

A Bible Lesson on Luke 4:14-44 (ESV¹)

This is a passage about the early public ministry of Jesus, as the home folks are just beginning to get an idea about who He is claiming to be. First, Jesus returns home to Nazareth and takes part in the service at the synagogue.

Luke 4:14 And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country.

Jesus returned to Galilee. This is after the temptation in the wilderness, when He returned to northern Israel from the south, where He had gone to be baptized by John.

¹⁵And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

The early reaction to Jesus as preacher was favorable. Then He heads to His home town. Barclay said that the word used to describe Nazareth in verse 29 is not one that would be translated "village," but rather "city" or "town." It's possible that Nazareth was a reasonable-sized place. Barclay speculated that it might have been as large as 20,000 inhabitants at this time. In any case, it may not be right for us to think of Nazareth as consisting of a few houses and a gas station.

¹⁶And 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.

The Sabbath finds Jesus with the worshiping community of believing people "*as was His custom.*" Post-moderns would do well to mark this. J.C. Ryle said, "We should observe in these verses, what honour our Lord Jesus Christ gave to public means of grace." Here is the only Son of God, habitually joining together with imperfect people in the regular worship of His Father. If ever there was anyone who could have claimed that He had other things to do, that everyone else there was less spiritual than Himself, that He could worship better in His own way someplace else, it would have been Jesus. But instead, it was His custom to join with the others in worship at the standard time, in the standard location, in the institutional synagogue. This is not a statement that Jesus found the people or worship at the synagogue to be perfect. It *is* a statement that He understood His regular, habitual participation with them to be important.

Jesus stood up to read. This posture intends to show respect for the Word of God.

¹⁷And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

The synagogue service consisted of 1) prayers, 2) reading from the Law, 3) reading from the Prophets and 4) a sermon. The person in charge allowed responsible individuals to participate in all parts of the service. Either as a volunteer or by invitation, Jesus is to take part in the reading of the Prophets and the sermon. Whether the passage from **Isaiah** was His choice or was the appointed scripture for the day, we aren't told. But Jesus reads in Hebrew (remember that the people spoke Aramaic) from **Isaiah 61:1-2**.

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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,

19to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

2to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

It is interesting and probably significant that Jesus stopped short of the phrase "and the day of vengeance of our God." In the minds of the Jews of the time, the promises of the first part of this passage were all aimed at the Jewish nation and the day of the vengeance was intended for the unrighteous gentiles. They understood the passage to be Messianic and expected Messiah to usher in blessing for the Jewish nation and punishment for gentiles. What Jesus is going to say here upsets that understanding.

20And 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.

He rolled up the scroll. The Isaiah scroll in the Dead Sea scrolls is 25 feet long. This is a dramatic pause as Jesus deals with the substantial mechanics of handling the large document in scroll form. Then Jesus sat down, not because He was done with His participation in the synagogue service, but because it was customary for the sermon to be delivered sitting down, likely from an elevated place, but from the sitting position. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on Him. You can just feel the anticipation in the air. They don't know what He's going to say, but they have heard the accounts of miracles and powerful teaching in the surrounding towns. He's read a Messianic passage and the anticipation is high. Jesus comes through with a statement that should blow their socks off.

21And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus has just said "I'm Messiah. I'm here to proclaim and do the things that Isaiah prophesied associated with Messiah."

Again, what are those things? "God has anointed Me. I'm here at God's commission. I'm here to preach good news, and to proclaim the year of God's favor." "year of God's favor" meaning what? The year 26 AD? No, the time of the coming of God's offer of mercy through His Son.

This is no small claim. Jesus, the local kid--that many of them have known for 30 years--has just claimed to be greater than the prophet Isaiah (and therefore the listeners), and in fact to be the One that the Jewish people have been waiting for to take the throne of David. The people's reaction is initially positive.

22And 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?"

They are pleased enough that Messiah is on the scene as long as they can think of Him on their own terms. As long as He's Joseph's son and can be expected to speak and behave in ways that are consistent with their view of what Messiah should be. In fact, if somebody from Nazareth is going to be Messiah, maybe there are some important positions waiting for some of them. If this is Joseph's son from down on Kellogg Street, maybe he'll hear my special request. Surely there will be some special perks for the home folks.

23And 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."

But the truth is that this isn't just Joseph's son! This is the Son of God! And He's not here just for the people of Nazareth. Jesus dashes their hopes that they have a special inside route to him. "Physician, heal yourself." is not saying "Get your act together before speaking to anyone else." Instead it is an injunction to practice first with your own, give them the benefit of your services first before taking care of others. Jesus sees that the people are expecting to gain special benefit from Messiah being one of their home town boys. He knows that some of them are thinking "Let's have some of those miracles we've heard about other places here and now!" But that kind of mindset is missing the point of who He is and what He has come to do.

24And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown."

They are willing to accept Jesus in Nazareth on their own terms ... as the kind of Messiah that they are expecting and want. They will not prove ready to accept Him on His terms and as the kind of Messiah that He truly is.

Jesus proceeds to give two Old Testament illustrations of the fact that God's blessings were meant to extend beyond the borders of Israel--that Messiah's job was more than to simply hand out goodies to Israel and beat down the gentiles.

25But 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,

26and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.

It's significant that Elijah is brought into this discussion, because Elijah was considered the prophet of the Messiah. The people were expecting his return to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. And the incident that Jesus cites from the life of Elijah is one where in a time of severe distress God miraculously brings aid, not to an Israelite widow, but to a gentile widow. On what basis did God provide for the widow? On the basis of obedience and faith. She did as Elijah instructed and believed God. (See **I Kings 17:7-16.**) That's the basis of God's blessing. The people here in Nazareth were wrongly thinking that it had to do with being of the right nation, with being from the same town as the Messiah. They were wrong.

27And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

Again Jesus cites the case of a gentile given a special blessing by God. This time it is a soldier in the army of an oppressor of Israel. On what basis? Again, as always, on the basis of faith, on

the basis of believing what God says and obeying Him, however reluctantly. (See **II Kings 5:1-18.**) It has nothing to do with being a physical Jew or being from Nazareth.

That is just too much. It is too far from what the people expected from Messiah. It includes not only other Jews, but gentiles as well, and THAT is disgusting beyond words. So the early (shallow) favorable reaction to Jesus quickly changes. If Jesus wants to claim to be Messiah, that is fine. But if He is going to spread the benefits of that too widely, and fail to produce perks for Nazareth, well then, that is a different matter.

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

29And 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.

30But passing through their midst, he went away.

It is not clear whether Luke intends for us to read this as a miraculous event, or not. In either case, Jesus shows characteristic command of the events of His life. It is not time for Him to die and these people have no power to take life from Him until He is ready to give it up in accord with the will of His Father.

31And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath,

As was His custom, Jesus is again with the worshiping community at the standard time in the standard place. In the context of the institution of the synagogue, Jesus begins to teach the people.

32and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority.

His message had authority. There are a couple of things being said here. For one, His word had authority because it was intrinsically true. Honest hearts, when the truth is spoken, recognize it and bow before it. There is no arguing or inclination to dispute. This is the case here. For another thing, Jesus was not speaking in the style of a Jewish Rabbi, or even one of God's prophets. The Jewish Rabbis always appealed to other authorities when making their points. They would say things like "Rabbi X speaking to Rabbi Y said Z about W. But Rabbi Q said ..." Their normal teaching was full of documentation and footnotes appealing to the authority of others. Even the prophets of God spoke with a kind of delegated authority. They would say "Thus says the Lord ..." But Jesus spoke in terms like "I say to you ..." He Himself, as God incarnate, did not need the authentication of others, or even the delegated authority of God. He is God and spoke like it! And there is also the fact that there was great authority evident in the miracles that accompanied his speaking. In all of these ways, Jesus spoke with authority.

33And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice,

Perhaps this guy was more oppressed at some times than at others, and could on occasion function sensibly and attend the services. But at this point, the demon recognizes Jesus for who He is, the One sent by the Father to destroy evil.

34"Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God."

This is fascinating exchange. The evil spirit speaks, in this particular instance, words that are literally true. Jesus is the Holy One of God and has come to destroy evil. What a deal. Jesus seems to be getting some free advertising of a most sensational kind, and at the expense of the competition. Why, here are the forces of evil scared into doing the work of spreading the Gospel. Some people today would hustle to get out their phones to record this for use in an advertising campaign, believing that here's the way to get the attention of those that need to hear the Gospel. But notice the reaction of Jesus.

35But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm.

"Be silent." It is not the least bit appropriate that such means be used to announce the Kingdom. This being doesn't have the Kingdom of God at heart, isn't interested in God's glory. Even in announcing who Jesus is in this sensational manner, the intention is to lead people off the point. Jesus is engaged in teaching the truth. The demon sees that it's better for his side to try to distract these people and get them thinking about either the powers of darkness or about their expectations concerning Messiah. It has said to itself "Well, let's try to get these folks off into either some kind of mystical demonology or into a political scheme for the Messiah." Jesus will have none of it and silences the spirit. Jesus deals with it in and goes on doing what He's about.

The pagans of the day, and even the Jews had elaborate rites and ceremonies for attempting to deal with demons. Jesus didn't play those games. This is God, the Sovereign of the universe, in human flesh, the One to whom all created beings answer, and He simply commands that the demon leave.

Luke, always the physician, lets us know that the exorcism leaves the guy physically OK. Luke's readers are more or less prepared for this scene. We know that Jesus is the Son of God, that He is the Messiah, the One who Isaiah prophesied would "release the oppressed." But still, imagine the shock of the people. Jesus has not only spoken with great authority, but a few simple words from Him have dealt with the demon.

36And they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!"

A better translation might be "What kind of power is this?" in place of "What is this word?" The people are clearly shocked.

37And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

This verse provides a break in the action. It jumps ahead a few hours to days in time, but the next verse is going to bring us back to where we jumped from.

38And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf.

The service is over. It's noon. It's time to go have a nice meal and relax. Jesus has been ministering all morning. It's time for a little rest. But what awaits Him at Peter's house, but a

sick mother-in-law. Luke uses a technical medical term here and thereby tells us that this is more than a mild case of the flu. This is a big fever, perhaps even life-threatening. Peter and whoever else is there don't hesitate to ask Jesus to help, and with characteristic compassion, Jesus does so.

39And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

Our health comes from God, and the only sensible use of it is then in His service. We weren't made to sit around and enjoy our leisure. We were made (and given good health) to be active and about God's work.

So the afternoon passes, the sun goes down, and all of a sudden it seems like the whole town shows up at Peter's house. What's going on? Why is everyone showing up all of a sudden? Well, the Sabbath is formally over at sundown, and people can carry their friends, which would have been Sabbath-breaking before. The fact that they start before the sun is completely down indicates how anxious they are to get there. They are probably bending the rules a bit.

40Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.

This is a really wonderful verse. First, there is the warm picture of friends and family members bearing those in need to the Savior ... carrying them ... doing for them. And then there is the picture of Jesus, who has had demand after demand placed on Him in one very full day, nevertheless taking the time to lay his hand "on each one." The Gospel is a matter open to all comers, but it is not some impersonal, mass thing. The God of the universe amazingly enough deals with us human beings according to our situations, one at a time, individually.

41And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.

Again, this is not testimony that Jesus wants or needs. He is not interested in the spectacular or sensational. He is instead interested in bringing men to God. And the words of demons do nothing in that direction, so He silences them.

42And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them,

Jesus attempts to be alone. Mark says explicitly that it is to pray that He departs. The people try to keep Him from leaving. They are looking for a kind of permanent ultimate emergency room. They want to keep Him for themselves, so that He can take care of whatever might come up in the future. They want Him to stay around to guarantee that their future lives will be smooth, without sickness or pain. But Jesus rejects that on two accounts. First, He has been sent not only to them but to others as well. And second, His primary work is not to heal physically, but to preach and subsequently die atoning for us. We are flat wrong when we think of God as existing to make things "good" for us. In thinking that way, we've got the Creator/creature relationship all out of focus. Jesus was compassionate and cared for physical needs of those that asked. We should do likewise. But his primary purpose was to first preach the Good News, and then to die and rise again to bring men to God. Our primary purpose must also be to preach the Gospel.

⁴³but he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose."

In this verse is the first occurrence of "kingdom of God" in Luke. It is a very common phrase in the Gospel. In various contexts it refers to the eternal kingship of God; the presence of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus, the King; the future kingdom; the opening of salvation to all people through the work of Christ. It is the rule of God, both as a present reality and as a future hope.

⁴⁴And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.