



According to God's Means

Matthew 11:12-24

We do not think like God. We are not capable to such. We do not have the perspective. We are finite in contrast to the infinite. We know that God is different from our parameters and that we are limited. This is not something would not likely argue against. At the same time, this is the great problem we have with God. We want God to be more like us. That way we might understand God better. If God is so foreign to us, however, why do we think God should act according to our manner of thinking? What reason would we have to expect God to be more like us than like the great Sovereign of the universe?

John the Baptist was a hero from Jesus' perspective. The people esteemed him as a prophet, but at the same time the religious leaders and many who followed their lead did not find him to be anything special. They sought out and found ways to throw criticisms in his direction, so as to classify him as demon possessed. He was too severe in his way of conducting his life, eating strange foods, acting in austere ways, and using clothing that was inappropriate and unworthy of a social position. On the others hand, the same people sought criticisms to cast at Jesus, also to class him as demon possessed, a glutton, or a drunk. This time, they found his association with others as an excuse to implicate him for failing in acceptability before God.

In both cases, it was not God who found them unacceptable. It was the political and religious structures that did. It was the social customs the people had accepted. It was the people invested in a social system that found something uncomfortable in God's message through John and Jesus. It was those who were opposed to the purposes of God, for they were too content with the system of living they had adopted. This system helped and supported them and their way of living. They neither wanted a change in, nor a critique of their position and social standing. They wanted God to act according to the means already established by them and their forefathers, not that God would invent other ways and means that were inconvenient to their habitual ways of living.

It was not that they did not want change. It was not that they liked all about their living and context. They did not like the Romans being in power in their lands. They did not like paying tribute to Caesar. They did not like the economic situation of their people. They did not like the closeness of people who did not worship Yahweh as their only God. They did not like that there were people who ignored what they understood as God's instructions for living. They wanted to change their situation and context into a new experience of God's provision and blessing. They wanted everything according to their plans, however. They wanted change to follow their pleasure and design. They wanted God to act as they deemed appropriate.

That was somewhat presumptuous, wasn't it? They felt they had a right to dictate to God how God could act and who could serve as a prophet. The presumption extended to the message God could share through the prophets, along with the restrictions and instructions God could give the people. God was free to be God, but within the parameters established by the chosen people. Without realizing it, they were reversing the positions of God and a servant nation. They neither saw just how much they were demanding of God, nor that they were making demands of the One they called their Sovereign. They simply had expectations about how God could act and had chained God to imprison the Almighty to their already established ways and means.

They did not recognize that God was no slave to their concepts of God. They did not recognize that their concepts were so fallible in reference to God. They did violence against God without recognizing they were doing so, because they trusted too much in their formulas and routines to raise their sights and look around to perceive the presence and action of God in their midst.

They were surrounded by God's presence, but they did not see or recognize it. They heard in the words of John the Baptist God's message for their lives with a call to repentance, but their enjoyment of their habits and life routines squelched the message. Their discomfort with the implications of John's words impeded their seeking to know whether his message really came from God. There were not happy and did not seek to determine the reality behind his words. God should comfort them, not interfere with their plans, their modes of action, and the routines of their living. They did not want this discomfort as divine instruction or correction for their means and formulas for living and treating one another.

John said they should help one another as if they were one. John said they should repent of their sins, not considering themselves as good enough. He demanded they stop taking advantage of others and that they demonstrate real love. He demanded a real change in their lives in contrast to a dependence on being descendants of Abraham. Jesus asked something similar. He asked that love, grace, forgiveness, and dependence on God be the markers of their lives. He demanded that those who wanted to call themselves God's people evidence these same markers in their own lives. He required they begin to live according to the demands of God, without contenting themselves with talking about God. He called for a transformation of life from the acceptable molds of their society toward the means acceptable to God.

While they wanted to force others to act according to their modalities, they did not accept changing their ways to adapt themselves to God. Such a way of living was not free of cost. For John it cost his very life. For Jesus it was the same. When the disciples talked about finding their place in Jesus' reign, he mentioned it would also come with a very high price tag on their lives. This was no simple message of comfort. This was a challenge to their faith and dependence on God. They were recognizing God's message and this would exact a cost from them. According to their understanding of the good news, they would have to accept their responsibility for the same message, even when it countered their acceptable ways of living.

They were too comfortable with their way of life to accept that God wanted something different for them. God wanted something more. God called them to change the complete structure of their lives with all their complacency. Their sense of superiority distanced them from God and God's directions. They could not be bothered with recognizing that God expected more of them. They could not be bothered to verify what God called them to do and be. They did not worry with Gideon to determine if it were or not God's message they heard through John and Jesus. They were too comfortable in their way of life to allow God to interfere with their system of comfort. They preferred to cast accusations at others and point to others' failings than to see themselves in God's mirror.

If only we were different! We have also received traditions that define appropriate ways of living. We are also tempted to relax in our routines of comfort without reflecting enough on the demands of God's love, grace, and forgiveness. We remain secure and pampered in our ways of life without giving God room to disturb us. When will we be ready to listen to the gospel's way of life? It should change our way of living until we live according to the means of living God deems appropriate.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*