

**"When Pride Gets in the Way"**  
**Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom***  
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**(Mt. 14:1-14)**

**Introduction.**

There are a great many Herods who are mentioned in the Bible, and it's difficult to keep them all straight in one's mind when you're reading Scripture! My friend Jim Singleton has developed a way to try and "Keep Your Herods Straight." First, there is *Herod the Great*, but he really wasn't all that great, except that he did build a great Temple in Jerusalem. Then there is *Herod Antipas*, and he was about as likable as antipasto! And there is also *Herod Agrippa*, but he had a hard time getting "a grip o" things, and kept losing his kingdom. Eventually a worm got "a grip o" him!

Herod the Great was the king of Judea when Jesus was born, and he's the one who talked to the wise men and ordered the slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem. Herod Antipas is the Herod in this passage, and he was also the Herod before whom Jesus appeared during His night of trials. And Herod Agrippa was the ruler who is mentioned in the book of Acts who ordered the execution of the disciple John. Shortly after this happened he died a grisly death. Is everything clear now? Have you got all your Herods straight?

Today we read about Herod Antipas. He was the son of Herod the Great, and when his father died he became tetrarch, which literally means "the ruler of the 4<sup>th</sup> part." It was a portion (actually ¼) of the kingdom his father had governed, and he was the ruler over Galilee and Perea.

Today as we look at this man and the tragic drama of his life, I want to highlight three things about the man: 1) the immorality of Herod; 2) the spiritual curiosity of Herod; and 3) the tragic downfall of Herod.

**I. The Immorality of Herod.**

*"Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Phillip's wife, for John had been saying to him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her'" (14:3,4).* Originally, Herod Antipas married the daughter of Aretas IV sometime before 14 AD. Aretas was a Nabatean king, and the marriage was arranged for political purposes. We don't know the name of the woman Herod married, only that she was the daughter of Aretas IV.

Fifteen years later Herod traveled to Rome, and on his way there he paid a visit to his half-brother, Philip who lived in one of the coastal cities of Palestine.

Antipas was quite taken with his brother's wife, Herodias, who also happened to be his own niece! She was a very ambitious woman, and she saw this as her opportunity to move up in the world and to become the wife of a tetrarch. She agreed to marry Herod Antipas upon his return from Rome with the stipulation that he get rid of his first wife and divorce her. Aretas' daughter got wind of this, and she fled to her father in tears. It's no coincidence then that later on the Nabateans retaliated against Herod Antipas, and this eventually led to Herod losing his kingdom, and he was exiled in 39 AD.

Meanwhile, after Herod Antipas and Herodias were married, John the Baptist began to speak out publicly against their marriage. He denounced Herod, who was Jewish, because he had married his brother's wife. The Mosaic Law strictly forbade a man to marry his brother's wife, with the one exception of a levirate marriage for a deceased brother who had no children. However, in Herod's case, the brother was still very much alive, and he had a child, namely Salome, Herodias' daughter who later danced for Herod in this passage. (This reads like a soap opera!)

As a result of John's preaching, Herod arrested the Baptist and put him in prison. He couldn't afford to have this prophet stirring up the people with his denouncement of the king's immorality. John was bold in what he said about Herod, and it posed a threat to the king. As Calvin writes: *"We behold in John an illustrious example of that moral courage which all pious teachers ought to possess, not to hesitate to incur the wrath of the great and powerful, as often as it may be found necessary: for he, with whom there is acceptance of persons, does not honestly serve God."*<sup>1</sup>

How many times have you and I failed to speak up and say what needed to be said because we were afraid of how the person might react, especially if they were powerful or influential? We worry what they'll think, so we swallow our words in an effort to get along and win their favor and keep the peace.

We've all been there. We've all done the same thing. You and I should be willing to speak the truth, even when it's unpopular, even to the powerful, even when it may cost us something. John did, and it is to his credit he did so. The next time you're tempted to remain silent when you know you should say something for fear of how the person will react, remember the example of John the Baptist who feared God more than he did anyone else.

## **II. The Spiritual Curiosity of Herod.**

Herodias had not taken John's condemnation of her marriage lightly, and she was infuriated by him and wanted to have him killed. As NT scholar T.W. Manson has written, Herodias knew that *"the only place where her marriage certificate could safely be written was on the back of the death warrant of John."*<sup>2</sup>

While the text tells us that Herod wanted to kill John because of the things he said, the gospel of Mark also tells us that Herod had a curiosity with the Baptist, and the king liked to talk with John. Our text here says that Herod was also afraid of the people because they regarded John as a prophet, so the king refused to allow the Baptist to be put to death.

Here we have an example of a person who has a spiritual hunger, but he doesn't have the capacity or the desire to really believe. He comes to the edge of the water of the knowledge of God, but he refuses to drink. How many people have you known like this? How many of us, if we're honest, are like this ourselves?

I remember a student at SMU who was involved with my college ministry many years ago back when I lived in Dallas. His name was Ben. When I first met him, Ben was on the college swim team, and he was majoring in Business. Ben had such a curiosity and an interest in spiritual things. He came by all the time, and he wanted to talk about the meaning of life and what the Bible had to say about various topics. But Ben never would come to the point where he was ready to commit himself and follow Jesus. He loved to discuss, he loved the search, but he wasn't willing to commit and trust in Christ personally himself.

The last time I saw Ben he was involved in a destructive lifestyle, battling drug abuse, and he had dropped out of school. Ben reminds me of a sermon that J. Wilbur Chapman preached a hundred years ago which was entitled "*Almost Persuaded.*" There are some people who are interested in a while, but it doesn't last. They come close to making a commitment to God, they're almost persuaded, but in the end they fail to take the final step.

Herod was like that. He was more concerned with pursuing the good life and indulging in the pleasures of this world than he was in the truth of God, and that led to his tragic downfall.

### **III. The Downfall of Herod.**

*"On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.' The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he orders that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison" (14:6-10).*

Herodias finally got the opportunity she was waiting for. When Herod celebrated his birthday with a banquet, he invited all the military and political leaders of his kingdom to come, and at party Herodias' daughter danced for all the guests. Everyone was very pleased with her performance, and the king was so delighted that he offered her whatever she wanted. Prompted by her mother, the girl asked that the head of John the Baptist be served on a platter right then.

Herod was conflicted. He was reluctant to grant the request, but because of his oaths and his many dinner guests, he didn't refuse her, and he ordered John's execution. The Baptist was beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter as requested. It was presented to the daughter, and she in turn gave it to her mother. What a grisly and disgusting scene.

Here we have a tragic case of a person who did all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons. Herod wanted to save face. He was more concerned with what other people thought of him than he was in doing the right thing! Sadly, the opinion of other people was more important to him than the opinion of God, and he went against his conscience.

Have you ever been guilty of doing that? I suspect there is a time in your life when you struggled with peer pressure. Whether we're 7-years-old or 97, we're tempted to cave in to the opinions of others. I'll never forget a time when I was in high school and I got into trouble with some of my friends. When they called our parents, one of my friends' mother said, "Well, they can't be in too much trouble, because they're with Peter." I knew what we were doing was a bad idea. I knew it was wrong, I knew we shouldn't do it, but I was too afraid to speak up.

For the rest of his life Herod lived with a guilty conscience, and our passage says that when he heard about the reports of Jesus and the miraculous things He was doing, Herod said in fear, "*It's John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead!*" (14:1). Herod was always haunted by the fact that he hadn't done the right thing when he had the chance. And it cost a good man his life needlessly.

This was the beginning of the end of Herod's reign. Because of his seduction of Herodias and his divorce from his first wife, Herod's ex-father-in-law, Aretas, the king of the Nabateans, bitterly resented the insult to his daughter, and he made war against Herod and defeated him badly. Herod was only rescued by calling on the power of Rome to clear things up. Eventually, Herod was sent into exile off the coast of Gaul, and he was banished there for the rest of his life. Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived at the time of Christ, wrote, "Some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment for what he did to John, who was called the Baptist."<sup>3</sup>

There are consequences to the choices we make in life. Herod suffered those consequences, not only in this life, but also in the life to come. And he not only had to face the judgment of Rome but also the judgment of God Almighty one day. You and I will too.

## **Conclusion.**

As we close this morning, let me ask you a few questions, and then I'll tell you a story. *First*, is your life marked by purity? In a day when we're tempted to compromise and embrace the morals of everyone around us, may our lives be

marked by purity and truth. It's so easy to compromise and just go along with the crowd. "Everybody's doing it. Why should I be the one who's left out?" we think to ourselves. But it does make a difference. Do the right thing, even if you're the only one.

*Second*, are you just curious about Jesus, or have you decided to accept Christ for yourself? Like Herod we may feel drawn to spiritual things, we may be interested, but we're afraid that it might require something of us if we really take the truth of Christianity seriously and commit ourselves to it. And we're right! It will cost us a great deal. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "When God calls a person, He bids him to come and die." Are you simply curious about Jesus, or have you decided to accept Him yourself?

*Third*, do you make promises you shouldn't? Do you have a tendency to "shoot from the lip," as they say? Think before you speak and especially before you make a promise. Herod was flippant and casual with the words he spoke and the oath he made. As my dad used to remind me, "Get your mind in gear before your mouth starts running."

And *finally*, do you worry more about what other people think than you do God's opinion on a matter? If it's the right thing to do, then do it, regardless of what other people may say. Don't let the voice of others drown out the voice of God. And live your life in such a way that you can to hear His affirmation, "*Well done, good and faithful servant of the Lord.*"

I close with this. In the 12th century, Thomas a Becket became the Archbishop of Canterbury. Before being appointed archbishop he had been a fun-loving and care-free sort of person, and he was appointed to the post largely because he was such a likable guy. He and Henry II, the king of England, had been buddies growing up, and his expensive lifestyle and his love of entertainment made him a fun person to be around. It was Henry who appointed Thomas Archbishop.

But something happened to Becket after he became Archbishop. God began to move in his heart in a powerful way, and he started to take his calling before the Lord very seriously. As the Lord brought about a transformation in his life, Thomas began to abandon his expensive habits, and he became a champion for common people. Eventually he realized that he had to stand up for righteousness, and so he spoke out against his old friend, Henry, because of the king's adultery, just like John the Baptist had done centuries before. Maybe he was inspired by the story in this passage.

On the evening of December 29, 1170, while Thomas was celebrating communion in the Canterbury Cathedral, the king sent four of his soldiers to kill the archbishop while he led vespers. They murdered him as he celebrated the meal which commemorated the sacrifice Jesus made for all of us. Thomas a Becket realized in a way that most of us never will that, like John the Baptist before him,

the follower of Christ is called to be more concerned with what God thinks of what we do than anyone else. Even if that person happens to be the king.

Remember this story in the coming week as you seek to live in the center of God's will. Don't let pride get in your way, and have the courage to speak the truth in love, even when it's hard, even if it costs you. God will bless you if you do. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary of a Harmony of the Evangelists*, Vol. 2, p.222.

<sup>2</sup>T.W. Manson, *The Servant Messiah*, p.40.

<sup>3</sup>*Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.5.2.