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Matthew 13:53 - 13:58



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In Matthew 13:53-58, Jesus returned to his hometown where he was known as just an ordinary person, despite being a significant figure in his later ministry. Many people were surprised by the depth of his knowledge and wisdom. The speaker notes that while Jesus may have limitations based on his own thinking, he cannot go against his own principles and so cannot choose to act on faith alone. Nonetheless, the speaker encourages us to continue studying the life of Christ, regardless of our own limitations.

Transcript

Today, let's turn to the latter part of Matthew chapter 13. The earlier part has been occupied entirely with a series of eight parables that Jesus told about the kingdom of heaven. And the kingdom of heaven, of course, is his primary theme in all of his teaching.

And nowhere do we find such a concentration in the scripture of lessons about the kingdom in parabolic form as we have in chapter 13. But before the chapter ends, the parables end, and we have a little story at the end that I would like to consider presently. In Matthew 13, 53 through 58.

Now, it came to pass when Jesus had finished these parables that he departed from there, and when he had come to his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary, and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things? So they were offended at him, but Jesus said to them, A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house. And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. Now, this says that Jesus came to his own country.

Now, obviously the word country is being used to suggest a region since the country, technically, that Jesus lived in was the country of Israel, the nation of Israel. Of course, the word country is used a variety of ways, but all it says here is he came to his own

country. It must mean the region of Galilee and that particular section of Galilee where Jesus was raised, which would be Nazareth and surrounding areas, perhaps.

The reason I say that is because, first of all, Jesus did almost all of his ministry within the country of Israel, which was his own country in the sense that he was born and raised there. And furthermore, if we wanted to limit it to Galilee, well, almost everything that we've read so far in Matthew was done in Galilee already. Galilee is the region, we could say the district, up to the north in Israel that Jesus grew up in.

But he's already been there, and when it says he now came to his own country, it must be delimiting the region considerably more. And therefore, we would assume that it means Nazareth and its environs where Jesus grew up. It's also clear that the people of this country were acquainted with him.

They knew him as the carpenter's son, they knew the names of his mother and his brothers, and they also were acquainted with his sisters who lived apparently still with them, that is, in the region. So, these were people who knew the family, they lived in the region that Jesus grew up in, and we should assume, therefore, that although the word Nazareth is not used in the narrative, we are talking about the region of Nazareth, which was a town of Galilee. Now, we know from Luke chapter 4 that Jesus had come to Nazareth before this, and he had done something similar.

He had come and taught in the synagogue there, and we have much more detail in Luke chapter 4 of what Jesus actually did on that occasion. And the end of it was pretty much the same as this time. Essentially, in both times, Jesus concluded by saying, Prophet is not without honor, except in his own country.

Now, in fact, because of those similarities, because both stories occur in Nazareth, and both contain Jesus making that statement, one might get the impression that these are just two accounts of the same story. And I suppose we couldn't rule that out entirely, but it seems to me that chronologically, and even in terms of detail, it is wiser for us to consider these as two different trips, two different visits to Nazareth, and that's how I have at least understood it in my study of the Scriptures. If I might remind you, in case you're not, maybe you're not acquainted with the previous visit to Nazareth, that is found in Luke chapter 4, beginning at verse 17 or 16.

It 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. And he was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.

He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the

acceptable year of the Lord. 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, and he began to say to them, Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

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? And he said to them, You will surely say this proverb to me, Physician, heal yourself. Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in your country.

Then he said, Assuredly I say to you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you, truly many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah. When the heaven was shut up in three years and six months, there was no rain, and there was great famine throughout the land.

But to none of them was Elijah sent, except to Zarephath in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. Then all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and 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. Then passing through the midst of them, he went his way. Now this is not probably the same visit to Nazareth, but as you can see in Luke chapter 4, this earlier visit to Nazareth, it would appear that Jesus preached in the synagogue as he did here, and concluded that a prophet is not going to be honored in his own country.

So these things they have in common. Now on the first occasion, and that is that which we just read in Luke chapter 4, Jesus read from Isaiah the prophet and said, these words are fulfilled in your hearing. The words that he read were the words about the inauguration of the messianic era, the messianic kingdom.

And he indicated that he was the one who was being quoted in the book of Isaiah. That caused, of course, the people of his town to marvel because he was claiming something very significant about himself. And yet they had known him from his childhood and did not know him as a significant person.

They said, isn't this just Joseph's son? Now, of course, Jesus wasn't Joseph's son, but that was apparently how he was thought of in that town. Joseph was not his father because Mary had become pregnant while still a virgin. But she had married Joseph and Jesus had been raised in Joseph's home with the rest of Joseph and Mary's children.

And therefore he was regarded by all around to be one of Joseph's children as well, the firstborn. And yet Joseph was an insignificant man. He was a mere tradesman, a carpenter.

He was not a prophet. He was not a religious leader. And for this man, Jesus, whom they knew and whom they had known to be an apprentice carpenter among them for probably about 20 years of his life, he's now claiming that the words of the prophet Isaiah that were written 700 years earlier were written about him and that he is the Messiah, which is what is implied, though that was a little too much for them to take.

And Jesus said to them, why, you will probably use this proverb, physician, heal thyself. Now, this is an interesting quotation. First of all, it indicates that physician, heal thyself was a common proverb among the Jews.

And it was not necessarily applied literally to physicians healing themselves. It is like a lot of other proverbs. It's set in one setting but applies to many.

It's like the shoemaker who doesn't have shoes for himself or like the janitor whose house is a total mess. One might say, well, physician, heal thyself. Now, Jesus, when he said, you will say to me, physician, heal thyself, we might ask, well, how, what is the meaning of that in this case? When was that fulfilled? Well, many people would say that the fulfillment of this prediction, that they would say, physician, heal thyself, was perhaps when he was on the cross and we know that many people there at the foot of the cross said he saved others, himself he cannot save.

In other words, save yourself if you're really the Savior. Physician, heal yourself. I think that's maybe the most common way that Christians have taken this when Jesus said, you will say to me, physician, heal yourself.

And yet, I don't know that that is really the right way to understand the fulfillment of this statement. Because, first of all, there's not any reason to believe that the people at the foot of the cross who said he saved others, himself he cannot save, there's no reason to believe that they were of Nazareth, that this all occurred in Jerusalem at the other end of the country. And while there might have been some people from Nazareth around, there's really no reason to associate that statement with the people that he's speaking to here.

I think he explains himself as he gives illustrations. He says, essentially, you will say to me, physician, heal yourself. The works that we heard that you did in Capernaum, do them here in your own town, too.

You see, if a man is a physician and he spends all his time working outside his own home, healing everybody around, but his own family is sick and he does nothing for them, someone might say, physician, heal thyself. And by that I mean your own kin, your own family, take care of your own responsibilities. And they were saying something like this, you know, Jesus, we have heard through the grapevine that you're doing some amazing things.

But all these stories are coming from Capernaum. Now, this is your hometown. Why don't you do them in your hometown? What you did out of home.

Physician, heal your own people. Come here and do in your own land what we hear you're doing outside. I think that is what's implied there.

And then he gives the example, both of Elijah and Elisha, both of whom in their ministries perform miracles of, in one case, provision and in the other case, healing for Gentiles. Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian and Elijah helped to feed a widow from Zarephath and Sidon. These were Gentile people.

And Jesus said, in the days of those prophets, there were many Jewish widows who were not helped and many Jewish lepers who were not cleansed. And yet the prophets didn't help them, their own countrymen. They helped a widow in another country and a leper from another country.

Now, what he's saying there is not that Elijah and Elisha had no concern about their own people, but that they almost had to go out of the country to find somebody who had enough faith for them to really help. Because the ministries of Elijah and Elisha in performing these miracles required faith on the part of those who received them. The widow of Zarephath, for example, had to give Elijah the prophet her final meal, her final meal that she and her son were going to eat and then die of starvation because of the famine.

And Elijah said, just give it to me and God will make sure you don't ever run out. And by faith, she did what he said and God provided for her. Likewise, Naaman the Syrian was told by Elisha the prophet to dip himself seven times in the River Jordan and he would be cleansed of his leprosy.

Well, it didn't make sense, but Naaman eventually did what Elisha said and he was healed. He had to believe the prophet and obey him in order to receive the miracle, but these people did. The implication of Jesus' words here is that there were no Jewish lepers who had enough faith to get healed.

There were no Jewish widows who had enough faith to have these miracles of provision. And the closest people that God could find or that the prophets could find who had enough faith to benefit from their ministry were not locals. They were not their own people of their own country.

They had to go to other countries to do that. Now, the illustration, of course, is suggesting that Jesus can't do that many miracles in his own country because he doesn't find his own people to have enough faith. And therefore, he does more elsewhere because other people have more faith.

That enraged his countrymen so much that they tried to throw him off a cliff. However,

he escaped and made it out of town. Now, that was the previous visit.

In this second visit, sometime later in Matthew, we don't have anywhere near the details. All we have is the record of him coming back to his own people, to his own country, teaching in their synagogue again. This time, we don't have any record of what he taught except in a very, very, very short conclusive remark.

And we read of the reaction of the people very similar to the last time. They said, where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? And they said, is this not the carpenter's son and his mother called Mary and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas and his sisters? Are they not all with us? The statement about his sisters, are they not all with us, suggests that there were more than two because if there was only one or two, you'd say, is not his sister with us or are not both of his sisters with us? But they said all of his sisters, which means there must have been at least three and there could have been many more. And that means that Jesus was the oldest son in a very large, what we would consider a very large family.

He had four younger brothers and at least three younger sisters. So, Mary and Joseph raised at least eight children, Jesus being the oldest. And the people there knew him.

Now, we find the same thing occurring on this visit as before because he finally says to them, a prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house. And he means by that the phenomenon that he was experiencing right there. The people felt they knew him only too well.

He had lived among them. They'd known him since he was a child playing in the streets with their children. They had seen him work in the carpenter shop.

They had probably at times brought things to him and he probably had to fix them in the normal way. He didn't work miracles to fix the broken leg on their chair. He had to get out his tools and sweat and work just like anyone else.

He didn't seem special. He was just an ordinary man, just another tradesman. And now he comes back and all these amazing claims are made about him and by him.

And they simply couldn't believe them. He was too well known to them in terms of, you know, the same familiarity breeds contempt. Someone has said that an expert is a man with a briefcase who's from out of town.

And what that saying implies is that as soon as you leave town, people are willing to trust your expertise. If you come in and say, well, this is my field. This is what I know.

But when you're in your own town, everyone knows you as just, you know, ordinary Joe, not an expert about anything. They grew up with you, went to school with you. And it's when you're a stranger.

People are more inclined to believe that, you know, if you claim to be something exceptional, exceptional. But when you're not a stranger and everyone knows you to be quite ordinary, then, of course, they're going to have a harder time believing. And so he did.

You know, it was almost a self-fulfilling prophecy because just as the previous time, he found that they were unwilling to believe because he was too familiar to them. And it's just like, you know, Elijah and Elisha, the people of their own town didn't receive their ministries. So they had to go elsewhere to minister.

Now, the concluding remark of this is rather interesting because it's a little differently written in the account in Matthew than it is in the account in Mark, which is parallel to it. The final statement in Matthew 13, 58 is, And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. Now, it says he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

The parallel to this is found over in the Gospel of Mark in chapter six. And in verse five, at the same point, it says, And now he could do no mighty work there except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them, and he marveled because of their unbelief. Then he went about teaching in a circuit in the villages.

Now, the difference in the wording between Matthew and Mark, I think, catches my attention. It's interesting because Matthew simply says he did not do many mighty works there. But Mark says he could not do many mighty works there.

And in Matthew, it says because of their unbelief. In Mark, it says he marveled because of their unbelief. He did do a few healings, though.

It does say that in Mark. It says he could do no mighty work there except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. Frankly, where I go to church, if someone did that, that'd be fairly impressive.

I don't know that we'd say he couldn't do any mighty works there if he had healed a few people by laying hands on them. But in any case, Jesus was accustomed to doing more than that when he went places. But the unbelief of the people made it impossible for him to do as much as he would otherwise have done.

It may surprise you to learn that it is possible to limit God's ability to do things. It says of the children of Israel in Psalm 78, and it's referring apparently to the time when God was leading them in the wilderness and wanted them to go into the promised land, but they did not because of their unbelief. It says in Psalm 78 and verse 41, Yes, again and again they tempted God and limited the Holy One of Israel.

They limited the Holy One of Israel. Now, it could be understood that in their own thinking, they limited him. That is, they put restrictions on what they thought he could

do, which was a foolish miscalculation on their part.

However, it's entirely possible that it means they put limits on what God could do and he couldn't do more. Now, when you think about it, there is truth in either of those. The Jewish people who were supposed to go into the promised land, they did in their thinking limit God.

They didn't think he could pull it off. They didn't think he could bring them safely into the land. But their not thinking it made it impossible for him to do it because they would not act beyond their own level of faith.

And Jesus could not do many miracles in his own hometown. They limited him by their unbelief. Now, that does suggest that there are things that God would do if we had more faith, that he does not do or maybe cannot do because we don't have faith.

The idea that God can't do something seems to offend our sense of omnipotence. But the Bible makes it very clear there are things that God cannot do. Even though we say that God is omnipotent, meaning essentially he can do all things, there are implied limitations.

He cannot lie. The Bible tells us that in Titus 1, 2. He cannot be tempted with evil, according to James, chapter 1. God cannot deny himself, Paul told Timothy. There are things God cannot do.

And one thing he cannot do is violate his own principles. And one of his principles is that he will act mightily on behalf of those who trust in him. And therefore, by choosing to be one who does not trust in him, a person limits what God can do for them because he cannot go against his own principles.

And by being one who does trust in him, you remove any limits to what God can do on your behalf. God is somewhat limited by our faith because his policy is to act on behalf of those who trust in him and who cry out to him. Remember, James said you have not because you ask not, with reference to prayer.

And in chapter 1 of James, he says concerning asking God for wisdom, he said, But let a man ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavers is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.

A man can't expect to receive anything from the Lord if their faith is not really in God. So you might hope that God will do something for you, but if you have no confidence in God himself and no relationship of trust with him, there are limits to what he can do for you. And so we find it illustrated in the life of Jesus.

He could do no mighty works or very few mighty works in Nazareth because of their lack

of faith. And he marveled at their lack of faith. God can even be astonished sometimes.

Anyway, we will read more into Matthew 14 next time. I hope you'll be able to join us as we continue our study through this book and our study in the life of Christ.