

Christianity Explored

Choices—King Herod

Mark 6:17-28

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Scripture

What is it that determines the choices we make? Is it our consciences? I ask this because my conscience is currently being pricked by advertisements I see in some magazines that promised me washboard abs within three months.

Well, it's three months later and I still don't have washboard abs. But I'd love to. It would be great to have "six-pack abs" where at present I have something that looks like a family-size pack of marshmallows!

To be honest, I would like the result of hard work without doing the hard work. But I realize more and more each day the truth of what Meryl Streep's character says in *The Bridges of Madison County*, "We are the choices we have made."

You see, advertisements are not aimed at developing a healthy conscience. Advertisers know that most people think of their consciences as an imposition on their lives. Conscience is a drag on our fun! It asks people to act in ways that inconvenience them. It either stops people from doing things that they would otherwise enjoy, or it takes away their enjoyment when they ignore their conscience and do the thing anyway.

Conscience is a nag! It never shuts up. It will not leave us in peace to live in the way we want to live.

And yet, if I had listened to my conscience three months ago, I would be much closer to having abs of steel, as opposed to having abs of mush.

Not only that, but listening to my conscience—and by that I mean the God-give sense of what is right and wrong—will affect far more than my body. *It will affect the destiny of my soul.* Why? Because "we are the choices we have made."

¹ The material for this message is from *Christianity Explored* by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper (New Malden, Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2002), 93-99.

Please turn to Mark 6. Today we are going to look at the story of King Herod, a man who really paid the price for the choices he made. Let me read Mark 6:17-28:

¹⁷ For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." ²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." ²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. ²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. (Mark 6:17-28)

Introduction

Perhaps you have heard the story of a CEO who has taken on a new job. The outgoing CEO says to him, "Sometimes you will make wrong choices. You will. You will mess up. When that happens, I have prepared three envelopes for you. I left them in the top drawer of the desk. The first time you mess up by making a wrong

choice, open envelope #1. The second time you mess up, open #2. The third time, open #3.”

For the first few months, everything goes fine. Then the new CEO makes his first wrong choice. So he goes to the drawer, opens up envelope #1, and the message reads, “Blame me.”

So, he does. “This is the old CEO’s fault. I inherited his problems. The mistake I made is really his problem.”

Everybody says, “Okay.” And it works out pretty well.

Things go fine for a while, and then the new CEO makes his second mistake. So, he goes to the drawer and opens up envelope #2. This time he reads, “Blame the Board.”

And he does. “It’s the Board’s fault. The Board has been a mess. I inherited them. They’re the problem.”

Everybody says, “Okay, that makes sense.”

Things go fine for a while, and then he makes his third mistake. So, he goes to the drawer and opens up envelope #3. This time the message reads, “Prepare three envelopes!”

We chuckle. But the fact is that our choices have real consequences.

The story of King Herod and John the Baptist has fired the imaginations of artists and composers over the centuries. It brilliantly illustrates the fact that “we are the choices we have made.”

Lesson

In today’s lesson we wrestle with what it means to repent and believe, as we examine Herod’s refusal to do so.

I. Herod Chose to Rebel (6:17-20)

First, notice that Herod chose to rebel.

It is helpful to keep in mind that there are several men with the name of “Herod” in the Bible. One Herod is Herod the Great. He was king of Judea, Galilee, Ituraea, and Trachonitis from 37-4 BC. Jesus was born during his reign. And he was the Herod who

murdered all the baby boys living in the Bethlehem region when Jesus was born.

Herod the Great had six sons. One of his sons became known as Herod Antipas (or Herod the Tetrarch), and he ruled over Galilee from 4 BC – 39 AD. And this is the Herod that we are talking about in our text for today, Mark 6:17-28.

Herod Antipas' first marriage lasted over twenty years. But then, while visiting his brother Philip (also known as Herod Philip I), he met Philip's wife, Herodias. He allowed himself to fall in love with her and he proposed marriage. Herodias accepted, but only on the condition that he got rid of his present wife. Herod agreed.

So Herodias left her husband Philip, Herod's own brother, and came to live with Herod in Galilee. By doing this, Herod made a conscious and deliberate choice to rebel against God's law. Did he know that he was rebelling? Yes, because this man John—who Herod knew as “a righteous and holy man” (6:20)—had been bravely telling King Herod, **“It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife”** (6:18).

John, you may remember, was the man we met right at the beginning of Mark's Gospel. Also known as John the Baptist, this man told people about Jesus and urged them to turn away from their sin in order to be forgiven by God. Herod put John in prison, but he continued to listen to him. We read in Mark 6:20, **“When he [Herod] heard him [John], he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.”** Note that the word **“perplexed”** here doesn't mean that John's words were complicated. It means that Herod was disturbed by John's teaching.

Why? Because he had exposed Herod's rebellion. Perhaps as you have attended this series of sermons, you have had a similar experience. Perhaps you've come to realize that you've been living your life for yourself, and ignoring the God who made you. Perhaps, like Herod listening to John, you listen to the words of Jesus and want to go on listening, despite the disturbance they cause.

So Herod continued to listen. Day after day it went on. The

people at the palace must have thought that their king had gone religious, listening to this strange figure preach as he did. **“Herod feared John”** to the extent that he even **“kept him safe”** (6:20), but there was nevertheless something that Herod was not prepared to do.

II. Herod Chose Not to Repent (6:21-28)

And second, notice that Herod chose not to repent.

Yes, he was prepared to listen to John. He was prepared to acknowledge John as a righteous and holy man. He was even prepared to protect John. But there was one thing he would not do.

He would not cease his adultery. He would not repent. Remember how we’ve seen that the right response to having our rebellion against God exposed is to repent. It is to do an about-turn, to turn from our sin and ask God for forgiveness. But Herod wouldn’t do that.

Then one day, on his birthday, Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. Notice Mark’s description of the banquet. He says in Mark 6:21, **“But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.”**

Herod’s birthday is described as an opportunity. It was an opportunity for Herod to repent decisively and publicly. But it was also an opportunity for Herodias to get rid of John. Notice who seized the opportunity, and who missed it.

During the birthday banquet, Salome, the daughter of Herodias with her former husband Philip, came in and danced in front of all the men. The phrase **“she pleased Herod and his guests”** has sexual overtones. As a result of her dance the king uttered a ridiculous promise to this teenage girl. He said in verse 23, **“Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom.”**

I am sure that as he said it, all his friends were laughing and clapping him on the back. Salome ran to her mother, Herodias. (It

is astonishing that she has allowed her daughter to do this.)

“What shall I ask for? Diamonds, gold, rubies, or the lovely meadows to the south so we can establish great lands and farms?”

“No, no,” snaps her mother, “you ask for the head of John the Baptist.”

Herodias seized her opportunity to get rid of John. We read in Mark 6:25, **“And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, ‘I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’”**

Well, that quickly wiped the smile off from Herod’s face. We read that he was **“exceedingly sorry”** (6:26).

And, suddenly, we reach the key moment in Herod’s life. He was suddenly in an extremely dangerous place. If “we are the choices we make,” then this choice would have a profound effect on what Herod would become. And it was a terribly hard choice to make, considering all the oaths he had made, and all the guests he was trying to impress.

But there it is. He could have said, “Look, I shouldn’t have made the oaths I made—it was a stupid thing to do. I can’t kill John. He’s a good man. I know the things he’s said have been hard to accept, but he’s always spoken the truth. I will not kill him.”

Or, alternatively, he could cave in to the fierce pressure of those around him, gamely pretending to laugh with all his guests, and suppressing his conscience one more time.

What would he choose? Look at what Mark 6:26 says, **“And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.”** Much as he feared John, he feared his guests more. Verse 27 continues, **“And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.”**

It’s horrific, isn’t it? Tradition has it that Herodias pulled the tongue out, cut it off and pierced it with one of her pins, and said, “That’ll teach John to speak to me like that.” You see, under pres-

sure, this king capitulated. He allowed the head that warned him, the tongue that told him to turn from his rebellion and repent, to be literally cut off.

But how many of us would have done something similar in Herod's position? The fact remains that many people will do just that. In the moment of decision, they will deny what they know is right because of what the family will think, what business colleagues may do, or because of what friends will say. Or because they know it will mean changing much-loved habits.

I wonder if you see the parallels Mark wants us to draw between John and Jesus? Both preached the same message: that we need to turn from our rebellion against God and accept the rescue he has lovingly provided. Both were protected by powerful men: Herod and Pontius Pilate, both of whom tried to remain neutral but could not. And both John and Jesus suffered violent deaths as a result. There is, of course, one further point of comparison. Why were both John and Jesus killed? Because in both cases people would not repent and would not do what was right.

In Mark chapters 1 to 3, we saw Jesus' awesome power and authority. In chapters 4 and 5, we saw the power of his teaching and of his word. Yet at the beginning of chapter 6, we see him rejected by his "home town." Their familiarity with Jesus bred contempt, they were offended by him, and they rejected him. Jesus' response in subsequent chapters was to take his preaching elsewhere. He instructed his disciples to do likewise, saying that if people would not listen, they should move on.

That's the pattern: the message will be rejected by some, who will themselves be rejected because of their response.

Interestingly, this Herod is mentioned a final time in the Gospels, in Luke chapter 23. Luke records that Pontius Pilate sent Jesus to Herod when he learned that Jesus was from the area Herod controlled. The meeting between Herod and Jesus was ominous, not because of what was said, but rather because of what was not said.

Notice what we read in Luke 23:8-9, "When Herod saw Je-

sus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer.”

You see, there comes a time, after repeatedly refusing to repent, when there is no longer an opportunity to do so. It is easy to put it off, to say that we don't have the time, to think that we have too much to lose. Surely it's better to wait, you may well be thinking, there'll be a more convenient time in the future. Of course, it's never easy to repent. There will never be a “convenient” time. And Herod's story reminds us that we may not get an opportunity later.

When Herod got no answer, he and his soldiers mocked Jesus by dressing him in an elegant robe and sending him back to Pilate, who enjoyed the joke. And look at Luke 23:12: “And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.”

This should be a warning to us: rejecting Jesus' call to repent and believe may earn us the approval of other people, it may even win us friends, but it will eventually earn us the rejection of Jesus.

Conclusion

If you are a sports fan, and particularly a fan of golf, you are no doubt aware of what has happened to Tiger Woods. Last November he was involved in an unusual late-night accident near his home. The result of that accident surfaced that he was living a double life—a life with his wife and children, and another life with multiple girlfriends.

I recently came across an interview that Tiger Woods did in 2006. During an exclusive golf outing for top business and entertainment executives, Tiger Woods was put on the spot by an evangelical guest of Nike on October 9, 2006.

That day, 30 people gathered at the Trump golf course in Los Angeles for the 2006 “Tee It Up with Tiger Woods” event, which included a private golf session and lunch with the living legend.

During the lunch, there was a question-and-answer session with Woods. Most people asked about their swings or golf questions.

However, one guest of Nike stood up and asked two questions: “Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior? And if not, prayerfully, would you?”

A source present at the lunch later said, “You could have heard a pin drop. People were mortified. But Tiger was as unflappable as he is on the golf course.”

Tiger said, “My father was a Christian—of course Christianity was part of my life. But my mother is Asian, and Buddhism was also part of my childhood. So I practice both faiths respectfully.”

Jesus demands exclusive loyalty. You cannot follow Jesus *and* Buddha, or Jesus *and* anyone or anything else, for that matter.

When faced with a choice, Herod chose to please his guests.

You have a choice to make. Who will you choose to follow?

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develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, you have given us the example of King Herod. When faced with a choice, he made the wrong choice. He chose to please his guests.

There are some here today who are faced with a choice. They are being confronted with the claims of Jesus and what it means to follow him.

Would you enable that person today who is wavering to make a choice to follow Jesus? Enable him or her to repent and to believe in Jesus alone.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.