

Grading Jesus' first sermon (Luke 4:14-21)

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Luke captures for us the inaugural sermon that Jesus preaches to the hometown crowd upon his return to Nazareth. As a homiletics professor, I would be inclined to give Jesus a passing grade, and not just because he is Jesus.

In my 25 years of teaching preaching, I have had a few students who thought they were the messiah. I did not hesitate to grade them sternly but fairly, in the belief that unfettered ego should be checked early and often. But in critiquing this sermon from Jesus, if I could set the redactor aside and read the biblical text as text, I would give Jesus high marks.

As far as creativity, it is OK. As far as originality, it will do, even though it is pretty much a couple of quotes from different parts of Isaiah. His use of illustrations is fitting and convicting; he is clearly familiar enough with the prophets Elijah and Elisha to know the difference between the two. He follows Karl Barth's advice and "hugs the text." He is not verbose. His audience analysis is on target, and he has read the hometown crowd very well.

Jesus knows scripture, and he knows that the people to whom he is preaching in his hometown synagogue know scripture. I would give Jesus a good grade because he dares to take as his text this worn and threadbare passage from Isaiah —"The spirit

of the Lord is upon me...”—made in the long-ago, cheapened through overuse, repeated so often that it tends toward abstraction. He takes this oft-repeated promise and brings it home with such immediacy, such urgency, and such interpretive power that the people who were initially praising him rise up to kill him when they fully understand what he is saying.

What a sermon. No fluff and no wasted words! How do you break it to the hometown crowd that you did not come to please them; you came to be faithful to the working out of God’s redemptive purposes among them? What pressure he must have been under to conform to the hopes and desires of that adoring crowd. He chooses instead to preach the unvarnished truth, and in so doing he not only disappoints them but angers them.

That is the main reason I would give Jesus a passing grade. He holds fast to the courage of his convictions. He looks out upon the hometown crowd and tells them exactly what kind of Messiah he will be. No pandering to the crowd, no giving in to the preacher’s temptation to please the listeners at the expense of the gospel. He instinctively knows that it is the truth that ultimately sets us free.

The countless number of preachers who lost their jobs during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s followed this courageous example of Jesus—the courage to speak up knowing there is a price to be paid. Those in our day who are now being warned by church officers and well-meaning members to keep silent on matters of injustice, from Muslim bans to child abductions on our southern borders, should find in this example of Jesus the courage to speak truth to power. We can only hope that such preachers will have the courage to tell it like it is. That they will do it with love, grace, and a generous concern for those who hear them, but never at the expense of the good news of what God has done for us and for our salvation.