

“A Warning about Miracles”
John 4:46-54
June 19, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

We're in a series this summer on the miracles of Jesus, using the seven miracles John records in his Gospel. As we come today to the second of those miracles, we are confronted with a warning. When requested to heal the son of an important official, Jesus said, **“Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe”** (v. 48). Most people assume that the world would be a better place if there were more miracles, not less. Many Christians think that if God would only be a little more liberal in the miracle department, then more people would believe in him. For example, what if everyone who came to faith in Christ acquired the miraculous ability to fly? That would serve the dual purpose of clarifying who actually is a Christian and who is not, as well as convincing people that God is real.

Would a miracle-rich world be a better world or a worse world? Such questions are best answered by Jesus, and it seems that he is not quite so enthusiastic about miracles as many. On the one hand, Jesus loves to author miracles because they show the true nature of the coming kingdom. It is a kingdom from which Satan and all his demons will be banished, a kingdom where there will be no more pain and death, and a kingdom of abundance. Jesus' miracles show the nature of that kingdom as he heals, casts out demons, feeds the multitudes and even raises people from the dead. But on the other hand, Jesus knows that there is a danger with miracles, a danger summarized in his warning of verse 48. Miracles can easily capture our hearts so that we seek miracles instead of seeking Jesus. As we are going to see in this passage, Jesus navigates this situation by going ahead and performing the miracles, but at the same time he seems to go out of his way to keep the miracle quiet. When he turned water into wine, only Mary and the servants knew that a miracle had been performed. In today's passage, he declines to go to this official's house, but heals quietly and privately with only a word spoken from a distance. Jesus' attitude toward his own miracles should cause us to lower our enthusiasm for miracles and to increase our treasuring of Jesus. Miracles are temporary. Jesus is forever. A miracle is like having the golden egg, while Jesus is like having the goose that lays the golden eggs. So let's seek today, through this miracle story, to have our desire for Jesus grow.

I. The Danger of Sign Faith

Jesus is back in Cana again, where he had turned water into wine. An official in Capernaum had a son who was ill and on the verge of dying. This official was undoubtedly an important person, probably serving King Herod in some way. He

has heard about the miracles Jesus has done, and when he hears that Jesus is back in Cana, he decides in his desperation to make the 18 mile journey from Capernaum to Cana and ask Jesus to come to his house and heal his son. When he finds Jesus and makes his request, Jesus' response sounds a bit harsh to us. Jesus was clearly able to help, but his answer seems to deny the help being asked for. **“Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”**

Jesus is giving a warning. It is significant that the pronoun here is a second person plural. In his response, he is addressing the people as a whole, not just this man. The context shows us why Jesus felt it necessary to speak this warning. Since his previous miracle of turning water into wine, Jesus has made a trip to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. John tells us back at the end of chapter 2 that Jesus had done many miracles while in Jerusalem, with the result that **“many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing”** (2:23). But Jesus knew that this miracle-inspired faith was deficient, so he **“did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people”** (2:24). Jesus knew that the real interest of the people was in what Jesus could do for them, not in Jesus himself. They loved his gifts, but not him.

This explains what is recorded in the verses just prior to this second miracle. When Jesus returned to Galilee from his trip to Jerusalem for Passover, we read that the **“the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast”** (4:45). But it is clear from John's parenthetical statement in verse 44 that this welcoming of Jesus was deficient. **“For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.”** They welcomed his miracles, but not Jesus, and Jesus says that this brings dishonor to him. It is like the grandfather who loves his granddaughter, and gives her a twenty-dollar bill every time she comes to see him. She comes every week and will sit and visit for a while, swapping stories and keeping him updated on what's going on in her life. But then the granddaughter's mother asks him to stop giving her money, with the result that she never comes around again. She obviously liked his money more than him, and Jesus said that many around him were the same. They were dishonoring God by wanting what he could do for them, but not wanting him.

In the Pastor's Class I teach, I will often refer to an article I came across years ago by the atheist Sam Harris. In the article, he challenges Christians with a proposal he says will turn everyone in the world into Christians. He says that Christians ought to find some child who has lost an arm or leg in some war-torn region, and agree together in prayer to ask God for the miracle of restoring the child's lost limb. Harris says that we could televise the whole miracle, and when the world sees the limb made whole again, everyone would believe in Jesus. But is that true? Jesus knows that it is not true, as evidenced by the response to his miracles and his warning in verse 48.

I know a pastor who reported that prior to his conversion, he asked God for a miracle. He was hiking out in the woods somewhere in Pennsylvania, and he

asked God to demonstrate that he was real by showing him a blooming rhododendron at a time way beyond the season when those plants normally flower. “God, if you really exist, then make me see a flowering rhododendron.” Immediately, he saw one. He walked on for another thirty minutes or so and never saw another one. Then he prayed again, “Well, God, if you’re really there, then make me see another one.” The same result followed. This happened four or five times, and still he didn’t believe. Our problem isn’t that we lack evidence of God and his work. Our problem is that our hearts don’t want him in our lives. We want to run our own lives and have God serve up miracles as we demand them. The problem with this, and the reason Jesus speaks so strongly against it, is that such an attitude leads us further into destruction. What we need is Jesus, and to the degree that miracles help us to Jesus, they are good. But to the degree that they keep us from Jesus, they are harmful. So let’s turn next to consider how miracles help us grow closer to Jesus.

II. The Honor of Word Faith

Miracles take us closer to Jesus as we respond to them in faith. John records this particular miracle story because this official responds to Jesus in faith, unlike those who merely wanted more miracles from Jesus. Apart from faith, miracles can bring harm to our souls. With faith, miracles draw us closer to Jesus. When I was a boy, my family once spent a week’s vacation in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, at a place called Estes Park. There is a spot at that park through which the Continental Divide runs. Two drops of rain can fall inches apart and end up thousands of miles apart, with one going to the Pacific Ocean and the other to the Atlantic via the Mississippi River. Faith is like the Continental Divide, making the difference between drawing us nearer to Jesus or taking us further away from him.

I notice four features of this man’s faith, and the first is his desperation. Any parent knows the desperation this man must have felt. When our children, who depend on us, are needful of our help, we would do anything to relieve their suffering. We would gladly trade places with them were it possible to do so. This desperation doesn’t mean that everything in your life has to be falling apart before you can believe in Jesus. What it does mean is that you have to come to the place of realizing that the answer for your need lies outside yourself.

The second quality of true faith is that it is able to receive a “No” from God without growing angry and bitter toward him. Notice how Jesus twice delivers a negative response to this man. The first is when he gives a warning to the people in general about the kind of faith that requires a miracle. The second was when Jesus would not come to Capernaum with him, but simply spoke the word that his son would live. Unbelief demands a miracle while faith asks for a miracle and leaves the matter with Jesus. Faith trusts that Jesus knows best. True faith is like that of John Bunyan when he wrote:

I was driven to such straits that I must of necessity go to Jesus; and if he had met me with a drawn sword in his hand, I would sooner have thrown myself upon the edge of his sword than have gone away from him; for I knew him to be my last hope.

The third quality of this faith is that it trusts the word of God alone. This man had no sign from Jesus at all. He only had the word of Jesus, **“Go, your son will live,”** and that was enough for him. He had absolutely no evidence that what Jesus had said was true, but Jesus’ word was sufficient. If it hadn’t been enough, I don’t think he ever would have departed. True faith believes the naked word of Jesus. Miracles without faith take us further from Jesus and closer to death and destruction. Believing the word of God, even with no miracles at all, takes us closer to Jesus and all the good he has for us. The application of this is to seek to believe Jesus’ word over seeking miracles from Jesus. Please understand, there is nothing wrong with asking Jesus for a miracle. But it is not as important or as good for your soul as believing the naked word of God.

The fourth quality of true faith is that it increases as we practice it. Notice that this man’s faith is described in two stages. After Jesus told him to leave because his son would live, he believed Jesus and left. But notice that we read of something that happened the very next day that strengthened his faith. As he was travelling back to Capernaum, his servants came to him with good news. His son was alive. Remembering Jesus’ words, he asked what time it had been when his son’s fever had broken. Upon discovering that it was the exact time that Jesus had told him his son would live, we read that he and all his household believed. He believed before, but now his faith was deepened. Jesus could say a word and heal a fever from a distance. He was not just a prophet who could accurately predict things, but one who had power and authority over things like fevers. His faith of yesterday now led him to a deeper faith today.

Let’s pause for an application. The way for your faith to grow is to believe and act upon what you already know. If you are struggling to trust God about something, just go back to what you know and believe and act upon that. Take a step of faith with what you already know, and God will use that to build further faith. For example, as most of you know, our church is in the process of searching for a new assistant pastor. Through past failures and successes in hiring decisions, I know that this decision is a high risk, high reward decision. Making the wrong decision has the potential to bring harm to the church, while making the right decision to bring much good to our church. Obviously, my need is to trust God in this. But how do I go about doing that? I go back to what God has said and act on that. He has said that I can ask him for wisdom and he will give it. So I act on that and ask. He has said that he is Lord of the church, so I act on that by considering what he wants instead of what I might want. As these simple steps are taken, faith grows.

One final thing we learn about faith in this story is that faith treasures Jesus instead of using Jesus. Those who only want miracles from Jesus just want to use Jesus. But when you know him, you come to treasure him. There’s a story

about a certain old miner who lived all alone deep in the mountains of Colorado. When he died, distant relatives came from the city to collect his valuables. Upon arriving, all they saw was an old shack with an outhouse beside it. Inside the shack, next to the rock fireplace, was an old cooking pot and his mining equipment. A cracked table with a three-legged chair stood by a tiny window, and a kerosene lamp served as the centerpiece for the table. The furnishings of the little room were completed with a dilapidated cot and a threadbare bedroll tucked into a dark corner. They picked up some of the old relics and started to leave. As they were driving away, an old friend of the recluse was riding down the road on his mule. He flagged them down and asked, “Do you mind if I help myself to what’s left in my friend’s cabin?” “Go right ahead,” they replied. After all, they thought, nothing inside that shack could be worth anything. The old friend entered the shack and walked directly over to the table. He reached under it and lifted one of the floorboards. He then proceeded to take out all the gold his friend had discovered over the past 53 years—enough to have built a palace. The recluse died with only his friend knowing his true worth. As the friend looked out of the little window and watched the cloud of dust behind the relative’s car disappear, he said, “They should have got to know him better.”

CONCLUSION:

Many people view Jesus like those relatives thought of their distant relative, the miner. They think he has nothing of value to give them. But his riches are given to those who know him by faith. Do you know him? Do you know that he wants a relationship with us?

Just a couple of years from the time of the events in this chapter, there would be another Father watching his son die. He would die in agony on a Roman cross, and he would cry out to his Father, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** But the one who answered the agonizing cry of this royal official would hear no answer at the moment of his need. Heaven would respond only with silence. The reason for the silence was that God was trading places with his sick children. He was dying the death we should have died because of our sin. He was giving us the life he deserved because of his righteousness and obedience. He did all this because he desires a relationship with you and me. May God give us faith to believe him and enter into this relationship!