

“Good News to the Poor,” Luke 4:14-30 (Fifth Sunday After Epiphany, February 10, 2019)

¹⁴ And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. ¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³ And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.’” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. ²⁵ But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, ²⁶ and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷ And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. ²⁹ And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. ³⁰ But passing through their midst, he went away.

PRAY

In 1963 the first ever human lung transplant was performed at University Medical Center down in Jackson. Dr. James Hardy led the team and one year later they also performed the world’s first heart transplant – they put a chimpanzee heart into a human recipient.

Some of you have friends or loved ones who have been through liver, kidney, or even heart transplants and so you know what a big deal organ transplantation is. Only in the most desperate, most dire situations do you go through this process. When you need a transplant, either you get this new, vital organ inside of you from some source other than yourself *or you will die*. Organ transplants involve a radical solution to a deadly problem.

And they are a great illustration of how the gospel of Jesus Christ works. Becoming a Christian is not like adopting a set of New Year’s resolutions or turning over a new leaf. It’s not like resolving to eat better and go to the gym three times a week. Nor does it mean that you say to yourself, “Ok, I’m going to do better. I’m going to start going to church. I’m going to start reading my Bible. I’m going to start being nice to my roommates and my family.”

Becoming a Christian is so much more radical than that. It means that a power from outside of you must now take up residence inside you. Christianity involves transplantation, not of a new, vital organ but of a new kind of life in your soul, *and if you don't get this power in your life you will die.*

But the great danger of all kinds of transplant is that of rejection. In an organ transplant, your body's immune system will to some degree or another always fight to reject the new organ, so for the rest of your life you have to take immunosuppressants to keep rejection from happening.

Likewise, when gospel power comes into your life, your sinful, natural self (the apostle Paul calls this "the sinful nature" or "the old man") will fight to reject it. We see a picture of rejection in Mark 4. There Jesus compares the good news, the gospel, the power of new life, to a seed, and compares the human heart to various kinds of soils. But the seed doesn't sprout and grow in every soil; it grows only in the good soil, but for a variety of reasons in most of the soils the life of the seed is rejected.

In our text for today, Luke is preaching his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus has become a minor celebrity in the region, so at first everyone in town is excited that the town's favorite son has returned from the preaching circuit to teach in his hometown.

But their excitement quickly turns into rejection of the good news Jesus brings. That's the subject of the sermon this morning – what it looks like when Jesus is rejected. I want us to look at this subject under two headings: *the signs of gospel rejection.* When these symptoms are present in your life, watch out – you're in danger of rejecting the gospel. *Second, the cure for gospel rejection.*

First, the signs of gospel rejection. It's the Sabbath day, and Jesus is in the synagogue. As the honored guest, the synagogue leader asked Jesus to teach that day. Jesus reads from Isaiah 61, and then we read this: "And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" Luke 4:20-21.

Everyone listening would have known what Jesus meant by that statement. Jesus is saying he is the Messiah. He's saying is the one anointed by God to liberate the people of Israel from their bondage and their oppression. Jesus is saying all the power of God to deliver and redeem is bound up in him.

And the people in the synagogue hear Jesus preach and *they don't like it.* **Immediately they reject his claim.** Verse 22 is, frankly, a difficult verse to translate, and the ESV rendering doesn't get the sense of it across very well. In the ESV the first half of it says, "And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth." Luke 4:22a. It reads as if the people of Nazareth at first accept to Jesus's claim to be the Messiah.

But clearly that's not what's going on. Literally the Greek does not say, "All spoke well of him." It reads, "They testified about him." Then the last half of the verse reads, "And they said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'" Luke 4:22b. In other words, the people of Nazareth are saying,

“Jesus can’t be the Messiah. He grew up here. *We can testify* as to how ordinary this guy is. His teaching is impressive, we grant that. But if he was the anointed one of God he wouldn’t have to tell us – it would have been obvious to us for years and years.” In Matthew’s account of this event the people’s rejection of Jesus is made clear. He records them as saying, “‘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?’⁵⁶ And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?’⁵⁷ And they took offense at him.” Matthew 13:55-57a.

Now why did the people of Nazareth reject Jesus so quickly? We see three reasons. **The first sign of gospel rejection is when you start to doubt Jesus because you find you’re just not that impressed.** Jesus and his family were a known quantity in Nazareth. There was nothing outstanding or remarkable about them. “[H]e had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” Isaiah 53:2b.

So the people of Nazareth took offense at him. They said, “The carpenter’s son is the Messiah? Yeah right! There is no way he can be the Messiah.”

It’s tempting to reject Christianity not because you’ve examined the evidence for the faith or really studied the Bible, but only because you know some person or some group of people who claim to be Christians who, to you, are totally unimpressive. You say to yourself, “If those idiots are Christians then there’s no way I could ever be one.”

C.S. Lewis in one of his books says the reason so many people new to the faith are tempted to walk away from Christianity is because they go to church for the first time and see a bunch of people they don’t want to associate with: people who sing out of tune, who aren’t attractive, who have bad breath and double chins, whose clothes and hair are all out of style. And they think, “Do I really want to be around these people all the time? Maybe Christianity isn’t true.”

But that is a ridiculous basis on which to evaluate Christianity, if for no other reason than that we don’t do that in any other area of life. Say you grew up in an Ole Miss family and you pulled for the Rebels your whole life but you were born and raised in Alaska, so you never had a chance to attend a game and actually see the Rebels play in person until the first Saturday in the fall of your freshman year of college. So you walk in Vaught Hemingway and you see some impressive, attractive people, but then you notice over here some other Rebel fans you’ve never seen before. These fans somehow never made it on camera when you watched the Rebels on TV growing up, so you didn’t know they existed. These fans aren’t all that attractive, they don’t look sharp or bright. They don’t look like they have a lot of money. Some of them have bad haircuts. And to top it all off these fans don’t have the latest, best Ole Miss athletic gear on (you even see some wearing Shea Patterson and Jeremiah Masoli jerseys).

Would it make any sense to walk out of Vaught Hemingway at that point and say, “Well, forget this! I’m going to transfer to Arkansas.” Of course not. You don’t do that with your favorite team, nor do you do that with politics (I’m sure if you are die-hard Republican you’ve know some other Republicans you are embarrassed by). You don’t do that with your profession – if you’re in sales, I’m sure you know some salesmen you don’t like. You don’t do it with education – just because you know someone with a Ph.D who is a jerk doesn’t mean you refuse

to go to college. You wouldn't do it in any other area of life, but it's a real temptation with your faith.

The second sign of gospel rejection is when you begin to demand proof of Jesus. “And he said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “ ‘Physician, heal yourself.” What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.’ ” Luke 4:23. In other words, the people are saying, “We've heard that you can work miracles, and that you've done it in other places. So, Jesus, put on a little show for us in Nazareth, and if you do maybe then we will believe in you.”

This is actually a common sign of gospel rejection. Bertrand Russell was one of the most prominent atheist philosophers of the middle part of the twentieth century – he was sort of the Richard Dawkins of his day. He was once asked what he would say if he found himself standing before God on judgment day and God asked him, “Bertrand, why didn't you believe in me?” And Russell said he would reply, “Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!” And I've heard that, too, from many different people who don't believe. They've said, “J.D., Jesus lived two thousand years ago in an obscure part of the world, and he expects me to believe in him now? If he really wanted me to believe in him, why doesn't he appear in the sky over the Empire State Building or over the White House and get himself on CNN and Fox News so his triumph and glory could be broadcast worldwide? Then I would believe. Until then, I say there's no enough proof of the claims of Jesus.”

There are two responses to that: *first, we really need to get out of our heads this notion that we have a right to demand proof of Jesus.* We are in no position to make demands on him that he prove himself to us. If there is a God and he is our Creator, then we are his creatures and *he owes us nothing.* In his Word, the Scriptures, he demands our allegiance. **End of discussion.** As a parent with young children, it is incredibly frustrating when you tell your kids to do something and the first word out of their mouths is “why.” “Why should I do this? Why can't I do something else?” As a parent, your reply is, “It doesn't matter why I want you to do it. You obey me because I am your dad. I am the authority in your life.” If that's true in the family how much more is it between human beings and the Lord Jesus Christ?

But second, even if Jesus did show up today and perform some miracle in front of us, just seeing Jesus in his glory does not make you a Christian. Jesus performed plenty of miracles in the gospels. John goes so far to say at one point: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book ...” John 20:31. So many in fact that if all the books in the world couldn't contain a record of them. Virtually everyone who lived in Israel two thousand years ago knew of or personally witnessed one of his miracles. Yet at the end Jesus died alone on the cross. In the end almost no one believed. Faith in Christ is not ultimately a matter of proof.

The third sign of gospel rejection is when you are offended because of what Jesus says.

Jesus talks about Elijah and the widow of Zarephath and Elisha and Naaman in verses 25-27. We'll circle back and talk about those verses more in a minute. Suffice it to say at this point the people of Nazareth were highly offended and their hearts were hardened against Jesus because of what he had to say. “When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.

²⁹ And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff.” Luke 4:28-29.

You’re in danger of full-blown gospel rejection when you encounter the teachings of Jesus and you say, “I don’t like this because Jesus teaches one thing about this certain sphere of life and I believe another. Jesus teaches this about hell, or about human sexuality, or money, or he teaches this that challenges my political views, so I can’t follow him.”

Instead of listening to Jesus, *we reject him just because we don’t like what he has to say*. One of my favorite examples of this can be found in a letter written to the Countess of Huntingdon. She lived in eighteenth century England and she was converted to Christianity during the Great Awakening under the preaching of George Whitefield. After she became a Christian, she gave a lot of money away to try to spread the gospel, and she would often invite other members of the nobility to come and hear the Methodists like Whitefield and the Wesley brothers preach.

One time the Countess invited the Duchess of Buckingham, who was a daughter of King James II of England, to hear one of the Wesley brothers preach. But the Duchess declined and wrote her this: “I thank your Ladyship for the information concerning the Methodist preachers; [but] their doctrines are most repulsive, and strongly [flavored] with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors ... It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your Ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.”

These are the signs of gospel rejection. Now, the truth is that to some degree these signs will always be present in your life. But rejection begins to happen when you allow those understandable responses to Jesus undermine your faith in him. Rejection is happening when you find you don’t trust Jesus because of these responses.

These signs of rejection can occur in one of two ways. They can show up immediately upon hearing the gospel. That’s an acute rejection of the gospel. An acute rejection of a transplanted organ means the body immediately attacks the new organ before the patient even has a chance to heal from the surgery. The organ never has a chance to do its work. The people of Nazareth illustrate acute rejection.

But transplant rejection can also be chronic. Things can look good at first, but slowly, over months and even years, the body rejects the new organ cell-by-cell until it is destroyed. Likewise, a person can encounter Jesus Christ, find him attractive and compelling at first, he can begin to take a more and more prominent role in her life, but then slowly these signs begin to appear in her life, and left untended long enough she comes to a settled conclusion that Jesus can’t be for her, and the gospel rejection is complete. A tragic example of chronic rejection is Judas. Judas believed Jesus, he followed him for years, he taught in Jesus’ name and performed miracles in his name. But at the end, Judas completely rejected Jesus.

The question then is: what can be done about it? How can we make sure gospel rejection doesn’t happen in our lives? Second, the cure for gospel rejection.

Let's look at Luke 4:18. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61 and says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." Luke 4:18.

Jesus says, "My good news is only for the poor." But what kind of poverty is he talking about? Is he talking about money or something else?

He makes it clear Luke 4:25-27: "But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, ²⁶ and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷ And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

The first thing we must notice is that only one of those two is someone without money. The widow is materially poor, but Naaman was the prime minister of Syria. He was wealthy.

Therefore, you do not have to be physically poor to receive the good news of Jesus, ***but you do have to be poor in spirit.*** You have to be at the end of your rope. You have to be desperate and admit that your life has become unmanageable. But above all else you must realize ***you have nothing left to lose.***

Being physically poor can help with that. The poor are accustomed to feeling desperate, so frankly they are ready to hear from God in a way the middle class are not. It helped the widow of Zarephath. You can read about her in 1 Kings 17. Elijah the prophet came to her and said, "Cook me a meal." She replied, "I only have enough flour to cook one small, last meal for me and my son. Then we are going to eat it and get ready to die." But Elijah said, "Cook me a meal first, and then God himself will fill your barrel full of flour until the famine is over."

The widow did not say, "Elijah, how about you prove yourself first by giving me the flour, and then I'll cook you all the cakes you want!" Instead she said, "What do I have to lose? I'm going to die anyway. If this prophet is wrong I'll just die a few days earlier than I otherwise would." So she trusted God's Word and was saved.

Naaman was the second most powerful man in the most powerful nation on earth at the time. Yet he was also spiritually poor. How? He had leprosy. His life, as privileged as it was, was to him no longer worth living because of his disease. And so in 2 Kings 5 when Elisha said, "Go, wash in the Jordan River seven times and you'll be cleansed," Naaman said, "I've been all over the world trying to be healed, and nothing has helped. The Jordan River is the most pathetic river I've ever seen. The rivers in Syria are so much more impressive. But what do I have to lose?" And because he was desperate and at the end of his rope, he trusted God's Word and was saved.

The only safeguard against gospel rejection is to see how spiritually poor you really are. Do you admit that you don't have enough wisdom to navigate this life? Do you admit you aren't able to live up to even your own standards? Do you admit that you judge others and are harsher with them than you are with yourself? Do you admit that hypocrisy? Do you admit that your life is a

mess and, in the grand scheme of things, you are so out of control in your life, ***you really do have nothing to lose?***

It's hard to admit that, it's humiliating to admit that, but it's good to do so because then Jesus is good news. He comes into your life and says, "You don't measure up and you're out of control and you deserve to be punished by God. ***But it's all going to be fine.*** Because I am the Messiah, I am the Savior. I lived the life you should have lived and on the cross I died to take all the punishment you deserve for your sins. And if you just come to me with your poverty and nothing else, I'll love you, provide for you, and protect you forever."

My favorite passage illustrating this comes from John 6. Jesus had just given his followers a very hard teaching. We then read that after this many of his disciples walked away and refused to follow him anymore. Then Jesus turned to his closest disciples and said, "Do you want to leave too? Because now would be the time." And Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life ... " John 6:68. He's saying, "We don't like what you're saying any more than they do, but we have nothing left to lose. We know you're our only hope."

Friends, your biggest problem is not what has been done to you or how you've been hurt. Your biggest problem is not that you haven't had the same chances other people have had, or that you don't have the money or the looks or the recognition someone else has. Your biggest problem isn't your parents, or your spouse, or your lack of friends, or your children. Your biggest problem isn't your job. *Your biggest problem is your sin.*

Spiritual poverty is a wonderful gift because it opens your eyes to see that truth. Someone who's spiritually poor has learned to say, "I just don't trust myself anymore, I don't trust my judgment. I've been wrong so many times. I just want to trust the Lord. I just want to hear him speak to me through his Word and obey. Sure it's hard and yes Jesus says some hard things, but compared with me trying to run my life, his yoke is easy and his burden is light."

Being spiritually poor means it doesn't matter if anyone else follows Jesus, I will. It means I won't make any demands on Jesus for proof, because where else am I going to go? Only Jesus has the words of eternal life.

The poor in spirit are looking for good news! And that's a healthy place to be. Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." We said earlier that the gospel is like a seed that goes into soil, but the seed can only release the life contained within it if it's dropped in a soil that's ready to receive it. What kind of soil is that? ***Only soil that has seen the plow. Only soil that has been broken open can receive the power of the seed.***

It is a great mercy when God lovingly applies the plow of his love to our hearts (no matter how bad it hurts) so that they are broken open and we can receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. Then its power can explode in our lives, and we will never, ever reject it, but instead glory in it forever. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." AMEN

