

Worth the Cost

"Follow Me on Mission" Series, November 2 & 3, 2024 | Mark 6:14-29

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Do you ever count the cost and pay it?

Toll roads involve a cost.

This is what toll booths on toll roads used to look like.

You'd be travelling down a turnpike, come to a toll booth, stop, pay your toll, and go on.

Now, most toll roads have electronic systems for collecting tolls.

People have been refusing to pay the cost since toll roads were invented.

The Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike was the nation's first toll road.

It was built in the 1790s to link eastern and western Pennsylvania.

It was to be a new kind of road. It would be made of flattened, packed dirt covered with flattened stone and then flattened, packed gravel. The government couldn't afford to build it.

So, they created a private company to build the road and collect tolls to pay for it.

From the start there were people who did not want to pay the tolls.

Some people would travel along the road and slip off near the toll collection booths only to return to the road just a bit down from the toll booth.

And there were farmers along the way who needed just a short section of the highway to get from one part of their farm to another.

Exceptions were made to the tolls for those living on the highway. Or going to military service. Or church. Or a funeral. The exceptions mounted. But still, some people don't like to pay tolls for roads.¹

Most of us count the cost of toll roads and pay it.

Frequently, turnpikes are faster and better than any other road available.

So, we count the cost of toll roads and pay the cost.

Today our Scripture reading reminds us that there are costs involved in being disciples of Jesus.

We are going to look at what serving the Kingdom of God cost John the Baptist.

And we are going to think about what being disciples of Jesus costs us.

Grace is free. It is a gift, and we do nothing to earn God's grace.

But being a disciple of Jesus involves costs.

What are those costs? Are we willing to pay them?

¹ <https://www.tehistory.org/hqda/html/v23/v23n1p025.html>

Herod shows us the kingdoms of this world.

Herod and his family show us the kingdoms of this world in our reading for today, Mark 6:14-26:

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.

The kingdoms of this world are different from the Kingdom of God.

Herod shows us what it looks like to be part of the kingdoms of this world.

Let's look at four characteristics.

"Love is love is love."

The person in Mark chapter six is actually Herod Antipas. He was the son of Herod the Great who rebuilt the Temple and was king when Jesus was born. Herod Antipas was one of many children of Herod the Great, and Herod's realms were divided among four of his children.

One of the other four children was Phillip. Phillip's wife was named Herodias. Herod Antipas and Herodias fell in love and wanted to be together. So, Herod Antipas divorced his wife, and Herodias divorced Phillip. Then the two of them married.

Easy-come, easy-go divorce is forbidden by the Bible, as is marrying your brother's wife.

But Herod Antipas and Herodias were going to have what they wanted because love is love is love. That's what life in the kingdoms of this world looks like, though.

"Might makes right."

John the Baptist spoke out against what Herod and Herodias were doing. God expects more of His people and of the rulers of His people. And John the Baptist spoke on God's behalf and condemned what they had done.

Rather than repenting or even just listening, Herodias became angry.

As rulers, the Herod family had the power to do something about their anger.

Herodias pressured Herod Antipas to use that power and arrest John—which he did.

And this is another feature of the kingdoms of this world. Might makes right; the ends justify the means; power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. They had the power to get what they wanted, so they used it. Because that's what the kingdoms of this world are like.

“Climb the ladder, step on the rungs.”

When John was in custody, Herod Antipas protected him.

It seems that Herod Antipas thought highly of John. He thought of him as a holy man and liked to hear what John had to say about God.

Meanwhile, Herodias was scheming in the background. She wanted John dead, so she was looking for a way to make it happen.

We see this kind of behavior all the time. If you watch reality television, people are always scheming against one another—making alliances, breaking them, and taking down enemies. It's also the stuff of dramas about corporate life.

It's survival of the fittest, eat or be eaten, everyone for themselves, get ahead at any cost. That's what the kingdoms of this world are like.

“Mama needs a drink.”

Herod Antipas threw a giant party to celebrate his birthday. He invited all the big shots of Galilee to celebrate with him. There was food, and there was wine.

Herod Antipas was drinking liberally, and his judgment was compromised.

That's when Herodias' daughter danced for Antipas and his crowd.

It must have been some dance because at the end he promised her a gift. She could ask for anything, and he would give it to her.

She asked for John's execution and for the evidence of that execution to be provided.

Herod Antipas was caught in a trap because he couldn't go back on his oath, and he couldn't look bad in front of his “friends.” So, Herodias got what she wanted.

But we can't rush past Herod Antipas' drunkenness; his judgment was compromised, and he made an error that cost John his life.

But fast forward to today, and we know that there are movements promoting sobriety, but at the same time we know that a mommy-drinking culture is growing rapidly and that drug use is accelerating quickly. So, Herod Antipas is just showing us again what the kingdoms of this world are like.

John the Baptist shows us the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is very different from the kingdoms of this world.

Today we're getting a view of what the Kingdom of God is NOT like.

It's not about demanding our own way.

It's not about abusing power.

It's not about scheming and conniving to get our way.

It's not about being out of control.

It is about recognizing that God is in charge and obeying Him. When we do, we THRIVE!

John the Baptist spoke truth to power.

John called out Herod and Herodias for their sin.

Speaking truth to power requires a special brand of courage.

John had that kind of courage, but he had it because he had a special kind of faith.

His faith told him that God is in charge, that God must be obeyed, that God will not ultimately allow the wicked to prosper, that God is intervening in human history through Jesus the Christ and Savior of the world, and that God is preparing eternity for those who belong to Him.

John spoke truth to those in power because he knew who holds the true power, and he was accountable to that Power!

John the Baptist would speak truth to us.

I know that if John the Baptist were alive today, he would confront us. He would say to us that while we are citizens of the Kingdom of God, there are times when we act as if we were citizens of the kingdoms of this world.

John would confront us about the ways that we make excuses for breaking God's commandments about relationships and intimacy.

He would confront us about the ways that we use power and about the people who get abused by our power.

He would confront us about the ways that we scheme and act as if the ends justified the means.

He would call us to sobriety and to keeping our minds and our judgment clear.

If John the Baptist were alive today, he would call us to repent of our sin and obey.

John the Baptist paid the price for the Kingdom of God.

Herod had him arrested and executed.

It would make me much happier if God had sent an angel, if that angel had released John from prison, and then levelled Herod's palace for even thinking about harming God's servant.

But that's not what always happens in the Kingdom of God. It happens sometimes. Not always.

Instead, John paid for his convictions and his service to God with his earthly life.

But John had faith in Jesus, and he has eternity with God now.

And John's disciples came, collected his body, and buried him with honor.

The Kingdom of God involves cost.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer counsels us to think about *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the most important theologians and church leaders of the first half of the twentieth century. I mentioned him extensively in September.

The Cost of Discipleship is perhaps his best-known book. In it, he is painting a picture of what following Jesus and being a disciple are really like.

As a German doing his most important work in the 1930s and early 40s during the rise of Nazism, he was painting a picture of the disciple who would not fall victim to Nazi ideology, as so many Christians had in his day.

Bonhoeffer thought that cheap grace was the problem. He wrote, "The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing ... Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before." With cheap grace we think we come to Christ and nothing changes.

What does the true Christian look like? One is called to be a disciple.

Bonhoeffer writes, "The response of the disciples is an act of obedience, not a confession of faith in Jesus ... Christ calls, the disciple follows: that is grace and commandment in one."

He continues, "For faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience."

Discipleship costs. It costs obedience. What does that look like?

Body: We are not free to do whatever we want with our bodies.

The way we take care of our bodies and the ways that we get into relationships should be determined by God's will revealed to us in the Bible. Period.

That means that the Bible is the guide and rule for what we consume and don't consume.

The Bible is the guide and rule for how we dress.

The Bible is the guide and rule for our relationships and our intimacy.

When it comes to relationships and intimacy, the Bible is utterly and completely clear. Intimacy is a gift given to one man and one woman AFTER they are married—never before and never with anyone else. Till death do us part.

As Christians we aren't called to disagree with God's will, to argue with God's will, to second-guess God, or to go our own way. We are called—commanded—to obey. It's a cost.

Finances: We have expectations of how we steward our finances.

God blesses us with financial resources. We earn money.

God allows us to spend much of those financial resources to live and thrive.

But we never get to spend our money just any way we see fit.

To be a disciple of Jesus means that we give a substantial percentage of our money back to God as an offering to be used to do His work in the world. This is a command to every single disciple. We are to give back to God generously.

But that doesn't mean we are free to do whatever we like with the rest. We are given our resources to accomplish God's purposes, and we want to honor God with our tithes, our offerings, and with every dime we possess. It's a cost.

Time: We have expectations on our time.

God gives us a lifetime full of time. He gives us minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years.

And God expects us to use our time as we do our money—for His glory.

God does tell us to work. Beyond that, God tells us that we are to work for His glory. Even our work is for His purpose.

God tells us to rest. Regularly. And worship. Regularly.

We may like to do other things—to chase after sports and hobbies and travel and fun. None of those is a bad thing. But if they keep us from regularly worshipping God, that's out of bounds for disciples of Jesus. We are to work, rest, and worship. It's a cost.

Speech: We show our motivations and our hearts by our words.

We also honor God with our speech.

The Bible does not teach a legalism of good and bad words.

But the Bible does make clear that the words we say reflect our hearts. What comes out of our mouths is what's going on in our thoughts and emotions. Our words reflect our spiritual condition.

And in a world experiencing a crisis of incivility, we want to think about our words.

Angry words frequently mean that sinful things are going on in our hearts.

Our words should bring honor and glory to God. It's a cost.

Count the cost of being Jesus' disciple.

The Kingdom of God is worth the cost.

Jesus describes the Kingdom of God as being like a pearl of great price.

He calls it a treasure buried in a field. When you find the treasure, you go, sell everything you have, and then buy the field so that you can own the treasure.

Being citizens of the Kingdom of God means that we get forgiveness through Jesus, we are reconciled with God, we are adopted as children of God, we are given a spiritual family, we are filled with God the Holy Spirit and made holy ourselves, we are given a job inside the Kingdom, we get hope that is concrete, and we are given eternal life.

That's life inside the Kingdom of God, and it is worth the cost!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer counted the cost of being Jesus' disciple.

In September, I told you how Dietrich Bonhoeffer started a seminary to train pastors for the Confessing Church in Germany during the 1930s. The Confessing Church was the group of Christians opposed to the Nazis and Hitler and for true Christian faith.

Bonhoeffer wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* while he was leading that underground seminary.

His thinking about what a true Christian does for the Gospel was becoming clear.

And it was also becoming clear that the Nazis had to be stopped. Either someone would stop the Nazis, the world would destroy Germany, or Germany would destroy the world.

It became clear that Dietrich Bonhoeffer would be required to serve in the military, a step he could not and would not take.

Bonhoeffer was given a costly chance to leave Germany for the United States. He was invited to the United States to teach for years. He escaped to the United States but stayed less than a month. He went back to Germany to be with his people, to lead by example.

He seemed to join the German military intelligence; it gave him cover. Secretly, he was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. This was the form his Christian faith took.

When that secret plot was uncovered, it led directly to his death. But to Bonhoeffer, that was the cost of discipleship. And he was willing to pay it. Because the Kingdom of God is worth it.

Obedience is always the key question for Jesus' disciples.

Obedience was the call of John the Baptist—it was his call to the crowds, to people who should have known better, and to people in power.

It was the clear call of Jesus. Jesus says that to love Him is to obey Him. (John 15:10)

Obedience is the call on a disciple, and it's the call on us.

Be ready to pay the cost.

The cost looks different, depending on who you are.

For John the Baptist and for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the cost meant giving up one's life.

For some, obedience means a radical change of life—a change of location, a change of career, and a change of goals in life.

For all of us, obedience means aligning our lives with God's will.

It's what Jesus means when he calls us to come to Him, take up our own crosses, and follow Him. Be ready to pay the cost.

Jesus paid the cost ...