

The Opposition by the Nazarenes
Matthew 13:53-58
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The parables of Matthew 13 conclude with Matthew 13:52 and the remainder of Matthew will describe the continuing opposition to Jesus. While Jesus taught in parables in order to hide understanding about the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to those who were against Him (Matthew 13:11-13), His opponents will eventually plot His death.

The next instance in the growing opposition to Jesus are those whom He grew up among in Nazareth, followed immediately by the opposition to Jesus by Herod in Matthew 14. From the common Jew, to the Roman leadership, to the Jewish religious leaders, the antagonism to Christ expands.

The departure from Capernaum (13:53)

Matthew 13:53 is another transitional verse in Matthew's account of the life of Jesus. The phrase "*When Jesus had finished these parables*" not only ends the third discourse in this book, but is the type of wording that Matthew uses to move to the next major section of his gospel.

We find this at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:28, "*When Jesus had finished these words.*" We find this at the end of Jesus' instructions to the disciples in Matthew 11:1, "*When Jesus had finished giving instructions.*" We find this at the end of His teaching in Matthew 19:1, "*When Jesus had finished these words.*" Finally, we find this at the end of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 26:1, "*When Jesus had finished all these words.*"

This verse transitions the reader from the teaching in parables about the kingdom of heaven to the growing opposition to Jesus beginning in Nazareth. The place where Jesus "*departed from*" was the house from where He had taught the last four parables (Matthew 13:36). This house was the house He left to sit by the sea when he gave the first four parables (Matthew 13:1). He had entered this house in Matthew 9:28, which was in Capernaum, where Jesus had settled (Matthew 4:13). It very likely was the house that belonged to Peter in Matthew 8:14.

We can therefore reasonably conclude that Jesus left Peter's home where He had been staying for some time. Jesus did not have His own home but relied on what was provided by others. "*The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*" (Matthew 8:20).

The disbelief by the Nazarenes (13:54-57a)

Matthew 13:54 informs us that Jesus came to His hometown, which was obviously the town of Nazareth. Luke 4:16 says, “*He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up*” (cf. Matthew 2:23; 4:13; Mark 6:1-6). Nazareth was a town on the northern ridge of the Jezreel Valley in Lower Galilee. It was between the Mediterranean Sea and the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee, slightly closer to the Sea of Galilee. While we don’t know the exact route that Jesus would have taken to walk to Nazareth, it would have been close to a twenty mile hike from 700 feet below sea level to 1,400 feet above sea level.

Each town like Nazareth had a synagogue and it would be normal for a teacher like Jesus to be granted the opportunity to teach in the synagogue. Matthew described Jesus as teaching in other synagogues earlier in his account, in Capernaum in Matthew 12:9, and throughout all of Galilee in Matthew 4:23. Therefore, it would be expected that Jesus would teach in the synagogue in His hometown. The imperfect tense used for “*began teaching*” implies that He taught on more than one occasion in Nazareth.

The response of those with Jesus in the synagogue in His hometown consisted of a series of five rhetorical questions, each challenging His authority:

1. “*Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?*”

Clearly, the teaching of Jesus was unlike any other teacher that the residents of Nazareth had ever heard. Matthew describes those listening to Jesus as astonished or amazed. This amazement at His teaching was seen as early as the Sermon on the Mount (7:28-29), where it was based upon Him teaching with authority, unlike their scribes.

In Nazareth, the amazement was certainly based upon His wisdom and His miraculous powers. It may also be in response to listening to someone they had known since His childhood. They were aware of His humble background and could have been shocked by His powerful teaching. There is an implication that Jesus veiled His wisdom from the Jews, at least in Nazareth, to some degree (outside of the temple in Luke 2:46-47), for them to be so shocked by Jesus.

They also were likely aware of His lack of rabbinical training, which made His teaching even more remarkable for the residents of Nazareth. “*The Jews then were astonished, saying ‘How has this man become learned, having never been educated?’*” (John 7:15).

In addition to the wisdom of His teaching, the people were also amazed at His miraculous powers. Obviously, the Nazarenes had the opportunity to observe His miracles, and possibly some of the residents had traveled to other areas where Jesus had done miracles. In the parallel account in Mark, we find that Jesus did some miracles in Nazareth *“He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them”* (Mark 6:5). Even these limited number of miracles astonished them.

It cannot be missed that there was never a controversy about whether Jesus performed miracles. The miracles of Jesus were undeniable and compelling. They were uniquely different from what alleged faith healers claim to do today. When Jesus healed, He did so immediately, totally, and everywhere. His miracles were of many types of organic diseases, that is, physical ailments where an organ of the body has a defect. Jesus never healed anyone whose body part was sound but for some reason not functioning well. Healings of organic diseases, such as a withered hand, crippled legs, leprosy, blindness, an ear that had been sliced off, are undeniable and dramatic. The healings that are claimed today are not of the same category and leave open the question of their direct cause or even if a healing had occurred at all.

The objection to the miracles of Jesus leading up to the story has not been the question of whether Jesus received the ability to perform miracles, but rather this question of *“where did this man get this?”* The answer the Pharisees gave was, *“He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons”* (Matthew 9:34; cf. 10:25; 12:24). The Nazarenes did not deliver this same accusation but they clearly questioned the source of His miracles, thus failing to acknowledge the power of God as the obvious source and rightful One to be praised for such remarkable deeds.

2. *“Is this not the carpenter’s son?”*

Nazareth was not so populated for this to be anything other than a rhetorical question. Of course they knew that Jesus was the son of Joseph, who worked as a carpenter. Mark 6:3 records, *“Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?”* Taken together, we can see they referred to both Joseph and Jesus as being carpenters by trade, which would be common for a son to follow his father in his trade. The reference to Jesus as *“the carpenter’s son”* using the definite article implies there was only one carpenter in Nazareth.

The Greek word translated as carpenter (TEKTON) means simply “builder.” It could even be understood as “handyman” or “contractor” in today’s terms. In the first century this would likely involve working with stone as well as with wood. Before Jesus embarked upon His public ministry He served others as a craftsman, just as His earthly father had done. Since there is indirect evidence that Joseph had passed away by the time Jesus had begun His ministry (cf. John 19:26-27), Jesus may have been the carpenter of Nazareth.

3. *“Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?”*

Jesus’ mother and brothers had been referenced earlier in Matthew 12:46-50 and now their names are recorded. The lack of reference to Joseph further implies that He had passed away by this time. It appears that Jesus was the only one of His family that no longer resided in Nazareth at this time.

John informs us that the brothers of Jesus were not followers of Jesus during His public ministry, *“For not even His brothers were believing in Him”* (John 7:5). Even though they grew up with Him, they were resistant to believe in Him. Later, Paul teaches that the resurrected Christ appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7). By the time of the ascension of Jesus into heaven, these brothers had become believers and joined the disciples in the upper room, *“These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers”* (Acts 1:14).

Later we will find James serving as a leader of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. Judas (Jude 1:1) and James (James 1:1) would each write an epistle that would be included in the canonical text of the New Testament. These four are called Jesus’ brothers by the Nazarenes, which would have been meant in a literal sense, thus contradicting the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary.

4. *“And His sisters, are they not all with us?”*

This is further evidence opposing the perpetual virginity of Mary. Such a doctrine is related to an unbiblical exaltation of Mary that ascribes attributes to her that only apply to Jesus, such as her virgin birth (the so-called “immaculate conception”), her ascension (the so-called “bodily assumption of Mary”), and her interceding on our behalf (cf. Romans 8:34). The phrasing of this statement (*“are they not all with us?”*) implies that there were more than one or two sisters of Jesus.

5. *“Where then did this man get all these things?”*

This is the summary statement against Jesus. Since His upbringing and life was so common, that He was from a small, insignificant town, that they found it difficult to imagine that His authority was real. Contrary to the fanciful childhood miracles of a few later apocryphal writings about Jesus, there could not have been anything unusual about His life as *“Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men”* (Luke 2:52).

Because of the incongruence between what they thought they knew of Jesus and what they saw with His wisdom and miraculous powers, they reject Him in unbelief. Matthew 13:57 states, *“they took offense at Him.”* This is the opposite of faith in Him and has been translated in a number of ways: rejected Him, stumbled at Him, turned against Him, were upset with Him, and were scandalized by Him (a transliteration of the Greek word SKANDALIZO). This describes a settled intention to dismiss His authority, even though they heard His great wisdom and saw His miraculous powers.

The residents of this town responded to Christ in the same way as those of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matthew 11:20-24). The Pharisees also were described as taking offense at Jesus in Matthew 15:12. Every time a person is offended (SKANDALIZO) in the New Testament, Jesus is who they are offended by.

This response is described in 1 Peter 2:7-8, *“This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,’ and, ‘A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE’; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.”* Peter quotes Isaiah 8:14-15 as being fulfilled by the response of those stumbling over Jesus and taking offense at Him. Those of Nazareth were the ones that Jesus spoke about in the parable of the sower, *“when anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart”* (Matthew 13:19).

The declaration by Jesus (13:57b)

Normally in life, famous people are honored by their hometown. Streets are named after these native sons, monuments are erected, and awards are given. This is even more true when the town is small and insignificant, for it brings notoriety to a place often overlooked. This was not the case with Jesus.

The reason Jesus was not honored in His hometown was because He was a prophet. This is obviously a statement by Jesus calling Himself a prophet, in response to their offense. Like their forefathers before them, they rejected the prophet of God, *“Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and it was your fathers who killed them”* (Luke 11:47).

Jesus was not only without honor in His hometown but also *“in his own household.”* Mark 6:4 also adds, *“among his own relatives.”* This is obviously a reference to the brothers of Jesus, if not also to other family members. One’s family is often not responsive to the followers of the Lord. Family and household relationships in no way guarantees that the soil of our family members is good soil. *“A man’s enemies will be the members of his household”* (Matthew 10:36).

The determination by Jesus (13:58)

Jesus did not do many miracles in Nazareth because of the unbelief of its citizens. Mark 6:5 informs us of the few miracles that He did in the town, *“He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them.”* So there was clearly a cause and effect relationship between the relatively few miracles in Nazareth and the lack of faith of the residents.

Modern day faith healers have used Matthew 13:58 and Mark 6:5 to claim that miracles of God require faith on the part of the recipient. Therefore, any supposed prophecy of healing that they make is predicated upon the person having a sufficient amount of faith in order for God to deliver the person from whatever ailment from which they may suffer.

However, Mark’s words that Jesus *“could do no miracle there”* should not be understood as either absolute or necessarily constricting His miraculous power. Mark states that Jesus did do some miracles in Nazareth and the Gospels record many miracles that occur without expectation of faith at all. Jesus’ miracles of nature were certainly not anticipated by anyone. The healings of demon possessed people occur without faith. Those who were dead were raised back to life by Jesus apart from faith. Of the ten lepers that Jesus healed in Luke 17:11-19, only one had faith.

Since faith was certainly not essential for Jesus to heal anyone, what Jesus did in Nazareth was His choice. Doing only a few miracles had nothing to do with an inability of the power of Jesus based on their unbelief, but rather on His choice to limit His healing for those who had already rejected His message.

This is the final recorded visit to Nazareth as the people there did not receive Jesus. Jesus not only limited His miracles in response to their unbelief, He limited His teaching and His presence. The miracles did nothing to deliver anyone into the kingdom of heaven. The miracles served to validate what Jesus taught and who Jesus was. Once Jesus was opposed by the Nazarenes, there was no longer any greater purpose for His miracles. Their opposition did not divest Him of power but rather resulted in decisions by Jesus to move on in light of their opposition. His choice was based upon the mission that He was called to, just as he chose to not turn bread into stones simply to show that He could (cf. Matthew 4:3-4).

Conclusion

Jesus hid His teaching from those who had rejected Him by speaking in parables and now Jesus hid His miraculous powers from those who had rejected Him in Nazareth. Those from Nazareth responded in unbelief not just because of their familiarity with Jesus or their jealousy over His popularity, but because of their rebellion against God. Jesus was a prophet of God, but also the Son of Man and the only way to the Father (John 14:6).

There are unique impediments to ministry to people who we have known from the time we were young since no prophet is welcome in his hometown. While we are not prophets of God, we are ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), and may have unique opportunities for ministry to those from our hometown and from our family. Our family may dismiss us, but as with the brothers of Jesus, they may reconsider and repent at a later time.

We should recognize and be faithful with the opportunities the Lord has granted to us to represent Him among those who have known us for so long. For some of these relationships, the principle of 1 Peter 3:1 may be appropriate where the wife should minister to her unbelieving husband in a manner such that *“they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives.”*

In humility, we can be patient and deferential, knowing the challenges that such familiarity may bring and hopeful that the Lord may grant them the ears to hear about the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. God has chosen the place and the family that we would be born into and He is fully able to use us for His glory regardless of the obstacles that may be present. May we serve Him well among those whom the Lord put around us from our beginning.