

The Sermon in the Synagogue

Luke 4:14-21

A year has passed. During that time, Nicodemus sat beneath a shower of stars, stunned at a Carpenter's wonderful words. At Sychar, a woman full of failure paused beside Jacob's well and listened to life-changing words from the Master's lips. And at Cana, the Savior turned plain well water into fine wine. Even that is not the end.

Jesus has toured towns and villages scattered among the hills and dells of Galilee. People trembling with palsy have felt His healing touch. The blind have thrown away their tapping sticks. And cripples have left crutches that once helped them hobble down cobbled streets.

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. Verses 14-15

But the Savior not only healed broken bodies. He healed broken lives too. In small town synagogues, He spoke words that soothed wounded hearts and salved warped minds.

The people of Nazareth heard the stories buzzing about marketplaces at Capernaum and Bethsaida. And they wondered at them.

"Surely," they would say, "you don't mean Jesus of Nazareth!"

The miracle Healer and master Teacher people were so excited about could not be Mary's son. Why, they had known Him since He was a little boy. Then one autumn afternoon, the Carpenter came home.

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; Verse 16

The people of Nazareth did not have to wonder if Jesus would show up for Sabbath services at the synagogue. Even His neighbors knew weekly worship was a life-long habit with Him.

...and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, Verses 16

Synagogue services had decayed and deteriorated over the centuries since God's people returned from Babylon. Instead of teaching the truth of God's Word, rabbis endlessly quoted the opposing opinions of long lists of ancient teachers.

But it did not make any difference to our Master if He did not get much out of worship services. He attended anyway. And we who claim Christ's name ought to be every bit as faithful as He was.

The Actions of the Gospel

Synagogue services were rigid and ritualistic. And men and women sat in separate areas, separated by a screen.

There were no published books as we know them. The law of Moses, the Psalms, and the writings of the prophets were hand copied onto skin scrolls. Kept in a great cabinet called an ark, those scrolls were reverently removed and read each Sabbath.

A priest read a portion. So did a Levite and the village rabbi. Then others were also invited to read a portion of scripture. And this Sabbath our Savior was one of them.

He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. Verse 16

The synagogue leader motioned to the Master. So the Savior stood and strode to podium at the front of the synagogue. Others read the books of Moses and the Psalms. Now it was time for a reading from the prophets.

And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Verse 17

The scroll was large. And there were no chapter or verse numbers. So it took the Master a moment or two to find the place He wanted.

Carefully unrolling one side while rolling up the other, He searched until He found the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah. Only then did He begin to read.

And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.” Verses 17-18

When He finished, Jesus declared that the scripture He read not only referred to Him. He was in the act of fulfilling it that very day while His neighbors watched and listened.

And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Verse 21

So both while He read and explained Isaiah’s ancient prophecy that day, Christ was referring to Himself. It was a personal portrait of Jesus.

So we cannot take it any other way. Especially when He reminded the people who packed the synagogue that He was not speaking offhand. He was speaking by the divine inspiration.

Filled and overflowing with the Holy Spirit, the Savior said God had appointed and anointed Him to proclaim a message the prophet called *good news*.

And that is just what it was. The Gospel was good news in that day of dust and donkeys. And it still is. It is the best of news.

The people of Nazareth had heard stories about the quiet Carpenter they had known so long. On market days, strangers told of cripples with withered, twisted legs that suddenly became straight and strong when Jesus touched them.

Others told about bent backs, hacking coughs, and fevered children He had healed. Still others told even stranger stories. People with eyes like gray marbles blinked in the sunlight when their sight was suddenly made keen and clear at Christ’s word.

The people of Nazareth could not simply dismiss the stories as runaway rumors. Absolutely everyone had a tale to tell.

Now they had it from the Carpenter Himself. He stood before them and read the prophet’s words. Then He sat down and said it again.

He was the Lord of life. And He came to transform people’s lives.

The Attitudes of the Gospel

But the glorious good news of the gospel is not for everyone. The grace and goodness, the power and presence of God is targeted.

True, the gospel of Jesus Christ is available to all men. But it can only be accessed by a select few.

He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord. Verses 18-19

Our Savior said He did not come to preach the good news of forgiveness and new life to all men. God's Spirit personally appointed Him to proclaim the message to *the poor*.

Later Jesus sat on a grassy hillside overlooking the sparkling blue waters of the Sea of Galilee. And He said the same thing in another way.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:3

The Redeemer was not referring to narrow physical circumstances: ragged clothing and empty cupboards. He was talking about people who are poor and needy in mind and attitude, in soul and spirit.

The original word for *poor* means *to crouch or cringe*. It describes people who are so needy, they cannot even afford the luxury of pride, but are reduced to begging.

Yes, the Gospel is good news. But only to beggars, people who are so overwhelmed by their need of forgiveness and a fresh new dawn that they will humbly and tearfully plead for it.

Jesus also said he came to bring freedom, to open locked doors and lead men out into the sunlight. And so He did.

...if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:36

But the freedom God's Son purchased with His body and His blood is not for everyone. It is only for *captives*.

The Greek word means *one taken by spear point*. It describes a person who has been taken prisoner by a powerful, merciless enemy.

And no enemy is more powerful or more merciless than Satan. He does not merely tempt us to disobey God. When we do, he takes us captive. He addicts and enslaves everyone who obeys him.

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin." John 8:34

And slaves to sin are slaves indeed. They cannot break the bonds that hold them and defeat the addictions that enslave them. They cannot go home and leave behind their life of toil in service to Satan.

Paul knew the reality of the raw edge of that slavery. Although he hated what he did, he could not stop. And though he longed to do what was pure and perfect, he could not. He was a captive, a prisoner of war. But he found deliverance and freedom from his slavery to sin.

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Romans 7:24-25

Diseases and parasites were a plague when Jesus lived among men. And many people were blinded by them. There were no social services, so streets were lined with blind beggars, each of them listening for the sounds of footsteps and pleading for coins to buy a bit of bread.

Both Elijah and Elisha not only healed sick people. They also brought the dead back to life. But they did not bring sight to the blind. That was a miracle only the Messiah had the power to work.

In prison, John the Baptist became discouraged and struggled with doubt. So he sent messengers to Jesus to ask Him if He really was the promised Messiah. And our Savior used hard evidence to assure John that he was neither mistaken nor misled.

Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them." Matthew 11:4-5

When John heard that Jesus was bringing sight to the blind, all his doubts drained away. And he smiled and settled down in his cell. No one in all of time or eternity could do that but the Messiah.

But empty, unseeing eyes were not the only blindness our Lord came to heal. Much worse were the empty, unseeing minds of men.

The temple scribes who needled and nettled Jesus spent their lives studying the Scriptures. They could quote the entire Old Testament.

But they could not see the striking truth of it. Even when the glorious fulfillment of God's faithfulness stood before them, they were so blind they could not see and understand.

It is glorious good news that our Lord came to bring sight. But He only touches minds and eyes which are blind.

Jesus knew what it was to be bound. At Gethsemane, He was bound with chains. Outside the soldiers' barracks, His hands were tied to a whipping post. And on the cross, He was nailed to a wooden cross. Finally, He was bound with burial clothes in a stone sepulcher.

He was bound in all those ways that He might be empowered to set people free today. But one last time, the promise is not for all men.

Jesus only brings freedom to those who are *oppressed*. That word really means *broken in pieces*.

Our loving Lord brings freedom only to those whose hearts are broken, whose wills are broken, and whose pride is broken. He does not do business with those who are proud and have plenty.

He helps only those whose lives are shattered and scattered. Our great God is drawn to the bruised and the broken.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:18

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. Psalm 51:17

The people of Nazareth listened as the Savior spoke. But they were a lot like us. Only a precious few really heard Him. So now as then, only a few were touched and transformed.

We do not hear the good news. And even if we do hear it, we do not really believe it. But the reason is not that we are not poor.

Other people find release from captivity and the refreshing relief of a new life. But we do not. And once again the reason is not because we are not captives.

Now and then, we meet a man who sees life and living for what it really is. He sees problems and pain, sickness and sorrow in a light of love we cannot seem to catch.

Our righteous Redeemer has brought light that chases away all the darkness. And once again, we do not experience it for ourselves. But not because we have perfect sight and are not blind.

From time to time, we hear also men and women talk about the terror and tragedy of slavery to sin, bondage they have forever left behind. And we wonder whether their stories are really true.

We know we have not found the sweet serenity and full freedom they have found. But the reason is not because we are not broken in pieces, any more than we are free from poverty, blindness or captivity.

We are poor, skinny and starving in spirit. We are prisoners to our addictions and slaves to our sin. We grope about life unable to see the stark realities all around us. And we are indeed shattered and broken.

Our problem is like that which plagued Sunday morning church attenders at Laodicea. It is not that we do not have the disease; it is that we refuse to admit our need.

...you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, Revelation 3:17

Above all else, our God is infinitely fair. He gives us what we want. So if live in a dream world, convinced we have of nothing, that is precisely what we get. Nothing!

The Gospel of Grace can empower, emancipate and enrich anyone. But it requires an attitude firmly rooted in reality. We must know deep down in our bones that we really are poor and blind, captives with broken hearts and shattered spirits.

And we must be willing to admit it.

The Alternative to the Gospel

Jesus finished reading the words scratched on the great synagogue scroll. Then He reverently rolled it up and handed it back to the attendant to be returned to the ark.

And He closed the book, 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." Verses 20-21

Christ was very careful that Sabbath morning. He specifically chose a particular passage to read. He started reading at a specific place. And He deliberately stopped reading in the middle of a sentence.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord... Isaiah 61:1-2

Jesus said that portion of Isaiah's prophecy was being fulfilled that very moment in Nazareth. He was the Messiah, the Anointed One. And He was indeed sent to preach good news of salvation from sin and slavery, from darkness and defeat.

Our Savior stopped reading in the middle of Isaiah's sentence for good reason. He could not truthfully say He was fulfilling the next few words Isaiah wrote.

...and the day of vengeance of our God; Isaiah 61:2

At Nazareth that Sabbath morning, those last words were not yet a part of our Master's ministry. And they still are not.

Christ came to proclaim the time of God's favor: the time when the high and holy Lord of all creation will freely accept anyone and everyone who comes to Him in confession, contrition and commitment.

But that day will not last forever. There will come a time when our Savior will split the skies. And that day He will not come to heal and to help. He will come as Judge.

God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. Romans 2:16

He will come with the fire and fury of God righteous wrath. And those who refused to receive Christ's free gift of forgiveness and salvation will stand before His judgement throne.

I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds...And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.
Revelation 20:12,15

There are two days in Christ's calendar: the day of God's acceptance and the day of His wrath. Today and tomorrow.

So the question is not whether or not each of us will have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. The question is merely when.

Today or tomorrow.