

Sacrifice It All: Give Up Nothing

1 Kings 17:8–16

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What does it mean to be a Christian in today's world? That's a pretty common question today, one that the church is wrestling with in different ways. Those of us who were raised in the church, or those who are old enough to remember the days when it was simply understood that every red-blooded American believed in God and Jesus, we're real familiar with what sociologists called "Christendom."

During the years of Christendom, the church in general flourished. Clergy were respected. Prayer in school was the norm. Good was good. Sin was bad. People went to church a lot, partly because everything was closed on Sunday, there were only three channels: ABC, CBS, and NBC, and the Beatles hadn't yet made the debut on Ed Sullivan.

Ahh the glory days. I don't personally remember them, but I've heard about them. But those "glory days" are gone. Vanished. Kaput. In today's world, the Bible is a good book, Jesus is a good guy, and God is watching us from a distance. Oh, and church is either a quaint thing your grandma did, or a hornet's nest filled with Bible-thumpin' bigots, holier-than-thou's, and hypocrites.

What happened? Why did the "good ol' days" disappear? Well, the truth is, there are a LOT of reasons for the demise of Christendom, but in my research I think most of it can be summed up in this statement: Because the church forgot that it was supposed to be out on mission with Jesus. And so we stayed home...or more accurately, we stayed in our church buildings.

In other words, being a Christian in today's world means that you're out on the road with Jesus doing mission. Now, exactly what that mission is for you is beyond the scope of my message this morning. I'm sure Pastor Katie and some of the other church leaders would be happy to meet with you to help you discover where Jesus is calling you to be "missioning" with him. Instead, this morning, I want to talk about what it might be like for you to be out on mission with Jesus...and what that calling might require of you. Which brings us to our story today. Elijah and the widow woman.

Tell the story

Generally, when you hear this story preached, the theme is something about obedience. And that indeed is one of the themes. But this morning I want to look at something else. I want to look at this story to help you understand what it might mean to be out on mission with Jesus.

As I read through this passage prayerfully, I saw four things Jesus might call on you to do when you're out on mission with him.

You Might Be Called On To Take The Word Of God To Your "Neighbor."

First, let me say that your neighbor might be someone next door to you, or it might be like “Elijah’s neighbor,” the widow woman, who lived in a different neighborhood, was a different race, and had a different ethnicity. The scriptures say that God commanded a widow in Zerephath to provide him food, but apparently the widow didn’t get the memo. When Elijah came into town he was tasked with taking the word of God to her.

Now, Elijah had nothing in common with this woman. They didn’t share the same religion. They didn’t share the same customs. They didn’t share the same holidays. About the only thing they did share was their language, and I’d be willing to bet both thought the other had a funny accent. But that didn’t matter. Elijah was committed to living his life by the commands of God, so when God said, “Hit the road and go talk to that woman,” he did.

Following Jesus in the mission field may mean that you’re called to take the gospel to a “neighbor” you don’t really “get.” But if you’re on mission with Jesus, you may discover you’re called to have some pretty interesting conversations about God with the people you’d least expect.

You might be called on to share sacrificially to support the work of God.

Now, put yourself in the widow’s shoes. She’s not a wealthy woman and anything God might ask of her materially would be, well, let’s say it would be a hardship. So, when Elijah shows up and asks for some fresh homemade bread, she’s a bit put out. The fact is, it wasn’t convenient to share what she had to support the work of God. It wasn’t in her budget. She was broke. But God said, “Give” anyway ... even if she couldn’t afford it. Deal with it.

Except around Memorial Day, sacrifice isn’t a good American theme. We live in what Madonna rightfully described as a Material World. The majority of the folks in our society today are over our heads in consumer debt. Oh, we may not all be struggling financially from it, but many are carrying enough debt that much of our sacrificial giving is made to Citi-Corp. But debt isn’t the only issue. We’re also rather obsessed with “stuff.” That’s why one of the fastest growth industries in the US is the Personal Storage Unit so when our garages are full, we can keep the rest of our “stuff” somewhere else.

But following Jesus in mission may mean that you’re called on to give sacrificially to support the work of the Lord – sacrificially. Which brings us to the next point.

You might be called to give up your personal comfort.

So, the widow woman shared her very last loaf of bread with the man of God. It might be pushing the point to say she gave it joyfully, but as the vast majority of scholars, theologians, and preachers have told us over and over, she was obedient.

And what did she get in return? Well, there are some preachers around who will tell you that if you sacrifice it all, you’re really giving up nothing. God will bless you a hundredfold and you’ll live happily ever after.

Tell that to the widow woman. Oh sure, she got to eat, but I want you to imagine, just for a moment, just this one thing: Imagine eating bread and water three meals a day for the next 1,095 days ... that's 3,285 meals of bread and water.

—PAUSE—

Oh sure, compared to the alternative it sounds pretty good. Unless it was *you* who has to eat bread and drink water for the next three years. I'm sure she'd have been *much* more content if she'd had beans and rice to go with it. And maybe some green vegetables. Perhaps some butter. And how about some roasted chicken?

But sometimes, God calls us to be obedient and still give up what's comfortable to *us* for the sake of the Kingdom.

Which begs the question, what comforts or preferences might you have to give up for the sake of the Kingdom?

Well, let me assure you that you're probably not going to have to eat bread and water for the next 3,000 meals. On the other hand, you might really have to start taking what Jesus said seriously ... which will *not* make you comfortable. Things like let the dead bury their own dead and if you put your hand on the plow and look back then you're not fit for the Kingdom of God. When most of us think about Jesus, our image is "Jesus shepherd, meek and mild." But if that's your image of Jesus, you've succumbed to a popular gospel, not the one of the Bible. Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus did *not* die so that you could be comfortable. You hear a lot these days to the contrary, though. Many preachers are out there telling their flocks that if they'll just claim the "promises" in the Bible that they'll be healthy, wealthy, and wise. Well, when I look at the New Testament, I see that they're right about 1 out of 3 times. You claim the promises in the Bible and you'll be wise. But healthy and wealthy? What do you do about these sayings in the Bible then?

All men will hate you because of me. —Matthew 10:22

Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. —John 15:20

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. —Acts 14:22

When I speak to those who claim that Christians are promised all sorts of perks in this life, I just ask them to show me a single New Testament example of someone who became an obedient Christian and who went on to be either healthy or wealthy ... because there are none. Instead, if you're an effective follower of Jesus, you should expect to be treated like Jesus ... or Paul ... or Peter ... or James ... none of whom were spared any sort of trial or persecution. Paul was afflicted with disease. Peter spent a good deal of his ministry being beaten and imprisoned. And James was arrested and impaled on a sword.

All that's to say that even though it's pretty unlikely that being on mission with Jesus is going to cost you your life or being imprisoned, you can expect to be called to give up some of your comforts *even if you're obedient*.

And lastly,

You might be called on to help build the Kingdom of God.

The widow woman in this passage was called on to share sacrificially for the sake of the Kingdom and when she was obedient she was called on to give up being comfortable for the sake of the Kingdom. But all of that was for one purpose: she was being called on to help build and establish the Kingdom of God.

Being on mission with Jesus means just that. It means you're called to build the Kingdom. "Go make disciples," he said, "In Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Translated that means to your neighbor, to your neighborhood, to your community and beyond. But before you go, you'd better know that when you're obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ, that you'll be called on to take the word of God to your "neighbor," to live an obedient and sacrificial life; to give up being too comfortable; all in the name and for the sake of building up the Kingdom of God. Jesus didn't say it would be easy. He just said it would be worth it.