

## **Sermon: Rejected: Jesus at the Synagogue**

### **Joseph Vest**

#### **Scriptures: Matthew 13:54-58**

I'm not sure there's anything worse than to be rejected, and every week millions of Americans watch a TV show that does a lot of rejecting. (Here I showed a video clip from American Idol of a contestant that was rejected. This particular clip was made funnier in that the man had sung "Amazing Grace," then refused to leave the set upon his dismissal and had to be escorted out by Idol personnel.)

But in real life many of us have felt the sting of rejection: in a job - you've been passed over for a promotion, received a bad job review or, worse still, you've been let go. That sort of rejection is a bitter pill to swallow . . . especially if you've work at a place for some time. I spoke to a lady recently who remains angry that her long time employer let her go. Sound-ing like a jilted lover she wondered aloud, "How could they do that after I'd given them so many good years?"

Some might have felt rejected by a parent - as if you never really measured up. Perhaps it seemed like they favored your sibling. I get that from my sisters sometimes - it's understandable really. In that case though it's simple jealousy, but people feel that rejection for years. What about being rejected by your child? There's an amazing story Jesus told once about that, called the story of the Prodigal Son. If you feel rejected - if that's you, Jesus gets it. And what about a relationship rejection - maybe by a spouse? That's devastating. It can be debilitating. It rocks you at your core.

What do you do if you've been rejected? You could do what the Desert Storm soldier did. He was deployed overseas when he received a Dear John letter from his girlfriend back home in the states. To add insult to injury, she wrote, "Will you please return my favorite photograph of myself? I need it for my engagement picture in the local newspaper."

The poor guy was devastated, but all the soldiers came to his rescue. They went throughout the entire camp and collected pictures of all the other guys' girlfriends. They filled up an entire shoe box and sent it to the girl along with a note saying, "Please find your picture, and return the rest because for the life of me, I can't remember which one you were!!"

I hate to admit my shallowness, but I really resent being rejected too. Before I came to Kainay, I sent my resume to several churches. I was looking for God's direction in my life and felt confident that He was moving us to a different place to serve. I can't tell you how many job rejections I received during that time.

What I hate is getting to the interview process and then being rejected. It's one thing for people to look at your resume and reject you - there's no great investment of yourself there. But when you interview, it's face to face, or at least phone to phone. They hear your voice or they see you, they get to know the real you, and to then be rejected . . . that hurts.

There was one particular church in Western Kentucky that interviewed us. (My wife, Myriam, went with me, which usually means it's going to be a slam dunk because she's awesome.) But a couple of days later, they sent me a rejection email. How lame is that? What, they don't have phones in Western Kentucky? I was crushed. I felt like such a loser.

I must admit that for the next couple of months, I frequently visited their web site, watching to see who they could've picked that would have been better than me. It was sort of website stalking. Then they posted their new pastor's picture - just as I suspected, the guy who got MY job was a grade A, certifiable loser. He didn't even look saved to me.

So I started comparing stats. I mean sure he was younger than me, and better looking than me, and the message I listened to online proved that he was a better speaker than I am; you know he used complete sentences and gooder words and stuff. And I realize he was better educated than I am and had quite a bit more experience in much larger churches than I had, but other than that, I couldn't see that he had much on me. Oh yeah, he was Billy Graham's nephew, but come on!

What do you do if you've been rejected? It's a great question and one I hope to answer this morning.

You know what one word I would use to describe this event? Rejection! The home crowd's amazement quickly turns to scoffing and the taking of offense. The word used there is skandalizo from which we get scandalize. In this case it means they refused to believe in Him. Luke records a similar event. Look at the result: Luke 4:28-29, When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was enraged. 29They got up, drove Him out of town, and brought Him to the edge of the hill their town was built on, intending to hurl Him over the cliff.

Now there's kind of a debate about this: Did Jesus preach at the Nazareth synagogue once or twice. Many believe the event recorded in Luke happened quite a bit earlier than the one in Matthew. If that's the case, Jesus gave them an opportunity to get ticked off at him twice. And the second time would have been after they nearly threw Him off a cliff!

I don't put that past Him. Jesus' passion for people ultimately led Him to the cross, so it certainly might have taken Him into harm's way in His home town more than once. Did you catch why they took offense? It was basically because He was one of them. They knew Him. He was becoming renowned in the area, and it seems they didn't like it. How Jesus handled rejection is a model for us. In this case it was the rejection of his hometown people who attended his hometown church. He probably had an affinity for them.

But they scoffed. Did you catch what they said? "He's just the carpenter's son." Mark puts it a different way, Mark 6:3, Then they scoffed, "He's just a carpenter, the son of Mary . . . (NLT). You have to understand that in that culture boys carried on the family business. If Joseph was a carpenter his sons would be as well. So it makes sense for them to say, "Hey, this guy doesn't have authority to preach to us . . . he's not a rabbi, he's just a carpenter."

He's a faux rabbi. He's nothing special. Who does He think He is? We know he's getting a lot of positive press everywhere else, but we aren't that easily impressed. I believe that's the reason for Jesus' response, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown . . ." (Matthew 13:57). What's the title Jesus used concerning himself? He calls himself "Prophet!"

It's hard to garner respect in your hometown among family. I've had the privilege of having my mom and dad as members of my church and one of my sisters and her family as well. That was from God; they preached at me for most of my life, and God gave me opportunity for payback. And it's always challenging to preach in front of my in-laws. My father in-law is a New Testament professor, so when you preach in front of that guy, it's a little stressful; he knows so much.

I remember when Myriam and I first got married, we were riding in the car with her parents. Sigi, Myriam's dad, and I got into a preaching conversation and he dropped some huge theological expression I probably should have known but didn't, something like "Matthean Primacy" or "deuterocanonical ecclesiology." He was driving, and Myriam and her mother were in the back seat, so I leaned over to him and said, "Sigi, I understand what you're talking about, but you might want to explain it for the ladies." He's a little intimidating honestly.

So many of us have our identities, our self worth, wrapped up in the approval of others. Then if we don't get it, we're crushed. We don't see that with Jesus here. He's not crushed that the home people don't throw a parade and hoist Him onto their shoulders. He's really not about that. One of the amazing things about Jesus is He never loses focus of His mission. His job in coming to Nazareth is to share the Good News that God is looking for relationships with people. In the Lukan account (Luke 4), Jesus explains that God wants relationship with Gentiles as well as Jews. They really got ticked about that. It's probably why they wanted to help him take a flying leap off the Nazarene cliff.

There's never an indication that Jesus needed the approval of people. That's not where I am. I wish it was, but it's not. Most of us are looking for approval. Many of us are addicted to approval and we'll do anything to get our approval fix. Author and counselor Margaret Paul writes, "In my experience as a counselor for over 40 years, I have found that . . . approval addiction is far more prevalent than any substance addiction. We live in an approval-addicted society."

Sociologist George Herbert Meade writes about what he calls the "generalized other." This is an approval panel. Our sense of esteem and self worth is largely wrapped up in their appraisal of our work. These are the Simon Cowells in our life. You know Randy Jackson and the guest judges on American Idol are usually nice, but people look to Simon for the ultimate in approval - his opinion matters more than all the other's put together. If Simon gives you the golden ticket to Hollywood you've made it; if he shows you the door then you haven't. Your "generalized other" may include parents, teachers, friends, coworkers, or boss.

In other words, the opinions of some people matter more to you than others'. Do I care what the guy at the oil change place thinks of the state of the interior of my car? Do you think I care if he gets in and has to swim through 450 Big Mac cartons to reach the steering wheel? No. Do you think I care what that lunatic driver going 25 in a 45 zone thinks of my passing her as I scowl out my window? Not much . . . unless of course they come to my church and she recognize me. That's why I wear a hat when I drive . . . incognito!

However, I really care what my wife thinks . . . especially about the messages. I give her a copy before I ever preach it. After every service I can't wait to get her critique. "Did you think that story was effective?" "How do you think the audience responded at that point?" "How did I look in my blue shirt?" You know deep spiritual stuff like that. I care what my kids' think . . . what the Elders thinks. It's good to have trusted people whose opinions you care about.

The problem is when we begin to care about everyone's opinions equally. Or what's worse, is when we place too much emphasis on the opinions of the wrong people. For example, I'm in a mess if I care more about what my friends say than what my wife says.

Truth: not every opinion is equal. Jesus was smart enough to know that. What would have happened if Jesus had crumbled under this rejection, if Jesus had buckled right here? What if Jesus had cared more about the opinions of his hometown friends than His heavenly Father? If we begin to notice we're trying to please everybody we're heading down the wrong path. It is impossible.

Another check to see if we're addicted to approval is to note how angry we get when we're rejected or criticized. Nobody enjoys criticism, but how we handle it says a great deal about who we are. At a church I pastored once, on a Sunday morning, I was greeting people at the door, and a visitor shook my hand and said, "I usually attend First Baptist, but we're visiting here today. Give me a call sometime." Then he handed me his business card. I was sort of excited about the prospect of stealing a member of FBC, (it was long before I became the mature follower of Christ you have before you today). After I got home I looked at his card: it had the guy's name and his occupation . . . he was "Speech Instructor" . . . jerk.

Did you notice Jesus' response to the people who rejected Him? Remember, in Luke, it says they tried to push Him off the cliff. At that point I'm going Ninja on every last one of those suckers. But it says, ". . . He passed right through the crowd and went on His way" (Luke 4:30). He proclaimed his rightful position as prophet which was received with less than a positive response, they take him to do a little cliff diving and he proceeds to just move on. No anger . . . no Ninja.

Consider the legitimacy. As hard as it may be to accept, sometimes the perceived rejection is legitimate. Now this wasn't true about Jesus, but it might be about us. Not every negative comment is whack! Here's a truth we don't want to hear: we all need someone to tell us when we're not measuring up. And we'll all have times when we aren't. Maybe we get a bad job review because we're doing a bad job. Maybe what we perceive as rejection is simply a challenge from someone who cares about us.

Like the young woman out in Southern California who worked at a roadside stand that sold fruit and vegetables. She was behind the counter painting a sign when Joel Marks walked up to pay. "Why the new sign?" he asked. "My boyfriend didn't approve of the old one," she said. When Marks glanced at the sign that hung above the counter, he understood. It declared, "Local Honey, Dates, Nuts." Let it sink in.

Sometimes the rejection is legit. A couple of years ago, in the fall, I bought a tree from one of the local stores and planted it in our back yard. After only a few weeks I noticed that the leaves had started to shrivel and the tree appeared to be on its last legs in spite of my tender care. So I took some leaf samples, drove back to the store, marched in and demanded an explanation or my money back.

The young snotty nosed kid working in the lawn and garden department looked at my leaves and said, "Dude, I know exactly what's wrong with your tree." "Great!" I said. "What's the problem?" I figured it was diseased, fungus, or some soil issues. You can imagine how stupid I felt when he simply said, "It's autumn, dude. The leaves fall off in autumn."

What if the perceived rejection is simply someone who loves us telling us the truth? I think it's always wise to do two things when we feel rejection: consider the source, and consider the substance.

In Jesus' case it was home folks who may have been jealous of His popularity. It could be a spouse or friend acting selfishly - sometimes rejection is just caused by the sin of another. I had lunch with an old friend of mine recently and he told me of his divorce. He sat across from me and told me how stupid and selfish it was to leave his wife. And he said something very interesting to me . . ., "I wish I could undo what I did."

Rejection happens to everyone. If you've been or are feeling rejected, Jesus has felt that too. One of the more debilitating things about rejection is that it often makes you feel so all alone, especially if it's a relational rejection. But Jesus knows what that's like. You're not alone. This wasn't Jesus' only experience with rejection. His family once questioned his sanity. Mark 3:21, When His family heard this, they set out to restrain Him, because they said, "He's out of His mind." Sounds like rejection to me. It's a bad sign when you're mama thinks you might be cool for Cocoa Puffs. Judas betrayed Him - relational rejection. Peter denied Him - relational rejection. And the crucifixion was the ultimate rejection.

The Son of God comes to earth as a man to show people the genuine way to peace with our Heavenly Father and after three amazing years of ministry He was crucified. And while He hung on the cross he prayed, At about three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46) Doesn't that sound like rejection to you?

Isaiah 53:3-5 is a beautifully haunting verse about that: He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like one people turned away from; He was despised, and we didn't value Him. 4Yet He Himself bore our sicknesses, and He carried our pains; but we in turn regarded Him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. 5But He was pierced because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on Him, and we are healed by His wounds.

Which brings me to my last and most important point: Jesus will never reject you. I sometimes speak to people who've been rejected by a church or by other Christians. These people have been deeply hurt by that experience - I get that. But understand something; Jesus will never reject a person who genuinely seeks Him. John 6:37, However, those the Father has given me will come to me, and I will never reject them (NLT).

Your boss may have rejected you, your mama may have rejected you, your child may have rejected you, your spouse may have rejected you, and those are deep wounds - there's no denying that. But you will NEVER be able to say Jesus has rejected you. In fact, if you're feeling rejected today Jesus understands better than anyone what that feels like. Tell Him about it through prayer. Maybe now you can better understand how He understands what it feels like to be rejected.