

A SERMON PREACHED ON FEBRUARY 3, 2019, AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE

A guy walks into work, and both of his ears are all bandaged up. The boss says, "What happened to your ears?"

He says, "Yesterday I was ironing a shirt when the phone rang and geez! I accidentally answered the iron."

The boss says, "Well, that explains one ear, but what happened to your other ear?"

He says, "Well, I had to call the doctor!"ⁱ

It's bound to happen some day...I've tried to answer the telephone with the tv remote on quite a few occasions! I'm probably just steps away from a serious electrical accident!

Herein today we have a portion of Scripture that is rarely read not because it is difficult to understand its context and meaning, but it is just plain weird. At the same time it contains two of the most oft quoted phrases in the bible: "physician heal yourself" and "no prophet is accepted in his hometown," both plain and simple maxims, both pure and guided truths, both molded into a story about human boundaries. Let's look at them a bit closer.

The "heal yourself" portion is not surprising given the rumor of the day was that Luke, the author of this gospel, was a physician; hence he would have spoken in language and metaphors that befit his profession. Luke uses this ancient proverb that appears in many writings going back to as far as 5000 BCE. One biblical commentator has pointed out the echo of similar skepticism in the taunts that Jesus would ultimately hear later in Luke while hanging on the cross: "He saved others; himself he cannot save." The shortened Latin form of the proverb, *Medice, cura te ipsum*, was made famous through the Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, in the 5th century, and so gained currency across Europe. Similar proverbs with a medical theme appear in other Jewish literature. "Physician, Physician, Heal thine own limp!" for example, is an ancient one. The Greek dramatist Aeschylus uses a healing proverb in his *Prometheus Bound*, where the chorus comments to the suffering Prometheus, "Like an unskilled doctor, fallen ill, you lose heart and cannot discover by which remedies to cure your own disease."

The moral of the proverb in general, containing within itself also a criticism of hypocrisy, is to attend to one's own defects before those in others. This meaning is underlined in the fable of *The Frog and the Fox* attributed to Aesop (6th-7th century BCE).ⁱⁱ As one can see, the proverb is a longstanding one. If they knew it at all, today's modern generation would call it "snarky" due to its hints at hypocrisy in a tenor that Jesus uses himself.

In this version of the story, Jesus, early in his ministry was in Nazareth speaking in the synagogue. Nazareth was his hometown (which one would have guessed), and the people there were familiar with his family and had watched him grow up. When Jesus was handed a messianic prophecy from Isaiah and claimed to be the fulfillment of it, the crowd in the synagogue immediately balked. It was then that Jesus made reference to a proverb the gospel features: "Physician, heal thyself."

Jesus' audience in Nazareth reacted in amazement to his words in the synagogue, and they began to remind themselves of his personal history: "Isn't this Joseph's son?" They couldn't find any sin in Jesus' past, but they definitely brought up the fact that He was a local boy—as if that disqualified Him from being the Messiah. In essence, they were saying, "Jesus is the son of the local carpenter; he's common, like us. Where does he get the idea that he's something special? The Messiah ***will not*** be a tradesman!"

Jesus' response to their reluctance to believe was to make himself the point of a proverb: "And he said unto them, 'Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country'".

In the proverb "Physician, heal thyself," Jesus is the physician, and the Nazarenes, his countryfolk, are demanding that he heal himself. It's another way of saying, "We won't believe a word you say until you take care of what ails you"—except, being a proverb, it's much less wordy. The basic idea is that no one wants to visit a feverish doctor who is hacking up phlegm. The advice of a dermatologist whose face is covered with an itchy, scaly rash carries little weight. A dentist with bad teeth has little or no credibility. "Hey, Jesus," the crowd is saying, "before you can help us, you have to take care of your own problems!"

"Physician, heal thyself" also carries the idea of needing proof. The attitude to the synagogue-goers in this chapter is that a real doctor should be able to prove his credentials by correctly diagnosing and treating whatever ailment he suffers from personally. To apply the point of the proverb more specifically to Jesus' situation, "It will take more than words to convince us. If you're truly the Messiah, prove it by working a miracle or doing something else equally messianic." As Jesus expounds on the proverb, he mentions the miracles he had done in nearby Capernaum—miracles that the Nazarenes had heard about and wanted to see duplicated in their own city.

"Physician, heal thyself" also communicates a demand that the miracle-worker work some of his miracles at home. The doctor in the proverb should heal *himself*; that is, he should practice his medicine *at home*. In the same way, Jesus should display his power at home, in Nazareth, and not just in other places. In this way, the proverb "Physician, heal thyself" is similar to our modern proverb "Charity begins at home."

The challenge was clear. The people of Jesus' hometown demanded signs and wonders before they would accept him as the Messiah. Jesus gave them no miracles. Rather, he used the examples of Elijah and Elisha to show how unbelief in Israel had caused those prophets to work "away from home" with Gentiles. The Sabbath crowd listening to Jesus grew irate at the comparison, and they attempted to kill Jesus. So much for a homecoming party!

Jesus should have been given the keys to the city of Nazareth; instead, he was given skepticism, rejection, and a terse proverb: "Physician, heal thyself." As Jesus told the crowd just before they ran him off the cliff, "No prophet is accepted in his hometown." ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, there's another good proverb. At the beginning of this tale Jesus was teaching at the local synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, where his mother and other family members would also be in attendance. We believe it was his mother, Mary, who actually provided Luke with most of the details about this particular event. As we read Luke's account, we can easily imagine her sitting there listening to the whispered remarks of those around her, her awareness of their reactions heightened by her maternal sensibilities.

At first the audience appeared to be responding quite favorably to the things Jesus was saying. But behind the outwardly positive reaction there was hidden an inward resentment. Here he was, this man who had grown up in their town and who had lived and worked among them for his entire life, and yet never once performed the kind of miracles that they heard he was doing elsewhere. And why not? Didn't they also have those among them who were suffering with sickness and disease?

Jesus knew what was in their hearts and he exposed their resentment saying, "no prophet is without honor except in his own home," or something of the kind. He then went on to back up what he had just said (the "weird part" mentioned before) with obscure examples from the lives of Elijah and Elisha, two of their most revered prophets: "I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." The hearers of this text needed biblical PhDs in order to understand what they were being led to!

In the book of *Proverbs* it says, "Do not reprove a scoffer, or they will hate you," and that is exactly what happened when Jesus reproved the congregation at Nazareth. Jesus had not only wounded their pride, he had also challenged their deeply held prejudices regarding the Gentiles and their right to feel superior to them. Any fleeting sense of admiration that they might have had was immediately transformed into fury. They all rose up as an angry mob against him, and drove him out of town in an act of attempted murder. However, the timing and manner of his death was not going to be determined by this angry mob. Jesus simply walked right through the crowd and went on his way, leaving the small town of Nazareth behind him. It would never be his "hometown" again.^{iv}

So, two simple phrases outline and explain an entire story. Yet, imagine how hard it would be to hear what Jesus is saying in today's verses. We have the Jews of Nazareth, God's chosen people, listening to a man who had just claimed to be their long awaited Messiah and he is telling them that no prophet is accepted in his own town. The Jesus goes on to tell them that two of their greatest prophets performed miracles not to fellow Jews but to Gentiles.^v

Jesus said all this after they had asked Him to perform miracles in Nazareth similar to those He performed in Capernaum. Essentially Jesus is telling them that God's glory and majesty is not limited to the Jews but available to the Gentiles. Talk about a slap in their collective egos.^{vi}

Wouldn't it be wonderfully interesting if at the end of the long train of people coming through Central America we spotted Jesus, the Christ, followed by tens of thousands of pilgrims carrying the cross, their own crosses and others (as they are now, are they not?), through Mexico and to the border with the U.S. Will we see our political leaders of every stripe standing and not knowing what to do? Or will there be a call to action. I know for one thing: that were Desi Arnaz there he'd be saying 'you've got a lot of explaining to do, Lucy.'

When the time comes, when the day arrives, when Jesus reaches the border we have a lot to answer for. Let's start paring down our list now.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called "children of God."

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.

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ⁱ <http://www.workjoke.com/doctors-jokes.html>

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Frog_and_the_Fox

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from <https://www.gotquestions.org/physician-heal-thyself.html>

^{iv} Adapted from http://www.jesustalking.org/no-prophet-is-accepted-in-his-hometown-luke-4_16-30/

^v <https://dwwork.wordpress.com/2014/07/07/no-prophet-is-acceptable-in-his-hometown/>