

"THE CRUELEST BLOW OF ALL"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The pain of rejection is a pain that is familiar to most of us. We remember those terrible younger years when we were searching for our own identity and acceptance by our peers was so important. Whether it was the last one chosen for the ball team or standing on the sidelines watching another being crowned Homecoming Queen, most of us know how it feels to be on the outside "looking in".

There were those terrible dating years in high school and college and those tangled feelings of hope and hurt. A lady wrote to the Reader's Digest to tell about a friend of hers whose dorm sisters had a system for dealing with the problem of what to do and say when the wrong fellow calls asking for a date.

"It wasn't hard to say no in my dorm" she claimed. "I put together a list of ten excuses and taped it next to the phone. That way we could decline an invitation without fumbling around for an excuse. It worked like a charm."

Except for the time one flustered young lady was overheard saying, "I'd love to go out with you, Tom, but I can't...because...because Number Seven." I suppose this message today is for anyone who has ever been "Number Sevened".

DEVELOPMENT

Sometimes rejection comes from our own family. Remember the story of those two great lovers, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. We are told that Elizabeth's parents objected so strongly to her marriage to Browning that they disowned her. Elizabeth wrote to them regularly to tell them that she loved them. After a silence of ten years, she received in the mail a large box from her parents. Inside were all the letters she had written. None of them had ever been opened.

And sometimes rejection comes from our friends. P. T. Barnum was famous for the phrase, "A sucker is born every minute..." He learned the lesson the hard way. He invested all of his money in a wild scheme to make a "magic preparation" that would grow hair on bald heads. Good man. His partner then spent all the money, fled to Europe and left Barnum with nothing but the recipe.

Some of us face rejection every day in our work. Recently I heard about a football coach in one of our Southern football factories who was experiencing the horrors of a losing season. By the middle of October the Alumni were in a state of near mutiny. The first week in November, after a tough loss to an arch-rival, the coach received a telegram which read:

"The last train out of town leaves on
Sunday afternoon at 2....Be under it!"

As that plaintive philosopher Snoopy once said in a Peanuts cartoon, "It doesn't make any difference whether you win or lose - until you lose."

Rejection? It hurts. It shatters. Occasionally it kills. It is the cruelest blow of all and Jesus knew what it was to be rejected. Misunderstood by His own family, cast out by His own townsfolk, crucified by His own nation

and particularly by the leaders of the very religion in which He had been nurtured - He knew what it was to be on the "outside....looking in". Yet, His rejection was somehow turned around and became a matter of rejoicing.

REJECTED TO REJOICING

He quoted the words of the Psalmist found in Psalm 118, verse 22:

"The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner...."

And Peter later on would quote those words to the rulers and elders in testimony concerning the Good News of Christ. He'd mention them in one of his epistles.

There was a legend that was well-known in New Testament times that in the building of the temple of Solomon most of the stones were of the same size and shape. However, one day a stone arrived that was different from the others. The builders took one look at it and said, "This will not do" and they sent it rolling down into the Kedron valley below.

The years passed and the great temple was nearing completion and the builders sent a message to the stone cutters to send the chief cornerstone that the magnificent structure might be complete. The cutters replied that they had sent that stone years before. Then someone remembered the stone that was different from all the rest...the stone that didn't seem to belong. They realized they had thrown away this cornerstone. And so they hurried into the valley to try to retrieve it. Finally under the debris and the vines they recovered it and with great effort rolled it back up the hill and put it in place so that the great temple would be complete. The stone that had been rejected had become the chief cornerstone. Jesus, who had been rejected, now reigns at the right hand of God, the Father. From rejection to rejoicing.

WHAT WE NEED

There are times in our lives when we need to see that this same Jesus can help us when we feel rejected.

There's a touching story about how a teddy bear sat high on a shelf in a department store that majored in rapid turnover of stock. But there he sat. He was a pretty, brown teddy bear...but he had a problem. He had on a cute pair of bib overalls, but the button that held one strap over the shoulder was missing. The strap drooped by his side and the bib hung over his chest. And as he sat there he got more and more dusty. No one seemed very interested in a teddy bear like that, but then one day it happened!

A little girl walked into the store and spotted the dusty teddy bear with the drooping bib. The clerk suggested that perhaps she would rather have one that was perfect, but this little shopper was insistent. She wanted the dusty one on the shelf with the missing button.

When the clerk finally got the teddy bear down and handed him to the little girl, she threw her arms around him and said,

"I love you...but I think you will feel better if I dust you off and sew a button on you..."

That is Christ's word to all of us who find ourselves sitting on a shelf, and covered with dust, with a few buttons missing. He longs to dust us off and sew those buttons back on and help us get on with our lives.

A man wandered into a church in this city recently...looking around for the pastor for some spiritual help. The pastor sat down with him and asked him about his religious background. The man replied,

"Well....I went to Sunday School as a boy...but I can only remember one verse from the Bible. It was John 3:16... 'God so loved the world that He gave His only forgotten son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The pastor noted that the man had substituted the word "forgotten" for the word "begotten". And he asked the man "Do you know why God forgot His Son?" The man replied "No". And this alert minister said, "It was because He wanted to remember you". Christ was rejected that we might be remembered. I thought that was pretty good. And because He knows what it is to be rejected, He can help us with our feelings of hurt and despair.

How does one deal with rejection? Let me offer two thoughts.

WE DO NOT GIVE UP THE FIGHT

In the first place, we do not give up the fight. We do not drop out of the race. We do not crawl off and hide in a cave and feel sorry for ourselves. We need to remember men like St. Paul who knew what it was to be rejected and still he wrote,

"One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

It's so easy to allow rejection to defeat us. It is the cruelest blow of all. A football coach was quizzing his players. With fire in his eyes, he marched up and down in front of the bench in Pitino fashion...screaming...and stopping in front of a seldom used third string offensive tackle and posed this question:

"Suppose" said the coach, "we were involved in a tie game. One minute remained. We were three yards from the goal line and a play was called to the left side of the line. What would you do?"

The lineman thought for a moment and then said,

"Gee coach....I don't know. I reckon I would slide down the bench and try to get a better view."

Now wouldn't you be tempted to agree that here was a young man for whom rejection had meant giving up hope? We must never give up hope. Never! No matter what.

Contrast his attitude for a moment with that of Harry Truman. After Truman retired from the Presidency and went back home to Independence, he was at the Truman Library one day talking with some third graders. An owlish little boy in glasses asked, "Mr. President, were you popular when you were a boy?"

Mr. Truman looked at the boy and answered,

"Why no - I was never popular. The popular boys were the ones who were good at games and had big tight fists. I was never like that. Without my glasses, I was blind as a bat, and to tell the truth I was something of a sissy. If there was any danger of a fight, I took off. I guess that is why I am here today."

The little boy started to applaud and soon the others joined in. It hurts to be rejected - whether you are seven or seven-five or some point in between... whether it is by your peers or by your own family. It hurts, but there is a Man hanging on a tree...God's "forgotten" Son who says to us:

"I saw so much possibility within you that I gave my life for you. Don't give up. I know you are hurting, but your rejection will turn to rejoicing if you hold steady to your course and trust in Me."

LET CHRIST USE THAT REJECTION TO HELP YOU TO GROW

When we are rejected, we don't give up. Instead we allow Christ to use that rejection to help us grow in maturity and also to make us better ministers to others who also feel rejected.

You and I in our more reflective moments may question why it was that Christ had to suffer and die. Why could He have not been born in Caesar's house rather than the stable of Bethlehem and established His Kingdom by some kind of royal decree? It would have been so much easier that way and certainly less painful. Fortunately the life of Christ came not from the mind of man, but the mind and the heart of God. If He was not rejected, how could He then minister to us in our rejection? If He did not confront life's most heart-breaking difficulties and disappointments, how could He help us as we pass through the dark valleys and tunnels of our existence?

"By His wounds were we healed." Because He was wounded, He could then reach out to us.

In Galilee, a wretched leper forces his way into the presence of Christ. "Depart! Unclean!" the man says, for a leper was forbidden to come into contact with other people. The man's body is covered with rotting flesh and running sores. What does the Master do? Moved by compassion, He reaches out and touches the man's decaying body and the man is made whole. The rabbis had a saying that,

"When the Messiah comes, He will be found sitting among the lepers at the gate of the city."

That saying was fulfilled in Jesus. He is the wounded healer, and those of us who have been wounded are called to be healers as well.

In his book, Margaret Olgiviy, J. M. Barrie has a chapter entitled, "How My Mother Got Her Soft Face". Barrie is really describing his own mother. According to the story, the oldest son in the family moved far away to the big city when he came of age and never returned home. Word came that he was desperately ill so Barrie's mother hurriedly packed her bags to go be with her eldest son. Before she was able to make the trip, however, word came that he had died and that his body was being returned to the family home.

Following the funeral the mother moved about the house, her face revealing a sorrow too deep for human speech. But after some weeks, they saw her face shine with a light that was never on land or sea. She betrayed no bitterness, no harsh words, no complaints. Hers was a patience like the patience of Christ. And when some neighboring woman lost her boy or girl, or when sorrow came to a neighboring home, Mr. Barrie said, five miles away, ten miles away, twenty miles away, forty miles away...the suffering and sorrowing one said,

"Send for that woman who has the soft face. She will know what to say to us, for she has passed down the valley of suffering herself."

CLOSING He was despised and rejected for our sake. And yet, "the very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner!"

Perhaps I am not talking to you this morning. Perhaps you have never been "number sevened". Perhaps you have never sat on a shelf covered with dust with a few buttons missing. That's wonderful in a way. But it is also sad. For you have probably never known what it is to feel the ministering touch of a Man with nail prints in His hands. You have not needed that, so you have not experienced it. Perhaps some day you will. But now you are at something of a disadvantage in ministering to others. Your face has not been "softened with heartache." But that time may come...

However, there are some of you present today for whom this pain of rejection is all too real. To you I say "hang in there". Remember there is a Man on a cross who says it really does matter that you keep on going. And there are those who need you to be their wounded healer just as Christ has ministered to you. Remember that and go on from here as you deal with the cruelest blow of all...rejection.

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your presence and nearness, God, in these moments of quietness. Touch our hearts. Keep us steady. And help us always to remember the life and love of Jesus even when we are hurting. In His spirit we pray. Amen.

REJECTION

"The definition of an actor: someone who loves rejection!"

Kirk Douglas, Ragman's Son.

26. Miss Gigi Harris: 201 East 12th Street, NYC, NY 10003 Nov. 6th
27. Mr. and Mrs. Chester (Darcy) E. Naramore: 35 W. 90th Street,
New York, New York 10024 Nov. 6th
28. Miss Tammy Schlepp: 314 East 89th Street, 5C, NYC, NY 10128 Nov. 7th
29. Mr. O. L. Locke: 200 Manhattan Avenue, 5C, NYC, NY 10025 Nov. 7th
30. Mr. Kevin Wilcox: 25 Cornelia Street, New York, NY 10014 Nov. 8th
31. Miss Judy Pena: 1475 Second Avenue, 3H, NYC, NY 10021 Nov. 8th
32. Mr. Glenn Wright: 170 West 74th Street, NYC, NY 10023 #512 Nov. 9th
33. Miss Cheryl Muncie: 235 E. 95th Street, NYC, NY 10128 Nov. 9th

CULTIVATION LETTERS / NEW MEMBERS: October 11, 1989 to November 30, 1989

1. Mr. William Beeney: 317 West 89th Street, NYC, NY 10024 Oct. 11
2. Mr. Al Thomas: 242 East 77th Street, NYC, NY 10021 Oct. 12
3. Ms. Colleen Adolphus: 223 East 89th Street, NYC, NY 10128 Oct. 13
4. Miss Julie Predmore: 312 East 82nd Street, NYC, NY 10028 Oct. 16
5. Miss Azani Marceline: 35 West 70th Street, NYC, NY 10023 Oct. 17
6. Ms. Vivian Scarborough: 10 Hill Street, Newark, NJ 07102 Oct. 18
7. Mrs. Marie Allain: 1482 York Avenue, NYC, NY 10028 Oct. 19
8. Miss Cory Abernathey: 165 East 89th Street, NYC, NY 10128 Oct. 20
9. Miss Cynthia Koontz: 225 East 95th Street, LOG, NYC, NY 10128 Oct. 23
10. Dr. and Mrs. Robert Findling (Cheryl): 150 E. 85th St., NYC 10028 Oct. 24
11. Mr. Wade Giddens: 225 East 28th Street, #2, NYC, NY 10016 Oct. 25
12. Miss Eva Patton: 215 West 16th Street, 5FE, NYC, NY 10011 Oct. 26
13. Mr. Isaac Newton: 191 East 76th Street, NYC, NY 10021 Oct. 27
14. Mr. and Mrs. David Moffett: 140 West 69th Street, #118, NYC 10023 Oct. 23
15. Miss Priscilla Kotey: 303 East 83rd Street, NYC, NY 10028 Oct. 24
16. Miss Yvonne Russell: 435 East 86th Street, 4F, NYC, NY 10028 Oct. 26
17. Miss Kim Conner: 114 East 97th Street, 5F, NYC, NY 10029 Oct. 27
18. Mr. Tom Condon: 52-45 39th Avenue, Sunnyside, NY 11104 Oct. 27
19. Mr. Jay Zimmerman: 231 East 89th Street, 3 RW, NYC, NY 10128 Oct. 29
20. Mr. and Mrs. Len McKeown - Funk: 1735 York Avenue, 38 C, NYC Oct. 31
21. Mr. Mark Corpron: 423 East 90th Street, 7A, NYC, NY 10128 Nov. 1
22. Mr. Walter Schmidt: 165 E. 88th Street, #624, NYC, NY 10128 Nov. 1
23. Miss Mellanie Hannocks: 545 First Avenue, #3, NYC, NY 10016 Nov. 2
24. Mr. and Mrs. Sam Wilson (Billy): 1623 Third Ave., 32 GW, NYC 10128 Nov. 3
25. Miss Mary Kathryn Holden: 314 East 78th Street, #13, NYC, NY 10021 Nov. 3