

LUKE 4:16–21. (EHV)

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As was his custom, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. [Isa. 61:1–2]

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 to tell them, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Some of you may be familiar with author James Herriot, which was the pen name for Alf Wight. Alf Wight wrote a series of books containing stories about veterinary practice, set in rural England in the second half of the 1900s. The stories were based on his own real life experiences as a veterinarian. Wight's books became immensely popular, which created some interesting situations for him. Tourists would show up at his practice while he was working, wanting to meet him and to have him sign their copies of his books. The craze for his books and the tourism they created meant that word about his books actually filtered back to some of his clients.

For instance, one time a BBC television crew descended on the town of Thirsk where Alf Wight worked to film a special on his rise to fame, after he already had published four books. After a long day of filming, toward evening the director asked Wight if he could talk to someone typical of one of the many colorful characters he described in his books. Wight directed him to a Mr. Hogg in the waiting room, who was a breeder of sheepdogs and an engaging conversationalist. The director started talking to Mr. Hogg and filming the conversation and Mr. Hogg ate the limelight right up. When the interview was over, Mr. Hogg sidled up to the director and whispered to him, "I heard that you wanted to talk to a local character. Is that right?"

"Yes," the director replied.

Mr. Hogg pointed in the direction of Alf Wight and said, "You should have a word with Mr. Wight. He's a very interestin' feller!"

"Oh yes?" the director asked, trying to keep his amusement to himself.

"Aye!" Mr. Hogg continued. "In fact, I'll tell you somethin'!" And he put his face even closer to the director's ear. "Don't let it go any further, but just between you and me, I've heard he's written a couple o' books!"

The country folk who lived closest to Alf Wight were among the last to find out he had authored some books, and even after they found out, they weren't the kind of people to go ga-ga over it and to make a big fuss out of it and embarrass their vet.

But what if Wight had quit his job once he made it big as an author? What if he had given televised presentations in London and had been on the radio, and then decided to go back to the city that had made him famous? What if he announced he was going to put on a seminar there

about how he became an author and about the real people behind the fake names in his stories? Do you think they would have been interested then? I think so.

So can you imagine what the scene was like for Jesus? He had already changed water into wine at the wedding at Cana, and now he had been going around preaching from synagogue to synagogue and everyone was raving about him. And now he makes it back to his hometown. And he's not just sneaking back for a quick, quiet visit. He has come on the Sabbath! He has come to preach at the synagogue he attended growing up! We can just imagine all the people that Jesus had grown up with flocking to the synagogue to see what all the fuss was about—some genuinely interested to listen to what the town's most famous son had to say, some simply out of curiosity.

They began the service following an order of service like we do. They recited their creed from Deuteronomy 6 and they went through a series of prayers and blessings.

Then came the reading of Scripture, the part they had all been waiting for. First a section from the first five books of the Bible was read and translated into Aramaic. Then a section from the rest of the Old Testament was read. And this is where Jesus came in. He took the scroll of Isaiah from the attendant, unrolled it to find the reading he wanted from Isaiah 61, found it, and read verses 1–2 out loud while standing:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

It was a section talking about the Messiah, the Anointed One! Certainly if people hadn't been talking openly about the possibility that the Messiah had arrived or was about to arrive, there were plenty of people thinking about it in light of the news spreading around.

Then Jesus rolled the scroll back up, handed it back to the attendant and sat down.

Now for us today, that would mean that the speaker was done, but back then the reader sat down when he was about to give the sermon. So as soon as Jesus sat down, the tension that had already been building reached a climax. Jesus knew how to speak and how to preach well. He probably didn't sit down and immediately begin talking. No, he probably waited in silence, knowing that there is nothing like silence to get everyone's attention. And when everyone had stopped fidgeting and whispering to each other about what he had just read and had settled in for the sermon and had given him their attention, only then did he begin.

And here was his opening line: "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Can't you just imagine the electricity in the air!

Luke doesn't give us the rest of Jesus's sermon, but later he says that the people were amazed at the words of grace that came from his mouth. Let's look at the words of grace Jesus would have preached on the basis of this text.

1.

First we have to note that Jesus was clearly identifying himself as the Messiah. If the entire reading is written in the first person and talks about how the Spirit of the Lord is on him because the Lord has anointed him, and Jesus says that today this Scripture is fulfilled in their hearing, then he is saying that he was the one Isaiah was prophesying about, that he was anointed with the Holy Spirit, that he had come to preach these things.

Later John tells us about how Jesus was in Jerusalem for one of the festivals and the Jewish leaders gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." And Jesus responded, "I did tell you." He no doubt was referring to his many sermons such as this one, where he read a prophecy about the Messiah and then told the people that that prophecy was now fulfilled.

The Messiah was here! That means that God had kept his promises that he had been repeating over the past four thousand years! This was certainly a word of grace coming from Jesus's mouth.

2.

We have to note, secondly, whom Jesus said he came for by reading from and preaching on Isaiah 61. What did Isaiah say? "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to preach good news *to the poor*. He has sent me to proclaim freedom *to the captives* and recovery of sight *to the blind*, to set free *those who are oppressed*, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He has come for poor people. He has come for captive people. He has come for blind people. He has come for oppressed people. He has come as a result of the Lord's favor, not in response to human merit. In other words, he has come for the undeserving.

Jesus himself later summed up the message of Isaiah 61 very succinctly: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31, 32). In other words, if we are going to benefit from the Messiah, if he is going to mean anything to us, then we cannot simply come to him out of curiosity, as many of the residents of Nazareth did. We must come to him in abject need. We must recognize that we are poor, captive, blind, oppressed, and unworthy.

But how is this true of us? In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus would define the poor as those who are spiritually poor, those who recognize that even if they had all the riches and treasures and wealth of the world, they would still be no better off than the beggar in the most important aspect. They would still be lacking something on the inside, in their souls.

Later Jesus would define captivity this way: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." And his apostle Paul would describe us as living in the devil's kingdom and following him by nature. And the writer to the Hebrews would describe us as being held in slavery by our fear of death.

Jesus would later use his healing of a physically blind man to illustrate just how spiritually blind everyone else was, since they tried to deny Jesus's miracle and chalk up the blind man's recovery to natural causes. When some of the Pharisees later asked Jesus if he thought they were blind too, he told them, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin, but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." In other words, they were blind precisely

because they did not recognize they were spiritually blind and thought they were on the road to heaven without a problem, on their own.

The apostle Peter would later describe oppression this way: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). And the apostle Paul would describe the oppression of our sinful nature this way: “For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Romans 7:19).

As for unworthiness, if everything we have already looked at hasn’t stressed that already, then listen to Jesus’s apostle Paul tell us that “like the rest, we were by nature children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). Listen to the man whom Jesus described as the greatest prophet born of women, namely John the Baptist: “The thongs of the Messiah’s sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie” (Mark 1:7). Listen to the centurion whom Jesus described as having “great faith”: “I do not deserve to have you come under my roof” (Luke 7:6).

These are the people Jesus came for. Do you recognize yourself in these labels? Do I recognize myself? Even as Christians, have we ever stopped to take note of the natural poverty and captivity and darkness still lurking within us, still wanting to break out and become dominant again? If we do recognize it, then we will also recognize Jesus’s words as words of grace.

3.

After all, Jesus not only said whom he came for, but what he came to do for them. He came to preach and proclaim good news to them. That’s another way we know that Jesus isn’t talking purely about physical poverty and captivity and blindness and oppression here—because Jesus says the Lord has anointed him to solve these people’s problems simply by preaching and proclaiming good news to them! Simply proclaiming good news to a poor person won’t make him rich, unless the good news doesn’t pertain to physical wealth and the poverty of the poor person isn’t purely physical. As the evangelism hymn tells us to do in imitation of Jesus: “Publish glad tidings, tidings of peace! Tidings of Jesus—redemption and release!”

Are you by nature missing something spiritually? The most important thing? Jesus came to fill that gap with his Word. Are you by nature a slave to sin, death, and the devil? Jesus came to set you free with his Word. Are you by nature spiritually blind and unable to see the true realities of life? Jesus came to enlighten your hearts and minds with his Word. Are you by nature hounded by the devil and all the forces of evil? Jesus came to defeat the devil and the power of sin, and to render the devil’s attacks ineffective by his death and resurrection, and he shares that victory with the oppressed and turns them into conquerors through his Word.

In short, Jesus has come to proclaim the forgiveness of all your sins and all your guilt, victory over death, the devil, and hell, and eternal life, beginning imperfectly here on earth and continuing forever in perfection in heaven. Jesus came to proclaim all this by proclaiming himself as our victor and savior.

Do you see how Jesus’s words are words of grace? They come to the undeserving and announce and give to them every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3). Jesus’s original audience recognized his words as words of grace, but they rejected him because they didn’t recognize their need for those words. May we always acknowledge our need for his words of grace, so that we always receive them with joy and benefit from them eternally. Amen.