

Knowing Too Much  
Matthew 13:53-58

So, does verse 58 really mean what it says? Was Jesus' power somehow limited by the unbelief of the people around Him? After all, this was the Man Who calmed the stormy seas back in chapter 7. In chapter 9, He raised a little girl from the dead. And on neither occasion did He pray that God would provide the power for Him to do these things – no, it was sufficient for Him simply to speak a word. So, can Matthew be serious? Did the people's lack of faith somehow limit Jesus' power?

Well no, not if we mean that Jesus was suddenly and mysteriously incapacitated in the presence of unbelief, the way Superman is said to be weakened in the presence of Kryptonite. After all, verse 58 simply says that Jesus did not do many mighty miracles in Nazareth. Matthew is thus by no means saying that Jesus only possesses divine power in the presence of the faithful.

So, what is Matthew talking about? Not a limit on Jesus' ability, but instead a limit on His willingness. Jesus didn't do many mighty works in Nazareth for the same reason that parents don't give children dessert before dinner or for the same reason we don't give cash handouts to beggars on the street. Of course we have the ability to give such gifts, but we don't allow ourselves to – largely because those things wouldn't be good for the ones who are asking.

But that raises another question, doesn't it? Why wouldn't it have been good for the people in Jesus' hometown if He had made a big, public display of His divine power? Was it because so few people believed in Him? Perhaps so – after all, back in chapter 9, Jesus told the woman who had been healed from an issue of blood, "Thy faith hath made thee whole." That certainly seems to imply that there is an important connection between faith and miracles.

But Jesus didn't always reserve His miracles for those who were faithful – if He had, the disciples would all have gone down with the ship in that storm on the Sea of Galilee in chapter 8. For remember, after Jesus miraculously stilled the storm with a word of power, He rebuked the disciples with a word of truth: "Why are ye fearful, o ye of little faith?"

Okay, so why did Jesus do a miracle for the faithless, storm-tossed disciples in chapter 8 but not for the faithless people of Nazareth in chapter 13? Maybe because of the different relationships they had with Him. After all, the disciples had all made a decision to follow Jesus, whether they knew everything about Him or not. In contrast, the people of Nazareth knew quite a lot about Jesus, but they nevertheless rejected Him. In fact, verse 57 says that they were offended by Him, and the Greek word indicates that they were scandalized or made to stumble because of Jesus.

Okay, so why didn't the people of Nazareth believe in Him? Why didn't they believe what He had to say? Strangely enough, it could be that they knew too much about Him, or at least they thought they did. And what they knew about Jesus, for one reason or another, didn't inspire confidence in them, didn't allow them to honor Him as a prophet, let alone believe in Him as their Messiah.

So, what was it about Jesus that kept the people of Nazareth from respecting Him? Well, why do any of us choose to listen to some people and not to others? What sorts of credentials do we consider to be worthy of our respect?

Well, I suppose first on the list for us Presbyterians would be education or training of some sort. Just take some of our deacons for example. Everyone knows to go to Eddie Lipscomb for veterinary advice or to Mike Mikell to find out about trees or to Jimmy Cassell for horticultural knowledge or to Shreve Guthrie for help with a hardware project, because those are their areas of expertise. In the same way, people tend to ask me questions about theology or history. But if anyone were to ask me about forestry or agriculture or veterinary medicine, they probably wouldn't get the best answers, would they? And just because I bought a big hat in Texas doesn't mean I know anything about cattle. No, we all tend to respect people because of what they've studied and what they know how to do.

Just so, Jesus was a carpenter. His hometown folks knew that – maybe He had made some of the furniture in their synagogue or perhaps even in some of their houses. But regardless of His technical skill, they knew very well that Jesus hadn't studied theology with any renowned rabbis. So while they might have acknowledged His craftsmanship, they had no reason to look to Him as a Bible scholar.

Okay, why else do we trust certain people? Perhaps because they've been to certain places or experienced certain things. If someone wants to know something about Iraq, they should ask Elder Jimmy Hynum because he's been there. Or they might read books or articles by other people who have recently visited or studied the area. But if they were to come to me for modern insight on the same region, they would be disappointed – I could tell them something about the Ancient Sumerians and the Babylonians, but not much else.

In the same way, the people of Nazareth knew good and well that Jesus hadn't been anywhere special. Oh, he had been down to Jerusalem for the great festivals at the Temple, just like a lot of them had. But He hadn't gone up on Mount Sinai to talk to God the way Moses did – if He had, they would have known about it. So, why should they listen to Jesus tell them things about God?

Okay, what other sorts of reasons do we have for giving people our respect? Sometimes, it's because of their family connections. After all, would George W. Bush or Hillary Clinton have received their parties' nominations for President of the United States if they had different last names? And on a more local level, don't we tend to respect people who come from "good families?" And isn't it harder for someone who doesn't come from the right kind of background to earn our trust?

Well, the folks in Nazareth knew all about Jesus' family. They spoke of His brothers and sisters as though they were plain folks. And did you notice how in verse 55 they mention Mary but not Joseph? This could be because Joseph had already died, but it could also be that some of those old rumors about Mary – that she was pregnant before she and Joseph got married – that those rumors were still swirling around in that small town. In any event, Jesus' family connections obviously didn't inspire a lot of confidence among his hometown friends and neighbors.

In sum, Jesus had no special education, no special experience, and no special status. Because the people of Nazareth knew all these things about Jesus, they did not honor Him as a prophet much less as their Messiah. And none of that should surprise us – in fact, we could easily see ourselves dismissing the authority of someone we have known for a long time for the same sorts of reasons.

But how did Jesus react to such a lack of faith among the people of Nazareth? Well, the parallel passage in Mark chapter 6 says that He marveled, that He was amazed. Now, think about what it must have taken to amaze Jesus. After all, this is the guy Who healed the sick and cleansed the lepers and cast out the demons and raised the dead. He walked on the waters and calmed the seas with a word. So, what was so amazing to Him about the fact that the people of Nazareth didn't believe in Him?

Well, at first glance we might think that Jesus had expected the miracles He had done in nearby towns to give Him at least a little credibility in the eyes of His hometown friends. After all, Galilee was not a big place. Capernaum, the town where Jesus did so many of His early miracles, was only about 20 miles from Nazareth, about as far as Port Gibson is from Vicksburg. So it's no wonder that as verse 54 says, the people of Nazareth knew all about the mighty works Jesus had done nearby.

But if Jesus was counting on His miracles to impress the people of Nazareth, surely He would have performed a few for them. So, maybe it was something else that surprised Jesus about the way His hometown folks treated Him. Maybe it was because they didn't just know about Jesus – His education, His experience, His family, and the fact that He had done lots of miracles in other places. No, maybe He was shocked and disappointed that they didn't know Jesus Himself, the way you know the people you have grown up with.

After all, that's one of the really special things about living in a small town like Yokena or Port Gibson or Nazareth, isn't it? You really get to know, not just things about people and their families, and not just what people have done, but the people themselves.

So, given their history with Him, the people of Nazareth had every reason to trust Jesus. The boys who grew up with Him knew very well that He had not taken part in any of their schoolyard bullying. The girls who grew up with Jesus knew He never tried to take advantage of them, but was always a perfect gentleman. The people for whom He had done carpentry work knew that He was a straight shooter who did a hard day's work and never tried to cheat or gouge anyone. Just think about how many Sabbath School perfect attendance pins He would have won, if such things had been given out in those days! To us, Jesus' holiness of life is largely theoretical, but to the people of Nazareth it should have been an undeniable fact.

Yes, Jesus' neighbors should have known from personal experience that He wasn't selfish, that He wasn't a liar or a cheat or a bully – in short, that He was someone Who could be trusted. But because of what they thought they knew about Jesus, they didn't trust His claim to authority over them. And because they rejected Jesus, because they didn't listen to His teaching and because they didn't believe He was their promised Messiah, the people who should have known Him best didn't get to experience the miraculous outpouring of God's power the way that the people of other nearby towns did.

So much is as sad as it is clear. But what can we modern-day Christians learn from all of this? I suppose an obvious lesson would be not to fall into the same sort of snobbery, the same sort of prejudice where it comes to other people. Of course we shouldn't tune people out just because they don't have the right connections or the right credentials, just because they're not part of our "in" crowd. Maybe we should all be more concerned with what people say than we are with who is saying it.

But what can we learn about Jesus from this story? After all, we already know Who He is – the Messiah, the Son of God, our Prophet, Priest and King. But do we really know Jesus? Or like those folks from Nazareth, do we just know things about Him?

Let's think again about how those people from Nazareth reacted to Jesus. They were offended, they were scandalized, at least in part, by the wisdom of Jesus, the things that He taught them. In contrast, we rightly claim that Jesus is our great Prophet, the One Who not only speaks but Who embodies the very Word of God.

But let's be honest: do we ever find things about Jesus' teaching to be a bit offensive to our reason or our feelings? I mean, are we really enthusiastic about the opportunity to love our enemies and forgive those who have hurt us? How eager are we to turn the other cheek, allowing someone who has hurt us in the past to hurt us again? We know what Jesus told us to do, but do we really honor Him as a prophet? Or do we continue to make our most important decisions based on what we think and how we feel?

And sure, we correctly claim that Jesus is our great High Priest. We know about His saving work – the perfect sacrifice He has made for all who trust in Him. And I'm sure we all want Jesus to pay the price for our sins so that we can go to Heaven someday.

But do we really stand in awe of His self-sacrificial, unconditional love even for faithless people like us? And are we really willing to respond to that love by truly following Him, denying ourselves, enduring whatever pain and sacrifice might be necessary to bless others and bring them to faith in Him? Or do we tolerate sin in our lives, pulling ourselves away from Jesus to live for our own comfort and pleasure, satisfied to keep our distance from Him and His call to take up our own cross?

And yes, we acknowledge Jesus to be our King, but are we really interested in bowing the knee to Him as the Lord of Hosts, seeking to do His will in every aspect of our lives? Or instead, do we find ourselves presuming on His grace as we neglect His calls to repentance and service? Do we second-guess His decrees, falling into disappointment with His sovereign providence, the things and

relationships with which He has chosen to bless us? Whatever we may confess with our lips, do we reject Jesus' authority and majesty with our lives?

So sure, we know a lot about Jesus. But do we want to know Jesus today – the way He really is, on His terms? Or has our familiarity with Him bred a certain kind of contempt for Him? If that's the case, maybe we are a lot more like Jesus' hometown folks than we would care to admit. And if that's the case, we shouldn't be surprised if we don't see Christ's power at work in our lives. In fact, we shouldn't be surprised if Jesus moves on to the next town.