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Sermon Summary # 16

How Fear led one man to Heaven and another to Hell Mark 6:14-29

There's no easy way around this story, so let me come straight to the point and say it as honestly, yet delicately, as I can. On the surface this story feels more at home in the National Enquirer than it does in the Bible. I would expect to read about this sort of thing in the gossip column of some Hollywood blogger, but hardly in the Bible! This story may well qualify as the most seedy and slimy story in all of the NT: it speaks of divorce and adultery and incest and cold-hearted cruelty and jealousy and revenge and an erotic dancer and lust and drunkenness and injustice and murder and decapitation. Enough said!

Actually, the story is about two men (Herod Antipas and John the Baptist), both of whom were driven by fear. But not the same kind of fear. And the ends to which fear led them are as far apart as heaven and hell.

Our Characters

Our first character is **Herod (Antipas)**, son of King Herod the Great. Young Herod ruled from 4 b.c. until he died in 39 a.d. This is the same Herod who beheaded James and imprisoned Peter and was eventually struck by an angel "because he did not give God the glory" and he was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:23)! He married his sister-in-law Herodias, wife of his half-brother Philip. But Herodias was not only Herod's sister-in-law, she was also his niece (she was the daughter of his other half brother, Aristobulus). Philip and Herodias already had a child, a daughter named Salome, whom we'll meet in just a moment

But this is enough information for you to understand why John the Baptist is denouncing and rebuking Herod. Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21 prohibit a man from marrying his sister-in-law while his brother is still alive. Therefore, the marriage of Herod and Herodias was not only unlawful, it was **incestuous**. To sum up: Herod was the husband, brother-in-law, and the uncle of Herodias! He was also both great uncle and step-father to Salome! Both Herodias and her daughter Salome called Herod uncle!

Now we come to Herodias, surely one of the most perverse and vindictive women in all of the Bible. From the time of John's first rebuke of Herod for having married her, she wanted John's head on a platter: literally! She began scheming to rid herself of this meddling prophet, waiting for just the right opportunity. When it came, she never hesitated to exploit her only daughter and sacrifice her honor by making her a sexual spectacle, all in order to trick Herod into killing John. If that weren't enough, she has no qualms about exposing her young daughter to the grisly scene of John's bloody head on a platter.

Next, we are introduced to Salome (so named by the Jewish historian Josephus), "Herodias's daughter" (v. 22). She was probably only fourteen or fifteen at the time, but here performed as a prostitute would; a first-century version of a modern day stripper, a lascivious, sensual, and seductive dance that mesmerized Herod.

Our final character is John the Baptist who didn't hesitate to confront Herod and Herodias and to denounce their relationship as immoral. Holy boldness! Note: v. 18 – "John had been saying" indicates that it wasn't a one-time indictment; John was repeatedly and often denouncing the relationship.

We are told in v. 14 that news of Jesus and all that he was doing had reached the palace of Herod. The many miracles of Jesus and his teaching and undoubtedly the testimony of John the Baptist before his execution got Herod to thinking, and worrying.

Herod (1) feared John, yet (2) was impressed with John's personal piety and his holiness of, in addition to being (3) greatly perplexed when he heard John speak, and yet (4) heard him "gladly" (he was intrigued by John and curious and found a measure of joy in what he said).

Finally, Herodias got her chance. See vv. 21-23 . . . Her plot worked to perfection. Whether impulsively or drunkenly, Herod made his promise in public, in the presence of nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee (v. 21). All the powerful and rich men of the region were present. Herod was determined to save face. As much as he regretted killing John, he had to maintain his reputation. He couldn't afford to be seen as one who made a promise and then casually broke it.

See vv. 27-29 . . .

In conclusion, consider **John's undying devotion to Jesus** in spite of imprisonment and death. He never retracted his words to Herod. He never softened his stance on the immorality of his marriage. He never tried to rationalize a compromise by saying: "But if I simply modify my position, just think of how much good I can do preaching the Word and ministering to people's needs. What good am I to anyone, least of all God, if I'm dead?" Never.

Consider also that **John hadn't been imprisoned and mistreated because he had sinned or turned his back on God**. It wasn't for immorality that he found himself in Herod's jail but because of his unwavering righteousness and commitment to the call of God on his life. Yet nowhere do we get any indication that he wondered to himself or aloud: "What have I done to deserve this? How could a loving God abandon me to this dungeon after all I've done for him?" John knew that following Jesus meant suffering and hardship and often times martyrdom.

Consider also that **John had lived for 30 years in complete obscurity, waiting for the time that God had ordained when he would serve as the forerunner of the Messiah**. John's life and ministry had been prophesied in the Old Testament. He was the one who came in the wilderness shouting, "Prepare the way of the Lord." John was the fulfillment of the prophesied coming of Elijah (Mt. 11). And if that weren't enough, it was Jesus who said: "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Mt. 11:11a). And yet John probably only ministered for about a year! One year! All of this prophesied preparation. All of this sacrifice in terms of earthly comforts. All for one year of ministry. Why?

Why didn't Jesus mount up a rescue operation, a raid on the prison to set John free? Surely that wouldn't have been difficult for him. After all, this is the man who had driven out demons and cleansed lepers and raised the dead and calmed the waves on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus let his friend, his cousin, die. Why?

That was God's will for his life! It may be God's will for yours. John accomplished what God raised him up to accomplish, and then God took him home. Why did those 10 medical aid workers in Afghanistan die so young, with so much work left to do? That was God's will for *their* lives!

What does that mean for us? At minimum, it means we must diligently seize every second of every day for the glory of Jesus Christ. It means that we must redeem the time, to use Paul's language. It means that we must count every minute as a gift of grace that we do not deserve. It means that we must never charge God with injustice or unfairness or a lack of love simply because godly people who are fulfilling a glorious and fruitful ministry are taken from this earth at what appears to us to be a premature time.

One final consideration comes to mind in light of this story: **How far will your faith in God take you?** To what lengths are you willing to go on behalf of the gospel? What kind of sacrifice are you committed to making in your stand for righteousness?

See Hebrews 11:32-38 . . .

I earlier said that **this story is about two men and their respective fear**. Herod was afraid of people, of plots against him, of his wife, fearful of losing face, of losing power, of diminishing popularity. He was afraid of everything and everyone except God.

John couldn't have cared less about popularity or praise or power or even life itself. His fear was of God; not that he was afraid of him. It was the fear of reverence and awe and amazement and adoration and awareness of the majesty and glory and beauty of God as revealed in Jesus. Herod's fear led him to hell. John's fear was the pathway to heaven.