

“No Prophet Is Acceptable in His Hometown” (Luke 4:14–30)

February 4, 2018

Brian Watson

I want us to imagine a hypothetical story, a parable, if you will. Imagine an industrial town somewhere in the Midwest, in the Rust Belt. It’s a town that had a once-thriving industry (let’s say it was making widgets) that has dried up decades ago, kind of like Brockton’s shoe industry. And in this town, there was a boy. This boy wasn’t famous growing up. He didn’t come from a rich family. He wasn’t a star athlete. But he was smart. And he went off to a good college, and then law school, and he then became a lawyer for a firm in another state. Eventually, he became a U.S. Senator in that other state, so he still had family in his hometown. He still had some hometown connections. Eventually he ran for President and he won the election.

At the beginning of his presidency it’s announced that he’s going to return to his hometown to make a speech there. He’s going to make that speech in the old, abandoned widget factory. As you can imagine, the people in his hometown get excited. Pretty soon, there’s talk about how the president’s visit means the town is likely to get a federal grant. Some old factory and mill towns across America have received this grant to renovate and repurpose old factories and mills, so they can be used as apartments, office spaces, and studios. (This has happened in Waltham and Beverly, with the old Waltham Watch and United Shoe buildings, respectively.) Because this president has been talking about the need to put America back to work, and because of his trip to his old hometown, and because of the location of the speech, everyone assumes he is going to announce that this town is going to receive a grant.

The president begins his speech with talk about the old days when people in America worked hard and had good jobs. He talks a bit about the old widget factory. Everyone is waiting for the moment when he gets to that grant. “How much money is the federal government going to spend on us?”, they think. Then the president starts to talk about how Americans are lazy and how workers overseas do better work. He says it’s time for Americans to be tougher, to be more disciplined, to work harder. So, instead of announcing a grant, he talks about how his administration is going to reform entitlement spending, cutting back unemployment benefits and cracking down on Social Security fraud. For the sake of this story, let’s assume what the president says is true, and what he proposes is good.

Imagine the reaction of the people. At first, they were thrilled that the local boy made good was coming to town. They assumed they would receive something good. But then when they hear something they don't want to hear, they are enraged. They boo the president. Someone starts leading a chant: "Not our president! Not our president!" The Secret Service agents at the event get nervous and they cut things short, escorting the president out of the factory before things turn worse.

Now, why do I tell that story? That's kind of what happens in the passage that we're going to look at today. I've been preaching through the Gospel of Luke over the last two months and today we come to Luke 4:14–30. Here, we see what happens when Jesus teaches in his own hometown of Nazareth.

Before we start, I want to give us a little bit of context. Two weeks ago, we saw that Jesus was baptized and then anointed by the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:21–22). At that time, God the Father said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."¹ We Christians believe that there is one God, who is triune. In other words, we believe that God is one Being in three Persons. Here, God the Father blesses God the Son, upon whom God the Holy Spirit comes, giving him power. Jesus has always been the Son of God, but over two thousand years ago, he added a second nature, also becoming a human being. And, as a human being, he was given the Holy Spirit to guide and empower him. Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the long-awaited King of Israel who will reign forever.

That bit of information is important to know as we look at today's passage. Let's start by reading the first two verses, verses 14 and 15:

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

This is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Luke is giving us a summary statement. Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, went to the region of Galilee, where he had grown up. People heard about his teaching in synagogues and he was glorified by them. This probably means that Jesus' teaching brought him a certain level of fame. The people started to hear about how Jesus was a great teacher and those who heard him marveled at his teaching.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Then, after giving us that statement, Luke tells us about a particular time when Jesus taught in a synagogue.

Before we look at that, I want to make just a brief note on synagogues. Synagogues probably emerged while the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon, over five hundred years earlier. A synagogue was really a gathering of people, not so much a building. In some towns, the people probably gathered in someone's home. Synagogue meetings usually centered on Scripture readings and teaching. Any qualified Jewish man might be invited to teach. You might remember that in the book of Acts, the apostle Paul was able to testify to Jesus while visiting different synagogues in the Roman Empire (Acts 13:13–43; 14:1; 17:1–3, 10–12, 16–17; 18:1–4, 19; 19:8).

While Jesus was in his hometown synagogue, he was able to read from Scripture and teach. Let's read the first part of what happens. We'll read verses 16–22:

¹⁶ 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.

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 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,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

²⁰ 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. ²¹ And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² 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?”

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but he was raised in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. “In the time of Jesus, Nazareth was a small agricultural village with a spring and a population of approximately 400 to 500 people.”² Such a small town wouldn't have its own synagogue building. They also probably wouldn't have had a complete copy of the Hebrew Bible. In that

² Lamoine F. Devries, “Nazareth,” ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009), 4: 240.

time, Scripture wasn't printed in one nicely-bound book. Books of the Bible were written on scrolls. So, a scroll is given to Jesus.

Jesus reads from the Isaiah scroll, and he locates a passage that he wanted the people of synagogue to hear. He reads the first verse of Isaiah 61 and part of the second verse. It appears that Jesus may have skipped a line that's in verse 1 ("he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted") and added a verse from Isaiah 58:6 ("to set at liberty those who are oppressed"). People used quotations a bit more freely back then. What's important is that Jesus chose this passage for a purpose.

Toward the end of his book, the prophet Isaiah speaks of a servant upon whom God will put the Holy Spirit. This servant will bring forth justice (Isa. 42:1, 3). He will be a "light for the nations" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6; Luke 2:32). His mission was "to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Isa. 42:7). Most importantly, this servant would be "wounded for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities" (Isa. 53:5). In other words, he would die for the sins of his people. And "with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). Though this servant never sinned (Isa. 53:9), he died in place of our sins. He would "make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities" (Isa. 53:11).

So, Isaiah promises a time of comfort and salvation, of rescue for the hurting and the oppressed. Isaiah also contains a description of a new creation, where there will be no more crying (Isa. 65:17–19) and no more death (Isa. 25:6–9).

The passage that Jesus read recalls those good promises. It's therefore understandable that after he read it, the crowd was waiting for him to say something. That's why "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." They were waiting for Jesus to tell them something about that passage. Perhaps they were wondering when the "good news" that Isaiah promised would come.

Jesus probably said more than Luke reports, but we're given only one sentence: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." I'm sure the crowd didn't fully understand what Jesus meant. Perhaps they thought Jesus was telling them that someone else would bring this liberty, this freedom, the Lord's favor. But what Jesus meant was that he is the one who has been anointed by the Holy Spirit. He is the one who proclaims the gospel, which means "good news." But more than that, Jesus is the one who brings about liberty and healing. He is the one

who fulfills the great promises of the Old Testament. When you stop and think about it, his claims are amazing. He is the one who will make everything right in this broken world.

It's not clear how much the crowd understood, but they liked what they heard. Luke says, "And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth." Jesus spoke a message of grace. The liberation and healing that he said had been fulfilled was not something that God owed to anyone. We aren't entitled to freedom and good health. But God gives us salvation through his Son. That is why salvation is by grace alone. It is not something we deserve or can earn. The crowd probably wasn't thinking of salvation the way that you and I think of it. They might have thought of physical healing of blind people and others who had disabilities. They might have thought about being delivered from the oppression of the Roman Empire, which occupied their land. But whatever they understood, they were impressed by Jesus.

Then they say, "Is not this Joseph's son?" It's not clear what they mean. It is usually understood to mean that they are doubting whether Jesus could be the fulfillment of the passage of Scripture he read. They liked the idea that the promised liberation and healing had come, but then they thought about it and said, "Wait a minute, Jesus is Joseph's son. Maybe he's wrong?" Or perhaps they realized that Jesus was claiming to be God's agent of salvation, and they thought, "Hey, how could Joey Carpenter's son be the Messiah? I mean, have you seen Joey's work? I could make better tables than that guy!" In other words, they're doubting that a small-town guy could be the key to making everything right in the world.

That may be what they thought, but there's another way of reading their question. When they ask, "Is not this Joseph's son?" they may have been thinking something like, "Wait a minute, if Jesus has something to do with this liberation, this year of the Lord's favor, this healing, and if he's Joey Carpenter's son, then that's good news for us. Jesus is from Nazareth. If he can bring God's favor to Israel, how much more are we going to receive all these good things? We're definitely in!" They're like the people in that story I used at the beginning of the sermon. The hometown folks thought the president, a hometown hero, would bring home the bacon. Little did they know they were going to be grilled.

The people in this synagogue in Nazareth might have thought that Jesus would bring them special favor. After all, Jesus' message, which is Isaiah's message, sounded a lot like the year of Jubilee, which was supposed to occur every fifty years. Leviticus 25:10 says, "you shall

consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan.” Nazareth was a poor town. They might have thought that Jesus was promising them that they could be released from their debts and poverty.

Either reading is possible, and either reading makes sense of what Jesus says next. Let’s read verses 23–27:

²³ 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.” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. ²⁵ 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, ²⁶ and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷ And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.”

Depending on whether we think these people are skeptical or hopeful, the proverb “Physician, heal yourself” could mean one of two things. If they were skeptical, they might be saying, “Prove it to us!” If someone who was obese and sounded like he smoked five packs a day claimed to be a doctor, you might say, “If you’re a physician, heal yourself.” That could be why the people wanted Jesus to perform the miracles they heard he performed in Capernaum. In other words, they might not have believed that Jesus was the Messiah, or Christ. They might have wanted to see signs and wonders that authenticated his message.

But if they were hopeful that Jesus would first bring good things to his hometown, that same proverb could mean, “If you’re a good doctor, you make sure that you and your family are particularly healthy.” They might have been pleading for special favors. “Jesus, you’re one of us. Why are doing those miracles in Capernaum? Take care of your own first.”

Either way, Jesus won’t have it. He won’t give to those who reject him, and he can’t be manipulated. So, he says, “No prophet is acceptable in his hometown.” That could be true because people don’t believe a regular “Joey from the block” could be a prophet. Or it could be true because people think that their homeboys shouldn’t say hard things, which the prophets often spoke.

Jesus then reminds the crowd of what happened in the Old Testament. Some eight hundred years earlier, there were two prophets in Israel, Elijah and Elisha. They were called to

turn Israel back to God and away from worshiping false gods. They served during a time when Israel was led by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, both infamous for being wicked rulers. During Elijah's day, there was a great famine in Israel. That famine was a judgment on Israel's idolatry. Jesus reminds the crowd that Elijah didn't go to any widows in Israel during that time, even though there were many in Israel. No, Elijah was sent out of Israel to the coastlands, to Gentile territory. In Zarephath, which was between Tyre and Sidon, he miraculously provided flour and oil for a widow and he raised her son back to life (1 Kgs. 17:8–24).

Elisha, Elijah's successor, healed and cleansed Naaman, a commander of the Syrian army (2 Kgs. 5:1–14). Syria was Israel's enemy. Though there were many lepers in Elisha's day, he only healed Naaman.

Jesus' point is that Gentiles often exhibited more faith when they encountered God's prophets than the Israelites did. The Israelites often didn't listen to the prophets. The prophets said hard truths. They said, "You've turned away from God. You're worshiping fake gods and you're doing wrong. Turn back to God." The people didn't want to change, so they rejected the prophets. And because of the people's continual rejection of God, they were not healed. But God healed Gentiles, at least those who showed some glimmer of faith.

The hint is that just because these people are from Jesus' hometown, and just because they are Jews, doesn't mean they will automatically receive God's favor. God will not be manipulated. He wants people to love, trust, and obey him. And if people continually reject him, he will give his favor to others.

So, how will the people respond? They seemed to like what Jesus said at first. Will they like what Jesus says now? Let's see by reading verses 28–30:

²⁸ When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.

²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But passing through their midst, he went away.

The people obviously didn't like what they heard. They understood what Jesus was getting at. He was hinting that if they didn't respond rightly to him, they would be like the sinful Israelites of Elijah's day. But more than that, they probably hated the notion that Gentiles would receive God's favor. The Jews thought of themselves as God's treasured possession. They thought they were automatically part of God's kingdom. They assumed that just because of their biological heritage, they would receive God's blessings.

But God doesn't work that way. He calls a people to himself, and these people will come from all nations, tribes, and tongues (Rev. 5:9). There are no people who automatically receive God's blessings and favor. There are no people who are born into God's kingdom. No, we must be changed by God. We must be born again (John 3:1–8). We must turn from sinning and making created things our functional gods, and we must turn in faith to the one true God.

But these people didn't care about all of that. All they knew was that Jesus was saying something they didn't want to hear. And their marvel turned to rage. They were so filled with wrath that they tried to kill Jesus. And, somehow, he escaped from them because it wasn't yet his time to die.

Before we think about how this passage applies to us, I just want to point out what this passage says about human nature. The passage starts with Jesus being allowed to teach in a synagogue. The crowd had heard about his teaching in other places and they had some respect for him. When he read Scripture and said it was fulfilled, the people at first had a positive reaction. But then when Jesus said something they didn't like, they flipped. This is not what rational people do. But when people hear things they don't like, even if they're true, they often act in irrational ways. I think that's particularly true when it comes to religion. It's probably because we're talking about deep, ultimate matters and we're talking about cherished traditions and beliefs. I have heard stories about people in churches acting in the most ugly ways when they don't get their way. And I've seen some of this myself. I suppose this affirms what the Bible says about sin. The power of sin and evil is irrational. When we turn from God, our minds and our hearts are darkened and we can't think and desire and act rightly.

That's important to know, because today people tend to think that if they are hurt or feel offended—if they hear something they don't want to hear—that they are in the right and the one who has spoken, hurt, and offended is wrong. But that's not always the case. Sometimes the truth hurts. That doesn't mean telling the truth is wrong.

This episode demonstrates how the truth can create opposition. It shows how we all can resist the truth and become enraged by it. One of the reasons I'm a Christian is because the Bible makes so much sense of the human condition. It's like holding a mirror up to our world and seeing just how beautiful and also how broken it can be.

Well, now that we've gone through this passage, what should we do? How does it apply to us?

First, we should know who Jesus is. According to this passage, Jesus is a teacher, a prophet, and the anointed servant of Isaiah. It's important to see that while Luke emphasizes Jesus' teaching, he's much more than a teacher. He's the one who makes his teaching possible. He's not just the one who announces the year of the Lord's favor, but he is able to bring about freedom, healing, and restoration. In other words, he is more than just a man. He is also God. And he's our Savior.

We also see that Jesus was a controversial figure. People didn't always respond to him favorably. After Jesus was born, a man named Simeon told Jesus' mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed . . . , so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34–35). Jesus revealed the secret thoughts of these people in Nazareth, and their rejection of Jesus would cause their own fall.

Jesus was also a man who knew what it was like to be rejected, to be hated. People wanted to kill him. Eventually, they did. Truly, Jesus "was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). Jesus was hated because he told the truth. If you tell the truth, there may be people who turn on you. If you share the gospel with someone, people might at first like the idea of Jesus paying for their sins. But if you say that Jesus is the only Savior, and that if people don't trust Jesus and follow him, they will go to hell, don't be surprised if people get angry at you. They first got angry at Jesus.

Second, we should know what Jesus came to do. In part, Jesus came to teach and to proclaim a message of good news. However, there is some debate about what Jesus meant when he said he came

to proclaim good news to the poor. . . .
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.

Some people take this quite literally. They believe that Jesus came to relieve the poor, to give freedom to the oppressed, and to heal those who are disabled. And some people think that since that was Jesus' mission, that should be the primary mission of the church.

If we're going to understand Jesus' mission during his first coming, and if we're going to understand the mission of the church, we have to think more carefully. First, we should realize that Jesus didn't free everyone in Israel from poverty. Yes, he miraculously fed thousands of

people on a couple of occasions, but that didn't solve the problem of poverty. Second, we should realize that he didn't come to heal all disabilities. Yes, he healed at least a couple of blind people (for example, Luke 18:35–43), but he didn't solve the problem of blindness. Third, he didn't literally set prisoners free. There's no account of Jesus leading a jailbreak or bailing someone out of prison. Fourth, Jesus didn't lead a political revolution "to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

So, what does this passage mean? I think the best way to understand it is to see that it refers to spiritual realities. Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor in spirit, those who realize that they are sinners and can't save themselves. In order to be reconciled to God, you first need to know how much you've been a rebel against him and how much you must rely on his grace, the way a beggar relies on people to give him a handout. Jesus came to proclaim liberty to those who had been held captive by the power of sin. That power enslaves us, leading us to do things we know are not right. Jesus came to give us spiritual sight, so that we can see the truth. Those who can't see who Jesus truly is remain spiritually blinded. Jesus came to bring freedom to those oppressed by Satan, the devil (Luke 13:16).

The fact that Jesus came to deliver people from spiritual poverty and oppression doesn't mean that we shouldn't care about the physical needs of others. We should. God cares about our bodies, our hunger, and our circumstances. If we're going to care about other people, we should care about those things, too. But if we care about relieving suffering, we should first care about relieving eternal suffering. It would do no good to help someone out of poverty in this life only. What we all need most is to be reconciled to God, to be forgiven for our sins, and to be united to Jesus, the only Savior. Christians should care about both poverty and souls.

And, when you think about it, the gospel is truly good news to the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed. To the poor, it says, "You won't always be poor. In eternity, you will never lack for anything." To the slaves and the prisoners, it says, "You are in chains or behind bars now, but that won't always be the case. Hang on. Freedom is coming in the new creation." To the blind or the disabled, it says, "You will receive a resurrected body in eternity. Then, you will be able to see. You will be able to walk and run. Your body will be perfectly healthy, and it will never die." The gospel has given many people in dire circumstances great hope. God has not promised to relieve all pain and suffering in this life, even for his children. But he has promised that the pain and suffering of his children is temporary.

Third, we should respond rightly to Jesus. What's interesting is that Jesus stops his quote of Isaiah 61 at "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The next line in Isaiah is "and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa. 61:2). The first time that Jesus came, he did not come to bring a day of vengeance, but a day of salvation. However, we only have so long to respond to Jesus. After we die, there will be judgment (Heb. 9:27). When Jesus comes a second time, everyone who has ever lived will be judged. Those who hate Jesus or who are apathetic to Jesus will be condemned. They will be cast out of God's creation. They will experience eternal torment. The same is true of those who try to manipulate Jesus to their own ends, those who demand that Jesus provide all kinds of signs for them. But those who trust Jesus, who realize their own spiritual poverty, who sense that they have been imprisoned by sin and oppressed by evil forces, who have realized they were blind to the truth—those people will be saved. They will live with Jesus forever in a restored, renewed, perfected world. They will experience endless years of the Lord's favor.

If you are not trusting in Jesus today, I would urge you to put your faith in him. I would love to talk with you about what that would look like in your life.

Let us see that Jesus proclaimed good news and that he made that good news possible. Let's turn to him in faith. And let's bring good news to the physically and spiritually poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed.