

The main issue is clear - do we see Jesus for who He really is? One way to uncover our view of Jesus is to ask – what do we expect Jesus to do for us?

Our author Mark’s main concern of the previous passages carries over into our passage for tonight. Mark has been writing how the ministry of Jesus had been building up. More people, new situations, and each time we learn something about Jesus. Mark is pushing us to consider and to perfect our own view of Jesus. Again do we see Jesus for who He really is?

What if one of Jesus’ faithful servants was arrested, detained, and being threatened with death, and what if Jesus did not protect the life of that faithful follower? If that happened would that change your view of Jesus? Would you still trust Jesus?

**To see Jesus for who He is, means that we factor in eternity, and we conclude that the deeper tragedy is not the death of John the Baptist, but rather the death of the conscience of Herod.**

**1. The backstory tragedy started when a stirred conscience delayed to take proper action. (v.17-20)**

Verse 17, “...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.”

We have a flashback to a previous time. Back in chapter 1, Mark had already written some about John the Baptist. Specifically, Mark wanted us to know that the prophet Isaiah had predicted that John would come to prepare the way for Jesus, crying in the wilderness for others to prepare the way for the Lord, and to “*make His paths straight*” (Mark 1:3). At the start of Mark’s fast-moving Gospel, Mark paused long enough in chapter 1, to tell us quite a bit about John the Baptist. Before Mark would tell us that Jesus “came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan” and before Mark would inform us that John was there when the heavens were torn open and the Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove, and before Mark would write that a voice came from heaven announcing Jesus as the beloved Son, the well-pleasing Son, before Mark would write that Jesus was driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit, Mark wrote to us about someone else, who was in the wilderness before Jesus was in the wilderness. That someone in the wilderness was John the Baptist.

Before Mark would write that “*John was arrested,*” and that Jesus came into Galilee preaching, Mark would inform us a lot more about this John the Baptist. Mark needed us to know that John the Baptist had a huge following and a huge influence. Mark needed us to know that John was, in fact, baptizing many people. Mark needed us to know that John was focused on Jesus without distraction, and

that he was a simple man who lived in the wilderness, and ate wilderness-style. John was a force. John preached about truth. We could say that John was the conscience of the land. Thanks to Mark's writing, we can imagine John the Baptist shouting "*make straight the paths of the Lord!*"

To sinners, John was preaching – make it right! Straighten up!

Let me read what Mark took the time to write, now reading Mark 1:4-8, "*John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

What does all of this backstory about John the Baptist have to do with our study tonight about Jesus and Herod? We return to our passage, in Mark 6:18, and we read WHY Herod had put John into prison, "*For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'*"

What Herod and this woman had done, is they met and each decided to divorce their spouses and marry each other. But it gets worse. They were related! Herodias was the daughter of Herod's half-brother Aristobulus, and thus she was Herod's niece. When Herod met her, she was the wife of another of Herod's half-brothers, Philip, and therefore, she was his sister-in-law. For Herod to marry her was totally unallowable by Jewish law, and law in any nation of the world. John was not nitpicking, he was touching on an important topic, and John was not about to let that rest.

Do you remember the backstory to the backstory? When this fellow John was born, he was a miracle child. There was an elderly priest named Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth, a long time after it was biologically feasible for them to have children. But to quote Pastor Tony, when he was preaching of Abraham and Sarah in that same predicament, "God does not need fertile subjects to provide the seed for the world." Same applied to Zacharias and Elizabeth. God opened the womb of Elizabeth, and due to explicit orders from the Angel Gabriel, their son was a Nazirite from birth. Who is that boy? You guessed it, none other than John the Baptist. Because of this special vow, John's hair was never cut, and John never touched a dead body, and never drank a fermented drink, per Numbers chapter 6. John was from his infancy, specially set apart for God. As John grew in His knowledge of the Scriptures and God's call upon his life, he began to dress like the ancient prophets dressed, wearing the rough clothes of camel's hair, kept on with a

leather belt around his waist. And John's food was grasshoppers and wild honey, both items that are found in the desert.

As John spent time alone with God, John developed an intense moral fiber and a deep sense of righteousness. John was fortified with moral courage. One thing John would never lose would be his conscience.

Consider the words of Christ Himself, from Matthew 11:11, "...among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist."

John clearly proclaimed that Herod's marriage was wrong, and that same truth also impacted the wife of Herod, the woman named Herodias. Listen to her response to John's preaching in verse 19, "*And Herodias had a grudge against [John] and wanted to put [John] to death. But she could not...*"

We read in verse 20, the reason that Herodias could not put John to death. "*But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that [John] was a righteous and holy man, and [Herod] kept [John] safe. When [Herod] heard [John], [Herod] was greatly perplexed, and yet [Herod] heard [John] gladly.*"

Herod kept John safe from Herodias!

## **2. The consequent tragedy when one harbored sin gave way to a new crisis of conscience, to deep grief, and then to further sins, previously unthinkable, and a life of sin-enslavement. (v.21-29)**

Verse 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.*"

The Herod clan of rulers commonly had birthday parties with drinking and voluptuous dancing. Usually, it was the prostitutes who would dance, but this time, as the next verse shows, it was a surprise dancer, courtesy of Herodias.

Verse 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."*

Herod was related to this young dancer, so it is creepy that he was watching her dance? And besides that, the young lady was probably a teenager at this time. Yet Herod and his guests were pleased with her dancing. Flowing with the evening and the alcohol, Herod then did what was also commonly done – he announced his approval of the dancing by offering a large prize. It is best for it not to be taken literally – he did not even have the right to give away half of his kingdom - but it was a proverbial way of saying "name your prize." What would she ask for? A beautiful dress with pearls from Rome? Maybe to have two large horses that only she could ride?

But before we could find out her requested prize, Herod turned it into a vow. Verse 23, "*And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom."*

This was all a show for his guests, and it was working. His guests were duly impressed with this birthday party rising to its main highlight, with the punchline to follow. The young lady did not know what to request.

Verse 24, *“And she went out and said to her mother, “For what should I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.”*

There are so many things wrong with this, it is hard to keep score. Why would this young lady agree to be dancing for her relative and his drunken friends in the first place? Then, why would this young lady be asking her evil mother what to ask for as a prize? We know why the evil mother asked for the head of John the Baptist, severed from his body – it was so that John would die, silencing the righteous preaching about the marriage of Herod and Herodias.

Two more questions 1) why would this young girl follow through with her mother’s murderous and criminal request, knowing that it would cost a man his life? 2) why would she ADD her own gruesome idea of serving the head up on a platter? And that is what we have in verse 25. Notice one of our author’s favorite words “immediately” being used as I read verse 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.”*

Like mother, like daughter! She had fully been schooled in the criminal, power-mongering ways within the Herod dynasty and evil clan. But was this young lady’s conscience even old enough to realize what sort of rare and godly man she was asking to have murdered?

Suddenly the drunken Herod was sobered up.

Verse 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.”*

The word exceedingly sorry was only used one other time in the entire New Testament. It was also by Mark, over in chapter 14:34, when Jesus was praying, and began to be troubled to realize the full extent of what would be required of Him on the cross. Jesus said this about Himself, *“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death...”*

Jesus reached the moment of truth. The moment when He must decide whether or not He will go through with it. Will Jesus go to the cross for these people? In that moment, Jesus had to decide within His soul, to die for us, before He actually went ahead and died in His body. Realizing what must be done, Jesus had to meet His circumstances by keeping His conscience alive, and living for God by dying for us.

Our author shows us that similarly, Herod had reached such a moment of truth. It was this moment when Herod must decide whether or not he will go through with what He had promised the dancer and his dinner guests. Will Herod order the killing of John the Baptist for these people? In that moment, Herod had to

decide within His conscience, before he actually went ahead and gave the order to kill John. Realizing what now would be done, Herod had to meet his circumstances by dying to his own conscience. Herod's conscience died, before he even ordered the death of the conscience of the nation, the man John the Baptist.

Herod should have known that there was good reason why Herod had always admired John. Herod should have known that his uneasy feelings about killing John were his own internal conscience talking to him. Herod should have factored in other people beyond just his dinner guests. What about the crowds of people who knew that John was a true prophet of God? And Herod should have realized that his wife had tricked him into this difficult situation and that she would be getting her way if Herod followed through with this rash vow.

How could Herod get out of this predicament? There is always a way out. There is always a godly response. Here are some statements that Herod should have said, "Young lady, I promised you a gift, not a crime. I won't do it." OR "Young lady, I promised you a gift, not your mother. Select something else." OR, Herod could have slowed the whole thing down, called John the Baptist to come over and give him advice. John could have read to Herod from the Bible what to do, and perhaps John the Baptist would have read to Herod from Leviticus 5:4-6, "*if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, he shall bring to the Lord as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.*"

Herod could have chosen for right rather than wrong. Herod could have chosen for John rather than for Herodias. Herod could have chosen to please God, rather than pleasing his dinner guests. Herod could have chosen the Lamb of God, but he chose to murder one of the most eminent men of God who ever lived.

Herod made his decision. Herod killed his own conscience and Herod killed John.

Feel the tone of our author in verses 27 and 28, as I read, "*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.*"

Where was John going? To be closer to God than he even was in the desert.

Where was Herod going? Farther away from God, than even he was in his birthday party of debauchery.

In this story, we ought to grieve more for the tragedy of Herod's decision of conscience that we grieve for John the Baptist. Why do I say that? Because the death of John was a death that brought honor to God, and ultimately, it was a death

that was reversed in the resurrection of Jesus. With the perspective of eternity factored in, John will live forever, and Herod will die forever.

Verse 29, “*when [John’s] disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.*”

Just as the body of John the Baptist was put in a tomb by his disciples, so also the body of Jesus will be put in a tomb by His disciples. Our author, by ending this passage with the body of John placed by His disciples into a tomb, raises the question what are the disciples of John supposed to do now? The disciples of John now see Jesus for who He really is – Jesus would allow His servants to be beheaded. Given that, the disciples of John the Baptist need to decide whether they will follow the Jesus that truly is.

The disciples of John are supposed to do what John taught them to do – to behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) and to remember that John himself must decrease, while Jesus must increase. (John 3:30). John taught his own disciples that John is not the Christ. John prepared the way, so that after his own death, his own disciples would turn and follow Christ.

**3. The incredible mercy of Jesus. Yet even now, after the needless tragedies and extra layers of sins, there is still mercy to be found for those who respond to Jesus, who is still calling out to their consciences! (v.14-16)**

Verse 14, “*King Herod heard of it, for Jesus name had become known.*”

As the ministry of Jesus expands and expands during these early chapters of Mark, now Mark shows that the ministry of Jesus expanded so much that even King Herod heard of it. This brings us back to the main question of the passage – who is Jesus? Specifically, did Herod see Jesus for who He really is?

Don’t be confused. John is now gone. Herod killed John. John is not preaching anymore, but now a new preacher has come named Jesus. And Herod heard of the ministry of Jesus. Our author wants us to see a new situation – will governmental leaders follow Jesus?

Herod was the ruler in Galilee throughout the ministries of both John and Jesus. Any new religious movement carried a potential for a popular uprising. John and Jesus had crowds of people listening to them. The large-scale popular enthusiasm for the preaching of both John and Jesus, and the reports of Jesus preaching about the kingdom of God, would give any king suspicions.

How did Herod view Jesus? As a threat? Yes, but what is fascinating, is that Herod did not view Jesus as a threat militarily. Rather, Herod viewed Jesus as a threat personally – a threat to the very conscience of Herod!

Verse 14 – we get the possible options for Herod to choose about how Herod will think about Jesus? a) Herod could see Jesus as a re-appearance of John the Baptist. It is not the God-man from heaven, but rather it is John the Baptist, risen again, and now able to do miracles. b) Herod could see Jesus as a re-appearance of

Elijah. (v.15). Was Jesus another Elijah? This theory that some were offering could have been based on 2 Kings 2:15, when the prophets said “*The Spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.*” c) Herod’s third option was to view Jesus as another prophet, like one of the famous prophets of the Old Testament. To call Jesus a resurrected John or a resurrected Elijah was not the articulation of a well thought-out belief in resurrections, but instead it was a rather clumsy, but vivid way of expressing a sense of similarity and continuity such as is better conveyed in the image of the transfer of the Spirit of Elijah to his colleague Elisha. Today we might say – Billy Graham is gone, does so-and-so have the tendencies of Billy Graham? Or, does Giannis play like MJ? The issue of identifying newcomers in the language of the previous people, is common. Matthew 11:14, Matthew wrote that John the Baptist IS Elijah.

What was Herod’s view of Jesus? Verse 16, “...when Herod heard of [the ministry of Jesus], [Herod] said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised...’” This is the conscience of Herod influencing Herod. But Herod did not do anything about it.

Jesus saw this as a vitally important lesson. In Mark 8:15, Jesus “...cautioned [His disciples], saying, ‘Watch out; beware of the leaven of...Herod...do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?’”

Jesus understood that Herod’s heart was hardened! Jesus had sent John the Baptist to call out repeatedly to the conscience of Herod, and Herod did not respond. Herod delayed. If you get a fresh bagel from the bakery, don’t delay to eat it, or it becomes hard. If God calls out to your conscience, don’t delay to respond, or it becomes hard.

How did Herod use his position of governmental authority in relation to Jesus? We know from over in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13:31-32, listen, “...some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’” And Jesus was not surprised. In the next verse, Jesus called Herod a fox, which is a negative term referring to Herod’s uncleanness with a dubious marriage and his general immorality.

From our Christmastime studies, we all remember the other Herod, Herod the Great, the one who was in power when Jesus was born and who slaughtered the innocent children after the Magi told him about the Christ child. In our story tonight, we have Herod the Great’s son, Herod Antipas. Our Herod Antipas was never granted the title King by the Roman Empire. He was only a tetrarch, a leader over a small area which included Galilee, and Mark used the term King in verse 16, probably in derision like Jesus did.

As modern Christian readers, we might be tempted to think Jesus would have been more courteous if He had spoken to Herod. But we are misunderstanding Jesus. Tetrarch Herod treated King Jesus with contempt. It is also significant in our study of Mark's Gospel account of Jesus' life and ministry, that Mark records very little public ministry activity by Jesus within the territories of this Herod Antipas after this point. And the passage that we are studying tonight was followed by a retreat to the other side of the lake by Jesus.

Back in Mark 1:4, John was arrested. What was the outcome? We finally found out here in chapter 6. The fate of John, when facing Herod, is meant by Mark to be a foreshadowing of what Jesus must expect from Herod. Mark puts four references to Herod or Herodias in Mark's gospel, and all four of them imply hostility and threat to the Kingdom of God. Jesus' mission is a continuation of the mission of John. The death of John sets the scene within which Jesus will approach His own confrontation with authority.

As Mark arranged his Gospel account for us, Mark wants us to see that Herod's banquet was wicked, and following the story of Herod's type of banquet is the type of banquet of Jesus. Herod gathers wicked people. Jesus gathers disciples.

What if the same Herod who killed John, the same Herod who wanted to be King, had a face-to-face meeting with a true King named Jesus, who was announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand? What might that interchange be like? That actually happened! Luke 23:7-12, *"And when [Pilate] learned that [Jesus] belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, [Pilate] sent [Jesus] over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, [Herod] was very glad, for [Herod] had long desired to see [Jesus], because [Herod] had heard about [Jesus], and [Herod] was hoping to see some sign done by [Jesus]. So [Herod] questioned [Jesus] at some length, but [Jesus] made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing [Jesus]. And Herod with his soldiers treated [Jesus] with contempt and mocked [Jesus]. Then, arraying [Jesus] in splendid clothing, [Herod] sent [Jesus] back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other."*

### **Concluding Application:**

1) **Be a conscience for our generation.** Our culture is quickly losing the righteous thinking that your grandparents had, that your parents had, and that you have. Our culture is confused about these basics. You are not confused. Not only do you have a conscience, but you can serve as a moral compass for others. Here is the way it is done - when you see something wrong, speak up and say so. If it is wrong, call it wrong. You say –well, I'm not a great one like John the Baptist. I don't know if I'm up for the task to be a conscience for others. Well, let me encourage you in precisely that area. Remember how Christ spoke about John – no one greater than John? That



is not the whole quote. Let me read that again, and this time listen for how Christ's words apply to you. This is Matthew 11:11,12, "*Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*" You are in the kingdom of heaven! By placing your faith in Jesus Christ, you are in the kingdom in the New Testament age. That means you are greater than John the Baptist! Your conscience is greater than the conscience of John the Baptist, because Jesus came in the New Testament and changed everything. Jesus died for your sins, rose again for your victory, and sent His Spirit to illuminate the Word for you and to live inside of you. You have all that is needed to be a conscience to others.

**2) Listen to God, speaking to you through your own conscience and the Bible.**

God is saying something to you. Are you hearing it? God has been trying to get your attention. Will you pause and hear it? Take time daily for your walk with God, and not just reading the Word, but also praying. It is in prayer before God, that God will mercifully say it again to you. It is not too late for you. Today is the day of salvation.

**3) Do a cost and benefit analysis of true discipleship.** Many people have a one-sided view of following Jesus. They think that because of Jesus' power, our lives will be an uninterrupted stream of miracles, conversions, victories, expansion, and abundant provisions from heavenly storehouses. This passage tonight corrects that false and one-sided view. God would let John the Baptist die of beheading, it should change our view of Jesus and our discipleship. What is the true reward for discipleship? To know that you are serving God faithfully. Serving God faithfully may cost your popularity, your freedom, your family, your friends, and even your life. In order to faithfully follow Jesus, there is a price to pay. The discipleship of John the Baptist cost him the ultimate price. But John would not have changed a thing. John was well aware of the cost. The reward John sought was not success. John was seeking God in truth. John saw Jesus for who He really is. Do you? John did not expect the Lord to rescue him from beheading and prison, and to make his life comfortable. Do you? What you expect Jesus to do for you reveals who you believe Jesus is. Don't expect earthly protections, and earthly rewards. But fully expect heavenly protections and heavenly rewards. Do a cost and benefit analysis of true discipleship. 1 Corinthians 2:9, "*...no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.*"