

## REJECTED

Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath at Nazareth. He stood there in the center of all those who knew him. He was a hometown boy, the center of attention that day. "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him" says Luke. From the prophet Isaiah, Jesus reads these words: The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. Jesus closed the Scriptures, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

The word of God is not always pleasant to hear. It doesn't massage the status quo at the expense of the truth. People don't want their turf invaded, not even by a hometown boy. Walter Bagehot once wrote, "One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea." The citizens of Nazareth were the favored people and they resented Jesus taking God's word of grace to others beyond Nazareth, especially to Capernaum. After all, Capernaum was heavily populated by non-Jews.

Israel had been full of widows in Elijah's day yet Elijah went to the house of a widow in Sidon. Also, Israel had many lepers in Elisha's time, yet Elisha had given the blessing of God to a man from Syria. These stories were quite familiar and part of their tradition. But grace for all was not what they expected to hear from one who was one of them. Most prophets do not get a good hearing in their own country, or popular acceptance during their own lifetime.

Dr. James Sutherland Bonnell, a Presbyterian minister of several years ago, had a great line on this text. "Jesus was favorably received by his townsfolk until he challenged the provincial, racial prejudice. He dared to declare that the children of Israel were not special favorites of God." Indeed, the heavenly Father had singled out individuals in Sidon and Syria for unparalleled blessings. Dr. Bonnell wrote, "And that, really set the heather on fire!"

The people became angry and set out to do away with Jesus. It has been said, people defend nothing more violently than the pretenses they live by. The people of Nazareth fell into the error of thinking to destroy Jesus would also destroy the word of truth. They failed to understand that truth is indestructible! Coretta Scott King has reminded us that the forces of repression, brutality, and racism can slay the dreamer but not the dream.

What the people heard that day was not what they wanted to hear from “their” Messiah. What about “our” Christ? We still reject the biblical Jesus. We want to re-create Jesus in the image of a white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. There is often a wide discrepancy between the Jesus of Scripture and the Jesus propagated in American culture. This Scripture directs us to deal honestly with ourselves. Senator Paul Simon, in an interview printed in the U.S. News and World Report several years ago said: “The greatest sermons my father preached were not from his pulpit. My father stood up when they took the Japanese Americans away from the West Coast at the beginning of World War II. He took a very unpopular stand. I would love to tell you that I stood up for my father and was very proud of him, but I remember being embarrassed by what he had done. Now, it’s one of the things I’m proudest of my father for. And it taught me a great lesson. If you believe something, stand up.”

It doesn’t matter what others think as long as you are right. To be sure, it may cause rejection. You may find yourself in the midst of controversy but Jesus handled the controversy and rejection by walking through it. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. In Christ hangs the destiny of us all. He is the way, the way out, the way home, and the only way that matters. We reject him at our own peril.

At a performance in the Kennedy Center, actress Julie Harris was portraying the life of Emily Dickinson. Emily talked about religion—about her father’s strict Puritan moralism, about the preachers of her childhood who made her feel “guilty, guilty, guilty,” and about her growing disenchantment with organized religion. But she also talked about Jesus Christ and her love for him. She said, “I do believe that no person can be truly happy until that person can say, ‘I love Christ.’”

Emily is right. When you think about it, that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? Entering into a love relationship with the one who is in all and beyond all. “Come to me,” is how Christ himself says it. Christ is not a way of escaping the world but of loving the world. We are to come to him even though the world calls us in a hundred different directions.

In closing, hear these words. To laugh is to risk appearing the fool. To weep is to risk appearing sentimental. To reach out for another is to risk involvement. To expose your feelings is to risk exposing your true self. To place your ideas, your dreams, before a crowd is to risk their loss. To love is to risk not being loved in return. To live is to risk dying. To hope is to risk despair. To try is to risk failure. But risks must be taken, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person, who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing and is nothing. They may avoid suffering and sorrow, but they cannot learn, they cannot feel, they cannot change, they cannot grow, they cannot love, and they cannot live. Chained by their attitudes, they become slaves. They have forfeited their

freedom. Only a person who risks all is ever truly free. God gave us a remarkable gift. It is up to us if we accept it or reject it. The choice is yours, the time is now. Only you can decide what path to choose.