

The Cost of Doing God's Will

Matthew 14:1-12

A couple of weeks ago I finished a book by Gary Thomas called, *Holy Available*. It's a book about spiritual formation; about being transformed into the character of Christ. In a chapter entitled, "What if it's Not Easy?" Thomas tells about his attempts to qualify for the Boston Marathon. He had told a friend that he was thinking about running the marathon in Duluth, Minnesota. When the friend heard that he said, "Duluth? I thought you were going to run in San Diego. Why in the world would you want to fly out to *Duluth*?"

In response he said:

"I'll tell you why. I've run three marathons in Washington State, including two in Seattle, which happens to have a monster of a hill about twenty miles into the race. San Diego throws a big hill at you about five miles in. Overall, Duluth goes *downhill*. I think I'd like that."

And then he says:

Call me a wimp, but I was just on the cusp of qualifying for Boston - and always while running very hilly . . . races. I thought if I could run an easier one, I could eventually end up on the starting line of every marathoner's holy grail - the famous Boston Marathon. Of course, I'd rather spend time in San Diego, and one of my closest friends lives there. But in this case, none of that could compare with a course that goes downhill.

It's human nature to seek the easiest course, in our faith as well as in our athletic endeavors. (*Holy Available*, 200).

My question for you today, is what kind of race do you expect the Christian life to be? Is it Seattle or Duluth? Is it a rugged hilly course or is it one that goes downhill? What do you expect? Is the Christian life to which you've been called easy or hard?

It's an important question; a question that I believe is answered by John the Baptist's life and by the Scriptures as a whole. This Advent season we have been doing a study on the life of John the Baptist because his birth and life were so intertwined with Jesus' birth and life. Today, as we look at the end of John's life we are going to see that there is a cost to doing God's will. We are going to be looking at Matthew 14:1-12.

I. The Cost of Doing God's Will is illustrated in John the Baptist's death

¹ At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, ² and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead; and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

This Herod is Herod Antipas; son of Herod the Great. He is called a *tetrarch*, which literally means "ruler of a quarter." He ruled over Galilee and Perea, which was a small part of his father's kingdom. By this time, he had been ruling for more than 30 years.

We are told that Herod *heard the news about Jesus*. Jesus is performing miracles and doing amazing things and eventually the news comes to Herod. When he hears about the things that Jesus is doing his conclusion is that John *has risen from the dead*. There was a commonly held belief that servants of God, (e.g. prophets), could return to earth after their death and that's Herod's explanation for the miracles that Jesus is doing. It's John come back from the dead.

Now, if you're reading through Matthew, the last you would have heard about John was that he had been imprisoned by Herod (Matt. 11:2). But now, Herod is talking about him rising from the dead. What happened?

As we come to verse 3, Matthew does a flash back to explain how John died.

³ For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. ⁴ For John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."

Herod had John arrested on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. Philip was Herod's half brother. Herod the Great was the father to both of them. And so in taking his sister-in-law, Herodias, to be his wife, Herod was in an immoral relationship. The Old Testament prohibited such a marriage. Leviticus 20:21 says:

If there is a man who takes his brother's wife, it is abhorrent.

And so John, faithful to his calling proclaimed the truth to Herod. He didn't back down from speaking the truth just because Herod had the power to do him harm. Rather, he boldly said, *it is not lawful for you to have her*. When it says, *John had been saying*, the verb tense suggests that John had not just said this once, but he repeatedly did so.

What was John's assignment? What was God's will for him to fulfill? It was to prepare the way for the Lord's coming (Luke 1:17). He was called to lead the people to repent of their sin and to turn back to God (Luke 1:16-17; 3:3). And when you read the accounts of John's life that's what he did. In Luke 3 we read about some of the truth he proclaimed to the people. To the multitudes he told them to share food and clothing (Luke 3:11). To the tax-gatherers he told them to collect no more than what their orders required (Luke 3:13). To the soldiers he told them to not take money by force or falsely accuse anyone (Luke 3:14). And to Herod, he told him that what he was doing in taking Herodias as his wife was not right.

John was faithful to his calling. He followed God's will. He didn't back down from proclaiming truth to anybody even if that person was Herod.

Needless to say, this didn't exactly make Herod happy. Verse 5:

⁵ And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Herod wanted to *put him to death* and he had that authority. But he was held in check because *he feared the multitude*. The people rightly regarded John as a prophet. Herod was afraid of what the people might do if he killed him and so he merely kept him in prison. But then a fateful day came.

⁶ But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. ⁷ Thereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. ⁸ And having been prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist."

In Mark's Gospel he tells us that Herodias also wanted John dead (Mark 6:19). But of course, she didn't have the authority to order it. But one wonders if it is the scheming of Herodias who puts her daughter from her previous marriage forward to dance in hopes that Herod would do what he does here. Her daughter dances and pleases Herod and in response he promises to give her whatever she asks. And after being prompted by her mom, she asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

⁹ And although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. ¹⁰ And he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. ¹¹ And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought it to her mother.

I'm reading a history of Julius Caesar right now. One of his contemporaries was Cicero who was known for his powerful tongue and rhetorical skills. Ultimately, Cicero was murdered in 43 BC by the followers of his political opponent, Mark Antony. One historian says that Antony's wife, Fluvia took Cicero's head, pulled out his tongue, and jabbed it repeatedly with her hairpin in revenge for the things that Cicero had said.

The ancient Christian historian, Jerome, writes that when John the Baptist was killed, which would only have been about 76 years after Cicero, Herodias did the same thing to the John's head. Obviously, the Scriptures don't tell us this and we are not sure how Jerome knew this, but the story certainly highlights that it was John's tongue that got him in trouble with Herod and Herodias. Because with his tongue he was faithful to proclaim truth. And it didn't matter to John whether you were a commoner or the Roman ruler, he was committed to following God's will. And that faithfulness to God's will got him killed.

And then in verse 12 it says:

¹² And his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus.

Is doing God's will easy or is it hard? John's life would suggest that it's often hard; that there is often a cost to doing God's will. This truth is taught and illustrated throughout the Scripture. Let me read a passage from 1 Peter 2 in which Peter is addressing a group of believers in Asia Minor who are facing suffering. He says to them:

²⁰ For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. ²¹ For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,

Peter makes it very clear that in this world if we *do what is right*, if we do God's will, we may suffer for it. He says we *have been called for this purpose*. Christ himself suffered and in that suffering he left an example for us to *follow in His steps*. There is often a cost to doing God's will.

Sometimes we tend to have this mental equation to life: "If I obey God, if I serve Him and do His will then I will find favor and success." We can tend to assume that that if I'm doing God's will my life will be better; it will be easier. It will be Duluth. But John's life illustrates the truth that there can be a cost to doing God's will. Let me state the principle this way: Fulfilling God's will doesn't guarantee favor or "success," instead it often involves suffering.

Now, I'm not saying that doing God's will always involves suffering and hardship. It doesn't. But we are not thinking rightly if we think that if I do God's will then everything is going to be easy. It's just not true.

And I think the reality is the most of us know this. Most of us know this because we've experienced it. Maybe you've recently become a believer, but no one else in your family is a believer and they think you've gone off your rocker. They might even mock your faith. There's a cost.

Or maybe you are in a work situation where you are seeking to live out the character of Christ. But your boss or maybe a co-worker is putting pressure on you to do something that would be good for the business, but it is unethical and you refuse to do it. And you worry for your job or at least you feel their displeasure. There's a cost.

Or maybe you in your walk with God, you've felt prompted by God to serve in a certain way. You are already busy and to do God's will by serving in this way only makes life more complicated and challenging. There is a cost.

II. The Cost of Doing God's Will in our lives . . .

In the remainder of our time I want to mention three things related to this truth that I think will help us deal with the cost of doing God's will. And the first is this: When it

comes to the cost of doing God's will it **is vital to acknowledge**. It is vital to acknowledge because then you are living in reality and that is always a good thing. But if you think that doing God's will leads to an easier life, then when it doesn't shake out that way, you can easily become disillusioned. You can think God is letting you down or that He is displeased with you.

But if acknowledge the truth that suffering often comes with doing God's will you are in a better position to endure. You are in a better position to persevere. Think about how the disciples reacted to some of their first bouts of suffering after they began preaching about Jesus. In Acts 5 we read this:

⁴⁰ and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus, and then released them. ⁴¹ So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

They didn't think something was wrong. They didn't think the Gospel didn't work. Rather they understood that doing God's will is sometimes costly and as a result they were actually able to rejoice that they were worthy to suffer shame for Christ.

You will be better prepared for this life; this Christian life if you can acknowledge that suffering often comes when we do God's will. Secondly, I think it is helpful to know that when we suffer for doing God's will that it **doesn't always make sense**.

I'm sure as John sat in prison it made no sense to him. Couldn't he do more for God out preaching? I'm sure it made no sense to his disciples when they had to come and pick up his decapitated body and bury him. I'm sure they wondered what God was up to. It didn't make sense.

Sometimes we will find ourselves suffering for doing God's will and we will not be able to make any sense out of it. It will seem to be without purpose. If we could make sense of it, it would be so much easier to deal with, but the reality is that so often it makes no sense.

But here's the deal. It makes sense to God. He knows the why. He knows what He is doing. And we need to trust Him. We read a passage in 1 Peter earlier where Paul is addressing the believers who are suffering. A little later in chapter 4 he writes this:

¹⁹ Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

Trust God. You might be suffering because you are doing God's will and it may make no sense. You don't see how God is using it for good. Peter says entrust your soul to a faithful Creator and keep doing what is right.

Finally, though there is often a cost to doing God's will it **is always worth it in the end**. God is not going to waste your suffering. It is not without purpose. God is doing things in the spiritual realm that we cannot see. And it will always be worth it in the end. It is worth it in the end because there is a reward for doing God's will. At the end of Jesus' beatitudes, Jesus makes this point. In Matthew 6 He says:

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus is saying that doing God's will may involve persecution; it may involve being insulted; it may involve people saying all kinds of evil against you. But Jesus says that the suffering is worth it. *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great.* In the end, the suffering will be worth it. As we embrace the truth that there is often suffering when we do God's will, we also need to hold to the truth that whatever cost we may have to pay for doing God's will, it will always be worth it in eternity.

In 2003, Karen Watson took a leave of absence from her job as detention officer at the Kern County jail in Bakersfield, CA to devote herself to missionary work. She felt that God was giving her a new assignment to go and do relief work in Iraq. Her desire was to express the love of God through this practical help.

And so she sold her house. She sold her car. She sold nearly all of her worldly possessions and packed up a single duffel bag and headed to Iraq. Once in Iraq, she spent much of her time helping to restore schools that had been used as ammunition dumps during the war.

On March 15, 2004, she along with two other relief workers were killed in a drive-by shooting as they were helping to set up a mobile water purification plant.

In preparation for going to Iraq, Karen wrote a letter to her pastor in Bakersfield that said, "Open in case of death." When the news of her death reached her church, the pastors opened the letter, which in part said:

When God calls there are no regrets. . . I wasn't called to a place; I was called to Him. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected, His glory my reward . . . I was called not to comfort or to success but to obedience.

Karen Watson embraced that suffering was part of doing God's will. But she also believed it was worth it. God's glory was her reward.

For most of us following God's will will not include a missionary call to Iraq like Karen Watson. But the reality is that God is giving each one of us assignments - things He wants us to do and things He wants us to say. And in living out those assignments, there will often be a cost - a cost that will ultimately be worth it.

Amen.