

“Keeping Up With the Herodians”

Mark 6:14-29

Turn with me in your Bibles to Mark chapter 6, where this morning we will read verses 14-29. Several years ago, there was a ‘reality’ TV show that became popular with people called ‘Keeping Up With the Kardashians.’ I think the only thing they were famous for was being famous, not because of any groundbreaking contributions to science, medicine, or world peace. Nobody tuned into ‘Keeping Up With the Kardashians’ wondering, “I wonder what positive contribution they’ve made for humanity this week?” What you had represented in that show was basically a famous, wealthy family whose complicated relationships became public drama. People watched because they had drama—and apparently, we like other people’s drama better than our own. So I guess people just popped their popcorn and watched it all unfold on national television.

Long before there was ‘Keeping Up with the Kardashians,’ there was ‘Keeping Up with the Herodians.’ If reality TV had existed in the first century, the Herod family would have given them a run for their money. They would have given producers enough material for ten seasons. There was wealth, political maneuvering, extravagant lifestyles, scandalous marriages, family feuds, manipulation, revenge—and eventually murder. You almost need a chart just to keep up with who was married to whom. And a lot of that scandal comes out in the passage that we’re going to look at here in Mark 6. (Read)

The name ‘Herod’ comes up frequently in the gospels, but who is he? There are actually several ‘Herods’ in the New Testament, beginning with Herod the Great who was the founder of the Herodian dynasty. He is the Herod who is mentioned in the birth narrative of Jesus, the wicked man who slaughtered all the baby boys of Bethlehem. He had several sons, two of whom he murdered because of his

own paranoia. After Herod the Great died, his territory was divided among three of his sons—Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee, Herod Philip ruled over the area east of the Jordan River, and Herod Archelaus ruled over Judea but only for a brief two years before Rome deposed him and replaced him with a Roman prefect. The King Herod mentioned in our text is Herod Antipas who was ‘tetrarch’ over Galilee.

Verse 17 mentions the woman that Herod Antipas married, and her name is Herodias. She was the daughter of his older half-brother Aristobulus, and was therefore his niece. But she was also the wife of another of his half-brothers, Philip, and therefore his sister-in-law. History says that Antipas seduced her and persuaded her to leave Philip to become his wife, a sin for which John the Baptist called him out on, and I’ll say more about that in a minute. But these are the main characters of our text.

This is a story filled with corruption, compromise, and the murder of a righteous man. As Mark pulls back the curtain on this dark episode, there are three important details that I want to point out. First of all, we see:

1—A TROUBLED conscience (6:14-16)

“King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some said, ‘John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.’ But others said, ‘He is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’ But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’”

Notice verse 14 begins by saying, “King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known.” The Twelve who had been sent out by Jesus were doing many wonderful things in His name, so that Herod heard about Jesus. All kinds of

ideas were swirling around about who He was—Elijah, or one of the prophets, even John the Baptist raised from the dead. And when Herod heard of it he said, “John, whom I beheaded has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.” There was such a similarity to John’s ministry and message that he assumes this, but more than that, it is Herod’s conscience that is working on him. It is out of his own fear and a guilty conscience that he makes such a statement.

Based on what Mark says here, as well as what we’re able to find out about him from other places in the gospels, we can piece together an interesting character sketch of King Herod Antipas. Based on what we read, it is obvious that:

He was supernaturally curious

Herod is not an atheist or someone completely indifferent to spiritual things. He is interested in truth without ever surrendering to truth. In verse 14, when he hears about Jesus’ miracles, his mind immediately goes to supernatural explanations. So he concludes that John has been raised from the dead. Later on we discover that Herod was also supernaturally curious towards Jesus. Luke 23 says that when Pilate sent Jesus to him, “when Herod saw Jesus, 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.” Herod had heard things about Jesus, he even believes something supernatural is happening, but that supernatural curiosity is not the same as saving faith.

He was sensually controlled

Something else that we know about Herod is that he was a man who was controlled by his appetites. The banquet he hosts on his birthday reveals the appetites that dominated Herod’s life—luxury, entertainment, sexuality, and

excess. So that his desires overrule his convictions. And he is a picture of what happens when appetite becomes authority in a person's life. He had political power over others, but very little power over himself. His passions and impulses increasingly dictated his decisions.

A lot of people today are sensually controlled, living not by conviction, but by appetite. They don't ask, "Is this right?" but instead, "Does this feel good?" We live in a culture that tells us that if you desire something, that desire deserves to be expressed and fulfilled. But the Bible says that not every desire is good, not every appetite should be fed, and not every impulse should be followed.

He was spiritually conflicted

John had called Herod out for his sin, and so Herod has him locked up in prison. Verse 20 says that Herod "feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man." He recognized that there was something different about John. His conscience was telling him that John is right even while his own lifestyle says otherwise. For that reason, he didn't harm him. And perhaps in what is the strangest statement of all, verse 20 says, "When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly."

"Perplexed" — *the word means to be in doubt, to not know which way to turn*

Other translations say he was 'greatly disturbed' or that he did many things. The idea being that he was conflicted in his mind. He respected John and found him to be oddly fascinating. Herod saw in him a kind of integrity that he knew he didn't have the spine to maintain, a deep devotion to God that maybe he longed to experience but didn't have the faintest idea of how to get. He kept John around sort of like a spiritual good luck charm because this man of God in his dungeon was his last and only connection with anything that was truly holy.

He was socially conscious

Another thing to point out about Herod is that he is socially conscious. He is very concerned about his own reputation among the social elites. Later when the request for John's head comes, verse 26 says that he was 'exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word.' Herod's opinion in the eyes of his nobles, his military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee mattered more to him than his standing with God.

The Bible refers to this as the 'fear of man.' It is not fear in the sense of being terrified or scared, but in the sense of awe or being controlled by something. For those who may be young, we call it peer pressure. When you're older, we call it people pleasing. It is allowing the opinions, approval, rejection, or reactions of other people to have a greater influence over us than the approval of God. It causes us to ask, "What will they think?" before asking, "What does God think?" It becomes the driving force behind our decisions.

Proverbs 29:25—"The fear of man brings a snare."

Matthew 10:28—"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

And so he is supernaturally curious, sensually controlled, spiritually conflicted, and socially conscious. Something else is that Herod had been scripturally confronted with his sin, which leads us to the second important thing:

2—A TRUTHFUL witness (6:17-20)

"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. For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's

wife.’ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, 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.”

If Herod is a man with a troubled conscience, John is a man who serves as an honest and truthful witness. Verse 17 says Herod had put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. The whole situation was scandalous, and the background to it makes John’s confrontation even more explosive.

According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, Herod Antipas was already married to a Nabatean princess who was the daughter of King Aretas IV, when he became involved with Herodias. While traveling to Rome, Herod Antipas stayed with his half-brother, Philip. During the visit, Antipas began an illicit relationship with Herodias. And to complicate matters further, Herodias was also his niece, since she was the daughter of his half-brother Aristobulus. Antipas proposed marriage, and Herodias agreed on the condition that Antipas divorce his existing wife. His wife learned what was happening before he could carry out the plan. She asked permission to travel to Machaerus, near her father’s territory, and from there escaped back to King Aretas. The humiliation of Aretas’s daughter contributed to a political rupture between Aretas and Antipas, eventually culminating in war. Meanwhile, Herodias left her husband who was still living and married Antipas. And this was the situation that John the Baptist confronted. Verse 18 says, “For John had been saying to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”

Like a trumpet, he sounded the warning to Herod over his treacherous marriage to Herodias. And when faced with the truth, the king chose to silence the

messenger rather than submit to the message. So the reason that John was in prison was his preaching. John's preaching was marked by four characteristics:

Humility

It is seen in the way that he pointed away from himself to Christ. In John 1:19, when people wondered whether he might be the Messiah, John immediately redirected their attention to Jesus. Later in John 3:30, he summarized his entire posture toward Christ, "He must increase, but I must decrease." John wanted all the glory to go to Jesus.

Clarity

John said exactly what needed to be said. His preaching wasn't vague or ambiguous. He told the crowds to repent. He confronted religious leaders. And he also gave specific instructions about repentance. For instance, in:

Luke 3:10-14—“And the crowds asked him, ‘What then shall we do?’ And he answered them, ‘Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.’ Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than you are authorized to do.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusations, and be content with your wages.’”

Nobody had to wonder what John meant. He was crystal clear. It didn't matter if those in the crowd were religious leaders, or wealthy tax collectors, or Roman soldiers, or even King Herod himself.

Urgency

John preached as though eternity were at stake. Keep in mind that his message was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). He spoke about the axe already lying at the root of the trees and warned of coming judgment (Matt. 3:10-12). In other words, repentance was not something to be considered eventually. He announced that the true King is coming and the time to repent is now.

Integrity

John lived what he preached regardless of the cost. His simple lifestyle reinforced his message (Mark 1:6), and he applied God’s truth impartially. And so the same preacher who confronted ordinary people here confronts a king. He would not soften God’s truth because Herod had the power to imprison him. John would rather lose his head than lose his integrity. And it is in that sense that he is a model for all who preach—humility, clarity, urgency, and integrity.

Something else about him was that he was direct and very straightforward. When the hypocritical Pharisees came out to his baptism, John said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath which is to come?” We used to call that ‘steppin’ on toes.’ And don’t forget that it is John’s preaching that gets him in trouble with the ‘powers that be.’ Verse 18, “For John had been saying to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’” Herod is in the wrong, and John the Baptist calls him out on account of it. God’s Word was clear on the nature of such immoral relationships (Lev. 18).

If John had been looking out for himself, or if he’d been a respecter of persons living out of the fear of man, he would have left matters well enough alone. But Herodias was not only Herod’s sister-in-law; she was also Herod’s niece. So their marital bed was an adulterous, incestuous pit. And he boldly pointed that

out to them, so that it was his preaching that got him in trouble. And if things continue as they are apparently going in the climate of our own modern culture, then I suppose my preaching is about to get me in trouble too. God intends for there to be a prophetic voice when it comes to speaking truth to power. We're going to see this again in a few weeks when we look at the life of Elijah from the Old Testament.

The preacher has a responsibility to warn people about sin and judgment. I heard someone say a long time ago that if you want everyone to like you, go drive an ice cream truck and leave the preaching to someone else. Our sin has to be exposed and confronted if we are to confess it and seek God's forgiveness in Christ. We don't want to ignore sin, and neither do we want to drive people away. We need to preach the truth plain and clear but always with the goal in mind of seeing people repent and trust Christ.

So it is love for God and commitment to His truth that leads John to let the king know he is in error. There is a sense in which we all are preachers, we are witnesses to the truth of the gospel, we are called to proclaim the gospel, and there is much that we can learn from John's example.

James 5:19-20—“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

When the Holy Spirit knocks on your heart, sometimes it sounds like a harsh pounding. But it is actually God being merciful to you. It is His goodness that leads us to repent. I had a situation one time where the wife of one of my staff members came to me with suspicion that her husband was involved in something

that he shouldn't have been. And let me tell you, the confrontation wasn't pleasant. But I got to see him confess his sin and repent of it—and even though he lost his job—he didn't lose his family.

The worst possible judgment is for God to turn you over to your sin, to stop all of the Holy Spirit's dealings in your life. And yet, that's exactly what is happening to many people today. They choose to listen only to soft, flesh-affirming preaching. Where there is no convicting Word, there can be no godly sorrow over sin. And where there is no godly sorrow for sin, there can be no repentance. And where there is no repentance, there is only hardness of heart. A third thing I want to mention involves:

3—A TRAGIC outcome (6:21-29)

“But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias’ 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, up to half of my kingdom.’ And she went out and said to her mother, ‘For what should I ask?’ And she said, ‘The head of John the Baptist.’ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, ‘I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. 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. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.”

Truth spoken to power, but no real desire for repentance, will inevitably lead to a confrontation. Herod was content to keep John in prison. Herodias, however, wanted him dead. And so she waited for an opportune time. Verse 21 says the opportunity came when Herod hosted a birthday party. All of the ‘who’s who’ from Galilee attended. And when the alcohol was flowing, and better sensibilities had long since disappeared, the daughter of Herodias came in to dance. Though her name isn’t mentioned here in Mark or the other gospels, historians say that her name was Salome. Verse 22 says she came to dance and entertain Herod’s guests. We’re not talking about ballet or the waltz here. It was a sensual, perverse, and twisted thing for a bunch of men who were beholden to their appetites. And to reward her entertaining antics, King Herod makes a boast to give her anything that she wanted, up to half of the kingdom. You can only imagine the cheers from the guests. Maybe they began to wager on what she would ask—a pair of horses, or a wardrobe from Rome, or maybe an exorbitant amount of money. It was a perfect trap. She confers with Herodias and the evil request is made in verse 25, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

Verse 26 says, “And the king was exceedingly sorry.” It is remorse, but not the kind that led to repentance.

John Phillips — *“Herod was sorry that his drunken tongue had landed him in such an awkward situation. But he was not sorry enough to do what was right. He was not sorry about his sin; he went on to commit worse ones. He was only sorry that he had said what he had said and that he had no way out of his predicament, except to confess himself in the wrong. But with the curious eyes of his guests upon him, and the [ruthless] eye of Herodias in his thoughts, and*

the mocking eye of Salome challenging him, he forgot all about the all-seeing eye of God.”

Herod is a dramatic illustration of what happened when a person repeatedly hears the truth, even feels the conviction of the truth, but refuses to surrender to the truth. John the Baptist was the voice of God to Herod, but he has the man of God beheaded—he silenced God’s voice in his life! The voice of everyone else took precedence.

Leonard Ravenhill — *“The man whose one word sermon is ‘Repent’ will eventually lose his head*

You can kill the messenger, but you can’t kill the message.

As for John, he was a prophet whose sole purpose was to prepare the way, clear the road for the coming of Christ. He was one of the greatest characters to ever walk across the stage of human history. You won’t find John’s name mentioned on the world’s lists of ‘who’s who.’ And yet in the gospels, no life received a higher compliment from the Lord Jesus than did the life of John the Baptist. Jesus said it this way:

Matthew 11:11 — **“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”**

The tragedy of the situation is not what it seems. Was it a travesty for John to die as he did? Absolutely. But his life didn’t end in tragedy. He simply took his place among the lives of those described in Hebrews 11, among those who served God faithfully in their generation, such as:

Hebrews 11:32-38 — **“...Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms,**

enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy.”

John was not rescued from prison. No angel opened his prison cell, no last-minute miracle stopped the executioner. He told the truth, remained faithful, and lost his life in this world for Christ. But what he lost in this world, he made up for and then some in the life to come! He simply takes his place among ‘God’s others,’ those faithful servants who did not experience some miraculous deliverance but remained faithful even unto death. John had nothing in this world, but he had everything waiting for him in glory. Herod had everything in this world, but he had nothing waiting for him in the world to come.

The next time we meet Herod Antipas in the Bible is when Pilate sends Jesus to stand before him. Luke writes:

Luke 23:7-11 — “When Pilate learned that He belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, 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 length, but He made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing Him. And Herod with his soldiers treated Him with contempt and

mocked Him. Then, arraying Him in splendid clothing, he sent Him back to Pilate.”

Herod was all about gaining the world at the expense of his own soul. And this is a lesson for us, those who lose their lives here to gain them in heaven, they gain their life here as well in Christ. But those who seek their life down here and lose it up there, also often lose it down here as well. That happened to Herod Antipas in AD 39. Herod Antipas’ own nephew denounced his uncle to the Roman emperor, and Antipas was deposed and exiled. He lost his power, lost his authority, lost his world. And the time came when he stood condemned before the very One who had once stood condemned before him.

Let me give some application for you before I finish up:

- **Beware of a compromised conscience**

That’s the main point of application we can glean from the example of Herod. If you are not careful, you can hear the truth, respect the truth, and even be convicted by the truth without ever surrendering to it. But if your conscience is in a tender place, don’t ignore it. Respond to the conviction the Holy Spirit may be producing.

Herod’s wasted life and squandered spiritual opportunity is the real tragedy here, not John’s martyrdom.

- **Beware of a hardened heart**

That’s something we see illustrated in Herodias. When we refuse to repent, we eventually begin to resent anyone who confronts our sin. The problem shifts in our minds from our sin to the person exposing it. Instead of asking, “What needs to change in me?” we begin asking, “Who are they to judge me?” We get

defensive, and that defensiveness becomes resentment, and resentment becomes hostile.

- **Beware of a passive participation**

That's something illustrated by the daughter and all the guests. Not a single one of them intervened in the situation to speak up for what is right. Sometimes evil advances not because everyone approves of it, but because no one has the courage to speak against it.

Positively, John's example reminds us to be faithful to God and His Word regardless of the cost. Our responsibility as believers is not to make truth popular, but to simply declare it faithfully and leave the consequences with God. You can go through life trying to keep up with the Herodians or with whomever, chasing what everyone else is chasing, craving approval, indulging your appetites, measuring your life by the standards of the people around you. Or, you can choose to walk the road less traveled, the way of the cross, the path of discipleship that John walked. It is not an easy road, but it is the only road that leads to life. Herod had the palace and the party, John had the prison cell. But when it was all said and done, there is no question which man was truly free!

John spent his life pointing other people to Jesus. That was the driving passion of his life. And he even points to Jesus in his death! Mark says in verse 29 that his disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. When other people thought that he was the guy, John responded, "No, I'm just a simple messenger. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. I'm a simple lamp. But the One coming after me, He's the Light!" Men tried to extinguish the Light too. He didn't just speak the truth, but He was Truth in the flesh. He was executed like a

common criminal, and His body was laid in a cold, dark tomb. But three days later, Jesus walked out of the grave!

From the moment he leapt in his mother's womb, to the moment his body was laid in a tomb, John's entire life and ministry was to magnify Christ. He lived by an important philosophy:

John 3:30—“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Herod's philosophy was the opposite. What about yours? Friend, only Jesus can give eternal life. Salvation is simply trusting Christ and possessing Christ's life. It is received as a gift for the one who turns from sin, who recognizes the depth of their need for God's grace, and trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation.

And so perhaps a fitting question to leave you with is this one—“Have you responded to the truth by repenting of your sins?” You've stopped defending yourself, stopped blaming everyone else for your failures, stopped offering excuses. Repentance says to the Lord, “I have no one else to blame, the sin is all mine, the guilt is all mine, and I believe that only the Lamb of God can take it all away.” He will wash away your guilt, remove the stains of sin, He will cleanse and forgive you, and He will make you brand new. That's why the gospel is good news!