

John Decided to Defer— John 1:15–35

Deference is part of every human culture. It is the way we establish and exhibit the relationships that people have to each other and, to a certain extent, it is the way we express who is more important and who is less important in a society.

For example, in countries where there are monarchs, if you are going to have an audience with a king or a queen, you are almost always instructed on the etiquette of that occasion in advance. You are told when to speak, what you can say, how to stand and when to bow or curtsy — all the things you are supposed to do. In some cultures with royalty, you are not allowed to turn your back upon a king or a queen, so if you leave before the monarch does, you have to back all the way out of the room. That’s a form of deference, of showing who has the power and who is the royalty and who is in charge.

In America, of course, we don’t have royalty or rules for royalty, but we do have very strong patterns of deference. It is, perhaps, most obvious in speaking order when a group of people are together — who speaks first and who speaks last and, especially, who can interrupt whom. So, for example, in most companies, if you are an employee and the boss interrupts you in the middle of a story or the middle of a sentence, the deference order means that you keep quiet and the boss goes ahead and says whatever the boss is going to say. Generally, in our society, women defer to men, children defer to parents, poor people defer to richer people, younger people generally defer to older people and employees defer to employers. Generally, minorities defer to those who are part of a majority. If we expect someone to defer and that person doesn’t, we have a whole series of sayings and ugly names. For example, children are to be seen, but not heard. You hear men call a woman who interrupts “pushy,” but a man who interrupts “a leader.”

It is amazing and exceptional when someone chooses to defer who doesn’t have to, when someone who has power, authority and position and could just keep talking, doesn’t and grants the floor to

someone else. There was a man like that in the Bible who was called John the Baptist. He wasn’t a Baptist by denomination, for that was long before modern denominations were invented. So don’t think there was John the Baptist, Thaddeus the Presbyterian and Peter the Episcopalian.

John was a man who preached a powerful message of repentance, and thousands of people came out to hear him and be baptized by him in the Jordan River as an expression before God and the public of their repentance of their sins.

John was an amazing and an interesting man in so many different ways. He was a popular prophet and a wonderful man, although also a little weird. All four of the New Testament biographies of Jesus incorporate a major section telling the story of John the Baptist. Especially interesting is Mark’s Gospel because, unlike the one before it and the one after it, Mark does not begin with the birth of Jesus, which you would expect in any biography. In fact, Mark never even mentions the story of the birth of Jesus. Instead, the Gospel of Mark begins with the story of John.

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” — “a voice of one crying in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to

him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will bap-

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tize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:1-8)

John was something of a wild man. He lived out in the desert, not a sandy Sahara-type desert, but a wilderness of crags and rocks and scrubby growth, a place where even to this day very few people, other than Nomads, live. He wore clothes that were made out of camel’s hair. It was rough and crude cloth, not to be confused with an expensive camel’s hair jacket from an exclusive department store. He ate locusts and honey — perhaps a low fat diet, but not my idea of a normal diet.

His preaching was as wild as his appearance. He was a prophet, and prophets are in-your-face kind of people. Prophets are those who like to tell people what is wrong with them. John told people right out that they were vipers. He told them that they were sinners and named the sins they were committing in their businesses, families and personal lives. He not only named the sins, he named the people. John was especially tough and direct on religious leaders. He considered them to be the worst of all; they were typically arrogant and self-righteous.

People loved him! He was a great populist, and they came by the thousands to see him and to hear him. John was a spellbinding speaker. Mark records that virtually everyone in the city of Jerusalem marched out into the wilderness in order to experience John. They came from all over the province of Judea because he was a powerful presence, a sight to see, a great equalizer of people, an articulate and captivating communicator. And, he was a prophet of God. They counted it a rare thing for a true prophet to come along; there hadn’t been one in generations, and they wanted to see and hear him.

John was a charismatic leader; he swayed the crowds of people; they listened to him and believed him. When he told them to repent and change their ways and be baptized, they did it. You begin to realize that John could have gotten the crowds to do almost anything. He could have raised an army, won a political office and become a very wealthy and powerful man.

But instead of greatness for himself, John decided to defer. It is one of the greatest decisions recorded in the Bible. It was a humble decision, and it was a decision from which we can learn to make our great decisions in our lives.

John decided to take all that he had and to le-

verage it for the benefit of someone else. He transferred his credibility over to Jesus. Understand that at this point in time, in terms of popularity, Jesus was a nobody. He was completely unknown. He had not performed miracles; he had not preached scintillating sermons to large crowds of people. His total number of followers was zero; nobody knew about him; nobody cared about him; the best that could be said of him was that he was an obscure carpenter from a little town called Nazareth. By contrast, John really was somebody. Everyone knew him. He was even discussed and feared in the royal court.

Put all that together and you begin to understand the significance of John before the crowd saying, “I’m nobody. The one that you really want is Jesus. Look, there he is! He is so much better than I am that I am not worthy to tie or untie his shoes. I’m nobody. I’m not even good enough to be his servant.”

The crowd believed him and turned to look at Jesus. They listened to Jesus and it was the beginning of everything that Christianity was to become. In the popular mind, it was John who made Jesus great.

Now by certain human standards, John could be judged a fool for doing this. He gave away the farm. He walked away from a great career. His humility, some would say, really should be spelled stupidity — but not by divine standards. By the standards of heaven, John was truly great. Humility is a high virtue. He made right choices. John was a great and a wonderful man.

So what did he get for this? You might expect that the next chapter of the story would be the exciting and rewarding chapter of the story. But that’s not it at all. Instead, John’s biography ends with loss and with tragic death.

To see what immediately happened, we go back to our Bibles, this time to the Gospel of John written by another man with this familiar name. In John 1:35-42 we read about the next day after John told the crowds that they should turn to Jesus.

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you

want?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

"Come," he replied, "and you will see."

So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.

Do you get what happened? When John deferred to Jesus, all of his friends and followers left him and transferred their loyalty to Jesus. In the morning John was number one in popularity, attracting huge crowds and loyal fans, and by sunset the next day he was a has-been, yesterday's star.

As if that were not enough, his story went from bad to worse. As a prophet he publicly had denounced the adultery, divorce and remarriage of Herod the king. But even King Herod was afraid to touch John because of his popularity with the masses of people. Herod knew that if he were to threaten John in any way, the crowds might turn against the king. And so he just took it, although the new queen seethed at these accusations of impropriety and immorality.

And then the opportunity came. For once John deferred to Jesus, the crowds weren't following John anymore. Gone was the risk that the crowds would turn against the crown. And so, at the request of the queen, King Herod gave the order that John was to be arrested and imprisoned and beheaded.

You see, humility does not always end well. Deferring to someone else does not guarantee later exaltation, just as doing right can leave a person worse off than before.

There is a lesson here for us. The lesson is that when we make our decisions to do what is good, let us not think that we will make life easier, because, in fact, we may make life even harder.

A couple that had been life-long missionaries to Africa came back by ship to New York City, which

was to become their retirement home. They had given their lives in the service of God to the people of Africa. They had very little money; their health was marginal; the best they could afford was steerage class on the transatlantic journey.

When they arrived in New York City there was no one there to meet them, no one to welcome them back home. But on the pier there were thousands of people, a large band and fireworks shooting up into the air to celebrate the arrival of another passenger on that ship, President Teddy Roosevelt, who had been in Africa on a big game hunting safari.

The missionary became disappointed and bitter. He resented the fact that he had given his life for God in Africa and no one welcomed him home, but someone who had gone there to shoot animals got such a large reception. And, as bitterness often does, it seethed inside of him and started to eat him up from the inside. Recognizing that his bad attitude was self-destructive and un-Christian, he decided he had to confront God with what he consid-

ered to be God's failure to him. He told his wife that he was going to go into the bedroom of their New York flat and talk to God.

Hours later he came out and he had a peace about him that she could sense. When she asked him what he had said to God, he answered, "I told God that I resented not having anyone to welcome me home the way they welcomed Mr. Roosevelt." She asked, "And what did God say to you?" He told her that God had said, "You're not home yet."

You see, the rewards for humility and for right decisions are not always immediately coming; sometimes they do not even come within this lifetime. But that is not in any way to imply that God has forgotten or that he does not care. The rewards did not come quickly for John and maybe they will not come quickly for us either.

Why did John decide to do what he did? Why did he step down so that Jesus could step up? Why did he defer and give away everything that he could have kept? I think there is no single answer to that, for like all human decisions, there are complex reasons behind what we choose to do.

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John decided what he decided because purpose was more important to him than popularity. This man knew why he was alive. He stated it — he had come to prepare the way for the Messiah. He knew what his life was all about and it was more important to him to fulfill his purpose than to be popular with the crowds. Even if he lost all his followers, he knew it was good if it meant he fulfilled his purpose.

What's your purpose? If I were to say, "Take five minutes and write down what is the purpose of your life," what would you say? It is very difficult to make right decisions if we do not even know why we are alive. Having a purpose is extremely important. A life can be wasted if it has no reason to be, if it has the wrong purpose.

I would encourage you before making the most important decisions of life to know why you live; to think it through, to pray it through, to write it down and to live the way John lived — by purpose, not by popularity.

Add to that, John decided to do what he did because doing right was more important to him than his life. He knew what was right; he knew what was wrong. He was convinced that Herod's divorce and remarriage were morally wrong and so he said it. That cost him his life.

Now comes an even tougher question for us: What are you willing to die for? What "right" is more important to you than life itself? One old sage said that unless you know what you will die for, you'll probably never really know what to live for.

John decided what he decided because true greatness for him was defined in terms of Jesus. He was a Christian in the sense that Jesus Christ was the center of his life, and so what really mattered to John was not the clothes that he wore (rough camel

cloth), or the food that he ate (locusts dipped in wild honey) or the place in which he lived (he didn't even have a house but lived out in the wilderness). Those things just didn't matter to him. For him greatness was all about Jesus: knowing Jesus, promoting Jesus and pointing other people to Jesus.

The question comes around to us again, "What is really important in our lives?" Frankly, if we are honest about it, we will probably say that what is really important to us includes the clothes that we wear, the food that we eat and the houses and apartments in which we live. But let us learn the Christian way from John who decided what is really important — Jesus.

Now all of this is not just about John's decisions, it's about our decisions. It's about our present attitudes, our future choices and the great decisions of our lives that we are making all the time.

When deciding, try to answer these questions:

1. What is life's purpose?
2. Is doing what is right your greatest value?
3. Do you define your worth in terms of Jesus?

There is not one of us who does not face great personal decisions which must be made. May your great decisions be good . . . and Christian!

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