

**Who is Jesus?**

Matthew 13:53-14:1-12

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No one likes to experience it. Yet it happens to all of us. It can occur in an instant yet its impact can go on for years. It can happen when a guy asks a girl out for coffee. It can show up through a letter from a school you've applied to or a job for which you interviewed. You can experience it when you try to break into a social circle. You see how that group hangs out together and it looks like fun. You like the people in that group. You think that you're part of it. But then you hear about a gathering that you weren't invited to or thought of.

You can experience it when you post a picture or a thought on Facebook or when leading worship or when sharing your faith. Some experience its bitter taste within their own families when someone closest to them speaks words that pierce us.

What is it? Rejection. To reject means to refuse to accept or acknowledge; to deem wrong or inappropriate; to disbelieve; to doubt; to slight or brush aside. How do we deal with rejection? How can we continue on in our lives when we experience it? Whatever your experience with rejection, there's one person who experienced the ultimate rejection. In fact Jesus experienced rejection throughout His life. **Both Jesus and His forerunner experienced rejection.** Yet Jesus' rejection ultimately led to our salvation. So today we examine the rejection Jesus and John experienced. Though rejection from others is difficult we will look at the opportunity it presents. To reorient our lives so we are more prepared to preserve through rejection.

**Matthew 13:53-14:12 (ESV)** (Page 690 in Pew Bibles)

<sup>53</sup> And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, <sup>54</sup> and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? <sup>55</sup> Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? <sup>56</sup> And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" <sup>57</sup> And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." <sup>58</sup> And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.

**14** At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, <sup>2</sup> and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."<sup>3</sup> For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>4</sup> because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."<sup>5</sup> And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. <sup>6</sup> But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, <sup>7</sup> so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. <sup>8</sup> Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."<sup>9</sup> And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. <sup>10</sup> He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, <sup>11</sup> and his head was brought on

a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. <sup>12</sup> And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.

Matthew's account moves on from the parables to another section of Jesus' life. Jesus established his home ministry base at Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. But now Jesus returns to his home town of Nazareth. There, he goes into the synagogue where he would have gone to as a boy and young man before He started his public ministry. He likely sees many old friends and neighbors. But this time he's not there to listen to the rabbi teach the Scriptures or hear the village elders explain some wisdom. Jesus teaches. It astonishes the people. They cannot deny His great wisdom or mighty works.

They can't understand where these come from. Rather than ponder the amazing teaching or responding to the mighty works and knowledge of Jesus, they begin to evaluate the situation based on their past experience. *Is this not the carpenter's son?* They knew Jesus' earthly father Joseph, the carpenter. They knew he had a boy named Jesus. They knew Joseph most likely trained Jesus in carpentry. But they also knew Joseph did not send Jesus off to become a disciple under a prominent rabbi. So where did he get this teaching?

*Is not his mother called Mary?* They knew Mary. She did not come from a wealthy family. She was just like the other mothers in that community. *Are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?* We know from the Gospels that Jesus' brothers did not believe in Him as Messiah until after the resurrection. James became a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church and the author of the book of James. We think Judas or Jude wrote the little letter of Jude near the end of the Bible. But at this time, these brothers did not talk up their eldest as some great prophet. They seemed to think he was a bit crazy.

*Are not all his sisters with us?* We don't know anything else about Jesus' sisters besides their mention here. But apparently they all still lived in Nazareth. Maybe they too did not know what to make of their oldest brother.

*Where then did this man get all these things?* That's not a very affectionate question about a native son. They talk about "this man" not "our hometown boy Jesus." What are they doing with that question? They're concluding that there's no possible way someone from their village with that background from that family with that trade could gain the kind of wisdom Jesus shared or do the works He did. "So they took offense at him." Literally, they were scandalized at him.

They concluded something was wrong with picture. He either had stolen this wisdom from someone else or he had learned magic arts in Egypt or he was trying to put himself forward as better than they were. But whatever he was doing, it was bad because they knew his family and his roots. They reject Him as their Messiah. And in a way that conclusion is understandable. What would you think if someone you knew who grew up with your kids and was another ordinary kid on the block came back after 3 years claiming to be God? Yet they were astonished by his teaching. They'd seen some mighty works. But they couldn't get beyond their familiarity.

Jesus responds to their rejection. He says "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own household." So he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. Instead of allowing Jesus' wisdom and miracles to testify to his divine origin, they reject him.

**Why was Jesus rejected? 13:53-58 - Jesus' home town people allowed familiarity to blind them to Jesus' true identity.** They rejected the ultimate prophet who came from among them. This is not the first time this happened in Israel's history. Prophets often experienced rejection because of the message God proclaimed through them. But Jesus was the ultimate prophet. Yet His own townspeople and family rejected him. Familiarity can lead to rejection.

Before, we're too quick to judge these townspeople, we need to guard against allowing our familiarity with Jesus and the Gospel story to blind us to Jesus' true identity. "What do you mean Tom? If someone is familiar with Jesus and the Gospel story, they're not going to be blinded to Jesus true identity." Really? There are New Testament scholars in universities all over the world who know a lot about Jesus but don't believe in Him as God the Son. If we've grown up in Christian homes or grown up going to church, we may know the story well. But that doesn't automatically mean we know Jesus. Just as sitting in a garage does not make you a car, going to church doesn't make you a Christian. It's certainly a great regular practice for Christians but it can't substitute for a relationship with Jesus.

Watch out if you are very familiar with the Jesus story. Don't let some knowledge of history keep you from knowing His story. When we get familiar with someone we can begin to believe we know how they operate and know how they'll respond. We can do that with God. "I know how God operates. I know how Jesus operates. Therefore, I can begin to believe that I've got God figured out and there's not much new to discover there. Or there's not much I need to change." We can reject Jesus or His commands because of our familiarity with Him. Tim Keller writes - a great danger is to respond to God with a shoulder shrug – to believe that He exists but doesn't really matter.

Yet, every new stage and phase of life brings the opportunity to discover something more about God. Through marriage, we get to discover the joy of intimacy with one person. It gives us a glimpse into the closeness between the three persons of the Trinity. Through parenting, we begin to discover a little of what God experiences with His children – the joys and challenges. In the journey through different ages of life, our body's limits can cause us to think more about life beyond these limits. In facing multiple challenges at the same time, we can understand more our need for the Lord's strength. We can never get so familiar with Jesus that there is nothing left to discover. But we can let our familiarity with the story keep us from knowing Him.

Familiarity can also blind us to the possibility of people changing. We can conclude, "oh we know that person. They won't change." Some people don't change. But if you add Christ to any life, the possibilities for change are endless. And we cannot underestimate how God can soften a heart or wait decades until the perfect moment to speak into a person's life with His saving Gospel. I remember a time talking to a 77 year old woman. This woman had experienced tremendous upheaval in her family. Events had deeply impacted her child and her grandchild. She came in to talk and try to make sense of it all especially why God would let this happen. And somewhere along the line I asked her if she had actually ever received Christ into her life. And God just intervened. I was prepared to discuss this further. But instead, she just started praying. This senior citizen invited Christ into her life for the first time. So we dare not conclude "it's no use sharing the Gospel with that person because they'll never respond."

Sometimes we experience the rejection because of other's familiarity with us. People conclude that they know us and we won't change. So they reject our ideas or our faith or our growth. If that's happened to you, your Lord knows what that feels like. We'll talk in a few moments about how He helps us in those times. But there's a second part to the story.

Matthew continues the account into chapter 14. He describes the circumstances surrounding John the Baptist's death. Matthew starts with John's murderer. "At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus." Now who is this Herod?

He is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. So his dad was the Herod who met the wise men. When the wise men didn't return, his dad had all the baby boys in Bethlehem slaughtered to protect his power. Herod the Great also had one of his wives and some of his sons killed to protect his power. He was widely despised.

So Antipas learns a brutal way to hold onto power through his father. When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided between his sons. Archelaus (2:22) was given the region of Judea. He had the worst reputation. So Mary and Joseph chose to return to Nazareth up in the Galilee to raise Jesus and their other children. Antipas had become the tetrarch or ruler of a fourth of Herod the Great's kingdom. Antipas rules over Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39. Antipas married the daughter of King Aretas, the ruler over the Nabateans. But Antipas fell in love with Herodias, the wife of his half-brother Philip. So the already married Antipas and the already married Herodias divorce their current spouses so they can get together. Herodias divorced Philip, Antipas divorced the daughter of the Nabatean king.

So he went to war against Antipas and inflicted a humiliating defeat on him. Antipas had a shaky hold on Perea.

So John the Baptist comes along as a prophet of God who tells it like it is. He publicly calls out everyone; the religious leadership for their abuse of power and the heavy loads they lay on people's backs; the people themselves for failing to live lives honoring to God and Antipas for engaging in a marriage contrary to God's law. Antipas does not like this and has John arrested. Antipas wants to kill John but fears the people. Yet Herodias holds a grudge.

Opportunity knocked during a drunken party for Antipas' birthday. Herodias' daughter Salome, (who is probably 12-14 years old) performs a dance. Antipas is so intoxicated with drink and lust that he pronounces he will give her anything up to half his kingdom. Salome's mother shrewdly asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. So Salome asks and Antipas' honor is at stake. He can't lose face in front of his houseguests. So he commands and John is killed and his head is brought to the party. Talk about rejection.

This is the same John the Baptist who served as Jesus' forerunner announcing the coming of the Messiah. This is the same man who baptized Jesus. This was the prophet the crowds went out to see from Jerusalem in the wilderness. And he ends up executed in an evil ruler's dungeon.

Now let's step back for a moment and think about what Matthew is doing here. Why Matthew would tell this story at this point in his gospel? It may have happened earlier. In verse 3, Matthew writes "Herod *had seized* John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias." In fact he was imprisoned for over a year according the Jewish historian Josephus. Remember back in Matthew 11, John is already in prison and doubts if Jesus is the Messiah. So he sent his disciples to find out. Surely Matthew could have told the end of the story there. But he waits until now. Why?

He could be using this story to foreshadow Jesus' own death. There are some similarities. John is arrested by the governing authorities. He is given no trial of consequence. He is brutally executed. It may be that Matthew begins to prepare the reader for what's coming in Jesus' life.

But Matthew could also be playing on the theme of rejection. Jesus has just been rejected by the people of his hometown. Now John suffers a rejection that costs him his life. This will be the path Jesus will have to follow until he too pays the ultimate price.

Yet the bigger question remains, why was Herod so sensitive to John's criticism? It's not like Antipas really cared about Jewish law or Jewish morality. Why not just ignore the crazy wilderness prophet? His words didn't matter in the courts and social circles of the ruling class. There had to be something more. **14:1-12 - Herod Antipas took John the Baptist's moral rebuke as a potential political threat.** The most important thing to Antipas was power. John the Baptist's questioning threatened that power because John enjoyed great popularity. So even though John didn't criticize Antipas' policies, Antipas interpreted the moral rebuke as a threat. He wanted John gone to remove the threat. In fact in verse 5 Herod wanted to kill John earlier but because of the people it wasn't politically the right time.

Now think about the relevance of this to our world today. What kind of responses do we get as Christians if we try to speak up about issues like same-sex marriage, homosexual relationships, transgender bathrooms or assisted suicide? How willing are people to listen and engage in thoughtful dialogue?

Simply asking a question leads to a threatening responses. *"Oh, you're homophobic. I thought Christians weren't supposed to judge. Don't tell me you live back in the dark ages? How dare you question my lifestyle?"*

Last weekend, the federal Liberal and federal Conservative parties held conventions. The Conservatives changed their definition of marriage to be the marriage of two persons. The Liberals said the Conservatives were 10 years late. The news commentator said that the Conservatives were getting in line with the mainstream. So what used to be outside the mainstream is now part of the mainstream. And the exclusive definition of marriage between man and woman is now outside the mainstream. This is contrary to God's law. But any attempt to discuss this or question this is shut down as homophobic and intolerant.

People may not feel politically threatened but identity threatened. The culture says "your identity is based on your sexual feelings." So if someone identifies themselves primarily by their sexual orientation it is understandable why they

respond with hostility if someone questions the morality of a certain behavior or lifestyle. Our discussions need to begin by question the culture's definition of identity. Is it really based on our sexual feelings? Why would we want to limit ourselves like that? There is so much more to be found if we were to identify with Christ.

But to offer even the slightest moral rebuke today will likely be met with hostility and rejection. So the question arise - why would anyone want to do this? Why would we risk rejection? Why risk such consequences when we could just say nothing and get along with everyone.

Well, there are some things more important than whether or not we experience rejection. Sometimes doing right or speaking God's Word will cost you.

*But why speak up if people have already made up their minds? Why speak up if it's already decided? Aren't you acting in a morally superior way?* We certainly have to be humble and considerate. We cannot think of ourselves as morally superior in any way. We are all sinners. We might not even start with the lifestyle decisions or questions. The bigger question – "Is there anything wrong with anything?" If there is something wrong with some of the decisions the culture has made; if people want to know God but live in ways that are contrary to His will, then one way we can help them grow closer is by speaking up lovingly.

Think about John the Baptist. He could have gotten out of prison. All he needed to do was go to Antipas and Herodias, apologize and then promise to go out and say he was mistaken. Yet that would be calling God and His moral law a mistake. So John died for staying true. Or think about Jesus. He could have backed off the teaching. He could have backed off stirring everything up. But then no one would have arrested him. There would no trial and execution. There would be no salvation.

Jesus' rejection, though difficult, was not a bad thing. It resulted in the very good thing of our salvation. John's rejection, though difficult, was not a bad thing. It resulted in his entry to heaven and almost universal condemnation towards Antipas for his childish and impulsive act. The rejection we experience may be very difficult. But it doesn't have to define us or limit us from moving forward. I'm not talking about rejection because we were a jerk or behaved badly. That rejection may very well be deserved. I'm talking about people rejecting us for our faith or their own familiarity issues or their own pride issues or their insensitivity to being exclusive or simply because they don't think it would work for us to be in that job or in that relationship.

When we experience rejection, we have an opportunity to evaluate what we've built our lives on. Many people build their lives and their identities on what other people think of them or say about them. Or we can build our lives on being accepted by others. So we can begin to live in a way that we'll do whatever it takes for acceptance in a certain group or with people around us.

But think about the frailty and flimsiness of such a foundation. If our lives depend on the acceptance of other people, we are always at their mercy. We can constantly play the game of testing whether or not we're doing enough to keep their acceptance. Or we can build our identity based on our accomplishments or talents or education or bank account. Certainly, each of those plays into our identity. But none of them can deliver us from the fear of rejection by someone.

Yet there is another way to deal with the fear of rejection. Think about building your identity on the foundation of Christ. Build your identity based on God's goodness and His unfailing love towards you. Tim Keller writes "How can we be delivered from all our fears? Build an identity that gets its significance not from your accomplishments or racial identity or talent or moral efforts or family or social group or likes on Facebook or your looks but from God. Build an identity that gets its significance from knowing God and His goodness and His unfailing love and His constant presence. Then and only then is your self-worth not subject to fears and shame. How can we get such an identity? By not just believing God but "tasting" and experiencing God's goodness in prayer."

And when we come to Jesus in this way, we come to one who has experienced the ultimate rejection. Yet, He came through it for our good and the world's good. He will be your comforter and foundation regardless of what others say or do. Though you may experience rejection because of your faith in Christ, He walks with us through it having experienced the greatest rejection in all of history. This is Jesus who was a rejected prophet leading a rejected people who enjoy the acceptance of God into His kingdom and eternity. Let us come to Him now to respond to His Word.