

Sunday, February 12, 2023 | Onward

Week 5 | Luke 4:31-44 | "The First Miracles of Jesus"

On January 1, Pastor Bob kicked off the first sermon series of 2023 entitled "Onward." This series will explore the so-called "firsts" of Jesus' life and how he pressed *onward* into new and unexplored territories. And Jesus' first words tell us that wherever we are and whatever we're doing, we ought to "be about [our] Father's business."

Three weeks ago, we moved from Jesus' *first words* to the *first steps* of his earthly ministry. As we read, God even showed up to mark that magnanimous moment by declaring to all that Jesus was his actual "Son." And just so that Luke's readers do not miss the importance of that declaration, he immediately provides a lineage that proves that Jesus was, in fact, directly descended from God and not only Adam. Through his *mother's* side, Jesus identifies with the *human* race. But through his *Father's* side, Jesus identifies with the *divine* race. And by being the true heir of God, Jesus can transform sons and daughters of Adam into sons and daughters of God.

Two weeks ago, we discussed Jesus' first recorded run-in with temptation. And this temptation is a result of Jesus being declared to be God's Son. A claim of that magnitude had to be real-world tested. And, as we saw, Satan didn't pull any punches. He tempted the Lord to turn stone into bread, to worship him, and to cast himself down from a lofty height. Ultimately, Jesus did not succumb to the Devil. And so, when the Son of God overcame temptation, he made temptation something to be overcome. What does that mean for us? Through the Messiah's victory, we can be victorious over temptation.

Last week, we unpacked Jesus' first sermon. In that message, the Lord laid out his life's purpose: *he is the bringer of "good news."* He came to fulfill God's promises and liberate God's people. And while his words were initially met with overwhelming enthusiasm, the Lord ended up being driven from his hometown and nearly thrown off a cliff. Why? Jesus revealed that the "good news" wasn't only for his friends but also for their enemies, which proved too much for them to swallow. And so, a congregation that had just been applauding Jesus nearly killed him. Ultimately, Jesus never did a great work in his own hometown. And though that is sad, their failings taught us a valuable lesson: **prejudice keeps us from experiencing the wonders of God.** If we think God has only come for "our camp," we can rest assured he will leave us behind and find those who love the stranger as much as the friend.

Today, we'll see Jesus perform a few of his first *miracles*. And this passage is in stark contrast to what came before. Unlike the Nazarenes, who wanted to toss him from a cliff, the residents of Capernaum will end up begging Jesus to stay. And because they were far more willing to believe, Jesus performed several miracles in their midst over one day. This demonstration of power further legitimizes Jesus' claims and begins to establish his authority in the people's consciousness. But though this city will receive Jesus, the Lord ultimately reminds them (as he did w/ the Nazarenes) that preaching the "good news" takes priority over the performance of good works. Though miracles are important, they are secondary to the message.

Now, before giving us a detailed account of Jesus' exorcisms and healings, Luke tells us that, like the Nazarenes, the people of Capernaum were impressed with Jesus' teaching. But, unlike the Nazarenes, the Galileans noticed that "his words possessed authority."

READ: Luke 4:31-32 (ESV)

³¹ And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, ³² and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority.

The word "authority" is the Greek word **ἐξουσία** (*ex-oo-see'-ah*), and it refers to the concept of force, competency, or mastery. This is why its most basic translation is "power" in the authoritative sense of that word, as **ἐξουσία** speaks to someone or something having jurisdiction over someone or something else (cf. 4:6; Mat. 8:9; John. 5:27; 19:11). In this case, Jesus exuded confidence/power/authority when teaching. Unlike other teachers during this time (cf. Mar. 1:22), the Lord spoke clearly and definitively from a text (cf. Lu. 4:21). Apparently, at this time, qualified teachers were a scarcity, and the few who were thought of as qualified still seemed to lack some understanding (cf. Jhn. 3:10; 9:24-34). So, what set the Lord apart from the other teachers was that he spoke as one possessing "authority." In other words, Jesus taught ***principles***, not ***theories***. He did not use traditions and long-held rabbinic interpretive devices in his preaching; instead, he simply opened the Scriptures and explained what they meant.¹ He never said, "I think this passage means that..." or, "Rabbi so and so said this..." He always said, "Thus saith the Lord..."

So, considering this passage illustrates the Messiah's ***authority***, I want you to notice ***two*** ways Jesus' power manifested itself in the real world.

i. Jesus rebukes demons, and they depart (vs. 33-37, 41).

¹ Bock, Darrell L., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 1994), p. 429.

READ: Luke 4:33-37, 41 (ESV)

³³ And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴ "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the **Holy One** of God." ³⁵ But Jesus **rebuked** him, saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. ³⁶ And they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word? For with **authority** and **power** he **commands** the unclean spirits, and they come out!" ³⁷ And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

Jump to verse 41

⁴¹ And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the **Son** of God!" But he **rebuked** them and would not allow them to speak because they knew that he was the **Christ**.

It ought to be noted that of all the miracles that Jesus did, Luke ensures the first one he records is an exorcism. Considering he wants to put Jesus' authority in a context that his readers can appreciate, he begins by showing how the Lord exerted his power over that of demonic forces. And it is not by accident that we find Jesus putting the Devil's minions in their place fresh off a confrontation with the Devil.

Human beings are powerless against the forces of darkness. But Jesus, on the other hand, is in total control. In fact, there's no contest. We do not find Jesus wrestling with a demon, nor do we find him engaging in some verbal debate, as we saw in his interaction with Satan. Instead, Jesus speaks, and the demons obey. The monsters even appear not only to be shocked (i.e., "Ha!" or "Leave us alone!") but threatened given their sporadic questioning (i.e., 'What have you to do with us...' and "Have you come to destroy us?"). They were clearly frazzled by Jesus' arrival.² However powerful these demons may have been, it was **afraid** of Jesus because they knew, as John knew, that the Lord is "mightier" than all (cf. Lu. 3:16; 11:21-22).³ The Devil won't even be able to hurt the man it was possessing when it is ripped from his body by Jesus' word (cf. vs. 35).

But what's truly interesting in this brief exchange between Jesus and these unnamed demons is that they appear to know exactly who the Lord is. They **recognized** Jesus.

² Bock (1994), p. 432, notes when questions like this are posed in the OT, surprise is the implication.

³ Bock (1994), p. 432.

First, they call the Lord "Jesus of Nazareth." This meant they knew who Jesus was and where he was brought up before coming to Capernaum.

Secondly, they refer to Jesus as "the Holy One of God." Admittedly, this "the holy one" can refer to Aaron (cf. Ps. 106:16), and even Elisha (cf. 2 Ki. 4:9), which could mean the demon implied Jesus was a messenger from God like that of the high priest or a prophet. But, taking out those exceptions, this is a title used almost exclusively to refer to God (cf. 2 Ki. 19:22; Job 6:10; Ps. 71:22; 78:41; 89:18; Pro. 9:10; 30:3; Isa. 1:4; etc.).

In the third instance, the demons refer to Jesus as the "Son of God." And, given Luke's own comment, this was explicitly a claim to Jesus' messiahship. Though we know that title would eventually mean so much more.

Thus, taken together, demonic forces perceive three things about the Lord: he was a man who grew up in Nazareth and was God and Messiah.

How they knew this is unclear because we know so little about how the spiritual realm works. But the point in Luke telling us this is that even at this early juncture in Jesus' ministry, demonic forces knew who he was (cf. Ja. 2:19). In a section of Luke's account dedicated to Jesus' identity, it is significant that he gives us not only the testimony of angels, prophets, John the Baptist, and his lineage but also the testimony of evil spiritual beings.

But, even more shocking, Jesus doesn't want their testimony. Both times a demon tried to reveal Christ's identity, the Lord silenced them. And this is something that Jesus will regularly do (cf. Mat. 8:28-30). Why? He did not want nor need the word of a demon. What sort of assumptions might the public make if they heard a bunch of evil spirits testifying on behalf of Jesus? What's more, the title they were using might've been understood more in their political/revolutionary context than their spiritual/redemptive context. "Christ" would've been a rallying call for war to a first-century Jew rather than a call to repentance.⁴

But, again, the main point of this interaction between the demonic and the divine is to demonstrate Jesus' superiority. And, in fact, Luke tells us this precisely the reaction of the people as he tells us, "And they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!" And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region." Jesus is so powerful even the demons flee. Devils and evil spirits may keep us at night, giving us

⁴ Edwards, James R., *The Gospel According to Luke*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), p. 148.

nightmares. But it is the Lord who stalks demons' dreams. It is Jesus they fear. Satan's minions tell scary stories sitting around a campfire about their boogiemán, the Messiah.

But Jesus not only demonstrates his power over *spiritual* forces, but he also shows his power over *physical* ailments.

ii. Jesus rebukes diseases, and they disappear (vs. 38-40).

READ: Luke 4:38-40

³⁸ And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. ³⁹ And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them. ⁴⁰ Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.

This would be the same Simon, later known as Peter. But before we get there, and before we get to his calling as a disciple, and even before we're introduced to Simon as a fisherman, we're introduced to Simon as the son-in-law. And, apparently, as Doctor Luke explains, his mother-in-law was sick with a "high fever," a medical term likely referring to something like malaria.⁵ That Peter had a wife may come as a surprise, but as 1 Cor. 9:5 indicates, this was common knowledge at the time. And, if tradition is to be believed, Peter and his wife had children, and she was actively involved in ministering to other women.⁶

That Luke tells us he "rebuked" the fever does not mean it was demonic. While it appears Luke is aware of the connection, the Greek verb can be used without necessarily implying a devilish association. In 8:24, the Lord will "rebuke" the storm, but no demonic forces are mentioned. Luke is personifying the fever so that we'll compare the healing from sickness with the exorcism.

But just because this fever is not the result of some demon should not detract from the fact that viruses act like biological demons. They infect a body. They enter unbiddenly and take control of our bodies. True, our nervous system kicks in automatically trying to fight the disease. But, as a result, we become achy and tired. If our temperature is high enough, we start to tremble and shudder as we're wracked with chills. And I suspect people are as afraid of diseases today as they were of devils back then.

⁵ Edwards (2015), p. 146.

⁶ Bock (1994), p. 436.

The point of these back-to-back miracles is to show that just as he rebuked the demons, the Lord Jesus rebuked diseases. Whether he's dealing with sentient beings that are malevolent or non-sentient organisms that are malicious, Jesus commands, and they obey. The powers of darkness and decay are broken. They do not stand a chance against the Lord's authority.

So, what's the takeaway?

Jesus' miracles are ***subordinate*** to Jesus' message.

READ: Luke 4:42-44 (ESV)

⁴² And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, ⁴³ but he said to them, "I must preach the **good news** of the kingdom of God to the **other** towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose." ⁴⁴ And he was preaching in the synagogues of **Judea**.

So, what's the takeaway?

Jesus' miracles are ***subordinate*** to Jesus' message.

The Galileans would've kept Jesus from leaving. In a parallel passage, we're told that Peter, Andrew, James, and John were a part of this entourage trying to restrain Jesus (cf. 1:29, 36). Likely, this was because they wanted the Lord to do more of what he did the day before. They wanted more healings and exorcisms. But Jesus reminds them that while he can do wonderful works, and he will yet perform many more amazing things in their midst, the point of all this is so that the "good news of the kingdom of God" is preached to "other towns." Jesus' primary purpose was ***declarative*** by nature. He was sent to preach, teach, and declare the "good news of the kingdom of God," not just perform miracles. Sadly, though Capernaum is portrayed in a more favorable light than Nazareth, Jesus eventually rebukes them for their lack of repentance (cf. 10:13-16). He did not just come to give them a better existence in this life. He came to provide them with a better existence in the life to come.

Now, we might be tempted to think that Jesus' words have no application for us today. After all, he no longer works miracles in the same way that he did back then. But this assumption is wrong. Undoubtedly, Jesus is still casting out demons and healing the sick. But it looks different today than it does back then.

Through Jesus, addicts become recovering addicts, broken families are made whole, and "the good life" becomes "the great life." These things, and things like them, can rightly be called modern-day miracles. But as amazing and wonderful as those things are, they pale in

comparison to the miracle of the gospel. Knowing that you are forgiven and reconciled to God, having become a son or daughter of the King of Kings, is a far better gift than being set free from addiction, having a family reunited once again, or being given a great life. This does not downplay the importance of those things. If anything, it ought to elevate them. The point is that whatever benefit we receive in this life for following Jesus is of secondary importance to the benefit we get when we receive the gospel.

When we read about the amazing things that Jesus did, we might be tempted to get so wrapped up in the phenomenal aspects of Jesus' works that we miss the point of those works. The Galileans were on the brink of doing just that. But Jesus reminds them he's more than just a miracle worker. He's a preacher of the good news. Thus, in the Christian world, **substance** ought to take precedence over **spectacle** every single time. Miracles are great. But the message is of far more importance. If we prioritize one over the other, we'll create a Christianity that prizes experience over exposition. At the heart of every Christian ought to be a hunger to be fed with the word, not entertained.

Truth be told, people can live a good life apart from Jesus. I have met many good sinners in my day. But, sadly, what does it profit a man if he lives a good life today and then loses it all tomorrow. If you follow the gospel's leading, you will undoubtedly live an extraordinary life. But the true benefit of the gospel does not come until our next life begins. This is why even if we don't live the "good life" in this life, we can still go on, knowing that someday, all will be made right and life itself will be renewed.

Video Description

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: