WHY DO PEOPLE REJECT JESUS?

Luke 4:16-30

The lesson this morning is a familiar passage. It’s where Jesus goes back to His hometown of Nazareth, preaches in the synagogue, and then is run out of town. Actually, the home folks tried to kill Him! It’s a shocking event and it begs the question, “Why do people reject Jesus?” They have no problem with His teaching. They’ll even tell you that He was a good teacher. They won’t argue about His miracles. They don’t really have anything bad to say about Jesus. And yet they refuse to believe Him. They reject Him. The question is why? Let’s look at this passage, Luke 4:16-30.

Jesus has just begun His ministry. He’s been baptized by John the Baptist; been tempted by the devil in the wilderness; performed many miracles; turned water into wine; been to Samaria and talked with the woman at the well; and hand-picked a few disciples. As Luke picks up the narrative of Jesus life here in Ch 4, Jesus is about a year into His ministry. Jesus has returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. News that He’s back has spread through all the surrounding country. He’s teaching in the various synagogues to much acclaim. So that’s the setting.

READ Luke 4:16-17

Jesus returns to His hometown of Nazareth. He enters into a familiar synagogue filled with familiar faces. A **synagogue** *[show slide]* is a Jewish place of assembly, a house of instruction in God’s word. Most Jewish towns had at least one synagogue. So Jesus is back in His hometown synagogue and the people are eager to hear Him speak. They’ve heard a lot of good things about Him – His teaching and miracles – and now they want to see for themselves. The way teaching was done in the synagogue back then was the attendant would get a scroll, hand it to the teacher, the rabbi. The teacher would unroll it, read from it, and then expound on what he read. Expository preaching! That’s what happens here. Jesus is selected as the honorary teacher on this day. The attendant gives Jesus the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolls it and turns to what we know today as Isaiah Chapter 61. This is what He reads…

READ Luke 4:18-20

Jesus chooses this passage on purpose. He finishes reading the text and prepares to expound on it. The whole congregation is focused on what Jesus is about to say. He has their full attention.

Before we go further I need to give you the big picture. I think it will help us to understand why Jesus picked this passage. The Bible is about God. It’s HIS story. Early on in the story of God (Gen 3) we’re told how man sinned against God and how he then fell under God’s judgment for that sin. Then from Gen 3 all the way thru to Rev 22 the Bible tells us how God carries out His plan to save fallen mankind. God’s plan is to send a rescuer, a savior, a messiah. We know from reading on ahead in the biblical story that this messiah turns out to be Jesus. So, when Jesus picks Isaiah 61, He is reading a Messianic passage. He’s looking at a passage about Himself. This passage is one that every good Jew was familiar with. Isaiah is prophesying about the coming Messiah and what He will do. It’s a favorite passage because it offers such great hope for God’s people.

Isaiah in his writing here has the Messiah speaking in the first person. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me. God’s Spirit has anointed Me to…” and then the Messiah mention some specific things. “I, the Messiah, am going to: (1) “proclaim good news to the poor.” From our lesson last week we saw where poor is a reference to those who are poor in spirit, spiritually destitute, morally bankrupt; (2) “proclaim liberty to the captives.” These captives are people who are in spiritual bondage, those being held in the grip of sin, death, hell, Satan, fear, and guilt. He announces, “you’re free!” (3) “recover the sight to the blind.” This speaks of those who are in spiritual darkness, who cannot understand the truth. The Messiah says, “I’m here to enlighten you. I’m going to help you to see”; (4) “set at liberty those who are oppressed.” The oppressed here are the downtrodden, the broken down, the distressed, the weary and the heavy laden For those who are overwhelmed by trouble and pain the Messiah tells them, “I have come to release you from all that!”

“I, the Messiah, have come to save lost sinners, those who are spiritually destitute, those in bondage to sin, those without understanding, and those overwhelmed by the burdens of life – I have come to save you, to free you.” That’s good news, right?

The last thing that Isaiah’s Messiah says here is that He has come to “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Other translations say “proclaim the year of the Lord.” Every Jew knew what the year of the Lord was. It was the year that salvation would come to them, to God’s covenant people. This is a wonderful thing! It’s something they were looking forward to. You can understand why this was a favorite passage of the Jews. Well, now Jesus begins to expound on this passage…

READ Luke 4:21-22

“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Wow! If you look at the passage that Jesus just read and grasp its full context, Jesus is claiming that He is the Messiah of Isaiah 61. Based on their initial reaction I don’t think the people there in the synagogue fully grasped what Jesus was saying. They don’t appear to be upset by what He said. Perhaps they’re confused. Maybe they think that there’s some kind of a hidden message in what Jesus said that they’re not getting. We know that they’re impressed with Jesus’ public speaking ability because, v 22, they “all spoke well of Him and marveled at His gracious words.” Many of them had never heard Jesus speak publicly before. They saying, “Hey, Isn’t this Joseph’s son? We know this guy.”

The truth of the matter is that in their minds they were probably thinking something like this to themselves: “Certainly Jesus can’t really mean that HE’s the Messiah, can He? That can’t be what He’s saying. We know Him. He’s just an ordinary carpenter’s son from Nazareth. I mean, come on!” Well, Jesus knows their thoughts and responds to them…

READ Luke 4:23

“If you’re really a doctor as you claim to be, prove it. Heal yourself!” That was a well-known saying of the day. They weren’t going to buy the idea of Jesus being the Messiah of Isaiah 61 just yet. They needed some sort of proof first. This verse says that they wanted Jesus to do in Nazareth what He had done elsewhere – perform miracles. “If Jesus does that here then maybe we’ll believe.” Jesus knows this is what they’re thinking and now He exposes it.

READ Luke 4:24

Jesus knows human nature. He knows how difficult it would be for the people He grew up around to acknowledge Him as the Messiah. He fully understands why the hometown folks might have some reservations about Him. The bottom line is that this group of religious Jews here in Nazareth did not believe that Jesus was who He claimed to be – the Messiah of Israel. And they’re certainly not going to believe without proof. This sounds a lot like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. Despite witnessing and hearing about countless miracles that Jesus did – the lame walking, the blind seeing, lepers being cured, the dead being raised back to life, demons being cast out… despite all that they wanted more proof. The truth is, and Jesus knows this, miracles affirm the faith of those who believe. But miracles will do nothing for those who don’t believe. Just read the gospels. Jesus now exposes their unbelief for what it is. In doing so He reveals the primary reason why most people reject Jesus.

“No prophet is acceptable in his hometown.” Oh, and by the way, speaking of unwelcome prophets who were rejected by the people of Israel, consider Elijah and Elisha…

READ Luke 4:25

The Jews there in Nazareth know this story. It’s taken from 1 Kings 17. The Jews didn’t like this story much because it brought up a dark period in Israel’s history. In response to Israel’s plummet into apostasy and their participation in Baal worship (led by their leaders King Ahab and Queen Jezebel), God sent a severe famine. Everybody in Israel and the surrounding nations was impacted by this famine. Especially hard hit were the poor helpless widows. But God directed Elijah not to any of the widows in Israel, but instead sent him to Sidon, an enemy nation, to a Gentile widow. This widow was destitute. In fact she was down to her last bit of food and oil. Elijah tells her to take the last of what she has and prepare a meal for him. What was this widow’s response? Without asking for a sign or for proof of Elijah’s credentials, she does what he says. She prepares him a meal. The way she sees it she has absolutely nothing to lose. She’s going to die of starvation sooner or later anyway. Because of her obedience, God, thru Elijah, pours out his blessing on her literally. She receives an endless supply of oil.

After Elijah was taken into heaven (remember the chariot of fire) he was followed by his protégé, Elisha. And he’s the next example Jesus uses.

READ Luke 4:27-28

This story is found in 2 Kings 5. Jesus says that in Israel in Elisha’s day that there were many lepers and none of them were being cleansed. A young Israelite servant girl who tells her master, Naaman, a Syrian army commander, a Gentile with leprosy, that if he will go to Elisha the prophet in Israel he will be healed. So Naaman takes her advice and goes to see Elisha. He’s desperate. He’ll try anything. Elisha tells him to go dip 7 times in the Jordan River and he will be healed. At first Namaan is angry at being told to do something so bizarre. But out of desperation he goes ahead and does as he was instructed. Without any proof that this will work, Naaman eventually goes and dips himself 7 times in the Jordan River. Lo and behold, he was healed.

Jesus’ point here is obvious, isn’t it? These two stories fit right into the Isaiah 61 passage that He had just read. The poor, the needy, the desperate don’t need signs. They don’t need proof. They have nothing to lose. They’re going to die anyway. So they just act in faith. They do what God’s messenger says to do even if it doesn’t make sense. The obedience of these two Gentiles is what saved them from their hopeless condition. This is what the Messiah has come to do in Israel today! For all those who will recognize and acknowledge that they are in fact poor, captive, blind and oppressed, Jesus will save them. But herein lies the problem, doesn’t it? You see, most of the Jews in Israel in Jesus day including these here in Nazareth didn’t view themselves that way at all. They were God’s chosen people! They kept the Law! They loved God! They were already good enough! “How dare you, Jesus, insinuate this about us!”

READ Luke 4:28-30

This wasn’t just uncontrolled mob violence. They viewed Jesus as a false prophet. And according to the Law, Deuteronomy 13 and 18, as God’s people they were not to tolerate false prophets. They were to kill them. And that’s what they tried to do to Jesus – kill Him by throwing Him off a cliff *[show slide of steep hillside at Nazareth]*. But they don’t kill Jesus. Instead Jesus performs His one and only miracle in Nazareth. He becomes invisible and passes thru their midst and goes away. The next time we see Jesus, in v 31, He’s in Capernaum teaching and healing many people. Rejected in Nazareth, Jesus moves on down the road to people who will listen to Him.

Application. Why do so many people reject Jesus? Here it is: they don’t really see that they need a Savior. They don’t see themselves as poor sinners, prisoners, blind and oppressed. Most people think they are good enough. They’re OK. They’re content with their life the way it is. Well, until a person is honest about their sin; until they recognize their need for a Savior, they don’t need Jesus. So they reject Jesus and they reject the whole gospel of salvation. Salvation starts by us being honest about our sin. The good news that day in the synagogue is the good news we still have today. Jesus the Messiah is here. Salvation is available.

“Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand;” “Come to Me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.”