

Text: Matthew 14:1-12

Title: Murder of John the Baptist

Truth: Believers can expect unjust persecution.

Date/Location: Sunday January 23, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

This is a story of incest and immorality in the highest levels of government, an eccentric religious preacher, and a murder plot to get revenge. Sounds like a movie, but it was a reality. By the way, the only reason it would fly as a movie today would be because of the sinful features of it. We covered some of this in our study of Matthew 11:1-19 when we looked at John the Baptist's depression in prison. We look at it from a different angle in these notes.

I. Background: The Immorality of Herod's Family, v. 3

- A. The family tree is "complicated" to say the least. Herod the Great had as many as 10 wives. We will not get into all the details¹ so we can better understand the immediate context of the situation.
- B. Herod the Great is the Herod alive at the time of the birth of Jesus (Matthew 2:1, Luke 1:5). He had 14 children in total.
- C. Herodias was the daughter of Aristobolus, one of Herod's sons. She married Herod Philip, her uncle. Then she divorced him and married another uncle, Herod Antipas (Mark 6:17).
- D. It is this Herod Antipas who is the Herod the tetrarch of Matthew 14 who ruled over Galilee (not Judea; note another Herod, Achelaus, was over that region around the time of Christ's early years). This was not a case of levirate marriage where a brother died and another brother married the wife to raise up an heir for the deceased. Rather, it was a violation of the Law of Moses (Lev. 18:16). Lust had taken over their relationship and they did not control their base passions. And by the way, it was a violation of the Lord Jesus's teaching—which was a perfect reflection on the Law of Moses—as to how divorce in this case was most certainly a sin (Matthew 5:28, 31-32).

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great#Family_trees

II. John's Call to Repentance and Herod's Hatred, v. 4-5

- A. Somehow it worked out so that John could speak truth directly to power! He told Herod Antipas that it was against the law for him to have this woman as a wife. It is unclear if this message was relayed through other messengers or if John was able to speak directly to Herod.
- B. The lust of Herod did not permit him to see the evil of what he was doing, and he was enraged that someone would dare question his right to do whatever he pleased. So, he desired to kill John.
- C. But Herod had a competing motivation which meant he did *not* want to kill John: he feared the populace. They took John to be a prophet. The *hoi polloi* were correct and the elites were wrong. But his motivation was not driven by a principle of right and wrong—it was one of fear. There was a political reality on the ground, and he did not want to upset the people too much because it would make his life difficult. It was selfishly motivated. Certainly, either within his lifetime or shortly after, he learned the consequences of messing with a prophet of God.
- D. Mark 6:20 tells us that his motivations were complicated by the fact that he was being pushed by Herodias to kill John, but also Herod himself feared John because he was holy. His thought may have been a secular idea: “You don’t mess with a minister or steal from a church.” You can do damage to anyone else, but not them! There is a snippet of a self-centered fear of God here, but it is not very righteous thinking.
- E. I conclude from this that motivations are sometimes very complex.

III. The Women's Revenge, v. 6-12

- A. Herod's birthday party was not the moral equivalent of a Sunday school picnic. It was probably a drunken party. Herodias' daughter (Salome, from the first marriage) danced for the assembled guests and Herod enjoyed the spectacle. He offered a reward, he said, of whatever she wanted to have.
- B. Her mother saw the opportunity for revenge on her foremost critic, and so she prompted her daughter to ask for Herod to go through

with his initial murderous instinct to kill John the Baptist by beheading.

- C. Herod was “sorry.” Because we know that Herod did not have holy feelings toward John in the first place, this rings hollow. He was sorry because now he was put into a position where he had to address the competing motivations of fear of the populace, the desire to placate his wife, and his knowledge that killing a holy man was not good. He weighed that against displeasing the guests at his party and how it would look to them if he went back on his word. Again, this was not a matter in his mind of right and wrong or justice or injustice. It was a matter of embarrassment, of shame, of saving face. He had to go through with his open-ended promise to avoid looking bad. This was another one of those rash vows that we have read about elsewhere in Scripture. Such vows should never be made in the first place (Num. 30:6, Judges 11:30-31).
- D. The orders were carried out and John’s head was cut off. In a grotesque show, his head was brought to the girl and the girl gave it to her mother. Their sick fantasy was fulfilled. Imagine what kind of daughter they were raising! What never bothered them was their sin—not only the sins of incest and adultery, but now of murder as well.
- E. The disciples of John came and retrieved the body—at least Herod permitted this—and they gave a proper burial to the greatest man who ever lived (Matthew 11:11).

IV. A Bothered Conscience, v. 1-2

- A. Some weeks or months later, news of the mighty works and teaching of Jesus were getting around, and Herod heard about it.
- B. His conscience was at least somewhat bothered because of what he had done with John. Or perhaps it was simply superstitious fear that drove him to think that his misdeed was about to come back to bite him, like people who talk about karma “paying back.”
- C. Evidently there was a belief in reincarnation at that time. Dear friends, there is no new heresy under the sun. What is *was*, and what was *will be*. How Herod could be ignorant as to think this, I do not know. It is strange that he would not have heard of Jesus

prior to this nor made the connection that Jesus and John were both alive at the same time (save six months) and so his hypothesis could not be correct. But He was worried that John was back and was now a miracle-worker.

V. Conclusions: Lessons for Today

- A. As much as I hate to have to say it, God permits rank injustices of the worst kind, even to His people. We must be ready for that possibility. Christians in Canada are having to face this. We have had to face a little bit of it with the pandemic restrictions on religious worship. DEI and other doctrines that are running rampant mean that we will face such things in the workplace and society generally. And, when any of us face it, we all face it.
- B. Sometimes there is a price to be paid for preaching righteousness like John did. But that price is worth the honor that it brings to God to do so.
- C. People are hard-hearted and hard-headed. They do not see the most obvious things, particularly when it comes to love or, as I like to remind people, lust. It is very easy to mix up those concepts and feelings overrun reason and morality so that decisions regarding marriage and intimacy and living together and divorce and adultery are all messed up. Some people know it is wrong and do it anyway; others have lost the connection with moral reality and think it is just normal and not a problem. When you confront them with that, they become quickly defensive because they love what they are doing. The gospel can penetrate such force-fields, but we ourselves cannot.
- D. We need to think about our motivations. Herod had some very complicated machinations going on in his head in which he wanted to get rid of John, but he knew better than to do that, and he had pressure from outside. We too have justifications and reasons and thoughts and desires that affect how we behave. We must make sure these complex motivations are lined up with Scripture and we do not allow ourselves to submit to the weakest or basest of motivations.