

“JESUS IN A BOX”  
MATTHEW 13:54-58

Like many American kids, I grew up idolizing Abraham Lincoln. It was hard not to, since his image, it seemed, was everywhere and his birthday was a national holiday. I learned from my teachers that Abraham Lincoln was a perfect gentleman, a political genius, a brilliant orator, a heroic statesman, and a champion for the oppressed. I was told that what made him the greatest president in the history of our country is that he always did what was right, even if it cost him dearly.

Not surprisingly, my childhood imagination processed these qualities in such a way that Abraham Lincoln became bigger than life. I imagined him being not just extraordinary, but perfect. He was *perfectly* kind, respectful, honest, humble, wise, and fair. He performed his presidential duties flawlessly. I truly believed that next to Jesus (and possibly Moses), he was the greatest person who ever lived.

Inadvertently, I carried that idealized concept of Abraham Lincoln into my adulthood, probably because nothing I heard or read about him challenged it. Until recently. I am currently reading a book about Lincoln and some of his contemporaries entitled, “Team of Rivals.” And though what I am learning about him is fascinating and endearing, it has revealed that he was not the epitome of perfection that I thought he was. He was human. And as a human he had a number of flaws and made many mistakes.

All of us have a concept of Jesus—a concept that has been shaped by a variety of factors. We have heard and read things in Scripture about Him that have given us the foundational truth about who He is and what He has done. He is the eternal Son of God. He is the Messiah. He is the Holy One. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the sinless Savior of the world who bore our sin in His body on the cross. Because the Scriptures are absolutely true and reliable, these are truths of which we can be certain.

But besides these fundamental truths our imaginations have inadvertently processed quite a bit more information about Jesus, introduced to us by teachers, sermons, books, movies, paintings, conversations, and our own personal musings.

And whether we know it or not all this information has been mixed together to form a concept of Jesus that fills in a lot of the Bible’s blanks. For example, most of us imagine Jesus having a particular kind of personality—the kind we subjectively consider to be the most admirable. We imagine Him having a certain tone of voice—the kind we subjectively consider to be the most soothing or the most authoritative. We imagine Him doing or not doing certain things, responding or not responding a certain way, being playful...or not, having a sense of humor...or not. We imagine him having a certain body type, a certain demeanor, a certain aura. And since Scripture is silent about most of these things our imagined concept of Jesus is, at best, partly truth and partly fiction.

Which leads me to ask some questions: If Jesus were living in our community today as He lived in Palestine in the first century, would you recognize Him? Would He be what you imagine Him to be? If He wasn’t, how would you respond? Would you believe in Him? Would you follow Him?

Most of us want to say, “Yes, of course I would know Him and believe in Him and follow Him! He’s my Lord and Savior!” Before you immediately answer, I’d like you to consider a story from Matthew’s Gospel about some people who thought they knew Jesus better than anyone. They watched Him grow up and were with Him for the first thirty years of His life. They traveled with Him and His family to the festivals in Jerusalem at least a couple of times

a year. They played with Him as a child and conducted business with Him as an adult. But when they saw Him after He had been away for a while, they had a surprising reaction. We read in **Matthew 13:54-58**. <sup>54</sup> *...And coming to His hometown [Jesus] taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? <sup>55</sup> Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And are not His brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? <sup>56</sup> And are not all His sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" <sup>57</sup> And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household."<sup>58</sup> And He did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.*

Before we actually dig into the text, I want to inform you that this same incident is also recorded in Mark's and Luke's Gospels (Mk 6:1-6; Lk 4:16-30). Matthew's account is the briefest of the three and lacks some of the detail given in the others. I will be referencing Luke's version throughout this message because it will shed light on some of the questions raised in Matthew.

The story of Jesus' return to Nazareth comes at a time in His ministry where His popularity in Galilee was waning. The initial excitement of seeing Jesus perform miracles, cast out demons, and teach with authority was gradually being replaced by confusion, disappointment and doubt. This was because Jesus did not correspond to people's pre-conceived perceptions of what Messiah would be like, and His teaching contradicted some of the prevailing theological notions of the day, prompting religious teachers to denounce Him.

Nazareth was only 20 miles from Capernaum, the hub of His ministry. There is no question that the people of Nazareth knew all about what Jesus was doing and teaching, and also the controversy surrounding Him and His ministry. After all, their homeboy was making headlines almost every day, and because Nazareth was such an obscure, unimportant village, they had to be enthusiastically following all the news about Him.

Jesus, apparently, had not returned to Nazareth since being baptized by John and beginning His public ministry, so His return would have been a big deal. Luke tells us that He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, and, as a distinguished guest, was asked to read a portion of the Scriptures. Typically, a guest would then deliver some comments on it. We read in Luke 4, <sup>17</sup> *...The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,*

<sup>18</sup> *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because He has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

<sup>20</sup> *And He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. <sup>21</sup> And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:17-21).*

The passage from Isaiah that Jesus read is clearly a messianic prophecy, and every Jew in the first century knew that. So, when Jesus sat down after reading it and said, *"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,"* they understood that He was declaring Himself to be the anticipated Messiah.

That was, of course, intentional. Jesus *wanted* them to know. But it was also bold,

and it created a stir. Matthew's account states that the people were astonished—astonished by His statement, certainly, but astonished because they wondered *where* He got the wisdom and the power to perform miracles.

I think this statement likely reveals that when Jesus was growing up among them, He did not possess this wisdom or do miracles—at least they didn't see it. In other words, they had no inkling that He was Messiah. They didn't look at Him and say, "Wow, I got a funny feeling about this kid. He checks all the boxes, fulfills all the prophecies, and has all the qualifications of Messiah!"

They may have viewed Him as exceptional in some ways. They might have said things like, "That Jesus sure is a good boy—wish our kids behaved like him." Or they might have enjoyed retelling the story about when Jesus was twelve years old, and His parents inadvertently left Him behind in Jerusalem after one of the festivals, and how they found Him in the Temple conversing with (and amazing) the religious leaders. But there was nothing about Jesus that compelled them to make the connection between Him and messianic prophecies. "He's one of us! He's Joseph and Mary's boy! He played with our kids. He worked alongside his dad building our house!"

So, when Jesus declares Himself to be Messiah in the synagogue, there was some head scratching. They were trying to make sense of this bold proclamation. And, at first, their astonishment contained excitement. Luke says, "*...All spoke well of Him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from His mouth*" (4:22). Gracious words and might works.

So, what happened to change their minds and cause them to become angry and offended with Jesus? I would suggest three things: First, He did not match their messianic profile. They thought Messiah would come from a well-heeled, well-educated family that had obvious connections to David's royal lineage. They thought He would be educated in the most prestigious theological schools by the most renowned teachers of Judaism. Jesus came from a working-class, blue-collar family. And he was educated in the no-account town of Nazareth.

Second, the people of Nazareth had an expectation that Messiah would be a sort of "knight in shining armor," a bigger-than-life action hero who would arrive on the scene as a charismatic commander-in-chief. Jesus didn't fit that profile either. He was too familiar. He was the kid next door. "Oh, He was a good kid, but He's one of us. We know His mom and dad. We know His brothers and sisters."

Remember the idiom, "Familiarity breeds contempt?" For some reason, when you know someone well, especially if you have known them since they were young, there is a tendency to keep them in a box. You assume they haven't changed—they are still the same unremarkable person you knew way back when.

When my sister died several years ago, I naturally assumed I would be the point person in our family to plan and preside over the memorial service, simply because I'm a pastor and have lots of experience doing such things. So, I organized a family meeting at my older brother's home and began to facilitate the conversation. It was really awkward. I noticed my family members weren't participating like most people do when I'm leading such conversations. Finally, my sister burst into tears and blurted out, "Stanboy, you're not our pastor; you're our brother!"

The people of Nazareth couldn't get past the fact that Jesus was one of them. They kept Him in a box. Sure, He taught with authority. Yes, He performed miracles. But this is the guy we saw running around in diapers when He was a toddler. This is the kid we saw

crying when He fell down and skinned His knees. This is the boy who used to run in a pack with our kids on the way to Jerusalem.

But I think there may be a third reason why the people of Nazareth were offended at Jesus. He provoked them. In Luke's account, just after we are told that all the people spoke well of Him and marveled at His gracious words, we are told, <sup>23</sup> *And [Jesus] said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well."* <sup>24</sup> *And He said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in His hometown."* <sup>25</sup> *But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land,* <sup>26</sup> *and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.* <sup>27</sup> *And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."* <sup>28</sup> *When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.* <sup>29</sup> *And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff.* <sup>30</sup> *But passing through their midst, he went away (Luke 4:16-30).*

Some of us may wonder why Jesus didn't just leave well enough alone, because it is apparent that before He started talking, all His hometown folk were endeared to Him. They were astonished by His power and amazed by His wise and gracious words. It seems as though Jesus provoked them by comparing them to the hard-hearted people of Israel in Elijah and Elisha's day. And, of course, He said what He said intentionally, knowing it would get under their skin.

First, let me remind you that Jesus was never interested in impressing people or being popular. He wanted people to believe in Him so they could have eternal life. Second, Jesus knew what was going on in the hearts and minds of the people with whom He interacted. And Jesus knew that, in spite of their amazement and praise, they had not yet believed in Him. He was still in their mental box. Oh, He had made a name for Himself outside their tightknit community, but ultimately, He was the kid next door, not the Messiah.

Like the Pharisees before them (12:22–32), the citizens of Nazareth acknowledged the good work that Jesus was doing yet failed to acknowledge that this work meant He was from God. "He's not from God; He's from Nazareth! We saw Him grow up!" For them, familiarity bred contempt, so when Jesus said what He said to them, they not only denied the obvious, they were deeply offended. Look at **verse 57**. <sup>57</sup> *And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in His hometown and in His own household."*

It is likely that Jesus was quoting a familiar proverb, but it is worth noting, incidentally, that He identifies Himself as a prophet. A prophet is one to whom God reveals a message, and then proclaims that message on God's behalf. Apart from John the Baptist, there had been no prophet for centuries. And yet John, like many other prophets in the Old Testament, was not received or believed by everyone. And this is a likely outcome for anyone who truly speaks for God, especially in His hometown.

Many people, including professing believers, will praise and honor a prophet or a preacher as long as he says the things they agree with, as long as he doesn't confront them personally, or as long as he doesn't meddle in their business or contradict their views. But when he does (and prophets always do), he discovers that behind their smiles are sharp teeth. People can turn on a prophet in a heartbeat. And when they do, they forfeit the opportunity to be blessed by God. Look at **verse 58**. <sup>58</sup> *And He did not do many mighty*

*works there, because of their unbelief.*

Their unbelief is not a reference to their lack of faith that He would do miracles, but their rejection of Him as Messiah. They didn't believe that He was who He said He was—the fulfillment of Isaiah's messianic prophecy He had just read to them. He didn't check the boxes, match the descriptions, or meet the qualifications that they believed (or had been told) were part of the messianic profile. He was too familiar. He said things that offended them, something "their" Messiah would never do.

How about you? Do you believe in Jesus? I'm not talking about the Jesus that you have imagined from all the things you have heard and read and seen and supposed and pondered from a variety of sources. I'm talking about the Jesus that is revealed in the Gospels. The Jesus that is revealed in the New Testament. The Jesus that was disappointing and offensive to most of the population because He didn't meet their expectations.

I come back to the questions I asked earlier. If Jesus were to show up in our community today just like he did in Nazareth, would you recognize Him? Would He be what you imagined Him to be? If He wasn't, how would you respond? Would you believe in Him? Would you follow Him?

I guess I'm asking about your discernment. Are you able to separate and distinguish between your biblical notions from your non-biblical notions of Jesus?

By the way, it has always been a commonly held belief about Messiah, both in Jesus' day and in our day, that we'll know Him when we see Him—that we're not going to be surprised by what we see, or by what He says or does, or how He says it or does it. Because, after all, we've thought about Him...a lot. We've imagined interacting with Him. And one thing is for sure, if we ever meet Messiah, He'll affirm us, He'll be nice to us. He would never provoke us with His words, like Jesus did with His hometown folks. There would never be a rebuke from Him or a challenge from Him.

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus is still not interested in impressing people or being popular or even being liked. He is interested in revealing Himself for who He really is and *all* that He is so that we will believe in Him and have eternal life. He's the King of kings and the Lord of lords, e's not my pal.

So, let me make a suggestion: Let's ask Jesus this simple question, "Lord, do I have you in a box? And if I do, would you destroy the box? Would you reveal yourself for who you really are? Would you destroy any pet notions, perceptions, or assumptions that I've made about you? Lord Jesus, let me know you and understand you in truth, that I might not only love you more deeply, but that I might fear you?"

## **“Jesus in a Box”** **Matthew 13:54-58**

**Main Idea:** *Familiarity can be a deterrent to saving faith.*

Introduction: Your concept of Jesus

Jesus' incredulous hometown (54-57a)

Astonished by Jesus' teaching and miracles (54)

Bewildered that Jesus was one of them (55-56)  
“He’s the carpenter’s kid!”

“We know His family!”

“We don’t know where He got these abilities!”

Offended by Jesus (57a)  
Because He didn’t match their messianic profile

Because He was too familiar

Because He provoked them

Jesus personalizes a proverb (57b)

Jesus’ limited activity (58)