

## **Purposeful Yet Realistic** **Luke 4:14 – 44**

After Jesus' baptism by John, after the temptation scene, Jesus began His public ministry, which begins in Luke 4:14.

*(14 – 15) Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.*

In this first tour of the northern part of Israel, the Roman province of Galilee, lots of miracles will happen. Further, shortly before this, John the Baptist had started proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah, so, as word spread, Jesus became an object of considerable interest. But, as the gospel account unfolds, we will see that the quantity of people who thought this Messiah idea might go somewhere was significantly subdued by the fact that Jesus was poor, non-political, and was not raising an army.

A small historical note about synagogues: we associate that word with where Jewish people gather on Saturday. However, no meeting place other than the tabernacle and, later, the Temple, is mentioned in the Law or the Prophets. Synagogues arose during the Babylonian Captivity period, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, in Babylon, which today we call southern Iraq. When the Israelites were permitted by the Persians to return to their ancestral lands, they brought the custom back with them.

As we go through the remainder of chapter 4, I would like for us to look at the character that Jesus displays. Even though the whole synagogue concept was not really what God had in mind for the Sabbath, Jesus went with the cultural norm. After all, the Israelites in a walking-distance area, who actually cared about God to some degree, were assembled in one place to talk about that God. Jesus took advantage of that custom. As we would expect, people were impressed by the quality of His presentations. As we read through some of them, you will notice that they are not legalistic, not focused on exactly how to perform the various rules and rituals of the Law. Instead, Jesus spoke simply and plainly about what was true and what was right, and about the importance of being consistent from what we think to what we do. Certainly, some of what Jesus said made people scratch their heads, but not because it was too difficult for them, but because His topics were unexpected and challenged the hearers to think. For a lot of people, thinking and religion do not go together. They were mystified. But those who actually cared about God took in what Jesus had to say and thought about it as they went about their various labors during the week.

That word, glorified, has become a religion word and lost its original meaning. Glory originally referred to the parade they had for victorious armies as they returned with the spoils of war. As time went on, glory was used more generally to mean whatever made you important. Here, people began to talk about Jesus in terms of what made Him special or distinctive: that He spoke plainly and interestingly, that He was thought-provoking, not like the legalists who dominated synagogues in that day. They glorified Him by talking about what made His lessons different and worth listening to.

But, throughout, Jesus was realistic about His audiences. He did not expect them to change instantly, but rather to think about it, like in this next paragraph:

*(16 – 31) So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’ Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth. And they said, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “You will surely say this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.’” Then He said, “Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way.*

The Mark account (6:6) includes, right after when He said, “No prophet is accepted in his own country,” that He marveled at their unbelief. I think this is a big descriptor of Jesus’ attitude about people. He did not expect the worst. He had an optimistic attitude that people would figure this out. That’s a good reminder for us. People disappoint us a lot. We could get cynical in our expectations, but where’s the joy in that?

In the synagogue service, various people were given a scroll and would read and comment. If you visited with the keeper of the scrolls during the week, you could request to be given a certain scroll, even rolled to a certain place. The scroll containing Isaiah is rather large, so the reader did not take chances by rolling it to the place of his choice because it was difficult to do, and dropping it probably would damage the scroll, which was extremely expensive. So, it is likely that Jesus had arranged for the Isaiah scroll to be ready at this place.

The passage Jesus read was mired in controversy. Many rabbis in the several centuries before Jesus had speculated whether it could be describing the Messiah, although, if you read the whole context spanning several chapters, the better application is a promise from God about their return from Captivity. Remember that, in the time of Isaiah, the Northern kingdom had been conquered recently by Assyria and deported to what is now northern Iraq (721 BC). Isaiah had already predicted the fall of Assyria to the Babylonians (614 BC), the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, and the captivity of the people of Judah (586 BC). So, promises of restoration (which began in 532 BC) would give hope to the faithful that the nation had not been forsaken by God forever. But a lot of the flowery language gave space for Messianic speculation.

Jesus said, “This is fulfilled in your hearing.” Modern English speakers have really messed up the word, fulfilled. We use it to mean that a promise has been accomplished, like a contract is fulfilled. But that is not what it meant to them. In their day, if you wanted to say that a

prediction of a prophet was coming to pass, you said, “As is written in the prophets.” If you wanted to appropriate an Old Testament scene as an illustration of the present, to help in describing how people felt at the current moment without filling several pages with description, you would say that an Old Testament passage was being fulfilled, that the people in the time of the writer were feeling just like those people in that well-known passage which described the past. In this case, Jesus’ point was that, just like Isaiah predicted the restoration of Israel and the return of exiled Israelites from all over the region, in His day, in Jesus’ day, they would soon witness a restoration of Israel of even grander proportions. If you thought that the Israelites who rebuilt their devastated country saw a great change, you ain’t seen nothing yet.

The way Jesus framed this quote was a masterpiece of bringing people together. It did not matter which rabbi’s explanation you favored, Jesus’ short statement fit. The hearers did not get sidetracked with the theological ramblings of the elites in their religion. No matter which way you took it, Jesus was proclaiming a restoration of Israel to greatness.

The teaching trait, this character trait, of Jesus would be tremendously helpful to us in our own spreading of the Good News. There are lots of wild theories out there. People are in a lot of competing camps. The really Good News is easily lost in the tangents that occupy most of the teaching time in most churches. “Preach the gospel to the poor,” not the seminarians or the philosophers, or the clergy – ordinary people. “Liberty to the captives,” shackled to sin, to government, to the past. Doesn’t matter. Whatever people feel captive to, the gospel will show you how to overcome. “Recovery of sight,” being able to “see,” to understand, to make sense of this messed up world. “The acceptable year of the Lord.” Paul picked up this line in 2 Corinthians 6:2, a very similar context also from Isaiah (49:8), ““In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation.”

After introducing the concept of this being a favorable time (whether you thought that Isaiah 61 was about the Messiah, or if you thought that Isaiah was writing about himself bringing the message of restoration 5 centuries hence, and, by using “fulfilled,” Jesus compared Himself to that hopeful message of restoration, Jesus hit them with a second thought that worked no matter what you thought about Isaiah 61. Both interpretations were somewhat lost on the people because they thought physically, not spiritually. So, both groups expected Israel to become militarily powerful and economically prosperous. Jesus let them know that God has a much wider impact than just Israelites. That was the point of the Elijah and Elisha references. God has always been interested in all the faithful, no matter where they were from, not just Israel.

That’s an important point for all who make an attempt to spread the gospel. All too often, our target audience is far too small. We may just stick with family, or people of our own socio-economic status, or people of our own ethnic background. We need a wider view. Even though Jesus was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, He never lost sight of that bigger picture. When He came across fledgling faith in someone who was not a descendant of Jacob, He still took an interest in them and served them.

Another lesson we can learn from Jesus’ character displayed in this scene: be gracious even when the hearers are not. Being challenged to consider enlarging the group in which God was interested did not go well. Across all the varieties of Jews in that day, a common thread was that the Israelites were the only people of God. So, when Jesus pointed out that two very well-known prophets of the past had served Gentiles, they were livid.

Funny how that works. If we have a belief that doesn’t make a lot of sense, but it’s just the way we were always taught and everyone around us thinks like we do, we never put much

thought into it. So, when that unreasonable belief is challenged, most people just get angry. They have no explanation, so feel helpless, and anger is all they have left. Note that Jesus kept His cool even when the crowd appeared to have murderous intentions. None of the gospel writers give any explanation of how Jesus managed to just walk back through the crowd and leave. I think we should leave it there instead of making up some sort of miraculous intervention. I look at Jesus' character. Luke commented in verse 22 that the hearers marveled at His gracious words, so I do not think it a stretch that they also marveled at His gracious character. He stayed calm when the crowd became less and less so. Anger lets violent actions make sense. Jesus stayed calm rather than fighting back and increasing the level of anger. Those who panic when accosted by evil generally come out with some sort of cuts and bruises. Those who remain calm defuse the immediate anger, which allows for a smooth exit.

Moving along to the next scene in the chapter, still during Jesus' tour of the area on the west side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus demonstrates His competency (31 – 37):

*Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths. And they were astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority. Now in the synagogue there was a man who had a spirit of an unclean demon. And he cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him in their midst, it came out of him and did not hurt him. Then they were all amazed and spoke among themselves, saying, "What a word this is! For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out." And the report about Him went out into every place in the surrounding region.*

The description, authority, does not refer to His position today of King of all nations, but rather that He displayed a mastery of the Scriptures. Most of the rabbis of His day relied on quotations from previous rabbis, those with big names, probably already deceased. The power was not in the sense of overpowering or a demeanor that frightened people into keeping their questions to themselves, but rather a mastery of truth, not with complicated philosophical terms, but with statements that were just obviously true. As with the other lessons by Jesus recorded in the Scriptures, the ideas He presented were easy to understand in that they used common language and familiar scenes as illustrations, although the concepts were often times thought-provoking to the point that only those who were willing to spend some time turning the ideas over in their minds were going to actually get what He said.

The reaction of the demon who had inhabited the man in the story was in keeping with the nature of the demons who were loose on earth in that time. The demon exaggerated only slightly. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8); the demon would be chained in the abyss within a little less than 40 years (2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6); although their destruction would not come until Judgment (Revelation 20:10 – 15).

The audience was particularly impressed by the fact that Jesus dispatched the demon with a word, not a battle. The Pharisees of that time had elaborate and loud exorcism rituals, most probably fake, but perhaps some real.

What can we learn from Jesus' methods here? That we need to be competent but understated. Address differences or challenges directly and simply. Complexity spoils everything. The hearer just gets lost. Endorsing oneself by claiming agreement with notable theologians gains nothing, and probably puts people off. Of course, each of us is not likely to be

as well prepared as Jesus. He had figured out that He was the Messiah years earlier. His studies of the Scriptures certainly took on more of an urgent feel. But, we need not worry about it; rather just make progress. If you can't think of a good answer at the moment, write down the question and tell the person who posed it that you will look it up and report back. Then, do just that.

Moving along to the third characteristic of Jesus displayed during this tour of the region on the west bank of the sea of Galilee, Jesus was purposeful (38 – 44).

*Now He arose from the synagogue and entered Simon's house. But Simon's wife's mother was sick with a high fever, and they made request of Him concerning her. So He stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. And immediately she arose and served them. When the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying out and saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of God!" And He, rebuking them, did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ. Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; but He said to them, "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent." And He was preaching in the synagogues of Galilee.*

Jesus had opportunity to do many good things. Certainly, He could have gone into the full-time healing business. Obviously, He did not do that. He healed many, but not all the sick or possessed in an area. Healing was a proof that He was from God. But His purpose was to demonstrate how godly character works in a broken world. Later, having accomplished that goal and being ready to move on to the most important goal, redemption, He shifted again. He knew His purpose and did not let it be re-directed by life or pressure or the overwhelming needs of others.

Do we know our purpose? A few of them are (1) we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us (2 Corinthians 5:20), (2) we are comforters (2 Corinthians 1:4), (3) we are edifiers, those who build up others (Romans 14:19), (4) we are those who demonstrate that the gospel makes stuff happen (2 Corinthians 4:7). Jesus put on the hat that fit the moment, but was not stuck on any one of those purposes. We need to be the same, adjusting our goals to fit the needs of the moment without becoming stuck in doing that which we are comfortable doing. Do we have flexibility?

Jesus took time for serious prayer, resulting in loss of sleep.

Jesus took advantage of meetings at which people who cared about God tended to gather, in His case, synagogues. Surely we can find pleasant gatherings like this, and use them to raise questions and engage people positively so that they begin to ponder something about God. Jesus was not supplying the list of essential doctrines, but rather ideas illustrated in common scenarios about which people could learn to overcome the messiness of this world. We are there to spark thinking, not dictate belief systems.

Jesus healed people partly because such miracles validated that He came from God. But it was more than that. He was using physical healings to illustrate spiritual healings. We need to arrange our interactions in a similar way, helping people physically but not just leaving it there as a good deed. Rather, make the connection to how the same physical good deed also teaches a principle. We comfort people as God comforts us. We share with people because we are family,

God's family. We tell people the good we see in them because the gospel is about good news, not bad news.

The purpose of the gospels is to allow us to observe how godly character operates in a broken world, the corruption of which we have escaped (2 Peter 1:4). We are trying to bring others to that same escape, to the point where we use the world; it no longer uses us.