

The Tragedy Of Lost Opportunity

Luke 4:14-30

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One of my favorite preachers in church history is John Wesley, who lived from 1703-1791. He was a clergyman in England, the founder of Methodism with his brother, Charles. Charles wrote so many of the hymns we love and sing today.

What was unique about John Wesley was that God called him to go outside the established Church of England to take the Gospel to the common people out in the open air. So he began to do what's called "open-air preaching." John Wesley's first sermon that he preached in the open air was on April 2, 1739. He chose as his text Luke 4:18-19, which says, "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It is said that when John Wesley preached, many times preaching to 30,000 people out in the open field without a sound system, he would sometimes preach to the coal miners, whose faces were blackened with coal dust. As he was preaching, one could see white streaks of tears washing away the coal down their faces when they heard the good news of Jesus Christ. There was a revival in England known as the Methodist movement, and it was brought to America as well.

Jesus Christ was also a preacher. In verse 18 we have the words "preach" and "proclaim." And "proclaim" was also in verse 19.

I always thought it interesting that God had only one Son, and He was a preacher. I like that. He was called to preach, and we'll see what He preached.

Like John Wesley, Jesus went outside the established synagogue in those days and preached to those who were poor in spirit and those who were brokenhearted and taken captive by their sin. They needed the good news of the Gospel.

Luke's text passes over the first year of Jesus' public ministry. As far as Luke's Gospel is concerned, our text is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. But in John's Gospel, in chapters 1-4, John gives us a whole year of Jesus' ministry before Luke's record of Jesus' public ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth. So the chronology is that in the Luke text, Jesus had already been preaching for 13 months in Galilee before He went to Nazareth to preach in the synagogue where He is rejected by His people. So Luke starts with Christ's sermon and rejection in Jesus' home synagogue of Nazareth.

Now why does Luke start the public ministry of Jesus with His rejection? What a great way to record the beginning of Jesus' ministry by showing He was rejected by His own people in Nazareth!

Let me give you three reasons why Luke is recording this story. Number one, it reveals who Christ came to seek and save. Luke 19:10 says that “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” “The Son of Man” is a title for Messiah. Jesus didn’t just come to Israel, but He came to anyone who was lost, and He sought to seek and to save them.

Number two, Luke records this so as to reveal how Christ was rejected by His own people. So this was a typical picture of the overall rejection of Messiah by the nation of Israel. Romans 9, 10 and 11 covers Israel’s election, Israel’s rejection and Israel’s future restoration. It shows God’s purpose and plan for the nation of Israel.

Here in our text, we see that Israel would reject the Messiah. They were looking for a conquering king, but Jesus came to set us free from sin. So Israel missed the Messiah and rejected Jesus.

Number three, this story in Luke reveals what the Gospel is: It is good news. Verse 19 calls it “the acceptable year of the Lord.” This is the Gospel time of “the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Jesus is accepted, Jesus is rejected and Jesus is protected. The first section is Jesus was accepted, in verses 14-21. The first thing we see in verses 14-15 is the setting for this story. “Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. And He...” that is, “Jesus” “...taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.”

What you have in these two verses is actually a survey of one year of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. This is the setting. Jesus had already been baptized, He had been tempted by the devil in the wilderness, and He left the Jordan Valley and went to Galilee, where He preached the Gospel, healed the sick and ministered grace and mercy for a whole year there. John 1-4 records this period of time in Jesus’ life.

There are four things I want you to notice in verses 14-15. “The power of the Spirit” was upon Jesus. Jesus was “filled with the Holy Spirit,” He had been “led by the Spirit” (Luke 4:1) and now He goes back to Galilee to preach “in the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14). Luke’s Gospel has as its focus the humanity of Jesus Christ, so it brings out more of His relationship to the Holy Spirit, because as a man—as well as God—He relied in His humanity upon the Holy Spirit’s power, guidance and help. And if Jesus needed the Holy Spirit to minister and preach, so do we. So Jesus was filled with the Spirit and with the “power of the Spirit.”

We also see Jesus’ fame, in verse 14. “News of Him went out through all the surrounding region.” Jesus was gaining popularity and fame. This is what is known as His “springtime Galilean ministry.”

And notice also that “He taught in their synagogues,” verse 15. Synagogues were different than the temple. Synagogues were places of instruction where people gathered together. Synagogues came into existence during the “intertestamental period.” Because of the Babylonian captivity, the Jews were dispersed from their land, so wherever there were 10 Jews

—or some say 10 families—they would build a synagogue to gather in to pray, to read the law and the prophets and for instruction. So Jesus started His Galilean ministry by entering the synagogues and preaching there.

And verse 15 says, “being glorified by all.” This is kind of a home-boy-makes-good concept. They knew Him as the carpenter’s son from Nazareth. Jesus was from this area, from Nazareth in Galilee, Capernaum became His headquarters and everyone was hearing the stories and news of Jesus. He performed miracles of healing the nobleman’s son, He turned water into wine and all that is recorded in John. So His fame and popularity was spreading, but Luke wants us to know that Jesus went to Nazareth to enter the synagogue there where He would be rejected. But at first, His fame and acceptance was growing.

Verse 16 says, “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.” Notice it says, “as His custom was.” If Jesus made it a habit on Shabbat to go to synagogue, how much more should we, as Christians, be in church on Sunday, the Lord’s day.

Do you make it a habit to be in church? Are you committed to be in the Lord’s house hearing God’s Word, praying with God’s people, being mutually built up and edified? I believe for you to be a healthy, growing, strong Christian you need to be plugged into and connected to a local church fellowship. Some people take church like a smorgasbord—“I’ll take a little of this church, a little of that church. I’ll go when I feel like it.” The church suffers because of that.

When we were shut down because of Covid, for 10 Sundays I preached to an empty sanctuary. I preached to an empty sanctuary so we could capture it and put it live online. I can’t tell you how hard that was for me to do. It was difficult for me to go home after church not having greeted you or pray with you or hug you. It was so difficult.

So do not take for granted our congregating together in God’s house. Capture every opportunity and privilege we have to be in God’s house to hear the Word of the Lord, just as Jesus made it a habit to get to the synagogue.

Starting in verse 17, “And He was handed the book.” From the word “book” here we get our word for Bible. They didn’t have books in those days; they were scrolls. He was given the scroll “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, 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.’” Jesus here was reading from Isaiah 61:1-2.

This is an amazing episode. Jesus had entered the synagogue and read the Scriptures. And in

those days the Scriptures were on scrolls without chapters and verses, so we don't know how they knew where to find Isaiah 61:1-2. But we know from our Bible that He read from Isaiah 61:1-2. Were these Scriptures assigned to Him, or did He go to the synagogue intentionally to read this text? We don't know. Either way it doesn't matter; the message is still the same.

What they did in the synagogue was they would have prayers, the blessing, pronounce the great Shemaiah and would read from two sections of the Old Testament, from the law and the prophets. The attendant would give the scroll to a lay person in the synagogue, and that person was invited to stand and read and give exposition on it. Then they would discuss it. So he would stand to read and sit to teach.

What Jesus was reading was a Messianic prophecy. And He said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He was saying that verses 18-19 referred to Him as the Messiah. And He preached "the acceptable year of the Lord." This was an amazing episode.

In verses 18-19, I want to note what Jesus, as Messiah, came the first time to do. The Jews had a misunderstanding of what Jesus came to do. They were looking for what we know as the Second Coming. They were looking for a king who would come powerfully, mightily and wonderfully to overthrow the Roman government and to set up His kingdom. Even today the Jews reject Jesus as the Messiah, because they say He didn't overthrow the Roman government and set up His kingdom then. Rather, He was crucified, so He couldn't have been their Messiah.

But Jesus makes clear that His mission was "to preach the Gospel to the poor....to heal the brokenhearted....and recovery of sight to the blind...set at liberty those who are oppressed." In Jesus' first Advent, His first coming, He came to deal with our sin, so He would suffer and die on the Cross and rise from the dead. Yet when He comes the second time at the end of the seven-year tribulation, He will judge sin, punish the wicked and will set up His kingdom for 1,000 years and will reign forever in the eternal state.

So verses 18-19 give us a description of Jesus' mission. He said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me." Why? "Because He has anointed Me to preach." If you're going to preach, you need the anointing of the Holy Spirit. You can't preach in the energy of the flesh. So Jesus Messiah was a preacher, and He relied upon the Holy Spirit's anointing to do so.

The word "Messiah" and the word "Christ" mean the same thing. "Christ" is the New Testament word for the Old Testament "Messiah." They mean "anointed One." So it was fitting that Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit, because He was the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed One.

What did Jesus come to do? He came to do five things. Number one, "to preach the Gospel to the poor." I believe that the word "poor" here is a reference to the spiritually poor. God has a special place in His heart for the poor. James 2:5 says that God has "chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." Generally speaking, poor people are more receptive to the Gospel, because they don't have the money to take care of themselves; many

times they have to trust in God.

I grew up in a lower, middle-class family; we didn't have a lot of money. I grew up as a young boy in the church, and I realized that we needed the Lord. We needed to trust the Lord. That doesn't mean rich people are despised by God, but the Bible says that God has not called "many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble" (1 Corinthians 1:26). Notice it doesn't say "not any"; it says "not many." Don't for a minute think that God loves poor people more than rich people. God loves everyone equally. But there is a sense in which poor people see their need of Jesus more than the rich.

So I believe that the text refers to spiritually poor people. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus made it clear by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). It refers to those who see themselves as sinners. And the word "poor" means complete poverty or "dirt poor." It means so poor that you would cover your face as you would beg.

Spiritually you must come to Jesus out of a sense of "I am a sinner." Biblically I don't believe that anyone comes to Christ to be saved unless they truly understand that they are sinners and need a Savior. You don't come to Jesus to try Him out. You don't come to Jesus so you can prosper or be happy. You come because "I am a sinner. He's the Savior. God, be merciful to me, a sinner." That's how you come: "wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17).

This is what turns some people off to the Gospel. "I'm not a sinner! I don't need a Savior!" They try to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. But what a blessing it is when God draws you by His Spirit, shows you your sin and grants you repentance. You find healing and restoration at the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Number two, Jesus came "to heal the brokenhearted." Isn't that beautiful? Only God, who created you, can heal your broken heart. Drugs won't heal it. Alcohol won't heal it. Possessions won't heal it. Popularity won't heal it. Power, position and fame won't heal it. Only Jesus Christ can heal your broken heart.

When my watch breaks, I don't take it to the Ford dealership to get fixed. I take it to a watchmaker. And when your heart breaks, where do you take it? To the "heartmaker," to Jesus Christ. Only He can forgive, restore and heal your broken heart. I like Jesus' statement, "Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

So if you are heart heavy today, come to Jesus. He invites you to give you rest.

Number three, Jesus delivers the captives. "To proclaim liberty to the captives," verse 18. He comes to those who are held captive by sin. If you're bound by sin—maybe addicted to alcohol, drugs, sexual immorality, or stealing, lying or unforgiveness—Jesus Christ can set you free from it. The Bible says, "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). You'll be truly free. Jesus says that Satan comes "to steal, and to kill, and to destroy" (John 10:10).

Jesus came to set us free.

And there is an allusion here to what's called "the year of Jubilee" when every 50 years, all debts were cancelled and all slaves were set free.

Number four, He came to bring "recovery of sight to the blind." I like that. That refers to the spiritually blind. Before we are born again, before we are saved, we are blind spiritually. When God saved Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus and Paul later recounted it in Acts 26:18, Jesus had told Paul that He would send him "to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God." So when you become a Christian, your eyes are opened, you are turned "from darkness to light," and "from the power of Satan to God."

Number five, Jesus came "to set at liberty those who are oppressed" or "bruised" in the King James translation. "Bruised" means "shattered or crushed." This is because of sin or life's circumstances. So many people are crushed or bruised. Jesus came to liberate them from their burden. He said, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).

All this Jesus came to accomplish at His first Advent, His first coming. At the Second Coming, He will come to judge for sin. He came to deal with our sin at His first Advent.

Now in verse 19, we see that Jesus ended His reading of Isaiah 61:1-2 by saying, "...to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." When He was quoting these two verses, Jesus left out the last half of Isaiah 61:2, which says, "...and the day of vengeance of our God." He stopped in the middle of the sentence. Some English Bibles have a very important comma or pause after "Lord" in Luke 4:19. He didn't finish the verse; He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant. Then he said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Why did Jesus omit the last half of Isaiah 61:2, "the day of vengeance of our God"? Because it referred to His Second Coming. So there is a day of acceptance, and there is a day of vengeance. The Bible says, "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 3:15). If God is convicting you or you sense your need of Him, come to Him. Don't reject Him. Don't run from Him; run to Him.

So Jesus rolled up the scroll right in the middle of the sentence, because He realized He had not come to preach "the day of vengeance of our God." That refers to His second Advent. He came to preach "the acceptable year of the Lord" at His first Advent.

Verse 20, "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." They looked at Him in awe. Verse 21, "And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'" He was saying to them, "I am the Messiah. This prophecy in Isaiah 61 is about Me." At this point, they are very amazed that this man, Jesus, who grew up among them, was claiming to be Messiah.

Now we move from Jesus accepted to Jesus rejected, verses 22-29. "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?" They were mystified. "We grew up with Him! We went to elementary school with Him! Our kids played soccer with Him!"

My former church I pastored for 39 years was in the same neighborhood I grew up in. I went to elementary school there, junior high and high school there, got married there and raised my family there. People would come into the church and say, "Oh, I know John Miller! I'll tell you some things about that guy! I went to junior high with him."

So Jesus is with His people, and they knew Him so well. As a result, they took Him for granted. There is the expression, "Familiarity breeds contempt." "This can't be the Messiah! He's the carpenter's son!" So Jesus went from first being accepted by them to them doubting Him. They were baffled and perplexed by what was going on. They reacted with amazement, then doubt.

Jesus then resumed His sermon in verses 23-27. "He said to them, 'You will surely say this proverb to Me....' How did He know what they would say? This is His deity or at least an understanding of their facial expressions. When you preach long enough, you can tell when the congregation is with you or not. Jesus had eye contact with the crowd.

They would give Him this parable and say to Him, "Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country." Capernaum was in the northwest corner of the Lake of Galilee. It became Jesus' ministry headquarters. For that first year of His ministry, there was a lot of ministry going on in Capernaum. So they're basically saying, "If you're the Messiah, do a miracle here. We heard you healed the nobleman's son, so heal someone here. We heard you turned water into wine. Do a miracle for us."

They are rejecting Jesus' Scripture-based claim. Yet these Scriptures are affirmation that He is the Messiah! Isaiah affirms who He is and why He came. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). But no; they wanted a miracle. "Physician, heal yourself!"

Verse 24, "Then He said, 'Assuredly...' or "verily," which means "truly," a stern warning or important statement to follow "...I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country." In the Old Testament, many prophets were rejected by their own nation and people.

Now Jesus gives two illustrations of His point. The first one is from 1 Kings 17 regarding the prophet Elijah. "But I tell you truly, many widows..." This will be contrasted with "none of them" in verse 26. "...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..." meaning the widows, and here's the contrast "...was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow."

What is He saying here? He's saying that God went outside Israel to bless a Gentile widow. There were a lot of widows in Israel, but Elijah wasn't sent to them; he was sent to this Gentile widow, who lived up in the north on the coast of modern-day Lebanon, which was a Gentile territory, Sidon. It just happened to be the home territory of Jezebel, the wicked queen married

to King Ahab.

The story is that Elijah the prophet went to King Ahab, because the people began to worship Baal, the weather god. Statues of him were found holding lightning bolts. God told Elijah there would be no dew or rain except according to His word. There was no rain for three-and-a-half years, so famine resulted. And the righteous suffered with the wicked.

Elijah needed food and water, so God sent him to the Brook Cherith. He drank of its water, and twice a day ravens would bring Elijah bread and flesh to eat. Can you imagine that?! “Thank you, Lord, for Your provision.” But the brook eventually dried up because there was no rain. So God sent Elijah to Zarephath, this Gentile territory, to a widow, who would take care of him.

No doubt with reluctance Elijah went north into Gentile territory and met this widow, who was picking up sticks. The Lord told Elijah to tell the widow to first fix him a meal. But she said that she was going to use the sticks to start a fire, prepare a last meal of a handful of flour and a little oil “for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die” (1 Kings 17:12). So he went to this widow, was going to eat her last meal and said to her, “Feed me first.”

If I were the widow, I’d hit him on the head with one of the sticks. But she trusted the Lord and did what Elijah said. She was a Gentile, but a prophet of God had come to her. Every day she scooped out the flour, but it didn’t run out. God provided and took care of her.

The point of our text is that although there were lots of Israeli widows, God sent Elijah to a Gentile widow. Since Israel was rejecting their Messiah, Jesus, He went to the Gentiles. This is consistent with Luke’s theme of a universal Gospel; it will go to everyone, including Gentiles.

The second illustration is taken from 2 Kings 5. We move from Elijah to Elisha. Verse 27 of our text says, “And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them...” meaning none of the leprous people in Israel “...was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian,” who was a Gentile.

Naaman, the Syrian general, had leprosy. And when they raided one of the Israeli towns, he took a young slave girl back to his home to serve in his house. She told Naaman’s wife, “If Naaman would go to Israel to the prophet Elisha, he would heal his leprosy.” But he was proud and said, “No!” Eventually his servants talked him into going to Elisha. Naaman got in his chariot and went to see Elisha.

But Elisha was very cool and didn’t even go out to meet the commander of the Syrian king’s army. He just said, “Tell Naaman to go to the Jordan River, dip seven times and he’ll be cleansed.” And when Naaman heard that, he was furious. “Dip in the muddy Jordan River?! Syria has better rivers than that!” So he started to ride off in his chariot, but one of his servants said, “Master, you’re going to die from your leprosy, so what have you got to lose?!”

Many people are so proud that they won’t even examine the claims of Christ.

So Naaman reluctantly turned around and went back to the Jordan River, dipped seven times and comes up perfectly clean. He was so excited that he went back to Elisha's house and wanted to reward Elisha with money. But Elisha refused; God had healed Naaman, not Elisha. Then Naaman returned to Syria.

Now the point of this story that Jesus is making is that God didn't send Him to anyone in Israel but to a Syrian general, who was leprous and was healed. Jesus was going to be rejected by His own nation, so He was sent to the Gentiles, who would hear Him.

Notice also that when Jesus gave in His message from Isaiah 61:1-2 why He came, they were expecting a conquering, reigning Messiah. But Jesus came to suffer and die. Jesus wasn't meeting their expectations, so they rejected Him.

In verses 28-29, we see the reactions of the people. "So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things..." When they heard that God would go to the Gentiles, that really set them off. They "...were filled with wrath." That is the same phrase used for "filled with the Spirit." What does it mean to be "filled with wrath"? It means controlled by your wrath. "Filled with the Spirit" means controlled by the Spirit. So they were being controlled by their anger, their wrath, their rage.

They "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." There is a sheer drop on one side of the city of Nazareth about 40-50 feet down to the rocks overlooking the valley. This is a mob wanting to kill Jesus. The whole synagogue attacked Him, grabbed Him and dragged Him out of the synagogue. But verse 30, Jesus was protected. "Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way."

The Bible doesn't say, but I believe this was a miraculous happening. His time had not yet come; He would have to die upon the Cross for the sins of the world. Can you imagine if Jesus had been thrown off the cliff and died at this time? What a tragedy that would have been! So God the Father was watching over God the Son, so that miraculously Jesus slipped through the crowd. And even though He was rejected in His first sermon in Nazareth, He continued to preach.

If you are called to preach the Word and you are faithful to preaching it, if people don't appreciate what you say and reject the message, just keep preaching the Word. One of my favorite preachers in the Bible is Jeremiah. He preached his whole ministry and never had one convert. But he kept preaching faithfully. Jesus was rejected by His family, friends and neighbors in Nazareth, but He kept on faithfully preaching. "Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way."

So Jesus was accepted, Jesus was rejected and Jesus was protected. Now let me give you three thoughts about this. I believe it is still important today that we live in "the acceptable year of the Lord." We are living right now in "the acceptable year of the Lord," the age of grace.

When the Lord comes to “the poor...the brokenhearted...the captives...the blind...oppressed,” He wants to forgive you. But that time will come to an end, and then there will be “the day of vengeance of our God.”

Don't miss your opportunity. The Bible says, “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2). “Today, if you will hear His voice: Do not harden your hearts” (Psalm 95:7-8).

The people of Nazareth were so familiar with Jesus that they rejected Him. Maybe you grew up in church. Maybe your dad was a pastor. Maybe you grew up in Sunday school. Maybe you listened to preaching every week. But you haven't trusted Jesus Christ.

Don't miss your opportunity to be saved. God's Spirit will not always strive with man. There is coming a day when that door will shut. It will be “the day of vengeance of our God.”

But today is “the acceptable year of the Lord.” Believe in Jesus Christ. Trust Him as your Savior and be saved.