

“The Sin of Unbelief”
(Matthew 13:53-58)

Jesus had been in Capernaum, teaching the multitudes and especially His disciples concerning the things of the Kingdom of heaven. But now it was time to move on. There were others who needed to hear the Gospel. The harvest was plentiful, and at that time, the workers were very very few. Jesus decided that it was time to visit His home town, the town of Nazareth. This is where His parents had settled after their trip to Bethlehem for the census, their flight into Egypt when Jesus was about two years of age to protect Him from Herod’s wrath, and after Herod had finally died. This is where they lived, as was predicted in the Scripture, and this is where they raised Him.

But now why was Jesus going to Nazareth? We need to remember that everything that Jesus did, He did for a reason. His whole life was planned. What was that reason? Certainly, Jesus wanted to gather His elect from that city, even though it appears as though there were not very many there. Jesus went out to call His sheep. But there was another reason, the reason that Matthew recorded this event in his Gospel. John tells us that there are many things Jesus said and did which are not recorded in any of the Gospels. The world itself could not contain the books which could be written about Christ’s ministry. Yet this event was recorded. Why? I believe that the Lord wanted us to see how foolish it is to use any excuse, especially that of familiarity, of knowing someone too well, as a reason to reject Him. God has given to everyone in the world overwhelming evidence that He is, that He has made all things, that He is good to all and yet angry for our sin, and that one day He is going to judge all men. All men are without excuse for their unbelief. But He has given to some even more evidence. The Jews also had the sacred writings, the Scriptures. These not only verified that what men knew about God from the creation was true, they also revealed this God more fully and His plan of redemption through His Son Jesus Christ. But the particular Jews we read about in our text this morning, had even more than this. They not only had God’s revelation in nature, they not only had the Scripture, they also saw Jesus grow up in their midst, and then when He was grown, do exactly what God said in His Word that the Messiah would do. They, of all men, had no excuse for their sin of unbelief. This is what Matthew is showing us from this passage, and this is what I want for us to consider this morning, ***That it is a terrible sin to reject the evidence God gives us regarding His Son.***

Now as I said, Jesus went to Nazareth, and the first thing He did when He arrived was to go to the place where He could continue His teaching ministry to the people, and that was the synagogue. The synagogue was the place where the Jews, who were too far from Jerusalem to worship there on a regular basis, would meet for Sabbath worship. We are not told whether or not this event happened on the Sabbath. It could have, or it may be that they met at other times for instruction as well. But I would draw your attention to the fact that Jesus continued to press forward in His teaching and preaching ministry, even though the Jews had rejected Him shortly before. He never allowed anything to discourage Him or to slow Him down in the work the Father had called Him to do. He knew that He had a job to do, and He knew that He had to do it. Even though there were those who rejected God’s Word, He knew that He was preaching and teaching the truth, and that these people, God’s covenant people, needed to hear it. He didn’t go through deep times of doubt any time someone would question His doctrine or tell Him He was just outright wrong, because He knew He was right. He is the truth. We’re the ones who have to

struggle with doubt, because we're not firmly grounded in God's Word. We tend to draw back and give in, whenever we run into someone who speaks with more conviction than we do. The house of our convictions seem to crumble all the way to the foundation, so that we find ourselves looking again for the basis of our beliefs. But there comes a time when we need to finish our foundation and begin building on it. If we are always unsure of what the Bible teaches, we will always be crippled to some extent in the work we attempt to do for the Lord. Now, I'm not saying that we should become so sure of ourselves that we become unteachable or uncorrectable. If our pride swells to the point where we believe that we have all the answers, we can be sure that we don't. We always need to be open to examining the Scriptures, especially when our brethren humbly bring them to us for correction. But what I am saying is that there is a time to be disciplined in the foundational truths of Christianity, and then there is a time to labor to advance that cause. If we are always having to go back to square one, every time we strike out to do God's will, we won't get very much done for our Lord in this life at all. Jesus knew the truth, He was the truth, and He certainly wasn't afraid to use it.

And so we find Him again teaching the Jews and, from what Matthew says here, also performing miracles, to the point where Matthew writes, "They became astonished, and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers?'" (v. 54). Now notice from what he writes that these Jews did not simply ignore Jesus. Obviously, His ministry was too unique and too powerful to ignore. Word about Him was spreading everywhere. Certainly the people of Nazareth must have been listening for the latest news about Jesus throughout His early ministry, for He was from that very town. And now, after having left that town to begin His ministry, He had finally returned home, to the place of His childhood. They finally were able to hear Him with their own ears and to see His miracles with their own eyes. And as they listened to what He had to say, and saw with their own eyes the miracles He was doing, they marveled that He had gained such wisdom and such power. In order to understand this, we need to remember that Jesus' ministry did not begin until He was baptized and anointed with the Holy Spirit at the baptism of John. And even after that, He still had to go out into the wilderness, fasting for forty days and forty nights, in order to face His adversary the devil and overcome him, before He could begin His preaching ministry. They might not have known what brought about the change in Jesus, but they did know that He changed. They were asking, Where did He get this wisdom? He had not been schooled in the great schools of the Rabbins. Where did He get these great powers? As far as they knew there was nothing special about Him or His family. After all, Jesus had grown up right there in Nazareth. This was Jesus, the son of the carpenter. Joseph and Mary, His parents, had been their neighbors for years. They knew all of Jesus' brothers -- James and Joseph and Simon and Judas --, and His sisters. Joseph and Mary apparently had a very sizable family. But as far as they knew, none of them showed any of this extraordinary wisdom or were able to do such wonderful things. How then could Jesus?

Now what were they thinking? It appears as though they were for a natural explanation as to why Jesus could do the things He did. They were looking to His family to see if any of these same traits could be found in them. They were looking to His roots, His family stock, to see if they could explain what they were seeing and hearing, but they couldn't. They were seeing the hand of God at work, but they could not bring themselves to admit it. They were like so many today, who look at the work of the Triune God in nature, but see it through the eyes of unbelief. So many people today don't believe that God created all these wonderful things we see around us. They don't believe He exists. The sheer power of their intellect, of their mind, has finally penetrated the darkness of superstition, revealing, so they suppose, that God never did

exist. He's just the figment of weak-minded and weak-willing people, a crutch for them to stand on. They believe that the answer to our existence must be in the material stuff that this universe is made of. God didn't make our Universe, or our Galaxy, or our Solar System. It must have come about through a big bang, a big chunk of rock that suddenly exploded and formed itself into the wonderfully balanced and organized universe that we see now. And as for this rock, or stuff, it must have come from nothing, nothing that one day became something, a something that could form itself into this well ordered universe. But what about the life we see all over this planet? Where did it come from? It must have come from the lifeless sun, beating down on the lifeless ground with its destructive radiation, until life sprang out of it and became more and more diverse and complex over time. Now we would have to admit, that those who think this way today are irrational. What they believe defies all reason. Professing themselves to be wise, they have actually become fools, as foolish as these Jews were in Jesus' day. They see the wonderful things God has made. God has revealed Himself through them. All men know and are without excuse, but they are unwilling to admit that He even exists. These Jews heard the wonderful things that Jesus was teaching and saw something of His miracles. But they would not believe that this was a work of God, and that Jesus was sent from God. The odd thing about this is that, unlike many of the unbelievers of today, they did believe that there was a God, and that He could and did work miracles. They believed in the God of Scripture, the God who made all things. They at least believed that these things were true, even if they didn't savingly trust in the One who made them.

The problem appears to be that because they had known Jesus for so long, they were not willing to believe that God had given Him this ability and sent Him to preach His message. To understand how they felt, it would be like our seeing one of the young men in this church, after he grows up, go away for a short while, sense a call to the ministry, get seminary training, and then accept a call to come and pastor the church he grew up in. If that happened, it would be hard for us to accept him. Familiarity tends to breed contempt. It is more difficult for us to respect someone we know very well, especially when that person, for most of their life, was either below us in authority, or our equal. This is why Jesus said, "A prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and in his own household" (v. 57). If there were still prophets today, in the sense that there were in Israel before and at the time of our Lord, how easy do you think it would be to accept someone you grew up with in that role? It wouldn't be easy because of our pride. It wasn't easy for these Jews, and so we read "They took offense at Him," which literally means that they rejected Him. We must as well beware that we don't let pride get in the way of our receiving God's Word. Jesus isn't here personally to proclaim it to us. We must receive it from weak and sinful messengers. But we mustn't let the weakness and infirmity of the messenger, nor our familiarity with them, make us reject the Word that they bring to us week by week. They are laboring under a higher authority who has been pleased to commit the preaching and teaching of His Word to weak and oftentimes inferior vessels. We are not to reject God's Word because of the messenger, but because receive it because of the authority of the One who gave it.

But there is one more thing that I want you to see here. Look at the last verse of our text, "And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief" (v. 58). A parallel passage in Mark's Gospel puts it in even stronger language, "And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And He wondered at their unbelief" (6:5-6). Matthew tells us that their problem was that of unbelief. They would not listen to Him, nor receive His miracles, because they did not believe. And Mark is so bold as to say that He

couldn't do many miracles there because of that unbelief. Now did their lack of faith make it impossible for Jesus to do miracles? Does our faith have anything to do with His ability? No. If God wanted to do something, there would be nothing we could possibly do to stop Him, neither should we ever want to, for whatever He does is absolutely right. What then is Matthew and Mark saying?

Well, we need again to remember why the Lord performed miracles in the first place. He did not do them to persuade those who had no faith to believe. Nor did He do them to convince those who wickedly persecuted Him that He was the Messiah, although in both cases, those miracles would certainly have left them with even less excuse for their unbelief and exposed to greater judgment. No, He did them to confirm His message, that it truly was from God. He did them to confirm the faith of His people. The elect would see and would receive these things. But in the case of the people of Nazareth, for the most part, they did not. They heard His words. They saw the few miracles that He did. And they were astonished. But they still rejected Him. And because they rejected Him, the Lord was rejecting them. He would not perform miracles and continue to teach where the light was rejected. He would not continue to cast His pearls before the swine of unbelief. Instead, He would move on.

This stands as a warning to us that we must not reject our Lord's Words or His works through a heart of unbelief. We must believe the revelation God has given us, through His Creation, through His Word, and through His Son. We must also accept His Word from the weak vessels He chooses to bring His Word to us. We are not to accept it because of the messenger himself, but because it is God's truth that he brings. If we reject any one of these precious beacons, we do so to our own peril. God has shown us that He is and what it is He wants us to do in many infallible ways. They are all meant to strengthen our faith and to give us the foundation we need to serve the Lord with confidence. And so may the Lord open our eyes to see His truth, and may He make us to stand strong upon it, and may He cause us to go forth in its light to reflect and shine that light to others. And lastly, if there should be anyone here this morning whose eyes have not been opened, who are still looking at all this wonderful evidence of God's works and words through the eyes of unbelief, may He graciously open your eyes that you may see and believe and come to Christ that you might have life. Amen.