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How Life's Pressures affect Good Judgement

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Mark 6:14-29

In the opera Faust, there is a fight to the finish between Satan and the young man Valentine. During the course of the fight, Satan breaks Valentine's sword and he stands poised to slay him. But the young boy takes the two pieces of his sword and fashions them into a cross. Confronted with this symbol of faith, Satan becomes immobilized and Valentine is saved. It is an interesting concept: A dramatic demonstration of faith. Unfortunately such resolution of faith does not always save you. In fact, it might be your deathbed. It was John's. Take a look at the story with me. John the Baptist has been arrested by King Herod. And why? Because John kept reminding Herod that even the king is not above the law. He said, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

So this was the king's egregious sin. He had stolen his brother's wife, Herodias. Now, it would be understandable if this were where the story ended. The king didn't like a desert preacher calling him a sinner so he had him beheaded. Simple enough. But life is not always simple. There is usually more to a story than meets the eye. And in this case we learn that Herod actually liked to listen to John, thought he was a holy man, and protected him. Perhaps, in Herod's mind, putting him under lock and key was a way of removing him from harm's way.

So if the king was offended by John's outbursts, it was not enough to warrant death. The king feared the prophet and dared not harm him. But life has a funny way of pressuring us to do things we would not normally do. This is a story about a man who caved due to social pressures. Let me ask you: How do life's pressures affect your judgment? What can we learn from this deplorable moment in the life of this king, this moment when the king caved? We learn...

We learn first, that puzzling problems require conscientious decisions. There were two brothers in Georgia during the 1950's. One decided that in opposition to the dominant culture of the day, he was going to participate in the formation of a desegregated community. The other worked as an attorney for a prominent law firm. Both were Christians and attended church regularly. As the community formed and social pressure forced the community into court proceedings, the one brother asked his attorney brother to help them with the legal work. The brother refused, saying that he could lose his job. He pressured his brother to help with a reminder that he was a Christian. The lawyer responded, "I will follow Jesus to his cross, but it is his cross. I have no need to be crucified." His brother replied, "Then you are an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple."

I have found that most of the answers we apply to the problems in life are at best only the second and third best answers; they are not the first. Why is this? It is because we don't want to address puzzling moral dilemmas head on because it means facing them heart on. Look at Herod. He finds himself in a difficult situation. He has made an oath which according to the cultural and legal customs of the time he must keep. But keeping the oath means killing a man of God. Does he keep the oath or execute the prophet? Now it appears that he is confronted with two choices. And it seems obvious that the best possible answer is to break his oath and save the man of God. But this is not the best answer to this issue. The best answer is to get rid of his wife, Herodias. Not because she is a source of contention but because she is not his wife.

When you find yourself in a puzzling moral dilemma it is a wise thing to look at what got you in the dilemma in the first place. What warning did you not heed? King Herod's problem is that he would not heed the original warning. When this happens we slowly work our way into the woods. Finally we are lost and we do not know what got us there in the first place. Is the issue my wife? Is the issue the oath I made? Is the issue that you don't persecute holy men? No, the issue is still and always will be the first one: You are in an adulterous relationship. You have stolen your brother's wife and you must repent.

This brings us to the second lesson: Promises made in haste create great waste. A greater example of this can be found in the words of George W. Bush's campaign promise, "Red my lips, no new taxes." It was a great line at the moment and helped in his election but it was his undoing in his reelection campaign.

Promises and decisions made in haste. They will bring down empires, topple kings, destroy businesses, ruin marriages, cripple lives, drive wedges between us and our children. These decisions can haunt us for years to come. When Herod heard about Jesus and all that he was doing he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead." Herod thought that God had brought John back to life to get him. He knew his acts were wrong and they hung around his neck like an albatross.

What got Herod in this predicament? It was a pretty girl, & no ordinary girl. This was his wife's daughter, his stepdaughter. He was so pleased with her provocative dance that he promised her anything. She runs out, consults with her mother, and then makes the damaging request before the king and all the guests: The head of John the Baptist.

I suppose that Herodias felt embarrassed by John. He would not stop pointing out their sin so she concocted this scheme to hang John. History does not record for us what happened to their marriage after this incident, but I can assure you that their marriage was not a bed of roses. Whatever their situation it is obvious that the King's conscience

bothered him thereafter. What a waste: A marriage is destroyed by a covetous powerful brother. A mother uses her daughter in a murderous scheme. A prophet is killed. A king commits murder to save his honor over a stupid oath. What a waste all because a powerful man was not able to see his original error and made a promise in haste.

This brings us to our third and final lesson: pressures in life can affect good judgment.

Now let me tell you, it doesn't matter your station in life. All of us experience pressures and they come at us every day. And these pressures will influence the decisions you make. Lloyd J. Ogilve, in his book "Life Without Limits," tells the story of a pastor who in the space of one week heard the following comments from various people:

--A young man said, "My parents have fantastic goals for me to take over the family business. It's not what I want to do, but their pressure is unbearable."

--A husband said, "My wife is never satisfied. Whatever I do, however much I make, it's never enough. Life with her is like living in a pressure cooker with the lid fastened down and the heat on high."

--A secretary said, pointing to her phone, "That little black thing is driving me silly. At the other end of the line are people who make impossible demands and think they are the only people alive."

--A middle-aged wife said, "My husband thinks my faith is naive. When I feel his resistance to Christ, I wonder if I'm wrong and confused. As a result, I've developed two lives; one with him and one when I'm with my Christian friends."

--An elderly woman said, "My sister thinks she has all the answers about the faith and tries to convince me of her point of view. I feel pressured to become her brand of Christian, but I keep thinking if it means being like her, I don't want it at all. When she calls, I just put the phone on my shoulder and let her rant on while I do other things. A half-hour later, she's still on the line blasting away, but I still feel pressure."

--A young pastor at a clergy conference said, "I hardly know who I am any more. There are so many points of view in my congregation, I can't please them all. Everyone wants to capture me for his camp and get me to shape the church around his convictions. The pressure makes me want to leave the ministry."

All of these persons have one thing in common. They are being pressured by other people. We all experience people-pressure. The question is how will it affect our judgment? That is the question Herod faced. After making an oath to a pretty young girl that she could have up to half of his kingdom, she surprised him and asked for the head of the Baptist. Mark 6:26 indicates that the King was thrown into distress, he knew it was wrong, but because of his oath and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. He sent the executioner and on a platter was delivered the head of a holy man.

When you find yourself in the middle of a difficult situation, one which requires you to make an important decision, remember first that puzzling problems require conscientious decisions, and second, promises made in haste create great waste, and finally that the pressures of life can affect good judgment. Amen.