

Lesson 12 Lecture

Good morning/good evening. I hope you are finding enjoyment in this Christmas season – certainly today’s POW experience should help! I liked how Steve Mood described the stories in the Gospels as “vignettes”. We should look at these vignettes from at least two perspectives. The first perspective is to consider **what** was done – to examine the actual actions of the story. Whether they are miracles, healings, rebukes, or teachings, there is great power and revelation in these stories. For many of us in this room, we have read and/or heard these stories many times. If we’re not careful, we can begin to start to gloss over them and take for granted what is happening. We can be thinking like, ‘*Yeah, yeah, Jesus healed the blind man – good for Him – whatever. Where’s the TV remote?*’ Come on, **I’ll** admit I’ve done that – I know some of you – you’re just as capable of this attitude as I am! For me, though, and I pray for each of you, as I get further into my relationship with God and read these vignettes, I find myself going beyond the “**what**” is happening in the story to the “**why**” the story is happening. I ask myself **why** would Jesus do what He is doing? The **why** question challenges us to examine the **character** of Jesus – the **character** of God. This is how we make God **personal**. And this brings me to the theme I have for this lecture – *Free Will and Its Consequences*. As I go through these vignettes, I’m going to highlight some of the key points where the freedom of choice was presented, and then examine the consequences of the choices made, to reveal the unavoidable truth – that free will, or the freedom of choice, produces consequences. Our choices reveal who we are and what we truly believe. When it became clear to me this was how God wanted me to approach this section of Scripture, He made this lecture a **loving conviction** of what I believe to be true – I hope it will do the same for you.

The three vignettes in today's reading are:

1. The murder of John the Baptist
2. Jesus feeding the 5,000
3. Jesus walking on the water

Notably, as they are presented in the Gospels, they are in sequence *as* they happened - the second vignette immediately follows the first vignette, and the third vignette occurs upon the completion of the second one. As I said, the first of the three vignettes in our reading deals with the details of John the Baptist's murder. The fruit of Jesus' ministry was undeniable, and His popularity had reached King Herod the tetrarch. *Tetrarch* means the ruler of a fourth, or quarter of the province. We learn there are several explanations for the success of Jesus' ministry floating around – they included that He was really Elijah appearing; He was one of the prophets from long ago who had come back to life; or, He was the resurrected John the Baptist. The latter explanation was most disturbing to Herod because he knew he was the one responsible for John the Baptist's murder.

Herod had taken the wife of his brother, Philip, and married her. So as we begin to examine the importance of free will and its inevitable consequences, let's take a look at this situation. Herod no doubt was attracted to his brother's wife, but he could have chosen to honor the sanctity of his brother's marriage (and his as well, if he was married), but he chose not to. Herodias, his brother's wife, was complicit at least in some manner in leaving Philip and marrying Herod. She had the choice to honor her marriage, but for whatever reason she thought Herod offered more to her, so she chose to destroy her marriage for the sake of satisfying her flesh. Therefore, this marriage's foundation was based on mutual sinful actions. Not a great way to start a life together, is it? Think there might be some lingering guilt for their basis of their marriage? Guilt is one of the major fruits, if

you will, of sin. The sinister truth of guilt is unless it is forgiven; it typically manifests itself into more and greater sin.

Now we get to John the Baptist's role in this vignette. Herod must have had some dealings with John because Mark's version of this story tells us Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. (Mark 6:20) John the Baptist's message was spiritual – to repent, be baptized and live according to the law. The problem with spiritual messages to the non-spiritual is they don't make sense to those living in the flesh. I've always seen the Holy Spirit as God's Interpreter to us. Things of the Spirit to the non-believer are like a foreign language. Without an interpreter we simply don't understand Biblical spiritual messages. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, "*But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*" John's message to Herod was having its effect on him – even though he didn't understand what John was saying, he liked the message.

Upon learning of the circumstances of Herod's and Herodias' marriage, John had a choice to make. He could have kept his mouth shut and not confronted Herod. But he did not keep his mouth shut, and it would cost him his life. Herodias' guilt had now manifested itself into bitterness and holding a grudge against John - no doubt because either Herod or one of his servants had told her that John was calling them out for their sin. This is the challenge for every human being – when confronted with our sin, we have a choice to make – to humble ourselves, confess, repent, and seek forgiveness, or to become defensive and react in anger. Where does that anger come from? It is a manifestation of the guilt that does not go away without forgiveness. Herodias' guilt must have been huge

because her anger had grown to the point of wanting to kill John for calling her out for her sin.

Herodias was not silent about her feelings towards John, but Herod up to this point had made a good choice – to protect John from her murderous ways. That protection, though, would come to an end as Satan had a plan. At Herod's birthday party, he had invited his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. Herodias' daughter – most likely Herod's niece – performed a seductive dance. Although Scripture doesn't say this, I believe Herodias prompted her daughter to do this knowing full well how this would affect Herod. This speculation of course would invalidate her candidacy as *Mother of the Year* in using her daughter in such an immoral way. She indeed knew her husband, and he gets caught up in the lust of watching his *niece*. Creepy! He told her to ask him for anything she wanted, and he would give it to her. Obeying his lust takes him even deeper into Satan's trap, and He promised her with an oath, "*Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.*" That must have been some dance.

Validating my suspicion the dance was planned by Herodias, the daughter went to her to ask how she should respond to Herod's offer. The culmination of all the guilt Herodias was carrying ended in John's death sentence. This is clear proof of the truth of what Scripture tells us – the wages of sin is death. Upon hearing his niece's request for John's head, Herod is trapped. He made an oath to this girl in front of all his officials, commanders, and leaders. Herod, though, still had a choice to make – he could have stood up for what was right, or he could cower and let sin continue to its eventual destination. Well, we know the choice he made, and this will lead to the end of John's life.

From this tragic story, I have two observations regarding free will and its consequences:

1. Often times when we make the choice to do what is right, we will suffer.

Forgive my language, but this statement is kind of a “*damned if you do or damned if you don’t*” truth. Had John not called out Herod and Herodias for the circumstances of their marriage, their position of leadership could have been seen as a validation or an example to the people that it was ok to do what they did. How much of what is going on today in our society that is a blatant affront to Godly living is happening because the church has kept its mouth shut out of fear of reprisal, condemnation, and humiliation? By keeping silent, we have enabled these sinful behaviors to not only continue but also spiral into worse sin – spreading spiritual death to a broader audience. By keeping silent, we have chosen to protect ourselves – our concern of fleshly suffering – in exchange for the death of others who don’t know the difference between secular morality and Biblical morality. If what I’m saying stings a little, it should – I’m every bit as guilty as not speaking up when I should as anyone else in here, so I feel the sting myself.

A possible root of our choice – it is a choice - of not speaking out is we’ve bought the lie that by even if we do what is right, we’re going to get persecuted. Our flesh then tells us, ‘*What’s the point of saying anything?*’ Our fear of persecution and suffering is very real, but if we can get to the truth of our faith – that death in this life is actually a graduation to eternal life in God’s presence – we can find the strength in the Holy Spirit to do what is right. That is what Jesus did – He willingly surrendered His flesh to take the inevitable judgment of our flesh. He was able to do this because He knew death in *this* life is not the end – it is just the beginning of new life in the spirit world. Yes, standing up for our faith can be costly, but, as Romans 8:18 promises, “*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*” (NKJV)

The second observation from this vignette on free will is really an expansion of my first observation.

2. The gift of free will brings with it the truth of spiritual warfare.

By its definition, choice implies there is more than one option to choose. Prior to Adam and Eve's sin in the garden, there was no knowledge of sin. By surrendering to their fleshly desires to Satan's temptation, they invited Satan to introduce an opponent to God's righteousness. Satan's version of what is right to him has an agenda – to devour and destroy. **God's** righteousness is all about life – what is truly right. God gave us the gift of free will for the purpose of deepening the love relationship between Him and us. Love is always its greatest when there's a choice to love. God chose to have mercy on us and send Jesus to the Cross to pay the price for our sins. His preference for the choice we make is outlined in 2 Peter 3:9, “*The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.*”

I have one more comment about free will and its consequences. How often do we say we “**can't** do this” or we “**can't** do that”? I would argue that the vast majority of the things we claim we **can't** do are really things we **won't** do. When we use the words “*can't*” or “*cannot*”, they imply impossibility – there is no choice or option. When we say, “*I can't forgive him*” or “*I can't confess that sin*”, what we are really saying in those statements is, we are rejecting God's promise that with Him, all things are possible. What we're really saying is not that we **can't** do something, it's that we **won't** do something. Not all the time, but more often than we would like to admit, when we say we **can't** do something when we really can *with God*, that is potentially sin. If we use the word “**won't**”, we are then held to the truth that there is a choice to be made. We then become accountable for our behaviors. If we were to go back in this vignette and suggest to Herod and

Herodias they could have made different choices, I'm certain both of them would have said they had no choice. It was their sin that fed them the lie they had no choice. They did have choices, but they chose the safety of their own flesh over what was right. Thank God, Jesus didn't do that because He had a choice, too. May we never forget that the next time we consider using the word "**can't**".

Our second vignette is regarding Jesus feeding the 5,000. Our story actually picks up where our last story ended. Jesus is grieving over the murder of his cousin, John. He attempts to get some private time to deal with His grief, but the popularity of His ministry is greater than ever. Here we see the beginning of a series of choices Jesus makes – all of them are evidence of God's relentless goodness. The crowds of people follow Him, and we see He had a choice. He could have rejected the people and chosen to be alone in His sorrow. How often do we do that? We're down or depressed about something in our lives – the last thing our flesh wants to do is provide for others – much less even be around others. That is Satan – he seeks to isolate us, so he can speak more death and doom into our lives. If we can find people who are like-minded in Christ, these people are actually forces from God to protect us from that place of isolation in the flesh. This isn't to say isolation isn't all bad - if we seek God in our isolation, He will speak to us truths of His never-ending presence, care, mercy, and provision. If those are the messages you're hearing in your isolation, you are listening to God. If you're hearing anything else, go find a trusted brother or sister in Christ to help strengthen you in the Lord to what is true.

What do we read about Jesus' choice to respond to the people amidst His grief? He had compassion on them and welcomed them. This is the mindset of God – He foregoes His own needs for the benefit of blessing us. You can only think like this if the foundation from which you operate from is sacrificial love. Mark's version of this story is Jesus saw them as sheep without a shepherd. Being the

Good Shepherd, He healed and taught the people throughout the day. As the day was drawing to a close, the disciples observed the situation in their flesh and told Jesus the people needed to go to the villages to find food and shelter. This seems like a pretty natural observation, doesn't it? With Jesus, though, there is nothing natural about Him – He sees things with God's eyes – in the *super*-natural. He wasn't done providing for them, and I believed what He was about to do was far more about teaching the disciples His *always-servant-based mindset* than it was about feeding the people.

Jesus challenged their position to send the people away and told them “*You give them something to eat*”. We're told there were 5,000 men, so the size of the crowd was likely at least twice that when you factor in the women and children. In Mark's version of the story, the disciples' response was, “*That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?*” (Mark 6:37) John's gospel tells us this is Philip saying this, which surprises me as it sure sounded like something Judas Iscariot would have said.

The disciples looked at the situation in the flesh and saw impossibility to Jesus' request. They were, in effect, saying we *can't* do that. By this time in Jesus' ministry, how many miracles and healings had they witnessed? How many times had they heard Jesus tell them with God all things are possible? Yet, they still were not getting where Jesus was coming from. Why? - Because they were thinking and operating in the flesh. Look – these guys ended up great men of God – Jesus saw enough in them to entrust the future of humanity with the Gospel message. However, at this point, they're operating without the benefit of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit prompting us and empowering us to overwhelm our fleshly perspective and adopt the more powerful spiritual perspective, we are going to continue to look at the challenges in life from a defeatist attitude. If with God all things are possible, then there is *always* hope when we are living in the power of

the Holy Spirit. If you are a believer in Jesus, you have the Holy Spirit dwelling in you. Take a step of faith and ask Him to reveal just a glimpse of the hope you have in your life because of your identity in Him and His presence in you.

Jesus not only fed the 5,000+ people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish to the point of being satisfied, but also there were 12 baskets full of leftovers. The number 12 is significant in Scripture – its meaning has been linked to the Godly form of government authority – the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 disciples as the elders of the original church, and there will be 12 thousands from each of the 12 tribes of Israel that will make up the Jewish remnant in the Great Tribulation. The number 12 also can be linked to completeness or perfection – similar to the number 7. There are 12 months in a year, there will be 12 precious stones as the foundation of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, and these 12 baskets represented the complete fulfillment of God's provision.

In keeping with emphasis on choice for this lecture, I mentioned earlier the choice Jesus made to sacrifice His personal grief for the sake of ministering to the people. He also chose to provide for the people beyond their comprehension. They all were witnesses to the power of God's provision with what appeared to be a mere pittance of food to begin with. Because they were hungry, their immediate satisfaction from this miracle was in the flesh – their appetites were fed. The real message of this miracle isn't the food, though, is it? What's the real message of this miracle? God loves His creation, and He desires to provide for it. Again, this is a choice He makes. If we honestly look at our lives of periodic sin and disobedience, how can we not fall to our knees and praise God for His faithfulness, His mercy, and His never-ending provision? Once again, that is our choice. We can choose to grumble and complain about what we don't have or what others have and we want in our flesh, or we can choose to praise God for His loving provision

– even if it seems small compared to others. God chooses to provide for us – shouldn't we be able to choose to thank Him?

We find the third vignette only in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels. This is one of my favorite stories in the Gospels because the heart of God is so powerfully revealed. In both Matthew and Mark, this vignette is the subsequent event following Jesus feeding the 5,000. He wants to go spend time in prayer with His Father and tells them to go ahead of Him in a boat and go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida. From this point forward in the story, I'm going to break it down in steps for the purpose of showing you Who God is – not just to the disciples – but to you and me as well - as I point out the number of times choices were made. I'll begin with pointing out the command to the disciples – to get into the boat to go to the other side to Bethsaida. Jesus didn't say in this command “*in hopes of you getting to the other side*” or “*if you're lucky you'll get to the other side*”. He said He'll meet them on the other side – there was a certainty to His command. There is a similar story of the disciples being in a boat with Jesus when a storm hits, and the disciples are freaking out. What is Jesus doing while they're fearing for their lives? He's catching some “Z's”. Just as He indicated in today's vignette, He told them in the story with Him in the boat that they would get to the other side. What He didn't tell them was **how** they would get there.

There was never any doubt to the certainty of Jesus' will, but the circumstances that arose amidst the journey forced the disciples to challenge their faith in God's promise – to get them to the other side. Does that ring a bell of truth to you in your life? It sure does to me. The writer of Hebrews told us in chapter 12:2 that Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith. As our author, He has the complete script of our life of faith in His hands. There is a beginning at our confession of Him as Savior and Lord, and there is an ending when we breathe our last breath and meet Him face to face in glory. For those of you who have worked

with wood, to get the wood to a place where it can be perfectly smooth for painting or staining, there is a finishing process that requires sanding out the imperfections, chips, dings, and anything else until it is made perfect. I believe God is not above initiating - yes, I said **initiating** – circumstances in our lives for the purpose of sanding out the imperfections of our faith – which is our lack of trust in Him. Deuteronomy 32:39 is a foundational Scripture for my position on this aspect of God’s character, “*Now see that I, even I, am He, and there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; nor is there any who can deliver from My hand.*”

I believe this life we are given is to make one long series of choices. The first choice is whether or not to believe in God. For those that do make that choice to believe, God presents a continuous series of choices for the rest of our life for the purpose of preparing us for eternal life with Him. Because as the finisher of our faith, He knows where He wants us to arrive. Therefore, He is not above allowing temporary pain and suffering to wake us up to important truths of Who He is as our God. He introduces or allows circumstances to make us aware of where we are in our faith in Him and for Him to demonstrate over and over again to us His faithfulness and trustworthiness as Lord and Savior. In our story in today’s reading, I have no problem with the possibility that Jesus caused the tough seas the disciples were dealing with. I don’t know if that is what happened, but whether Jesus caused the seas to be rough or allowed Satan to stir them up, in the end Jesus was in complete control, so He made the choice to let the situation be as it is – what we need to understand was His purpose for making this choice was rooted in goodness.

The next segment of the story is Jesus is watching the disciples struggle in the rough seas and **chooses** to walk out on the lake to help His friends. This is what Jesus does as a Savior – He saves! He doesn’t have to, but He **chooses** to. Why? –

Because He loves His friends – He loves every one of you. Notice what His reply is to their fears of who He is as He is walking on the water, “*Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid.*” If you don’t take anything else from this lecture, commit this response to your memory as a life verse. Jesus promised in the great commission in Matthew 28 that He would be with us always until the end of the age. God promised in Deuteronomy and Joshua that He would never leave us or forsake us. Psalm 18:30 tells us God’s way is perfect. 1 John 4:8 assures us God is love. 1 John 4:18 confirms there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. Do you want to know why you can take courage in the face of your stormy seas? Because God is with you always, and if God is with you always, His perfect love has the power to cast out all the fear in your circumstances. Jesus *chose* to walk out on the water to prove His faithfulness to the disciples as their Lord and Savior. He *chose* to go to the cross to be yours and my Savior.

Only Matthew’s version of this story includes Peter stepping out in faith and walking on the water towards Jesus. Many Bible scholars believe Mark’s Gospel is really Peter’s Gospel told to John Mark. If this is the case, I can see why Peter would not want this part of the story added for two reasons. First, the fact that he was able to walk on water might divert the glory of what Jesus had done. Secondly, he may have not wanted to tell a story of his failure.

For me, this vignette was one of the key stories where my heart and mind started to change about Peter. As I have said before, in my early days of a Christian, I didn’t think much of Peter – he was just a blow-hard big mouth who was weak in faith. Well as the Lord raised up a spiritual mirror to me causing me to recognize that my opinion of Peter was really a self-assessment of me, I began to develop an appreciation for him. Did anyone else in the boat show a willingness to walk on the water? I’m certain Peter’s boldness and passion were two of the Lord’s favorite qualities in him. He saw through the sin-damaged parts of his

character and saw the final version of Peter in the Spirit. He was willing to put up with his flaws because He knew what an amazing man of God he would become. Do you know He looks at each of you this way? He sees beyond your rough edges, failures, and flaws and sees the final product. Each of you is a cherished possession to Him, and He is thrilled to walk with you in your mess because He knows where you will end up at the end of your journey. Jon Courson has a great saying, *“Because love sees more, love sees less.”*

Once again, Peter had a choice – he could have been like the rest of the disciples and stayed in the boat in fear, or He could choose to step out in faith and obey the Lord’s command to come to Him. Peter was able to walk on the water because His eyes were fixed on Jesus. What caused him to sink? - The distractions of his circumstances – the wind kicked up. Again, I have no problem with the thought that Jesus initiated the wind to teach Peter the lesson that when we divert our eyes from Him, we begin to sink. Peter called out *“Lord save me”*, and the Lord had a choice to make. He could have said, *“Nope, you’ve let me down for the last time, Peter. You’re on your own.”* That’s not what the Lord did, did He? Peter asked Him to save him, and Jesus, as He always does, lived up to His title as Savior – He saved him. Once they’re in the boat, Jesus looked at Peter and told him, *“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”* What do you think Jesus’ tone of voice was like in this statement to Peter? It should tell you a lot about what your opinion of God and His attitude towards you. If you think it was in a stern and condemning tone, then I am sorry that this is your concept of God. I believe God looks at all of us as His children. When you see a toddler taking his first steps, do you yell and condemn him when he falls? – No, you gently encourage him and try to help him get back up and walk some more, right? I believe that is the mindset of God in our lessons in life. He is not angry with us – His objective is to build our

faith and trust in Him. He doesn't do this through anger and condemnation. He does this through love and encouragement.

The end of this vignette tells us that after they got to the other side, the people recognized Jesus, and they came out in droves for healing. They begged Him to let them just touch His cloak, and we learn Jesus chose to allow them to do just that. Every one of those who made the choice to take that step of faith was healed. I have often wondered how many things I have put myself through and the resulting suffering that occurred would have happened if I had just made the choice to seek the Lord for His help or healing. Even by not choosing to seek the Lord, we really have made a choice – to not take a step of faith and ask for help.

As I review these three vignettes, I see the following about God through Jesus:

God is a compassionate God – Matthew 14:14

God's mindset is always to provide for us – Matthew 4:16-21

God sees our struggles – Mark 6:48

God is a saving God – Matthew 14:31

God's choices are always evidence of His goodness – Mark 6:34

One final comment about this Christmas season – if we watch the Hallmark channels, we see idyllic scenery with beautiful people looking and finding that perfect Christmas spirit experience. The reality is that for some of us, this Christmas season is not going to look anything like a Hallmark movie. Some of us are facing serious issues that are going to challenge our faith and trust in God. I totally understand how questions arise like, “*Where are You, God?*” I would like to offer you something I do in these tough times. There are things about what I understand to be true about the Bible and the Christian faith that I have zero doubt about – the Holy Spirit has confirmed the undeniable truth of God's true character

to me through His Word. There are, though, things I don't understand – suffering that seems unnecessary and sometimes even cruel. I've made the commitment that I don't let the things I don't understand nullify, invalidate, or diminish the things I do understand. God will ultimately explain the things I can't explain in His perfect time. That is my personal concept of faith. For those of you who might be in that time where you are questioning God's goodness and love, my heart goes out to you. Please know you are not alone – even if it feels like you are. One of the components of the Bible I have no doubt about is what this season is supposed to be celebrating – the birth of Jesus. His arrival was humble and meek – nothing perfect and nothing idyllic. He was and is the embodiment, of a servant-based providing God. He said His burden is light – did you ever think that it's amazing our God would even be willing to carry our burden? Please consider making the choice to take that step out of the boat in the midst of your stormy seas and go to Jesus just like Peter did. Making such a choice may seem like you're being asked to walk on water, so my prayer is you will hear Him say to you what He said to His beloved friends, *“Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.”*

Merry Christmas, everyone. Let's pray.