

A Battle of Will Power

Luke 13:31-35 (NIV)

³¹ At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." ³² He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' ³³ In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! ³⁴ "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁵ Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

"If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything!" How many times have heard that sentiment or something like it. It is an affirmation of mind over matter. If I just focus hard enough and long enough, I can do things that I think are otherwise impossible. It's a battle of willpower. If I'm determined enough and strengthen my resolve, then it will happen. But is that true? Is all that we need to accomplish something is to stick with it, be determined? Determination is what is tested in our gospel reading for today.

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." (verse 31) I want to be charitable to the Pharisees who said this to Jesus, that they were actually warning Jesus of a plot by Herod against his life and so they were looking out for his bodily welfare, upholding the fifth commandment, but the evidence and past precedence suggests otherwise.

This is what we know about Herod the tetrarch. He was one of the sons of Herod the Great, the one who was ruling when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He was not a benevolent man. He was kind of a creep. He stole his brother's wife, Herodias, and she was in on it. This was public knowledge, and John the Baptist preached out against what they had done. This landed John in prison under Herod's orders. Herodias wanted John dead, but Herod was afraid to execute him because he knew the people considered him a prophet. So instead of immediately executing him, Herod protected John by simply keeping him in prison. He liked John. "When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him." (Mark 6:20) Yet, when the opportunity presented itself, Herodias used her daughter as leverage to get her wish and have John executed. This was not what Herod wanted.

When Herod heard about Jesus and the miracles he was doing, he thought for sure that this miracle worker was John the Baptist raised from the dead. If Herod had not wanted to kill John, then why would he be plotting to kill Jesus? The evidence doesn't add up. Maybe it was an empty threat to get Jesus to move on so as to not stir up trouble in his territory, a sly way to get rid of Jesus without having to get his hands bloody. Add on top of that that the Pharisees had already been plotting with the supporters of Herod to kill Jesus for a while now. If the death threat was real, they probably wouldn't have said anything because they wanted Jesus to die. Instead, they were most likely trying to lure Jesus to Jerusalem because with their supporters there, they could probably get him executed. Jesus' enemies were subtly opposing him, feeding him information by which they hoped to get him to leave.

What would you do if that news had come to you? You were warned: someone wants to kill you for doing things in the name of God. Would you back off, take a break, and let the situation cool down? How about if your faith is challenged? Do you leap into attack mode to defend what you believe or do you try to calm the situation, maybe even retreat so as to keep a religious debate from breaking out? Does your determination fuel your godly living?

For some of us, opposition does fuel our determination. If someone challenges your faith or makes a sloppy, careless statement about what you know is truth, you are right there to adamantly defend God and his Word. Maybe you were blindsided by a comment that you had never heard before and were unprepared to defend. Your faith was opposed, and your determination to prove what you believe is right sends you digging in the Bible, looking for the passage that clearly explains and backs up what you believe. You ask your pastor about the comment. You become even more determined to defend your faith in the face of opposition. In this way, our will fuels us to find the true and correct answer instead of letting someone's words roll over us.

For others of us, though, a death threat might make my determination of being a follower of Christ wane. I don't want to die just because this person doesn't like what I believe. My determination to remain true to my God and what I believe drops, and I lose that battle of will power.

For when our determination to follow God and what his Word says is drained in the face of opposition, we need someone who does not back down. We need someone who refuses to give up the good fight no matter how hostile the opposition is. [Jesus] replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (verses 32-33)

That's Jesus battling for us. He is determined to go and do what he came to do. He knows that continuing on in his mission means death in Jerusalem. His opposition, his enemies, will get what they want, but he shows us his determination to carry out his plan, his purpose, of doing what must be done in order to save all humankind from the torments of everlasting punishment in hell. He will not be intimidated. He would not let the Pharisees stop him. He won't let Herod or any other ruler stop him. He won't let an army stop him. He won't let walls stop him. He will reach his goal. You need proof? Look at the demons that he is driving out. Look at the crippled people who now walk because of him, the blind who can see, the deaf who can hear, those who had lifelong diseases who are now cured, the dead he has raised. If he can do these things, can anything on this world stop him?

Determination in the face of opposition, we get that. For some of us it fuels us to work harder, longer. We will do it until it gets done right to prove the opposition wrong. But what about determination in the face of rejection? "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." (verse 34) In the face of opposition, Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem to die, but he knows that in doing so, many people who he came to save will refuse to be saved.

In the battle of wills, I will work harder to prove what I believe is right when my beliefs about God are opposed, but what about when I am threatened with rejection? I won't talk to you anymore if you do not accept me as I am. How many parents have faced that when their children go away from the instruction of the Lord that they taught them? They move in with a boyfriend or girlfriend. How many parents cave on telling them that this is wrong, sinful behavior because they are afraid that if they do so, that their son or daughter won't talk to them anymore if they say this? How many refuse to tell their gay friend that acting on these impulses is wrong because they might lose them as a friend? How many stay in the same religion purely because if they leave then their family will reject them? If you threaten me with rejection, I am taken aback. I'm conflicted. My determination to live up to God's standards begins to wane. I lose the battle of will power.

Jesus was faced with rejection. You can hear the pain in his voice. How I have longed to gather you to me, but you were not willing. You rejected me. Was he tempted to think, "What's the point? If they are going to reject me, why should I continue on with my mission and die for them?"

But this is Christ's determination. Even knowing that by following through with his mission to save all humankind many will reject him, refuse to be gathered to him, refuse to believe in him, he continues on. He will keep going to Jerusalem knowing that he would die there. Any of us, our determination in the face of rejection would fail us. We couldn't do it. But Christ will not stop. Nothing will stop him. No one can keep him from completing his mission. He may be rejected, but yet you will still see him come. For the Pharisees of his day, they may very well have been there on Palm Sunday when Jesus rode in on the donkey and the people yelled, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." (verse 35) Even if they didn't say it on that day all people will say it when Jesus returns again, not to save the world, but to judge it. On that day every knee will bow and acknowledge him as the one who came in the name of the Lord.

This Sunday, Jesus engaged in a battle of will power. Some oppose him and want him to die. Others reject him even though he is willing to die for them. Instead of losing his will to carry out what God had called him to do, he set his face like flint. He would not quit. Nothing and no one would stop him from reaching Jerusalem. Nothing and no one would stop him from dying in Jerusalem. He is determined to save us all. His determination was ironclad even while ours fades in our determination to live for him. Because of Christ's determination, we are saved from our lack of willpower. Amen.