

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

G. Campbell Morgan, D.D.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

MATTHEW 13:53-58

THE parabolic discourse completed, our Lord went on with His work, and in continuing our study of the particular section dealing with the enforcement of His claims, we have two sub-divisions left.

- First of all the period marked by increasing opposition;
- Then the brief story of how one man at least had seen Him and known Him - the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi.

Looking at the section beginning with verse fifty-three of chapter thirteen, and running to verse twelve of chapter sixteen, we see the King going forward once more, and the opposition was more marked, more definite. He moved on in His propaganda in an atmosphere characterized by hatred and misunderstanding.

There are two ways in which this whole passage might be analyzed; around the opposition offered, or around the mistakes made concerning Jesus.

To survey it from the second standpoint would be to find mistake after mistake chronicled.

- First, the mistake of the men of Nazareth,
- Then the mistake of Herod,
- Then the mistake of the multitudes who wanted to take Jesus by force and make Him the King,
- Then the mistake of the disciples, who saw Him moving over the water at midnight.

Mistake followed mistake, because the people did not understand Him. This was the last period of the intensive public ministry. Not that the public ministry entirely closed now, for after Caesarea Philippi our Lord appeared publicly, but He specially devoted Himself to His own disciples, instructing them concerning the Cross.

Finally He appeared in Jerusalem for the official rejection of the Nation. In this study we take the first of the sub-divisions, which deals with the opposition of His own people; not His own disciples, but the people of Nazareth, Having instructed His disciples in the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, that is to say having taught them what the Kingdom would be in that particular age, thus preparing them for future ministry, the King continued His work, and the first place to which He went was Nazareth.

He set His face again toward the old and familiar scenes of His boyhood and His young manhood.

This visit of Jesus to Nazareth is not the same as that which is recorded by Luke. This was much later. Here He was going back to Nazareth after prolonged ministry, and very near to the close of things.

The picture of this verse is one very full of beauty. Perhaps we can best interpret it to our own hearts by calling to mind what our own sensations have been, when, after years of life's strenuous battle, we have taken our way back to the scenes of childhood, of youth, to what we sometimes think of as the dull and dreary days of preparation for the more public service.

That description would not be at all applicable in the case of our Lord, for the perpetual sunshine of His life was the consciousness that He was doing God's will; and whether at Nazareth, or on the public highways and byways, His one joy and delight was His Father's will. But He had taken His way back again to these scenes of early life; and one can imagine Him, as He went into the old familiar synagogue on the Sabbath day, the synagogue to which His mother had taken Him in the earlier days, where He had listened to the reading of the law, and sometimes to its exposition; the synagogue so closely associated with those days of childhood, boyhood, and youth.

It is well sometimes to strip ourselves of the larger and truer ideas of the Christ, and try and look at Him on the purely human level.

If we can do so here, we catch the beauty of this story. He had gone back again to the little town nestling on the hillside, far removed from the great crowds and activities, the great centers in the midst of which He had been busily occupied. He had left them forever, when He began His ministry, and set His face to go to Capernaum, and to take up His residence there. He had made Capernaum the center of His operations, but at last He had to say, "**And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell.**"

He had turned His back upon it for the last time, and He was now back again in Nazareth.

Back home in the old synagogue, among the old familiar scenes, looking into the faces of the men who were boys when He was, and who had grown up to manhood with Him. And there in the synagogue He taught them. After the reading of the law He expounded it, told them its inner meaning.

Oh, to have heard Him as, beginning at Moses, and on through the prophets, He taught those listening men! He had gone back from the crowds to the quietness of Nazareth. Now let us see what happened. In order to do so we must look first at the men of Nazareth; then at the King Himself.

The men of Nazareth.

What was their first attitude as He came that day to the synagogue? They had heard the fame of Him: it had spread through all the region round about. The very next paragraph, with which chapter fourteen opens, makes it perfectly plain how far the fame of Jesus had spread, for we find that the report concerning Him had reached Herod, and the last place in which any man becomes famous is the royal palace.

Everybody knows the rumour before it reaches the King. And so the people of Nazareth had heard of Him, and undoubtedly had been interested in Him. They knew about Him, so that when He returned to Nazareth, and went into the synagogue, their first attitude toward Him was one of perfect familiarity with Him. They were His people.

“Is not this the carpenter’s son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us?”

These were the things naturally in their minds when He entered. We know Him, we know all about Him, His people are all here with us. Mother, and brothers, and sisters. He is just one of us. We know His development; we watched Him grow up here as a Boy, and we loved Him in those old days. He grew **“in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men.”**

We know all about Him. We know His occupation. Did we not often come and watch as He began to use the tools of His craft by the side of Joseph? Did not He make the very yokes in which our oxen are ploughing? That was the first attitude, and it was a very dangerous attitude, and yet it was perfectly natural. He went into the synagogue, not as a stranger. There was very little curiosity in their midst as He entered, save curiosity arising out of the reports that had reached them.

It is all so human; we understand it perfectly. The boy who grew up by your side went out. Other people were startled and surprised because he did something, and accomplished something. He comes back. His success is interesting; but you say, we know him. That was the attitude of Nazareth towards Him. It was very perilous, as we shall see, that first attitude of perfect familiarity.

What happened? He began to teach them.

We can quite imagine the faces of those men in that synagogue, those strange, strong, Jewish faces, as they watched Him that day before they began to discuss Him. We can imagine the astonished surprise on their faces. They were listening, they had never heard things like that before; such exposition, such interpretation of their own Scriptures. As He talked about them, the old familiar words they had been reciting for years, flamed into light and glory. He merely repeated them; and as they listened they heard illustrations which proved that He was in possession of a knowledge which was quite foreign to them. There was no university in Nazareth. There was no school of the prophets in Nazareth. The great Rabbis never set up their seat in Nazareth, and He had been there all the time, through all the years; and yet interwoven with His matchless speech were allusions which they had always imagined, and rightly imagined within the limitation of their own life, could only be gained by the processes of learning, and the school.

We are not told upon this occasion that He wrought any miracles. Indeed we are told, “**He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.**”

The inference is that He did some; and perchance before He spoke they saw some wonder, or it may be that the report of wonders He had wrought had come to the place. They watched Him and listened to Him, and there was no escape from the conviction that He had wisdom, and there was no escape from the evidence that He had power. These things they could not deny. But, they said, This wisdom is not of human origin, for we watched Him as a baby, growing into boyhood; we watched Him as a boy growing into youth. He never went away to study in the schools, and yet He has the wisdom. And the power certainly comes from no human source! Look at His people, Mary, and His brothers and sisters, just ordinary people. He is one of the same kith and kin, but He has the power, He has the wisdom. And so the second attitude was one of astonishment.

Now we come to the final attitude of these men of Nazareth. “**They were offended.**”

Perhaps we are not warranted in reading that word exactly in that form. Literally, they were made to stumble. One of the old commentators gets very near the heart of translation when it reads, “*they were scandalized,*” for remember the *scandalon* was the rock of offence over which people stumbled. He had become a rock of offence, something over which men stumbled.

At first they were perplexed, but perplexity is not offence and stumbling. There was more in it than that. In the presence of the mystery presented to their view, they stumbled by taking up a wrong attitude towards Him.

There was only one logical sequence. What astonished these men was not to be accounted for, yet it existed. Therefore these things were supernatural things, beyond human ken and understanding, but to be received because of what they were, and because of what they testified concerning Him. A mystery, but yet a revelation.

Here is the point where they fell and stumbled. They did not admit the sequence concerning Himself. They made their judgment blind. Wrapped up in that simplicity of personality with which we have become acquainted, was a sublimity of personality which even we have never yet fully discovered.

There is only one attitude in the presence of such a phenomenon as that.

While we cannot understand the mystery, at least we ought not to reject the Person simply on account of the fact that we cannot follow the working and explain the method.

But there they failed.

They were offended. The link was missing, they could not find it. Therefore they refused the wisdom and refused the works because they refused Him. “**And He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.**”

Such is the picture of the men of Nazareth. Now let us look at the King Himself.

If we have noticed their familiarity with Him, what shall we say of His familiarity with them? He also knew them; He had lived in their midst and observed them. He had seen them in the process of their growth, as they had seen Him in the process of His growth; and from the human side He was more familiar with these people than with any others.

But He also knew them in their deepest life, as He knows the underlying secret in every life. He **“needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.”** And yet, notwithstanding this, He went back to them once more.

- He taught them, and wrought amongst them,
- He gave them new manifestations of Himself; things they never could have discovered, for they were not emblazoned upon His personality.
- He gave them manifestations of His power in great grace; but the final thing is this, **“He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.”**

The popular conception of a miracle or **“mighty works”** is that it is something which creates belief, and we should be inclined to say that was His opportunity for a miracle, just because they did not believe. But there is a matter to bear in mind perpetually. Jesus never wrought miracles to create belief.

Not in a single instance in the New Testament can we find that a miracle was wrought to create belief or faith. They were all beneficent.

Unbelief was the atmosphere in which He could not perform a miracle, and there was lacking at Nazareth the atmosphere in which it was possible for Him to work a miracle, a wonder, a mighty power. Belief is not merely intellectual conviction. They had intellectual conviction. They knew His wisdom, they knew His power; they were perfectly convinced of the wisdom of His speech, of the might of His work.

Belief is the abandoning of the will to conviction, the handing over of the life to the thing concerning which we are convinced.

If we say we believe in God the Father Almighty, and live all the week as though there were no God, we may have an intellectual conviction of His existence, but we do not believe in God.

They believed intellectually certain things concerning Him, but as belief is the abandonment to conviction, when that abandonment is withheld there can be no progress, contact is not made.

Now let us go back with Him to the synagogue of His boyhood. There He was mighty in speech and mighty in deed. All wisdom and power were His. He spoke the words of wisdom and He worked the deeds of might. Those people heard the wisdom and recognized it; saw the deed and knew it, and then said, Whence did He get His wisdom and His might?

The men of Nazareth went astray attempting to account for something half understood. Oh, that they had responded to the fact of wisdom, and to the fact of power, and believed in Him upon the basis of the evidences! He could then have wrought miracles amongst them, He could have done other things, and said other things, but their unbelief sterilized His power, and He could make no contact with them. At the first evidence of His wisdom and might which makes a demand upon us, let us answer it, yield to it, not merely intellectually but volitionally, and we shall see that the same wisdom can go further in its giving of light, that the same power can work more mightily. Refuse to answer it, and Christ Himself cannot make us understand Him, and Christ Himself cannot do more mighty works.

Nazareth is the symbol of many an individual life. The Christ comes, there is the flash of His wisdom, the thrill of His power; and then the man begins speculating and wondering, and oftentimes refuses light. Christ can go no further with that man. Christ Himself cannot make that man know Him; until he answer the first flash of light with obedience, the first thrill of power with abandonment. That is the great word here, the startling word, the tremendous word “**He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.**”

There are in this study lessons of personal relationship and lessons of cooperative fellowship.

As to the first, this story teaches us the unutterable folly of refusing to accept fact because it is astonishing. Yet there are thousands of people standing in that position to-day concerning Jesus Christ. It is utterly unscientific, not to say irreligious. Here is an astonishing thing. They say we cannot understand how this Man hath this wisdom. Has He the wisdom? Why, yes, we cannot escape it. Then in the name of God and common honesty, obey the injunction and postpone the investigation. Oh, the unutterable folly of refusing to accept a fact because it is astonishing! If we had done that persistently in other realms, we should never have had our buildings lit with electricity, for no man understands electricity. There are certain laws we have discovered, and we are obeying the laws, and the light is illuminating our buildings, and the force is driving the machinery. We have harnessed the lightning, but we do not understand the lightning. These men of Nazareth came into the presence of an actual fact, and they saw wonders, and they were in danger of eternal perdition, because they tarried in the wonder.

That is a peculiar characteristic of our own age. We may not understand the Incarnation, and we never shall; we do not understand the Atonement, and we never shall; but is there any other teacher who spake as this Teacher spoke? Oh, no.

We are bound to admit the wisdom. We may be puzzled. Let us postpone the problem, and obey. That was the blunder of the men of Nazareth. They saw the wonders, and their attitude remained the same as when on a former occasion they had tried to fling Him over the brow of the hill. And immediately growing out of this there is the tremendous blunder of attempting to account for Christ by ordinary standards.

There are men who say: Until we can account for Him we cannot submit to Him. If we could account for Him, we would not submit, because there are many people we can account for by ordinary standards, and we have never submitted to them.

If we could once put the Christ of God into the formulae of human interpretation, we should consider Him useless as Teacher, and Lord, and Saviour. It is because He towers above us, and impresses us, and baffles us, and eludes us; enwraps us with love, and thrills us with power; that we are Christians. We are Christians in the presence of the Infinite Mystery, infinitely more than in the presence of things that can be perfectly explained.

There is another peril, that of familiarity with Jesus.

There is a terrible danger threatening those born in the atmosphere of Christianity. We may thank God for Christian parents and Christian home training. And yet, oh the peril of it! As a great preacher once said to a crowd of preachers, Whatever else you lose, pray God you may never lose the element of surprise when you see Jesus. Does He startle us? Does He astonish and surprise us? Let us be careful not to be familiar with the familiarity of the men of Nazareth. If they had not known Him so well, they might have known Him better, and that principle abides for ever true.

One thought as to the lessons of cooperative fellowship for workers. Let us remember concerning each other as with Him, faith fertilizes, criticism sterilizes. It is in the atmosphere of faith, and belief, and confidence, that the worker does his best. It is the critical, and the cynical, that kills.

And yet once more. Are we ever guilty of hindering Him by unbelief?

He is the same to-day. If we are saying in our hearts we are not sure of Him, we shall have to end by saying, He did not many mighty works. It is when we come believing in Him that He touches our hearts with His fingers, and heaven's music is in our souls. He is to-day, as ever, the One Who answers faith. God help us to believe in Him with all our heart and soul. So shall we receive from Him new wisdom and new light in all the enterprises of life.

~ end of chapter 41 ~

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