

*Sermons on the Person, Words, and Works
of our Lord Jesus Christ*

by
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Sermon V
"The Loss of Unbelief"

*"Now He could do no mighty work there,
except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them."*

Mark 6:5

Regularity, order, and a designed system or plan may be traced out in all the proceedings of our Lord Jesus Christ. He did not, for instance, leave His apostles without assigning them the special course they were to adopt in carrying forth the Gospel among men. Though He said to them, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," still it was to be in a prescribed and defined manner--"beginning at Jerusalem," then "in Samaria," and then unto the "uttermost ends of the earth."

So also was it in our Lord's own ministry. He did not begin in just any city or locality but in His own country, where He had been brought up from childhood. And after His baptism and temptation we find Him at once beginning: *"Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read"* (Luke 4:14-16).

Now we know from the fourth chapter of St. Luke that the Nazarenes, instead of rejoicing at the high privilege of having Jesus thus beginning His ministry in His native place, rejected Him and His preaching so as to draw down on themselves the condemnation, *"Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country"* (4:24). And when He proceeded to abase their pride (national and spiritual), we read: *"So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff"* (4:28,29). But His blessed life was preserved, not by any abandonment of their wicked attempt, but by the exercise of His own divine power: *"Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way"* (ver. 30).

Nor did these inhabitants of Nazareth repent or subsequently show any better mind toward the Lord of glory. Jesus gave them other opportunities, space and time for repentance, fresh seasons for glorifying Him if they had chosen to do so. For at a later period of His ministry, we

read:

Then He went out from there (the coast of Tiberias) and came to His own country, and His disciples followed Him. And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue. And many hearing Him were astonished, saying, "Where did this Man get these things? And what wisdom is this which is given to Him, that such mighty works are performed by His hands! Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" So they were offended at Him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house." Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them (Mark 6:1-5).

I have now briefly referred to the whole Scripture history or context leading to this most remarkable passage. May the Holy Spirit guide us while we consider, first, the difficulty which the concluding declaration involves, and then, second, the solemn and important lesson that it contains for us all.

"Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them." All will, I imagine, see and feel the very obvious difficulty these words present. Was not Jesus as almighty when living and sojourning on earth as He was in Heaven, this Jesus who could raise the dead, cast our devils, calm the tumultuous waves by His word of command and accomplish all miracles physical and spiritual? We know He could exercise his Divine power in any place and under any imaginable circumstances; and should he now be described as one who *"could do no mighty work"* except for healing a few sick people?

There is the difficulty, and at first sight it is without doubt no ordinary one. I trust, however, that we shall soon see how it affords a very clear solution.

We know that impossibilities are of different kinds. For instance, it is impossible for us to add one cubit to our height, to move a mountain by our own strength, to create or give life to the smallest insect. These things are physically impossible. But in this class or range of impossibilities no explanation of our present question is found. Another therefore must be investigated.

The class to which I refer is that of things which are impossible when viewed in a *moral* light. For instance, it is an impossible thing for an honest and upright judge to intentionally condemn an innocent person or intentionally acquit a guilty one (that is, if he would maintain his integrity). That judge would feel and declare this as simply being impossible, something he could not do if he wanted to preserve his duty to himself, to his sovereign, to his country, and to his God.

The same occurs when any man of honor and truth has promised to fulfill a certain act. He has

pledged his word; and if he lives (or if nothing independent of himself should preclude the deed), it will be impossible for him to fail in fulfilling it. And though many things might occur to make him wish that he had not promised, still it will make no difference--he will live by his word. Scripture affirms this righteous course: *"In whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honors those who fear the LORD; he who swears to his own hurt and does not change"* (Ps. 15:4).

These illustrations taken from the conduct of men will, I think, suffice as a preparation for advancing onward, for examining the right sense in which it can be said, and in which it is said in our text, that there was something impossible for Jesus to do.

It was, of course, in a moral sense. He could do nothing inconsistent with Himself as God. For instance, He could do no wrong--nothing which is not perfectly holy and perfectly excellent in all ways. And we may lay it to heart that if anything in God's actions appears to us otherwise, it is only because of our own blindness and incapacity in judging them. Paul writes: *"Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us"* (Heb. 6:18). To be untrue is therefore a thing impossible with God; and to perform any act whatever inconsistent with His perfections and attributes as God is a thing which He cannot do.

But we must proceed a little further still if we would rightly apprehend the text and several other texts of Scripture, or if we would rightly apply them.

When God has determined in Himself to adopt and execute any one certain plan in preference to others or in exclusion of them, it is then impossible that this plan should not be fulfilled or that any other should be substituted in its place. Hear God speaking of Himself in this very light: *"For I am the LORD [Yahweh], I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob"* (Mal. 3:6). Because he is God, and because He does not change, and because He has formed and is carrying out His purposes of grace to His people Israel, therefore He spares them and does not consume them, in spite of all their sins and transgressions.

Consider God's purpose concerning Lot and his family. The Lord granted him Zoar as his refuge, but at the same time urged him out of Sodom, which was soon to be consumed by brimstone and fire: *"Hurry, escape there. For I cannot do anything until you arrive there"* (Gen. 19:22).

And to take an illustration from the purpose and plan of God in redemption, we find Jesus, upon being taken prisoner, declaring that He could pray to the Father who would *"provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels"* (Mat. 26:53) for his defense. But his being captured and being crucified was a part of God's plan of redemption for our souls, and therefore it was impossible for Jesus to ask this. His undertaking of infinite love made it impossible. He could not do it if He was to be our Saviour. And He Himself states it as an impossible thing: *"How*

then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" (ver. 54).

One more example will suffice, with two or three references bearing on the same truth. In the last chapter of Luke we find Jesus speaking to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus: *"Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?"* (Luke 24:26). In other words, was it not needful, essential, indispensable for the glory of God, in and through Jesus our Redeemer, that the Messiah should suffer first and then be glorified? And in the same chapter we find Jesus opening the understanding of His people and saying to them: *"Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the death the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem"* (vers. 46, 47). We find Paul enforcing the same truth, *"explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead"* (Acts 17:3). In God's purpose of grace, in His plan of redeeming love effected by the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, it was impossible that it should be otherwise. It could not be.

I offer these remarks not so much for our chosen text only, but also to explain a difficulty that meets us frequently in the Word of God, and, I may add, not only in the letter but in its spirit and general design.

The text tells us that in a certain place, where the words and ministry of Jesus ought to have been received with all readiness, gladness, and living faith, He *"could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them."* It was not that the criminal and inexcusable unbelief of the Nazarenes diminished in any way the power of Jesus, as God. In one sense, He could have done all signs, wonders, and miracles among them just as much as if they had all been the very equals of Abraham in faith, as if all of them had been worthy of a place in that glorious catalog of believing saints whose names shine forever in the eleventh chapter of the Hebrews. Whether all these saints were around Him or just the unbelieving Nazarenes, it would have made no difference at all to Him, for all power was in Himself.

But in another sense, it was impossible for Him to accomplish His mighty acts. Why? Because it was His purpose and His plan to act according to the faith given to men. For instance, what was the word which opened the blind man's eyes? *"According to your faith let it be to you"* (Matt. 9:29). What was the word to the ruler of the synagogue before the restoration of his daughter to life? *"Do not be afraid; only believe, and she will be made well"* (Luke 8:50). What was the testimony to the centurion when his servant was healed? *"I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"* (Luke 7:9).

Such was the Lord's plan--to act on faith and not on unbelief. I trust that now all difficulty is explained, and I trust that we see how the power of Jesus is not impugned at all. And when we find at Nazareth, His own city where He had been brought up and which was so mightily honored, that he could do no mighty work there, we can be assured that all was done in perfect harmony and consistency with Himself and His work.

It now only remains to apply the practical and solemn lesson inseparably bound up with these truths. And what is it? That God will and must act forever in perfect agreement with Himself as revealed in His Word; that it is impossible for Him to act otherwise; that He cannot do it.

If, therefore, He has said, *"Unless you repent you will all likewise perish,"* (Luke 13:3); if He has said, *"Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"* (John 3:3); if He has said, *"He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him"* (John 5:23); if He has said, *"Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord"* (Heb. 12:14); if He has said, *"If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him"* (1 John 2:15), then be well assured that no power in the whole universe can or will change or supersede one of such principles, on which men shall be judged hereafter.

I know that in many minds there is a lurking thought and vague impression that all God's purposes may not be applied to themselves; that in some way they will escape the woe and retribution plainly denounced against all who reject or neglect the Gospel, against those who show a state of unbelief like that of the Nazarenes. They may dream of some strange work of mercy hereafter. But as surely as God is true, it will be impossible. It is a delusion. Oh, what a blessing it would be if this truth would come now to any such trifler! In the power of the Holy Ghost it would scatter away his vague and unreal hopes, and constrain him at once to live a life of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Then he may be saved, for in his present state it is impossible.

Now the opposite train of thought is a most joyful thing to all true believers in Christ. It is impossible for one good thing to fail out of the "all things" which are their forever through Jesus their Lord. Eternal pardon is theirs. Eternal peace is theirs. Eternal glory is theirs. The covenant of grace is theirs. No one is able to pluck them out of the Father's hand. They are Christ's, and Christ is theirs. And it is impossible that they should lose Him or He lose them forever.

May God grant that these impossibilities may adequately warn us, or adequately gladden us, as the case may be. Warn us in time, if we are like the Nazarenes in their unbelief and neglect of the Saviour. Gladden us, if we are faithful and of that number who have received the Saviour and believed in His name to the salvation of our souls. The message of God is one and the same: *"Say to the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their doings. Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him, for the reward of his hands shall be given him"* (Isa. 3:10,11). Here is no uncertainty, nothing indefinite. It is all *"shall be."*

Therefore, I speak to the impenitent in the language of earnest love. No longer presume, lest it should be ill with you forever. And to all who in spirit and truth are serving the Lord, I say, no longer doubt, no longer fear. Live in the full assurance of faith in and through Jesus your Redeemer, and it shall and must be well for you unto all eternity.

"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For

he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life" (Gal. 6:7,8). The thing is sure. It is impossible that it should be otherwise.

Sermon V from *Sermons on the Person, Words, and Works of our Lord Jesus Christ*, by Francis Trench (Oxford: James Wright, 1857). **Note:** Liberty has been taken in some light editing and paraphrasing for clarity.