

Introduction

People are proud of hometown heroes. When soldiers return from the field, they are usually greeted warmly. The last time I traveled by air, special recognition was given to soldier passengers. This past summer at a Fourth of July parade I heard a parent enthusiastically informing their child, "These are our heroes!" I looked up to see a troop of veterans marching down the street. When someone makes it big, cities will often consider them a hero and it is not unusual for them to name buildings and streets in their honor. I think of guitarist Les Paul. In Waukesha there is the Les Paul Performance Center, the Les Paul Middle School, the Les Paul Monument, and Les Paul Parkway.

But now think about the little town of Nazareth in Galilee. No one in all of human history is more important or more powerful or more of a hero than Jesus. He grew up in Nazareth. Yet that town did not consider him a hero and certainly would not have named anything in his honor. At the conclusion of Matthew 13, we read about a return visit Jesus made to his hometown. And while it did not end in the same uproar as previously, the welcome wasn't any warmer.

[Read Text; Pray]

This morning's text sets Jesus before us in contrast to his hometown. And the way I want to unpack the narrative for you is to look first at what we see about Jesus and then what we observe about this little village in which he was raised.

First, I want you to see . . .

I. The Portrait of Jesus.

Three primary characteristics stand out in the portrait Matthew paints of Jesus in these few verses.

A. First, we should note that he is decisive. This is the point of verse 53. "When he finished these parables, he went away from there."

Jesus had spent about a year in and around Capernaum. There had been early interest in Jesus, but as time wore on, it seems that the people grew used to him. The time in and around Capernaum became challenging. Here is where the conflict with the scribes and Pharisees erupted. And much of the people, though they had been privileged with miracles and instruction, did not continue with Jesus. As a result Jesus had issued a strong word of judgment. "And you Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

So in conjunction with their resistant hearts, Jesus had spoken in parables. He was hiding the truths from those who half-heartedly stood around, not really wanting them. He was clarifying the truth for those who sought it. Now he was done with Capernaum and he was decisively moving on.

MacArthur notes that from that time Jesus did not return to Capernaum except to pass through. And the city continued in a state of spiritual decline. Archaeological discovery indicates that even the Judaism of the city eventually devolved into pagan idolatry.

What a sad and tragic statement about Capernaum, "He went away from there." And what a predictable outcome for a town that today is a mere pile of ruins. It is a warning not to take the mercy and patience of Jesus for granted. The last thing you want in your life is for Jesus to go away and leave you to yourself. In contrast to Capernaum, however, I would encourage every believer in Christ. You can be sure Jesus will never do this to you. He will never leave.

The world will not celebrate followers of Christ. It will often persecute them. But Jesus will never leave them alone. We who trust in him can confidently say, "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:6)

B. Not only is Jesus decisive. We also see that he is gracious. He turns the other cheek. We learn in verse 54 that Jesus came and began to minister in

his hometown of Nazareth. It is interesting. This is the first time that Matthew mentions a visit to Nazareth. However, it is at least the second visit of Jesus to teach in Nazareth. In Luke 4 we learn of a previous visit there near the outset of his ministry. On that visit the people were initially warm and welcoming but soon became so enraged with him that they tried to throw him off the cliff. He managed to escape. But now after some time, he has returned. How gracious! It does comply with Jesus' teaching to make yourself vulnerable after people abuse you. He did it because he was more concerned to extend grace than exact justice.

What a convicting example. When people offend and mistreat us, our flesh cries out for payback. Jesus' example shows us that meekness and long-suffering are signs of great strength. Oh, to have a heart that is molded more and more into the disposition of Jesus! How are you treating the citizens of Nazareth in your life? Here is Jesus, who never did one thing worthy of blame. Whereas you and I are more than deserving of worse than the worst we ever get. And yet we cry out in our offenses as though we deserve better. Brothers and sisters, look to Jesus and be gracious. Let love cover a multitude of sins.

C. We need to see one more characteristic in the portrait. Jesus was patient. That patience manifests itself in the way Jesus approached the people. He taught them so that they were astonished and asked where did he get this wisdom and these mighty works. Jesus comes back to these hostile people. But he comes back not wielding a sledge hammer, not with a fist in their face but a heart to teach. He is bringing to them wisdom and giving them evidence that demonstrates they ought to listen.

We often run out of patience with the world. There is so much foolishness. And people ought to know better. And so we want to just have done with them. But listen to the instruction of James. I have been quoting these verses left and right lately to anyone who will listen.

James 3:13-18 – Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above,

but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

So Jesus was decisive, gracious, and patient. What a contrast we see when we look to ...

II. The Portrait of the Hometown Folks.

What do we see in Nazareth? The folks there were sightless, rancorous, and faithless.

A. First, they were sightless. Now, I am not speaking of their physical eyes. Nothing was lacking in their physical vision. For that matter their hearing was just fine as well. The townspeople saw what Jesus was doing and they heard what he was saying. It astonished them in the outward sense. Jesus did not perform MANY mighty works there, but he did perform SOME and he did teach them truth. And the hometown folk were quite aware. For they were asking, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?" They were hearing wisdom and they were seeing extraordinary works. They were mighty works, putting on display the kind of power that made the people marvel.

But the people were sightless. They could see the mighty works and they could detect that they were hearing wisdom, but they could not recognize from where the wisdom and the power came. They are quite the contrast to Nicodemus. He came to Jesus so astounded by his mighty works that he called them signs. And he said to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." But the people in Nazareth saw the same kinds of things and asked each other where Jesus could have gotten them.

They are a Jewish reflection of the Gentile reality of which Paul speaks in Romans 1 (18-23). He explains that men "by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is PLAIN to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the

creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their THINKING, and their foolish hearts were DARKENED. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Creation stares human beings in the face and it is evident that there must be a first cause. And the first law they lay down is that God could not have done this. They are sightless because they deny what even their conscience tells them. It is a willful blindness. They are determined not to see because they do not like and do not want to accept what they are being told.

In Nazareth God was obvious. The wisdom Jesus taught and the mighty works he did demonstrated he was from God. But the Nazarenes had already written that off as a possibility because they were determined that was not an acceptable explanation. It was not an explanation they could stomach. So instead of acknowledging the truth, they wondered aloud as if there was no answer and no explanation. They knew his father, his mother, his brothers, and his sisters. He had grown up right there in Nazareth for crying out loud. The Nazarenes were sightless.

B. And not only were they sightless, they were also rancorous. Verse 57 says they took offense at him. This is what happens when you do not like the obvious explanation that you see. Since you do not like it, you deny it and impugn it. You will embrace any explanation no matter how ludicrous it may be, and since it often is ludicrous, the only thing you can do to champion that explanation is to throw insults at the truth. You call it stupid. You say it's worthless. You take on an air that communicates that only the simple-minded would actually believe such.

When Jesus was last in Nazareth, about a year previous, there was a similar kind of reaction as this one. After telling the synagogue that he is the Messiah, they attempted to throw him off a cliff. This time we are told simply that the people took offense at Jesus. And Jesus said to them, "A

prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.”

Notice Jesus used the word prophet. Hometowns and families are happy to own those who make it big. Signs greet you as you enter cities alerting you to the famous people who have come from there. Earlier this month when Melissa and I were in Arkansas, we came to the city limits of the town in which we had lived for 8½ years. The sign said, Welcome to Batesville, Arkansas, home of Mark Martin. But Mark was a successful NASCAR driver. Jesus did not say successful people are not without honor except in their hometown. He said, “a PROPHET.”

Why is it that a town is happy to own any successful person but not a prophet? Because prophets deal in truth. They deal in the word of God. And the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. The word of God confronts the heart and exposes the darkness and selfishness and hostility within. So prophets fight an uphill battle from the beginning and when it comes to the home folk, they really do not want to hear it from some kid they watched grow up. Pride upon pride. Sin upon sin. So the people of Nazareth were rancorous.

C. Sightless, rancorous—and finally, they were faithless. Verse 58 is a sad commentary on this second visit of Jesus to his hometown. “And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.” This is quite a contrast with the report of Matthew in 8:16. After the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, Matthew reports, “That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick.” Matthew 9:35 reports that “Jesus went through all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.” It was not so in Nazareth. He did not do many mighty works because of their unbelief. They were faithless.

It is not that God depends on faith to do his work. God can do anything he wants to do. And this is the point. Jesus was NOT UNABLE to do many

mighty works because of their unbelief. He was UNWILLING to do many mighty works because of their unbelief.

Hebrews 11:6 gives us the explanation. "And without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." God is not ashamed to be called the God of those who trust him, but he will not do many mighty works for those who do not.

III. Powerful Principles from these Two Portraits

A. The two portraits in the passage set before us the savior and the sinner. Nazareth serves to help us picture the natural man, the human being in his natural condition. Like Nazareth he or she is sightless, rancorous, and faithless.

There is a spiritual blindness, a veil that lies over the heart. Humans do not see what is right before their eyes. Paul says to the Corinthians (1 Cor 2:14) that "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

In addition there is a rancor. People in their natural state love darkness and they hate the light. They are rancorous towards it. It offends them. They therefore repudiate it. They persecute it. They are discourteous and hostile. And certainly there is no faith in the natural man.

Yet Jesus came to Nazareth. And Jesus comes to the aid of the natural man, to the sinner. He came from heaven to earth graciously, patiently, and decisively. He came to offer himself. He came to fulfill the will of the Father. He came teaching wisdom. He came with power, and he performed mighty works. He did the mightiest of all works by coming and living in complete righteousness and dying on a cross as a lamb upon whom was laid our sin. He rose victorious from the grave in which his dead body had been laid. Never was a mightier work done than that.

But he comes personally as a prophet to you and me through the gospel. He is the wisdom from above. He is the mighty one to save, justify, and

cleanse us from all sin. But how have you responded to him? Have you trusted him, turned from your sin to welcome him into your life? If so, praise God for his mighty work. Apart from a gracious internal work of God, we will always behave just like the Nazarenes.

Perhaps you have spurned him time after time. This morning, here he is again at your door. Would you throw down your blindness, your hatred, your faithlessness and welcome him in? Would you in your heart acknowledge that he is God, the Good Shepherd, the perfect sacrifice, the coming King and Lord? Would you bow before him rather than casting him out yet again?

B. But here in these two portraits is a second principle for us this morning. It is one for those who have welcomed Christ. You know we see in Nazareth what we once were. But in Nazareth we also see the flesh which remains even when we come to Christ. We see the elements against which we must wage war in order to yield ourselves to righteousness and holiness of life. We have vestiges of sightlessness, rancor, and unbelief.

We have to fight sightlessness. We are slow to see our own sin and quick to see the sin of others. We tend not to see the log in our own eye but we see the specks in the eyes of others. We have to fight this blindness.

Secondly, we have to fight our tendency to offense. We are too easily offended. The Nazarenes were so rancorous that they became offended by the truth. We get offended when people think ill of us. But if we are honest about ourselves, we would acknowledge the truth that we are far worse than anyone has ever thought or accused us of. We deserve treatment far worse than anyone could dish out to us. We love ourselves and think too highly of ourselves and not enough of others.

Thirdly, we have to fight unbelief. Unbelief is when we doubt God's testimonies and promises and commands. Adam and Eve had unbelief when they listened to the voice of God's enemy and ate the forbidden fruit. You and I have unbelief when we listen to the voice of the flesh and the world and let them form our thoughts. God has designed to do many mighty works in our lives. He has the power and the wisdom to do so.

Faith is when we believe and form our thoughts according to his thoughts and obey his commands. Why would we not? No one has ever proven their patience and love and power like Jesus. Why would we not?

Conclusion

All Christians expect, at least hope, that God will do mighty things in our lives. We tend to think he should do more. Do you wish God would do more mighty works in your life? I am not talking about the fulfilling of all your fleshly wishes. I am talking about really mighty works like defeating sin and cultivating a burning passion for fellowship with him and experiencing power in ministering among fellow believers and boldness in witness for the gospel. The Nazarenes show us how NOT to experience God's power in our lives. Conversely, they show us what we need in order to experience God's mighty work. We need to fight. We need to fight against sightlessness, rancor, and faithlessness. We need to strive to see accurately, to love others more than self, and to trust God in all things.

The eye is an amazing thing. I was reading A. W. Tozer this week and he made a striking comment about the eye. The eye is able to do and be what it is because it is not obsessed with itself. The eye is able to focus because it is not focused on itself. The problem with the Nazarenes and the problem with us is that we are focused on ourselves. Rather we need to turn our eyes upon Jesus, looking to him, loving him, and living for him. And that is key to his doing many mighty works in us and through us.