

Series: **CHRISTMAS CLASSICS—December 9, 2007**

THE RED NOSE SYNDROME
Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25

I. INTRO

- A. How many of you can remember the first time you heard of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer? Well, he actually wasn't created until 1939. Robert May, an employee of Montgomery Ward's department store chain, was paid to write a Christmas promotional gimmick.
- May settled on the story of an under-dog reindeer—kind of his own story, actually. Like some of you, he was teased and bullied as a kid because he was small, skinny and shy. So, he wrote his story of Rudolph—a reindeer with a red nose!
 - That year Montgomery Wards sold 2.4 million copies of the story of Rudolph. In 1949, when cowboy singer, Gene Autry, recorded the song, it became second in sales only to the song, ***I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas***.
1. You know the story of ***Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer***, don't you? It's a story about acceptance. It's about this little fawn born with this weird looking nose. And Rudolph gets permanently identified by the only thing that made him different from the other reindeer. His nose. What happens to poor Rudolph next could be a scene from any school playground.
 2. Well, thank goodness one day Rudolph's weird nose turns out to be useful for Santa and the children of the world. There was this ***really foggy night***--and in a utilitarian sort of way Santa asks this poor misfit reindeer to be a kind of fog-light for his sleigh.
 - From then on, Rudolph was psychologically well-adjusted and self-actualized--because, see, ***now*** these same fickle reindeer who had once made him miserable--***loved*** him. "Rudolph! You have a purpose in life after all. Here ***we*** thought you were just some weird freak of a reindeer--but you ***do*** really work well as a kind of living, breathing fog light to make travel safer in snowstorms!"
 - The name ***Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*** stuck, however. But that's okay. Because it says in the Bible somewhere, ***sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me***. It ***is*** in the Bible, isn't it? Sorry. Not there.
- B. Acceptance is something every kid wants. Every school teacher knows that the "cool" fight to keep it; the unaccepted fight to find it. But, that's just kids, right? We outgrow that over time!
1. Truth is, ***everyone*** wants to be accepted--to belong, or at least be noticed. To be unaccepted is one of the worst feelings in the world--a little like standing outside watching someone else's party through the front window.
 2. I don't know if you realize it or not, but the beautiful story of the Nativity--the birth and life of Christ--is enveloped in ***non-acceptance***. I think you'll be able to relate.

II. NATIVITIES, RED NOSES, AND ACCEPTANCE

- A. I would like you to imagine yourself, this morning, as a *normal* person. I know that's hard, but do it just this once. One day, in the middle of your normal routine, an angel stops by and tells you that you'll no longer be just a normal person. You will be a one-of-a-kind person--famous, in fact. One day after you're gone, yours will be a household name.

-That's the **good** news. The **bad** news is that what sets you apart will not **look** like fame. Not for a long time. In fact, at first, it will bring *intense* non-acceptance--from some of those you love most. What would **you** say to that kind of deal?

1. That's pretty much what happened to Mary the day Gabriel showed up. The wording here in the original languages makes it clear that Mary was *thoroughly* upset by Gabriel's greeting. Gabriel's response was,

“Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!” (Luke 1:30-33 NLT)

-Mary's question reveals her heart.

“But how can this happen? I am a virgin.” (Luke 1:34 NLT)

The angel says that all this will happen through the power of God. No man will be involved.

-**Big** problem. You can't hide pregnancy. Not in a small town.

God would use Mary to change history. What would happen to here would be a one of a kind event on this planet—and one of *the* most honored women in history. And the *very* miracle that made her so amazing—would initially bring her shame. It would be her *red nose*, in the words of this story.

- a. Who would ever believe, in seeing a poor teenage girl pregnant out of wedlock, that God had chosen her because of her purity and character to do an astounding miracle? That she had selflessly laid aside all her plans to be used by God?

-That's not how it works, is it? When suspicious looking things happen to good people, the *immediate* thought is, "Ha! That's what I thought! Boy, was *she* ever a good actress--pretending to be such a goodie two shoes! But *we* knew all along it was too good to be true.

- b. Even her fiancé, Joseph, didn't initially believe her. Listen to this:

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the

power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. (Matthew 1:18-19 NLT)

-God could not have chosen a more humiliating way to bring His Son to this planet. Interesting—you never read anything about Jesus' grandparents.

I wonder what **they** thought? This, friends, was a **COLOSSAL red nose**.

2. Another issue. Anyone here ever lived in a small town? How many secrets **stay** secrets? Not many. People in small towns don't need newspapers. **Everybody** knows what's going on. And when someone has violated the village code, they might as well move away, because no one will **ever** forget. Ever.
 - a. I think I understand why Mary would travel 75 miles through tough terrain—9 months pregnant to get registered for taxes with Joseph, don't you?
 - b. Something else. It's clear in Matthew's account that Mary and Joseph and Jesus were apparently settled into a house in Bethlehem—that's where the Magi found them. Why? Why not go home to show off the baby? I think it was **red nose**; I think they had been ostracized from the Nazareth "reindeer games."

-If Mary was a normal girl and a normal Mom—which she was, I'll bet there were times when she cried herself to sleep, thinking, "Why couldn't I have just had a **normal** life? That's all I ever really wanted."

3. You don't have to dig too far to find out that Jesus was not accepted either-- even though he was the Son of God. Simply being from Nazareth was enough to get him off on the wrong start. Nazareth was considered red-neck country—

where people listened to country music and ate possum stew, dipped snuff and chased women. Apparently people from that area even had a strange accent--a little like being from the deep South.

-Lately I've been reading and re-reading Isaiah 53, a powerful prophecy about Jesus' suffering. Listen to these words.

There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down! (Isaiah 53:2-4 NLT)

-The words **despised** and **rejected** are red nose words. Even Jesus brothers didn't accept him. That was the story of Jesus' life. Read the record. This One who split history in half and offered eternity to the inhabitants of the world was called a liar, a glutton, a drunkard, demon-possessed, and crazy. He actually **died** as a criminal—with people laughing at him; spitting on him.

-The biography that John, Jesus' disciple wrote about his life says, **He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. (John 1:10-11 NLT)**

- B. This morning, I really don't think I can over-emphasize how powerful acceptance is in life. And I don't think I can over-emphasize how **devastating** it is when we are not accepted.

Most of you remember the carnage a few years ago at Columbine that sparked shootings in a number of other schools; and then, most recently, on the campus of Virginia Tech. Most of it is related to the festering rage in the hearts of kids who were rejected; excluded from the "reindeer games." The question is, "why?"

1. I think the answer is pretty obvious, don't you? It's the **red nose**--something that makes someone **different than you**--and that's the key. Different than **you**. They're clutzy at sports, or a little overweight, or don't have cool clothes—or their social radar isn't working.

-Years ago when I lived in the mountains of Pennsylvania, I saw a **profound** parable of the **red-nose syndrome** acted out in a pen of wild turkeys. I noticed that one of these young turkeys was bleeding and missing tail feathers. I asked my friend what the deal was. He said, "Look at it's foot." It had a deformed foot. He then went on to say, "Because it has a deformed foot, the other turkeys will eventually peck at it until it dies!"

-Withdrawing acceptance—rejection--is a form of control--and it shows up in some pretty unusual places. When we lived close to Amish country, I was amazed at how those people, particularly the women, had **tough** lives. Know what keeps them in it? **Shunning**. The ultimate form of non-acceptance. Mess with the system, and they'll throw you outside the community into a world about which you are clueless!

-The single most **devastating** form of non-acceptance is the kind that sometimes happens in families. "There's something wrong with you; we never wanted you in the first place; why can't you just be normal; why are you such a slob; you'll never make it." Kids hearts get systematically dismantled with this kind of stuff!

-In our world, even if you carefully treasure and build a child's soul, you eventually have to launch them into a school system filled with carnivores—bullies; predators who thrive on dismantling the personalities and hearts of those who are smaller, weaker, and more vulnerable. Remember the turkeys? When that kind of stuff happens, kids **bleed** from the soul.

2. Truth is, though, everyone has a **red nose**. Something about ourselves that we don't like--that affects how we feel about ourselves. Something that makes us afraid that if others knew, we might get laughed out of the reindeer games like Rudolph.

3. If we don't sit down and figure it out--this desperate longing to be included and accepted follows us through life. People will go to extraordinary lengths to be accepted; buy clothes, accessories and cars they can't afford, tell lies, name drop, power up on others, try to be funny--or appear smart and sophisticated. Some people work hard to make it clear why **they** are more acceptable than others--you know, by criticizing, judging and gossiping about the competition.

-It is **so easy**, friends, to forget that **reindeer games**--are just that. Little kid games. And you can **burn down your whole life** playing these games. The need for acceptance can become this black hole in your life that **cannot be filled**--no matter how much you accomplish, no matter how much you are loved.

III. DON'T LET YOUR NOSE WRITE YOUR BIOGRAPHY

- A. The bottom line is that we need to see **God's** perspective on "red noses." If Jesus, God the Son had come and been wildly accepted by everyone, it would be a little hard to relate to Him. But He wasn't.

1. The most profound thing about Jesus is what He **didn't** do. He didn't try to be accepted. Even though acceptance of Him meant life for those who would—he never chased after people; never compromised; never hid his feelings...or frustration. And he spent his entire life reaching out in love to everyone--**especially** those who were the unaccepted. Those no one else would touch or talk to. Lepers. Street people. Prostitutes. Even scoundrels.

- a. I want to tell you what that means. He focused on **loving** rather than **being loved; accepting** rather than **being accepted**. Our world system has that flipped. Most people are trying **really** hard to be loved. To impress or intimidate others into accepting them.
- b. Let me ask you a question: Is that what you **really** want? You want other people to be **impressed** into accepting you? Because that's a pretty heavy burden to carry through life--always having to be beautiful enough, athletic enough, rich enough, smart enough, or cool enough to get your "fix" of love and acceptance. I don't think you want to live like that. It's not worth it.
- c. Want to know how God feels about this stuff--cause He doesn't leave us guessing. There are clues all through the Bible--but the place where God just tells us **precisely** how he feels is when he called Samuel to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the next king. Samuel shows up at Jesse's sheep ranch--and the first of the sons to arrive is the oldest.
-He climbs out of his red Jeep Cherokee--tall, good-looking, intelligent--with a kind of..."air" about him. This guy would **never** get left out of the reindeer games! Samuel's about to tip the anointing oil and say, "You de man!" But God whispered in his ear, "He **not** 'de man."

-And God gives **His** perspective. Listen.

“Don’t judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7 NLT)

David, the runt of the litter was "de man"--the man after God's own heart. Interesting, isn't it, that Gabriel told Mary that God would give **David's** throne to her baby!

2. Now, let me just get to the heart of the issue. You and I need to somehow get beyond our 'red nose.' The thing in our life that at times makes us feel unloved and unaccepted. I know it's really easy to stand up here and say that--but it's different when it comes to living it out. Feelings of rejection and non-acceptance create baggage. Pain. We become sensitive, reactive, and sometimes unteachable.
 - The biggest problem with self-pity and self-loathing is that Jesus has asked us to love others like we love ourselves. What does that mean if you can't **stand** yourself? Well, the command that comes first is for us to love God completely. I think that comes first—because there is **no one** in this world who opens His arms wider than God.
 - a. Lori and I used to regularly watch the **Antiques Roadshow**. Anyone here ever seen it? I'm always amazed by what people bring in--and what it's worth! Someone brought in this one thing they thought was an old boot scraper. It turned out to be an ancient Eskimo harpoon rest--and was worth tens of thousands of dollars. I thought, "I'd never pay that for it!" But as you know, the value of anything is determined by what someone is willing to pay for it.
 - b. God has already placed **His** worth on your life. He gave His Son for you. He's watched millions of things get bought and sold on this planet--and if there's **anyone** in this universe brilliant enough to know the worth of something, **He** does. So, **who are you going to believe when it comes to your worth?** When you believe that you can't do anything to make him love you more--or to make Him love you less--then red noses don't really matter.

3. I want to ask you to do something for yourself, okay? Figure out the **red nose** thing. Look back over your history and if you've felt non-acceptance, ask the question: "Does this have to do with **who I am**, or **something I'm doing?**" If non-acceptance is related to things you have no control over like appearance or physique or money or talent or race--it's not **your** problem, it's **their** problem. So, like Jesus, surround yourself with safe people who will love you--warts and all.
 - But if, like Mary, rejection is related to your **mission** in life, don't let go of it because of what **others** think!
 - Now, let's talk about the **other** side to this—because there is one! Sometimes, quite frankly, we **do** stuff that drives friends away. There is such a thing as

relational wisdom, relational intelligence--and the Bible is **full** of help on this for people who will be teachable.

-If you're spraying friend repellent all over yourself, don't wallow in self-pity and sing, "Nobody likes me, everybody hates me—I'm going to eat some worms!" Pick up the clue phone—it may be for you! Don't be rude. Listen more than you talk. Be gentle. If someone hates you or is rude with you, give love back. Be gentle, tender, generous, good, kind. Make it your goal to live at peace with as many people as possible. By the way, that advice comes from the Bible—and it's brilliant advice! So **take** it!

- B. This morning, I just need to make a few comments about acceptance that I think are **profoundly** important.
1. First, don't make the acceptance of others the rudder that steers what you do and where you go and what you buy. If you try to customize your God-given distinctiveness just to be accepted by a crowd that is fickle--for 15 minutes of fame--you're crazy. And you could miss your mission in life trying to please un-please-able people. Don't make the trade—you'll get cheated!
 2. If you're a parent--or maybe in a context where you are working with children either professionally or as a volunteer, let me talk to you. Have you watched what goes on these days on your street? It's brutal. It's the world of **un-grace. The survival of the fittest.** Kids think **absolutely nothing** about shredding up another kid's heart—even if it only makes them king of the mountain for 10 minutes. Many parents these days are training their kids to win the reindeer games—and love and acceptance aren't even in their vocabulary.
 - a. Know what's going on in your child's world. **Watch.** Don't let their soul get crushed. And take the time to teach—and **re-teach** them relational intelligence. Teach them--model for them--how to love and accept others. How to forgive when they do get hammered.
 - b. There's another side. You may have a child that is an expert at the reindeer games. They're the shining star in acceptance. This can be a real ego-booster as a parent—"that's **my** boy!"--but it can be deadly for your child if they don't understand that God is not impressed at all by outward appearances. God never declares people "cool" or "uncool." Don't judge your parenting by how cool and accepted your child is--but by how well they are able to love and accept those who never get included.

-You'll have to be **exceptionally** careful to teach them how to have BIG souls; how to love and accept and include, because if you don't, it will warp their hearts and ultimately handicap them spiritually.

-I read a great story on this several weeks ago. Rick Lavoy, an educator in Greenwich, Connecticut writes, "Greenwich is a wonderful town populated by many of the movers and shakers in our society. There is a sense of comparison that often pervades this town and this sense of community is often sacrificed at the altar of competition. One day I was eating at a pizza parlor with my 5 year old son. As we sat there, I couldn't help overhearing the conversation among three teenage boys in the booth behind us

-They were dressed in tennis clothes and had just returned from a morning at their exclusive tennis club. Two of the boys were discussing the faults and flaws of another boy, not in attendance. They criticized his style, his play, his appearance and every aspect of his personality. The boy obviously suffered tremendous social isolation and rejection. They laughed as they recited stories about his failures.

-At this point, one of the boys turned to the third boy who had been silent during the discussion and said, "None of us every wants to play with Mike. He's such a loser. Nobody likes Mike. Nobody will play with Mike. Why do you play with him?" The third boy responded quietly, "**That's** why I play with him."

-Rick writes, "I looked over my shoulder at the courageous young man. I looked at my own son. My fondest hope at that moment was that my son would develop the strength of character and courage that that boy possessed. I hoped that young man's father knows how proud he should be of his son."

3. I believe, too, that there's a Heavenly Father who is **so proud of HIS children** when they have the courage and character to be **accepting** people. In the light of what Jesus taught, how could those of us who want to follow Him be anything **less?** But sometimes we are. A lot less. Sometimes Christ-followers are **very** non-accepting.

-Truth is, sometimes we're Bible snobs—we'll reject people who differ from us in minute detail. We can get quite weird over style of clothing in church—what people have pierced or don't have pierced. How many of you think this kind of stuff sounds like something Jesus would endorse? Like, He would see it and say, "Wow! I'm **so** proud of you! Keep up the good work!" Actually, I think it would break his heart.

-Ever thought about **why** we would put someone outside the **acceptable** circle--and ourselves on the inside? Is it because we're afraid that if we **accept** them before they change, it might crystallize them in their mutated state and they would never have a chance to be normal--like me?

-I think we do this kind of stuff when we have cold, shriveled little souls. When people do this stuff, it proves they have never really thought about what it means for a perfect God to accept and include in **His** circle the likes of **us!**

-I don't think non-acceptance is usually conscious. At least, it usually isn't for me when I don't accept people. And I'm appalled at how often I do that. As I think about that, I wonder how many people down through the years I've left on the outside of my world?

-Well, if you and I are going to get serious about loving our neighbor like ourselves--as Jesus commanded us to--**accepting one another** is a part of that. The question is, can I **grow** enough? Can I be **big** enough, can I be enough like Jesus—who accepted me--to do that?

IV. WHAT I WILL BE

- A. Some of you this morning may have no idea just **how** accepted you are. The Christmas story is a story of how the ultimately acceptable One came in a quite unacceptable way. He lived his life with arms spread open wide. He died with his

arms nailed open wide--as if to embrace the world. And being welcomed freely into those arms, accepted, and embraced has transformed my life. Totally.

-And there's this **amazing** thing. He asks that we make a choice to either receive Him for who He is—into the core of our lives. Or **not**. Ever since Jesus came, the question for every human is...what will you do with Jesus? Your answer?

- B. The **other** question is, will we offer others that same amazing gift--of **acceptance**. Right now, in **your** world is someone whose life you could **totally** change—just by accepting them. Who is it? Some of you may have a child who is waiting—**longing** for your acceptance. This Christmas, you will have people, relatives, a daughter-in-law, a son-in-law, an aunt--someone for whom your acceptance may be the best gift you ever give them. Some of you have siblings who **desperately** need you to just accept them. Some of you, right now, know someone who feels left out. You could walk toward them. You could accept them. That's all you have to do. Who is it this morning that **YOU JUST NEED TO ACCEPT** in Jesus' name? Will you change, through the power of Jesus, to just **live** with open arms?