



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

The Lord's Day
January 17, 2010

www.jhbc.org

© 2010

Mission: Impossible?
Luke 4:14-30

It almost always began with Jim Phelps, leader of the Impossible Missions Force (played by Peter Graves), going to some obscure location, finding a small reel-to-reel tape recorder, and playing a message. After the recording described the situation, you'd hear the speaker say, "Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is . . ." Once the mission was described, the speaker would say, "This tape will self-destruct in five seconds," at which point smoke would start rising from the tape and the tape recorder, and that distinctive theme song would start playing. It was, of course, the old television drama "Mission: Impossible."

When I read or hear Luke's account of Jesus' inauguration of His ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth, I almost feel like the "Mission: Impossible" theme should start playing. It would make a good opening to an episode, wouldn't it—except that it was a scroll of the prophet Isaiah rather than a tape recorder, and the scroll didn't self-destruct in fifteen seconds. It was those who heard Jesus who did that a little later on in the story . . .

Back home again

Nazareth was Jesus' hometown. No doubt many of the people who were there in the synagogue that day had watched Him grow up.

Some of them might have been saying things like, "Oh, I remember seeing Him picking up wood scraps and sweeping shavings out of Joseph's carpenter shop when He was just a boy!"

"He was always such a nice kid—always so respectful and obedient to His parents. They should be thankful. They've never had a minute's problem with Him—well, except that time when He was twelve and stayed behind in the temple when the caravan left to come home."

They were proud of Him that day, and eager to hear what He had to say. Their native son had come back home, and He was speaking in the synagogue service this Sabbath.

Luke tells us that at this point Jesus was about thirty years old. He had been to John the Baptist to be baptized. As He was praying after his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form as a dove, and a voice came from heaven—God's voice—saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21-22).¹

After that, Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days. He fasted all that time, and toward the end of it, He experienced a series of intense temptations. As Satan presented each of the temptations, which were really attempts to get Him to take shortcuts to being the Messiah, Jesus answered them with Scripture and was victorious.

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*.

It was after this intense time of testing that Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and began teaching in their synagogues. A report about Him was spreading throughout the whole region. No doubt that report had gotten back to Nazareth. So that first Sabbath when He was back home, the people were eager to hear Him. The synagogue ruler chose Him as both the reader and the preacher for the day.

Now evidence suggests that the synagogues followed a lectionary for their readings, at least for the lessons from the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament, which the Jews called “the book of Moses”—the books of the Bible we know as Genesis through Deuteronomy). This lectionary consisted of 155 readings arranged to cover the entire Torah over three years. It’s not clear whether there was a similar lectionary for the readings from the Prophets, or if the leader of the synagogue chose the lesson from the Prophets for the day, or whether it was simply at the discretion of the reader.²

It was the lesson from the Prophets that Jesus was chosen to read that day. So at the appropriate time in the service, He stood up, received the scroll of Isaiah the Prophet from the attendant, unrolled it to the passage we know as Isaiah 61, and read the first verse and the first part of the second verse. Luke quotes it loosely from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that was produced a couple of centuries before Christ:

“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 favor.”

But here was the real clincher. Suspense hung in the air as they waited to hear what Jesus would say about this marvelous passage that they had come to understand as being about the coming Messianic age. He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down, assuming the position of an authoritative teacher. Finally He spoke and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Mission impossible? I mean, how was it being fulfilled? How would it be fulfilled? How *could* it be fulfilled? Those who were there that day had their own ideas.

No doubt at least some of them were thinking about deliverance from the Roman occupation they were enduring, about standing up to Rome, driving Rome out of Palestine, and setting up the Davidic kingdom of Israel again.

But Jesus was thinking and working outside their box. He would bring a deliverance far different from what they were expecting, and the good news He would proclaim was miles apart from what they were expecting.

In fact, even as they were all bragging on Him, He told them that they would reject Him, because “no prophet is accepted in his hometown” (3:24). And when He reminded them how Elijah was sent not to a Jewish widow in Israel but to a Gentile widow in Zarephath of Sidon and that Elisha only healed one leper, and he was Naaman the Syrian, they became *furious*! Jesus was showing them that the gospel is for the whole world, and they were ready to *kill* Him. They

²Malcolm O. Tolbert, “Luke” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* 9 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 45.

took Him out to the edge of the hill the city was built on to throw Him off the cliff, but He passed through them and went on His way.

Fulfilling the mission

How would it be possible for Jesus to fulfill this incredible mission God His Father had given to Him?

Well, isn't that the key? The mission was *from God!* It was *God* who had given it. It was grounded in the Old Testament Scriptures—it was something God was up to all along. And Jesus was empowered by the Spirit to accomplish it. That was the only way it could be done!

Now the Gospels are ancient biographies. But as Charles Talbert has pointed out in his commentary on Luke's Gospel, the conventions of ancient biography are far different from those of modern biography.

For instance, the writer would often present an episode early on in the story that was programmatic for the life and work of the subject of the biography, giving a preview of the person's life and work in miniature at the very beginning.

Isn't that what Luke was doing here? In this text, *Jesus declared that the Spirit had anointed Him to minister wholeness to the whole world, fulfilling this Messianic promise from the Prophet.* He told them what His ministry would be about and the course it would take. In this sense this announcement was indeed programmatic—a blueprint, so to speak—for His ministry, a preview in miniature.

But there's another convention of ancient biography that comes into play here as well. Sometimes the writer would pen a second volume that would tell about the *followers* of the hero of the biography. Luke has done that with the book of Acts. The point that ancient biographers would make with this practice is that the followers of the great one do the same kinds of things he does, following his example. Thus one purpose of the Gospels as we have them is to show us Jesus as a model for the Christian life and the work of God's kingdom.

So when we look at Acts, we find that the early church's ministry followed the same pattern as Jesus' ministry. They did the same kinds of things Jesus did (preaching, healing, casting out demons). They also met with the same kinds of responses (often rejection and persecution, especially by the Jewish religious leaders). The ministry of the church was grounded in the Old Testament Scriptures, and the church was empowered by the Holy Spirit. And as the body of Christ, the church extended His mission in the world. So this text is really also programmatic for the church's life and ministry!³

Sounds like "Mission: Impossible," doesn't it? Oh, we can proclaim good news alright, but how can we let the oppressed go free? Can we bring wholeness, healing, and deliverance to the hurting and oppressed?

Isn't it the same with us as it was with Jesus? If His ministry was given by God, and we are Jesus' followers, then isn't ours given by God as well? If His mission was grounded in Scripture, shouldn't ours be also? And if the anointing and empowering of the Spirit were a necessity for Jesus' ministry, then aren't they absolutely necessary for ours as well?

³ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, Rev. Ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 2, 3-4, 57-60.

On mission with Jesus

What will it look like if we fulfill this impossible mission?

First, we will recognize that *ultimately, it's about God and His redemptive purpose, not us*. When we get that straight, it clears up a lot of other issues, especially our dependence on the Holy Spirit for the power to do God's will—grounded in Scripture, empowered by the Spirit.

From a practical standpoint, *we will seek to meet people at their point of need, and to minister God's grace to them there*. Like Jesus, we'll proclaim good news to the poor and release to those who are in bondage, and proclaim that the time of God's grace is *now*.

This can take a lot of different forms in the work of God's kingdom.

It might mean demonstrating God's love and grace by helping the poor and feeding the hungry. It might mean doing something that will go beyond meeting crisis needs to helping people change their situations, and doing it all in the name of Jesus, showing them the good news by our deeds and telling them the good news about God's love and grace in Christ.

It might mean reaching out to the down-and-out as well as the up-and-out, lovingly showing them that a genuine relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ is worth far more than any material things we may or may not have.

It might mean witnessing in a winsome way to your neighbor or co-worker or classmate, or those in this community right around our church, or going on a mission trip to another part of our state, our country, or our world.

It might mean sitting quietly with someone whose world has fallen apart because of the death of a loved one or the destruction of a relationship or the loss of a job or a home or a child.

It might mean reaching out to people who are different from us—from a different race or socio-economic class or background or even country—to share the love and good news of Jesus Christ with them in word or deed.

It will mean giving ourselves up completely to Christ to be who He calls us to be and do what He calls us to do.

I first planned to title this sermon “The Whole Gospel for the Whole World,” because that's what Jesus is showing us here. The gospel, the *good news*, is about *wholeness* and it's for everyone, for the whole world! And *Jesus calls us to join Him in His mission to minister wholeness to the whole world*.

But the task seems so daunting to us. How in the world can we take the whole gospel to the whole world? It seems like an impossible mission.

But is it? Hardly! So long as we are grounded in Scripture, empowered by the Spirit, extending the ministry of Jesus into the world, or as our vision and mission statement puts it, “embodying the presence of Christ to Sanford and the world.”

Will *you* accept this mission?

†MEG