

# Hard Hearts

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Date: 18 November 2012

Preacher: Rev. Alastair Sterne

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     You're able to remain standing when you bow your heads and pray with me. Father, we ask that as we listen to your word, that you would apply it to our minds, that we not grow shallow, that you would apply it to our hearts, that we not grow cold, that you would apply it to our feet, that we not just be hearers of your word, but doers also.

We ask these things in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord, and in his mercy. Amen. Well, good morning. It is a pleasure to be here.

I have a quick, well, I have two disclaimers. The first one is this. I come out of a non-denominational background, and I'm in the process of being ordained in the Anglican Church. And this is the first time I've worn a surplus.

And it's interesting because I came in and I was like, okay, you know, I'm wearing a great James Bond-esque suit underneath this, feeling really good about how I'm looking. And they put this on me, and it's such a beautiful picture of the gospel, isn't it?

The pride, being humbled, and letting Christ live in us. And that was exemplified when one of my friends who's here visiting was like, I've got to get a photo. Facebook.

[ 1 : 0 9 ]     It is a pleasure to be here. This morning we have a heavy passage before us, don't we? Rejection and beheading. Now, this is cheery stuff for a Sunday morning.

It seems a little uncivilized, wouldn't you say? I think our society is known for coming up with more humane ways to kill people, supposedly. This is a weighty passage.

And let me start with one more disclaimer. If we're not careful, coming out of chapter 5, the healing of a demoniac, the healing of a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, a little girl who was dead coming back to life, we could get the impression that Jesus' ministry was one of success upon success.

But Mark carefully brings us back to reality. Throughout the entire gospel, the response to Jesus is always divided. And today, a major theme in Mark's gospel comes to the forefront, that of Jesus' rejection.

And this is an uncomfortable topic. You know, rejection is something that has caused some of our deepest hurts. It's undoubtedly one of our most sincere fears. Social psychology is showing that the majority of human anxiety comes from the fear of social exclusion or social rejection.

[ 2 : 2 3 ]     We long for acceptance. We long to be known. We long to be understood. And what we are actually finding, though, is that the basic motivator in our lives is not that of love, but is that the fear of rejection.

And rejection, it wounds us, and it takes different shapes. You know, maybe you were the last pick on the baseball team, or you're the outcast in high school, or you didn't get into the university you wanted, or you were denied that promotion, or your emo rock band that was an angrier version of Celine Dion kicked you out during the middle of your record deal.

Okay, that's my story, but still working through that one. Rejection can rock us deeper still. Maybe you're going through divorce, have been through divorce. Maybe your dad still looks down upon you.

Maybe your mother-in-law hates you. You know, we should hold these memories of our own rejection closely so that rejection is not just a theoretical concept, but something personal. We don't want to hold rejection at arm's length when we read a text like this.

We want to remember how it has stung all of us because it's personal. It's painful. It sticks with us. And it's powerful. It affects the way we live.

[ 3 : 36 ] It can paralyze us in fear and keep us hidden. It can even cause some to lash out. And so in Mark 6, 1 through 30, Mark shows us that Jesus is well acquainted with rejection.

It comes from every quarter, from his home and family, from the political tyrants of his day. And we have three scenes. We have the return of Jesus to Nazareth. We have his commissioning of the disciples and then sandwiched in between their being sent and returned, the beheading of John.

And these three scenes are about Jesus and his message being rejected by us and how his rejection was for us and how we can follow Jesus into the way of rejection.

So let's start in verses 1 through 6. The first scene here is Jesus returning to his hometown in Nazareth. He's teaching on the Sabbath in the synagogue, which was his custom. And like many people before, they are amazed at his teaching and at his power.

But their amazement doesn't birth faith. Actually, just something quite different. In verse 6, it says, it leads to their unbelief. Their astonishment begets a slew of questions, which descends quickly into criticism and accusation.

[ 4 : 44 ] Where did this man get these things? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joe, I don't know how to say his name, and Judas and Simon, are not his sisters here with us?

Their familiarity with Jesus and Jesus' commonness led them to take offense at him. And if there's any word we should keep in mind in reading this scene, it is this word, takes offense, found at the end of verse 3.

It's scandalous. It could be translated scandalous, or a stumbling block, or repelled. These people see Jesus, and they become critical and skeptical and even a little bit arrogant about who this person is.

They find his commonness and their familiarity with him to be a stumbling block. They see only a carpenter, only a son of Mary, only another child from the village who has now grown up.

One New Testament commentator, James Edwards, writes this, humanity wants something other than what God gives. The greatest obstacle to faith is not the failure of God to act, but the unwillingness of the human heart to accept the God who condescends to us in only a carpenter, the son of Mary.

[ 6 : 06 ] See, God is identified too closely with the world for the world to behold him, too closely with the town of Nazareth for them to recognize Jesus as the son of God.

And so it births this unbelief in the people of Nazareth, and they start trying to discredit Jesus. And unbelief isn't just a posture of asking questions or skepticism.

It could be translated unfaithfulness. It's doubt, it's disbelief, it's a lack of faith, and it's synonymous throughout the entire canon of Scripture with the hardness of heart.

These people harden their hearts towards Jesus. They think they know them, and in all their assumptions, they dismiss him. And each doubt and every denial calluses the heart layer by layer.

And Jesus responds in verse 4, A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household. He's saying, Your response to me just upholds the conventional wisdom of our day.

[ 7 : 09 ] But more importantly, in verse 6, he says, He marvels because of their unbelief. God marvels at the hardness of your heart when you reject him for being too close, when you reject him because things didn't go the way that you deemed fit, or he didn't show up the way that you thought he should.

He marvels at the hardness of your heart when you refuse to receive what he freely offers. I want to think about the pain of this too. Jesus is being rejected by his hometown.

He marvels, but how could this also not strike deeply into his heart? And there's a strange part to this event too. Because of their disbelief, it says that Jesus could not do any miracles or any acts of power other than healing a few people.

And so we see Jesus is able to heal people, but he does not coerce them into believing. He won't prove himself by putting on a performance. He just offers himself.

And we see that the message of Jesus and Jesus himself will be rejected, but for no other reason than the hardness of the human heart. And that faith is required for the heart to be rent and softened.

[ 8 : 21 ] So as we move from scene one into this next scene of the commissioning of the disciples, it seems strange, doesn't it, that Jesus' next act after being rejected is to send these men out into the world.

You know, this isn't the greatest locker room pep talk. You know, your quarterback is on the ground, has just been beaten. You don't have someone to play. You say, all right, the rest of you, finish the game.

You know, we're on a roll, guys. Why don't you give it a shot? In chapter three, Jesus calls his disciples and he calls them so that they could be with him and that he might send them out to preach and have power to heal people and cast out demons.

And since this point, we've watched the disciples follow Jesus. They've spent time watching Jesus preach the kingdom of God, offer repentance and belief to people. They've seen people miraculously healed.

It's important then to recognize that he doesn't send them out on this high note, not after the demoniac, not after Jairus and his little daughter being raised. He sends them out after being publicly ridiculed, criticized, belittled, and stifled by disbelief.

[ 9 : 29 ] The disciples have been with him during the phenomenal and the disappointing, and they're sent out on this low note, on this lull. And on top of that, they're sent with just the essentials. And this isn't just because Jesus is some radical minimalist.

He sends them with their belts, their sandals, their tunic, no bread, no bag, no money, because they're called to depend on the provision of God alone and not their own resources. And let's be honest, these men seem wildly underprepared for the task at hand.

They haven't had the best track record in this gospel so far. In chapter one, they impede Jesus's mission. In chapter four and five, they become exasperated with Jesus. In chapter three, they even oppose Jesus.

And all this group of men who are always a step behind, always underprepared, always slow to understand, are sent out without any resources at the low point of rejection. And if that's not hard enough, Jesus guarantees that when you go out, you will also be rejected.

In verse 11, he says, if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them. And that would have been a sign that they were actually rejecting the messenger.

[ 10 : 43 ] They were actually rejecting God himself. And the point in all of this, I think, is that God's gospel does not go forward based off of our own ability, but based off of his commissioning and his power.

The point is that they have to trust in Jesus and his calling and his equipping. They don't go into the world proclaiming their own ability or with some fancy tricks. They go preaching Christ's message.

They go pointing to the Savior. They go healing, but not in their own power, but by calling upon Christ's name. And this is always the case, I think, when it comes to following Christ in this world.

We're called to do more than we're able to do. We're called to be more than we're able to be. And we are always depending on God to show up and provide when we are weak, when we're frail, or when we're scared, or when we're simply unable.

And the amazing part is they go and they seem to have success. They preach repentance. They see healing. They see demons cast out. And then in verse 30, they return to Jesus and tell him all that they did and all that they had taught.

[ 11 : 47 ] And this could be the sermon's ending, you know, ending on a high note, like the last chapter. But that's not Mark's point here. From first to last and all the way through, this passage is about rejection.

Rejection happens before the disciples are sent. And then we hear of their calling and we hear of their return. And in between, Mark puts this story of John's beheading. We can't get away from rejection being intertwined in the way of Christ.

So backing up to verse 14, the disciples have been sent. And now Mark takes time to tell us about John's beheading. We're told that Jesus' name is becoming known because of the disciples preaching.

And now people are talking and they're asking the question, who is Jesus? And let's remember, this is the question Mark is trying to get us to ask. This is the question or the answer is the most profound and important answer that we could ever come up with and the most implications for the world that we could ever imagine.

And so people are asking, who is Jesus? And this time, they're not accusing him, they're speculating. Jesus is John the Baptist. He's been raised from the dead. That's why these powers are at work in him.

[ 12 : 57 ] He's Elijah. He's a prophet like one of the prophets of old. So amid this speculation, King Herod throws in his two cents. Now King Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea at the time.

He was sort of a false king. And he says, John whom I have beheaded has been raised. Herod gives into speculation about Jesus and gives this uninformed answer that's composed more by guilt and superstition than by the truth.

And so Mark gives us this backstory to see why is Herod answering it in this way in verses 17 through 29. We see all good prophets confront Israel's kings.

And so John, being a good prophet, confronts a false king who misrepresents God, takes advantage of the people, and thinks that he's above the moral authority of God. And so John, in good prophetic style, calls Herod out on his sins because Herod had taken Herodias, his brother's wife, as his own wife.

And John calls him to repent of this sexual immorality. But Herod, like all good false kings, wants to do what he wants, when he wants, how he wants, without anyone telling him what he can or cannot do.

[ 14 : 14 ] He wants autonomy, and autonomy is fundamentally opposed to the kingdom of God. And so to protect Herodias' honor, and let's be honest, his own honor, he puts John in jail.

But Herodias isn't satisfied with this. She knew, as T.W. Mason puts it, that the only place where her marriage certificate could be safely written was on the back of the death warrant of John the Baptist.

And so during Herod's birthday party, when the opportunity presents itself, Herodias uses her daughter to request the beheading of John. And now Herod is in a bind.

We're told in verse 20, he feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, that he was perplexed when John spoke, but heard him gladly. And then when this request is made, we're told in verse 26 that the king was exceedingly sorry.

But because of his oath and his guests, he did not want to break his word. Herod ultimately concedes to this rash oath and to his public image before all these dignified people and has John beheaded.

[ 15 : 24 ] He, like all the bad kings of Israel who are self-serving, kills the prophets. Now he thinks that John's back from the dead out to get him, which has the makings of a great, you know, revenge-based sci-fi action movie at this point.

So why this story about John? Why is Mark putting this here? Yes, it explains reason behind Herod's identification as Jesus as John resurrected, but there's more.

First, it's a revealing foreshadowing. We haven't heard about John since chapter one, and in chapter one, he was the forerunner of Jesus's ministry. And then John goes to jail, and that's when Jesus begins his public ministry.

And now we hear about John, and it's about his death, and it's because John is the forerunner of Jesus's death. Both John and Jesus are executed by political tyrants who fear them, but finally succumb to social pressure.

Both John and Jesus die silently as victims of political intrigue and corruption, and both die as righteous and innocent victims. This passage unanimously shows us that Jesus is the suffering servant.

[ 16 : 33 ] He will experience rejection even to the point of death on the cross. But secondly, this story also lifts up the beauty of the true king. We get a picture of King Herod, a false king who avoids rejection at all costs.

He's only concerned about his own reputation and well-being, who wants to do what he wants with no accountability or submission to the moral vision of the New Testament and God's word.

He has John beheaded because he's more concerned about how he appears. He wants the praise of men. But unlike Herod, Jesus is the true king. He's pleasing God.

He's more committed to doing what is righteous than what's best for him. He takes the hard way. He takes the road of rejection because that's what's pleasing to the Father. He's more concerned with righteousness, more concerned with the will of the Father than with his own well-being.

So we get this picture of the false king versus the true king. So when we step back and we look at these three scenes as a whole, where do they intersect with our lives?

[ 17 : 42 ] First, I think these texts show us that you can outright reject Jesus. This passage speaks to skeptics, critics, and speculators. Let me say this.

I understand that you might have legitimate questions about Christ or about Christianity. You may be skeptical about its origins or its spotted history. But if your skepticism and criticism just leads to question after question after question, if you refuse to recognize Jesus before all of your questions are answered, you will never come to Christ.

Or maybe you even view Jesus positively. You speculate about who he actually was. Perhaps he was a nice teacher or a moral teacher. Perhaps he was a prophet or maybe he was a guru.

And that his transmission of his memory throughout time has been distorted. And so your speculations lead to definitions and declarations about who Jesus was.

And Jesus becomes more of a caricature of your imagination than the Lord presented in the Holy Scriptures. You think you know him and you cast him aside. Here's the thing.

[ 18 : 50 ] These sorts of responses become a posture. And this is the posture that led to his hometown stumbling. It's not a posture of inquiry or innocence. So what is underneath all your concerns and speculations?

What's the underlying issue with all your issues with Jesus? Mark is blunt, so give me permission to be blunt as well. It's the hardness of your heart. Your hardened heart will lead you to reject Jesus no matter how close he gets to you.

It'll lead you to distort who he is no matter how much you hear about his name. Your hardness of your heart blinds you to the truth about Jesus. But no matter how many answers you're giving, no matter how much you try to craft Jesus in your own image, the only way to truly know him is to respond in repentance and faith.

The only way to know him is to bow your knee and to go through the painful process of admitting that you've had it wrong all along. Now let me also say, if you consider yourself a Christian, don't consider yourself exempt from the dangers of a hardened heart.

You may have been a Christian most of your life and in your proximity to Jesus, you're confident that you've heard it all before and this gives you a false sense of security that you actually know Jesus.

[ 20 : 11 ] And maybe you've been close to him all this time but you've never actually received him. And maybe you're a little bit like King Herod. You like to entertain the kingdom of God but once it challenges your life, you'd rather keep it locked away.

It amuses you, it encourages you but heaven forbid it actually challenge you and change you. And so you find ways to question the texts or you speculate about what they actually meant in the original context and they're bound to history so they don't really apply to modern day so the Bible is just relegated to be an artifact of the past.

But when we do this, when our hearts harden like this, we're keeping Jesus from actually interacting with our lives today. So it's hardness of heart for believers, for skeptics, for speculators.

This is the issue that needs to be dealt with in the gospel. This is the issue that Jesus is deeply concerned about. And the only way to receive him is that we need a new heart and that is a work of the Holy Spirit moving within you and the way that you receive that is the way we always receive it, on our knees, repenting, turning to the Lord who offers us more than we can fathom.

And let me say this, if you reject him, if you stay in the hardness of your heart, God will shake the dust off his sandals at you.

[ 21 : 35 ] And I desire that for none of you. If we remain in the hardness of our hearts, the only thing that awaits us is judgment upon Christ's return. And I think that's why the scriptures say over and over, today, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

Secondly, maybe you look at this way of rejection, this way that leads to beheading and to crucifixion and you feel wildly underprepared for this cost of discipleship.

And how do we find courage? How do we live in a city that rejects the message of the gospel? How do we live lives within our family and our friends when people are sometimes even opposed to the gospel?

I think the way that we find that sort of courage is by looking to the one who was rejected. When we look at how Jesus embraced this path, his identity was so firmly rooted in his baptism where God declared, you are my beloved son.

No rejection could take that away from Christ. Knowing the love of God, the acceptance and praise of men was nothing. He was so rooted in his identity that he could endure anything.

[ 22 : 54 ] And although going to the cross was horrifying, it was less costly than denying his relationship with his father. Jesus could bear all rejection because he was confident in being God's beloved son.

And so for us, we have to look to the rejected, crucified Christ to find confidence in who we are. This is how we face rejection. If you're unsure of how much you're loved, if you're unsure of how much you're accepted, of how much you're worth, you must look to the cross.

This is how far God is willing to go to give you an enduring right relationship with him. The cross shows us that we are far more loved than we dare imagine because God offers us incomprehensible acceptance on the cross.

We have acceptance in God through his son beyond our wildest dreams. When we repent and believe, we are adopted as God's own children. We're lavished with his love, his grace.

There's no bounds to how much he cares for us. And so you can face rejection in this world because ultimately it says nothing about you because you're accepted in Christ, you're loved in Christ, you're his.

[ 24 : 09 ] And when that becomes our new identity, it gives us a new basic motivator. We no longer need to be motivated by our fear of being rejected. We can be motivated by the profound love that God has shown for us.

And when we're motivated by that, it changes us. The gospel is not just how we're saved, it's how we're transformed. If you're struggling in your Christian walk to find transformation and renewal, the way that it happens is by dwelling on the gospel and seeing what God has done for you and that will birth love for God in your heart and that will change you.

And so I think the way we endure pain is by looking to the rejected one who is rejected for us. He accepts us fully, he forgives us completely and he empowers us to walk this way of rejection.

And the invitation for us all is always repent and believe. So we have to humble ourselves, we have to turn to him, we have to ask for that forgiveness and that grace and that love to change us and empower us.

And I want to say this, when you've tasted how good this is, how free this is, how true this is, how it satisfies every deep longing, every crack of the soul, no matter how unprepared you are, you can't help but share this news with people.

[ 25 : 31 ] This is what we're called to do. the disciples were called to be sent. That's the truth about chapter 3 and chapter 6 side by side. And God still moves this message forward, God still moves the gospel forward through people who are inadequately prepared, who people feel like they're facing a task bigger than themselves, but who are compelled by the profound love that he has for us.

And his love marks our footsteps. Amen. Thank you. So, thank you. Thank you.

You're welcome.