

## THE UNBELIEF OF THE NAZARENES

MARK 6:1-6

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With the exception of the first few years and last three years of His life, Jesus lived in the town of Nazareth. Nazareth was not a large town. It's population was probably no more than 10,000 people. And, the people who lived there were not highly educated like some of the people you would find in Jerusalem. It was a town where people knew each other, and they talked about each other.

For most of His life, Jesus worked as a carpenter in the town of Nazareth. LUKE 2:40 says that, while He was growing up in Nazareth, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." The fact that He grew in favor with God and men would indicate that the people of Nazareth respected Him.

But, when Jesus was thirty years old, He left Nazareth and began His public ministry. According to the Biblical record, He only returned to His hometown on two occasions. The first time was at the beginning of His second year of public ministry. LUKE 4:16-30 records that visit.

People must have been somewhat impressed when this young man from their home town began to speak in their synagogue, because LUKE 4:22 says that "all spoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips." But, Jesus was not trying to impress the people from His hometown. He never wanted to impress people; rather, He wanted people to believe truth so they could be changed. But, the people of Nazareth were not ready to believe the truth that Jesus had to share. Jesus knew this, so He said, "*no prophet is accepted in his hometown.*" He illustrated this point by giving examples of two famous prophets from the past. Elijah and Elisha were two prophets who chose to work miracles among Gentile people rather than their own people. By using these examples in connection with what He was saying, Jesus was implying that Gentiles were more willing to accept truth than these people from His hometown.

Before He visited His hometown, Jesus had started preaching among non-Jewish people living in Galilee. He had started performing miracles in the city of Capernaum. Gentile people had started accepting the truth that He was preaching. So, on His first visit to Nazareth after He had begun His public ministry, Jesus was telling the Jewish people from His hometown that the Gentiles were more worthy of seeing miracles, because they were more willing to accept truth. This caused the people to become so angry that they tried to throw Jesus down a cliff in order to kill Him, but Jesus escaped.

One year later, Jesus again returned to Nazareth to visit His hometown. This second visit to Nazareth is recorded in MARK 6:1-6 (which is today's Scripture reading) and also in MATTHEW 13:54-58.

Not much had changed in Nazareth during the year between the first and second visits. But, outside of Nazareth, Jesus had become more and more famous. There were now quite a few people following Him. This time, when He visited His hometown, a group of disciples went with Him. Just like His first visit, Jesus preached in the synagogue. It was most likely the same synagogue that He had attended for most of His life. The people who attended that synagogue had known Jesus and His family for years. Just like the first visit, these people were impressed with Christ's teaching. And just like the first visit, Jesus told them that a prophet is not accepted in his hometown. In MARK 6:4 Jesus said, "*Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.*" And then, we read that Jesus could not do any miracles there, and He was amazed at their lack of faith.

I want to take some time to consider with you the unbelief of these Nazarenes, because it is a special kind of unbelief. Perhaps we can describe it as the unbelief of the believer. I say this, because we are not talking about people who do not believe in God. The Nazarenes we are talking about did believe in God, and they did believe that the scripture was the Word of God. And yet, Jesus was amazed at their unbelief. It was their unbelief that prevented Jesus from doing a mighty work among them.

So let's take a look at their unbelief and consider its nature and its cause and its effect. And then, let us try

and see what lessons we can learn from the unbelief of the Nazarenes.

First of all, let's look at the nature of their unbelief. As I have already said, the people we are talking about are people who believed in God. Not only did they believe in God, but they also believed in some things about Jesus. They could not deny the fact that Jesus could perform miracles. They had heard too many stories from too many people to deny this fact. And, they could not deny the fact that Jesus was a gifted teacher. MARK 6:2 says that when Jesus began to teach in the synagogue, "many who heard Him were amazed." When you stop to think about it, there were really quite a few things that these Nazarenes did believe. So what was it that they did not believe? What was the nature of their unbelief?

Their unbelief is revealed in the questions they asked in the last half of verse 2. There, they asked, "Where did this man get these things?" and "What's this wisdom that has been given Him, that He even does miracles?" These two questions reveal the fact that they doubted Jesus' authority. Their questions strongly imply that Jesus taught and performed miracles without God's blessing. They did not believe that the very things that had impressed them and amazed them about Jesus came from God. If they really believed that Jesus was acting according to God's authority, then they would not have asked these questions. If they really believed that Jesus was an instrument of God, and that God was working through Him, and that God was giving Him the wisdom that came from His lips, then they would not have been offended. But, MARK 6:3 says that they were offended. They questioned the source of the power that Jesus was demonstrating. And obviously, if what Jesus was doing was not from God, then it must be from Satan. If the source of the power is not good, it must be evil.

On another occasion (MARK 3:22), the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of demons. And now, it seems that the people from Jesus' hometown had the same thought, thus they took offense at Jesus. They took offense not because He was a gifted teacher and not because He performed miracles; rather, it was because they did not believe that the source of what He was doing came from God. They could not accept the authority of our Lord, and that was the nature of their unbelief.

And, the reason why they could not believe that what Jesus was doing came from God was because they knew that Jesus came from Nazareth. Jesus said that a prophet is not welcome in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house. What does this mean? It simply means that people have trouble accepting the fact that someone from their own ranks is superior than themselves. It is the inability to believe that a man who worked by our side could ever be our teacher. Feelings of envy cause people to deny that one of their own can become their superior, exercising authority over them. This is a very ugly fact about human nature, but it is true. It is often much easier for a group of people to accept a stranger as being more superior than themselves than it is for them to accept one from their own ranks, even if the one from their own ranks is far more gifted than the stranger.

The Nazarenes could not deny the fact that Jesus was doing things they could not do. But, they did not want to admit that He was superior to themselves. So, the only thing they could do was to suggest that His power came from an evil source rather than from God.

Notice how they were actually criticizing themselves by thinking this way. What they were really suggesting was that because Jesus was one of them; therefore, He was incapable of being an instrument of good. They were suggesting that the one who had worked by their side could not teach them anything. And, the reason why He couldn't teach them anything was that He was on their same level.

But, when people think this way, they are actually criticizing themselves, admitting that no one among them can do anything significant. It is a very foolish way of thinking driven by envy toward those who have become our closest friends and relatives. But, as foolish as it may be, this is an ugly part of human nature that is true in every culture and every generation.

And so, the unbelief of the Nazarenes is revealed to us. We can see the nature of their unbelief revealed in their questions and the fact that they took offense at Jesus. And, we can see the cause of their unbelief being the fact that Jesus was one of them. But, this is really only a superficial cause. There is a deeper reason for their unbelief.

To say that they did not believe because they couldn't accept the fact that one of their own had become greater than themselves is true. But, there is a deeper reason. And, to understand that reason we need to look at what Jesus said on another occasion which is very similar to the one we are considering. It happened when Jesus

was in Jerusalem attending a feast. Just like the people of Nazareth, everyone recognized that Jesus was a gifted teacher and that he could perform miracles. And, just like the people of Nazareth, some people thought that the source of His power and wisdom was evil and not good. They thought that Jesus was trying to deceive people. And, just like the people of Nazareth, some people were revealing their doubts by asking where Jesus got His wisdom. JOHN 7:15 says that when Jesus got up and taught, "the Jews were amazed and asked, 'How did this man get such learning without having studied?'" Do you see how similar the unbelief of the Jews in Jerusalem was to the unbelief of the Nazarenes? They both could not accept Jesus based on certain prejudices that they had. In this case, they could not accept the fact that Jesus could be their teacher without having studied at one of their schools. The nature of their unbelief was very similar to that of the Nazarenes.

Now, listen to what Jesus said to the Jews in Jerusalem who could not believe that what He was doing came from God. In JOHN 7:16-17, Jesus answered their question by saying, "*My teaching is not my own. It comes from Him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.*" This is a very important answer, because it teaches us that by choosing to do God's will, by desiring to do the will of God, we create within ourselves the ability to believe. Our desire and our choice to do God's will creates within us the capacity to hear God's voice.

A person who desires to do God's will is a person with a double passion. He has a passion for holiness, and he has a passion for needy souls. It is God's will for all of us to be like God and to help people know God. If we lose this double-passion to do God's will, then we will find ourselves stagnating. We will be comfortable with the formalities of our religion, and we will reject anyone who comes along and suggests to us that we need to change, especially if that person comes from our own ranks.

And so, we return to our story about the people of Nazareth and we ask what was the deepest reason behind their unbelief, and we conclude that the real reason they could not accept Jesus was because their very motive for living was wrong. Their deepest desire was not to do the will of God; therefore, they did not have the ability to hear the voice of God and they were unable to believe.

And, what was the effect of their unbelief? What was the result? The result was that Jesus could not do a mighty work in their midst. He could not perform miracles when He was with them. Why couldn't Jesus do a mighty work there? It was because God was not part of the central desire and motive of life. Miracles are meant to shed light. But, it does little good to shed light among people who love the darkness more than light. They will only run from the light to an even darker place.

MARK 6:6 says that Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. That does not mean that Jesus did not understand the nature of their unbelief; rather, it means that Jesus stood amazed and horrified at the thought that this kind of unbelief could paralyze the power of God. We find the same kind of amazement revealed in the Old Testament. When the people of Israel exchanged the glory of God for worthless idols, God spoke through Jeremiah and said, "Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror, declares the Lord."

The final effect of this kind of unbelief was that Jesus left them, never to return again. The good news is that there were some who did believe. There were a few who desired to know and do God's will, so Jesus was able to lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them.

Now, how does all this apply to our present situation? I believe that any place where Christianity has been around for a couple of generations runs a high risk of this kind of unbelief. People become so familiar with the routine of being a Christian that they lose the most important desire that made them a Christian in the first place. Jesus wants us to have a constant passion for holiness. And, Jesus wants us to have a constant passion to help people around us. With these passions in our heart we will readily follow a leader who is doing his best to help fulfill the passion of our hearts. We will sympathize with the passion of our leader and we will recognize his passion and authority comes from God. When we lose these passions, then we lose our ability to hear the voice of God and we become envious and suspicious of others. God's power then becomes blocked, and we eventually feel that Jesus is no longer in our midst.

The people of Nazareth asked to see miracles, when what they really should have been asking for was a change of heart. And, many people today pray that God will do a mighty work in the church. But, the prayer will not be answered and no mighty work will be done because the central desire of our hearts is not to do the will of God.

So, the first way that I would like to encourage us to apply this truth to our lives is to challenge us to refocus our desire from wanting to see miracles and God's mighty power displayed in our church, to wanting to do God's will. When we make wanting to do God's will your primary focus, then will see the power of God demonstrated in this church. Let's not make the same mistake as the Nazarenes who wanted to see miracles more than they wanted to do the will of God; and as a result, no miracles could be performed in their midst.

The second way that I would like us to apply this truth to our lives is to challenge all of us to accept the fact that God can use anyone of us in a significant way to teach and lead the rest of us. Even though I am your pastor, I must believe that God can use any one of you and the gifts he has given to you to teach me things that I do not know. We must be willing to accept and respect the teaching and leadership of our own peers. If we cannot do this, then we will never grow like we should.

The more that we become willing to accept and respect the teaching and leadership of our own peers, the less people will be intimidated. And, the less people are intimidated, the more we will see people willing to step into positions of leadership to reach out and help others around them. And, this is what we need so desperately to see happen here at CCCNJ.

Many, including myself, who start out in leadership positions lack the skills needed to impress people. Those skills will come in time. But, as we begin a new year, let's look for the passion in the hearts of the leaders of this church. When you see it, encourage these leaders, because they have plugged into the heart of God. In time, God will impart the skills and the ideas they need to lead and teach effectively.

A healthy church is a church where a significant number of people aspire to become leaders and those who are leaders are finding the acceptance and support from those whom they are leading. What makes people desire to enter into leadership? For me, it was seeing the desperate needs of people around me that first caused me to want to get involved in leadership. And, it was seeing the desperate needs of people around me that caused me to want to accept and support those in leadership over me. May God help us to become a healthy church.

### **Scripture Reading**

#### **MARK 6:1-6**

<sup>1</sup> Jesus went there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples.

<sup>2</sup> When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synogogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him that he even does miracles?"

<sup>3</sup> Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor."

<sup>5</sup> He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.

<sup>6</sup> And he was amazed at their lack of faith.