

Scripture: Mark 6:14-39

The Head of John on the Menu

Beloved in Christ, Jesus sent out the twelve apostles on a mission. At this point, Mark finds it appropriate to include the account of the martyrdom of John the Baptist.

Feasting and food, as we have come to know, is an important aspect of Jesus' ministry, marking His victory over sin, Satan, and hell. But here we see Satan's counterfeit. As one author says, we see "a feast where saints [believers] are on the menu." King Herod serves John's head on a dish at a banquet on his birthday. This is not only a gruesome detail. It shows that king Herod is opposite of the greater King, Jesus. Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. For Herod, as one author fittingly says, "Jesus' flock [His sheep] are simply livestock to supply his table."

The good news of the kingdom is spreading but its growth is met with great resistance from the world. Followers of Christ even lose their heads. Here, from Mark 6:14-29, we see that John the Baptist loses his head for the sake of Christ. We see here

1. Herod's guilty conscience [vv.14-16]
2. God's probing Word [vv.17-21]
3. John, the beheaded prophet [vv.22-29]

Herod's guilty conscience [vv.14-16]

Our passage begins with a response, "*Now King Herod heard...*" [verse 14]. So who was Herod? This is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, who slaughtered the covenant boys at the time of Jesus' birth. Now this Herod, his son, was ruler over the district of Galilee and Perea on behalf of Rome.

So Herod heard about what? Mark tells us that he heard of Jesus, "*for His name has become well-known.*" So how is it that the name of Jesus was becoming so well-known? The answer is in verses 7-13, the mission of the 12 apostles. The preaching and the powerful signs confirming the Word were being seen in Jesus' twelve disciples [vv.12-13]. You see a precursor here to the New Testament church making the name of the risen Lord Jesus known in all the world.

But here the news of Jesus reaches the palace of a worldly king! When Herod hears of Jesus, he responds, "*John the Baptist is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him*" [v.15]. Herod concludes these powers are at work in John the Baptist who is risen from the dead. He is convinced that Jesus is John the Baptist restored to life!

Why is Herod so convinced that Jesus is John returned, risen from the dead? The answer: because he is troubled. He is bothered. He has a guilty conscience. See **verse 16**, "*But when Herod heard, he said, 'This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead.'*" Those words, "whom I have beheaded" emphasizes his tortured conscience. "I am the one --- I did it!" Hearing of Jesus haunted him because he is guilty.

The Lord, through Mark, now relates the whole story of what happened; how it happened and why. Earlier in **Mark 1:14**, we read that, "*After John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God*". Now we come to know in Mark 6 that Herod put John the Baptist in prison.

Beloved, the evil we do we naturally put away from our conscience as if it never happened. We don't confess it to God or man. But now Herod's suppressed conscience is awakened in hearing of Jesus. As far as we know, he never repents nor receives Christ's offer of true life and forgiveness. But we do come to know why Herod put John in prison and why he killed him. This brings us to our second point

God's probing Word [vv.17-21]

By probing, what do we mean? Probing means to search into a matter and dig deep into it. The Word of God, likewise, probes, digs deep, searches the heart. It comforts, but it also convicts the guilty of sin.

John the Baptist confronted the sin of king Herod with the Word of God. That's why Herod had John arrested, bound and put in prison to king Herod. God's Word dug deep. It hit home. **Verse 17** tells us that he did this *"for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for he had married her."* What happened is that while visiting his brother Philip, Herod was infatuated with Philip's wife. The two lovers agreed to separate from their own spouses and marry each other.

When John the Baptist heard about this, he confronted Herod, *"It isn't right [lawful] for you to have your brother's wife"* [verse 18]. The sense here is that he did not only say it once but kept on telling Herod. That he is king should not make a difference. God's Word comes to everybody. When the truth hurts, it often offends us. But John the Baptist did not back down from the truth. He understood that it is more important not to offend God and he did not want Herod to perish in his sin!

John the Baptist spoke kindly to Herod but also pointedly. As Ryle says, he didn't excuse himself by saying the timing is not right or it's useless to speak out anyway. He did not smooth things over, using soft words to describe his sin. He told the king straight; he told the plain truth, regardless the consequences, *"It is not right for you to have your brother's wife."*

You might not be before kings, but we do live among unbelievers who also speak and live against the truth. It rubs. Know that in Christ, you, like John the Baptist, have the strength; that is, God's Holy Spirit, to stand on the truth and stand for what is right. The Bible says that you too are prophets, called to confess Christ's name. QA 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism says, *"But why are you called a Christian?"* Answer, *"Because by faith I am a member of Christ, and so, I share in His anointing. I am anointed to confess His name...."* It can be costly, but think of the infinite cost Christ paid on the cross for your sins! Eternal life in Christ is way better than our short life on earth.

It was costly for John. Herod put John in prison to silence John's voice in order to keep the peace with Herodias, his wife. She wanted to kill him! We read in **verse 19**, *"Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not."* Herod didn't want to kill him. Prison was a happy medium.

Verse 20 tells us why. *"For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly."*

He feared John. He spoke the truth! He knew it. God's word terrified him. Herod knew John *"was a just and holy man"*; that is, approved by God, and an upright man, set apart for God's service. Herod almost seems like a 'nice guy' since he wants to protect John. And whenever Herod listened to him, he *"heard him gladly."* Why might that be so? Think about it. He lived among flatterers, sweet-talkers. But John dared to speak his real

mind. God's word peels off masks, removes all pretenses. *"No creature is hidden from God's sight but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account"* [Hebrews 4:13].

But one thing Herod would not do: He would not give up his sin; that is, give up Herodias, for the sake of Christ and his own salvation! Present life and its pleasures meant more to him--- than where he would spend eternity in hell! Yet putting John in prison did not silence the voice of his conscience, nor Herodias'. People today try to remove God's Word in polite ways [ie. not hearing it, not reading it] to silence their conscience but God sees the heart.

But for Herodias, the way to silence the conscience was killing the messenger! You see that in China, Iran, India, many other countries today. But does that get rid of the truth of God's Word? This leads us to our third point

A beheaded prophet [vv.21-29]

Herodias was waiting all along for her golden opportunity. Now it came. She knew her husband was weak and had no spine. We read in **verse 21** that it was Herod's birthday. Herod invited his VIP's: the nobles, the high officers and the chief men of Galilee to a banquet!

Verse 22 says that Herodias' daughter [Salome] – her daughter, not his – *"came in and danced and pleased Herod and those who sat with him."* Normally a slave girl would dance; not a princess. You can imagine – the erotic and suggestive manner in which the probably half-naked girl danced. Herodias knew how to catch Herod. After all, look how Herod got her!

Herod makes his move, asking the girl, *"Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you"* **[verse 22]**. He even seals his promise with an oath: *"Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom"* **[verse 23]**.

She goes to her mother, saying, *"what shall I ask?"* Her mom responds very bluntly, *"The head of John the Baptist"* **[verse 24]**! The plot unfolds as if Herodias planned every detail! Immediately, she goes to the king, saying, *"I desire that you give me immediately on a platter [plate or dish] the head of John the Baptizer!"* **[verse 25]**. Will he surrender to Christ and say 'no' or will he give in to Herodias? Will he say 'yes' or 'no' to God's Word? Christ's call to follow always takes priority over the closest of our earthly ties: family, relatives.

Herod's grief at this request was real. See **verse 26**, *"and the king was exceedingly sorrowful."* And yet... yet.... Herod did not want to refuse Herodias' daughter for two reasons: because of his oath and because of those who sat with him [v.26]. He did not want to lose face before all his guests who had heard him.

He could have argued, "I promised to favor you with a gift; I did not promise to do a crime." Or, "I promised you a gift; not your mother." Even so, the Bible provides a way of forgiveness in Christ for those who make rash promises! But no, no ... It was all excuses. Herod made his own sinful family, as well as his dinner guests, more important in his eyes than the life of God's messenger. For all his interest in John, he chose to remain in his sins instead of repenting and believing.

Herod made his choice against Christ. Immediately; that is right away, Herod sent someone to kill John the Baptist. He cut off John's head in prison. He brought the head of John on a dish and gave it to the girl and the girl gave it to her mother **[verses 27-28]**. What gore! King Herod serves John's head on a dish at a banquet on his birthday. Mark gives no further comment other than that John's own disciples came and buried John.

Herod made his own choice. But John made his choice for Christ. His courage for Christ cost him his life, yet he gained everything: eternal life. Herod, however, continued his life in luxury and pleasure – but with a guilty conscience and an unrepentant heart which only leads to hell. “Who would you rather be like, the dead John, or the living Herod?” [Beeke]

Jesus is the good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. The world needs someone opposite of King Herod. This is King Jesus. Read the following verses. We read of the feast of the Good Shepherd in green pastures, the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus on the still waters [see Psalm 23:1-2]. What a sharp contrast! Herod takes a life. Jesus, in love, gives His life --to save others!

Jesus eventually offers Himself on the menu for our salvation. Having been raised from the dead, His followers feast with Him, our risen Savior and Lord, at the Lord’s Supper. By faith, we see a greater feast.

Be faithful, even unto death. The Lord promises that better days are coming. Only by faith we see that! The apostle John hears the voices of a great multitude from heaven, saying, “. . . *Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come . . . blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb*” [Revelation 19:6,7,9]. All glory and praise be to Him who gives salvation through the sacrifice of His Son to all who repent, believe and follow His call. Amen!