

An Analysis of Unbelief

Matt. 13:51-58

Intro. The closing words of **Matt. 13:58** provide the subject for consideration this AM. The verse says, **And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.** (or **unbelief** - KJV)

Aside from Satan Himself, no enemy to our souls is greater than the sin of unbelief! We typically take **sin** to mean *violations...wrong things done against God and His law*. But sin runs deeper than wrong actions. Sin begins as evil attitudes in our hearts or minds. Jesus said wrong attitudes result in all sorts of wicked behaviour. **Mk. 7:21-23** – **“For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.’”**

When Moses led God's people through the desert, their great sin was unbelief. They refused to take God at His Word. Because they didn't want to trust God, they were disobedient. Every other sin is a result of unbelief. Now by the term, **unbelief**, I'm not talking about the doubts of a sincere person who really wants to know God. The Israelites were not in that category...they were insincere. They had every opportunity to know God, but they didn't want a relationship with Him. Their problem wasn't a lack of evidence. Their problem lay in their unwillingness to accept God's authority over their lives.

Another word for unbelief is **lack of faith**. We find that phrase here in **Matt. 13:58**. Faith is *active belief and trust in God and His Word*. I've always appreciated Dr. Ryries definition. He says, *“Faith is unreserved acceptance of divine truth with consequent surrender of my will to that truth.”* Now it's impossible to have faith until we have heard God's Word. (**Rom.10:17**) **Unbelief** is when those who have been exposed to the truth refuse to trust and obey it. And the consequences of unbelief are very serious. The people God delivered from Egypt were not allowed to enter the Promised Land because of this sin. As Pastor Jerry said last Sunday, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, that entire generation perished in the wilderness. And the results of unbelief are consequential still today. Not only does unbelief keep the unbeliever from forgiveness and heaven, but unbelief will neutralize and destroy a believer's fellowship with the Lord and short-circuit the enjoyment of His blessings.

Matt. 13 marks the culmination of the basic teachings Jesus gave to His disciples. As we've noted from **v.11**, the subject is **the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven**. Jesus revealed these **secrets** by way of 8 parables. The main parable all the others are built on, is the first one in **vs. 3-9...the parable of the sower and the soils**. By this parable, Jesus illustrated His role as the principal sower of the Kingdom message. Yet as the parable illustrates, His message is refused by many whose hearts are in no condition to receive it. If a ratio was intended, 3/4ths of the seed scattered in the field is wasted. Only 1/4th takes root and becomes fruitful. Tonight we'll see how this 3/4ths ratio is illustrated by eight accounts recorded next in **Matt. 13:54-16:4**. So I invite you to join us at 6 PM.

1. The Final Parable in Capernaum – vs. 51-53 - "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked. "Yes," they replied. He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there.

The setting is **Capernaum** on the north slopes of the Sea of Galilee. **Capernaum** was Peter's hometown. It was Jesus' home-away-from-home and the place where He performed most of His miracles. But you may remember...in **11:23, 24** Jesus issued a sober warning to the citizens of Capernaum. Despite their exposure to Christ, they refused to believe and embrace Him as their Messiah. So Jesus said, **And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom,**

it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you." In fulfillment of this prophecy, **Capernaum** eventually slid into oblivion. Today there's nothing more than foundations and ancient ruins. Archaeological excavations have found engravings and mosaics that reveal pagan influence on the Jews who lived there.

The judgment Jesus pronounced on Capernaum was due to their sin of unbelief. Faith is a decision ...a choice...a response of the human will. We can choose to believe in Christ and we can choose to not believe Him. Yet one thing is certain...we are accountable for our decision and each person will answer to God for that decision. Jesus warned Capernaum that unbelief is not without consequence and with greater privilege comes greater responsibility. In **Luke 12:48b** He said, **From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.** With Bibles available to all / a church on every corner / a heritage of religious freedom / and multiplied opportunities to hear the Gospel...this principle certainly applies to the United States of America! Yet the ratio of unbelief to belief remains the same still today. Most of the seed sown in America is wasted and unfruitful. Though the seed is spread liberally, most falls on hearts unprepared and unwilling to receive it. Let's consider this 8th parable before we consider an analysis of the sin of unbelief from the example of the Nazarenes.

These verses contain substantial encouragement for disciples. Because these men had spent time with Jesus, they weren't just fishermen / farmers / merchants and tax collectors anymore. Here Jesus ranked them alongside **teachers of the law**. As disciples, they were learners and students. Their rabbi didn't merely study and know the Scriptures because Jesus happens to be **the Incarnate Word of God!** By following Him, each man was in the process of becoming a teacher himself. Even though the disciples' understanding was incomplete, these 12 ordinary men knew more than many of Israel's most prestigious teachers and leaders. That's how it is for everyone who spends time with Jesus... who meets with Him on the pages of His Word. **Psa. 119:98, 99** say, **Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.** Education is important, but what good is understanding Einstein's theory of relativity if you don't know the Eternal Creator who made everything? What good is a seminary degree if you don't know how to get from earth to heaven? Knowledge without faith and love for God is utterly worthless. So never under-estimate the wisdom God gives those who know / believe / and order their lives according to His Word!

A case in point is my father. He never attended college but joined the Navy before finishing High School. But my father knew the Lord. Often when a relative, neighbor or coworker had a crisis or was in some sort of trouble they came knocking on our door. My dad had no degrees after his name and never hung out a shingle, but he was counselor and prayer support for many. Why?...because he knew the Lord and walked with the Lord. And people who knew him sensed this. Say listen, life down here may become very tough until Jesus airlifts us out of here. Are you ready to counsel and pray with people who may turn to you for help? Are those you come in contact with aware that you know God and the way to heaven? What do they sense in you...peace or panic / helplessness or hope / paranoia or praise? **I Pet. 3:15 - But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.**

So the parable continues...**every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."** What had Jesus just been doing with His disciples? By way of 7 parables, He had been teaching them secrets concerning the Kingdom of heaven. (**vs.11**) Because these men had eyes to see / ears to hear / and hearts wide open to believe, they could know and understand spiritual realities that are unknowable to the unbelieving crowd. They were believers. As a disciple of Jesus they were like the owner of an estate who has a storeroom full of treasures.

It's a separate study, but throughout the Bible, **wisdom and knowledge** are often compared to **wealth and treasures**. An example is **Rom. 11:33** where Paul erupts in praise. **Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!** Then speaking of Jesus, he wrote in **Col. 2:3...in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**. To sum up this brief excursion, listen to **Jer. 9:23, 24 - This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD..."** People who are truly rich, know God!

So what did this home owner do with the treasures he received? Did he hoard them? Did he keep them hidden? Were they kept on shelves in some theological library? No! He **brings them out**. **Brings out** is from the Greek verb *ekballo* which carries the idea of *scattering* or *distributing widely*. Say, wait a minute...isn't that what Jesus was doing? In the parable of the soils, the farmer is Jesus. He scatters the Gospel seed generously and we might even say, wastefully. The seed falls on all kinds of soil. But that isn't His concern. His concern is to spread the Good News far and wide.

So what are disciples to do with the truth entrusted to them? I think you know. The average Christian like you and me is privileged to sit and soak in volumes of God's truth. Are we bringing the Good News out where it can accomplish eternal good, or are we keeping it to ourselves? I think it was Beth Moore who compared many of us to members of a football team. We've had hours of team meetings and chalk talks. She then asks, *"Isn't it time for us to start running some plays?"*

Again I realize the danger of pressing every fine point in a parable. But mention of old stock and new stock seems too provocative to ignore. We're living at a time when many Christians feel the OT is archaic, irrelevant and perhaps even scary. They take pride in being, *"NT only believers"...* or *"Jesus Only"* Christians. Wait just a minute! **II Tim. 3:16, 17** says, **All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. All Scripture** means both testaments...the OT and the new! **v.17** insists we are only equipped for every good work when we embrace **all** of the Scriptures. And as many have observed, the NT is contained in the OT and the OT is explained in the NT. But all 66 books of our Bible are living, powerful and necessary. Jesus affirmed this in **Matt. 5:18 - I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished**. So disciples entrusted with such a tremendous wealth of knowledge and understanding are to become teachers who bring God's truth out of both testaments.

We then find a time notation in **v.53. When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there**. The disciples had much more to learn, these 8 parables mark the end of their basic instruction. From Capernaum, Jesus traveled about 40 miles southwest to His hometown of Nazareth. **Lk. 4** reports an earlier visit there. It was during that visit the people of Nazareth became enraged by His teaching. **Lk. 4:29** says, **They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. Jn. 1:11** says, **He came to that which was his own, but His own did not receive him**. So **v. 53** signals a change as Jesus turned from teaching the faithful at Capernaum to teaching the faithless at Nazareth.

II. The Faithless People of Nazareth – vs. 54-58 - Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at him.

But Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor." And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Now as we said earlier, to believe or to refuse to believe is a choice. Because unbelief involves deliberate rejection of truth after exposure to it, the unbeliever is accountable to God. The issue isn't a lack of information or insufficient confirmation...the issue is a matter of the will. Despite compelling evidence, many simply refuse to believe. In fact, in **Lk.16** Jesus told the story of a rich man in Hell. When in torment the man plead for someone to be sent to his unbelieving brothers, Abraham said, **'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'** - **16:31** Today many seem fascinated by "life after death" and "to heaven and back stories." While ticket sales may be high, I'm not sure the story will turn many to faith in Christ. **Rom. 10:17** says, **faith comes from hearing the message**, not by hearing nebulous stories.

Now most of what we teach at MBC focuses on the dynamics of faith. But the text before us this AM centers on a town where faith was absent. **v.58** says, **He (Jesus) did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.** So with the minutes remaining, I want to show you how this passage illustrates the nature and consequences of unbelief. Unbelief is characterized by four things which make it irrational / inexcusable and for which the unbeliever will be held accountable:

1. **Unbelief side-steps the obvious – v. 54 - Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked.**

My sisters tell a story from days when they were employed at a nursing home. There's no new revelation here...but patients in nursing homes sometimes "take" each other's belongings. Am I right about that? It could be a case of mistaken identity or perhaps an item was just borrowed. I mean, who wants to admit their sweet grandma has become a thief? But as the story goes, a blue Easter egg was missing from one lady's Easter basket. An all points bulletin was sent out. One by one the residents in the line-up denied they'd taken that blue Easter egg. Yet suspicion ran rather high as one woman proclaimed her innocence. It seems a piece of blue egg shell had stuck to her upper lip.

Notice...**v.54** says the people were **amazed**...they had egg shell on their lip. They asked...**"Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?"**...more egg shell. They didn't ignore or deny the extraordinary things they saw and heard. Instead they freely admitted that Jesus has amazing **wisdom and miraculous powers**. They knew Jesus hadn't studied at any of the famous rabbinical schools. He had no formal training in the Scriptures. **Jn. 7:15** says, **The Jews were amazed and asked, "How did this man get such learning without having studied?"** Yet Jesus exhibited wisdom and authority beyond anything the people had ever witnessed. He exhibited wisdom relating to every almost conceivable subject. And power...they had never seen anyone perform anything like the supernatural miracles Jesus performed! Jesus healed everyone who came to Him regardless of the deformity / the disease / the seriousness / or how long the person had suffered. He even raised the dead to life! His healings were always immediate, complete and undeniable.

So when the people of Nazareth asked the question, they tipped their hand. They exposed deliberate willingness to *sidestep the obvious*. Jesus came exhibiting the powers of the kingdom and doing exactly what the Messiah was prophesied to do. Therefore class...who must Jesus be? He must be the Messiah! But once again, faith is a choice...it's a decision. It's more about the will than convincing evidence. In fact, the people of Nazareth prove that convincing evidence can mean little to nothing. Their attitude seems to have been...*"don't confuse us with facts...our minds are made up."* Yet isn't that how it is for many people still today? The obvious is often side-stepped and dismissed by those who are unwilling to believe.

2. Unbelief swears by the irrelevant – vs. 55, 56 - "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"

Even though unbelief side-steps what seems obvious to people of faith, unbelievers realize they need something to validate their unbelief. Jesus said, **they strain at gnats and swallow camels**. And we hear these excuses all the time. In fact, atheists have compiled a list of their top 10 reasons for not believing in God. But here's a question...why would someone bother to prove that something doesn't exist? Though our focus is unbelief, I refuse to promote their stupid list by showing it to you!

But this was the cloud floating that hung over Nazareth...the cloud of excuses. *"Jesus can't be the Messiah because we knew him from the time he was a boy. We knew his father. My oxen are wearing a yoke Joseph made in his carpenter shop. And we know Mary, his mother as well as his brothers and sisters."* By the way, these verses refute the Catholic heresy that insists Mary remained a perpetual virgin after the supernatural conception and birth of Jesus.

But let's consider their excuses. The OT prophets said Messiah would be a child born of a virgin and that He would be a son and a servant. Beyond that, the prophets identified the time / the birthplace / and the family of their Messiah. So even if they overlooked prophecies promising the time and the birthplace, they should have known that Messiah would be somebody's son. What was so unusual about the Messiah having brothers and sisters? But once again, the unbeliever feels the need to come up with excuses to justify their decision to dismiss the obvious. So they build a case and swear by things that are irrelevant. How many times have we heard somebody object to Christianity because there are so many hypocrites in the Church? What does that have to do with their relation to God? None whatsoever! Having never actually read the Bible, how many times have people questioned God's existence and goodness because there's so much suffering in the world? Because unbelief side-steps the obvious and swears by the irrelevant, it's sinful and unbelievers will be held accountable for it.

3. Unbelief substitutes feelings for facts – v. 57 - And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor."

Don't you think God must be sick of hearing people say, *"I feel this is true and I feel that's not true?"* He must be weary of hearing the prime talk show question, *"How do you feel about that?"* I won't presume to put words in God's mouth. But I have to wonder if His response to those who feel their way through life might be something like this...*"I gave you a brain and intellect to discern what's factual and true. I gave you feelings but I never intended for you to rely on them as a GPS for life's choices and decisions!"* But it seems the people of Nazareth reacted to Jesus based entirely on how they felt about Him. **v.57** says, **they took offense at Him**. We aren't told what Jesus taught in their synagogue, but it seems pretty clear they didn't like what they heard. They reacted emotionally rather than intelligently. This is so true to human nature.

In his book entitled "The Trauma of Transparency", Grant Howard describes the typical human response to correction. *"You told me I was wrong...that made me feel bad...I don't like to feel bad...you are the one who made me feel bad...so...I don't like you...besides... who are you to tell me I was wrong!"* In **Jn. 15:22** Jesus said, **"If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin."** There are many people in the world who refuse to believe in God and Christ because of how they feel. It doesn't feel good to admit they are helpless sinners who desperately need a Savior. I doesn't feel good to submit to God's authority. But what happens to people who refuse to pay taxes because it doesn't feel good? What happens to those who refuse a diagnosis because it's not what they want to hear? I rest my case!

4. Unbelief short-circuits the power of God – v. 58 - And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

This verse is devastating to charismatic theology and faith healers. The fact is...most of the healing miracles Jesus performed were done whether the sick person had faith or not. Years ago a charismatic guy came into Doug Hammond's cubicle in ICU and told the family he would rise up if they had enough faith. That's a cruel belief. I gracefully showed him the way out. Jesus performed miracles to certify His credentials and to help people believe not because they believed. Oh but listen...where hearts were hard / unrepentant / and unbelieving...Jesus declined to demonstrate miracle working power. The divine order isn't see and believe...the order is believe and see. So in Nazareth and in our town as well, the power of God is short-circuited by unbelief. In principle, the same is applies to believers as well as unbelievers. Nothing quenches the power of God's Spirit more than unbelief. But listen...God shows up powerful in the lives of those who trust Him and obey His Word. Amen?

Let me close with this admonition. **Heb. 3:12** was written to brothers...to fellow believers. **See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.** Because of unbelief an entire generation of God's people was not allowed to experience the blessings God had for them. They traded faith in God for fear / anxiety / complaining / and forfeited blessings. That's not a good trade.

I Tim. 6:12 - Fight the good fight of the faith. Do you know what that means? It means make war against unbelief. **Jude 20** tells us how. **But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.** Faith is built up and made strong by prayer and exposure to God's Word. There's no shortcut. It's a fight to trust God for everything, but He's worthy of that trust and He will never let you down.

So how is it with you? Have you trusted Christ for salvation? I'm sure you've heard the Gospel, but have you decided to believe what you've heard? And Christian, what about you? For God to show up strong in your life, you need to take God at His Word without reservation.