

*"Rejected"*

**Mark 6:1-30**

John Breon

Jesus has been ministering all through Galilee. People crowd around him everywhere he goes. They want to see him, to hear him, to touch him. Many people are healed of diseases, delivered from demons, and are hearing Jesus' message of God's kingdom.

Now Jesus goes to his hometown, Nazareth. He wants the folks there to hear his message. He wants them to get in on the news of the kingdom.

What must Jesus be feeling as he takes his disciples to Nazareth? Anticipation—excitement—maybe some caution. He remembers that the last time he saw his family they tried to take charge of him because they thought he was crazy. But Jesus has preached and taught almost everywhere in Galilee. He wants to include Nazareth in his mission.

So he goes home and on the Sabbath he begins teaching in the synagogue. Maybe there was a bigger crowd than usual as people came to see Jesus and to hear what this local son had to say. The event is full of possibilities for Jesus. But something goes wrong.

Many who hear his teaching *are* amazed. But, as Mark often shows, amazement at Jesus is short of real faith and recognition of who he is. In their amazement, the Nazareth folks ask some good questions: Where did this man get these things he's saying? What's this wisdom he's been given and these wonders that he does?

But then in prejudice and perhaps low self-esteem, they answer their own questions about Jesus. And their answers fall short. They may be thinking, "How could someone from this town do what he does?" He's just the carpenter. He's just *Mary's* son. Children were generally identified as being their father's sons—unless there was no father. We can guess that Joseph has already died. And, this comment may reflect the idea people had that Jesus was illegitimate.

Then the crowd names off Jesus' brothers and mentions his sisters. The attitude seems to be, "We know Jesus and his family. There's nothing

special about them." How could someone from their town, someone they know, possibly have such wisdom and power?

"And they took offense at him." They were offended that one of their own could have received divine work to do. Earlier, in chapter 3, Mark recorded the first clear rejection of Jesus, on a Sabbath in a synagogue. There the issue was that he healed on the Sabbath. Here it's a matter of the people's unwillingness to believe that this "home town boy" is anything special. Both incidents are examples of refusing to recognize Jesus as the heaven-sent bearer of God's kingdom and salvation.

So they rejected him. As John's Gospel says, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (1:11). They rejected him and refused to believe in him because it was scandalous to think that God had come in Jesus of Nazareth.

When it says they took offense at him, it could be translated, "They stumbled because of him." The word there is a form of the Greek *scandalon*. Both the Old and New Testaments present Jesus as a stumbling block, a scandal. His conception and birth reflected this scandal, as we've seen in the Nazareth crowd's attitude and their calling Jesus "Mary's son" without reference to his father.

We see this scandal all through Jesus' ministry. Priests and Pharisees and Scribes stumbled because of him. His family stumbled and thought he'd lost his mind. His own disciples stumbled over him and his claims. In the end, they would betray, deny, and abandon him. John the Baptist stumbled and asked, "Are you the one?"

Michael Card writes:

The heart of our offense with Jesus is that He fails to meet our expectations. The priests and Pharisees expected a different sort of Messiah. It never occurred to John the Baptist that he would end up in prison. ...If it is truly Jesus Himself that you are getting close to, He will fail to meet your expectations sooner or later and you will stumble like all the rest.

Everyone who comes to Jesus stumbles because of Him. He fails to meet our wrong expectations. He calls us to do impossible things or

to become something we think we could never become. This is His way of teaching us how much we need Him. He breaks us to pieces so that He can put us together in His image.

Card says that some people today are preaching a different Jesus, one who never does anything unexpected. He's safe, predictable, and easy to follow. Instead of a stumbling-stone, he's easily stepped over. But that's not the Jesus of the Bible. Safe is the last thing he is (*Immanuel—Reflections on the Life of Christ*, 81-85).

That reminds me of a scene in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. In Narnia, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver are explaining to the children from England about Aslan, the great lion.

"Is he—quite safe? I shall feel nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just plain silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." (75-76)

Jesus is surprising. He won't be contained. Like Aslan, "He's not a tame lion." Philip Yancey wrote a book titled *The Jesus I Never Knew*. As a journalist, Yancey tries to get through the layers of tradition and opinion that have built up over Jesus through the centuries to recover the Jesus of the Gospels. He discovers that Jesus is more confounding and amazing than he'd ever imagined.

Jesus is the source of peace. But he's not the placid stained-glass image we often see him as.

Jesus is gentle and kind. But he's also dangerous in a way.

Jesus is humble. But the seeds of the kingdom he plants grow and bring new life. He plants himself in death and bursts out in resurrection. He won't be contained in our boxes.

The people in Nazareth just couldn't believe that Jesus was King. He was too much for them. It was too much for them to believe that someone they knew and had grown up with could be anything special, much less the Son of God. "They tripped over what little they knew about him and fell, sprawling. And they never got any further" (*The Message*).

How do you think Jesus felt at this point? He simply responded by quoting a proverb, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house" (v 4, NRSV) Jesus was identifying with the prophets who had been rejected as God's messengers.

Then Mark tells us that Jesus could not do any miracles there, except lay hands on a few sick people and heal them. And Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. Ordinarily, people were amazed at Jesus. Here, he's amazed at their unbelief. In another place, Jesus was amazed at the faith of a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:10). It seems that what amazes Jesus is faith or the lack of faith (*Card, Mark: The Gospel of Passion* 82).

There must have been some believing people there. The healings Jesus did in Nazareth are still more miracles than most of us are used to seeing.

The point here is that just as faith has positive effects when it's present, so the absence of faith hinders the manifestation of God's saving and healing power. By giving us freedom and choices God has given us the awesome ability to limit God. Now, lack of faith doesn't completely tie God's hands. But receptivity to God—openness, expectancy, faith—receives God's miraculous power. And not having that receptivity, openness, and expectancy can keep us from receiving God's miraculous power.

We have to be careful here. It's so easy to blame others for not having enough faith or the right kind of faith when their prayers aren't answered in the time and way we think they should be. We can get down on ourselves and think our faith is deficient when what we pray for doesn't happen right away.

Important as faith is, it's not the only factor in prayer. If we're praying for someone else, their freedom and choices count. There's the will of God

who sees the big picture that we can't see. There's the resistance of the powers of evil.

I tend to pray with confidence for healing, for example. I'm also prepared to deal with the fact that healing doesn't always come in the way or at time I think it should. I'm ready to deal gently and compassionately with people who aren't healed immediately. I'm not qualified to judge someone else for lack of faith. So I try to help us all stay open to the many possibilities of how God is at work.

The unbelief here is flat out rejection of Jesus. It's failing to believe that he's from God, that he speaks for God and brings God's kingdom. How could they receive from him if that was their attitude toward him?

Having been rejected and limited in some way by unbelief, how does Jesus respond to this whole situation? In his home town he's been rejected. He's failed to involve these people in his mission of God's kingdom.

Does he give up? Does he quit? No. He knows how we feel when we're rejected or when we fail. And he shows us how to deal with it.

As before when he was rejected at a synagogue, Jesus begins a wider ministry. He tries to reach more people. Here, he goes around teaching from village to village.

Jesus further extends his ministry by calling the Twelve to him, sending them out by twos, and giving them authority. With Jesus' own rejection fresh in their minds, they go out in teams. They depend on the hospitality of the people they preach to. In his instructions to them, Jesus gives the apostles a key for dealing with failure and rejection: "If they won't welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them." Don't linger over those failed situations. Don't carry that rejection around with you. Go on to the next place God calls you.

Mark summarizes the apostles' ministry. It sounds a lot like what Jesus was doing. "They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (verses 12-13).

Mark then interrupts this account to tell about how John the Baptist died (verses 14-29).

This story is a foreshadowing of *Jesus'* death. He will be ultimately rejected and killed in Jerusalem. Mark wants to remind his readers that they need to see the ministry of Jesus and the disciples in connection with Jesus' execution. This account of John's death again casts the shadow of Jesus' cross over the story Mark tells. Mark wants to reinforce the idea that it's not finally the power of the miracles but the sacrifice of the cross that most clearly reveals who Jesus is and what he means, why he's important.

In this light, those Roman Christians who first read Mark's Gospel shouldn't be surprised at the persecution and suffering they were going through.

What about us? What do we risk to follow Jesus in his mission? What are we *not* willing to risk to follow Jesus? A lot of people have given their lives.

This is part of the stumbling block, the *scandalon*. I don't like rejection. I try to avoid it. I don't really want to be crucified. I've sometimes spoken too easily of giving up everything, of dying with Christ, of crucifying self. I've glibly quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "When Christ bids a man, he bids him come and die."

But none of this is easy. Bonhoeffer himself was in a Nazi prison and was executed just days before the Allies liberated that prison camp. God forgive us when we make it sound so easy that people don't know what they're getting into when they follow Christ. So they're surprised when they meet opposition or resistance to their faith.

I once attended a school board meeting regarding the high school's Baccalaureate. This was years ago in another town. The Supreme Court had recently ruled that schools couldn't sponsor required religious services. At that meeting we were trying to work through the issues of Christian faith and witness, civil rights, pluralistic society and all the rest. I was impressed at that meeting by a teacher who spoke about being a Christian, having been a Jew. She mentioned being rejected by her family. She was paying the price to follow Christ.

At some point during that meeting, someone said to me, "Being a Christian is tough." I agreed. I also thought about how I'm kind of amused or irritated when Christians get indignant because the world is being

offensive or denying us some privilege. What do we expect? This is the world that rejected Jesus! What about the early church who endured various kinds of persecution for centuries? What about persecuted Christians in various places around the world today?

Now I don't enjoy pain and I don't like to go looking for trouble. But I can't help feeling that there's something inadequate about a faith that doesn't require risk and sacrifice. Our Lord was despised and rejected. Can we expect less?

But also know this—our Lord will be with us when we're rejected. He'll strengthen us and sustain us. And he'll use those times to further his kingdom.

Let's not be like that Nazareth congregation. Let's have faith in Jesus and let him do his mighty works among us as we risk following him wherever he leads.

I mentioned John's Gospel where it says, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (1:11-12).

Children born of God. That's who you are if you've received Jesus and put your trust in him. That's who you can become if you will receive Jesus and put your trust in him.