

## **Can you handle the Truth?**

by Rev. Robert Griffith

### **Luke 4:14-21**

*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. He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day 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. 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 sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” 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. He began by saying to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”*

You may have seen the movie with Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise called ‘A Few Good Men.’ It’s a powerful movie with a very famous courtroom scene and within that scene was the most quote line from any movie in recent years. When Tom Cruise’s character (the prosecuting Attorney) demanded the truth, Jack Nicholson’s character retorted, “*You can’t handle the truth!*” Well our gospel reading today takes us to another scene many years ago where those listening could not handle the truth, and the One speaking was Jesus.

Encouraged by the assurance of His Father’s love at His Baptism, and strengthened by His victory over Satan in the wilderness, Jesus walked from the desert to His home area of Galilee, but no longer to be making doors, fence posts and tables in a carpenter’s shop. Never again did Jesus lift the tools of His former trade. Now He was equipped for the three years of His public ministry by the power of the Spirit.

In other words, there was a dimension of spiritual enabling about Him that even Christ had not known before His baptism. The descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove was no mere symbol. Our Lord had always been filled with the Spirit from the womb of Mary but because of this new, energizing endowment our Lord had become gifted and prepared for His public ministry. So in the next chapters of Luke’s gospel Jesus’ ministry of word and action is comprehensively described to us. Never had the world seen anything remotely like those next two years when the Lord took the initiative traveling slowly from one community in Galilee to another.

His ministry transformed that whole area, banishing disease from the place, and bringing the message of the Kingdom of God to Galilee – the reign of grace over the lives of men and women. So Luke tells us in chapter 4 of one particular Sabbath day in Nazareth and describes what happened in the local synagogue, the one Jesus had been attending for almost thirty years.

Jesus was principally known to them as the local carpenter, the son of Joseph. The congregation knew the names of the whole family. Now a remarkable change had taken place, but knowing Jesus as they did they couldn’t have been all that surprised. He had gone to the Jordan river, listened to John and some of the more ignorant people thought He had ‘got religious.’ There He had been baptized, and then He didn’t return home. He was missing for about six weeks, and then the stories began to trickle into Nazareth that He was actually preaching in different places in Galilee; more than that, He was healing the sick, and people everywhere were impressed by Him.

So when He entered the synagogue with his family this day, heads turned to look at Him, to see if now He dressed any differently, or looked more 'religious.' And would He preach to them? Then came the time in the service when favoured known men were permitted to speak and Jesus stood up and walked to the front. It was the moment they had hoped for; the atmosphere was electric. He asked for the scroll of the prophecy of Isaiah from its keeper and then He began to roll it from one staff to the other until he found the passage He wanted to read to them. It was the opening verses of the sixty-first chapter. These are the words Jesus read aloud to the silent congregation:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* (Luke 4:18-19).

Everybody knew that passage. It was one of the most famous passages in the Old Testament. They knew Isaiah had written these words, but they also knew the real speaker of those words was the Servant of the Lord, the one God had promised to send to the people of Israel. It was the Messiah, and when He came all their troubles would be gone and all their problems would be solved. They were all waiting for what would happen next. He sat down in the front because preaching was done from a sitting position. He looked at them, and their eyes were all glued to Him as He proceeded to preach the shortest sermon in history. After reading that well known prophetic text from Isaiah, Jesus simply said, *"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."* (v.21).

Only eight words, but this one-sentence sermon was unprecedented. Jesus was effectively saying:

*"I am the grand finale; I am the completion; I am the fulfilment of God's plan to save you. Everything Moses wrote in his books, everything David wrote in the psalms, everything the prophets promised in their preaching and prophecies - that God's suffering servant would be born of a virgin and live in Nazareth, that He would be betrayed, beaten and bruised, and that His bones would not be broken ... all of it pointed to Me. I am the Seed of the woman, I am the Son of David; I am the Suffering Servant. I am the One God anointed: In the Hebrew language, I am called Messiah; in the Greek I am called Christ."*

This sermon in Nazareth may be the shortest sermon ever preached, but with those eight simple words Jesus was claiming to be the One whom God had promised to send ... not just one of many that God was promising to send, but THE one.

A little later in His ministry, Jesus made it even clearer when He said: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me."* (John 14:6). Now that is just about the most politically incorrect verse we could quote today, outside and even inside the Church!

I can still remember back to the funeral of US President Gerald Ford in 2006, where the preacher read the first half of that verse, but skipped over the part which said: *"No one comes to the Father except through Me."* If he had included it, it may have been the main news story of the day. Franklin Graham (Billy Graham's son) was on the Larry King show some years ago. At one point in the interview, Larry asked Franklin if Christ is the only way to God. The answer is yes, but Franklin Graham choked badly, mumbled something and didn't answer the question. He just couldn't say it. Now we need to say it with love, but we need to say it - because it's true: Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father, and there is no other way to God.

It is a tragic reality today that many preachers refuse to acknowledge the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. In this post-modern new age where truth is relative and everyone is right, the heart and soul of the Gospel is being preached less and less, in case we offend someone.

Well, in our passage today we see that this truth has been offending people since Jesus first spoke it that day back in His home town Church. Of course God is inclusive when it comes to His people. Jesus died for everyone. For God so loved THE WORLD that He gave His only son. But when it comes to His plan, God is exclusive; Jesus is the only way, the only One who brings release from sin, death and the power of the devil. But His offer of salvation and reconciliation to God is open to anyone and everyone who chooses to embrace His life, death and resurrection as their own.

When Jesus said, *“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,”* He was actually saying, *“I am the One who has come to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”* Every one of those phrases paints a different picture dripping with mercy, but each picture depicts the same scene: The Messiah was coming to release people from the power and penalty of sin. This was good news. It was the greatest news they could have ever heard. All are guilty because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Sin will always be a barrier in our relationship with a holy, pure, righteous God.

Jesus declared in this eight-word sermon that He (and only He) can get rid of our guilt. And He did. He kept God’s laws and had no guilt of His own. And then He took your guilt and mine on His back; He carried our guilt to the cross; He paid for our guilt with His blood and His death. Then He rose from the grave telling us His Father had accepted His payment for our sin and guilt.

So now God says to you and me: *“No guilt, no more. Your guilt is gone. Your conscience can’t plague you. The devil can’t accuse you. Sin can’t control you. Death can’t frighten you.”* How can we be sure? We can be sure because of three other words Jesus spoke – not in a synagogue but on a cross. Jesus said, *“IT IS FINISHED.”* Our guilt and shame is gone; we can be sure of it, because God, our Suffering Servant and Saviour says so!

Now this was the gospel – the good news – the best news any human being could ever hear. The long-awaited Messiah was here! Our redemption was near! God’s promise and plan to save, redeem and reconcile His lost children was now unfolding before their eyes that day. So you would expect that at the end of Jesus’ first sermon the whole Synagogue would have erupted in thunderous celebration and worship as they welcomed the long-awaited Christ. Well, let’s fast forward a few verses and see what actually happened when this truth was first preached and Jesus was revealed as our Saviour:

*“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.”* (Luke 4:28-30) What a transition! Verse 15: *“He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised Him.”* Verse 22: *“All spoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.”* But in the brief dialogue which followed, the hometown crowd really turned on Him. Jesus began His first sermon in adoration and praise, but ended it on the edge of a cliff about to be murdered!

Why is that? Why did these people want to kill Jesus? Why did they want to shut down this confronting teaching? Why have people always wanted to run from this truth? Why did the preacher at Gerald Ford’s funeral only quote the first half of John 14:6 and refuse to declare that Jesus is the only way to God? Why did the son of the great Billy Graham choke on national television and refuse to acknowledge this exclusive claim of Jesus Christ?

Well, the Apostle Paul answers this in Ephesians 6:11-13 with this warning:

*“Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”*

Satan will do all he can, at all times, to stop us from hearing the truth and acting on it. Satan knows better than any of us that when we finally accept that Jesus is the way, the Truth and the Life and that He provides the only doorway to eternal life in the presence of our God, he will pull out all stops to prevent us from going through that door and embracing that truth. The Apostle Paul even warned us that in the last days Satan would infiltrate the Church and there would be doctrines taught by demons from pulpits like this.

So why would Satan go to such lengths to prevent us from embracing the truth about Jesus? Because the moment we do, the Father of Lies, the archenemy of God has lost his grip on us. He can no longer control us by guilt or fear or shame. Because Jesus frees us from all that and more. Every one of us is born into a prison. We are all born as captives of sin and until we embrace the grace, forgiveness and freedom Christ secured for us, we remain trapped in our guilt, our shame and our fear. This should be the most attractive and celebrated truth in all of creation, but it’s not.

Even within the Church which bears Christ’s name, more and more preachers and teachers are refusing to proclaim that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. Some don’t even believe this foundational truth anymore themselves and have adopted an ‘all roads lead to Rome’ position which is more palatable to our post-modern Churches and communities. Jesus’ first sermon was a declaration to all prisoners and captives across all time: *“Freedom has come! The prison door is finally unlocked. Push on it and see. Embrace the wide open spaces of liberty and forgiveness and reconciliation. I have made this possible because I am the One. I am the Way. I am the Truth. I am the Life. I am God, the Son and your freedom is bought and paid for by Me. Now come, follow me as we take this good news to the whole world!”*

Friends, this is why we are still here. This is why the Church exists. This is why God has not wound up this broken, messed up world already. The mission of Christ has not been completed. The good news of His victory over Satan, sin and death needs to be heard by all. This is the only mission the Church has. At no point has God called us to build an institution or invite people to events. At no point has God commissioned us to build a Church. Jesus said, *“I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”* (Matt.16:18). Our calling, purpose and the reason for being here, is to lead people to Jesus ... so that Jesus, and Jesus alone can build His Church with us and for us.

Satan knows that and that’s why from the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry on earth until today, the power, the presence, the priority and the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ has been attacked, resisted, ignored, refuted and undermined at every point. The reaction Jesus received that day when He preached His first sermon is the same reaction I receive today from some of my colleagues in the Church and many outside the Church when I preach Christ crucified – as the one and only Saviour of the world.

Brothers and sisters, if we soften the Truth to make it more palatable to a lost world - we no longer have the gospel; and if we no longer have the gospel - then we no longer have the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes and we should close our doors and turn this into an art gallery. That would serve the community better than to be a Church where leading people to the person of Jesus Christ is no longer our highest priority and primary mission.