

Progressive Polarization

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Hello, everybody. It's really nice to see you all here this evening. If you don't know me, my name is Aaron, so I'm the minister. I look after the service. And so I'd love to meet you if you're new. Come and say hi. So we are in a series in Matthew's Gospel, and we've called these middle chapters, we're looking at The Gathering Storm. We're called it that because opposition to Jesus. At this point in the story, Matthew's Gospel, opposition is growing, and it's getting more bitter. Jesus has been doing these amazing things.

He's been preaching these brilliant sermons, and all the evidence points in one direction that he's the Messiah, yet he is widely rejected. And this is what we have in today's passage.

We have two stories of rejection. So let's have a look at them and see what God's Word is trying to help us understand. So the first story of rejection is that Jesus goes back to his hometown. This is verse 54 to 58. So this goes back to Nazareth. So Nazareth is not a place mentioned in the Old Testament. It's not a place mentioned in any extra-biblical literature in the first couple of hundred years after AD. And it's because it's this very insignificant sort of place. It's about 500 people. I'm tempted to say it's something like, but there's bound to be somebody here from Clinton or someplace like that, right?

But anyway, Jesus puts his place on the map. So he goes to this town, and is anyone here from Clinton, by the way? Okay, right, good. So he goes to town, and he speaks in the synod.

So the synod was like the Jewish church, and it was the center of the community there. And the rabbis would normally teach, but they would periodically invite guests to speak. And Jesus was a bit of a, you know, he was becoming sort of fairly well-known, so he was invited to speak. So that's how he got to speak. So Jesus preaches, and then afterwards they say, wow, where did he get all this wisdom from? And how is it that he's doing these amazing things?

[2 : 1 4] So that's interesting. What's interesting here is they don't deny any of his mighty works. They don't deny that stuff. But listen to what they say about him. And then they say, is this not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother Mary? Now notice they didn't say, isn't Joseph his father? They don't mention Joseph here. That would have been normal in a sort of this patriarchal sort of society. So why not? It's probably because Christ's paternity.

There's a big question mark over that. Remember, Mary was pregnant when she got married. And a small town like this, people don't forget that kind of thing. So they bring that up. And then they start rattling off the names of Jesus' brothers and sisters. In other words, here's what they're saying. They're saying to Jesus, you come here with your fancy words. But we know who you are.

And we know that. We know this is the attitude behind their questions, because in verse 57, it says they were offended by him. So the New Testament was originally written in Greek, and it was translated into English. And the Greek word for offended is scandalizo. Scandalizo. From where we get the English word scandalized. They were scandalized by Jesus. So they didn't just disagree with him. They were outraged. He used to play with our kids, that boy.

He built our back patio. He built our table. He's one of us. And he comes here thinking he's so superior. Well, he better think again. We'll cut him down to size.

The Nazarenes, they rejected their maker. They didn't deny his mighty works. But they refused to let the evidence take them to the reasonable conclusion. They just didn't like where the facts took them. They just didn't want to think that. So they said, he's just one of us and no more.

[4 : 43] And there's no integrity in that position, is there? I mean, all the evidence points this way, but they just decide to believe this. It's a very contemporary sort of rejection, isn't it?

It's an unreasonable refusal to believe. And it's a very modern way of looking at Jesus. Jesus. I'll give you an example. So Easter's coming down the line, right? I don't know what we are, like eight weeks or seven weeks or something out from Easter. And you'll find that you'll start to see, a couple of times you'll notice articles and magazines are online, like Time Magazine, for example. And the articles all have a similar spin, an Easter spin. And there'll be about the real Jesus, right? Let me tell you about the real Jesus. There's the Bible Jesus, but we obviously can't believe that. So let's talk about the real Jesus. And they reconstruct him. They try and redo Jesus. And I read one of these articles last week. And here was the conclusion.

Jesus was actually, I love that line, actually, actually. I know there's 2,000 years of history and there's a billion people who believe it. But, you know, I've got an undergraduate degree in journalism and I read some internet posts. Jesus was actually just a wandering sage with little supernatural baggage. That's a great line too. Jesus was actually just a wandering sage with little supernatural baggage and a great love of diversity. He's just one of us.

It's a great modern day Jesus, actually. Completely offensive and demands nothing of us. And of course, there's a big problem with this, is that the reader Jesus has no historical credibility whatsoever. Because Jesus was such a divisive figure. Before the crucifixion, there's lots of people trying to kill him. After crucifixion, there's a whole lot of people worshipping him.

So the actual Jesus provoked extreme responses. The redo Jesus is just sort of like, it's just some kind of like hippie guy, right? It doesn't actually fit the facts. But he appeals to people who don't want a Jesus that demands anything of them. So, you know, you sort of go with the, you go away from the evidence towards what you want to believe. So back to the story. Jesus visits his hometown and they say, you're not so special. And where did this pride, what did this pride cost? Nazareth, verse 58. And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. You know, it doesn't say he couldn't do mighty works. See, he just didn't.

[7 : 41] Jesus let them bear the consequence of their unbelief. Okay, so what's our takeaway here? I feel like this is the kind of passage that should put the fear of God onto us.

Pride, which I think is what was going on with the Nazarenes. Pride has this incredible power to blind us, to deaden our hearts. It can make us think things like this. I know the Bible says this. I'm just going to think this. So what do we do? What do we do about this?

What do we do with this kind of pride? What do we do when our hearts want to ignore the evidence about Jesus? We pray Psalm 139, which we read out together.

That's a vulnerable prayer, isn't it?

Let's move on to the next story of rejection. And it's not about something that actually happens to Jesus. It's about a message relayed to Jesus about what happened to John the Baptist.

[9 : 04] And it acts as a foreshadowing of what's coming down the pipeline for Jesus. So let's have a look at it. And it's interesting because it's sort of told in flashback, right? So I think this is one of the most tragic stories in the New Testament. So Herod was the ruler of Judea. He was part of a family dynasty that ruled for a long time, like the Kennedys or the Bushes, for example. So his father was also called Herod. And he was the other Herod that tried to kill Jesus when Jesus was a baby.

You remember this. So that's this guy's provenance. And the world that this Herod, the son, inhabited was all about power. And it was real power. I mean, this guy could indulge his desires. He could do whatever he wanted without facing much in the way of consequences, almost. History tells us that he was on a family holiday and he really liked the look of his brother's wife. So he disposed of his own wife and took her. Her name was Herodias. So she's in our story. Herodias, the mother of the girl that danced. Her first husband was actually her uncle, as was Herod. And the daughter that danced in the story, Salome, she went on to marry Herod's half-brother. So the family tree is more of a hedge. So what that means is that the branches only go out so far and then they have to sort of cut back in again.

So we have this really weird, violent, powerful family. And no one would say anything against all the crazy stuff they did, except John the Baptist. So John had the guts to say to Herod, you stole another man's wife and it's your niece. What are you doing? This is so wrong.

The new wife, Herodias, didn't like John saying these things because I think it seems that she rather enjoyed being married to the king. So to placate her, Herod imprisoned John. But he didn't kill him because Herod was actually fascinated by John. And this is where it gets quite interesting.

And Mark's gospel has a slightly longer version of the story. Herod feared John but loved listening to him so he would sneak down into the dungeons and listen to John preach. And it left him feeling very divided. It's the whole other sermon. But there's a word in Mark's passage which talks about that Herod had this very divided heart. Because on the one hand, he loved listening to the word of God through John. He found it fascinating. On the other hand, John was saying, you've got to stop doing this. And Herod's like, I've got this really great life. I can just do whatever I want.

[12 : 08] Why would I give that? Why would I miss that? Why would I mess with that? So he's got these two things going on. Loves hearing God's word. Hates what it demands of him though. He was a divided man.

I'm told that there was only one place in the Lord of the Rings. I read this anyway. There's only one place in the Lord of the Rings that would bring the author, J.R.R. Tolkien, to tears. And it's the scene where Sam and Frodo are sleeping and Gollum is leading them to the giant spider's lair. But right before that, something happens to Gollum and he looks at Frodo. And Frodo's been really kind to him.

And he starts to relent and he starts to think, I can't do this. I'm not going to do this. And he looks at sleeping Frodo and he reaches out to touch Frodo. Really bad timing. Sam wakes up and sees Frodo reaching out, sees Gollum reaching out. And he screams and he yells and he grabs Gollum.

And Gollum uses that as an excuse to return back to his original plan. It's apparently the only moment in the book that made Tolkien cry. It's this tragic moment. You've got Gollum, this divided heart, and he's got these two paths before him. And he chooses poorly. See, here it had his moment of choice in our story. So the scene is this. He's the head of state. He has to keep important people happy. He throws his big party. I think it was a birthday party. He invites all the key players.

It's a very indulgent affair. At some point he gets his wife's daughter, who's a stepdaughter slash niece. It's confusing, right? To dance for everybody. It wasn't a tap dance. It was a saucy sort of dance. Herod's a bit drunk. And at this point in the show of power and stupidity, because he loved the dance so much, he says, I'll give you whatever you want. Ask. You can have anything you like. His mates are all slapping him on the back. You're the man, Herod. And it all goes sideways, of course, because Salome, the daughter, goes to see Herodias. What do I ask for? And she says, asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. So Herod is a decision to make.

[14 : 46] What's he going to do? Kierkegaard says that sin is building your identity on anything besides God. And at that, at the heart of all of our lives is a savior and it should be Jesus, but it's not always Jesus. It could be power. It could be approval. It could be a particular cause, but there's something you desire more than anything else. And whatever it is, you're a slave to it. And for Herod, it was, he was so captivated by his power probably. And his greatest fear would have been losing face and losing power in front of his friends and it ruled his heart. So he acted against his conscious conscience and he murdered an innocent man. Okay, big picture now and we'll finish.

What does this story teach us about rejection? So Matthew, the writer of this gospel, he puts this story in as, well, he's putting it down as a marker for what's ahead for Jesus. It's also a warning to us, isn't it? Herod was so privileged. He liked the preacher, but he really liked the popularity. And he really liked being able to do whatever he wanted with his lust. These are powerful dissuasives. And many people have rejected Jesus because of these things. And as I was reading this, I asked myself, where am I rejecting Jesus because of them? And again, what do we do? What do we do about this? When family or power or popularity dissuade us from the path that Jesus put us on? Again, I think we come back to the Psalm. It's just so fantastic.

And it ties in so beautifully to what Mark shared with us this evening. This very vulnerable prayer. Search me, O God, and know my heart. See, Jesus is not just our Savior. You're not just saved and that's the end of the story. God wants to transform you. God wants to continue giving you new life. And how does that happen? You have the way everlasting. This is not an issue of salvation. It's what is God going to do with us? How does God continue to make us whole and heal us? Well, he asks us to pray this. Search me, O God, and know my heart.

Try me and know my thoughts and see if there is any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Amen.