

JOHN THE BAPTIST COMES TO TOWN

3. The Sermon that Cost a Preacher His Head

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We come now to the third message on the general series JOHN THE BAPTIST COMES TO TOWN, or the Ministry of the Forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is a type of the work of the Holy Spirit in preparing men's hearts to bow down to the claims of Christ Jesus and receive Him as Lord and Master and as Saviour of their lives and of their souls. We've been speaking to you for the past two Lord's Days on the necessity of repentance and how John the Baptist was faithful to keep sinners' feet to the fire and tell them that God demands and will settle for nothing less than all-out, unconditional surrender to the claims of Christ – and that only those who bow to the sceptre of King Jesus may know Him in the pardon of their sins and what we call salvation.

Now with your Bibles open for the third message at the Gospel of Mark, chapter 6, verse 14, I want to speak again along the line of the ministry of John the Baptist, and if I have a subject for the message today it would be "The Sermon That Cost a Preacher His Head." In Mark 6:14-20, we read, "And king Herod heard of him for his name was spread abroad) and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. Others said, That it is Elias. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. [They were trying to make some disposition of the person called Jesus.] But when Herod [the king] heard thereof, he said [I know who this fellow is], It is John, whom I beheaded: He is risen from the dead. For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: For he had married her. For John had said unto Herod [see, he was preaching the sermon outside of Jerusalem and Herod attended the service and John looked him in the face and said], It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. Therefore Herodias [that is Herod's wife] had a quarrel against him [John the Baptist], and would have killed him; but she could not: For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly."

Now old Herod knew that John the Baptist was bringing the truth, and he was afraid of him and respected him. And he did a lot of things that John said must be done, and he hears him gladly. Mark 6:21-29 reads, "And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee; And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he swam unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. And the king was exceeding sorry,' yet for

his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought; and he went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel,' and the damsel gave it to her mother. And when his disciples heard of it, they came and took up the corpse, and laid it in a tomb."

My friend, here is a sermon that cost a man his head. It is a sermon on holiness. It is a sermon on God's Holy Law. It is a sermon on the requirement of a holy God. It is a sermon on the character of God. And here is this mouthpiece, this voice of a Holy God, a man by the name of John the Baptist, facing the king of Judea with his ungodly wife and ungodly daughter and all of the courtiers that stand about the court. When this old king hears from God through the lips of God's preacher and God's prophet that it is not lawful for him to have his brother's wife, that sermon, that faithfulness, that truth, cost John the Baptist his head – but it cost that man Herod his eternity-bound soul. Revelation 21:8, "But the fearful and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone; which is the second death."

You know, my friend, from the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry throughout the lids of the New Testament, repentance is the watchword of the hour. Every prophet and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself in His prophetic ministry, down through John the Seer who wrote the last book of the Bible, rings the charges on the truth that God is a Holy God, that His demands have not been lightened, and that men are still called upon to repent toward God and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Immediately we open the Word of God – whether in the Old Testament or in the New – we find that the subject that is paramount is REPENTANCE.

In the Old Testament the prophets were all the time, forever and eternally, calling on the people to give up their sinful ways and to live a righteous life. When John the Baptist hit the deck to prepare the people's hearts to receive Jesus Christ, he immediately announced (in Matthew 3:2), "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The first sermon the Lord Jesus ever preached as a Prophet, He demanded repentance. The Apostle Paul is the author, as the Holy Spirit gave him utterance, of that eternal command as recorded in Acts 17:30: "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent."

It is God's command, and back of God's command is God, the character of God and the requirements of God. In the Bible, my friends, the word repentance, the act repentance, the duty repentance, the command repentance, the gift of repentance is the first step. (I don't like that term "first step," but I don't know how to put it any better!) There is no use for us to deny that God Almighty demands repentance. He commands repentance. The duty of all men, Paul says – now since Christ has come God doesn't overlook anything now and ignorance is no excuse – the first duty of men and women is to repent. You know, my friends, in our zeal we have lowered God's standards. We have widened the door of the professing church, but we have not been able to widen God's door to glory. Those doors that mark the difference between hell and heaven and between bliss and torment in eternity cannot be changed. The Doorkeeper is God Almighty Himself. These doors to glory were fixed forever in eternity in the eternal counsel of Almighty God, and the price of that fixing was wrought out in the agonizing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ at a place called Calvary. I know that I am preaching in a day now when we have made it too

easy; we have made it far too easy. And today, God pity us, to many it costs nothing to come into our churches. It costs nothing to go out. We give up nothing when we come in, and we leave nothing behind when we go out.

A generation or two ago – I remember even when I started to preach nearly 33 years ago – a generation ago it meant something to stack arms, to throw down your shotgun, to repent, to surrender, to come into the presence of the Living Christ in such a way as to be saved. In that day and time this Christian walk and this Christian way was a pilgrimage. Men and women walked in enemy territory as a pilgrim and walked the tight rope, seeking the will of God. In those days this business of being a Christian was a warfare – constantly at war with our old flesh within us, the devil tempting us. In those days this business of walking with Christ was an eternal conflict – it was an agonizing struggle. In those days coming to Christ meant an honest attempt to do eternally the will of a Sovereign God. In those days coming to Christ in what we call repentance meant, if necessary, the cutting off of the arms or a plucking out of the eye.

In the Word of God we are told about a cross and about taking it up and about denying self. In those days coming to Christ in repentance meant being willing to be a fool for Christ's sake. In those days coming to Christ in repentance meant walking alone if necessary. It meant a willingness to be hated for His sake. Now, God help us, it is more or less a picnic – it is a social – it is a mockery! May God open our eyes!

Repentance holds the field until our Lord Jesus Christ recalls it, and He has not done that up till now and so I preach it. John the Baptist preached it. It cost him his head. And I preach it, and failure to obey it will cost you your soul. Luke 13:3: "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

I am dead certain that the mess we are in religiously and spiritually now, the love-sick so-called church people, the sickly sentimental crop of so-called believers who are enthusiastic about a fair or a frolic but are conspicuously absent from prayer meeting – I am sure that this is due to the fact that our churches are full of people who are not born right. Somehow or another they got into our professing churches without ever having come face to face with the holy demands of a Holy God, and being brought in the face of those demands to the place of throwing up all hands of self-effort and self-confidence and turning one's self over lock, stock and barrel to the Sovereign Christ. Somehow or another they have missed the main business. Somehow or another they got in what we call the "church" without turning in abhorrence and in utter conviction against sin, without turning from their sin to obedience unto God. And, of course, their lives fail! If we dodge this step, we miss out on salvation!

In the days of the Apostle Paul it was Jesus or Ceasar as Lord – and you are either in enemy territory, friendly with God's enemies, giving comfort to those who would tear God off His throne and wipe the memory of the shed blood of Jesus Christ off the face of the earth if they could; or you are in the camp of those who gladly surrender to the rule and reign of Christ, and own His death as your death, His life as your life, His resurrection as your resurrection and His reign as your reign. You own Him, and you are awfully glad you do. I tell you, my Lord Jesus Christ never has made it easy. He did not preach "only believe." He preached righteousness, and then peace. He never offered to give peace to sinners while they waved the red flag of their open

rebellion against the claims of Christ and the rule of Christ. My friends, time and time again in the Bible that is clearly brought out. Here is the rich young ruler. My soul, if he had come to us we would have voted him in, wouldn't we! But he lacked one thing. He lacked one thing! He was like old Herod; he believed and he heard John gladly, and he did many things. He quit this, and he quit that, and he quit the other and quit the other. John put his finger on the sore spot – his illegal, both Godward and manward, relationship to his brother Philip's wife (he had killed Philip and taken Philip's wife to be his consort), and John said, "You are breaking God's Law." Old Herod was willing to do this and willing to quit that, but when it came to the sore spot in his life, and the one place where he was telling God to go to hell, proving that he was not willing to abide by the strict Law of the Holy God, when pressure was brought to bear on him, instead of turning from his sins to God, he cut off the head of John the Baptist, and they brought it in on a charger. Oh, my soul, it is repent or go to hell! I tell you now my Lord never has lowered the standard.

He told Nicodemus, a nice, respectable man, a member of the greatest religious group the world at that time had ever seen – they were strict and in many respects honorable and above board – but he told old Nicodemus that a miracle has to take place in his life and in his heart. He has got to be what the Scriptures call "born anew, born from above." Oh, my Lord Jesus Christ says, Let righteousness be established as the dominant principle of your life and then peace will be yours. John 3:5-7: "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again."

Let surrender be your action and your attitude, and then joy will be your portion. But no righteousness, no peace; no surrender, no joy. My Lord Jesus Christ will tell men to labor not for the meat that perisheth, but labor for the meat that springs up into eternal life. He will tell men to agonize to enter in at the strait gate and tell them that a few will be able to get in there. My Lord will not, my Lord cannot and still be God, save any human being in time or in eternity, apart from that human being as an act of himself bringing all of his idols and stacking his arms and making once-for-all-to-be-recommitted-and-done-all-over-again-day-after-day committal to the Lord Jesus Christ! Read John 6:27: "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for Him hath God the Father sealed." Luke 13:24: "Strive to enter in at the strait [difficult, narrow, restricted] gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

What is repentance? What is that John the Baptist is demanding? Well, he told old Herod, "You will just have to turn from this evil way." What is it? Well, repentance is conviction and yet it is not conviction. No man ever has been able to repent apart from deeply feeling the sense of his utter guilt. That is conviction. Yet repentance is more than conviction. Conviction is something like this; here is an illustration: For instance, it is one thing to be called at five o'clock in the morning by the hotel clerk or by the alarm clock, but it is another thing to get up. Do you see it? Conviction is to be called; it is another thing to heed the call. It is one thing to be awakened – that is conviction; it is another thing to arise – that's repentance. You see your duty – that is conviction; you do it – that is repentance. Light – that is conviction; life is the fruit of repentance. I know what is right – conviction; I will do it if it kills me – repentance!

My sinner friend, God Almighty has taken the trouble to wake some of you up to your perilous condition before Him. It was dark, and He struck a light and said to you, "This is the path I want you to walk in." And you were awakened. That is conviction. You were convicted. Some of you were alarmed. Some of you have been concerned. Your conscience was aroused. You knew you were wrong and that you were under God's judgment. You were moved about your need. You lifted your hand and said, "Pray for me." You sought somebody out and asked him to help you. You were moved. Had you acted you would have become a Christian, but you didn't. You resisted, you dallied, or maybe you fought it. You said, "No." Some of you have been in this state for years until the alarm clock sounds mighty dim. Once you trembled, now you sleep well at night.

Repentance is conviction, but it is more than conviction. Repentance is sorrow for sin, but it is more than sorrow for sin. This young lawyer who came to the Lord Jesus Christ was sorry, but he wasn't sorry enough to quit. He wept, but he went away wiping the tears from his eyes without Christ. My dear unsaved friend, tears do not count if your heart is in rebellion. More than tears are needed. A great ONCE-FOR-ALL "LORD, I SURRENDER" is needed! Repentance is not an emotion or excitement, but repentance includes it. No man has ever been able to repent who did not get terribly excited in the very seat of the affections of his soul about the heinousness of his sin and the desperateness of his relation, or lack of it, to Almighty God!

What is repentance? It is the one great deliberate act of the soul, the whole man, in obedience to the call of God. It is a turning from and a turning to. It is putting your hand on your sin and pulling it out. That is what repentance is. It cost John the Baptist his head to preach repentance to Herod.

Have you repented? Have you been able – as you sought a new heart, as you put yourself in the hands of a Sovereign God, have you been able to abhor yourself, your old nature and your sinful way, and turn utterly renouncing all hope in self to put your confidence and your trust and your surrender in the Lord Jesus Christ? I hope you have.