

Series Gospel of Luke

This Message #6 The Beginning of Public Ministry

Scripture Luke 4:14-30

So far in our study of the Gospel of Luke, the emphasis has been on the “coming-of-age” years of Jesus. We have thought about passages on His birth, on His formative years as a young child, on His baptism and introduction to Israel, and on His encounter with the devil.

Today we begin a new section. In the passage for today and into the next several chapters, Luke writes about the public ministry of Jesus in Galilee.

Read Luke 4:14-30

At the beginning of this passage, Luke once again mentions the special activity of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was the guide for Jesus throughout His ministry years.

According to Luke, the ministry phase of Jesus began in Nazareth, the town in which Joseph and Mary lived and where He was “brought up.” However, in actual fact, Nazareth was not the place where Jesus began His public ministry. Verses 14-15 and also verse 23 indicate that Jesus had previously been traveling throughout Galilee, including the city of Capernaum, and, as He taught in the synagogues, everyone praised Him, and the “news about Him spread through the whole countryside.” Before we jump to the conclusion that Luke did not have his facts correct, let me explain.

There was a plan or design in the way this Gospel was written by Luke. The next several chapters have information on the ministry of Jesus in Galilee. This is followed by several chapters in which Jesus ministered in Judea [*and Perea (the country east of the Jordan River)*]. The final chapters in this Gospel take place in Jerusalem. Luke used a geographical format in both this Gospel and in his other major work, the book of Acts, to explain the progression of events. In following this format, Luke did not stick with a strictly chronological sequence, but selected episodes in the life of Jesus which described how His ministry moved from the town in which He was raised (that’s the focus for today) toward the place of His death and resurrection in the city of Jerusalem.

By the time Jesus arrived in His home-town of Nazareth, the inhabitants there had already heard reports about Him. Jesus' acquaintances were undoubtedly curious and eager to see Him again, and perhaps proud that their hometown boy was becoming famous. As verse 23 indicates, they were probably eager to see Jesus perform some miracles. The synagogue was probably unusually crowded on the Sabbath day after Jesus came to town.

It was customary to give visiting rabbis the opportunity to speak. Jesus was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and He read two verses from the beginning of Isaiah 61, a passage which describes the promised Messiah. Then He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. In the synagogue, the reader would always stand when reciting the Scriptures but sit down on a small platform for the teaching part of the service.

The words read by Jesus were well known to generations of the Jews. They had been waiting for 700 years for the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise, and, as the years went by, their hope for the coming of the Messiah had become especially intense because they resented the Roman occupation of their land. The Jews desperately wanted a king, a deliverer, God's Messiah, to bring them back to their promised status as God's chosen people.

Verses 18 and 19 are a list of Messiah activities. Jesus' listeners would have understood the kind of work to be performed by the Messiah. They understood the necessity for Messiah's divine anointing. Luke wrote about the anointing of Jesus in chapter 3, but the worshippers in the synagogue in Nazareth on that day probably did not know that Jesus had already been so anointed.

During the reading, the thoughts of the listeners were focused on the promised Messiah, but they did not immediately associate the Messiah with Jesus. Linking the fulfillment of the promises of Isaiah with the Jesus they knew was beyond the scope of their imaginations.

What thoughts did the Jews have about the prophecies of Isaiah? They understood that the "The Spirit of the Lord" would be on the Messiah, and that the Messiah would be anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to "preach good news to the poor." The Jews understood that the expression, "the poor," sometimes meant individuals who were destitute of wealth, position, influence and honor, but also referred to people who were spiritually impoverished.

Scripture explains that spiritually impoverished people do not have the resources to help themselves. They cannot earn favor with God through their own efforts. There is no human way for them to obtain sufficient holiness to please God. Hence, they are dependent on outside help. The Messiah would come with the good news that God was preparing a way by which both the physical and the spiritual needs of humanity could be met.

The Jewish scholars understood that there were four characteristics of the “good news” which would be proclaimed by the Messiah. First, the Messiah would be sent to “proclaim liberty to the captives.” In Isaiah’s era, the people of Israel were without their freedom because they had become prisoners of foreign governments. This physical captivity was a picture of the spiritual bondage that all of humanity was under. The freedom that Messiah would provide would be from physical and especially from spiritual bondage. The Messiah would set sinners free from shame and guilt.

The second characteristic was that the Messiah would bring about the “recovery of sight for the blind.” This statement could mean that the Messiah would have the ability to heal physical blindness, but it was turned into a reference to the spiritual blindness of people. Satan’s objective from the time of creation has been the deception of people. He wants to keep people blinded to the truth about God. The Messiah would come to reveal and demonstrate the truth of God through His teachings and actions. He would reverse the consequences of sin. He would turn people from the darkness of sin to the light of God’s righteousness.

The Jews also understood that the Messiah would release people who were “oppressed” and “downtrodden.” This is a reference to people who had no ability to protect and defend themselves. The Isaiah passage could refer to people who were politically oppressed, exploited, and without justice, but in a broader sense it referred to the forces of evil which kept people entrapped in sin, pain, and death. The Messiah would come to offer release from such pain and helplessness and dark despair. His miracles would demonstrate His authority and power over physical conditions and point to His greater triumph over forces of sin. The Messiah would offer hope to those who were burdened, heavy-laden, and oppressed.

Most Jews recognized that the words of the prophet Isaiah had two levels of meaning. There was an immediate context, in which the words were applied to the circumstances of Israel in Isaiah's lifetime, and there was a long-term context in which the words were applied to the Messiah. The first context concerned the actual physical conditions of poverty, freedom, lack of human rights, and injustices suffered by the Israelites during Isaiah's lifetime.

The Jews recognized that social and political issues would also be a major concern for the Messiah. They believed that, after His coming, He would counter the greed, selfishness, subjugation, and exploitative conditions so prevalent among the people. The Messiah, in the manner of the Old Testament prophets, would teach against these attitudes and behaviors, and through His miracles He would help many people to overcome their physical ailments and difficulties. Most of all, however, the Messiah would be concerned about the ultimate needs of people — their spiritual needs. He would be sent to earth to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of people and to reconcile people to God.

The last phrase in the reading stated that Messiah would "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Isaiah was not referring to a calendar year, but rather, the era when the Lord's salvation would be realized. It would be the time when Israel would be delivered from the hands of its enemies and the people released from sin and all its consequences.

After Jesus read the statement about the "year of the Lord's favor," He stopped, rolled up the scroll, sat down, and then made an astounding statement: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, Jesus was informing His listeners that the Messiah was on the scene and that the time had come when God's salvation would be granted to His chosen people. After 700 years of waiting and hoping, Jesus' statement would have sent shockwaves of excitement to the ears of His listeners. Israel would soon be ruled by a descendent of David, as promised. All the nations of the world, including the hated Roman government, would soon be in subjection to the people of Israel, the people of Jehovah God, as promised. Can't you sense the excitement which flowed over the congregation?

The initial reaction to Jesus' words was favorable. He had stirred up emotions. Everyone was excited. The listeners spoke well of Him and were amazed at the manner of His communication. As sermon critics, they were ready to give the "home-town kid" good marks on His delivery and style.

But there was a turning point in their attitude toward Jesus. The opinions of the listeners quickly changed. The question is “why?” What brought about the sudden shift in the attitudes of the congregation? It started with the announcement, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” This was just the opening line in Jesus’ description of Himself as the promised Messiah. The fact that Jesus talked about Himself is implied in the following verses. As Jesus described His true identity, the doubts about Him multiplied. How could He be the Messiah? Wasn’t He the son of Joseph?

Jesus was well known to them. He had grown up in a Nazareth home and had worked as a carpenter in Nazareth for many years. His mother, four younger brothers (*James, Joses, Jude, and Simon; see Mark 6:3*), as well as His sisters, were probably still living there in Nazareth. All the synagogue attendees knew Him as the son of Mary and Joseph. How could He make the claim that He was the Messiah?

Verse 23 indicates that Jesus quickly became aware of the skeptical thoughts of His listeners. The words, “Physician, heal thyself,” was a popular idiom in the Middle East. It had the meaning, “Make sure you take care of your own needs before you try to take care of the needs of others.” How did this apply to the situation? According to the common interpretation of Isaiah, the Messiah would be able to help the poor, provide freedom to prisoners, restore sight to blind people, and provide justice to people who were oppressed. Yet, when the people of Nazareth looked at Jesus, He was as materially poor as they were, as a villager He didn’t have the kingly position and authority to change the power structures in the land, and He had not proven Himself by doing miracles of healing, at least in the sight of the local people. Jesus did not fit their ideas about what the Messiah would be like. He didn’t look like He could help them.

Jesus recognized that the people of Nazareth were reacting to Him in the same way they reacted to the Old Testament prophets. Even though the prophets spoke the words of the LORD, their words were seldom accepted by the listeners who knew them best. To illustrate that this was the case, Jesus reminded His listeners of episodes in the lives of Elijah and Elisha. Although there were many needs among the Israelites, for examples, among widows and lepers, God did not send His prophets to these people but instead sent them to Gentiles.

The Israelites would not listen to or believe the prophetic voices of fellow Israelites so, as a result, they received no relief from their suffering. In contrast, there was the Gentile widow in Zarephath and the Gentile military official from Syria who not only listened to the prophets but obeyed their words, and they came to appreciate the greatness of God.

Jesus refused to comply with the expectations of the people of Nazareth. He refused to validate His claim to Messiahship through a display of power and miracle. The parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark states that Jesus could not do many miracles in Nazareth, and that He was amazed at the lack of faith among the people there. Even though He was revealing the truth about Himself, the crowd in the synagogue did not seize their great historic opportunity to believe in and receive the blessings of their Messiah.

The people expressed their rejection of Jesus in a violent way. They were enraged when they realized that they would not receive any special favors from Jesus. They were angry because Jesus claimed to be God's anointed Messiah. They were angry because Jesus had indicated that God's mercy would be shown to Gentiles rather than rest exclusively on them as God's chosen people. They were so angry that they had murderous intentions.

Luke did not explain how Jesus was able to escape from the angry mob. He simply wrote that Jesus walked right through the crowd and went on His way.

We can ask the question: why was this episode so important in the history of Jesus' life that Luke included it in his Gospel? The reason Luke began his record of Jesus' ministry with this story was because the event in Nazareth was a microcosm of what Jesus would experience throughout His months of ministry. Jesus frequently presented Himself to the Israelites as their promised Messiah, only to be rejected and find Himself in life-threatening situations. Luke called attention to these episodes in his Gospel account.

Scripture teaches that the words of Jesus must be accepted and believed before there can be a deeper understanding of who He is. The people of Nazareth were unwilling to accept Jesus on the basis of what He explained about Himself. As a result, they did not experience any of the benefits that the Messiah could offer to them. Jesus did not come to earth to fit into the pre-conceived ideas that people had. He came to bend the understanding of people to the reality of who He was.

Thoughts/Questions for Reflection

*Do we take the words of Jesus as seriously as we should?

*Or do we reject Jesus because He does not fit our preconceived ideas?

*What do we think about ourselves? Do we see ourselves as spiritually poor, in bondage, blind, and oppressed? If not, then we will not be able to hear the good news that Jesus preaches to us.

Rejection of Jesus is a rejection of God and His plans.