



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

The Tragic Death of a Holy Man

Mark 6.14-29

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A Brief Look at a Sordid Story

Reportedly, Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.”¹ The principle expressed in that short statement is an excellent summary what we see in our text.

1. Herod Antipas preferred the title “King” (Mark 6.14, 23), but was officially tetrarch of Galilee (Matt 14.1; Luke 9.7) from 4 BC to AD 39. He “was the seventh son of Herod the Great”² who continued the family tradition “of immorality and intrigues.”³
2. The growing reputation of Jesus, enhanced by the mission of the twelve (vv. 7-13), led Herod to reflection, if not a crisis of conscience (Mark 6.16). From among the views of Jesus’ identity that were circulating (6.14-15), Herod concluded that, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised” (6.15; cf. 1.14).⁴ Mark records how the execution came about.
3. John had been arrested and imprisoned because he had dared to denounce Herod’s marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, who was also the niece of Antipas. A wider group of Jews was also offended by this violation of the law (see Lev 18.16; 20.21), so it is plausible that the arrest was designed to make an example of John.⁵
4. Although Herodias, like Jezebel of old,⁶ kept calling for John’s execution, Herod “feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe.” He “gladly” heard him upon occasion, and “was greatly perplexed” when he did (Mark 6.19-20).
5. The situation changed at Herod’s birthday party when his stepdaughter⁷ danced for him and his notable guests: “nobles” (high-ranking government leaders), “military commanders,” and “leading men” (wealthy and prominent Galileans) (Bayer, 1905). Because of her dance, Herod foolishly vowed to give her whatever she wanted, “up to half of my kingdom” (6.23).
6. Herodias seized the opportunity and, with her daughter, exploited Herod’s moral weakness, leaving him trapped by his foolish vow. He thus felt obliged to order John’s beheading.

Things To Remember from John’s Stand

1. God’s law is at odds with and will thus challenge the world’s norms.

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- a. "For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful⁸ for you to have your brother's wife'" (Mark 6:18).
 - b. Of interest is that, in verse 17, Mark explained that Antipas had married (*γαμέω*, *gameō*) Herodias. So, it is not just out-of-wedlock unions the Bible condemns, but also some marriages that are not permitted or authorized by God.
 - 1) Whether with regard to illicit marriage or some other issue, God's way is often at odds with the world's, as John said.
 - 2) We should learn the way of God so well that we understand when our world's ways, however customary or backed by power or popularity they are, run counter to God's.⁹
 - 3) We should shape our lives accordingly and resist any pull to a different way.
2. A lifestyle dedicated to worldliness knows few limits.
 - a. Look hard at the reality we might miss because we are so familiar with the story:
 - 1) At the blatant use of power to silence a critic.
 - 2) At the attitude of Herodias who wanted it both ways: to flaunt custom and religious law, but then to punish the one who criticized her lifestyle choice.¹⁰
 - 3) The debauchery of Herod and his guests, the likes of which many of us can hardly fathom (though we see more of it through the media than our grandparents did).
 - 4) Their cavalier attitude toward human life. Herod may have had a little conscience left (vv. 16, 26), but generally there was no remorse over what he did to John.
 - b. Mark has shown us a real life example of the point Paul makes in Romans 1.24, 26, 28: when people begin to pursue a life away from and unchecked by God, there is no extreme to which some will not go. That points to two things we should remember.
 - 1) We should not be surprised when worldly people act the way worldly people do. They have chosen to pursue that life, and God will not stop their pursuit.
 - 2) We should not think that we can control a given vice, that we can participate in just part of the world's way with no consequences. We should learn from examples like Joseph who did the right thing when he fled from Potiphar's wife (Gen 39.11-12; cf. 1 John 2.15-17; 1 Tim 6.9-11; 2 Tim 2.22).
 3. Faithfulness will be rewarded, but the faithful life may not always be pleasant.
 - a. We need to recall some additional information about John.
 - 1) Mark has previously reported that Jesus' ministry commenced "after John was arrested" (Mark 1.14; cf. Matt 4.12; Luke 3.20; John 3.24).
 - 2) Matthew says that when Jesus heard that John had been killed, he "withdrew . . . in a boat by himself" (Matt 14.12-13); he was then interrupted and fed the 5,000.
 - 3) Both Matthew (11.11) and Luke report that Jesus extolled John as "more than a prophet" and declared that "none is greater than John" (Luke 7:26, 28).
 - b. So, John was remembered and rewarded for his faithfulness. But, his last days were hardly pleasant (his external conditions perhaps made worse by his questions about Jesus — Luke 7:18-20). Such remains the nature of faithfulness, which should be absolute.¹¹
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To Out-die the World

Charles Swindoll told about a man who bought fried chicken dinners for himself and his date to take on a picnic. The attendant at the store put that day's proceeds into the man's bucket by mistake. When he opened it at the picnic and discovered more than \$800, he put the money back, got into his car, and drove back to the store—much to the relief of the store's frantic manager. He was so thankful that he told the man to wait while he called the paper; he wanted them to take a picture so the man could be properly recognized for his honesty. The man refused. "Oh, no. No, no, don't do that!" he said. Then he leaned closer to the manager and whispered, "You see, the woman I'm with . . . she's, uh, somebody else's wife."¹²

Though usually not demonstrated in such a dramatic way, that's how some think of following God, picking and choosing items of faithfulness. As we consider Jesus' call to die to the world (Mark 8.34-38), and notice how Mark shows what that means, John reminds us that we must resist every pull of the world and seek to be "righteous and holy" (Mark 6.20). Fortunately, even when we falter, he stands ready to forgive and nurture us toward better things.

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Notes

¹ Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Quotes and Idea Starters for Preaching and Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 25.

² Hans F. Bayer, Notes on Mark, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1904.

³ Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 97.

⁴ Hurtado, 95, writes, "The notion that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead (v. 14) may have been meant literally or figuratively, but in either case what is indicated is that Jesus seemed to be proclaiming the same message of the coming kingdom of God as John did, with prophetic urgency, only with additional power, as exhibited in the miracles."

⁵ Josephus also reports the event, saying that John "was a good man" who had "commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, . . . and piety toward God." Herod "feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion" (*Antiquities* 18.116-119).

⁶ Note Hurtado's discussion (p. 95) of the parallels between John's story and that of his forerunner Elijah (1 Kings 16.29-19.3; 21.1-29), and the way Mark's account of John's execution parallels and foreshadows the execution of Jesus (see Mark 9.10-13).

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.136, reports that her name was Salome.

⁸ ἔξεστιν, *exestin*, in the sense "to be authorized for the doing of someth[ing], it is right, is authorized, is permitted, is proper." Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 348.

⁹ Regarding v. 18, Bayer, 1905, observes: "Herod Antipas was not a Jew, yet John did not hesitate to tell him that he had violated the moral law of God (cf. Lev. 18:16). Similarly, the gospel message that people should 'repent' (Mark 1:15; 6:12), which would eventually go to Gentiles as well as Jews, assumes that God holds all people in the world accountable to his moral laws as revealed in Scripture."

¹⁰ Her actions remind me of a member of a popular country music group who a few years ago became pregnant out of wedlock and then denounced the clergyman who refused to perform a wedding ceremony for her because of the tenets of his faith.

¹¹ Over several years of teaching a Christian ethics courses in a school setting, I posed a dilemma for my students in which a friend would arrive at their house and ask them to hide him because some people who wanted to kill him were pursuing him. The pursuers would later arrive at their door and ask whether they knew where the friend was. Would they give up their friend or lie about where he was? After they discussed that some, I would point out that there was a third option, namely to admit they knew and refuse to say. Invariably, one or more students would respond with dismay that they might then be harmed. Yes, I agreed, that was possible, but I was asking them about the right thing, not the pleasant thing.

¹² Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 112.