

This morning, I am in the fourth week of a new sermon series that I've entitled "Meeting Jesus." I am making my way through Luke's account of the life of Jesus, looking at various interactions that people had with Jesus, in order to better understand what it means to know and follow Him. This morning, we are going to be in Luke 4:14-30, looking at Jesus and the people of his hometown, his fellow Nazarenes.

**Luke 4:14–30** - Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.<sup>15</sup> He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.<sup>16</sup> He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read,<sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place **where it is written**:<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>20</sup> Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.<sup>21</sup> He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled **in your hearing**."<sup>22</sup> All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"<sup>24</sup> "Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted **in his hometown**."<sup>25</sup> I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.<sup>26</sup> Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.<sup>27</sup> And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only **Naaman the Syrian**."<sup>28</sup> All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.<sup>29</sup> They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.<sup>30</sup> But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

After Jesus' baptism and temptation in the Spirit, he has been ministering in some surrounding towns, which Mark's gospel records but not Luke, and now he returns to his hometown of Nazareth. He enters the synagogue on the Sabbath day. During a normal worship service, someone would do a reading from the law, and then another person would read from the prophets. Jesus stands up, the scroll of Isaiah is handed to him, and he reads a section that is mainly from Isaiah 61, a passage

about the Servant of the Lord, a Messiah figure who would come to bring God's kingdom of justice and freedom:

**Luke 4:18-19** - "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, <sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And while it's certainly possible that Jesus said a great deal about this passage, Luke distills his message to one line:

**Luke 4:21** - He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled **in your hearing**."

In other words, this passage from Isaiah that I just read is about me. I am the Servant of the Lord.

Now, imagine if I were to read a prophecy from the Bible and then claim that it was about me. You would rightly think that I was out of my mind, suffering from delusions of grandeur. And this is yet another reason why C.S. Lewis so famously said what he said about Jesus:

"I'm ready to accept Jesus as a moral teacher, but I don't accept the claim that he is God.' That is the one thing we must never say. A man who is merely a man and said the things Jesus said can not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic, on the level of the man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You can shut him up as a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, you may fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about him being a great moral teacher. He did not leave that open to us, and he did not intend to."

And at first the crowd thinks well of him and is amazed at the gracious words coming from his lips. But eventually, they turn on him, and by the end of the passage, they want to kill him. What happens here? Why are they so offended by Jesus? What do we learn about Jesus from this passage?

### **1) Jesus offends expectations**

Remember the cultural context of this time. Israel was under Roman occupation. They believed that they were the people of God, the favored nation, but that a

wicked pagan nation was oppressing them, enslaving them, and mistreating them. The religious leaders of the day believed and taught that God would send a deliverer, a Messiah, to rescue them.

And so, as you can imagine, whenever a potential Messiah-figure came onto the scene, there was great excitement. Perhaps this would be the person to rescue them from oppression and deliver them to freedom and glory once again. And here is Jesus, reading from Isaiah 61, proclaiming that God has sent Him to bring freedom to the prisoners, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor!

**Luke 4:18-19** - "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Surely he is talking about Israel, no? The people are excited, but also a bit skeptical, seeing as how they knew Jesus and his family – isn't this Joseph's son? But then Jesus confronts them with these words:

**Luke 4:22-27** - All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"<sup>24</sup> "Truly I tell you," he continued, "**no prophet is accepted in his hometown**."<sup>25</sup> I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.<sup>26</sup> Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.<sup>27</sup> And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

Jesus gives them two historical examples from the days of the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament. In both cases, God sends the prophet to a foreigner, a pagan, to do his miracles, because of the unbelief of Israel. What is going on here? Again: Jesus' audience assumes that the Messiah has been sent to save them - the good people - who are being oppressed by the Romans - the bad people. But apparently Jesus has a different mission.

Jesus had a habit of offending people's expectations of what He would be like. Remember the two disciples on the road to Emmaus after Jesus' death and

resurrection in **Luke 24:19–21**. When Jesus, who they do not recognize, asks them what they are talking about, they reply: “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.<sup>20</sup> The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;<sup>21</sup> but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”

“We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.” Those are the words of expectation. The two disciples had hopes of what Jesus was going to do. They believed that Jesus, as the Messiah, the anointed one, would defeat the Romans who held power over Israel, and bring back the former glory to the nation of Israel. But instead, the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus, and the Romans killed Jesus. And so, the disciples were disillusioned, because they thought they knew what the Messiah would be like and do, and Jesus did not follow the script.

**Jesus has a habit of offending our expectations. How true is this of so many of us!** One big barrier to belief for many of us is that we have our expectations of what God should be like. For example, we think that God should just love and accept everyone, no matter what they do, and not judge anyone. Or we think that God should be on board with our political persuasions and clearly be against the other party. Jesus has a habit of offending our expectations. After all, we know how we would run things if we were God. And when God doesn’t operate according to our plans and expectations, then we become disillusioned, or worse yet, give up our belief.

**The most common time this happens in our lives is when something bad happens.** Someone we love dies. The disease or illness we are praying God to heal doesn’t go away. The marriage doesn’t turn around. We lose the job, and then our house. Prayers go unanswered. And we don’t understand how a good God could allow those things to happen, and we lose our faith in God. The expectations we place on God, especially when He doesn’t meet those expectations, can be a big barrier to belief. But God sees a bigger picture, the longer view. As He says:

**Isaiah 55:8–9** - “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.<sup>9</sup> As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

**Be careful that you do not end up like the Nazarenes in Luke 4, rejecting your Lord and Savior because He does not operate according to your expectations.**

## 2) Jesus' primary mission is spiritual deliverance

Jesus reads from Isaiah 61, declaring that he has come proclaiming good news for the poor, the blind, and the oppressed:

**Luke 4:18-19** - "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, <sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

But then Jesus gives two examples, one of a poor foreign widow, and another of a wealthy Syrian general named Naaman. Jesus gives both foreigners as examples of the poor, blind, and oppressed who God comes to save. Evidently, Jesus is thinking of something different than material poverty when he talks about the poor.

Jesus' primary mission is spiritual deliverance. Think of the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:

**Matthew 5:1-3** - Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them. He said: <sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

What does it mean to be poor in spirit, and why is poverty of spirit so critical to Jesus' mission?

**The poor in spirit know they are spiritually bankrupt and are dependent upon God for everything**

It might help to compare the poor in the spirit to those who are poor in material things. Just like those who are poor in material things have nothing material to offer, it is the same with those who are poor in spirit. We recognize that we have nothing of spiritual value to offer to God. Not that we in and of ourselves are worthless, because we are all made in God's image, but that we have nothing of spiritual worth to offer to a holy God. It is exemplified by the tax collector in Luke 18:10-14:

**Luke 18:10-14** - "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' <sup>13</sup> "But the tax

collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’<sup>14</sup> “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Notice which person comes away blessed, or approved by God. It is the tax collector who simply cries out of his poverty of spirit, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Poverty of spirit is not thinking “God is so lucky to have me on his team.” It’s responding like Peter did when Jesus hauled in that net of fish on his boat – go away from me, for I am a sinful man. It is Gideon or Moses, saying that they are unworthy of the call God has put on their life. It’s Isaiah saying “woe to me, for I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips” upon seeing a vision of the Lord. It is the hymn Rock of Ages – Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. Naked come to thee for dress. Helpless look to thee for grace. Foul I to the fountain fly. Wash me savior or I die.

And yes, it is like the widow of Zarephath or Naaman the Syrian, recognizing their inability to save themselves and their desperate need for God’s help.

We may feel like we are materially blessed, but that does not make us rich in spirit before God. Think of Jesus speaking to the church in Laodicea in Revelation:

**Revelation 3:17** – “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

Or Paul’s words in Galatians 6:3 –

**Galatians 6:3** - If anyone thinks he is **something** when he is **nothing**, he deceives himself.

The Jews listening to Jesus believed that they were the good people, and that God had sent the Messiah to save them from the evil pagan oppressors. And here comes Jesus saying that, just like in the days of Elijah and Elisha, he had not come solely for Israel, but for the poor in spirit, wherever they might be found, for those who did not think God owed them anything but knew their desperate need for God.

When Jesus declared:

**Luke 4:18-19** - “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the

prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

They heard Jesus saying that God had sent Him to save them, the good Israelites, from the bad Romans, but in reality, Jesus was primarily declaring that He had been sent to proclaim good news to the poor in Spirit, to bring freedom to those imprisoned by sin, to bring spiritual sight to the spiritually blind, to set free those who were oppressed by the devil, and to proclaim God's favor.

Jesus has come for the spiritual outsiders, the spiritually poor, no matter what their nationality, ethnicity, material status. And this offends the Israelites, who think that the Messiah should be for them alone.

Are you spiritually poor? Or do you think that God owes you?

We are spiritually poor. We do not measure up. We have nothing to offer. All we can offer is a recognition of our own inadequacy and sin: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." And then, Jesus says, we are blessed. We are under God's approval.

God will not pour out His Spirit and His life on self-sufficient, self-reliant people. We come empty, looking to Him to fill us. Revival begins with emptying, pouring out, breaking, submitting, bowing down, confessing, repenting. As D.A. Carson put it:

"We cannot fulfill God's standards ourselves. We must come to him and acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy, emptying ourselves of our self-righteousness, moral self-esteem, and personal vainglory. Emptied of these things we are ready for him to fill us."

All we have to do is to present our empty, broken self and let Him fill and keep filled. As Andrew Murray says, "Just as water ever seeks and fills the lowest place, so the moment God finds you abased and empty, His glory and power flow in."

God's grace and salvation are for the spiritually poor. Be careful that you do not miss God by walking in a spiritual pride that thinks God owes you anything.

### **3) The gospel is good news for the actual poor as well**

**Luke 4:18-19** - "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the



prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Although Jesus' primary focus is on spiritual poverty and spiritual blindness, this is not an either/or message. The gospel is good news for the actual poor as well. Throughout the Bible, God shows his preference for the poor, the outcast, the second born, the woman, the foreigner, and the outsider. Go back to Pentecost and the giving of the Spirit:

**Acts 2:37–46** - When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"<sup>38</sup> Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>39</sup> The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all **whom the Lord our God will call.**"<sup>40</sup> With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."<sup>41</sup> Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.<sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs **performed by the apostles.**<sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common.<sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.<sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,<sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

What happens after the giving of the Spirit? A community of generosity was born. As God gave generously, so His people would give generously to each other, making sure that there were no needy people among them.

If the gospel proclamation does not result in a community that brings good news to the poor, the outcast, the oppressed, the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, then something has gone terribly wrong. In fact, this is what Paul tells us:

**Philippians 2:1–11** - Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,<sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.<sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,<sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the **interests of**



the others.<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,<sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The gospel is good news for the spiritually poor, but also for the poor and the oppressed, if Jesus' followers will follow in His footsteps. Follow Jesus' example by laying aside your privilege to serve others, to elevate the interests of others above your own.

**Luke 4:18-19** - "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

May your existence, and the existence of our church, be good news for the spiritually poor and for the materially poor. Amen.