Luke Lesson 11 (2019)

**JESUS REJECTED BY HIS HOMETOWN PEOPLE**

Luke 4:14-30

Key Verse: 4:24

“‘Truly I tell you,’ he continued, ‘no prophet is accepted in his hometown.’”

In the previous passages, 3:21-4:13, the author Luke described how Jesus was anointed and led by the Holy Spirit before launching his messianic ministry. After being baptized by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was tested by the devil in the wilderness. In today’s passage, Dr. Luke describes how Jesus began his ministry in Galilee. Unlike other gospel writers, Luke introduces Jesus’ visit of his hometown, Nazareth, where Jesus declared himself to be the Messiah (14-21). Surprisingly, however, Jesus was rejected and almost murdered by his hometown people (22-30). Among all Gospel writers, Luke is the only one who recorded today’s event. Let’s think about how Jesus started his messianic work in Galilee and why he was rejected by his hometown people. I hope and pray we can learn important spiritual lessons.

Look at verses 14 and 15. “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.” Verses 14 and 15 are a brief summary of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, which is described in 4:14-9:50. Galilee is the place, in which Jesus grew up and spent most of his life and ministry. After defeating the devil’s temptation in the wilderness, Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. This shows that Jesus, who was fully divine and fully human, didn’t do his work all by himself. Instead, he was always led by God the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit. And he became very popular among the people in Galilee.

What did Jesus do in Galilee? Verse 15 describes that “He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.” Even though Jesus had done many miracles in Galilee (23), Jesus’ miracles were not mentioned. Instead, Luke records that the main focus of Jesus’ ministry was the ministry of God’s words, teaching God’s words in their synagogues.

Jesus, who is omniscient and infinite in knowledge, could have taught people about many things in their synagogues. But the most distinctive feature of Jesus’ earthly ministry is the ministry of God’s word. We find that Jesus being engaged with people in Bible study either through personal dialogue or through a group discussion. Why? It’s because the word of God has life-giving and life-transforming power (1 Pe. 1:24-25). Jesus said to his disciples in John 6:63, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life.”

Some people may argue by saying that the Bible is an ancient book. Yes. But the Bible is not just an ancient book. God still speaks to us very personally through the Bible and changes people’s lives even today. Hebrews 4:12 states, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrows; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” I am sure that most of us have experienced the life-giving and life-transforming power of God’s words in our personal lives. Therefore, we, as followers of Jesus, should continue to give our first priority to the ministry of God’s words.

In verses 16-30, Luke, after giving the general overview of Jesus’ Galilean ministry, focuses on what happened when Jesus visited his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. Look at verses 16-17a. “He went into the synagogue, as was his custom He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.” Apparently, Nazareth was not the first place Jesus visited in Galilee. Verse 23a indicates that prior to his visit in his hometown, Jesus had visited several towns and villages in Galilee, where he became very popular by teaching people in their synagogues, healing the sick and driving out demons. When Jesus went to Nazareth, he probably went first to see his mother Mary, his brothers and sisters. Then on the Sabbath, Jesus went to the synagogue to worship, as was his custom.

Apparently, the synagogue he went into was the same synagogue, in which he grew up. He was familiar with most of the members of this synagogue, including the synagogue ruler. A typical synagogue service began with an opening prayer for God’s blessing and then worshipers recited the traditional confession of faith, followed by the reading of the Scripture and a brief message, given by a rabbi or priest, sometimes by a visiting rabbi. It is certain that his townspeople heard rumors of Jesus’ popularity in nearby villages through his teaching in their synagogues. Therefore, it’s most likely that on that Sabbath Jesus was asked to read the Scripture. As he stood up to read, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He then picked to read a number of verses from Isaiah 61:1-2. Look at verses 17b-19. “Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of the sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’”

Look at verse 20. “Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.” I am sure that there was a moment of silence in the synagogue, indicating that everyone in the synagogue expected to hear from Jesus. Jesus, sitting on his chair, began to give his sermon by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (21) We don’t know exactly what Jesus said in his impromptu message. But we know at least that by saying to them “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”, Jesus was declaring that the words he had read to them had finally come to fulfillment in his own person.

Certainly, Jesus must have expounded the meaning of the words of Isaiah, applying the basic principles of Bible study, such as ***exegesis and hermeneutics.*** Isaiah 61:1-2 is the passage that prophesied the mission of the Messiah. According to the prophet Isaiah, when the Messiah comes, he would proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the prisoners, recovery of the sight for the blind and release to the oppressed, and thus he would bring the new age of the Lord’s favor into this world, the age of God’s grace and salvation.

By the virtue of God’s grace through Jesus who suffered and died on the cross for our sins, we are set free and no longer will be under the dominion of sin, death or evil. All we have to do is to simply believe in Jesus the Messiah by trusting and obeying him. This truly is amazing mercy of our God to all people. Now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation for all people (2 Corinthians 6:2).
Now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation for all people (2 Corinthians 6:2). As a matter of fact, Jesus was declaring that he was the one, anointed by God with the Spirit to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah by saying “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

How did Jesus’ hometown people respond to Jesus and his words? Look at verse 22. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son?’ they asked.” Probably, it was Jesus’ first public sermon in their synagogue. Perhaps, they had never heard a wonderful and gracious message as that of Jesus. They said in unison, *“Praise the Lord! Jesus, we didn’t know you were such a great speaker.”*

However, they also had difficulty in accepting Jesus’ words. They were amazed but they were also skeptical. They asked, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son” (22b) They were very familiar with Jesus and his family members. They were saying to one another, *“We know him from his youth. He is a good and nice person. But he is only human. How dare he say that he is the Messiah? Isn’t he going too far?”*

They were right in saying that Jesus was human. Yet, they were wrong in saying that Jesus was only human. Even though these hometown people couldn’t point out any wrong doing in Jesus as he grew up, it would not have been possible for them to acknowledge that he was divine. After all. Jesus probably didn’t perform any miracle when he grew up in Nazareth. But the fact that they could not acknowledge Jesus as the divine is a serious spiritual problem. When I recently visited Istanbul Turkey, a Muslim tour guide, who seems to have some Bible knowledge, said that even though she believes Jesus as a great prophet, she does not believe that he is the divine, the Son of God. I found that her spiritual blindness is to see only the human side of Jesus, not being able to see the divine side of Jesus. As a matter of fact, this kind of spiritual blindness is common among so many people. The people in Jesus’ hometown had known Jesus for a long time. But they failed to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God.

So how can we know that Jesus is divine, not just human? Humanly, it’s impossible. We need God’s special revelation through the Holy Spirit. In fact, Jesus’ hometown people remained spiritually blind due to their unbelief. In verses 23-27, Jesus challenged them to overcome their unbelief.

***First, Jesus challenged their sign seeking mentality (23).*** Look at verse 23. “Jesus said to them, ‘Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’” According to Jesus’ analysis, these people were thinking that Jesus should prove his divinity *by doing the miracles just as he did in other Galilean towns, like healing* the sick and driving out demons (Mk. 1:21-34). It’s just like someone who says, *“Show me God, then I will believe.”*

However, Jesus didn’t want to prove his divinity just by performing miracles for them. Why not? It’s because sign-seeking is the sign of unbelief. In fact, he said to the sign seeking Pharisees and teachers of the law, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” (Mt. 12:29) When we seek signs or miracles, we are actually putting God to the test. After all, God had already displayed his divine power and wisdom through his amazing work of creation of the world (Ro. 1:20). We don’t need more miracles to have faith God. What we need is to learn to trust him more in all circumstances.

***Second, Jesus challenged them to overcome their human familiarity****.* Look at verse 24. “Truly, I tell you,’ he continued, ‘no prophet is accepted in his hometown.’” Their familiarity with human Jesus was actually a great blessing that could be a good resource to know him better since Jesus lived among them for so long. However, when they put too much confidence in their own understanding of human Jesus, it actually worked against them. They remained spiritually blind because they thought that they knew Jesus too well. Unfortunately, however, this kind of spiritual blindness was common among the people of Israel. As a matter of fact, there were so many excellent God’s prophets in Israel, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Elisha, etc. But none of these prophets was accepted and welcomed in Israel. I grew up as a youngest son in my family. So, when I became a Christian, my old siblings wouldn’t recognize my changed life for a while. Why? It’s because they thought they knew me too well. Human familiarity often blinds us. We need to be careful that our old understanding of Jesus may not hinder us from knowing him more and deeper.

In verses 25-27, Jesus, in order to prove his point, gives two examples. Look at verses 25-27. “I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet, Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian.” In the times of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, the people of Israel revealed their unbelief in their difficult situation, but the widow in Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, displayed their faith in God of Israel.

In fact, they could have become humble before God and trusted in him through their poverty and disease. Especially when the general Naaman, who became leprous, came to Elisha, Elisha didn’t even come to see him. Instead, he sent his servant to tell Naaman to wash his body seven times in the Jordan river. Naaman was furious due to his pride. But when he bent his pride and washed his body seven times, his skin became as smooth as that of a newborn baby. What Jesus was trying to tell his hometown people through these stories is that they also needed to humble themselves before God and put their trust in him no matter what, like the widow in Sidon and the general Naaman in Syria.

How did Jesus’ hometown people respond? Did they humble themselves? No. Look at verses 28-30. “All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.” Surely, Jesus’ words made them angry, so angry that they became almost insane and murderous. They took Jesus and drove him to the edge of the hill in order to throw him off the cliff. But Jesus miraculously escape from them. Why did they become so angry and ready to kill Jesus? It’s because of their pride.

Let me close the sermon. In today’s passage, we learn that one of the most important aspects of Jesus’ messianic ministry is the ministry of God’s word. When Jesus visited his hometown, he also taught God’s words to his hometown people, declaring that he was the one who was appointed by God with Spirit to proclaim good news to the poor. Why only to the poor? It’s because even though God is merciful and compassionate, it’s only those who are humble who can accept God’s message of salvation. Those who are proud and self-righteous in their inmost thoughts end up rejecting God’s blessings. It’s also surprising to see that even though Jesus returned to his hometown in the power of the Holy Spirit, his words could find no place in the hearts of his hometown people because of their pride. Their pride turned to anger and their anger turned to murderous act.

Someone said that the sin of pride is the root of all sins. Pride is very common among people, including believers. Yet, pride is often very subtle and hard to detect because it’s often hidden or disguised. By nature, we tend to exalt ourselves over others. Even though we may want to be humble, it’s hard not to be proud before God. After all, we live in society, in which people try to exalt themselves and being humble is often considered to be dumb and not smart at all. Therefore, it’s easy for us to think that it’s okay to be proud. We don’t think being proud up to certain degree is no big deal at all. But the truth is that God opposes the proud and exalts the humble (Jas. 4:6-7; 1 Pe. 6:5-6).

In fact, when we carefully look around, we see that many people are ruined because of their pride, but those who are humble are honored (Prov. 29:23). It’s also an irony that those who consider themselves humble before God are actually proud people. It teaches us that we can be humble only when we have the holy fear of God in our hearts. Pride is often the true reason why we feel rejected and why we won’t admit our mistakes and faults. Gospel is simple but not shallow. It’s deep. Therefore, we need to look deeply in our hearts and motives to recognize our pride and self-righteousness. Jesus is too precious to lose. When we are proud, we lose him. It’s only when we are humble, we can hold him. He will fill us with abundance of heavenly blessings. If we remain proud, we are actually rejecting Jesus. May we strive to be humble before God moment by moment so that God’s blessing through Jesus may dwell and overflow within us.