

The Cost of Discipleship, Part 1

Acts 21:1-16

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Have you ever had anyone try to prevent you from following what you believe to be is God's will for your life? Perhaps it was a well-meaning family member(s), or perhaps it was even a Christian family member. Perhaps you have had well-meaning Christians try to prevent you from following God's will for your life. I'm not saying they are bad people or even sinning. I think sometimes our loved ones believe they have our best interest at heart. They believe they know what's best for us at the time. This has happened to me, and perhaps it has happened to you. It is not an uncommon experience.

Listen to the story of the 19th-century pastor and missionary John G. Paton. Paton was a missionary to the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) in the South Pacific. He was a courageous missionary, but before he was a missionary, he was a pastor in Glasgow, Scotland. While he was a pastor, God began to burden his heart for the New Hebrides. Now, the New Hebrides was an island filled with cannibalistic peoples with no knowledge of the gospel. As a matter of fact, twenty years earlier, two missionaries had been cannibalized there.

Paton shared with his church that he wanted to go to the New Hebrides. He received opposition from everywhere. The church offered him more money to stay. In a church meeting, one older man, Mr. Dixon, protested Paton's desire to go to New Hebrides, telling him before a gathering of the church that he would be eaten by cannibals. Paton famously replied, "*Mr. Dixon, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospects are soon to be laid in the grave there to be eaten by worms. I confess to you if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by cannibals or by worms. And in the great day, my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.*"

Paton wouldn't be persuaded by the high cost of discipleship, and he and his wife left for the South Pacific island. After years of costly obedience in the New Hebrides, he was not eaten by cannibals. Instead, he was eating the Lord's Supper with former cannibals that had repented and trusted Jesus.¹ To this day, the Presbyterian church is strong in modern-day Vanuatu.

I'm sure Mr. Dixon thought he had Paton's best interest at heart. The problem is that Mr. Dixon really did not know what God wanted for John Paton.

As we examine Acts 21:1-16 this morning, we will see that the Apostle Paul was determined to go to Jerusalem and, if necessary, to die for his faith in Christ and for preaching the gospel. However, well-meaning believers tried to talk him out of obeying the Lord by going to Jerusalem. Paul faced the high cost of discipleship and doing God's will and, at the same time, received counsel from well-meaning Christians to not go. Yet, he knew what the Lord Jesus had called him to do in order to see the gospel taken to the ends of the earth.

It is not uncommon that when the Lord Jesus calls us to do hard things when we follow Him, that at the same time, those who love us most will try to talk us out of obeying the Lord's will. When those who love and care for us see the high cost of discipleship, they will often want us to reconsider our decision.

¹ Adapted from Tony Merida, *Christ-centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Acts*, 332.

Have you ever been faced with obeying the will of the Lord when the cost of discipleship is high? If not, then at some point in your life, you will. At that point, you will have to decide who you trust. Do you listen to those who are trying to persuade you not to do what the Lord has called you to do, or will you obey what you know to be God's will for your life is even though the cost of obedience will be high? Bottom line: *When we follow Jesus, we will be tempted to avoid the high cost of discipleship and be obedient to the Lord Jesus.*

Let's walk through Acts 21:1-16 and see how Paul faced the temptation to avoid the high cost of obedience. Then we will make application at the end.

In vv. 1-6, we see that Paul and his mission team sailed from Miletus to Tyre. Then they stayed in Tyre for seven days. Verse 4 tells us that after having sought out the disciples in Tyre, the Spirit must have revealed to those believers there what was going to happen to Paul. Then we have this challenging verse which reads, "*in the Spirit,*" they began to try to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

What is happening here? Did the Holy Spirit contradict Himself by giving two different messages?

Let's get some context. Remember, in Acts 19:21, Paul said, when he was in the Spirit, he must go to Jerusalem and then to Rome. Then again, in Acts 20:22-23, Paul said that he was constrained by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem and that imprisonment and afflictions were awaiting him.

So, what does it mean when these disciples in Tyre were "*in the Spirit*" trying to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem. It means they were telling Paul what he already knew. He knew about the trials and suffering he would face. But they were also telling him that he must not go to Jerusalem?

Here is what I think was going on in v. 4. These disciples were told by the Spirit what would happen to Paul, but they inadvertently encouraged Paul to oppose what he already knew was the Spirit's leading.² Although they were well-meaning and loved Paul, what they did not realize at this point, was that Paul had already committed himself to the Spirit's leading even though it would lead him into tribulation and suffering.

They were like Peter in Matthew 16, one minute, by the revelation of the Father in Heaven, Peter was confessing Jesus was the Messiah. Then immediately after that, Jesus told them He must go to Jerusalem and be crucified and, on the third day, raised from the dead. Remember what he said in Matthew 16:22-23:

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Acts 21:5 resolves it for us when Luke writes that in the end, they understood what the Spirit had ultimately revealed to Paul and accepted God's will for him. After that, they all went to the beach to see him off. They all knelt in prayer and said farewell to him.

Then Paul's mission team boarded the ship and sailed from Tyre to Caesarea, where they stayed with Philip, the evangelist. Caesarea was the seaside capital of the province of Judea. It was also the city where Peter met Cornelius.

Philip, the evangelist, was the same Philip from Acts 6 who served widows, and in Acts 8, he traveled along the road to Gaza, where he met the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading Isaiah. Then he helped him understand the gospel, and after he baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip was swept up by the Spirit and carried away.

² R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *God's Word for You: Acts 13-28 for You*, 121-122.

Now, Philip lived in Caesarea and had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. Prophesying can mean one of two types of activities, and in Acts 21, we find both of them. First, to prophesy can mean that you evangelize and/or teach others the gospel. Most likely, Philip's daughter followed in their father's footsteps and taught people the gospel and evangelized people.

Second, prophecy can mean that a person would predict the near future events. We will see this type of prophecy with the prophet Agabus. When Agabus arrived, he took Paul's belt and bound his own hands and feet. Then he said this is what the Jews will do to the person who owns this belt. Then they will deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.

When the people heard this, the disciples began to weep and be sorrowful. Then they tried to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Now, this is the second time those who love Paul have tried to persuade him not to follow the Spirit's leading.

Look at Paul's response in vv. 13-14:

"What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

The disciples had to come to terms that the Spirit was, in fact, leading Paul. They may have meant well, but Paul knew what Jesus wanted him to do. He remained committed to obeying the will of the Lord.

Finally, in vv. 15-16, they left Caesarea and traveled to Mnason of Cyprus's house. Mnason was an early disciple, and they stayed with him before going the rest of the way into Jerusalem.

When we read what Paul experienced in vv. 1-16, we learn that he was tempted to avoid the high cost of discipleship in three ways.

First, he was tempted by those who loved him to remain with them and keep doing what he was doing. Basically, they did not want him to stop doing ministry, but they did not want him to go to Jerusalem, where he might be arrested and killed. I think it is safe to say they wanted him to preserve his life so he could continue to do ministry the way he had always done ministry. This way, they would not lose someone they dearly loved. This was not a bad motive.

Second, we see that Paul was tempted to listen to well-meaning spiritual advisors' bad counsel. It was not that their counsel sounded bad but that it was in contradiction with what the Spirit had told Paul to do.

To make matters even more difficult, these were not people who dressed or looked the part of being a deceiver. It was quite the opposite. These were Christians who genuinely loved and cared for Paul. They wanted the best for him.

I don't want to say these people were intentionally evil, but like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, their counsel was deceptive. So, if Paul followed their counsel, it would lead him to be disobedient to what God had called him to do, and that was to go to Jerusalem. It was bad counsel from good and even godly people.

Third, Paul was tempted to fear suffering. Agabus' did not attempt to lead Paul astray, but his prophecy did predict suffering. Paul could have given in to the fear that came with facing imminent danger. He had to know it was not going to be easy, but like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, he did not give in to the temptation. Eventually, he and the disciples said with his Savior:

"Let the will of the Lord be done."

Ultimately, Paul's temptation was to disobey the leading of the Spirit. His temptation is our temptation. There may be times when we are tempted to listen to the bad counsel of those who love us and are well-meaning. Perhaps they want us to remain with them or to do safe discipleship instead of costly discipleship.

Here are five principles to consider as we face the temptation to avoid the high cost of discipleship.

First, the Lord will call us to do hard things. Paul was called to be obedient to the highest call of discipleship, suffering, and eventually death. But Paul was not walking a path that had not been traveled. It was traveled by our Savior and he has blazed that trail. When we walk that path, we walk it with Him and so many others who have gone before us. Listen to how Hebrews 12:1-4 says it in the *Amplified Bible*:

THEREFORE THEN, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [who have borne testimony to the Truth], let us strip off and throw aside every encumbrance (unnecessary weight) and that sin which so readily (deftly and cleverly) clings to and entangles us, and let us run with patient endurance and steady and active persistence the appointed course of the race that is set before us, ² Looking away [from all that will distract (us and looking)] to Jesus, Who is the Leader and the Source of our faith [giving the first incentive for our belief] and is also its Finisher [bringing it to maturity and perfection]. He, for the joy [of obtaining the prize] that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising and ignoring the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. [Ps. 110:1.] ³ Just think of Him Who endured from sinners such grievous opposition and bitter hostility against Himself [reckon up and consider it all in comparison with your trials], so that you may not grow weary or exhausted, losing heart and relaxing and fainting in your minds. ⁴ You have not yet struggled and fought agonizingly against sin, nor have you yet resisted and withstood to the point of pouring out your [own] blood. ³

Jesus is our Substitute, our Example, our Leader, our Trail Blazer, the Author of our Faith and our Strength. He has walked this path for us and now walks with us so that we will not walk alone. In this way, He gives us the ability to walk the path of costly discipleship.

Second, we must love Jesus more than we love people.⁴ When we read these sixteen verses, we see that Paul had brothers and sisters in Christ who loved him. They wanted the Lord's best for him, but that does not mean they knew exactly what the Lord had called him to do.

So, when those whom we love very much and who also love Jesus counsel us to avoid the high cost of discipleship, we must settle in our minds that we love them, but we love Jesus more. We must remember the words of Jesus Matthew 10:37-39:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

³ [*The Amplified Bible*](#) (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1987), Heb 12:1-4.

⁴ Tony Merida, *Christ-centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Acts*, 330.

³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Similarly, Luke records Jesus' words in Luke 14:26-28:

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?"

First of all, these texts do not teach us to literally hate our mother and father. In reality, Jesus calls us to honor them. What He means is that we must love Him so much that, in comparison, our love for them seems like hate to the world. We must be like Jesus and love and desire to do God's will more than the will of those who love us.

Third, we must make sure we are spending time with God in His word, prayer, and worship. It is one thing to get godly counsel from those who love Jesus and love us, but that must never be a substitute for spending time with God in His word, prayer, and worship. We must guard against getting lazy and letting the spiritual counsel of Christians replace the counsel of the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, we must test the spirits. When the counsel of godly people and the counsel of God are in conflict, we must test the Spirit's leading. We must make sure we are hearing from the Lord in this matter and not from our own selfish desires. We must make sure those who counsel us are not, themselves, being selfish in their desire for our good.

I remember when I was changing my major in college and sensing the call to ministry. I was a senior accounting major. My parents were counseling me to finish my degree and then perhaps go to seminary. However, that was not what I believed the Lord wanted me to do. They reasoned that if I did not like ministry, then I had a degree I could fall back on in life. Yet, I was certain the Lord wanted me to transfer and pursue ministry.

However, in order to transfer looked impossible. Where would I find the money for school and do what I believed the Lord called me to do. After agonizing over the decision, I decided to step out in faith and transfer. It was at that point I discovered the Lord had cleared every obstacle for me to transfer and pursue my education in ministry. It was still not an easy path, but the Lord made a way when there seemed like there was no way.

The cost of discipleship in this situation for me was adding a year of school, which meant adding more school debt. It meant rejecting the counsel of my parents and some of my friends. Needless to say, my relationship with them cooled off for a while. Things became a bit awkward when I went home.

Bottom line: We must test the spirit and the counsel of those who love us. We must consider all of the information the Lord is giving us, pray over it and make a decision.

Here is the deal, testing the spirits is not necessarily some high-level mystical, spiritual experience. It really is simply considering the counsel the Lord God has given us and the counsel of godly people. We do our best to make sure we are listening to what the Spirit of God is telling us and then obey the Lord, which leads us to our fifth and final principle.

Fifth, when you know what God wants you to do, obey Him. Remember, the high cost of discipleship does not mean everything will be easy. It may mean you are choosing to suffer, and those who love you will

not want you to do that. However, we are not choosing suffering for suffering's sake. We are choosing to be obedient to God. Oswald Chambers says it this way:

To choose to suffer means that there is something wrong; [however] to choose God's will even if it means suffering is a very differing thing. No healthy saint ever chooses suffering; [instead] he chooses God's will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not.⁵

When we choose to do God's will, then we must not make our understanding of God's guidance based on the fact that the path we walk will be easy or that we will be happy, or that we will finally be complete. None of those things may happen.

Think about it this way. You do not sell all you own, pack your bags and move halfway around the world to take the gospel to those who have yet to hear because they think it will be an awesome trip. You do it because it is God's will. So, if you are called to preach, then you do not preach because it makes you happy but because it is God's will. You do not serve as an elder or deacon because it is fun, but because the Lord has shown you His will, and He has called you to serve. You do not serve in the nursery, preschool, with children, youth or college because it brings fulfillment to your life. It might bring fulfillment to your life, but that is not why you serve. You serve because it is God's will.

Bottom line: the desire to be obedient to God's will must be uppermost in our affections because when the suffering comes, and it most certainly will come, it is the desire to be obedient to the call the Lord has given you that will sustain you.

Now, those are our five principles. However, before we close, let me give you three fears that the enemy will use to keep you from following the will of the Lord in your life so that you avoid the high cost of discipleship.

First is the fear of man. When we value the love, opinion, and acceptance of those we love more than God, then we are in danger of disobedience to the leading of the Spirit in our lives. The fear of man means that the opinion of those we love has become bigger than that of the Lord. When we care more about what others think of us than what the Lord thinks, then we are headed in the direction of disobedience.

Second is the fear of misunderstanding the Lord's will. This is a legitimate fear in all of our lives. Every believer I know has at some point had to make a difficult decision in life, and their great concern is if they are really following the Lord's will. This particular fear can paralyze us so that we do not make a decision. Then it becomes decision by "in-decision." Psalm 37:23-24 has always helped me when I am struggling with making a decision:

*The steps of a man are established by the Lord when he delights in his way;
²⁴ though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his
 hand.*

When faced with a difficult decision and it seems confusing or costly or both, I am always concerned I might be misunderstanding the Lord's will. At this point, I set my heart to delight in the Lord in His word, prayer, and worship, and then I make my decision.

However, remember just because that decision leads us into suffering does not mean that we made the wrong decision. On the contrary, the Lord will sometimes lead us into situations where we will suffer for

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: Acts*, 286.

our faith in Christ and for holding fast to the gospel. Do not evaluate your decision on the evidence that you are suffering. Suffering may be what the Lord intends for you.

This leads me to the last fear we will face—the fear of suffering. We have an enemy that preys on our hearts and minds and seeks to have us avoid suffering at all costs. Embracing the high cost of discipleship means that we must be content that we will suffer for our faith in Christ and for the path He is leading us down.

We are conditioned at a young age to avoid pain, so anything that seems like it will lead us into suffering is to be avoided. In addition to that, if our decision results in suffering, then we believe it must have been the wrong decision.

Brothers and sisters, do not let the fear of suffering keep you from obeying the will of the Lord. Suffering for the sake of suffering is foolishness but suffering for the gospel is a high calling. We must know the difference. Yet, we must never allow the fear of suffering to prevent us from obeying the revealed will of the Lord for us.

As we pull this together, remember that the aim of Acts is to see the gospel taken to the ends of the earth, and that will be no easy task. It is one that comes with the high cost of discipleship. To be obedient to the call of the Lord in order to see the gospel proclaimed to all creation is costly. It is costly physically, financially, emotionally, and relationally. Do not let the high cost of discipleship prevent you from following the Lord's will in your life and doing hard things that result in suffering. Settle in your mind to be obedient to the Lord no matter what the cost.