

The Tragedy of Unbelief
Matthew 13:53-58

Introduction

All your actions are based in what you believe. Your beliefs may be complex and you may even have contradictory beliefs, but all your actions are still based on what you believe. For example, you go shopping and find a sale on a particular item that you have heard and seen a lot of advertisements about. You would like the item, but there is no money for it in your budget, but you buy it anyway. Why? Because you developed a belief that the benefits of having the item are greater than the pain you know you will suffer by not being wise and keeping to your budget. Perhaps the benefits will turn out to be greater than the pain suffered in other areas, but what if you are the victim of a successful marketing campaign and the item brings you little or no benefit? You acted upon what you believed at the time, but now you will suffer for it. The value of a belief is directly related to its validity. It is based on what is true or what is false?

The importance of any particular belief is directly related to the consequences of it. All of us have been victims of marketers who convinced us to purchase something that ended up bringing few or none of the benefits we had been led to believe. The seriousness of such a wrongly placed belief will usually be just the buyer's remorse and the price of the object for which you are now short in your budget. However, it could be much more serious if it causes damage or leaves you unable to fulfill your responsibilities. There are still a lot of snake oil products being sold with the claim they will improve your health, but they do nothing or may even be detrimental to your health.

Beliefs based on truth have a valid standing and lead to benefits. Beliefs based on lies and distortions do not have a valid standing and in the end will be detrimental. Or to state this another way, people are free to believe whatever they want, but they are not free to determine the consequences of their beliefs. If you believe the truth, you can plan accordingly and will benefit. If you believe a lie, or you are misled by someone else's deceit, or you just misunderstand, regardless of how sincere you were in your beliefs, you will still have to deal with the results of whatever decisions you made based on those beliefs. This is also true if someone tells you the truth and you do not believe them. There are consequences to the things you believe and do not believe.

The consequences of purchasing items based on marketing could be beneficial, insignificant or detrimental, but the consequences of ideas and philosophies are much more serious. For example, the ideas of socialism have become entrenched in our nation with very serious consequences. Government social programs have a nasty habit of making worse the problems they were supposed to solve. The Great Society programs have spent trillions of dollars and only exacerbated poverty by removing responsibility resulting in generations of people growing up dependent on welfare. The government Ponzi scheme of Social Security is rapidly approaching collapse as the Baby Boom generation reaches retirement and overwhelms the diminishing resources available to it. Medicare is projected to be insolvent by 2018. The Affordable Care Act has made medical care more expensive, and though Mr. Obama said I am a liar, the truth is that I am just one of the millions of people that had their medical insurance plan cancelled and the ACA approved replacement plan was both immoral and unaffordable. Most of the pastors I know no longer have traditional medical insurance.

And speaking of President Obama, many people voted for him with the hope that he would bring healing to race relations in this country, sadly and tragically, his statements and actions have only served to inflame them, but they are in keeping with the teachings of the church he attended when living in

Chicago. You see, it is not hard to be fooled and believe political rhetoric and especially so when it is something you would like to see happen. But lies are still lies even when sincerely believed, and the reality of truth eventually exposes them, but often only when it is in the consequences of having believed the lie. The travesty of government approved homosexual marriage will only serve to further destroy family stability since it has redefined the fundamental purpose of marriage in terms of self fulfillment instead of the good of children and society.

Beliefs have consequences which can be serious when it comes to making a purchase, economic policies, health care decisions, politics and morality, but at best or worst, they are only temporal and life is short. The consequences of what is believed regarding God are by far much, much greater for they will continue throughout eternity. This morning we come to a text that reveals the great tragedy of unbelief. Please turn to Matthew 13:53-58.

The Setting - Matthew 13:53

Let me remind you again that Matthew wrote his gospel account thematically instead of chronologically. In this passage Matthew takes us back to Jesus teaching in parables and then jumps forward at least a few days to what happens when Jesus returns again to Nazareth.

Matthew 13:53 states, *“And it came about that when Jesus had finished these parables, he departed from there.”* The “there” is Capernaum where Jesus had been living as His base of operations for ministry to the region of Galilee (Matthew 4:13, 21). According to Matthew 11:20, Jesus had done most of His miracles in Capernaum and the surrounding cities. Yet we have seen in our studies in the life of Christ that though there was an initial positive response to Jesus and His teachings, that was now past. The people enjoyed the show, but they refused the message. Even those that were favorable to Jesus bowed before the religious leaders and were hesitant to declare their thoughts about Jesus in a positive manner (12:23). A confrontation had occurred between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders over His casting the demon out of a blind and mute man and healing Him. They accused Him of doing it by the power of Beelzebul and Jesus thoroughly rebuked them showing their accusation was illogical, inconsistent with their own practice, insurrectionary against God Himself, and inane - it was a stupid thing to say. He also condemned them for their accusation was made against the work and witness of the Holy Spirit which left them without hope of forgiveness.

On that same day, Jesus switched His method of teaching the multitudes to parables in order to fulfill prophecy and reveal spiritual truth to His followers while hiding it from the self righteous (Matthew 13:10-17). Mark and Luke record what Jesus did that night in calming the storm while crossing the Sea of Galilee, and then the next day in casting out the legion of demons from the men in the country of the Gerasenes, and then returning to Capernaum where He healed the woman with the issue of blood and raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead (Mark 4:35-5:43; Luke 8:22-56). Matthew skips ahead to what occurs after this in Nazareth because it so well illustrates the parables Jesus had taught.

Jesus taught in the Parable of the Soils (or Sower) that the seed that fell on the side of the road that was eaten by the birds illustrated those who heard the seed of the gospel but did not understand it and so what was sown was quickly snatched away by the evil one. The seed that fell on rocky soil which quickly sprouted and then died illustrated those with a temporary faith that quickly fell away when persecution arose. The seed that fell among the thorns and was choked out illustrated those who heard the gospel, but the worry of the world and deceitfulness of riches choked it out so that there was no fruit. There was also the Parable of the Tares sown among the wheat illustrating that there would be unbelievers mixed among the believers in the kingdom of heaven.

The people of Capernaum and the surrounding cities were already examples of these parables which is why Jesus had reproached them earlier in Matthew 11:23-24 saying, *“And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be*

more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgement, than for you.” Jesus had in effect pronounced a curse on Capernaum, and when He left there, that city's doom was confirmed.

Jesus would pass through the city again, but He never ministered there in the same way again. In that city Jesus had demonstrated power that could have only come from God, but while some marveled and some criticized, only a few believed. A few centuries later the city would fall into ruin and there is little there today. Archaeological excavations show that the town had enjoyed a period of worldly prosperity, but along with that came increasing pagan influence. The last synagogue built in Capernaum, which was built over the site of the one in which Jesus had taught, was decorated with various animals and mythological characters demonstrating that in rejecting the one true God, they had fallen into worship of false ones.

For Capernaum, what they failed to believe and what they believed instead sealed their doom. The end of Matthew 13 records that the people of Nazareth were no better.

Return to Nazareth - Matthew 13:54

Matthew 13:54 explains what Jesus did after departing from Capernaum, *“coming to His home town He began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers?”*

This was the second time Jesus has been to His home town of Nazareth after beginning His public ministry following His baptism by John the Baptist and spending forty days in the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus had left Judea passing through Samaria where He talked to the woman at the well, and then returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and began teaching in the Synagogues of the district. His message was, *“repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

Luke 4:16-20 records that Jesus returned to *“Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, ‘THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT OF THE BLIND TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE DOWN-TRODDEN, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.’ and He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all the synagogue were upon Him.”*

Let me quickly point out here that the normal practice in a Synagogue was to read the Scriptures while standing and then to sit down to give the interpretation so that there would be no impression given that the comments were equal to the Scriptures. Jesus had read Isaiah 61:1-2 and sat down, so everyone was now waiting for the interpretation which begins in verse 21, *“And He began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, “Is this not Joseph’s son?”* Jesus was the local boy who made good. They were proud of Him and expected the fame Jesus was gaining would result in prestige for their community. However, they did not expect what Jesus said next in verses 23-27.

Verse 23, *“And He said to them, ‘No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your home town as well.’” And He said, ‘Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his home town. But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.’”*

The people wanted a demonstration of miracles just as He had done in other places. They did not expect Him to bring His message of repentance to them. However, the message of the gospel is the same

for everyone and Jesus began to expose their sin as He revealed their acclaim for Him was not based in their belief in Him. They became infuriated when Jesus rebuked them indicating there would be no miracles performed and that a believing Gentile is nearer to God than an unbelieving Jew. Luke 4:28-29 records their response, *“And all in the Synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they rose up and cast Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff.”* The exposure of their sinful hearts filled them with hate for the very person they had just been praising, and so they attempt to murder Jesus then and there, but Jesus passed through their midst and went back to Capernaum (Luke 4:30-31).

What occurs here in Matthew 13:54-58 is a largely a repeat of what had happened earlier at His first return to Nazareth. Jesus has done even more miracles since His first visit back and He is given the honor of teaching in the synagogue again. They are astonished at His wisdom and miraculous powers (verse 54), yet they still do not believe what was obvious. They question where Jesus learned these things and gained these powers with verses 55-56 giving the reason. *“Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things.”*

Jesus had grown up among them, so they knew Him as child and a young man. They knew He did not have formal religious training like the Rabbis, so how could He teach as He did? They had not seen Him do miracles when He was living in Nazareth, so where did this power come from? The fact that they were questioning where Jesus got these abilities demonstrates the falsehood of the myths that Jesus did miracles while a child growing up in Nazareth. If those myths were true, then they would not be astonished here when He does them as a grown man.

It should also be pointed out that the listing of Jesus’ siblings by name proves the Roman Catholic teaching that Mary remained a virgin after she gave birth to Jesus is heresy. Joseph and Mary had normal marital relations after Jesus’ birth and they had at least four more sons and two daughters who were still living in Nazareth. While Mary is honored as being blessed with the privilege of being Jesus’ mother, she was and is a normal human with a sinful nature in need of a savior. Mary was blessed because that Savior is the child born of her womb, but that child, Jesus, is God in human flesh, and the birth was the miracle of God. Mary is not the mother - as in progenitor - of God. She has no special power and she is not to be worshiped or venerated. To do so is idolatry, for as Jesus Himself said, God and God alone is to be worshiped (Matthew 4:10).

Matthew 13:57 continues on to tell us that the people of Nazareth, *“took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and in his own household.’”* They were offended over Jesus’ teaching and claims and refused to believe in Him. Jesus had emptied Himself of certain of His divine prerogatives when He became a man according to Philippians 2:7. Although Jesus was sinless and morally perfect every minute of His life, His perfection did not set Him apart as strange or bizarre in calling attention to Himself. To the people of Nazareth, Jesus was just a carpenter that used to live there and the son of a carpenter whose family still lived there. Though they recognized the wisdom of His teaching and acknowledged His miraculous powers, they would not believe in Him. They rejected Him in unbelief.

Causes and Consequences of Unbelief - Matthew 13:57-58

It can be hard for those who have watched a child grow up to later accept that person as a public official or community leader. They may be Mr so and so to everyone else, but to you they are still little Johnny, or Andy, or Davy, or whatever nickname they were called. They say it takes a hundred miles to make an expert, that is, someone who gets little attention or respect locally may be considered an expert if he is from somewhere a hundred miles or more away. A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and his own household. I may be Pastor Harris to you, but to my family I am still just Scott (at least no one calls me Scotty any longer).

It was partly because of this familiarity with Jesus that the people of Nazareth took offense at Him and did not believe. His teaching and miracles made it obvious that His claims were true, but they rejected them and would not believe He was the Messiah and only accorded Him minimal respect as an itinerant teacher by letting Him teach in the synagogue. However, they of all people should have believed Jesus' claims. They had known Jesus from childhood and so knew well that He was truthful and did not lie. They knew that He had no formal religious training, so they should have easily recognized that what He taught and the authority He had in teaching could only have come from God. They also knew Him to be a humble pious man and so should have known that His power to do miracles were genuine and must have come from God.

Their familiarity with Jesus was their excuse, but it was an irrelevant excuse. In reality, their familiarity should have made them pay even more attention to Jesus' teachings. They heard but did not believe. Their familiarity should have made them even more thoughtful of His miracles. They saw them and heard about them, but they did not believe.

It has been true throughout history and is still common today for people to use all sorts of irrelevant excuses for their unbelief and rejection of the gospel. Many find something they think is a fault in others and use that as an excuse. Most of the time it is something very trivially. The most common excuse I have heard is that Christians are hypocrites (claiming a higher standard than is being met), but that presupposes that the person causing the offense and professing to be a Christian actually is one. Remember, there are tares among the wheat. But what about hypocrisy in genuine Christians? Of course Christians are hypocrites! We proclaim God's standards of holiness and strive to live according to them, but we fail. Why? Simply because Christians are not sinless. We are only forgiven because of faith in Jesus Christ. The scriptures are clear that we will struggle with sin as long as we are in these bodies. But frankly, Christian hypocrisy is much better than unbelievers who are not hypocrites only because their standard is lowered to their level of lying, cheating, stealing, drunkenness, fornication, adultery, idolatry, hatred, or any other sin they enjoy.

But more to the point, the behavior of a Christian is irrelevant to responding to the claims of Jesus Christ Himself. The gospel is not about reaching perfection in this life, it is about finding forgiveness for your sins by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ who died as the perfect sacrifice for sin and rose from the dead as proof of His claims of deity. According to Romans 2:1, when a person points out the faults of others they actually remove their own excuses because they have three fingers pointing back at themselves and their own sin.

The other common line of excuse is that the gospel does not present God according to that person's preconceived ideas about God. Such was the case with not only the people of Nazareth but most of the people at that time. Jesus did not match what they thought the Messiah would be like and that blinded them to Jesus' teaching and miracles done in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

The most common excuse I hear along these lines is that because bad things happen then God must either not be good or is incapable of stopping evil or does not exist and therefore belief in Him can be rejected. Such reasoning is absolute nonsense, but it is common. God's existence, goodness and ability to punish evil is not dependent upon any human standard of goodness. That would be like a professional thief under police surveillance rejecting the existence of the justice system because his partner was killed and the person who murdered him has not yet been punished. His unbelief will quickly disappear when he is arrested and put into the same jail as the murderer of his partner.

People find all sorts of excuses to use as smoke screens to hide the real reason for their unwillingness to believe the clear and demanding claims and promises of Christ. Unbelief shifts attention away from the truth to the insignificant and trivial as a means of escape or self-justification. The person genuinely seeking the truth may have many questions they want answered before committing themselves to Jesus, but the sincerity of their desire is proven by the diligence by which they seek to have those questions answered and accept the truth when it is explained. Each answered question takes them farther along in

their quest for truth. The person controlled by unbelief scoffs at the answers to his questions and he brings up even more objections.

I do not know what may be holding some of you back, but you need to confront these issues directly. If you are honestly searching for the truth and have questions, then by all means ask those questions and diligently seek out the answers. Ask those questions of your Christian friends. The challenge will be good for them to find out the answer, or call me. I am usually at the office or the house, but one of the reasons I am here is to help you find answers to your questions.

However, if you are not really interested in the truth then be honest with yourself. You're certainly welcome to attend here, but I do not know why you would. We are committed to declaring the Word of God as plainly and clearly as we can. We want you to know and live according to the truth. But the Scriptures also warn that to whom much is given, much is required. You are hearing the truth here and God will hold you accountable for what you have heard, so what will you do with it?

Matthew 13:58 states that Jesus *"did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief."* Mark 6:5 adds that, *"He could do no miracles there except that He laid His hands upon a few sick people and healed them."* Their unbelief prevented the miracles God could have done there. Why? Not because God can only do miracles when His power is released by faith as some erroneously teach. God can do anything He wants anytime He wants anywhere He wants regardless of who is present and what they believe. God is not limited by man in anyway. The reason is simply that God does not exist for the pleasure of man. Man exists for God. Jesus would not perform miracles to entertain or satisfy ungodly curiosity. Jesus rebuked the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 12:38 telling them that, *"an evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign . . ."* Jesus performed miracles in accordance with the Old Testament prophecies and thus demonstrated that He was indeed the Messiah, and Jesus performed miracles to strengthen the faith of those who did believe in Him. It was His choice not to do them to satisfy the desire of those whose hearts were hard and were willfully unbelieving. The result was that Jesus did few miracles in Nazareth because of their unbelief.

Conclusions

The evidence before those in Nazareth was clear and overwhelming. Jesus is the Messiah. But the evidence was unimportant to them for they were controlled by their sinful hearts of unbelief. What about you? We have presented the evidence here over and over again. Jesus is God in Human flesh who lived a sinless life. He died in our place on the cross of calvary as the substitute for our sins and was then raised from the dead on the third day. He offers forgiveness to all who turn from their sin to put their faith in Him alone. What is holding you back from either coming to Christ for salvation or living for Him as you should? If there are unanswered questions, then get them answered. If it is unbelief, then repent, confess the sin, and ask the Holy Spirit to help you believe and seek after God. Otherwise your unbelief will keep you separated from God and will ultimately destroy your life. You will choose and do what you want based on what you believe, so be sure that what you believe is based on truth, for you will also reap the consequences accordingly whether good or bad and they will be for eternity.

Sermon Notes: *The Tragedy of Unbelief*
Matthew 13:53-58

Introduction

All your actions are based in what you _____

The value of a belief is directly related to its _____, its importance is directly related to its _____

Beliefs based on truth will lead to _____, beliefs based on lies / deceit will in the end be detrimental

Ideological and philosophical beliefs usually have more _____ consequences

The consequences of what is believed about God are much greater for they will continue throughout _____

The Setting - Matthew 13:53

_____ is where He had done most of His miracles, and had serious confrontations with the Pharisees

Jesus had switched to teaching in _____ to reveal truth to His followers and hide it from the self-righteous

Jesus' parables revealed the characteristics of those who responded to the _____ and those that did not

Jesus reproached Capernaum for continued _____ despite the miracles done there

Return to Nazareth - Matthew 13:54-58; Luke 4:16-27

Jesus had been to Nazareth and taught there soon after He _____ returned to the region of Galilee - Luke 4

The initial response to Jesus' teaching was very _____ (Luke 4:21-22)

Luke 4:23-27 - Jesus _____ them. Luke 4:28-29 - they responded with _____

Matthew 13:54-58 - they are _____ at His wisdom and miracles, but question where He got them

Their questioning of the origin of His miracles proves He had not performed miracles as a _____

The listing of Jesus' many siblings proves RC teaching of the perpetual virginity of Mary is a _____

The people of Nazareth took _____ and rejected Jesus instead of believing Him

Causes and Consequences of Unbelief - Matthew 13:57-58

A prophet / teacher is often honored everywhere except his hometown and household due to _____

Those in Nazareth knew the _____ of Jesus' character and so actually had more reason to believe Him

People still commonly use all sort of _____ excuses for their unbelief and rejection of the gospel

Accusing Christians of being hypocrites is not an excuse for remaining in _____ yourself

The behavior of professing Christians is irrelevant to responding to the _____ of Jesus Christ Himself

Another common excuse is dismissing God because He does not meet that person's _____ ideas

Claiming the existence of evil proves God is either not good or incapable or does not exist is _____

God's existence, goodness & ability to punish evil is ____ dependent upon any human standard of goodness

Unbelief shifts attention _____ from the truth to the insignificant as a means of escape or self-justification

A person seeking truth sincerely seeks answers while those controlled by unbelief _____ and object

Matthew 13:58 - They were unbelieving , and Jesus did not perform miracles for entertainment or _____

Conclusions

The evidence of Jesus' claims have been presented many times - what is your _____ to them?

If you have unanswered questions, be _____ to get answers

Do not let unbelief keep you separated from God and destroy your life - for _____

You will act upon what you believe - is what you believe based in _____? The consequences are eternal

KIDS KORNER

Parents, you are responsible to apply God's Word to your children's lives. Here is some help.

Young Children - draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch. **Older Children** - Do one or more of the following: 1) Count how many times "belief" is mentioned. 2) Discuss with your parents the importance of having beliefs based in truth.

THINK ABOUT IT!

Questions to consider in discussing the sermon with others. What is the relationship between belief and action? Explain. What determines the value of a belief? Explain. What determines the importance of a belief? Explain. Why are beliefs concerning ideology and philosophy usually so serious? Why are the most serious beliefs those related to God? Explain. What is the setting for Matthew 13:53-58? What had happened in the days immediately prior to Jesus' departure? Why had Jesus changed His method of teaching the multitudes? What is the meaning of the Parable of the Soils (Sower)? How was Capernaum an example of that parable? Why did Jesus rebuke Capernaum in Matthew 11:23-24? What happened to that city? What occurred the first time Jesus returned to Nazareth after beginning His public ministry? (See Luke 4). How is Jesus second trip to Nazareth similar to the first trip? How is it different? If the people of Nazareth were astonished at Jesus' wisdom and miracles, why did they question their origin? What bearing does their questioning have on the myths that Jesus did miracles as a child? Why do they bring up Jesus' siblings by name? What does this prove about the Roman Catholic doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity? Why does a prophet usually receive honor everywhere except his hometown and household? Why should the familiarity the people of Nazareth had with Jesus strengthened the reasons for them to believe His claims? Why is the claim that Christians are hypocrites irrelevant to responding in belief to the claims of Jesus Christ? Why is there a sense in which all Christians are hypocrites? What keeps unbelievers from being hypocrites? Which has a better standing with God and a better life - a Christian hypocrite or an unbelieving sinner? Why is doubting God's existence, goodness or sovereignty based on the existence of evil ultimately nonsensical? What do people who genuinely seek truth do? What do those controlled by unbelief do? Why couldn't Jesus do many miracles in Nazareth? If you are not a Christian - what questions do you need to have answered in order to believe the claims of Christ? What is your plan for getting them answered? What is the consequence of not getting them answered?