

THE MISSION OF CHRIST

Luke 4:16-22

In Nazareth the synagogue was almost as familiar to Christ Jesus as His home. Through the years of His boyhood and early manhood He had gone there as regularly as He had gone to the toil of the carpenter's bench on the other six days of the week. Now He had been away for more than a year. He had been in Judea, and there He had had some great experiences. He had been baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. He had emerged victoriously from the temptations of Satan. During His public ministry He had made a tour, and news about it had doubtless provoked a lot of wonder and curious inquiry on the part of the people among whom He had been reared. Now He had returned to His home town. Having heard so many glowing reports of the marvelous signs and wonders attendant upon His ministry in other places, His fellow-townsmen were in great expectation, hoping to see something remarkable done by Him when He appeared in their midst.

After the fame of Christ's discourses and miracles had spread abroad and He had returned to Nazareth, the citizens watched Him very closely as He walked along the streets. The people were anxious to hear Him Who had become so prominent, and had created such a sensation in Jerusalem and other places. When it was rumored that their townsman might preach at the synagogue, the people of Nazareth assembled there in unusual numbers on the sabbath.

We are told that Christ entered the synagogue, "as his custom was." In that statement there is a message for everyone. Our Lord had grown up in Nazareth. When He dwelt there, from His infancy and childhood, it had been His custom to attend the services in the place where the Word of God was read and expounded, and where the people assembled for prayer. To Him the synagogue represented the authority of God in Nazareth. So, it had been His custom to wend His way there from sabbath to sabbath.

Jesus Christ was a man of good habits. Perhaps it almost startles you to hear me make that statement. Christ always had the habit of ordering His life according to the will of His heavenly Father. With literal truth He said, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34). To use a modern expression, "our Lord had the habit of attending church." He learned this habit from His mother and Joseph. They attended the services regularly and took Him with them. Learning to go to the synagogue as a small boy, He went as a man, because it was His custom. All boys and girls should learn to attend the services at God's house while they are quite young. No parents have any right under heaven to let their children have their own way, when that way is to absent themselves from God's house, which is not right for any Christian, or even any good citizen. I shall ever be grateful to God for parents of sufficient Christianity, character and awareness of what was right to see to it that I was in God's house with regularity when services were being conducted. The law of habit is vastly important. Habits have to be cultivated.

Habits play a larger part in our lives than we realize. We easily get into a certain routine both of thinking and of action. The important thing is to form the right kind of habits and a routine of living that will enable us to fulfil God's purpose in our lives. This routine will include the activities of the home and of work. But for a Christian it must also include all that Christ means by discipleship, which is worship and the service of the Lord and of others. Without these the pattern of life cannot have any thread of gold to give it luster and significance. These were all part of the routine of life for our Saviour. He never had to decide when the sabbath came whether or not He would go to the synagogue. Its worship was part of the regular pattern of His life. It was a part of His weekly routine. When the sabbath came He went into the synagogue "as his custom was."

We are all creatures of habit. When we discover that Christ Jesus was no exception to this fact, it brings Him close to us. We seldom stop to think how large and powerful a place our habits have in that strange mixture of activities that we call life. Some are bad habits. Far better off would we be if they had never been formed. Some habits are excellent. We are fortunate to have them.

A habit may involve us in an amusing situation or it may take a pathetic twist. One can never be sure which it will be. A college president who was rather fat around the waist had the habit of using only a very few gestures when he spoke. On a special occasion at the college, before the student body and many visitors, the proud and portly president made his usual down gesture over his rotund front as he said, "My friends, I have watched this institution grow from a very small beginning." He had simply been tricked by a habit.

It is of the highest importance that all of us give earnest and eager attention to the forming of the right kind of habits. We need always to bear in mind that we are not born with certain habits, but we make and cultivate them. How are habits formed? They are the result of our choices. The choices which we make day by day gradually harden into habits. We make choices and persist in them until they become habits. Just as wrong choices issue in wrong habits, so right choices issue in right habits. Blessed is the person who cultivates the right spirit and the habit of right thinking through the years. By this means he has built up a reserve of strength that will stand him in good stead in his hour of need.

What, then, are some of the habits that every one of us ought to form for successful Christian living? The habit of private devotions every day should be formed and maintained. No day ought to be allowed to pass without a quiet time for the devotional reading of the Bible and prayer. Everybody ought to form the habit of participating in public worship. We cannot live as we should, or at our best, unless we cultivate the habit of public worship. Failure to worship will cause anybody to lose the sense of God's presence. Every one of us should cultivate the habit of helpfulness to others.

Christ was evidently accustomed to participating publicly in the services at the synagogue. So, that was a memorable hour when, after His return

to Nazareth, He appeared in His home synagogue. What memories must have surged through His mind as He entered the synagogue, where He had worshipped so many times! His boyhood associates were there and watching Him. All of them were curious; some were sympathetic, others were jealous, and still others were contemptuous. There was just about the same cross-section of mental and spiritual attitude we would find today before any young preacher preached his first sermon in his home church. But there was one present whose attitude was different from all the rest. That was His mother, Mary. She did not know how His listeners would respond to His preaching. Of course, Christ knew that a prophet is not without honor except in His own country. It is still true that those who are brought in from elsewhere are more highly esteemed than the ones who are at home. That first sermon to the home folk is a never-to-be-forgotten occasion in the life of any preacher.

After the service had been opened with prayer, the first of the two lessons for the day was read. Then the Lord Jesus Christ was officially invited to read from the scriptures and expound them. When the scroll was placed in His hands He unrolled it and read the famous passage which is recorded in the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah. He then rolled up the parchment, returned it to the attendant, and, as was the custom of the teacher, He sat down. It was the custom in those days for the teacher to sit down and speak, while the people stood to listen. If that were the practice today, fewer church members would sleep through the services.

With every eye fastened on Him, and every ear attent to His words, Christ sat down and said, "This day is the scripture fulfilled in your ears." All listened to Him with marked attention, astonishment and wonder. Although they were spell-bound, they were highly prejudiced against the truth which He uttered.

Christ boldly asserted that the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him and that He had been anointed to do certain things. According to His own declaration here, His mission was:

1. To preach the gospel to the poor.

The poor of His day were penniless and friendless, but He had something to say to them. What was the gospel or the good news which Christ came to preach to the poor? It was the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Prior to His coming, the doctrine of salvation by the works which men could do was very prevalent and widespread. When Christ came He offered salvation to every sinner who would receive Him as a Saviour. He came with a gospel for the poor in purse and in spirit. The glory of His gospel was revealed in the fact that the common people heard Him gladly. It was the rulers and the self-righteous leaders who lacked a consciousness of sin and a realization of their need. Naturally they did not appreciate Christ or have any interest in or concern about His message.

It is a striking fact that in every land where the gospel of Christ is preached it is the poor primarily who rejoice in its message. For the most part, those who have an abundance of this world's goods are so taken up with them that they are not concerned about spiritual riches. It is the poor and the struggling who delight to hear the gospel of Christ. Even though nineteen centuries have gone by since Christ left this scene, His gospel is still being preached to the

poor. Anybody who has God for his Father and Christ as his Saviour is rich indeed, but those who are not the children of God are paupers, regardless of what else they may possess.

2. To heal the broken-hearted.

Oh, what a mission! The broken-hearted are on every hand. Many hearts are broken because they have been beaten into the dust by the flail of unexpected disappointment. Many others are broken-hearted because of their failures in life. Still others are broken-hearted because they have lost their loved ones by death. Regardless of what has caused you to be broken-hearted, Christ says to you, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

It is interesting to note that the man who preaches to broken hearts never lacks an audience. A loving interest convinces a broken heart that somebody cares.

3. To preach deliverance to the captives.

Sin imprisons. The worst master that anybody ever had is Satan. The only deliverer from the power of Satan and sin is Christ. He came to save from sin to righteousness, from selfishness to usefulness and from hell to heaven. Whoever receives Christ as Saviour thereby comes into possession of forgiveness, deliverance and salvation.

4. To give sight to the blind.

Physical blindness is bad. Mental blindness is worse. Moral blindness is still worse. Spiritual blindness is the worst of all. Sin causes blindness. Sin is the most stupid thing in the world. Sin never paid anybody in good coin, and it never will do so. Sin always deludes, deceives and destroys. Christ not only offered physical sight, but spiritual vision as well.

5. To liberate the bruised.

Bruises are the inevitable result of sin. Christ alone can heal these bruises. This much-needed and invaluable work constitutes one important phase of Christ's mission.

6. To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

Have you accepted the wonderful Saviour Who came to this earth on such a glorious and manifold mission? If not, won't you receive Him now by simple faith or trust? He will be adequate for every need of yours. Moreover, He will never disappoint you or fail you.