

The Slow Death of the Soul

Mark 6:14-29

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Well, it's with great eagerness and joy that I invite you to return with me again to our study of the Gospel of Mark. It's been some time with Christmas and the various things we looked at in that time period, that we come back to Mark's gospel, but we're in Mark 6, Mark 6.

You'll remember that in chapter 5 of Mark, Jesus performed miracle after miracle, and again and again, people placed their faith in Him. The demoniac, you'll remember, at the beginning of chapter 5, the woman who was healed, Jairus, and of course his daughter who was healed, who was raised from the dead. But while that's amazing, and while it's wonderful that those folks came to true confidence and trust in Christ, people don't always believe in Jesus simply because they know about Him or because they've seen His work in the lives of others. If chapter 5 focuses on those who have faith in Jesus, chapter 6 focuses on those who don't.

It begins, chapter 6, with Jesus returned to Nazareth, and even the people of His own hometown refused to believe in Him. Jesus warned the disciples when He sends them out in verses 7-13 of chapter 6, particularly in verse 11, that they're going to encounter people who will reject their message. And then Herod is another example as the account of chapter 6 unfolds. So, the focus of this chapter then, is primarily on those who would not follow Jesus. Jesus had already explained that not everyone who heard the Good News would receive it; in fact, there would be many who would have nothing to do with it.

Back in December we looked at the response of the people in Jesus' hometown in verses 1-6, and then we examined Jesus' commissioning of the 12, and sending them out to minister in verses 7-13. But in both Mark's gospel and Luke's gospel, sandwiched between the sending out of the 12, and their return with the report of their ministry, is the same story; the story of Herod's killing of John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this account, but Mark's record here is the most detailed and the most complete.

It's really quite unique in the sense that this is the only story in Mark's gospel in which Jesus is not the main character. The other short and brief account in which Jesus isn't the main character

is John and his ministry back in chapter 1, and here this long account is about John's imprisonment and murder, here in chapter 6.

But this story is also unique because of the space that is given to the story of a man, whom as far as we know never believed. So, why's this story here? Why does Mark, in what is really a very brief gospel (it's the shortest of all the gospel records), why does Mark include this long, detailed account of Herod and Herodias, and the death of John the Baptist?

Well do you remember what Jesus told the 12, just before He sent them out preaching? Look back in verse 10.

... He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them."

Jesus was telling the 12 as He sent them out, "Listen I want you to know something, as you go, not everybody's going to love you, not everybody's going to receive you, not everyone's going to accept your message, expect rejection." That's what He was telling them. You're going to be rejected; and I think this story, in both Matthew and in Mark's gospel, the story is inserted into the sending out of the 12 and the return of the 12, to show that that rejection can come even at the highest levels of leadership and government; in fact, it's even possible that Jesus shared the details of this story with the 12 as He prepared to send them out, for what they would encounter. Because Matthew 14 says that after John's death, John's disciples went and found Jesus and reported everything to Him.

This account of Herod is really an apologetic for why Christian's will face persecution from the culture around them. In fact, the main point of this account is this: the truth is often hated, and its messengers can anticipate persecution.

At the same time, this passage is also a profound glimpse into the heart of a man who rejected the truth when presented with it. I've entitled the message tonight, and it can tragically be called, "The Slow Death of the Soul" – The Slow Death of the Soul. Look at Mark 6 and let me begin reading in verse 14.

And King Herod heard *of it*, for [that is of Jesus actually, for you'll notice "of it" is in italics] ... King Herod heard ... for His name... (that is Jesus' name) had become well known; and *people* were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him." ... [And] others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "*He is* a prophet, like one of the prophets *of old*." But when Herod heard *of it*, he kept saying, "[This is] John, whom I beheaded, [and he] has risen!"

The story really begins in these three verses with an "accused conscience," an accused conscience. Now before you can fully appreciate what's going on here, you need to understand a little bit about the line of Herod. Herod the Great, you've often heard that name, if you've been around the church or Scriptures any time at all. Herod the Great was the King of Palestine put in place by the Romans; he reigned from 39 BC – that is before Christ – until 4 BC; he died within two years of Jesus' birth. He's the one who remodeled and expanded the temple in Jerusalem, he was the great builder of cities across the country of Palestine. The only story in which Herod the Great appears in the New Testament is the story of the Magi and the massacre of the innocent in Bethlehem. That Herod is only there. Shortly after that he died.

Rome then, took Herod the Great's kingdom and divided it into four parts, and they gave one part to each of his four surviving sons. So, Herod the Great dies in 4 BC, Rome takes what's left of his kingdom, and gives a fourth to each of his sons. One of those four sons was named Herod Antipas, Herod Antipas. He was placed over Galilee and Perea. Just to give you little bit of a glimpse of that you see the yellow. In the north that's Galilee, you see Nazareth up there around the Sea of Galilee, that's Galilee, that was part of his reign, and then the yellow down on the east side of the Jordan River, down it goes down by the Red Sea. That is called Perea – Perea, and he was also responsible for that area. So, this is where one of Herod's sons was assigned, Galilee and Perea. He is the Herod in the gospel record, after the death of the innocents and the Herod the Great's death. So, this is the man, and this is the region over which he reigned.

Throughout the rest of the life of Christ, after the Magi, throughout the rest of the life of Christ, when you read the name Herod in the gospels it's referring to this son, who reigned over that area you see in the yellow. His official Roman title was Tetrarch, but he was popularly referred to as King Herod. And he actually encouraged that by the way, because he had aspirations of

becoming something greater. He had a great ambition to be king over all the land as his father had been, and not just over his fourth part.

Now notice verse 14 says, “And King Herod heard ... for His [that is Jesus’] name had become well known...” In response to Jesus’ popularity, there was a widespread disagreement about who He actually was.

Notice view one, verse 14 says, “... there were some people ... saying, ‘John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.’” Some were saying, “This must be John; John was a great preacher, and he was killed, but now he must have come back to life, because He’s doing some of the same things.” Jesus and His disciples were baptizing, they were preaching “repent, and believe in the gospel.” So, there were similarities. John didn’t do any miracles, but they figured if somebody had been raised from the dead, then he would have the power to do miracles as well. So, some said, that must be John.

The second view verse 15, “... others were saying, No, no, no, it’s not John, “it’s Elijah.” You remember Malachi said, Malachi 4 said, “Before the great and terrible day of the Lord,” Malachi promised Elijah would come. He must be Elijah, that must be who Jesus really is.”

View number three comes at the end of verse 15, “... others were saying, ‘*He is* a prophet, like one of the prophets *of old*.’” Luke adds, others said, “... that one of the prophets of old had risen again,” so it wasn’t just that He was like one of the prophets of the Old Testament, the other view, the third view was, He must be one of the great prophets of the Old Testament that has been raised from the dead; in fact, in Matthew 16:14, some thought Jesus might be Jeremiah, raised from the dead.

So, there was this sort-of common belief that He was a great prophet, He was either Elijah, or perhaps He was John, or perhaps He was one of the other Old Testament prophets raised from the dead, maybe Jeremiah.

While all three of those views were common, according to Mark’s gospel here, they had in common one thing; Jesus was at least a prophet, He was a great prophet. All three of those men they mistook Jesus for were great men, but in the discussion apparently no one considered that

Jesus was more than a prophet, that He was greater than those men, that he was the Messiah, that He was God's only Son.

Then Herod hears about this. Herod was in that region as you can see where Jesus ministered, but he spent his time in the palace. He didn't hear a lot of what went on on the streets, but eventually word got to him about Jesus and His disciples, apparently in response to Jesus' sending His disciples out, and their doing miracles and preaching, and people are talking about it. And eventually maybe through his servants, maybe through one of his officials, word gets to Herod.

And notice Herod decides between the three views, and he takes option number one; look at verse 16, "But when Herod heard *of it*, he kept saying, 'John, whom I beheaded, has risen!'" When this whole business about Jesus came up, Herod, and the verb tense says he repeatedly said, so over dinner or in discussions with his officials, his common response was, "That must be John, come back to life."

Now he really wasn't convinced because of the miraculous powers, he knew John, and there was no evidence that John ever did a single miracle; all he did was preach. I think Herod was convinced that it was John by an accusing, afflicted conscience, because, at this point, he's already killed John, at some time earlier. I think this because of what he says in verse 16, literally it says this, "He whom I beheaded, John, this one, is raised." He's feeling the weight of his conscience. The emphasis is on the personal guilt that Herod feels.

So, at this point in the story here is a man whose conscience is terribly afflicted and guilty, it's accusing him of what he's done, and his immediate response when he sees Jesus and His ministry that looks a lot like John's ministry, "No, no, it must be John." You know our world is filled with people who understand like Herod what it is to carry around the weight of guilt over past sins.

Now the last time we saw John was back in Mark 1. Look back in 1:14, "Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God." That's all we're told, he was arrested. So, when you come to chapter 6, and you read what's in verse 16, it comes as a shock because you didn't know that before. If you'd never read this account, if you never read this story of Jesus from Mark's gospel the last thing you know John's arrested, and here

Herod says, “I killed him.” And so, it’s appropriate then for Mark to step away and bring his readers up to speed with what actually happened to John. But I think as you will see it is not an accident, it’s not an aside, it serves a strategic purpose in the flow of Mark’s gospel.

So, we’ve been introduced to a ruler with a guilty, accusing conscience, and the reason that he is so accused is because he has abused his authority, and he’s ordered the execution of an innocent man, and he knows it. Then Mark takes us back. He takes us back more than a year in time, to see how this happened, and at that point in Herod’s life we find him with an awakened conscience – an awakened conscience. Look at verse 17; we’ve gone back now from verse 14-16 a year in time, to what actually transpired. “For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her.”

Now John baptized in the Jordan, most of the time down by the Dead Sea, down not too far from Jericho, most of the time was down in this region where you see the arrow, in the Jordan Valley just near the north end of the Dead Sea. And nearby, this of course is all this yellow area, is all of Herod’s kingdom, about where the arrow is pointing, there, about seven miles from the east of the Dead Sea – if I can get my arrow back, there it is, there is a fortress build by Herod the Great. It was a fortress; it was a palace; it was a prison; and it was a place that Herod loved to go. It’s called, “Machaerus”. That’s where Josephus, the Jewish historian writing near the end of the first century to the Romans, writes where John was held. Again, it was a great fortress; it was palace; it was a prison.

This is what it looked like, much like Masada. You can see, the same sort of general shape and feel. It as an elevated area where it could be easily defended, and on top of this massive hill, Herod the Great, Herod Antipas’ father, built a magnificent palace, and it was the place that Herod Antipas loved to go. There’s another view of it, a couple of other views; again, very similar to Masada if you’ve seen pictures of it, but it’s on the east side of the Dead Sea. There’s some of the remains they have unearthed up on the summit, you can see that it was you can just imagine what a magnificent palace fortress it would have been. That’s almost certainly where John was held.

So, Herod sent his soldiers from this palace, (undoubtedly, he was here at some point), sent his soldiers down nearby to where John was ministering and preaching and baptizing, and arrested him, brought him and held him at Machaerus. His disciples, John's disciples, were permitted to visit him from time to time, because on several occasions in the gospels they go visit him in prison, and they bring word back of the answers they receive to their questions.

The question though is "why?" Why did John have to be arrested? Why did Herod put him in prison? Well, he would have offered only one reason, and that was the reason that Josephus mentions. Josephus writes, (and I won't read the whole quote but you see the underlined portion), "Herod who feared, lest the great influence John had over the people, might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, for they seemed ready to do anything John should advise."

So, he decided to take him (and you'll notice Josephus ends in the underlined portion that I have there), "Accordingly, John was sent a prisoner out of Herod's suspicious temper to Machaerus (the castle I mentioned before) and was there put to death."

Now "why" had a political side to it, there's no question. There was a political reason involved in Herod's motive, but there was also a reason much more personal, and Mark here picks up on that reason in verse 17, it was, "... on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her." Now I have to tell you, the relationships within Herod's family are as tangled as a briar patch. I'm telling you the gene pool needs a little chlorine in this particular household, but let me see if I can briefly sort of tell you what's going on here.

You'll see at the top is Herod the Great, he is the father of all of this. He had ten wives and out of that he had a number of children, as you can see. You'll notice right in the middle, the sons of Malthace, a Samaritan, were Herod Antipas and Archelaus. Herod Antipas is the one we're talking about.

Now, you'll notice another wife, Mariamne, who is the second one over from the left. She had two sons, and Aristobulus was one of those sons, and his daughter was Herodias. There is the wife we're talking about, alright? So, if you're paying attention to the family tree at all, it starts out with Herodias being the niece of Herod Antipas; she was his niece.

Then, you'll notice in the far right-hand area, there was another wife who gave birth to Herod Philip the First. Herodias married that Philip, and had the daughter Salome, as you can see there, and then she eventually left Philip, one uncle, and married his half-brother, Antipas. Are you with me? (Laughter) You see what I mean, I mean you couldn't invent this.

So, what happened was, as you see in the right-hand column, Herodias was at first married to Philip, and they had a child, Salome, And Philip was deposed; he was king as well, but he was deposed by Rome, and he and Herodias moved to Rome. While they were in Rome, Josephus tells the story, while they were in Rome, and Antipas visited them, and he became infatuated with his half-brother's wife Herodias and his niece. They became involved in an adulterous relationship, and they agreed to leave their current spouses and marry, and that's exactly what eventually happened. If you really want to make it confusing, understand that eventually, because of who Salome marries, not only was she the ex-wife of Herod Philip, she was his mother-in-law. You ever hear that song, that old country song, "I'm my own grandpa?" It came from Herod's family line.

So, the bottom line is, you have two people who were married to other spouses, who become infatuated with each other, and she is his niece and his half-brother's wife, and they become married. Verse 18 – here's the problem, "... John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'"

Now we don't know when and how John confronted Herod. The language indicates that John had told Herod this over and over again. How and when, well perhaps through a messenger, perhaps he showed up uninvited at the palace. There are several commentators who suggest, and I think it may be very possible, that Herod invited John to his palace, persuaded that in that environment, he could convince John to put a stamp of approval on this marriage, because the people, while they tolerated a lot of stuff, this was even over the top for them. This would allow them to legitimize the marriage with the Jews who were so violently disagreed with him since they believed John was a prophet. So, it's very possible that he had that in mind; Herod thought he could manipulate John into putting his stamp of approval on this marriage and putting to rest the grumbling of the people.

But John couldn't be bought. What was John's ministry? What was the essence of his ministry? Repent, and Herod is no exception. He tells him, "You're living in sin." Now there're several sins he could have addressed, obviously there was adultery on the part of both of the spouses. Both Herod and Herodias had divorced their spouses without just cause, and then there was illegal marriage to a close relative. That's what John focuses on. He told him; it is not lawful for you to have your half-brother's wife. That's in Leviticus 18:16, "You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife...." Leviticus 20:21, "If there is a man who takes his brother's wife, it is abhorrent; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness...."

And so, John pulled no punches, he preached repentance wherever he went, to whomever he saw, and Herod was no exception. He told him the truth. Look at Herodias' response, verse 19, "Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not *do so*." Literally, the Greek text says, "Herodias was having it for him." It's a lot like our expression, "She had it out for him." She had been offended by the truth, and she had become angry and bitter and vindictive. The only thing that would satisfy her taste for revenge was his death; she wanted him to die.

Why? Well one interesting part of the story I didn't tell you. Rewind back to when she's married to Philip, and they're living in Rome. She was living with a man, her husband, who had been deposed from his royal rule. They're now living as essentially civilians in Rome. Not only did she get Antipas a new man, she got a new role as queen. A new palace, servants, and all that came with it. And John stood in the way between what she so desperately wanted and its achievement. And so, she resented him; she hated him; she wanted him dead. As one commentator writes, "The only way she could secure her permanent marriage and her marriage certificate to Antipas, was with John the Baptist's death warrant on the back."

But Herodias couldn't do it, she was thwarted time and after time; the text says she could not do it, she was not able. Why? Verse 20, because here's why she couldn't carry out her plan; "... for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him." Herod was very confused. He was confused about who Jesus was, he thought He was John raised from the dead later, but before that, back in this time period, he was afraid of John. He knew he was righteous, that is, he had the right relationships with other people, he did what was

right by others; and he knew he was holy, that is he had a special relationship to God, set apart to God. And so, while he was really not a religious man at all but more of a superstitious one, he kept John safe by locking him away in the palace prison. If not, you can believe that Herodias and her spies would have found him, and she would have found a way to kill him.

And while John's there, remember the prison is part of the palace, while John's there, when Herod Antipas shows up at his favorite palace, from time to time, he calls for John to be brought, and he visits with John. He listened to John's messages, and when he did, the text says he was very perplexed. He was perplexed about the truth; he was perplexed about what to do with John, but Herod actually enjoyed listening to John.

You know it's hard to imagine two men more different. They were different in their upbringing. They were different in their position; they were certainly different in their clothes and appearance. You remember how John dressed, and Herod is dressing in opulent and luxurious attire. And they were unimaginably different in their characters. But Herod found himself attracted to John, and attracted to the truth that he preached, even though it was straight and true and convicting, even though John pulled no punches.

What I want you to see is, at this point, it appears that Herod's conscience had been awakened. There's some awareness about his sin and some remorse for his sin. There's an interest at some level in the truth. There have always been people like Herod who find something attractive about the Bible and the church and the people who believe it. There're also people who, like Herod, live through a period of an awakened conscience.

Maybe you remember a time like that, when your conscience was stirred in conviction about your sin, when you felt the weight and gravity of it, when you were strangely attracted to the truth. That's where Herod found himself; but without repentance and faith, an awakened conscience only leads to a different kind of conscience, and that is, a spurned conscience.

We see this in verse 21. It says, "A strategic day came ..." Strategic in what sense? Strategic for Herodias. Remember, she's still trying a way to kill him, and here is her opportunity. She had remained an angry, vindictive and bitter woman. Herod was a weak man, often, always really, manipulated by his wife, and she is looking for her chance, and she was absolutely

relentless in her opposition to John; she was hateful, waiting for just the right moment, and finally that day came.

Verse 21, “A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday...”; very common for rulers, the Herods, but all the Romans, and the Herods really copied the Romans because they wanted to be little Rome, to have big parties on their birthdays, and he gave a banquet for his lords and his military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. A banquet here is really describing the dinner meal, and because of all the people who were invited it would have been appropriate to call it a banquet. It would have been some spread; it would have been a party like you and I have never seen.

And notice three categories of leaders were invited: his lords, that is the leading officials in his own government; military commanders, literally the Greek says *chiliarchs* which is a Roman, a borrowed Roman word, it speaks of the commanders of thousands of soldiers, that is over a thousand soldiers, so leading military leaders, probably Roman, and then it says, “... the leading men of Galilee.” These were the wealthy men in Galilee who could travel several days both ways for a party with the rich and famous, and who probably weren’t serious, in fact they couldn’t have been serious about their professions, whatever professions they made of loyalty to the true God of Israel. So, everybody who was somebody, and who didn’t care about what was going to happen at this party, everybody in Galilee and Perea who was the notable, the elite, the impressive, was there.

Verse 22, “... and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; ...” Now if you had lived in the first century, and you’d never read this before, several things about that sentence would have been shocking. First of all, that a princess would have done this. Women were no part of this dinner. The drink would have flowed freely before the dinner, and during the dinner, and afterwards things would have become more than a little rowdy. Only men in that kind of environment, and then came the entertainment. Typically, professional dancers would be hired. They were really very much the equivalent of strippers and prostitutes. And here, it’s the princess, this is the stepdaughter of Herod Antipas.

Now who is this girl? Notice she’s described as the daughter of Herodias. She was the one, as I showed you on the chart a moment ago, born to Herodias and Philip, her first husband. Josephus

tells us her name was Salome. She would later marry her uncle. At this point she would have been quite young, in fact, later in the verse you'll notice, she's called a "girl." The Greek word that's used there is only used one other time in Mark's gospel, and it's to refer, when Jesus refers to the daughter of Jairus, who was 12 years old. She was probably a little older than that, probably, certainly a teenager, and probably about 15 years old based on the flow of the secular history.

So here is a 15-year-old girl in the middle of this massive party of male leaders of the land after a night of drinking debauchery. Here's the remarkable thing; for her to do this would have been so out of keeping with the time and with her age, that she would have never come up with this herself; and if she had, a normal mother would never have gone along with it. So, it definitely appears in almost universally Bible scholars agree, that Herodias is so bent on revenge that she sets all of this up. She is coordinating this whole transaction, this whole event. She is so blind with anger and rage and hatred and a desire to keep her position, that she's willing to use her daughter, to send her daughter into a room with a bunch of drunken men, to play the role of a stripper and a prostitute.

But these rich lecherous men respond to her youthfulness and the unusual nature of a princess performing this dance, notice verse 22 says,

... she pleased Herod and his dinner guests ... Her stepfather liked it and all of his dinner guests. [So, look how he responds, verse 22], ... and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom."
[In his inebriated condition, he offers her whatever she wants.]

Now, when he offers the kingdom it's clearly an overstatement; the kingdom wasn't his to give. He had been placed there by the Romans, and the Romans wouldn't for a moment have tolerated that, but the meaning is clear; he's saying to her, to this probably 15-year-old girl who has just been sacrificed by her mother, he says, "Just tell me what you want, and it's yours." And in front of his guests, he swore to her, he made oaths to her. Verse 24 says, she didn't ask right away, instead, "... she went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?'" Apparently, Herodias has merely been using her daughter as a pawn; she didn't even tell her what this dance

and all this was about. And now she makes her plan clear. She says to her daughter, here's what you ask for, "The head of John the Baptist." Verse 25, the daughter doesn't take long to be convinced, like mother like daughter, "Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'"

You see to make sure that Herod can't back out of the promise that he's made to her, Herodias sends the daughter back while the banquet is still in full swing, and she comes with a request that puts Herod in a corner. Notice, "at once." That allows no delay, and it puts him on the spot with his guests in front of whom he's made this oath and this promise.

"And I want the head of John." Now why is that important? Obviously, it's just vicious and gruesome, but there's a more important reason, it was verifiable proof of the truth that John had been killed. Herodias didn't trust Herod, she knew he, for whatever reason wanted to protect him, and so, she wanted the head because that would be the proof that he was dead, and her troubles were done.

It appears that really Salome was very much like her mother, that she would go through this request for one, but she even adds on her own grizzly detail; notice what she says, she added on the request to bring it on a platter – literally a serving dish. Usually, they were made of wood, but on this occasion in Herod's palace it would have been made of a fine metal, so that's why you often hear the story repeated, you know, "Bring his head on a silver platter."

Verse 26, "And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her." Herod, in the middle of this inebriated party, suddenly sobers up. Obviously, he begins to realize what has happened. Herodias is behind all of this. She has set him up, and he is genuinely stricken. Notice it says that he was, "very sorry"; that word sorry, that's for sorrow there is used in only one other place in Mark's gospel, and it's used of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He was laboring in sorrow as He was anticipating His separation from the Father.

So, Herod is really in torment of soul, but he was unwilling to refuse her. He knew it was wrong, but there was something stronger for Herod than his fear of John, his like of John, his admiration of John, and stronger than the voice of his conscience. Did you see what it was? Look at the verse again, verse 26, "... because of his oaths and because of ..." what? His dinner guests, those

who reclined at the table with him, all of the powerful in the land were there. He cared most for the approval of these people because they were his ticket to continuing in his position of authority and possibly even to advancing. That mattered more.

Verse 27, “Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded *him* to bring *back* his head...” The word, “executioner,” by the way, is an interesting one, it’s a Latin word used for the emperor’s special bodyguard detail. Herod was the petty ruler of a small province, but he had structured his little world to resemble that that surrounded the emperor. It shows his ambitions. He basically sends one of his soldiers to execute the prophet and return with his head; verse 27, “... And he went and had him beheaded in the prison...” Seems obvious that since the man returns immediately, that John was being held in a prison nearby, very near the party, and it all fits together when, Josephus fills in that little detail, that John was in prison and executed at Machaerus, that palace fortress down near the Dead Sea.

Folks, this was nothing short of murder. The dinner would have begun around dark. By this time, it would be very very late at night or perhaps early in the morning. The soldier, if you could imagine, comes into the cell of John; they found actually some prison cells, some prison holding areas in that excavation there at Machaerus. They found places where there were ways to secure the prisoners to the wall. Apparently, the soldier comes in, perhaps awakens John out of sleep, very quickly prepares and cuts off his head. The man Jesus called, “the greatest prophet” is dead. Verse 28 says, “... and [he] brought his head on a platter...” A serving dish, and in the middle of all of that party and that drunken brawl he gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. I suspect that even some of the men there at that party, even though they were drunk, got sick at the sight. Bitterness and revenge are ugly things.

Verse 29, here’s the only touch of tenderness in the story, “When ... [John’s] disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.” Matthew adds that they went afterward and reported to Jesus.

What I want you to see folks, is that night, Herod was confronted by his conscience again. He had an awakened conscience; he had responded to the truth; he felt some guilt and remorse; he had had an attraction to the truth, but he had refused to turn, refused to repent, refused to follow the leading of that voice of conscience. And then a moment of truth came, and when he was

tested, he spurned his conscience. He violated his conscience, and he did what he knew to be wrong because he wanted something else more.

But fast forward about a year; fast forward from that night, about a year later. That's when Herod hears about Jesus, and he's still carrying around his very guilty conscience because he concludes that John must have been raised from the dead. Even at that point there is still hope for Herod. How do I know that? Luke tells us this, Luke 9:9, "Herod said, 'I myself had John beheaded; but who is this man about whom I hear such things?' And he kept trying to see Him." Luke 9 says, Herod wanted desperately to see Jesus. Maybe he'd arrange a meeting with Jesus, maybe he'd hear Him, and this time he'd respond, but that meeting never happened.

The next time we encounter Herod in the gospels, it's not with a spurned conscience, it's with a seared conscience. It was about a year to a year and a half later after he thought John was raised, about two years probably after the death of John; this is the first time we meet up with Herod, or I'm sorry, this is the last time we meet up with Herod during the ministry of Jesus.

It's Friday morning of the Passion Week; Herod has come to Jerusalem, possibly sharing the same compound with Pilate. Notice what's written in Luke 23, Luke 23:6. This is Friday morning just a brief time, few hours before Jesus is put to death,

When Pilate heard it ..., [verse 6 of Luke 23,] "When Pilate heard it ...," [when he heard about the fact that Jesus' ministry had started in Galilee,] "... he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself was also in Jerusalem for the feast time.

Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time..." [watch this], "... because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him." He wanted Jesus to do a trick. "And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing. And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently."

Again, you see what happens with Herod? What's swaying Herod for a second time? It's the crowd, it's concern for how he'll be perceived, for how he might lose his power, lose his position. Verse 11,

And Herod with his soldiers..." [notice that]— And Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate. Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been enemies with ... [one] another.

Here's the amazing thing, at this meeting, there doesn't appear to be even the stirrings of conscience. Perhaps he was so relieved to discover that it wasn't John after all that he didn't bother to find out who it was, but again we find Herod playing to the crowd, to advance himself. By the way if you fast forward ten years beyond that, Herodias pushes Herod to go to Rome to vie for the ruler of Judea position, to become king of all Judea; she urges him to go, she forces him to go, they go together to ask to be made king, and the request got him deposed and exiled; but that was his ambition. What a tragic life, what a tragic story.

What are the lessons? Well first of all on a personal and individual level, this story shows how conscience ignored and spurned eventually leads to the death of the soul. This story is a warning. Maybe you're here tonight, and you were raised in a Christian home; your conscience has been stirred time and time again, you've heard the Scripture and even found some of it desirable from time to time like Herod did.

Listen, if you ignore that work of the conscience that God has instilled in your heart, you can sear it by abuse over time, so like Herod, you can stand in the presence of Jesus Christ and be unmoved. No fear, no conviction, you feel absolutely nothing. If you're in that position, let me urge you that today is the day for repentance and salvation. Don't be a Herod.

This story reminds us that we must be willing to call sin sin, regardless of how popular it may be, or who practices it. John was fearless in saying, "That's wrong"; because the Bible says, "that's wrong." Folks, we live in a day when it is very unpopular to say certain things are sin; to say so, either on a personal level, or as a church, is to invite the anger and bitterness of the culture, but we must be like John; not angry, not vindictive, not hateful toward people involved in sin, but willing to say, "God doesn't tolerate that – it's sin."

Thirdly, understand the truth is often hated, and its messengers are often persecuted and killed. Listen, don't expect everybody to like you if you believe in Jesus Christ; the forerunner ends up getting beheaded! We won't face that probably in our lifetime, but we will face scorn and ridicule – “Those simple-minded Christians.” And maybe you'll get passed over for the promotion, maybe other things will happen; just understand, that goes with the Lord we have embraced.

Number four, the cultural elite often reject the message of Christ. Understand that; I think that's part of the reason the story's here. Takes two forms: with Herod, his rejection is interest and fascination, but no true faith or repentance. With Herodias, it's anger and hatred, and a desire to hurt and harm, because of the confrontational nature of the message. And we can see that in the cultural elite in our society today, can't we? For the Roman Christians reading this book, this Gospel of Mark, they would probably see the responses of Herod and Herodias modeled by their family and friends since they had come to faith in Christ.

Number five, for the Roman Christians enduring persecution from those in leadership, remember, they were already being persecuted for their faith, in Rome, and in the Roman provinces, This passage served as a reminder that it's always been like that. It was for John the forerunner, it was with Jesus, in fact, listen carefully, what happens to John here, prefigures what will happen to Jesus at the end of the book. He will find Himself caught in the cogs of the political machinery. His execution will also be both personally and politically expedient. And so, if it was that way with John, that way with Jesus, it be with them, and it will be with us too. Don't be surprised.

I think there's one other reason for this story here, remember Jesus has just sent out the disciples, He's sending them out to minister, and He tells them, “You're going to be rejected; in fact let Me tell you the story of John; let Me tell you what happened to the forerunner, the voice, the messenger to come before Messiah; let Me tell you how he was treated.” This story reminds the apostles, and it reminds us, of the cost of discipleship to Jesus Christ. There always is a cost, but the payoff is more than worth the cost.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for this really disturbing account of a man whose soul we have just watched die. Father, I pray that there would be no one like Herod in this service tonight. Lord, may no one here spurn conscience again and again and again, until the conscience dies, and the soul dies, and there's no interest in anything, and even to stand in the presence of Jesus Himself stirs nothing. Father may the thought of what happened to Herod be the tool and instrument You use in the hearts of anyone like that here tonight, who stands on the brink, on the precipice, of following in his footsteps; and may they come to true faith and repentance in Christ.

Father, I pray for those of us who are in Christ. Lord, help us to remember there is a cost, but Father remind us that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which will be revealed in us. Lord help us not to live for this life, not to live for acceptance with our friends, and fellow students, and co-workers and family. Lord, instead help us to be true to You, whatever it costs, knowing that someday we will receive from Jesus Christ our Lord Himself, all the affirmation, and all the recognition our souls could long for.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.