

Why Couldn't Jesus Perform Miracles in His Hometown?

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Both Matthew and Mark state that Jesus left the region near the sea of Galilee and came “into his own country” (Matthew 13:54; Mark 6:1). Undoubtedly this has reference to the environs of Nazareth, the city in which Christ grew up in the home of Joseph and his mother, Mary.

In connection with the Lord's visit to this region Mark records a curious statement. “And he could there do no mighty work” (6:5).

Frequently modern “faith healers” appeal to this text in an attempt to explain their own inability to effect genuine miracles. “Some people,” they complain, “just do not have enough faith to be healed.”

The Bible unequivocally teaches that Jesus possessed the power to perform miracles. His miraculous abilities had been prophesied in the Old Testament (Isaiah 35:5-6), they astounded his disciples (Matthew 14:33), and confounded his enemies (John 11:47). He exercised divine power over infirmity (John 9:1ff), the laws of nature (John 6:19), material objects (John 2:1ff), the demonic world (Matthew 12:22), and even death itself (John 11:43-44). In view of this wide range of supernatural abilities, it is hardly conceivable that Jesus failed in power on this occasion.

The Solution

A comparison of Mark 6:5, with Matthew 13:58 (a parallel text), will bring the solution into focus. Whereas Mark records that Christ “could there do no mighty work,” Matthew simply has it like this: “And he did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.”

Both Matthew and Mark state the same basic fact; the language they respectively employed, however, was slightly different. The seeming problem is with Mark's expression “he **could not**.” The Greek phraseology is *ouk edunato*. This expression is an idiomatic manner of speaking occasionally employed in the New Testament to connote the idea that one, for some reason, **chooses not** to do something — though technically, he has the ability to do it. Consider these examples.

In one of his parables, Jesus tells of a man who received an invitation to a great supper. For reasons of his own (though quite unjustified), he declined, saying, “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot [*ou dunamai*] come” (Luke 14:20). Having a wife scarcely creates an impossibility! In one of his epistles, the apostle John writes: “Whosoever is begotten of God does not sin, because his [God's] seed abides in him: and he cannot [*ou dunamai*] sin, because he is begotten of God” (1 John 3:9).

The apostle is not suggesting that it is impossible for the child of God to sin (cf. 1 John 1:8-9; 2:1-2); rather, he is stating that when divine truth becomes resident in the heart, one will choose not to yield ourselves to a habitual, unrestrained life of sin. The term “cannot” is used in the sense of a **moral imperative**.

Jesus Chose To Limit His Miracles

This is clearly the circumstance that developed in the region of Nazareth. There was a reason why Jesus **chose to limit** his miraculous demonstrations in this neighborhood. First, note that the Lord **did** perform some miracles in the territory. Even Mark specifically says: “he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them” (6:5b). His **power**, therefore, was not the problem. Second, there is a forceful emphasis upon the stubborn, purposeful disbelief of the Jews of this area. The inspired writer notes that Jesus was astonished at their “unbelief.”

In the Greek testament, the term “unbelief” is preceded by a definite article — literally, “the unbelief,” i.e., a **depth of unbelief** quite egregious. Matthew clearly states that Jesus refrained from performing many miracles there “because of their unbelief” (13:58).

The Lord has granted to man the power of choice. The gift of volition is intrinsic to the nature of those made in the image of the Creator. The manner in which that gift of choice is used, however, is determined by the condition of one’s heart (mind). In one of his parables, Christ described the person who has an “honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15). A miracle will convince the non-believer — provided he is **honest** enough to evaluate the evidence (cf. Mark 9:24). On the other hand, if one is fundamentally dishonest, **nothing** will convince him (cf. Luke 16:31).

When Jesus came into the region of his old community, he encountered a hard-hearted resistance. Many of the people said, in effect, “Who does this Jesus think he is? He is merely the carpenter’s son. We know his mother, and his brothers and sisters” (see Matthew 13:54ff; Mark 6:1ff). Both Matthew and Mark state that these folks were “offended” (repelled) by the Lord. Discerning this hostile disposition, therefore, the Savior decided to **limit** his activity among them. There was no need to cram the truth down their throats. No matter what he did, he was to be afforded no “honor” by these of his own region — and even his own kinsmen (Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4)!

One scholar has summarized the matter very well.

“[Jesus] felt it morally impossible to exercise his beneficent power in their behalf in the face of their unbelief (Matt. 13:58). It closed the door against the operation of His power. He refused to force Himself upon those who did not want Him” (Hiebert, p. 156).