

July 19 Lesson 7 (NIV)

THE WISDOM OF JESUS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Mark 7:14–23

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Mark 6:1–6; 7:1–23

MARK 6:1–6

¹ Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. ² When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?” ³ Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

⁴ Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” ⁵ He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ⁶ He was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.

KEY VERSES

When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.—Mark 6:2, 3

MANY FACES OF WISDOM

Unit 2: Wisdom in the Gospels

LESSONS 5–8

LESSON OUTLINE

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- B. Lesson Context

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 - B. Prayer
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HOW TO SAY IT

Galilee*Gal-uh-lee.*

Nazarene*Naz-uh-reen.*

Nazareth*Naz-uh-reth.*

Sepphoris*Sef-uh-ris.*

Introduction

A. Ordinary and Familiar

“Familiarity breeds contempt” is a very old saying. Over time, we become so accustomed to the things we experience frequently that we lose respect for them. Though outsiders remain in awe, those of us who have experienced a wonder over and over can cease to realize it *is* a wonder. Imagine the children of a great chef. Do they realize how good their family meals are? Extraordinary talent risks being rendered ordinary simply through everyday exposure.

Jesus, though extraordinary, seemed ordinary in many ways. He was born into a poor family from an insignificant village. For most of his life, he received no notice. In what we call his public ministry, he attracted great support as a rabbi and prophet, but also great opposition. In his lifetime, Jesus was known only in his own small part of the world. Worst of all, he died the shameful, tortuous death of a notorious criminal.

Today’s text narrates one of the most dramatic instances in which people respond to Jesus out of their familiarity with his ordinariness. We will wonder how anyone could have ignored how exceptional Jesus was, but we will also realize our own tendency to take for granted our Lord who has become so familiar.

B. Lesson Context

Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four accounts of Jesus' life in the New Testament. Its focus on Jesus' mighty deeds exposes a contrast between the faith of some and the disbelief of others.

Mark begins his Gospel with stories highlighting the joyous excitement of people who are blessed by Jesus' healing (Mark 1:21–34, 40–45). But soon we see religious leaders who object to Jesus' words and deeds (3:1–6). Confronted with danger, the 12 disciples Jesus had appointed (3:13–19) failed in their faith (4:35–41).

In the middle of a very mixed set of responses to his ministry, Jesus tells a parable of seed falling on different kinds of soil (Mark 4:1–9). The varying results represent different responses of faith and unbelief to God's good news (4:10–20). Jesus' experience at home leads us to today's text. (Matthew 13:53–58 and Luke 4:16–30 are parallel.)

I. Homeward Bound

(MARK 6:1)

A. Travel (v. 1a)

1a. Jesus left there and went to his hometown,

Jesus leaves the place near the Sea of Galilee where he had raised a girl from the dead (Mark 5:21, 35–43). From there, he travels about 15 miles west toward *his hometown*, specifically the village of Nazareth. Though Jesus had been born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4–7), his parents lived in Nazareth and had returned to the town when Jesus was very young (Matthew 2:22, 23; Luke 2:39). Throughout his life, therefore, Jesus is known as “Jesus of Nazareth” (Mark 1:24; 10:47).

Nazareth was a small agricultural village in Jesus' time, in no way famous or influential. Nearby was the prosperous city of Sepphoris, a booming market town. By comparison, Nazareth was a sleepy place with mostly poor farmers and tradespeople in residence.

B. Companions (v. 1b)

1b. accompanied by his disciples.

Mark draws attention to the *disciples* accompanying Jesus, although they will play no direct role in what is about to happen. Even so, the incident will undoubtedly make a lasting impression on them. Perhaps they will see a connection when Jesus later warns them about sheep among wolves (Matthew 10:16).

II. Neighbors Weigh In

(MARK 6:2, 3)

A. New Information (v. 2)

2a. When the Sabbath came,

The Sabbath is a key observance for the people of Israel. Established in the Law of Moses (Exodus 20:8), its requirement is simple: to rest the entire day, doing no work (20:9, 10).

This day of rest looks back on two of the most important events in God's work: his creation of the world (Exodus 20:11), and his deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15).

2b. he began to teach in the synagogue,

The Law of Moses has no requirements for the people of Israel to gather on the Sabbath, only to rest. But during the Babylonian exile, when the people were far from their homeland and the (destroyed) temple (2 Kings 25:8–12), the custom of gathering on the Sabbath began. It became a day to hear the sacred books read aloud and to pray together.

This practice developed and became commonplace over time. It eventually took root in Israel's homeland as the Jewish people returned from exile.

In Jesus' time, *synagogue* services were probably very simple. From what we read in ancient sources, they appeared to include readings from the Law and from the Prophets (Acts 13:15) and a discourse of teaching and exhortation. An example of this is found in Luke's parallel account. In that longer account of the same event, Luke reveals that Jesus reads from and speaks about Isaiah 61:1, 2 (Luke 4:16–22).

Because the gatherings are simple and not prescribed by the law, the opportunity to speak seems to be available to any adult male member of the faith who is present. (Women addressing any public assembly that includes men is seen as inappropriate in the culture of the time.) Praying and singing or chanting is likely also practiced.

Though formal training and expertise are available (example: Acts 22:3), such qualifications are not necessarily expected for a synagogue teacher. For this reason, Jesus is often able to enter a synagogue meeting on a Sabbath and offer an address to the people gathered (Mark 1:21, 39; 3:1–6).

2c. and many who heard him were amazed.

People are often *amazed* at Jesus' teaching and mighty acts. But Mark records different kinds of astonishment. Some is from confusion (example: Mark 10:24–26), but more generally it is surprise at the authority of Jesus' teaching and acts (examples: 7:37; 11:18). As this account begins, we are reminded of the amazement at a similar synagogue message in Capernaum (1:21, 22). That incident resulted in faith that God was doing great things in Jesus.

2d. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?"

But the nature for the amazement differs in this instance: the people of Nazareth wonder about the source and nature of Jesus' *wisdom*. Though we do not know what Jesus is saying to elicit this response, we can infer from earlier chapters that he speaks about the nearness of God's kingdom (Mark 1:15) as he asserts his own authority within that kingdom (examples: 2:8–12, 28). In Luke's parallel account, Jesus announces that he is fulfilling the promises of God given to the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:17–21). Such claims are good news, if they are true. Reasons for the people's skeptical amazement come next.

B. Old Knowledge (v. 3)

3a. "Isn't this the carpenter?"

Jesus based his ministry in Capernaum (Matthew 4:13). But for those who had lived alongside Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth, the claims he makes seem incredible. They know him as a common *carpenter*. This is an honorable trade, but a very ordinary one.

3b. “Isn’t this Mary’s son

The skeptics know Jesus’ family. This knowledge suggests to them that Jesus should not have any special knowledge beyond his trade. They discount that Jesus might be more than the one whom they knew as he was growing up.

If the skeptics acknowledge that the origin of both his wisdom and mighty works is God, it would answer their question of the previous verse. In Mark’s Gospel, neither Jesus’ birth nor his adoptive father, Joseph, is ever mentioned directly, and this passage is no exception. Referring to a man as the son of his mother may imply that the father is deceased. However, it also may imply in this culture that the son was born out of wedlock, the father perhaps unknown. Jesus, born of a virgin, doubtless appears at least to some to be the result of an illicit sexual encounter; divine revelation establishes otherwise (Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38), but the skeptics may be unaware of this or disbelieve it. So as the skeptics refer to Jesus as *Mary’s son*, they may be implying that Jesus’ conception was dishonorable. Certainly they feel confident that they know of his origin.

3c. “and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?”

Beginning sometime in the second century AD, some Christians concluded that Mary remained a virgin her entire life. To explain references to Jesus’ siblings, they suggest that these are cousins or other relatives, or perhaps Joseph’s children from a prior marriage. However, the New Testament nowhere suggests that Mary remained a virgin after Jesus’ birth, only before (Matthew 1:25). It is most reasonable to assume, as did the earliest church fathers, that those named here are Joseph and Mary’s natural children, Jesus’ younger half siblings.

Jesus’ brothers and *sisters* are well known to the townspeople. It seems that Jesus’ “mother and brothers” have moved to Capernaum with him by this time (John 2:12). That would leave *his sisters here* in Nazareth. Further, the neighbors may know that Jesus’ family—especially his brothers—are not supportive of his ministry. His mother and brothers had sought to bring him home, perhaps thinking that he had lost his mind (Mark 3:21–35).

Jesus’ brothers are skeptical of him throughout his earthly ministry (John 7:2–5). But he will appear to at least one of his brothers, *James*, after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:5, 7). James becomes not only a believer but a leader in the first-century church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). James also writes the epistle that bears his name (see lessons 9–13). *Judas* becomes the author of the New Testament letter of Jude (see Jude 1).

3d. And they took offense at him.

The term translated *offense* occurs about 30 times in the New Testament. It frequently describes someone or something that causes a person to be faithless in some way (examples: Matthew 15:12; Mark 9:42–47; Romans 14:21). The prophet Isaiah referred to God as both a refuge for his people and the cause for them “to stumble” (Isaiah 8:14), the very idea that Mark uses here.

Though Jesus’ words and deeds are evidence of his power and love, those who take *offense at him* act faithlessly because they do not understand who Jesus is. Disbelieving the implications of his reported miraculous deeds, the skeptics conclude that one who is as common as they are cannot be inspired by divine wisdom, let alone be wisdom personified (1 Corinthians 1:24). They have forgotten that God likes to use seemingly insignificant people in his work: Abram, an elderly man with no children (Genesis 15:2–5; 18:10, 11); Moses, who spoke poorly (Exodus 4:10); Ruth, a poor widow (Ruth 1:3–5; 2:2); David, an insignificant shepherd boy (1 Samuel 16:11–13); etc.

Generation after generation, God's wisdom is divisive, bringing blessing to those who believe but confirming unbelievers in their stubbornness and consequent judgment. Jesus' appearance becomes the supreme example of that pattern.

III. Jesus Impeded

(MARK 6:4–6)

A. Like a Prophet (v. 4)

4. Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.”

This saying is attested in other ancient Jewish and Greek texts. As the proverb well describes Israel's history of persecuting God's messengers, so *Jesus* now applies it to himself. He will apply it again as a reaction to the rejection that he will experience (Luke 13:33–35).

Jews in Jesus' day are certainly aware of the harsh treatment of prophets in their history. But whether they feel any responsibility for those martyred prophets (or are on guard against repeating that treatment regarding contemporary prophets) is unknown. The evidence in the New Testament suggests that neither concern is foremost in the social conscience; but treatment of prophets is and will be on Jesus' mind (Luke 11:47–51; etc.). Through the prophets, God had spoken to the people's forebears, but they had refused to heed the message. This was sometimes accompanied by violent treatment of God's messengers (Matthew 5:12; 23:29–31, 34).

Jesus' experience in his hometown is another instance of such rejection. It points forward to those who will conspire and call to have Jesus put to death (John 19:4–7). But in the present moment, the people's rejection of Jesus should be seen against a larger backdrop. Not everyone rejects Jesus as those *in his own town* do; outside Nazareth, large crowds follow him (Mark 2:4, 13; 3:9, 20, 32; 4:1, 36; 5:21, 24, 27). And although not everyone in those crowds is a faithful disciple, certainly some are or will be. Those who are offended by Jesus can reverse course and come to believe him. Jesus' own *relatives*, especially his brothers, will prove to be prime examples (see on Mark 6:3c, above).

B. Without Opportunity (v. 5)

5. He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.

This remark is challenging to understand. Our first inclination is to see the Nazarenes' unbelief or lack of faith in and of itself as preventing Jesus from doing *miracles* (compare Matthew 13:58). But in the preceding episode, Jesus raised a girl from the dead when the mourners around her lacked faith (Mark 5:35–43). It is more likely therefore that the Nazarenes' faithless response is followed by action that results in Jesus' leaving the village before ministering for very long. In Luke's account, we read of their attempt to throw Jesus off a cliff to his death (Luke 4:28, 29).

Due to the hostility in the town, Jesus does not attend to the sick for an extended time (Mark 1:21–34). Yet in the time he has, he still heals *a few*. Fierce rejection cannot put a stop to what God is doing in Jesus.

C. Without Boundaries (v. 6)

6a. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

At the beginning of the story, the people of Nazareth are astonished at Jesus' teaching and wisdom, leading to their rejection of someone they believe they know well. Jesus similarly marvels at *their lack of faith*. Though he knows the history of rejecting prophets, it is still a rude awakening to experience the same dismissal in his hometown among people he knows well and loves.

6b. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.

This disappointing rejection does not deter Jesus. He continues to travel *from village to village*, among people just as poor and insignificant as his former neighbors. He will be met with both enthusiasm and violent opposition. But Jesus continues forward, steadfast to complete the work that God the Father has given him.

Conclusion

A. Normal Wisdom

The text leaves us to ask: Do we accept Jesus as he is? Or do we think he ought to be someone else? As we weigh the great questions of faith and unbelief, perhaps the most astonishing idea is that God did his saving work in one from a town as ordinary as Nazareth. We expect God's work to be grand. Yet in Jesus it was humble.

Far from yearning to be humble, we often long to be grand. But wanting to be extraordinary can be especially problematic for Christians. This is how God's wisdom challenges us to our core. The good news of Jesus teaches us that God's goodness is usually manifested in the lives of ordinary believers and in the fellowship of ordinary churches. The gracious goodness of God surrounds us constantly. If we expect to experience it only in grandiose ways, we will overlook his "ordinary" work in our lives.

Prosperity, victory, status, security—these do not happen in a village like Nazareth visited by a carpenter who used to live there. Such aspirations and outcomes certainly do not look like willing surrender to one's enemies and submission to an unjust execution! Yet in Jesus' humility, God's wisdom was fully expressed.

God's wisdom is similarly expressed today. It is expressed in an ordinary church witnessing to the gospel in a community, in a circle of friends who study Scripture and pray together, in the often unnoticed acts of service rendered to others in the name of Jesus, in sacrificial gifts that provide sustenance of body and spirit for those in need.

Often those who do not know the true God hold such matters in contempt. They cannot believe that people of ordinary intelligence, of limited means, and having little of what the world counts as power can be doing what God desires. Their outlook tragically reflects that of the people in Nazareth who did not believe Jesus.

But the door is not yet closed on such people of today. No place, no group, no person is ever beyond the possibility of repentance. And God always welcomes the repentant.

God still embodies his wisdom in people who appear utterly ordinary. When we feel stuck in our own ordinariness and lowliness, we can take heart that God continues to do the work of his kingdom in people like us.

B. Prayer

Almighty God, we ask you to open our eyes to see clearly the work you are doing around us, in us, and through us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things.¹
