

**“Claiming Our Christian Identity:
In the Face of Rejection”
Luke 4:14-30**

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At the tender age of 15, I preached my first sermon. Facing family and friends, I said everything I knew to say in five minutes. Some of you still wish I would just preach 5 minutes! When it was all over, I sat down and cried.

Jesus preached his first sermon at the age of 30. In His hometown of Nazareth, He took a text from Isaiah 61 and delivered it to aunts and uncles, playmates, and the elders in the synagogue. While some were amazed at His gracious delivery, all were shocked by His inclusive theology. Before the whole episode ends, they're talking about throwing Jesus off the cliff.

I use this lectionary story today to raise a question. **How do you handle rejection?** All of us experience it. Whether or not you have been ridden out of town on a rail or faced a stoning you have felt the pain of rejection. Somebody just doesn't like us and a few people just wish we would drop dead. In life, a boss despises you, a friend blackmails you, a lover abandons you, a neighbor hates you, or maybe a family member won't speak to you.

How do Christians handle rejection? Will you consider that question with me as we poke around in this story of Jesus at the beginning of His ministry? It seems to me there are several reasons for rejection. Why were Jesus' friends, relatives, and synagogue teachers so furious with Him? How could they want this hometown boy dead? Well, the story suggests the answer to those kinds of questions.

In the first place, **familiarity blinds us**. Glen Campbell said, "There are none so blind as those who will not see." Some people said, "Aren't you Joseph's boy?" Jesus replies with a proverb, "No prophet has honor in his own country." To the world, Jesus was the Son of God. In Nazareth, Jesus was the son of Joseph. While there are certainly exceptions to that proverb, it remains amazingly accurate today. We say it in a variety of ways. An expert is somebody who has traveled at least 100 miles away from home.

While I have been privileged to preach in settings far greater than I ever imagined in my life, the last place I'm most likely to be invited to preach today is my home church of forty people or so. There I'm still Bubby who crawled around under the pews when I was just a little kid. Once people focus their minds on that concept, it's almost impossible to change it.

Actor Cary Grant was walking along the street, when he met a fellow whose eyes locked on his in excitement. "Wait a minute," said the man, "you're.... I know who you are, don't tell me...Rock Hud—no." Grant, trying to help out, said, "I'm Cary Grant." To which the fellow replied, "No, that's not who you are. I'll think of your name in a minute, just give me a little time, I'll figure it out." How quickly we set our mind on certain concepts and not much is going to change us.

The man who instructed Fred Astaire said he was balding and skinny and could dance only a little. Beethoven's music teacher said he was a hopeless composer. Albert Einstein's parents thought that he was sub-normal in his elementary days.

Poor little Nazareth town, they didn't know who Jesus was. They couldn't fight down the notion that this was a kid that had played on their streets and had messed around in the carpenter's shop with his daddy. Rejection; He experienced it

firsthand.

Further rejection comes out of jealousy. They came to Jesus and said, “Do here in our hometown what you did over in Capernaum.” The news is spreading. Jesus responds with another proverb, “Physician, heal thyself.” In fact, when Mark tells this story, he responds by saying that Jesus could do no miracles in Nazareth. You see, everybody wants Him to do what He’s doing someplace else and He can’t quite pull it off in this town.

A first-grader came home and proudly reported to her father that she was now officially a Brownie. Not to be outdone, her three-year old brother, Christopher, ran up to his dad and said, “And now I’m a cupcake!” Jealousy starts young and lasts long. There’s something inside of us that wants to be equal or better than someone else. We’ll do almost anything to try to equalize the territory. Sometimes, in spiteful ways, we do things trying to level the playing field.

Once upon a time, three churches were struggling to survive. One church landed an extremely gifted pastor. His sermons were relevant and he was personally compassionate. Folks began to find their way to that particular church. That’s when the two other pastors got together for breakfast. They decided that God would never bless such blatant success at this particular place. They talked together about the rumor they had heard several years ago, the one about the pastor and another woman. They didn’t bother to check it out, they just happened to repeat it here and there through-out the community. Before long the rumor spread and people wandered. The pastor resigned. Things got back to normal in a hurry. You see, there’s something inside of us that is jealous of other people’s success and it winds up in rejection.

“Jesus, why won’t You do over here in our town what You’ve been doing in all the other towns. If You won’t do it for us,

then we won't have time for You." As Jesus walks out of town, they threaten to throw Him off a cliff and stone Him. Rejection. It cuts into the fabric of our daily life.

Rejection sometimes comes because the truth hurts us.

You see, for centuries Israel was something special; it was the only one of a kind, but Jesus here begins to spin the story differently. He takes the old text and puts a different twist on it. The message is questionable to those who are hearing it. He says to them, "Remember Elijah, during the long drought, brought relief to only one widow and that happened to be a foreigner up in Cyrus. When Israel had an epidemic of leprosy, the only one that Elijah cleansed was an enemy soldier by the name of Naaman who was a Syrian. The message is clear and profound. Jesus was trying to say to an exclusive group of people that the grace of God is forever transcending our little boxes in which we want to put people. He's trying to tell them that God is never limited to any nation, or any church, or any race, or any creed. Salvation is free for all. When you start transcending the prejudices of people and breaking down barriers, you better look out. You're in all kinds of trouble, if you start changing the way people normally think.

In a Peanuts cartoon, Linus says to Lucy, "I think there's something you ought to know." "What's that?" inquired Lucy. "The world does not revolve around you," says Linus. To which Lucy replies, "You're kidding!" It's always a shocking revelation to come to that truth.

People who don't like the message begin to shoot the messenger. Of course we must hasten to ask another question – How do you handle rejection in your business, in your relationships, in your family, in your community. How do you handle the tough places of rejection? May I suggest three?

First of all, **He handled it fearlessly.** Verse 30 tells us, “He walked right through the crowd and went on His way.” There was a kind of freedom about Jesus. He was never threatened by anything anybody else wanted to say about Him.

In a commercial for an insurance company, a young girl is standing alone in a picturesque meadow. Unknown to her in another part of the field is a gigantic African Rhinoceros. The ominous beast begins a lethal charge toward the girl, whose serene and happy face is unmoved. As the rhinoceros gets closer, the words appear on the screen—TRUST IS NOT BEING AFRAID. A split second before the rhinoceros tramples the helpless child, she reaches up and pets the animal’s massive horn as the rest of the sentence moves across the screen—EVEN WHEN YOU ARE VULNERABLE. Trust is not being afraid.

The greatest words in the Bible are “**Fear not.**” Are you aware of how often that phrase is repeated in the Scriptures? “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” Isaiah said, “Surely it is God who saves us, let us trust in God and not be afraid.” “Fear not,” said the angels in the Christmas story, “for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.” “There is no fear in love,” says the New Testament, “for perfect love casts out fear.” Jesus said, “Fear not those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” Let not the fear of rejection stifle the good infection of Jesus Christ. Give to the winds your fear and be not dismayed in the midst of life. How do you handle rejection? Fearlessly, that’s how.

How do you handle rejection? Lovingly, that’s how. Jesus said in Matthew 5, verses 43 and 44; “You have heard it said unto you, love your friends and hate your enemy. But I tell you love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.” I suggest today that love is the distinguishing mark of a

Christian disciple. There is a different ethic for Christian living. The ethic for Christian living is “love your enemies.” I always say Jesus must assume you’re going to have a few or He wouldn’t have bothered to tell you to love them. You see, returning hate for hate only multiplies hate. It deepens darkness in a night already devoid of stars. If we live by the ethic of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the world will soon be blind and toothless.

The reality is just before us. We cannot live by revenge and survive. Was Jesus an optimistic idealist? I suggest not. I suggest that Jesus was a practical realist. The only way the world will really work is if you and I learn this principle and practice the grace of loving even our enemies. That’s the principle. There’s a better way and great people have discovered this way.

In his campaign for president, Abraham Lincoln made a lot of enemies. One of his most vocal enemies was Edwin Stanton. On every occasion, Stanton ridiculed and made fun of the way Lincoln looked. He said, “Nobody that looks like that and was born in Kentucky, could end up in the White House.” Upon Lincoln’s election, he sat down to determine his cabinet. Who does he name as his Secretary of War? Edwin Stanton! Lincoln’s friends were furious. “How dare you do that, he’s our enemy!” To which Lincoln said, “That’s the man for the job and I need him in this troubling time. I need him for what he’s about to do.” When Lincoln was assassinated on that fatal night at Ford Theater, it was Stanton standing near the dead body of the man he once hated. There Stanton said, “Here lies one of the greatest men to ever live. He belongs now to the ages.” Never, never, never underestimate the power of love. If it doesn’t change your enemy, it will change you and the way you relate to others. How do you handle rejection? You handle it fearlessly, lovingly, and creatively.

I will forever be indebted to my friends who have helped me

understand that rejection is not the final answer. To be down is not to be out. Hurt does not have to become hate. What seems hopeless today may become hopeful tomorrow. I've lived long enough to see that happen again and again.

When television was first marketed, there was an article in the Wall Street Journal that said, "It will never appeal to the average American family." At the Wright brothers first flight in their heavier than air machine, there were only five people who showed up to see it fly.

There's an old story about Ruth Graham. The first time she heard Billy Graham preach, she was so appalled by his preaching that she walked out of the church.

Sometimes, in God's time, things have a way of coming around. Life goes on. Those three words wrote by Robert Frost, sum up everything that I've learned about living. Life goes on.

Jimmy Carter said, "All of us wonder about our real purpose in life. When we have inner turmoil that needs healing, uncertainty about the meaning of life can grow into an obsession with self-pity. Our best solution is to think of doing something for someone else. Rosalyn and I were devastated after our defeat for re-election in 1980. Then we started working with Habitat for Humanity. In working side-by-side with families who have been living in sub-human dwellings, our lives have been changed.

In His time, in His time, God has a way of making all things beautiful, in His time. **How do you handle rejection?** Well, you handle it fearlessly, you handle it lovingly, and **you handle it creatively.** If Jesus had given in to the crowd, He would not have become the Savior of the world. So I say to you today -- claim your Christian identity, remember who you are, know in whom you have believed, and, in the grace of

Jesus Christ, rise above rejection to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven. You are a child of God – go out and live like it.
Amen.