

The Murder of a Righteous Man: Mark 6:14-29
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The passage that we're going to study this morning in Mark 6 tells about the murder of a righteous man. In this event the righteous man is John the Baptist. He is the righteous and holy man who was put to death at the hands of lawless men (and women). John lived a life honoring to God. He proclaimed the Gospel. He spoke the truth. He called people to repentance. He preached against sin. And because of this, they chopped off his head. They murdered this righteous man.

Who does this remind you of? There was another man, more righteous than John, murdered in an even more humiliating way. His Name is Jesus Christ, and John the Baptist was the forerunner who prepared the way for Him. The Gospel of Mark opens with a passage about the ministry of John the Baptist. We read there that John preached, "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" (Mark 1:7-8). John announced the coming of the Lamb of God. The Gospel of John records that for us. He said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, 36). We have sung this morning about the Lamb of God, and that was John the Baptist's message. He came, not to announce himself, but to announce the coming of the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. John's *ministry* was to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry.

What we're going to see in Mark 6 is how John's *death* prepared the way for Jesus' death. This passage and the section in chapter 1 that is about John the Baptist, are the only two passages in the Gospel of Mark that are not directly about Jesus. These two passages tell us about John the Baptist. Indirectly, though, both of these passages are all about Jesus, because John's whole purpose was to be the forerunner of Jesus. He did this both in his ministry and in his death. He announced Jesus' coming, and then he died in a way that foreshadowed Jesus' imminent death. This is the murder of a righteous man, and it foreshadows the murder of an even more righteous man—the perfect man, the spotless Lamb of God. There are two passion narratives in Mark. This is the first, and it foreshadows the passion of Jesus.

The account of John's death is filled with decadence and depravity and intrigue. It's the kind of stuff that movies are made of, or soap operas maybe. There is adultery and divorce, an utterly dysfunctional family, a weak-willed ruler and his conniving wife.

Then in God's providence, this perverse family is met by a righteous preacher.

There are four key aspects of this passage that I want to highlight for us this morning. First of all, Jesus' reputation. Second, John's prophetic voice. Third, Herod's depravity (along with the depravity of his family and friends). And finally, God's providential plan.

Jesus' Reputation (verses 14-16)

As a result of Jesus' ministry, and now also the ministry of the twelve, Jesus' reputation has spread. His name has become known and has reached even the ears of King Herod. Verse 14 says that "King Herod heard of it," meaning he heard of the ministry of the twelve that was having quite an impact on the entire area. The verses right before this told about Jesus sending out the twelve apostles. And this is what Herod heard about. "Jesus' name had become known."

There were at least three things that people were saying as they speculated about the identity of Jesus. "Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." This is being said, of course, at some time after John's death. Mark is about to record for us the details of John's death, and one of the ways that people speculated about Jesus was that He was John the Baptist risen from the dead.

John's ministry was not a ministry of signs and wonders. In John 10:41, people were coming to Jesus, and they commented about John, "John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true." So John's ministry was not one of signs and miracles and healings, but he was a righteous man who spoke with authority. And people could sense the resemblance. There was a connection. There was continuity. So much so, in fact, that people wondered if this might be John the Baptist, himself, even though John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod.

A second conjecture was that John was Elijah. There's a prophecy at the very end of the Old Testament about Elijah coming back before the day of the Lord. These are the very last words of the Old Testament, in fact, at the end of Malachi. It says, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Malachi 4:5-6) Some thought that Jesus was the fulfillment to this. Jesus, though, identifies John as the fulfillment of this. After the transfiguration the disciples asked Jesus, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" And he said to them, "Elijah does

come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.” (Mark 9:11-13) Jesus is saying that John the Baptist was the Elijah figure who has already come, and they killed him. So Elijah has come, not in the person of Jesus, but in the person of John. Some, though, were saying that Jesus must be Elijah.

A third thing that was being said about Jesus was simply that He was a prophet, like one of the prophets of old. These were the things people were saying to one another as they tried to get their minds around the astounding things that Jesus was doing. None of them are right, though. They recognize His authority and power, but they don't see that He is actually much more than a prophet. He is the Son of God. He is the Messiah, the Christ. Up to this point, the demons are the only ones who have acknowledged that. It's not until chapter 8 that Peter gets the answer right. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” (Mark 8:27-29)

So far, though, Jesus' reputation is that He is some kind of great prophet. Herod is haunted by the possibility that this man is a resurrected John the Baptist. That's the view that Herod takes. Verse 16 records Herod's assumption, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” What a terrifying thought that would be for Herod. It shows us what a tremendous impact John had on Herod's life. And it shows us what a tremendous impact Jesus' reputation was having on everyone who heard about Him. Herod had feared John, and now he must be all the more fearful thinking that John had been raised from the dead. The John whom he beheaded was back from the dead, and maybe he was seeking his revenge.

Mark mentions these things about Jesus' reputation (about what is being said of Him), and now he must fill in the background for his readers. So, beginning in verse 17 he recounts the story of John's death. To understand what prompted John's death, we have to understand who John was and the kinds of things he said. And this leads us to our next point.

John's Prophetic Voice (verses 17-20)

Mark 1 tells us that John was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” He was preaching repentance. He was a hellfire and brimstone kind of preacher. He was not afraid to confront sin. He was not afraid to step on

people's toes. He spoke very bluntly and boldly to those who came to hear him. Both Matthew 3 and Luke 3 record the words he spoke to the Pharisees and Sadducees. And as you listen to this you'll get a sense for the kind of preacher he was. He definitely wasn't a feel good preacher who was afraid of offending people. It was not his goal to make people feel good about themselves. He was a truth-teller. He had a prophetic voice. He said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." John was confronting the sin of the people and calling them to radical repentance. This was his role in preparing the way of the Lord. He had a prophetic voice—a voice of truth.

The beauty of his ministry is seen in the fact that he spoke this way to anyone and everyone. Whether you were a common person, or a religious leader, or King Herod himself, John was going to speak to you plainly and truthfully. Verses 17-18 tell us what was going on between John and Herod. Herod had sinned grievously. He had done something unlawful. He had married his brother's wife.

The Herodian dynasty was the epitome of a dysfunctional family. Herod's family was a mess. It's confusing, too, because there were so many men named Herod. There was Herod the Great, who had ten wives, and many of the sons were named Herod. There was Herod Antipas, who is the one spoken of in this passage. And he had a brother named Herod Philip. Herod Philip married Herodias, his niece. And then later both Herodias and Herod Antipas divorced their spouses and got married to one another. This is what John spoke out against. Verse 18, he had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

That's what triggered the wrath of Herodias. Herodias was so infuriated by John's repeated rebukes, that she wanted to kill him. She wanted to silence that prophetic voice. She didn't want to hear it anymore. She didn't want to have her conscience bothered by someone who was boldly speaking the truth.

Beware of that tendency, friends. It's in all of us. The sinful nature cringes and then lashes out when we hear something that challenges our sinful behaviors. Can you identify with this? Someone tries to probe a little bit about a particular decision you've made or some aspect of your lifestyle, and something forcefully begins to rise within you that says, "What right do they have to question me?" And you begin to justify your behavior, and

at the same time you try to silence the voice of truth. You avoid those people who might challenge your actions. And if they try to be persistent in holding you accountable about something, you may end up lashing out at them or accusing them of being judgmental, harsh, unloving. This is what happens in our hearts when we're confronted by truth. And that's why it's such a profound evidence of God's grace when we respond positively to rebukes. When our sin is confronted, and we respond in humble repentance, that is a gracious act of God. Our natural tendency is to react the way Herodias did.

Verse 19 summarized the reaction of Herodias. Verse 20 tells us about Herod's perception of John. Herodias wanted to put John to death. But she could not, and verse 20 tells us why. Because "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." There was something very interesting going on here. The response of Herodias was less complex. She hated John, pure and simple. But Herod's response was mixed. He wasn't sure what to do with John. He was intrigued by the things John talked about. He was drawn to the authority and boldness with which John spoke. He could see that John was a righteous and holy man, and therefore he had a great deal of respect for him. Indeed, he feared John. But in the end Herod didn't have the courage or the conviction to heed John's words. He found himself torn between the truth of John's prophetic voice, and bondage to the status quo.

Herod's solution was to put John in jail. This was his weak-willed way of dealing with the situation. He wasn't courageous enough to heed John's rebukes. He wasn't convicted deeply enough to repent of his sins. He wasn't bold enough to confront his manipulative wife. So he came up with this compromise measure. He would put John in prison so that Herodias wouldn't have to hear about his public statements denouncing their marriage. But at the same time he would be protecting John from any plans that Herodias might have to assassinate him. That's the situation at this point in the story. John is in prison. Herodias wants to kill him. Herod wants to keep him safe.

Two brief points of application before we move on to the next point. First, for believers, are we willing to speak the truth even when it's risky? Are we willing to speak the truth even when the stakes are high? The next time you're in a situation where you feel like speaking the truth would just be too risky, think of John the Baptist. He had a prophetic voice, and he feared nothing. He feared no one. Let him be an example for us.

For any unbelievers here, I want to warn you not to follow the example of Herod. Herod was on the fence. He had a fascination with the prophetic voice of John the Baptist, but his fascination stopped short of action. I exhort you, friends, not to remain in the place Herod was. Don't merely listen to the Gospel. Don't treat church like a form of entertainment or a social club or merely a means of education. This is about your soul. It's about eternal life and death. Therefore as you hear truth from God's Word, do what it says. As you hear John calling us to repentance, repent. Turn away from your sins. As you hear Jesus calling us to repent and believe the Gospel, do it. Turn from your sinful ways and put your hope fully in the Good News of Jesus Christ. Don't hold the Gospel at arms length, being fascinated and perplexed by it. Bring it into your heart and make it the very center of your existence. It will change you forever.

Herod's Depravity (verses 21-29)

The third thing for us to see in this passage is Herod's depravity (along with the depravity of his family and friends). The narrative moves on in verse 21 to tell of the specific things that enabled Herodias to get her way concerning John. She wanted to kill John. Herod wanted to protect John. But verses 21-29 show the depth of Herod's depravity, and Herodias's depravity, and her daughter's depravity, and the depravity of those gathered at the banquet. This is a picture of shameful, sinful, wicked behavior. This is the way of the world. This is the broad road that leads to destruction. These are the passing pleasures of this world that destroy your soul.

It was a birthday party for Herod. He invited his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee, and they had a big party. There would have been a lot of food. There would have been a lot of wine. There would have been coarse joking, as you would expect among a group of intoxicated men. And Herodias saw this as a golden opportunity. She sent her daughter in to dance. The historian Josephus tells us that this daughter's name was Salome. She must have been in her teenage years at this point. And she seems to be a willing participant in this plot. Given the nature of this birthday party, and that it was a male event, and that these kinds of parties were known to involve much drinking, this was most likely a sexually suggestive dance.

For all of us, and especially for those of us who are parents, this should make us nauseous. To think of a mother sending out her own daughter to put herself on display for a group of lustful men—it's appalling. It should serve as a reminder to all of us to protect the purity of our daughters. Let us teach them about modesty and purity. As appalling as this story may be, sadly it's

something we see all the time. Teenage girls, learning even at such a young age, that they can use their bodies to manipulate man and get the things they want. Lust drives so many things. Lust for sex, lust for power, lust for revenge. These are the depraved desires that are at work in this shameful party.

Salome's dance pleased Herod and his guests. As a result, Herod wanted to flaunt his power and position and riches, and so he made this extravagant offer to the girl. "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." Herod was playing to the crowd. He loved his position, and he was basking in all of its glory at this party in honor of his birthday. He was enjoying the satisfaction of having a banquet hall filled with admirers. He saw this as a way to increase that enjoyment. This will make the people love me all the more, he must have thought. They'll be talking about this for months. He was a people-pleaser to the core.

His offer, though, didn't turn out at all the way he expected. He might have thought that she would ask for an expensive piece of clothing or a rare jewel. He had no idea that he had been set up. The daughter went out and asked her mother, "For what should I ask?" And Herodias said, "The head of John the Baptist." Everything was working out just as she had hoped. Salome ran back in, and she added her own twisted humor to the request. "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." It was a banquet, after all. Why not bring in John's head on a platter for all to see.

Next we see Herod's deep dilemma. He thought his compromise was fool-proof. Keep John out of the public eye, so that Herodias won't be infuriated by his comments. And keep John safe in prison, so that Herodias can't kill him. John was, after all, a righteous and holy man. And Herod, even in all of his depravity, knew that it would be a very wicked thing to kill such a holy man. But now Herod is faced with the pressure of his rash oaths and his guests. Here's where we see that his lust for approval outweighs any sense of conscience. As fearful as he was of John's preaching and John's character, Herod was more fearful of letting down his dinner guests. He granted the request, and John's head was brought on a platter, given to the girl and then to the mother.

What a vivid picture of depravity, that we would stoop so low to satisfy our sinful cravings. We can see the foolishness of it all when we ask the question, Who won? Who is the victor in this story? From a human standpoint, it might seem obvious that Herodias is the winner. She got her way. She wanted John dead, and by acting shrewdly at an opportune moment, she achieved her goal.

What is she left with, though? A sense of triumph and victory? Maybe for a moment. A sense of freedom to live in her sin without anyone pricking her conscience? Maybe, for short periods of time. Really all she has is a bloody head on a platter. And that's not much of a prize. No, Herodias, and the rest of her family, are definitely the losers in this story. Make no mistake about it. Herodias got the revenge she was hoping for, and it may have been sweet for a time. But she lost her soul.

Don't make the same mistake. Don't believe the lie that revenge will satisfy you. Don't allow bitterness to make you think that if your enemies were dead you would be happy. That's not the case. We need to let go of bitterness, and the only way we can do that is by trusting in Jesus. If the Gospel is at the center of who we are, if the glory of Christ is sweet to us, then the fleeting pleasure of revenge will not be nearly so sweet. I encourage you, brothers and sisters, to relinquish any traces of bitterness that you are harboring in your heart right now. Don't live with that hardness in your heart. Don't go through life always angry at someone, holding a grudge against someone, refusing to speak to someone. That's a miserable way to live. Life's way too short to waste it on being mad at people. Instead, look to Jesus, and find your satisfaction in Him. And find hope in the fact that He is sovereign even over the ways that people will sin against you. He's in control. Therefore, the trials you will face because of other people's sin are ultimately part of His plan to sanctify you. It's from Him, and it's for your good. That puts it in a whole new light.

Herodias got what she wanted, only to realize at some point that the things she wanted only brought misery. She experienced momentary pleasure that led to eternal agony. John, on the other hand, experienced momentary misery that led to eternal glory. He faced the trials of imprisonment and execution, only to be ushered into paradise and enjoy the presence of the Lord forever and ever. He may have been scorned by Herodias and scoffed at by the dinner guests, but what did he care. He was not a people-pleaser. He had his eyes fixed on the eternal prize, and therefore he was free to risk it all for the sake of the truth and for the sake of Christ. I want to be like that. I don't want to be like Herodias, who may look like the winner in the world's eyes. I want to be like John, who looked like the loser in the world's eyes but in reality he gained everything. Like the missionary martyr Jim Elliott said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." John's the winner in this story. He lost his life, which he couldn't keep anyway. And he gained heaven, which he will never lose.

God's Providential Plan

We've seen in this story Jesus' reputation, John's prophetic voice, Herod's depravity, and I want to close with a few comments about God's providential plan. It's fascinating to observe the chronological relationship between John's ministry and Jesus' ministry. If you turn back to Mark 1:14, there's a little phrase there that indicates the chronology. It says, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God." That's the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and it happens only after John's public ministry has come to a close. This was God's providential plan for John the Baptist. His role was to be the forerunner. He was to point the way to the Messiah. And as John, himself, said: "[Christ] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). That's exactly what happened. John decreased, and was removed from the public scene, *before* Jesus started His public ministry. And now, in God's providence, John is executed *before* Jesus goes to the cross.

John's ministry and John's death marked the end of an era. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets. Therefore his ministry had to decrease and end before the death and resurrection of Jesus which marked the beginning of the new covenant era. Nothing happens by mistake in God's economy. God is never late or early. He's always right on time, and the timing of these events is a great example of that. In Matthew 11:11 Jesus says this of John the Baptist: "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." What He's saying is that John was the greatest in the old covenant, because he was the closest to Jesus. And yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John, because he wasn't part of the new covenant era. His role was to be the forerunner, but he didn't get to see the fulfillment. He was removed before the death and resurrection of Christ. As Matthew Henry says, "a dwarf upon a mountain sees further than a giant in the valley" (on Matthew 11:11). John the Baptist was the giant in the valley, but his life came to an end before the mountain top of Calvary. Thus even the dwarf on the mountain is greater than John. This was all part of God's providential plan in closing one era and opening the new era.

We've seen how Christ's death, which was carried out by sinful people, was also ordained by God. It happened exactly according to plan. In Acts 2:23 Peter says to the Jews, "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." We could say the same thing of John's death. John was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, and it

was at the hands of lawless men that he died. All of Herod's depravity was under God's sovereign control. God is sovereign over suffering and evil, and that should give us hope in the most difficult of circumstances. God has a plan. Even when the world seems to be crashing down around you, God is still on His throne. And He is using those difficult circumstances for your good and for His glory.

God was sovereign over the murder of the righteous man, John the Baptist. And He was sovereign over the murder of the righteous man, Jesus Christ. All of this was part of His providential plan, His glorious plan to save sinners. John was the forerunner. He was the one who prepared the way for the Lamb of God. His ministry prepared the way for Jesus' ministry, and his death prepared the way for Jesus' death.