

Mark 6:14–29 — The Death Of John The Baptist

March 31, 2019

As a church, we are studying our way through the Gospel of Mark. Today we resume our study in Mark 6:14. This is the story of the death of John the Baptist. John was the last Old Testament prophet. According to Jesus, he was the greatest man that lived up to that time in history. We often underestimate John the Baptist, but when Jesus calls him the greatest man, we should take note of what Jesus tells us. Incidentally, everything in the Gospel of Mark is about Jesus. This is the only part of the Gospel of Mark that is not directly about Jesus. If Mark thought John the Baptist was the only other person worth talking about in his Gospel, that means John the Baptist was a great man.

Let's remember the mission of John the Baptist's life was to prepare the way for Jesus. He called people to confess their sin and to repent of their sin. He baptized people in the Jordan River when they called out to God for repentance. John was incredibly popular.

By the time we get to Mark 6, John the Baptist was in prison. Luke 3:19-20 tells us John the Baptist's arrest and imprisonment took place soon after John baptized Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. At this point, when Mark gives us this flashback, John was a prisoner for about a year.

As we work through this story, we are going to look at it from Herod's point of view. We will look at Herod's fascination, Herod's family, Herod's fear, and Herod's folly.

Herod's Fascination

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." Mark 6:14–16 (ESV)

King Herod heard of it. What did King Herod hear about? He heard about what we studied last week. Jesus sent out the twelve apostles. He sent them out in pairs. He delegated to them authority to cast out demons, heal the sick, raise the dead and preach the gospel. Prior to this, Jesus was a one-man band. He did everything himself. Now it was Jesus plus six other pairs of apostles saturating the region with the gospel message. In seven places at once, in town after town there was gospel preaching, healings, exorcisms, and people rising from the dead. There was a huge gospel impact taking place around Galilee. Stories of miracles were coming from everywhere Jesus and the apostles went.

The buzz about Jesus finally reached Herod. Herod was the Roman ruler of the area. He lived in the lap of luxury, lust and laziness. Why didn't he know about Jesus before this when there were huge crowds following him in Capernaum? I don't know. Maybe it was because Herod was in Tiberius. He frequently spent time in that town. Jews stayed away from Tiberius because it was a city built on a graveyard. That made Tiberius defiled ground because of human bones, and they avoided it at all costs. Maybe Herod was just a bad ruler so he was aloof from his people. Personally, I think that was the case.

What we do know is secondhand reports keep pouring in about Jesus and his band of missionary apostles. There was a non-stop stream of reports about miracles from everywhere they went.

Everyone was looking for an explanation of these miraculous powers. Some said the miraculous powers done by Jesus and credited by his apostles to Jesus were because of Jesus was Elijah. The book of Malachi closes by telling the Jews that before the Messiah came, a prophet like Elijah would come. Some people thought Jesus was that prophet. Other people thought Jesus was a prophet like in the days of their ancestors. Still others thought Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead and he had miraculous powers working in him.

When Herod heard about these miracles, and the three popular options about what was happening, Herod was convinced that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead. In the Greek, Herod said Jesus must be John “whom I beheaded.” The “I” is in the emphatic tense. What does this tell us? Herod killed John the Baptist and was living with a guilty conscience because of it. He felt very guilty for what he did. He was so guilty that he was convinced Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead to haunt him.

Herod knew John the Baptist well. He kept John incarcerated in his palace prison for more than a year. He spent a lot of time talking with John the Baptist face to face. He heard John the Baptist preach and called John to him many times. Herod was manipulated into killing John the Baptist, and he couldn't forget what he did. Herod was projecting his worst fears into this situation. At night, he was haunted by what he did when he murdered John the Baptist, and he couldn't find forgiveness for what he did.

There is a point of application here for all of us. If we don't confess our sin, we too will be haunted by our sin. Herod heard John the Baptist's preaching

about confessing sin and calling out to God for forgiveness of sin but never followed through and repented. Herod heard John's message, but he wouldn't obey that message. As a result, Herod lived with guilt like a cancer of the conscience, eating him from the inside out. He couldn't sleep at night. He hated himself for what he had done. When the phone rang, he jumped because he thought someone found out what he had done. He lived that way for years because he wouldn't confess and repent of his sin. We know that if he genuinely called out to Jesus for forgiveness of sin he would have been born again and made into a new person. All that was offered to him when John the Baptist preached to him, but he wouldn't take the first step of confessing and repenting.

Don't be like Herod, where you live with constant guilt of your past because you won't confess and repent of your sin. Turn to Jesus to be born again. Herod missed this. Don't you miss this.

Before we get much farther in the text, I need to give you some context. Understanding Herod's background is extremely helpful.

Herod's Family

In Luke 3:1, Herod is called a tetrarch. That is a strange title. What does it mean? It means "ruler of a fourth."

Israel came under Roman rule years before this. When Rome exercised its power, it did that through regional rulers that worked for Caesar. Whatever power these regional rulers held was minimal. One false move and Rome would quickly replace, exile or execute them. They held their territories with a light hand but they ruled their territories with an iron hand.

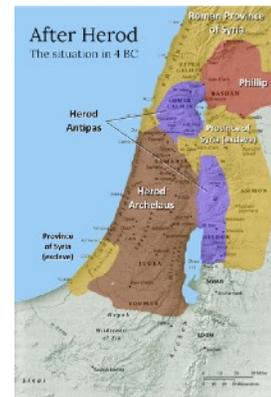
The Herod we are talking about in this passage was Herod Antipas. His father was known as Herod the Great. There are many Herods in the Bible because Herod the Great had 10 wives. When you have children through your 10 wives, there are lots of little Herods running around, and the family tree gets very complicated.

To explain the Herod family tree, let's start with Herod the Great and explain the family from there. Herod the Great was not a Jew. He was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. He attached himself to the Jewish people and on the surface tried to look Jewish. He was given the right to rule the entire land of Israel, which he did for 36 years. He was a very evil man with an appetite for sex and murder. He indulged in every kind of evil you can imagine. He also built the magnificent temple in Jerusalem that was around in the time of Jesus. He didn't build it because of his love for God but to stroke his ego and leave a monument of his own greatness. His insatiable sexual appetite was seen in his 10 wives. An appetite for murder was clear when he murdered everyone he thought would be a threat to his power. For example, he murdered one of his own wives and one of his sons because he thought they were a threat to his power. Herod the Great was the Herod in power when the wise men visited baby Jesus. He ordered the slaughter of all the male children younger than 2 in Bethlehem because he didn't want another king of the Jews to be a possible threat to his power and a contender for the throne.

The summary of Herod the Great's life is lots of women and killing anybody he thought was a threat to his power, even if those people were in his own family.

He died a ghastly death. Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, described him dying of ulcerated entrails, putrified maggot-filled organs, and bad breath. I didn't know you could die of bad breath but his breath must have been pretty bad to be listed as a cause of death.

Herod's will was that at his death his kingdom would be divided into four parts and given to four of his sons to rule. Each ruler would be called a tetrarch, which meant ruler of a quarter. A quarter of his kingdom went to Herod Archelaus who ruled over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. He only lasted a few years. In 6 AD, Rome removed him and replaced him with a series of governors, one of them was Pontius Pilate. We remember him for his role in executing Jesus.



The second quarter was given to Herod Phillip, who ruled Israel, Iturea, and Trachonities. By the way, we need to be careful. There are two Herod Phillips. One was a tetrarch; one was a common Roman citizen. When you have 10 wives, you have so many children that they start to share the same name. We will meet the second Herod Phillip in a few minutes.

The third quarter was give to Herod Lasanius. He ruled the area northwest of Galilee.

The fourth quarter went to Herod Antipas. He is the man we are studying. He ruled from the east side of the Sea of Galilee all the way down to the Dead Sea.

Herod's Fear

Herod's fear was that John the Baptist, the man he killed, had come back from the dead to haunt him in the form of Jesus.

The question is, "Why would Herod think John the Baptist came back to haunt him?" That begins a very intriguing story.

For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. Mark 6:17 (ESV)

The text tells us Herod seized John the Baptist and bound him in prison. John the Baptist was not arrested because Rome ordered his arrest. He was not arrested because John the Baptist did anything wrong. John the Baptist's arrest was all Herod Antipas' idea. It was simply to get John the Baptist off the street.

According to the ancient historian Josephus, Herod imprisoned John the Baptist at Machaerus, which was on the northeastern shore



of the Dead

Sea. This was a massive palace and fortress built on top of a mountain. The palace had an amazing view. It was filled with luxuries fit for a king. It was surrounded by thick walls and towers that rose more than 200 feet in the air. Below the beautiful mountaintop fortress was a dungeon dug into the mountain. Even today, the iron hooks are

still in the dungeon walls. We can imagine John the Baptist being chained to one of those hooks in pitch darkness for more than a year.

The greatest man to every live was suffering in a dungeon, while just feet above him one of the most wicked men was living in palace luxury.

Why did Herod arrest and imprison John the Baptist? That begins the soap opera part of the story.

Did you notice Herodias was not called Herod's wife? She was called the wife of Herod's brother Phillip. Herod married Herodias, but it was an illegitimate marriage. Herodias should have remained married to Herod's brother Phillip. The common belief is that Herod Antipas seduced Herodias away from Phillip. I don't agree. I think Herodias seduced Herod Antipas away from his wife. While Herod Antipas was unquestionably guilty for his sexual sins, there are many clues that Herodias was in control of this relationship.

Young men, there are some women you want to stay away from because they want to seduce, control and manipulate men for their own power. That was Herodias. She was gorgeous, a knock-out beauty. The problem was she knew she was gorgeous, and she also knew how to use her beauty to get what she wanted.

Herod Antipas was already married. He was married to Phasaelis, the daughter of Aretas, king of the Nabateans. In the ancient world, kings gave their daughters to other kings in marriage as a way of cementing alliances between kingdoms. That is what happened for Herod Antipas. King Aretas of the

Nabateans ruled the neighboring country to his southeast. Aretas' daughter created a marriage alliance that brought peace and unity between the kingdoms.

As you remember, Herod Antipas' father, Herod the Great, had 10 wives. This meant there were a lot of stepbrothers and stepsisters running around. One of them was Herod Phillip. This was a different Herod Phillip that was not one of the tetrarchs. He was a normal citizen that lived in Rome with his beautiful wife, Herodias. Herodias and Phillip lived without the benefit of the royal line because this Herod Phillip was not one of the tetrarchs.

Herod Antipas went to Rome to visit his brother Phillip. While there, he was captivated by the beauty of Phillip's wife, Herodias, because she was very attractive. When Herodias realized Herod Antipas was interested, she used her skills in seduction and manipulation and had an affair with Herod Antipas. After the affair, she told Herod Antipas that if he would divorce his wife, she would divorce Phillip, Herod's brother, and the two of them could marry.

Why did she do this? She was a woman hungry for power and control. Married to Herod Phillip, she was out of the ruling bloodline, but by marrying Herod Antipas, she would be in the ruling bloodline and become a queen. She used her sensuality to seduce Herod Antipas and get that control.

Things went according to plan. Herod Antipas divorced Phasaelis and sent her home to daddy, King Aretas of the Nabateans, breaking the marriage alliance. Herodias divorced Phillip and married Antipas. At first, it looked like a great plan, but we need to remember that when you sin, you will not win. Sin

always carries consequences. The consequence of that sinful choice was only beginning to unfold.

King Aretas was not a happy father when his daughter came home heartbroken. With the marriage alliance broken and a child deeply hurt, he eventually sent a huge army to attack Herod Antipas. He decimated Herod's army and was almost able to kill Herod. At the last moment, the Roman legions arrived to save his life. Herod's lack of self-control around women and his inability to say "No" to the advances of his brother's wife put in him a lot of trouble. It started a war between two nations and thousands of people died because of it. Let me give you one more consequence that came from this fateful affair.

Later, when Caligula became ruler of Roman, Herod Phillip, who was one of the tetrarchs, died. Caligula gave his quarter of territory to Herod Agrippa, Herod Antipas' brother. Herodias didn't like that. She thought her husband should rule the territory. She wanted to be a bigger queen and have control over more territory. She already had control of her husband. She manipulated him away from his wife to make her a queen, now she manipulated him again. This time she manipulated him to go to Rome to tell Caligula, the ruler of Rome, that he made the wrong decision and the territory of Herod Phillip should have gone to him instead of his brother. It was a risky move to tell the Roman emperor to change his mind. History tells us Herod Antipas didn't want to make this trip and ask this request but he did it because his wife, Herodias, controlled him like a puppet.

Things did not go well. Caligula saw Herod Antipas' poor character and how he was manipulated by his wife. Caligula stripped him and Herodias of their ruling power and sent both of them into exile in Gaul where they eventually died.

Herodias, who wanted to be a bigger queen, manipulated Herod Antipas to go to Rome and make a risky request, a request that ended up with him losing everything and being exiled to death. Herodias was a woman who knew how to manipulate, and she played Herod Antipas like a fiddle.

Let's get back to John the Baptist.

For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Mark 6:18 (ESV)

Most people in those day were smart enough to not criticize Herod Antipas for taking his brother's wife, even though they knew it was dead wrong. It was an illegitimate divorce. It was adultery. It was incest, because they were related. John the Baptist was one of the few people around that not only knew the truth but he spoke the truth. The way the text describes John the Baptist, he repeatedly told people it wasn't lawful for Herod to have his brother's wife. This led to Herodias nursing a grudge against John the Baptist because she didn't like anyone calling her out on her sin.

By way of application, one of the things I like about John the Baptist is he spoke the truth even when it wasn't easy to speak the truth. John the Baptist knew it would be costly to speak the truth, but he did it anyway. That is not because he was foolish but because he was courageous. That is what faithful disciples of Christ do. They speak the truth, even when it is not popular and what it gets you in trouble. Nothing is different today.

And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. Mark 6:19–20 (ESV)

Herodias was a scorned woman. She didn't like anyone criticizing her newfound position as queen. While she wanted John the Baptist dead, she couldn't put him to death because her husband stood in her way. Herod put John the Baptist in prison, but I imagine he told the guards to protect John the Baptist from Herodias.

Interestingly, Herod Antipas didn't just keep John the Baptist in prison, but he spent time listening to John the Baptist preach. John was always urging Herod to repent of his sin with Herodias. While Herod toyed with repentance, he never followed through.

The only thing keeping Herodias from killing John the Baptist was her husband, who was toying with repentance, and the consequences of Herod Antipas repenting would mean she might lose her position as queen. She felt the pressure to get rid of John the Baptist. Let's see how things fell apart.

Herod's Folly

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. Mark 6:21 (ESV)

An opportunity came. It was Herod's birthday. Herod threw a birthday party for himself. You need to worry about people who throw a party for themselves. Incidentally, you will occasionally hear that Jews never celebrated birthdays. That is true. The reason Jews never celebrated birthdays was because the Romans loved to celebrate birthdays. A Roman birthday was not about cake, ice cream,

and a few presents. A Roman birthday was an excuse for wild living with drinking and sexual behavior. At this point in history, Herod Antipas' parties were already legendary for being over-the-top with drunken, sexual sin. There was even the expression in that day called "Herod parties." In that culture, a Herod Party meant a party that was an over-the-top, excessively wicked celebration. For Herod, when your name meant party animal, that was not a good reputation.

Most of Herod's parties were stag parties, that means they were only for men. There would have been lots of drinking, food and sensual entertainment. As the evening progressed, the men's demands for erotic entertainment only increased.

The Bible tells us Herod invited nobles, military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee to this party. They were the elite, most powerful men of the region.

Since John the Baptist was in prison in Macherus, that must have been where the party was held.

Normally, at an all-male party birthday party, the female entertainment would have been done by the *hetarai*. Those are the professional court dancers and prostitutes. The dancing would have been a seductive strip tease. It was the kind of dancing found at a strip club.

The difference was the featured female dancer for this evening was no court prostitute. It was Herodias' daughter: A young woman named Salome, who was schooled by her mother in the art of using her sexuality to get her way.

For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will

give it to you.” And he vowed to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom.” Mark 6:22–23 (ESV)

Herod obviously had no concern for the purity of his adopted daughter. For a young woman, who was a princess, to dress like this and dance like this, was not the way things were done. Given the character of her mother and the porn addiction of Herod Antipas, her stepfather, this was not out of character.

When Salome performed her seductive dance in front of these inebriated men, let’s say she was a real crowd pleaser. Herod was so drunk and captivated by her beauty that he said something he should have never said, “Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you, up to half my kingdom.” Lest we misunderstand, Herod couldn’t give away the rights to half his kingdom. That was a figure of speech. Herod said to this young girl, “You are amazing. Ask of me, and I will give you whatever you want.” Herod’s sexual addiction reduced a king to putty in her hands.

And she went out and said to her mother, “For what should I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.” And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” Mark 6:24–25 (ESV)

Salome was taken back. She didn’t expect to be so pleasing to her stepfather. She immediately ran to her mother and asked what she should do. At the top of her mother’s list was the head of John the Baptist. There are hints that Salome, Herodias’ daughter, also wanted John dead. Salome didn’t question her mother. She didn’t think twice. She immediately ran into the party and said “I want John’s head right now.” She even added a little request of her own. “Serve John the Baptist’s head to me on a dinner platter.” Remember they were at a

party with a lot of food being served on platters. She wanted John the Baptist's head served to her.

Herodias and Salome revealed in that moment that while they were beautiful on the outside, both of them were disgusting on the inside. They were extremely wicked women in their hearts. Young men, these are the kind of women you want to avoid. They may look good on the outside but they are wicked as hell on the inside. Character counts. Beauty fades.

And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. Mark 6:26 (ESV)

It says Herod was exceedingly sorry. In the Greek, the only other time this word is used is to describe the anguish Jesus faced in the Garden of Gethsemane before the cross. Herod was completely torn what to do. Should he swallow his pride and admit that in a moment of drunken sensual passion he made a promise he could not keep? If he did that, it would shame him in front of the esteemed guests. If he followed through on the request, he would have to kill John the Baptist, the greatest man to live until Jesus. Herod's choice was to give in to the pressure of the crowd or do the right thing.

We all know what he did. Rather than repent, he murdered John.

This is another point of application. Many people today are like Herod. They live a torn life. They don't know if they should lose face with their friends, repent of their sin, and do the right thing or if they should go along with their friends and make a sinful choice.

My friends, let us not follow in Herod's footsteps and be more interested in pleasing the crowd around us than the God who will judge us.

And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. Mark 6:27–28 (ESV)

The king immediately sent an executioner, who cut off John's head and served his severed head to this young woman on a dinner platter. Salome immediately took the head to her mother.

It was not uncommon at this time in history for the head of someone ordered to be executed to be brought to the one who ordered the death as proof that the execution was carried out. In history, the head of Cicero was brought to Fulvia, the wife of Mark Anthony, after she ordered Cicero executed. Fulvia spat on the head of Cicero and abused the head because Cicero dared to speak against her husband.

While the Bible doesn't tell us this information, the early church father Jerome, who lived around 300 AD tells us that Herodias abused the head of John the Baptist after it was given to her for daring to speak against her and her marriage. We don't know if this happened, but given what we know about Herodias and all her other perversions, it is likely this is true.

When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. Mark 6:29 (ESV)

John's disciples came and buried his headless body. That was the death of the last prophet and the greatest man to ever live up to that time in history.

In Matthew 14:12, which is Matthew's account of John's death, it ended by telling us that John's disciples didn't just bury his body but they went and reported his death to Jesus.

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself... Matthew 14:13 (ESV)

Why did Jesus want to get away from the crowds and withdraw to a secluded place? This was big news. He loved John. Jesus withdrew because John the Baptist's death was a preview of his own. Like John, Jesus would tell the truth. Like John, there was a deep-seated grudge held against him. For John the Baptist, the deep-seated grudge came from Herodias. For Jesus, the deep-seated grudge that would end in his murder came from the Jewish leaders.

Application

1. Herod is a vivid illustration of what can happen to a man that allows himself to become enslaved to sexual sin. For Herod, his sexual sin ruined his marriage. It started a war. It led him to be married to a wicked wife. It led him to kill the greatest man to every live, and it ultimately led to him being manipulated by his wife into making choices that resulted in him losing his kingdom and dying in exile. The whole time, the answer Herod so desperately needed was right in front of him in the preaching of John the Baptist. He needed to confess his sin, repent of his sin, and call out to God for forgiveness of his sin. We know that if he did that and came to Christ, he would have been born again and the entire direction of his sad life would have changed. He needed to not just hear the preaching of John the Baptist but obey it and do something about his sin.
2. The other way we can apply this story comes from the context in which the story is given. Mark showed us what following Jesus may cost us. Last week, Jesus sent out the twelve apostle to preach the gospel. In Matthew's account of sending out the twelve, he told us that they would face suffering for the gospel. In Mark's account, he didn't tell us we may face suffering for following Jesus, he showed us what suffering for following Jesus looks like by telling us

what happened to John the Baptist. If John the Baptist suffered and died for simply telling God's truth, and Jesus suffered and died for simply speaking God's truth, we must expect we will pay a price for speaking God's truth today. Our suffering come when our friends laugh at us. It may be financial suffering. It may even be the loss of our lives.

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. Mark 8:34–35 (ESV)

While John lost his life in this world, he was welcomed home to heaven and the presence of God the Father. As Paul said, "For me to live is Christ but to die is gain." True discipleship is costly, but it is worth every penny we pay, even if it means we lose our lives.



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