

The Cost of Following Jesus

Mark 6:14-29

Pastor Bryan Clark

In the 1950s there was a gangster by the name of Mickey Cohen who had really become a darling of the media. They loved to follow him and to cover him. But through a series of events, which included a Billy Graham crusade and the witness of a friend by the name of Jim Voss, it appeared as if Mickey Cohen had come to faith in relationship with Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, it was the headline in many newspapers: *Mickey Cohen Finds Religion*. For weeks it appeared that maybe Mickey Cohen's life had been dramatically changed by Jesus. But as the weeks turned into months, it became evident that there was a problem. Mickey Cohen became aware of the fact that he had to make a choice: either he would be a follower of Jesus or he would be a gangster. He couldn't be both. Eventually he sat down with his friend Jim Voss and explained to him that if following Jesus meant he could no longer be a gangster, it was not worth the price. And with that he walked away.

There is no question that there is a cost to following Jesus. While there are many today that promote a gospel of health and wealth and prosperity, Jesus never did. As a matter of fact, if you read through the Gospels, over and over again Jesus says that you have to count the cost. It is not easy to be a follower of Jesus. We need to understand the price that we must pay if we're going to faithfully follow Jesus. But what's interesting is that often it is in counting the cost that we come to grips with what really matters in life, and it's there that we find what we want to live for.

In last week's text in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus sent out His apostles and they were able to do miraculous things. Jesus empowered them to take authority over demons. He empowered them to do miracles—to heal the sick. And it's almost as if Mark is anticipating that we as readers will read that and say, "Wow! That is fantastic! Sign me up!" Mark follows that with this section about the death of John the Baptist, as if to say, "Wait a minute...wait a minute. Before you sign up too quickly, you need to understand there's a cost." It's sobering to remember that ten of the twelve apostles died a violent death because they were followers of Jesus. Throughout the Book of Acts we read of many miraculous deliverances of the apostles, but in the end they paid the ultimate price for following Jesus.

Turn with me to the Book of Mark chapter 6. It's important to recognize that Mark does not discuss the death of John the Baptist here because this is what happens next in the chronology. As a matter of fact, this is what we refer to as a flashback. It means this is something that happened in the past and Mark is going back to it—not because it fits in the chronology of events here, but because it fits in the train of thought of what he's trying to teach us here. So again, he's just come off a very impressive text about what the apostles were able to do. But now he wants to take us back and remind us there is a cost—there is a price to pay—to be a follower of Jesus.

Mark 6:14:

And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him." But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of

old.” But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, “John, whom I beheaded, has risen!” (Mark 6:14-16, *NASB)

Word comes to Herod that there is this miracle worker, Jesus, and he probably hears word also of what the apostles are doing. Mark refers to him as King Herod, but it’s important to recognize he really wasn’t a king. He was what was called a tetrarch. There’s lots of debate about why Mark used this terminology. Some think he called him a king because that was how he was referred to on the streets. Others think Mark was being a little bit sarcastic because that’s what Herod wanted. In fact, eventually Herod went to the emperor and asked to be made king, and the emperor got angry and banished him forever from the kingdom. So he’s a tetrarch; he’s not really a king.

People start hearing of these miracles and some people think it’s John the Baptist come back to life. Others think it’s Elijah. The Hebrew people believed that Elijah would come back to life and he would be the forerunner, the announcer, of the Messiah. As a matter of fact, at Passover they always had an empty chair and they always had a full glass of wine, which was symbolic of the fact that they were waiting for Elijah to join them. There are Hebrews today who continue that tradition—still waiting for Elijah to come. So some thought that’s who Jesus was.

Herod is dealing with the guilt of what he’s done. He’s living in a constant state of paranoia that John the Baptist has come back from the dead and is going to haunt him. He’s convinced that’s who this is: “This is John whom I beheaded.” We’re going to find out in a minute that Herod clearly violated his conscience when he beheaded John. He knew it was the wrong thing to do. But he did it anyway, and he was never the same after that. Why did he behead John? Well, he tells us:

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him. (vs. 17-20)

John the Baptist spoke as a prophet of God and confronted Herod for his sin. You have to understand that the Herod family was extremely corrupt and very immoral. Herod the Great was the king in Matthew chapter 2 when Jesus was born. It was Herod the Great that massacred all the babies. But Herod the Great died, and the kingdom was divided. One of his sons, Herod Antipas, is now the tetrarch in this area of Galilee. The text tells us that he married his sister-in-law, Herodias, from his brother Philip. The family of Herod was so intermarried that the relationships get very confusing. Basically what happened is that Herod was on a trip and stopped to visit his brother Philip, and while he was there he seduced Philip’s wife Herodias and convinced her to marry him. So Herod divorced his wife, and Herodias divorced Philip, and those two got married. But because of the inner workings of the relationship, Herodias was both Herod’s sister-in-law and his niece. He was guilty of all kinds of incestuous relationships, and that’s what John was confronting. You also have to understand that in that culture, Herod set the moral tone for the culture as the leader. So, in essence, John was confronting the culture because of the sin that was identified with Herod.

Obviously Herodias had the most to lose by this. She dumped Philip, who was not in the government, and she married Herod, because that was a move up the ladder of power. She was very upset that John was messing around with her advancement to be queen. She wants John dead, and if it wasn't for Herod, she would have him put to death. So Herod is in this weird position where he arrests John and puts him in prison basically to protect him from his wife. The text says that Herod knew that John was a righteous and holy man. Another way of saying that is: Herod knew John was right and what he was saying. He was dealing with the guilt of that and he was also afraid of John's God. So Herod put John in prison, and it says he liked to listen to him.

Well, Herodias was planning and plotting and she finally seized her opportunity to have her way.

A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb. (vs. 21-29)

Herodias is waiting for her opportunity to have her way. Herod decides to throw a party for his generals and significant men in the Galilee area. Herodias realizes that this is her chance, so she gets her daughter, whom history records by the name of Salome, to do this sensual, erotic dance in front of her father and these drunken men. Now part of the sickness of this whole event is the fact that it was his own daughter that was arousing these sexual feelings in him. History tells us that these type of dances would have been reserved for the local prostitute, not for a member of the royal family. But Herodias is desperate and she invites her daughter into this mess. Salome does her dance and it has the anticipated effect. Herod offers her up to half of his kingdom.

You also have to understand that Herod was a big talker. He was impressing his friends. Herod was not a king and frankly had no ability to give her anything. The emperor of Rome really called all the shots, so Herod was just talking. She goes back and talks to her mother, Herodias, and this is what she has been waiting for. She wants the head of John the Baptist. She wants it now—immediately. It is interesting that the writer, Mark, tells us that Salome went back quickly. There was a level of excitement in this. She adds her own little flair: she wants the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

It says that Herod was "very sorry." That's a very strong Greek word. As a matter of fact, it's the exact same Greek word that Mark uses in chapter 14 to describe Jesus agonizing in the Garden of Gethsemane about going to the cross. So this is not a case where Herod said, "Boy, I didn't expect that...too bad." He absolutely agonized over this, because in his conscience he

knew that John was right in what he was saying and that John was a righteous man. He feared John's God, and he knew he should not do this. But on the other hand, he had made this oath in front of all of his guests and he knew he needed to follow through in order to save face. So he is stuck between, *Do I do what is right?* or *Do I save face?* And his ultimate conclusion is that he must save face, so He orders the execution of John the Baptist. They go and behead him, and his head is delivered to Herodias on a platter.

You know, this isn't really the way we'd like to see this story turn out. We'd much rather have the guards go down to the prison and, lo and behold, John is gone—miraculously delivered by the angel of the Lord—because you just cannot do that to one of God's disciples. But that isn't what happens. John wasn't miraculously delivered. He was beheaded. That was the cost of standing up for what was right and calling sin "sin" and confronting Herod—in essence, confronting the immorality of the culture.

There's no question that we are to see in this story a foreshadowing of the ultimate end for Jesus. There are similar dynamics at work, where you have a leader who knows the person is righteous and not deserving of execution. Yet, there is so much pressure from the people that ultimately he violates his own conscience, and neither Herod nor Pilate ever fully recovers from those decisions.

In the Book of Leviticus chapter 26 it talks about people that violate their conscience and sin against God. It creates a guilt—almost a paranoia—so that when the wind rustles the leaves they think somebody is chasing them and they flee. That's where Herod was at. He hears this work that Jesus is doing and immediately he thinks it's John the Baptist coming back to haunt him.

The reality is that Jesus says over and over again in the Gospels that you need to count the cost if you are going to follow Him. People were obviously impressed and excited about the miracles and things they were seeing, and hearing that the apostles had this great power, it would be easy to say, "Wow, sign me up!" But over and over again Jesus kept saying, "Wait a minute...wait a minute. You need to count the cost." In Matthew chapter 5 He said, "You need to know that they hated Me; they're going to hate you. They persecuted Me; they're going to persecute you." This is not an easy road.

This is the first week of Advent. The theme is "Jesus Is the Light." Jesus Himself in John chapter 3 said that people love darkness rather than light, because in the darkness their evil deeds are hidden. But when the light comes their sin is exposed, and people hate that. So man prefers the darkness over light. Mark has already told us that we as followers of Jesus carry the light. And that light is not to be put under a bushel. The light is to be put on a lamp stand to penetrate the darkness. John as a follower of Jesus was called to be a light in the midst of darkness, which included confronting sin and calling it what it is—to confront the culture for what it had become.

Certainly our calling is no less than that. We live in a culture that is characterized by darkness. Steve Turner, in his poem called "Creed," does a good job of capturing the culture in which we live:

We believe in Marxfreudanddarwin.
We believe everything is OK - as long as you don't hurt anyone,
To the best of your definition of hurt, and to the best of your knowledge.

We believe in sex before, during, and after marriage.
We believe in the therapy of sin.

We believe that adultery is fun.
We believe that sodomy's OK.

We believe that taboos are taboo.
We believe that everything's getting better
Despite evidence to the contrary.
The evidence must be investigated
And you can prove anything with evidence.

We believe there's something in horoscopes, UFO's and bent spoons;
Jesus was a good man just like Buddha, Mohammed, and ourselves.
He was a good moral teacher
Although we think His good morals were bad.

We believe that all religions are basically the same – at least the one that I read was.
They all believe in love and goodness.
They only differ on matters of creation, sin, heaven, hell, God, and salvation.

We believe that after death comes the Nothing
Because when you ask the dead what happens they say nothing.
If death is not the end, if the dead have lied, then it's compulsory heaven for all.
Excepting perhaps Hitler, Stalin, and Genghis Khan.

We believe in Masters and Johnson
What's selected is average.
What's average is normal.
What's normal is good.

We believe in total disarmament.
We believe there are direct links between warfare and bloodshed.
Americans should beat their guns into tractors
And the Russians would be sure to follow.

We believe that man is essentially good.
It's only his behavior that lets him down.
This is the fault of society.
Society is the fault of conditions.
Conditions are the fault of society.

We believe that each man must find the truth that is right for him.
Reality will adapt accordingly.
The universe will readjust.
History will alter.
We believe that there is no absolute truth
Excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.

We believe in the rejection of creeds, and the flowering of individual thought.
If chance be the Father of all flesh, disaster is his rainbow in the sky.

And when you hear
State of Emergency!
Sniper Kills Ten!
Troops on Rampage!
Whites Go Looting!
Bomb Blasts School!
It is but the sound of man...worshipping his maker.

– “Creed” by Steve Turner, printed in *Can Man Live Without God* by Ravi Zacharias, Word Publishing 1994.

I think it's a fairly accurate picture of the culture in which we live. It is very important for us to understand that our calling is to be *a light in the darkness*. We are not to be in alignment with the culture; we are to be counterculture. We are to penetrate the darkness with the light of Jesus.

There are many churches today who are seeking to make the message of the Bible more politically correct in order to be more in alignment with the culture. It's very important for us to understand that the message of the Bible is not politically correct. It is just correct. We believe that the Bible is the authoritative, reliable, inspired Word of God—that it is the standard for life and godliness.

We absolutely reject the belief in pluralism, which is a belief that all roads lead to heaven—that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something. Jesus Himself said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament the message is consistent: there is only one mediator between God and man and that is the man Christ Jesus. We reject the notion of relativity—the idea that there are no moral absolutes—because we believe there is one God and that God is absolute. Therefore, there is absolute truth and that God defines absolute morals. When people ask, "Whose absolute morals will we follow?" the answer is simple: God's.

We reject the notion of tolerance as it's defined in our culture as a willingness to tolerate sin. The culture is seeking to convince us that if we identify sin in anyone else's life that is both judgmental and intolerant. Apparently John was not aware of that, because he understood that the role of the Christian is to be a light in the culture and to call sin "sin." This whole idea of tolerance is supposedly wrapped around this view of love—that if you love someone you basically tolerate whatever they do. But we need to understand that is not love—that is indifference. The Bible clearly states that sin is destructive and if people are left to their sinful ways they will self-destruct. The most loving thing we can do is help people identify their sin and lead them to a relationship with Jesus Christ.

We believe in the sanctity of human life. We believe that all life is sacred and comes from God, therefore we defend life of the unborn. We defend the life of the elderly and those who are physically and mentally challenged.

We believe in the sanctity of marriage—that God intended marriage to be one man and one woman for life. We do not believe homosexuality is a sexual preference. We believe it is a sexual sin. In both the Old and New Testament the Bible is clear that homosexuality is unnatural, against God's design, and therefore offensive to God. And what is offensive to God should be offensive to us. It does not mean that our calling is to go out and attack homosexuals. It is to go out and love them and introduce them to Jesus. But in loving them, that does not mean that we condone their behavior anymore than we would condone the behavior of an adulterer, a liar, a cheater or a drunker.

We believe that God has created the races and that all people are equal before God. We believe that the Church, the bride of Christ, is made up of people of every tribe and tongue and nation. Therefore, anything that speaks to discrimination on the basis of race should be completely forbidden by the people of God.

We believe the ultimate purpose of life is to know Jesus. We believe that God became flesh in the person of Jesus, was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, was nailed to a cross—not for crimes which He committed, but for the sins of the world—that those who place their faith in Jesus receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

We believe that salvation is on the basis of Jesus Christ and Him alone—not Jesus and any other religious work. We believe that our ultimate purpose is to know Jesus and to fulfill His

purpose in the world. We believe that what ultimately will matter in life is that which is done for God, and if that is what ultimately matters, then we believe that is what ultimately matters today.

We believe there is a cost for following Jesus, but we believe Jesus is worth the cost.

In the days of the Roman Emperor Nero, there lived and served him a band of soldiers known as the “Emperor’s wrestlers.” Fine, stalwart men they were, picked from the best and the bravest of the land, recruited from the great athletes of the Roman amphitheater.

In the great amphitheater they upheld the arms of the emperor against all challengers. Before each contest they stood before the emperor’s throne. Then through the courts of Rome rang the cry: “We, the wrestlers, wrestling for you, O Emperor, to win for you the victory and from you, the victor’s crown.”

When the great Roman army was sent to fight in far away Gaul, no soldiers were braver or more loyal than this band of wrestlers led by their centurion Vespasian. But news reached Nero that many Roman soldiers had accepted the Christian faith. Therefore, this decree was dispatched to the centurion Vespasian: “If there be any among your soldiers who cling to the faith of the Christian, they must die!”

The decree was received in the dead of winter. The soldiers were camped on the shore of a frozen inland lake. It was with sinking heart that Vespasian, the centurion, read the emperor’s message.

Vespasian called the soldiers together and asked the question: “Are there any among you who cling to the faith of the Christian? If so, let him step forward!” Forty wrestlers instantly stepped forward two paces, respectfully saluted, and stood at attention. Vespasian paused. He had not expected so many, nor such select ones. “Until sundown I shall await your answer,” said Vespasian. Sundown came. Again the question was asked. Again the forty wrestlers stepped forward.

Vespasian pleaded with them long and earnestly without prevailing upon a single man to deny his Lord. Finally he said, “The decree of the emperor must be obeyed, but I am not willing that your comrades should shed your blood. I am going to order that you march out upon the lake of ice, and I shall leave you there to the mercy of the elements.”

The forty wrestlers were stripped and then, falling into columns of four, marched toward the center of the lake of ice. As they marched they broke into the chant of the arena: “Forty wrestlers, wrestling for You, O Christ, to win for You the victory and from You, the victor’s crown!” Through the long hours of the night Vespasian stood by his campfire and watched. As he waited through the long night, there came to him fainter and fainter the wrestlers’ song.

As morning drew near one figure, overcome by exposure, crept quietly toward the fire; in the extremity of his suffering he had renounced his Lord. Faintly but clearly from the darkness came the song: “Thirty-nine wrestlers, wrestling for You, O Christ, to win for You the victory and from You, the victor’s crown!”

Vespasian looked at the figure drawing close to the fire. Perhaps he saw eternal light shining there toward the center of the lake. Who can say? But off came his helmet and clothing, and he sprang upon the ice, crying, “Forty wrestlers, wrestling for You, O Christ, to win for You the victory” and from You, the victor’s crown!

- “Forty Wrestlers for Christ” by Paul Tassel, printed in *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations* by Paul Lee Tan, Assurance Publications

Throughout the 2,000-year history of the Church, there have been thousands upon thousands of courageous followers of Jesus who have paid the ultimate price to be identified with Jesus.

So let me ask you a question: Have you counted the cost of being a follower of Jesus? Do you understand that there is a price to pay? We are one of the few cultures in the history of the world that makes it possible to live with one foot in the culture and one foot in the kingdom of God. But Jesus is clear: that simply will not do. We count the cost of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Again, it is often in the process of counting the cost—when you finally understand what you are willing to die for—that you discover what it is you want to live for. I don't know what that might cost you. I know it will cost you time. I know it will cost you energy. I know it will cost you popularity. I know it will cost you money. It may cost you family. It may cost you friends. It may cost you a promotion. I don't know what it might cost you.

But before we start thinking the price may be too high, let me remind you that you today have brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who this very day will be raped, will be tortured, will be imprisoned, and will be executed for their faith in Jesus Christ.

Not so long ago, U. S. Congressman J. C. Watts stood before the Congress and in a speech to them identified that in recent years more than 2 million Christians in the Sudan alone have been put to death for their faith in Jesus. Another 4 million have been displaced from their homes because of their faith in Jesus.

I recently read an article about an 8-year-old boy who because of his unwillingness to renounce Jesus as his Lord had part of his leg carved off. Another teenager because of his unwillingness to renounce Jesus as his Lord had his fingernails and both ears torn off with a pair of pliers.

Every day in the Sudan there are Muslim terrorist groups that go to villages and they ask people to identify themselves if they are Christians. They give them one chance to recant, and if they recant they are allowed to go free. If they're unwilling to recant, the women are gang raped, the children are tortured, the men are executed. Every day in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Pakistan, China, North Korea, Vietnam, the Sudan, and many other countries of the world, Christians are systematically tortured, imprisoned and executed for their faith in Jesus Christ.

So let me ask you the question: One day when you get to heaven and you stand face-to-face with these brothers and sisters in Christ, knowing the price they were willing to pay for their faith in Jesus Christ, will you be able to tell them that you, too, counted the cost? That you, too, were willing to pay the price of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ? Take some time to process this and ask yourself: Am I willing to count the cost? Am I willing to pay the price? Do I really understand what it means to be a light in the darkness? Do I really understand what it means to take a stand for Jesus in our culture?

Our Father, we are sobered by the reality that many of Your followers throughout history paid the ultimate price to be identified with Jesus. Lord, this very day around the world Christians will be executed, they will be tortured, they will be imprisoned, simply because they name the name of Jesus. Lord, help us to understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus—to count the cost. I pray that we would be willing to pay whatever price is necessary to be a follower of Jesus. We may never pay the same price that our brothers and sisters pay, but Lord, make us willing. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Study Questions

The Good News About Jesus According to Mark

The Cost of Following Jesus

Mark 6:14-29

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What does it cost the average Christian in America to follow Jesus?
2. What has it cost you to follow Jesus?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement and why?
“Nothing is ultimately worth living for if it is not ultimately worth dying for.”

Bible Study

1. Read Mark 6:14-29.
2. In what ways is the story of John’s fate a foreshadowing of what is to come with Jesus?
What are the similarities?

3. Compare John’s fate with Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:10-12; 16:24-26.

What should we expect as followers of Jesus?

What might this mean in our American culture?

4. Does the lack of intense persecution of the American church feed the erroneous idea that following Jesus is about health, wealth and prosperity? Why or why not?

How would people in the Sudan, Iran, North Korea, Iraq, Pakistan and China respond to the message of health, wealth and prosperity?

5. Many Christians in America are frustrated because they are trying to live in two worlds by living out two value systems.

How is living out two value systems different in a culture where people are persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and executed for their faith?

What do we learn from these courageous believers?

Application

1. What does it mean to you to count the cost of following and serving Jesus?
2. What practical things can you do as a group to encourage one another to take your stand and live for that which ultimately matters?
3. Is there anything preventing you from counting the cost and taking your stand for Jesus? If so, how might the group help address your area of concern?
4. Consider as a group subscribing to *The Voice of the Martyrs* magazine to stay informed on the persecuted church around the world. Perhaps prayer requests from the magazine could be shared each time the group meets.

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