

# How Shall We Respond?

Mark 6:1-6 (ESV)

October 13, 2002

“Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.’ And 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.”

If “he marveled because of their unbelief,” what does he think about us? How have we responded to his gospel, his person, and his grace? With belief or unbelief? With gratitude or ingratitude? With faithfulness or offense? And more importantly, how shall we respond? How shall we respond today? How shall we respond tomorrow? How shall we respond the rest of our lives?

The good news of the gospel standing in, behind, and underneath today’s reading is that Jesus preaches with the grace of God, gathers followers with the reconciliation of God, teaches with the authority of God, heals with the power of God, governs the created order with the word of God, and casts out the forces of evil with the word of God. In short, he is the Son of God. Apart from this, his rejection at his hometown would have been of no significance. His concern about it would have made no sense. But with this great truth, his rejection is of tremendous significance. They brushed aside the Son of God. They questioned the word of God. They dismissed the will of God. They laughed in the face of God. And the question for us is: how shall we respond?

We need to be clear that all of this rejection happened in church! What happened in today’s reading was not out in the streets of the city. It was not in some arena or coliseum. It was not at the local university. It was on the Sabbath, in the synagogue, when Jesus began to teach, that people heard him, were astonished, and took offense at him. It was among the people of God, who were gathered on the day of worship and intent on hearing the word of God, that Jesus met his opposition. And this is not simply a history lesson. This is a question aimed right at us: how shall we respond?

“Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?” The people seemed to recognize the obvious facts about Jesus. They admitted his erudition, his wisdom, and even his power. They were led to ask the right questions about the source of all of that. But somehow, they arrived at the wrong answer. Somehow, he did not fit their preconceptions. Somehow, they grew contemptuous of Christ. “Is not this the

carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” Who does he think he is? Whom does he think he is kidding? The nerve of it all! How shall we respond?

“And they took offense at him.” Even as the Pharisees had already held counsel with the Herodians, how to destroy him, and even as his own disciples would fail to understand him and would eventually betray and desert him, so now do the residents of his home town reject him. This is nothing less than the shadow of the cross falling across the path of his life. As he would finally be rejected then, so already is he rejected now by his very own. How shall we respond?

“And 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.” This seems to be an odd way to put it. It hardly seems that faithlessness could limit the power of Christ, and in fact he did heal a few people. But it may mean that the point of miracles is usually not the miracles themselves. The point of miracles has to do with the identity of the miracle worker and therefore with faith in the same. Since these people had already taken offense at Jesus, since these people had already made up their minds, since these people had no real interest in him, it was hardly appropriate to do any miracles. If even the possibility of faith is ruled out in advance, there is no point to doing any mighty work. How shall we respond?

It must take a lot to make Jesus Christ marvel. But the people at his hometown church did it. It must take a lot to surprise the son of God. But they left him with little to say and almost nothing to do. You would not think that you could stump the Lord of the Universe, but that is what happened in today’s reading. One little church almost did him in. No, they did not completely shut him down. He got in a few words edgewise. “He laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.” But by and large he marveled because of their unbelief.

Jesus had been out, but now he came home. What did he find there? Well, there was a little church. It was the same as when he left. Everything went okay at first. They invited him to speak, and he did. Then everything started to fall apart. And yet, here is the very point of the gospel: though they rejected him, Christ never rejected them; though they despised him, Christ never stopped loving them; though they injured and mocked him, Christ never cursed them.

God, who comes to us in Jesus Christ, loves us even to the point of suffering and of accepting our hatred and rejection. How great is the love of God! Jesus showed it on the cross and beforehand in his hometown church.

Jesus Christ came to church, and they were not interested. He preached the kingdom of God to the nation of Israel, and their vision was not stirred or lifted a bit. He preached the greatness of the love of God, but they were untouched, unmoved, and unimpressed, and cold-hearted. How shall we respond?

Now is the time for us to hear the story and to act upon it! This story not only exemplifies the whole ministry of Jesus Christ but also stands as a stark warning against complacency and rejection precisely within the church. That is why this story was remembered. Look at what is going on here. These people are not Gentiles! These people are not unclean lepers, or demoniacs, or dead! These people are not Roman sympathizers, or pompous Pharisees! Unlike most of the people whom Jesus met, these were good, solid, hometown, blood-related, church-going people! And these were the ones who rejected him outright, turned him down flat. That is the problem. Everyone else Jesus had met was an outsider by any definition, and he had brought them in and made them insiders to the kingdom of God. These people were already insiders—his relatives and hometown people—yet by the hardness of their hearts they took their stand and remained firm as outsiders.

It is sad, frightening, and incomprehensible. Yet, there it is, in the middle of the gospel according to Mark, remembered and preserved down through all the centuries not to bash those hometown people—there would be no point to that—but to raise the question for each generation, for every congregation, and for every Christian believer—Do you see yourself in this story?

Is it I, Lord, who has betrayed you? Is it I, who has rejected you? Is it I, who does not like who you are, what you say, and what you do? Is it I, Lord, in the midst of church and prayer and song and worship, who has declined your invitation into the kingdom, who has preferred to limp rather than be healed, who has rejected your gospel and forgiveness, who has belittled your family? Is it I, Lord, because of whose unbelief you marvel?

Are we the church, Lord, where complacency outweighs vital faith? Are we the church full of good Christian insiders who confirm ourselves as kingdom outsiders? Are we more interested in who we are and how we do things, than in who you are and how we can minister to those about us?

The story raises, as sharply as possible, the question: how do we, and how shall we, respond to the grace of God in Jesus Christ?

Here are some positive possibilities. First, we can respond to the grace of God by hearing, believing, and obeying the word of God. It is possible that God will act outside the ministry of the word to lead us into grace, but history shows that it is unlikely. If we are interested in the grace of God—which is a sign of grace already—we do well to expose ourselves frequently and regularly to the reading and preaching of the gospel. God has assigned this as a means of grace. Here we both receive grace and respond to it. What the good news seeks first of all is hearing, believing, and obeying. If Christ marveled because of their unbelief, let us pray that he graces us with belief and faith.

Second, we can respond to God's grace with our whole selves, heart, soul, mind, and strength, our whole lives. Several years ago, at a presbytery meeting, I heard an excellent sermon by an elder from Charlotte, Price Gwynn, on tithing, giving ten percent to God. He told us that as a young man, he had been reluctant to commit to this or even to try it. Years later, he said, you could not pry him away from it with a crowbar. This was a meaningful personal response. He realized that he was a sinner, always. He said he never loved his neighbors as he ought. One thing he could do was tithe. Moreover, he said that tithing is God's plan. It is in the Bible. It never has to be revised or updated. Any other system of giving is your plan.

Third, we can respond to God's grace with action and evangelism. We live in a world that is increasingly indifferent to, or even hostile toward, the Christian faith and church. In many ways, the church in America is in a mission setting. We are surrounded by people with no knowledge of, or commitment to, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We in the Christian church are called to be more active, earnest, and diligent than ever in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, that means inviting people here, to Grace Covenant, to come to worship and make commitment to God and Christ by joining the church. The best way we can strengthen the church universal is to strengthen Grace Covenant.

Frank Harrington, preaching on this text at Peachtree Presbyterian Church five years ago, said, "What the church believes defines who it is. You have to believe something before you can be something. What we believe about Jesus Christ is the central conviction that has driven the church throughout its history....A church grows when its members, out of the foundation of their personal commitment to Jesus Christ, reaches out to others, invites them to come and share in the fellowship of the church, to be regular participants in small group Bible studies, come to Sunday School, [and] be regular in worship." Then he asked, "When was the last time you shared with anyone what Jesus Christ has meant to you?"

He went on to tell of a time that had happened. "A woman, a mother, sat in the office of a university pastor, and she was upset and she was really upset. She had sent her daughter to a prestigious university so that she would become a good lawyer and, being a graduate from that university, she would be admitted to a prestigious law school. And she thought it was a good idea, and had written the university pastor about it, for her daughter to get involved with some of the campus religious groups. And in her letter, she told the pastor it would be good for her. It would put her in contact with students with similar values. But now her daughter was in her senior year and she had informed her mother of a very disturbing thing. She was not going to law school, although her grades were near perfect. She

decided that she was going to go to Bolivia to be a teacher and work in a school where poor children were taught! And the mother, wiping her tears, said, ‘No one in our family has ever done anything like this! I just can’t figure it out, how she got all of this stuff in her head! We are Presbyterians, for God’s sake, from Atlanta, Georgia! For heaven’s sake, what happened to her?’ Well,” he continued, “I’ll tell you. It happened, for heaven’s sake, because somebody told her the story. Their story about Jesus Christ” (Dr. W. Frank Harrington, “What I Believe About Personal Evangelism,” in *Peachtree Presbyterian Pulpit*, Series: “What I Believe!” No. 5. Atlanta, Georgia: Peachtree Presbyterian Church, March 16, 1997). And so we return to his previous question: “When was the last time you shared with anyone what Jesus Christ has meant to you?”

Jesus continues to come to be with us here in church yet today. Of that we can be sure. He comes in the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word. What will he think of us when he comes to be with us? Will he marvel because of our unbelief? Or will he, by the riches of his grace, grant that we may be found believing and obeying his gospel? How shall we respond to the grace of God in Jesus Christ?

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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