In fact, I think all of Luke 4 functions as a thematic (rather than chronological) introduction to Jesus' ministry. In today's text, Jesus defines His ministry in terms of Isaiah 61 (preach the gospel, free the captives, heal the sick, [4:18–19]). In next week's text, Jesus does those very things (free the captives [4:31–37], heal the sick [4:38–41], preach the gospel [4:42–44]).²

¹ "Both Mark and Matt set Jesus' visit to Nazareth near the midpoint of his career, but Luke, in his most striking departure from Mark's narrative sequence, places the sermon in Nazareth at the outset of Jesus' ministry. . . . Luke has not disguised his transposition of the Nazareth narrative, for the first mention of Capernaum, in 4:23, assumes a prior ministry of Jesus there. The bold repositioning of Jesus' sermon in Nazareth, and its dramatic expansion in comparison with its parallels in Mark 6:1–6 and Matt 13:54–58, distinguishes it as the programmatic cornerstone of Jesus' ministry"; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel of Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 134. Garland is less confident, stating, "It is possible that Luke has deliberately shifted and edited the incident he found in Mark 6:1–6a to make it Jesus' maiden sermon"; David E. Garland, *Luke*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 189.

² I concur with Leon Morris, who writes, "Luke appears to be referring to an incident put later by Matthew and Mark. He does not regard it as the beginning of Jesus' ministry, for he knows of earlier work (14–15), though he does not choose to describe it. But right at the outset Luke shows that Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah. This was the kind of ministry that Jesus would exercise. These are the themes that would recur"; Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1974, 1988), 124.

So why does Luke move this event to the beginning of his narrative? I suggest that the sermon of Jesus at Nazareth sets the tone for four primary themes upon which Luke will expound throughout his Gospel:

- First, it sets the tone of Jesus' ministry, which is primarily a ministry of preaching. Faith comes by hearing, not by healing.
- Second, it establishes the content of Jesus' gospel. The gospel is good news for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed—blessed are the destitute, one might say.
- Third, it presages the Jewish rejection of the Messiah, and the resultant Gentile inclusion. The kingdom is going to be taken away from Israel and given to a people producing its fruits (Mt 21:43). The salvation of all nations is a key theme in Luke.
- Fourth, it provides a stark contrast between the faith of the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian on the one hand, and the unbelief of the Jews of Nazareth on the other. Thus, from the very outset of Luke's Gospel, we see what it means to receive Christ, and what it means to reject Christ.

In 1522, Martin Luther wrote a preface to the Paul's letter to the Romans for his German translation of the New Testament. In it, Luther provides the following definition of faith:

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times. This confidence in God's grace and knowledge of it makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all His creatures; and this is the work of the Holy Ghost in faith. Hence a man is ready and glad, without compulsion, to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, in love and praise to God, who has shown him this grace...³

My aim this morning is to present to you "the gospel according to Jesus" (to borrow a phrase from John MacArthur), to show you clearly what it means to receive Christ and what it means to reject Christ, and to call you to a faith that is "a living, daring confidence in God's grace" given us in Christ, to call you to a faith "so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a

³ Martin Luther, "Preface," in *Commentary on Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1976), xvii.

thousand times,” to call you to a faith that “makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all His creatures.” Do you want a living, daring confidence in God’s grace? Do you want to be glad and bold and happy before God and man? I do. I want that more than anything. Well, the apostle Paul said that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). So let’s listen to the word of Christ this morning and pray that God would work that kind of faith in our souls.

The Ministry of Christ (4:14–15)

We will begin with the summary of Christ’s ministry in Galilee in vv. 14–15.

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. (4:14–15)

As I have already alluded to in regard to the sermon at Nazareth, the precise timing of the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry is difficult to ascertain. I would not blame you at all if, having read all four Gospels, you were a little confused. From its earliest days, the church has recognized this difficulty and attempted to construct harmonies of the four Gospels. The earliest known harmony of the Gospels is known as the *Diatessaron* (Greek for “through the four” [Gospels]), which was produced by an Assyrian monk named Tatian about AD 160–175. In the *Diatessaron*, Tatian sought to combine the material from all four Gospels into a single, coherent narrative. Probably the most influential modern harmony of the Gospels was produced by John Broadus and A. T. Robertson, two professors at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. Broadus published his harmony in 1893, and Robertson revised and republished it in 1903 and 1922. It remains the best harmony available. According to Broadus/Robertson, the sequence of events from Jesus’ baptism at the Jordan to His return to Galilee is as follows:⁴

- Jesus’ baptism by John (Mt 3:13–17; Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–23a).
- Jesus’ temptation in the desert (Mt 4:1–11; Mk 1:12–13; Lk 4:1–13).

⁴ Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels with Explanations and Essays: A Revised Edition of the John A. Broadus and A. T. Robertson Harmony of the Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 15–16.

- John's testimony about himself to the priests and Levites (Jn 1:19–28).
- John's testimony to Jesus as the Son of God (Jn 1:29–34).
- Jesus' first followers at the Jordan River—Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael, and one unnamed disciple, probably John (Jn 1:35–51).
- Jesus' first miracle—the turning of water to wine at Cana (Jn 2:1–11).
- Jesus' first stay in Capernaum with his relatives and early disciples (Jn 2:12).
- Jesus' first cleansing of the temple at Jerusalem during Passover (Jn 2:12–22).
- Jesus' early miracles in Jerusalem during Passover (Jn 2:23–25).
- Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus (Jn 3:1–21).
- Jesus' ministry of baptism in the Judean countryside (Jn 3:22–36).
- Jesus' departure from Judea and journey through Samaria (Jn 4:1–4).
- Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:5–26).
- Jesus' evangelism of Sychar in Samaria (Jn 4:27–42).
- Jesus' arrival in Galilee (Mt 4:12–17; Mk 1:14–15; Lk 4:14–15; Jn 4:43–45)

Thus, according to the Broadus/Robertson harmonization, after His baptism and wilderness temptations, Jesus returned to the Jordan River where He gained a handful of informal followers (their formal call will come in Lk 5:1–11), travelled into Galilee where He turned water into wine at Cana and stayed in Capernaum, travelled to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast where He cleansed the temple, performed many miracles, and spoke to Nicodemus about the new birth, travelled out to the Judean countryside near the Jordan where He preached and baptized so many followers that it provoked jealousy among John's disciples and concern among the Pharisees, travelled through Samaria where He encountered the woman at the well, and only then did He return to Galilee to begin His Galilean ministry. It is no wonder that “a report about him went out through all the surrounding countryside” (v. 14). In fact, John writes,

So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast. (Jn 4:45)

Again, we should not think that the sermon in Nazareth was the first sermon Jesus ever preached, nor that his rejection in Nazareth occurred at the outset of His ministry. By the time the events of today's text occurred, Jesus has been at His ministry from quite some time.

Verses 14–15, then, provide a summary statement of a lengthy period of ministry, and from these verses we may glean three characteristics Jesus’ ministry. These characteristics not only marked Jesus’ ministry; they are to mark ours as well. For Jesus said repeatedly that what His disciples saw Him do, this they should do also.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do.” (Jn 14:12)

“As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” (Jn 17:18)

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” (Jn 20:21)

We ought to pay close attention to how Jesus conducted His ministry, for we ought to conduct our own ministry in the same fashion. So what can we learn about how Jesus conducted His ministry?

First, it was a ministry conducted “in the power of the Spirit” (ἐν τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ πνεύματος). Jesus’ whole life and ministry was conducted under the Spirit’s influence and by the Spirit’s power: He was conceived by the Spirit (1:35), anointed by the Spirit at his baptism (3:22), and led by the Spirit into the wilderness (4:1).⁵ It has sometimes been suggested that Jesus lived and ministered, preached and performed miracles and overcame Satan, purely in His human nature empowered by the Holy Spirit, and not by His divine nature. Such teaching divides what ought not to be divided—namely, the two natures of the one person of Christ. As the Chalcedonian Definition of AD 451 (which I have been drilling into us throughout our study of the Gospel of Luke) states, Jesus possesses two complete and distinct natures—divine and human—“without confusion, without change, *without division, without separation*; the distinction of the natures being in no way annulled by their union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ.” We must not divide the two natures so as to suggest that the words and

⁵ Garland, 194.

works of Jesus are the words and works of a divine Christ only or a human Christ only, but rather are the words and works of the one Lord Jesus Christ, the God-Man. When Jesus preached the gospel or performed His miracles, He did not do so as a divine Christ only, or the human Christ only, but as the one Christ who is both divine and human. That said, we also must affirm what the Gospels clearly teach, which is that the one Christ is also empowered by the Holy Spirit. D. Blair Smith explains, “[E]very work of the Trinity is undivided. When God acts, each person acts. It’s *not* wrong to say that the Spirit is acting in Jesus’s miracles; he is. It *is* wrong to say that the second person of the Trinity isn’t.”⁶ In so far, then, as Jesus ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit, this must serve as our pattern for ministry as well. Immediately after Jesus told His disciples on the night of His resurrection, “As the Father has sent me even so I am sending you,” John records,

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (Jn 20:22)

And before His ascension, Jesus told His disciples,

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8)*

The ministry of Christ must be performed in the power of the Spirit of Christ, or else it will be fruitless and futile.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (Jn 15:5)

⁶ D. Blair Smith, “How Did Jesus Do His Miracles—His Divine Nature or the Holy Spirit? *The Gospel Coalition*, January 14, 2020; <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jesus-miracles-who-how/>. This doctrine is known as “the inseparable operations of the Trinity.”

Gospel ministry is Spirit-empowered ministry. Let's remember that next week in Cuba; let's remember that this week here in Nixa. Let's remember that tomorrow morning in personal devotions, and tomorrow night in family devotions. Like our Lord Jesus, we must walk in the power of the Spirit.

Second, it was a ministry of peaching. We frequently think of Jesus' popularity as stemming from His miracles, and certainly that was a factor. But the performance of miracles was not the cornerstone of His ministry; preaching was ("and he taught [was teaching] in their synagogues" [καὶ αὐτὸς ἐδίδασκεν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν]—imperfect tense denoting persistent past action). In Luke's brief, two-verse summary of Jesus' early Galilean ministry, Luke does not mention miracles at all. According to Mark's Gospel, the day after His spectacular debut in Capernaum in which He cast out a demon in the synagogue (Mk 1:21–28), healed Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1:29–31), and then healed and cast out demons late into the night (Mk 1:32–34), Jesus rose early the next morning while it was still dark and went out of town to a desolate place in order to pray. Peter and the rest of the disciples came and found Him and said, "Everyone is looking for you" (Mk 1:35–37). We might paraphrase Peter's words to mean, "Lord, yesterday was a spectacular debut performance! Everyone in Capernaum is on board with this Jesus movement; everyone is ready to follow you. So we need to get back and build upon what you started yesterday." But Jesus did not agree.

And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." (Mk 1:38)

Jesus located the center of His ministry in preaching, not the performance of miracles. In fact, as one reads the Gospels, one gets the distinct impression that miracles actually hindered His ministry, which is why Jesus so often commanded those He healed to silence, forbidding them from telling anyone who He was or what had happened. Why is this? Because justification comes by faith alone, and faith only comes by hearing the word of Christ, not observing the power of Christ (Rom 3:28; 10:17). We might say that faith comes by hearing, not by healing. So if we are to follow Christ's lead, the center of our ministry must be the Spirit-empowered preaching of the word of Christ. The core of our Lord's ministry was the word of God, for it is only through the word of God that people come to know God. And the fact that this preaching

took place “in their synagogues,” as part of their Sabbath worship, gives us an idea of what kind of preaching it was—it was expositional preaching. Jesus would read a passage of the Old Testament Scriptures, and would expound upon it, undoubtedly, as he did in Nazareth (4:21), showing that those texts found their fulfillment in Him. In other words, Jesus’ ministry of preaching was the public exposition of the word in the midst of the gathered assembly.⁷ Do not despise or neglect the ministry of preaching. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Dt 8:3; Mt 4:4). This is your very life; feed upon it.

Third, it was a ministry directed toward the glory of Christ. What was the result of Jesus’ ministry of Spirit-empowered preaching? He was “being glorified by all” (δοξαζόμενος ὑπὸ πάντων). The aim of Jesus’ Spirit-empowered ministry of preaching was to lead His hearers to trust in and worship Him as their Messiah. The aim of our Spirit-empowered ministry of preaching ought to be the same. Week in and week out, passage by passage, the aim of my preaching is to show you Christ in all of His glory revealed in this book, that you might trust in and worship Him as your Messiah. That is my job. Your job as hearers is to come looking for Jesus, ready to glorify Him. And when those two aims meet at 11:00am on a Sunday morning, that is a glorious thing.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his classic work *Preaching & Preachers*, describes what happens when a Spirit-empowered preacher meets a Spirit-prepared audience.

How does one know [when he has been “clothed with power and authority”]? It gives clarity of thought, clarity of speech, ease of utterance, a great sense of authority and confidence as you are preaching, an awareness of a power not your own thrilling through the whole of your being, and an indescribable sense of joy. You are a man ‘possessed,’ you are taken hold of, and taken up. I like to put it like this — and I know nothing on earth that is comparable to this feeling — that when this happens you have a feeling that you are not actually doing the preaching, you are looking on. You are looking on at yourself in amazement as this is happening. It is not your effort; you are just the instrument, the channel, the vehicle: and the Spirit is using you, and you are looking on in

⁷ “Both Mark (1:21, 39) and Matthew (4:23; 9:35) report that Jesus taught in their synagogues but never give a description of what he taught. From this one example in Luke, we can infer that his teaching centered on the reading the explication of the Jewish Scriptures”; Garland, 194.

great enjoyment and astonishment. There is nothing that is in any way comparable to this. This is what the preacher himself is aware of.

What about the people? They sense it at once; they can tell the difference immediately. They are gripped, they become serious, they are convicted, they are moved, they are humbled. Some are convicted of sin, others are lifted up to the heavens, anything may happen to any one of them. They know at once that something quite unusual and exceptional is happening. As a result they begin to delight in the things of God and they want more and more teaching. They are like the people in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, they want “to continue steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine, and fellowship, and breaking of bread and in prayers.”

What then are we to do about this? There is only one obvious conclusion. Seek Him! Seek Him! What can we do without Him! Seek Him! Seek Him always. But go beyond seeking Him; expect Him. . . . This ‘unction,’ this ‘anointing,’ is the supreme thing. Seek it until you have it; be content with nothing less.⁸

The Gospel of Christ (4:16–21)

After this summary of Jesus’ early Galilean ministry, Luke records Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, which (as I stated earlier) occurred at about the halfway point of Jesus’ ministry. One of the many reasons Luke moves this episode forward in his narrative is that it provides a glimpse of what Jesus preached in the synagogues of Galilee. In vv. 16–21, we get a summary of the gospel according to Jesus.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

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

⁸ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, 40th Anniversary Edition (1972; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 339–41.

*to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 4:16–21)

Before we exposit Jesus' sermon, let's talk first about synagogues and synagogue worship in the first-century. According to James Edwards,

The synagogue was the religious, social, and educational nucleus of a Jewish community. Unlike the temple in Jerusalem, where animals were sacrificed on the altar by the priests, Jewish synagogues, . . . functioned primarily as worship centers where Torah was read and expounded, and secondarily as community centers, guesthouses, and perhaps schools for children. There was but one temple in Jerusalem, whereas synagogues . . . could be found throughout the Mediterranean world wherever ten or more Jewish males, thirteen years of age or older, were present. Synagogues abounded in first-century Galilee and have been excavated in Nazareth, Capernaum, Bethsaida, Chorazin, Gennesaret, Magdala, and Gamla. The official in charge of a synagogue was the "ruler of the synagogue," a position that included the responsibilities of librarian, worship committee, custodian, and perhaps schoolteacher. The ruler of the synagogue did not preach or expound Torah, however, which meant that Sabbath teaching and exposition fell to the laity, and on this occasion to Jesus.

A typical Jewish synagogue was outfitted with benches around its perimeter where women were separated from men, and where the latter were seated according to rank and importance. Candlesticks, musical instruments (esp. horns and trumpets), and floor coverings were standard décor in synagogues. A Torah cupboard and a podium, both elevated on a dais [platform], commanded the focal point near the front and center of the

synagogue. During worship, a Torah scroll was first produced from the Torah chest, followed by a scroll from the prophets, both of which were read from a standing position, but the expository sermon that followed was delivered from a seated position. A minister ([“attendant”] Heb. *Hasan hakeneset*; Gk. ὑπηρέτης) who retrieved the scrolls from the Torah cupboard and returned them to it presided over the service. Scripture readings were not the prerogative of particular individuals or officers, but could be assigned to any member of the congregation, including minors. The narrative in v. 17 commences between the reading of Torah and prophets, and preserves key liturgical elements — standing to read, unrolling the scroll, services of the minister [“attendant”], and seated proclamation — in their proper order.⁹

It is unclear whether the reading from Isaiah 61 was prescribed for Jesus by a lectionary (a schedule of Scripture readings), or whether He chose the text for Himself.¹⁰ Probably the former, although it does not matter. Jesus could have preached the same sermon (“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”) from any number of Old Testament texts (Lk 24:27; Jn 5:39). At any rate, Jesus unrolled the Isaiah scroll to the sixty-first chapter and began to read. Luke only records that Jesus read the first two verses; Jesus may have read the whole chapter. It does appear that Luke is giving us an extremely abbreviated summary of events, for in v. 21 that Jesus “*began to say to them*” (ἤρξατο δὲ λέγειν πρὸς αὐτούς), indicates that He said a lot more; and in v. 22 the people marveled at the gracious words “that *were coming* from his mouth” (τοῖς ἐκπορευομένοις ἐκ τοῦ στόματος), which is a present participle indicating a continuous flow of words. In any case, Jesus’ sermon left the congregation stunned. So what did Jesus say? What was the content of His preaching? What is the gospel according to Jesus? There are three main elements of Jesus’ gospel, as revealed in this summary of His sermon.

⁹ Edwards, 135. It is interesting to note that “4:16–30 is the earliest known account of a Jewish synagogue service”; Ibid., 132. “Many commentators tell us how synagogue services were conducted and point out where Luke agrees. But we should bear in mind that this is the earliest description of a synagogue service we have, . . . The synagogue was of uncertain antiquity, but in Palestine it was not highly developed before the destruction of the temple. There appear to be no certain ruins of synagogues in Palestine from pre-Christian times”; Morris, 125.

¹⁰ “There is no evidence that Jewish lectionary readings were prescribed as early as the first century. V. 17 therefore probably implies that Jesus personally chose the reading from Isa 61:1–2”; Edwards, 136. “Apparently Jesus did not select the book from which he read, for the Isaiah scroll was given to him. But this does not mean, as some think, that he read from a fixed lectionary. We cannot authenticate a lectionary as early as this. The passage may have been selected by the ruler of the synagogue or Jesus may have picked it himself”; Morris, 126.

First, Jesus proclaimed His identity as the Messiah sent from God. The Isaiah text begins, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me...” Do you remember what the Hebrew word משיח means? It means “anointed one.” The Messiah is the Anointed One promised throughout the Old Testament, the one who would combine in Himself the three anointed offices of prophet, priest, and king, the one who would be anointed, not with oil, but with the Holy Spirit. Whenever a prophet, priest, or king of the Old Testament was ordained for office, he would be anointed with oil as a sign of the God’s authorization and empowerment for ministry. But the Messianic figure who appears throughout the book of Isaiah, the one who fulfills the roles of prophet, priest, and king, is not anointed with oil by men but with the Holy Spirit by God the Father. This is the point of the prophecy in Isaiah 61, as well as Isaiah 42:1:

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Is 42:1)*

These prophecies were fulfilled at Jesus’ baptism.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized, and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased.” (3:21–22)

John the Baptist testified that the descent of the Holy Spirit was a visible event (Jn 1:32), so it is not out of the question that the congregation in the synagogue at Nazareth had heard of it. Thus, by preaching this Isaiah text, Jesus was connecting the dots for them. “I am the Messiah; I am the one who is Anointed by the Holy Spirit to be your prophet, priest, and king.”

Second, Jesus proclaimed the hopeless condition of man apart from God. This text from Isaiah 61 also allowed Jesus to connect the dots concerning the spiritual state of the objects of His Messianic ministry. Whom has Christ come to redeem? Those who are “poor” (πτωχοίς), “captives” (αἰχμαλώτοις), the “blind” (τυφλοίς), and the “oppressed” (τεθραυσμένους). How

are we to understand these descriptions? Is Jesus speaking literally or metaphorically? To answer that question, let's look at the ministry that the Messiah has come to perform for such people. The Messiah has come “to proclaim good news to the poor” (εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς), “to proclaim liberty to the captives” (κηρύξαι αἰχμαλώτοις ἄφεσιν) and “recovering of sight to the blind” (τυφλοῖς ἀνάβλεπιν), and “to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (ἀποστεῖλαι τεθραυσμένους ἐν ἄφεσει). We must understand these ministries as we understand all of the Messiah's ministry—in light of His two advents and the already/not yet nature of His redemptive work. At Jesus' first advent, including as He was speaking to the congregation in Nazareth on this particular Sabbath day, these four works must be interpreted spiritually.¹¹ Jesus did not establish a new economic system that raised people out of poverty. He did not declare a summary pardon to captives and criminals, and then go open their prison doors and unlock their shackles. John the Baptist, for instance, remained in prison and was executed.¹² He did heal *many* who were blind... but not *all*. And He did not overturn structures of victimization such that no longer would the powerful oppress the weak. Therefore, we must understand these promises as they relate to Christ's first advent in a spiritual sense. Through the redemptive work of Christ in His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection: He has brought immeasurable, infinite blessing to those who were spiritually impoverished and indebted. He has set free from captivity those who were held in bondage to sin, death, and hell. He has given sight to those who were spiritually blind such that they may see the glory of God and all of life in light of His light (Ps 36:9). He has set at liberty those who were oppressed by sin and Satan. All of these redemptive blessings were accomplished by the redemptive work of Christ at His first advent. But through the resurrection of the saints and the regeneration of the earth that Christ will accomplish at His second advent, every blessing, both spiritual *and* physical, will be poured out. In the everlasting kingdom in the new heaven and new earth, there will be no poverty, there will be no captivity, there will be no blindness, there will be no oppression. There will be no sin, no sorrow, no Satan; there will be no depravity, no destruction, no death. And in this present age between the two advents of Christ, all that was accomplished at Christ's first advent is available to us, *and* the powers of the age to come break in upon us such that we get foretastes of the future glory even now. What does this

¹¹ Gardner, 198–99, has an excellent discussion of the spiritual/metaphorical nature of these promises. See also Ryken, 169–73.

¹² Gardner, 198.

mean, then, for the present condition of man apart from God? It means that we are poor, spiritually destitute, having nothing of any value that we may offer to God. It means that we are captives of sin, death, and hell, slaves of iniquity and imprisoned under judgment, awaiting execution. It means that we are blind to the glory of God, and as a result we see all of life through a shadowy, sinful, smokescreen, condemned to call evil “good” and good “evil.” It means that we are oppressed by sin and Satan, dead in trespasses and sins, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, living in the passions of our flesh and indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph 2:1–3). But God...

Third, Jesus proclaimed the age of redemption promised by God. He was sent “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (κηρύξαι ἐνιαυτὸν κυρίου δεκτόν). This phrase from Isaiah 61:2 draws on the imagery of Leviticus 25 and the Year of Jubilee in which all debts were forgiven and all captives were released.¹³ Are you spiritually impoverished, owing to God’s law a debt that you can never hope to repay? Are you in spiritual bondage to sin and Satan, to death and the wrath of God? Are you oppressed by the burden of guilt and forces of evil? Then hear the proclamation of Christ this morning: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” This is the age of redemption; today is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2).

The Response to Christ (4:22–30)

How shall we receive the benefits of this redemption wrought in Christ? How shall we partake of the year of the Lord’s favor? Let’s look at vv. 22–30 to see two very different responses to Christ. We will begin with the rejection of Christ by the Jews of Nazareth.

And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.” And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only

¹³ Gardner, 199–200.

to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them were cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away. (4:22–30)

Why did the Jews of Nazareth reject Jesus, and with such hostility? There are three clues in the text. Their response began well enough, as “all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.” But, as Edwards writes, “their admiration was tempered by skepticism.”¹⁴ “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (v. 22). And herein lies the first clue as to their rejection. They were offended by Jesus’ *familiarity*. Jesus had grown up in Nazareth, and seemed perfectly normal until the age of thirty, when He went out to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. But upon His return, He did not seem normal at all. He had become an itinerant preacher who was gathering disciples around Him. He apparently possessed the power to perform miracles. And here He was in the very synagogue in which He had worshiped since he was a child, making utterly preposterous claims to be the Messiah of God!

Jesus evidently knew what they were thinking and saying amongst themselves. Jesus knew their unbelief, the hardness of their heart, and He provoked them in order to bring it to the surface.¹⁵ “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Physician heal yourself.”¹⁶ What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.’ And he said, ‘Truly I say

¹⁴ Edwards 139. Garland does not read skepticism in these words, but a happy exclamation: “Their question about Jesus’ relationship to Joseph should not be read as dismissive, as if they were saying, ‘This is merely Joseph’s son!’ It is not a case where ‘familiarity breeds contempt,’ which leads the hometown crowd to discount such enormous claims coming from a common man’s son. No grammatical indicator, such as an adversative (“but”), is present to indicate that they wheel from being aglow with admiration to being hot with indignation. The question contains no hint of hostility. When someone is identified as the son of his father in the Old Testament, it is never intended to diminish the individual’s status. Instead, this question should be taken as an exclamation that happily points out that he is a local boy. Implicit with this recognition is the expectation that they will reap special favors from him. That is the way of the world; one’s own clan always come first”; Garland, 202. I admit that the lack of an adversative is odd, but the longer statements in the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark demonstrate that there is indeed skepticism in their words.

¹⁵ “The text suggests that Jesus, not the villagers, provoked the crisis”; Edwards, 139. “Some do not see how there could be such a sudden turnaround in the attitude of the residents of Nazareth — from wonder in v. 22 to complaint in v. 23. The negative response, however, is caused by Jesus’ intentional provocation”; Gardner, 203.

¹⁶ “[This proverb] likely means that healing should begin at home. If one is to benefit others, one ought to extend the same benefit to one’s own. The proverb is explained by the next statement: ‘Do also here in your own hometown what we heard happened in Capernaum’”; Gardner, 203–4.

to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown” (4:23–24). Both proverbs “were widespread in Judaism and beyond,” writes Edwards, “both of which pertain to the rejection of prophets and sages. This suggests that the conflict in Nazareth is not related to a specific grievance. Rather, the Nazarene’s response to Jesus is a microcosm of the chronic hardness of Israel’s heart to the prophets.”¹⁷ In other words, they were not interested in hearing the word of God; they wanted the miraculous works, like He did at Capernaum. But we know from Jesus’ own lips that all the miracles He performed in Capernaum failed to produce repentance and faith (Mt 11:23). Faith comes by hearing, not by healing. So the second cause of their offense at Jesus’ *priority*. Jesus wanted to give them everlasting life; the people wanted temporal comfort. Jesus wanted repentance; the people wanted a show.

Then Jesus really shook things up by reminding the congregation of two well-known Old Testament stories. The first is the account of Elijah’s sojourn deep into Gentile territory, to Zarephath in the land of Sidon, where Elijah stayed with a widow and her son during the time that God was afflicting Israel with drought and famine (1 Kings 17). Sidon, too, was in the throes of the famine, and the widow and her son were on the brink of starvation. Yet God miraculously saved her and her son, first by providing an unending supply of flour and oil, and then by raising her son from the dead after he had succumbed to an illness. The second is the account of Naaman, the Syrian commander who was afflicted with leprosy (2 Kings 5). Naaman’s Israelite slave girl told him of a prophet in Israel who could cure him of his disease, so Naaman went and found Elisha, who told him to bathe seven times in the Jordan River. After grumbling at first, Naaman finally consented, and was healed of his leprosy. What was Jesus’ point in reminding them of these stories? It is that God passed over all the widows of Israel in order to save a Gentile widow, and that God passed over all the lepers of Israel in order to heal a Gentile leper. In other words, both stories pointed to Jesus’ (God’s) *liberty* and *liberality*. These stories demonstrate that God is free to save whom He will, and that His grace extends beyond the borders of Israel to encompass the Gentiles. Neither of these truths were palatable to the Jews of Nazareth. The self-righteous do not cherish the sovereignty and liberty of God to dole out His grace to whom He will. Why? Because they do not want a salvation based upon mercy, but a

¹⁷ Edwards, 140. Edwards notes that “Physician, heal yourself!” is found in *Gen. Rab.* 23 (15c), *Gos. Thom.* 31, and in a variant form in Mt 27:42. “Prophets are not accepted in their hometown” is found in Jn 4:44 and in Plato, *Rep.* 6.489; Edwards, 140n28.

salvation based upon merit, for they imagine that they have, of all people, earned it. And they do not want God's grace going beyond their borders, especially not to a people who aren't nearly as righteous as they. And so they rejected Jesus. Indeed, they rejected Him violently, dragging Him out of the synagogue, driving Him out of the town, and attempting to throw Him from one of the cliffs on the hill into which Nazareth was built. But as Jesus' time had not yet come, He simply "passed through their midst" (αὐτὸς δὲ διελθὼν διὰ μέσου αὐτῶν).¹⁸

Before we conclude, let me point you to the warning of this text. Do not stumble over the familiarity, the priority, or the liberty and liberality of Jesus.

- We, too, have a certain familiarity with Jesus. Most of us grew up in church. We have heard the stories and read the Scriptures a thousand times. Do not let your familiarity with Jesus blind your eyes to His glory or dull your ears to the earth-shattering claims He makes. Week in and week out, come ready to encounter the living Christ in His God-breathed word.
- We, too, can stumble over Jesus' priority. We want Him to perform some spectacular miracle in our life that relieves us of temporary suffering and provides us with temporary comfort. We want Him to heal our bodies, heal our marriages, heal our finances. Jesus wants to heal our souls, and ordinarily chooses to do so through sickness and suffering. Let Jesus set the priority of His redemptive mission. Trust His wisdom and His ways, and He will bring you into His presence where there is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11).
- We, too, can stumble over Jesus' liberty and liberality. He is utterly, absolutely free to extend His grace to whomever He will, and to pass over whom He will.

"All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Mt 11:27)

¹⁸ "He spoke no angry word, nor did he work any spectacular miracle. He simply walked through the mob. Some have felt that this was itself a miracle — though not the kind of miracle the Nazarenes wanted! As far as is known Jesus never returned to Nazareth. Rejection can be final"; Morris, 128.

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.” (Jn 5:21)

So let God be God, and receive His grace with gratitude.

We have seen how *not* to respond to Christ. So how should we respond to Christ? There are two people in this text who received mercy—the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian. And what did they have common? They were poor, blind, captive, and oppressed.

- They were poor—they had no claim on God, no merit by which to purchase His mercy.
- They were captives—captives of sin and of Satan, in bondage to the law’s precepts and penalty, helpless to free themselves.
- They were blind—prior to the grace of God coming to them—a grace neither requested nor sought—they could not see the glory of God. They were pagans living out their pagan lives according to their pagan ways. But then the light dawned upon their souls...
- They were oppressed—the widow oppressed by famine and imminent death; Naaman was oppressed by leprosy.

And yet, when the grace of God appeared, they believed the word of God and acted upon it. The widow believed Elijah’s word and used up the last of her flour and oil to make him some bread. Naaman believed Elisha’s word and bathed seven times in the Jordan River. If you would partake of the redemptive ministry of Jesus the Messiah, you must do the same. Believe the gospel, and act upon it. Trust Christ, and follow Him in obedience. May God grant you today a faith that is

a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times. This confidence in God’s grace and knowledge of it makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all His creatures; and this is the work of the Holy Ghost in faith. Hence a man is ready and glad, without compulsion, to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, in love and praise to God, who has shown him this grace.¹⁹

¹⁹ Luther, “Preface,” *Commentary on Romans*, xvii