

The Messiah You Think You Know

In our last few chapters of Mark's Gospel, Jesus performed some mind-blowing miracles. He calmed a storm at sea with a couple of sharp words, demonstrating his divine command over Creation. He exorcised the Gerasene demoniac, proving his divine authority over the forces of darkness. He healed a chronically sick woman and resurrected a little girl, confirming his divine power over illness and even death. These four miracles prove that Jesus is, indeed, the Son of God who's capable of doing absolutely anything ... until he returns to his hometown.

Jesus has been teaching and healing around the Sea of Galilee for months. He's famous, routinely mobbed by crowds of believers desperate to learn from his wisdom and be blessed by his healing touch. Yet, when he rises to speak in the synagogue at Nazareth, his neighbors can't wait to put him in his place. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" Their condescending questions really ask, "exactly who does Jesus think he is? He's nothing but a common laborer from a poor family. Why on earth should we listen to him?"

Bible scholars are divided on whether the Nazarenes calling Jesus the "son of Mary" is a slur. His neighbors should have named him "Jesus, son of Joseph" as a matter of common courtesy. Perhaps Peter misremembered their words, or Mark recorded them incorrectly. Some translations claim they called Jesus "son of the carpenter and Mary." But would Jesus really have been "amazed" by something so mild? I suspect that, by referring to him solely as Mary's son, his neighbors are none too subtly insinuating that everyone in town remembers his conception, and nobody is buying that cock-and-bull story about Mary and the angel. Oh, *please*.

When Mark says Jesus is "amazed" by their unbelief, he uses the word *thaumazó* (θαυμάζω). *Thaumazó* means to marvel, wonder, or even admire, but I doubt Jesus is admiring

much of anything here. HELPS Word-studies says that *thaumazó* means to cause wonder or to regard with amazement “with a suggestion of *beginning to speculate* on the matter.” Gobbled by his neighbors’ cynicism, Jesus may be starting to speculate about why he even bothered to come back to Nazareth. As the all-knowing Son of the Most High, he must have realized what would happen. You don’t have to be omniscient to know how petty and judgmental people can be, especially when they think they know everything there is to know about you.

Jesus teaches by demonstration. That may be why he “could do no deeds of power” in his hometown. It’s not that Jesus suddenly lost his supernatural abilities. Mark tells us that, while he was in Nazareth, Jesus “laid his hands on a few people and healed them,” which seems pretty miraculous. And the instant he left Nazareth, Jesus was again so powerful that he could authorize the disciples to cast out demons and heal the sick. Perhaps it wasn’t that Jesus couldn’t do deeds of power, but that his neighbors were so set in their cynicism that he couldn’t get them to accept what he tried to give them. That may be exactly what Jesus wanted his disciples, and us, to see.

In Jesus’s day, cynicism was a Socratic school of Greek philosophy. Cynicism focused on ethical living based on mental clarity. Its adherents cultivated the ability to see through other people’s affectations and ridiculed the foolish, sometimes vicious social conventions of the time. Some historians believe that Jesus himself may have been influenced by their thinking. Given how sharply our Lord criticized rich and powerful hypocrites, they may be right.

Cynicism has evolved, but it’s still with us. Today, we understand cynicism to mean believing that people are insincere and selfish, that good things won’t happen or don’t matter, and that it’s acceptable to hurt others for personal advantage. From “let the buyer beware” to “every man for himself,” popular conversation is rife with pithy, cynical sayings and memes.

The perception that cynicism is growing like kudzu in this country started emerging about ten years ago as experts began to appreciate how dangerous the internet can be. In a 2019 article for *Wired*, Zeynep Tufekci reported that the onslaught of falsehood online is making dupes and cynics of us all. We're becoming a low-trust society as people wrongly conclude that hope is lost, and nothing matters. Tufekci writes, "In low-trust societies, you never know. You expect to be cheated ... You expect things not to be what they seem and for promises to be broken, and you don't expect a reasonable and transparent process for recourse." It's a horrible way to live.

Cynicism isn't just unpleasant; it's toxic. In a 2023 article for *Psychology Today*, Dr. Bruce Hutchinson warned that emotions can be contagious. Fear, suspicion, anger, and hopelessness spread just like viruses. Negative emotions breed cynicism, putting our physical and mental health at risk. Hutchinson reports that cynicism is associated with unhealthy lifestyles, chronic depression, dementia, higher risk of cancer-related and other mortality, and heart attacks. Cynical people tend to be more isolated and earn smaller incomes than their more optimistic peers. Cynicism isn't just dangerous for individuals, either. As Hutchinson points out, unregulated emotions that create cynicism also produce societal violence like riots, vandalism, homicide, police brutality, suicide, and even wars. Cynicism may seem mature and realistic, but it's a distorted worldview that exacts a terrible price.

Our faith warns Christians not to give in to cynicism. We profess belief in a God whose existence we can't prove by scientific or legal means; if we don't believe that, we might as well skip the service and just sleep in on Sundays. We remember Jesus's statement to Thomas that those who believe without seeing are more blessed than those who believe only after having seen. What cynics might call naiveté, maybe even gullibility, we know to be faith in our Lord.

But Christians can still become cynical if we decide that Jesus can't be trusted to work in our lives. Sometimes, a major crisis shakes our faith: the lost job, failed marriage, frightening diagnosis, natural disaster, or death of someone we love. Sometimes it's subtle, years of little disappointments slowly eroding our faith. Eventually, we decide that it hurts too much to hope, so we stop. Even if we still believe that Jesus will be at the Second Coming, we no longer expect him to show up for us now. We think we know him, just as his neighbors did, and our cynicism makes it harder for Jesus to work miracles in our lives.

God is a Person – three Persons for trinitarians like us. We avoid cynicism by moving deeper into loving relationship with the Persons to whom we pray, We may have to look past appearances. When something goes wrong, it's easy to overreact, concluding that God doesn't care and never helps. It's just as easy to ignore or take for granted the many things that go right. If we believe that Jesus doesn't love us, he could shower us with diamonds and we wouldn't notice. But, judging from his miracles, he won't do that. When Jesus heals people, he doesn't make them eternally young or ridiculously beautiful. When he feeds multitudes, he multiplies food, not the money to buy it. When he calms the storm, he doesn't treat the disciples to a fancier boat. Jesus loves us with all our so-called imperfections, which tells me that there may be divine gifts in those imperfections if we put aside our cynicism and look for them.

It can be difficult to remain hopeful. So much seems to be going wrong, and so many people will insist to you that Jesus isn't going to help. He probably won't help in the ways we think we want. But as C.S. Lewis wrote, "To love involves trusting the beloved beyond the evidence, even against much evidence." Unlike his cynical neighbors, we know that Jesus is the Messiah. We know he is powerful and compassionate. We know *him*. And the more we love and trust the Messiah we know, the more deeds of power he can and will do in our lives. *Amen.*