

## The Death of a Conscience

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Mark 6:14-30

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The word **θαυμάζω** (*thaumazo*), translated “to marvel” or “to be amazed” is pretty common in the gospels. Luke, the physician, uses it most, but we find it some 30 times throughout the gospel narratives. Having said that, it’s almost always used in reference to the crowd’s response to Jesus. There are only two times in the New Testament where Jesus is said to marvel. One is in Mark 6:6 where Jesus marvels at the unbelief in Nazareth. That’s where we left our study last. The other is in Luke 7:9 where Jesus marvels at the great faith of the Roman Centurion. These are the only two times we have record of Jesus marveling. As we look at these two instances, it appears as if there are two things that really catch Jesus’ attention. First, those who believe when it’s not expected they would. Second, those who disbelieve when there’s every reason they should.

In verses 1-13 (I know it’s been a while) we saw that those who lived in closest proximity to Jesus, who lived in His hometown of Nazareth, disbelieved that the carpenter was really the Messiah. In verses 14-30, our text for this morning, we’ll see the unbelief of Jesus’ enemies. And next week, as we turn our attention to verses 30-44, we’ll see that even the inner circle, Jesus’ disciples, are still struggling with doubt. It’s interesting to note that Jesus never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief. *Doubt* is struggling to believe. *Unbelief* is choosing not to believe. Doubt is honesty. Unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light. Unbelief is content with darkness.<sup>1</sup> Herod, who we’ll meet in our text for this morning, is a picture of a man who rejects truth, and as a result, his conscience no longer has the ability to feel. Let’s turn our attention to our text. This is Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and these are the words he pens:

*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.” 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. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military*

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Drummond

*commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 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." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give 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, saying, "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 his 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. The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. Mark 6:14-30*

Brothers and sisters, "The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever" Isaiah 40:8.

In verses 14-29, the prior description of the disciples' mission abruptly shifts to a synopsis of Herod's execution of John the Baptist. Though we aren't given much commentary on the life of John the Baptist, he played an incredibly important role in the ministry of Jesus. John was a special man chosen for a special purpose. He was the forerunner of the Messiah. He was the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies. He was a powerful preacher and a fearless prophet. A man among men and a man of God. Jesus himself said of John, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" Matthew 11:11.

## **I. A PRICKED CONSCIENCE (v.14-20)**

Look at verses 14-15. Mark writes, "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.'" As Jesus and His disciples continued to minister (preaching repentance, casting out demons and healing the sick), Jesus' name grew to be a household name. But talk of Jesus at this point has breached the confines of the small towns and villages that He had been ministering in. Gone were the days of Jesus being a prominent figure only among the common folks. Now talk of Jesus had reached the high places.

Herod is a new Character in Mark's gospel narrative. Herod Antipas, who we meet in verse 14, is one of the many sons of the late Herod the Great. Mark tells us that he had become aware of the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. I love the way Matthew's account refers to Herod's knowledge of Jesus. Matthew writes, "At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the *fame* of Jesus" Matthew 14:1. It's interesting to note that Mark refers to Herod as "King Herod", a title that Herod himself

relished, but he wasn't really a king. Both Matthew and Luke withhold the title of "King" and instead introduce Herod as a tetrarch, which means ruler of a fourth part of the nation.

Herod Antipas's father, Herod the Great, ruled over all Judea. Remember, it was Herod the Great who was in power when Jesus was born. It was Herod the Great who killed every male child under the age of two hoping to kill Jesus. But Mary and Joseph, under the direction of an angel of the Lord, had taken Jesus to Egypt and didn't return to Israel until after they had received word again from an angel of the Lord that Herod had died. There aren't sufficient English adjectives to describe how ruthless a man Herod the Great was. But after his death in 4 B.C., according to his will, his kingdom was quartered and each of his four sons were given authority (Pseudo-authority under Caesar) over a fourth of the kingdom – becoming tetrarchs. Herod Antipas's rule covered all of Galilee and Perea – which encompassed much of the territory where Jesus and His disciples ministered.

Though Herod Antipas wasn't as prominent a figure as his father, he seemed to be strikingly similar in his ruthless, shrewd, cunning, pitiless, and malicious actions. Jesus referred to him as "that fox" in Luke 13:32 when some of the Pharisees came and told him that He had better get out of town because Herod wanted to kill Him. It's interesting to note, while Jesus was crucified by the permission of Pilate, Peter, in Acts 4:27, mentions Herod Antipas's name before Pilate's when recalling those who gathered together against Jesus. This is the character that Mark has just introduced to us in verse 14.

Herod is now aware of the miraculous powers being demonstrated by Jesus and the disciples, but it's apparent that while they have heard the chatter about Him, neither Herod nor the people know anything about who He is. Notice who the people relate Jesus to in verses 14-15. Mark writes, "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.'" There were the three prevailing opinions concerning who Jesus was (Cf. 8:27-28).

#### 1. Jesus is John the Baptist.

Some think that Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist with miraculous powers.

#### 2. Jesus is Elijah.

Others thought that Jesus was Elijah. Throughout redemptive history, the Jewish people have had high Messianic expectations. They were waiting for a Messiah who would come as a conquering King, break them free from their oppression, restore their liberty, and then lead them on a triumphant campaign throughout the world. Bound to that expectation was the belief that before the Messiah's entrance, Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, would return as His herald and forerunner. This comes from Malachi 4:5. God speaking through the prophet Malachi said,

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” Ironically, not only did some mistake Jesus for Elijah, but they also missed the fact that John the Baptist was the prophet and forerunner that God spoke about. Jesus wasn’t the Elijah; John was the Elijah who came before and announced the arrival of Jesus the Messiah (Cf. Mark 9:11-13, Matthew 11:13-14).

3. Jesus is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.

Others just lump Jesus in with the rest of God’s messengers. He may have some pithy things to say, He may perform some miracles, but He’s just like the rest – He’s not the One.

But look at Herod’s conclusion in verse 16. Speaking of Jesus’ identity he says, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” What’s going on here? I think we are seeing the dread of a guilty and fearful (which always go together) man. The “I” in Greek is emphatic. Herod is stressing that “he” bears responsibility for John’s death. As a result of his disturbed, uneasy conscience and disposition to superstition, Herod feared that John the Baptist had returned – in the person of Jesus – to haunt and torment him. Mark tells us in verse 20 that Herod feared John before he killed him because John was a righteous and holy man. But Herod was increasingly terror-struck as he considered that John had returned from the grave and was now wielding “miraculous powers”. Sadly, Herod’s guilty conscience wasn’t sufficient to cause him to repent and look to the one who can forgive his sin – which was John’s message (cf. Mark 1:4). Our text for this morning not only chronicles the death of John the Baptist, but also the death of a conscience.

## **WHAT IS A CONSCIENCE?**

Your conscience is that God-given warning system that alerts you when you have violated God’s Law. Paul writes about the function of our conscience in Romans 2:14-15. He says, “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them. Your conscience will either *accuse* or *excuse* you.

The conscience is to our souls what pain sensors are to our bodies: it inflicts distress, in the form of guilt, whenever we violate what our hearts know to be right and true. Fallen, lost, and desperately wicked as we are all born into the world, God has taken care to leave Himself a witness in our hearts. It is a poor, blind guide apart from the Holy Spirit, but every person has one. If I had to describe what your conscience is, I would say that your conscience is what *hurts* when everything else feels *good*. But if we suppress that God-given warning system over and over and over again, refusing to let it lead us to righteousness, it becomes less and less sensitive to sin until it is virtually lifeless. In other words, the conscience can become so defiled that it is no help in making distinctions between what is right and wrong, pure and impure, light and darkness (Titus 1:15).

Herod's conscience is pricked as he is confronted with the fact that he murdered John, but he suppresses his guilt and refuses to repent.

Verses 14-16 give us the context for Herod's fear and verses 17 and the following begin a flashback in chapter 6 where the Holy Spirit inspires Mark to recount the details surrounding John's death at the hands of Herod. Look at verses 17-18. Mark writes, "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."

Sometime after the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry Herod had John arrested and imprisoned (1:14). More than likely John was taken to a place called Machaerus, where Herod had built a lavish fortress, palace, prison that sat high on a ridge near the Dead Sea. Within this fortress was an opulent palace and below it were prison cells.

Why did Herod have John arrested? Mark says that Herod had John arrested for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. Herod had two brothers named Philip. One was a part of the tetrarch and the other was private citizen who lived in Rome. Philip from Rome was married to a woman by the name of Herodias. Mark doesn't fill in the details for us in his gospel, but the church historian Josephus writes that Herod, on one of his visits to Rome to see Philip, persuaded Herodias, who was both his niece and the wife of his half-brother Philip (making her also his Sister-in Law), to divorce Philip and marry him. This was devious to say the least, but even more so because Herod himself was married at the time. He was married to the daughter of the King of Arabia until he divorced her and sent her away for Herodias. The Herodian dynasty is quite complex to say the least. One commentator says, "The Herodian family tree is as twisted as the roots of an olive tree."

When John the Baptist heard of Herod's affair and divorce, he strongly condemned it. John was a man of conviction. Not even the royal house was exempt from his call to radical repentance. He lived for the truth and called a spade a spade. He let Herod and Herodias know that what they were doing was wrong – unlawful. It's interesting to note that John didn't refer to Herodias as Herod's wife. He said, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Herod was a Jewish proselyte (convert) and so John called Herod out for violating the Law of God. Be sure of this, being a herald of truth will cost you. It cost John the Baptist, it cost the disciples, it cost Jesus, and it will cost you. It may or may not cost you your life, but rest assured it will cost you – are you willing?

Look at verse 19. Mark writes, "And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not..." Be sure that Herod didn't love John's reproof of his adulterous relationship with Herodias, but Herodias fumed at the fact that John condemned her actions. She nurtured a grudge that wouldn't be satisfied until John was dead and gone. The text literally says that Herodias "had it in" for John. For Herodias, it was the power to kill John that was lacking, not

the will. Herod, at least for a time, kept John safe in prison. Herodias is such a picture of how bitterly people hate a reproof when they are determined to hold on to their sin. How do you and I respond when we are reproofed because of our sin? Do we humbly acknowledge and repent, or do we rear back and strike?

Herod's response to John was quite different from Herodias' response. Look at verse 20. Mark writes, "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." Though Herod didn't like the fact that John called his sin out, there was something peculiar about John's teaching that kept drawing Herod back to it. When Herod would privately listen to John preach about the Messiah, repentance, and the coming Kingdom, he would leave perplexed, confounded, and torn between the truth he heard and his deep-rooted love of his sin.

Herod's fear of John was the only reason that he kept him alive. The Greek word for "fear" is in the imperfect tense. In other words, Herod had a perpetual or recurring fear of John. Why, you ask, because light is terrifying to darkness - righteousness is terrifying to evil. Look at the text; John was a righteous and holy man. Herod knew that he was innocent. Furthermore, he knew that John's condemnation of his adulterous relationship with Herodias was true. The picture here of Herod is of a torn, double-minded (evil with a few good impulses) man.

It's possible Herod thought that listening to John would somehow atone for his condition. We don't know for certain if that's the case; but nevertheless, that same tragic mistake is made today. This very morning there are individuals sitting under the teaching of God's Word who mistakenly think they are good Christians because they listen to the truth. But listening to the truth and yet refusing to put it into action will only harden your heart. The same heat that melts wax is used to turn clay into stone.

It's interesting to note that Herod respects John, but at the same time, he rejects his teaching. He vacillates back and forth between the bedroom chambers of Herodias and the prison cell of John. He was intrigued by the righteousness of John's life, but he loved his sin as well. He was fascinated by John's message (Herod heard John **ἠδέως** - "gladly," with pleasure), but fearful of its consequences. Have you ever been there? You're caught in the spin cycle of conscience and lifestyle?

I can almost picture Herod walking away after hearing John preach, conflicted, thinking to himself, "I have everything. Pleasure, power, prominence, possessions, they're all at my fingertips. Why do I need to repent? Why do I need forgiveness? I'm happy." Therein lies the problem; the root of all sin is the pursuit of happiness apart from God. John the Baptist is functioning as the voice of righteousness to Herod, but unfortunately, Herod silenced the voice that pricked his conscience and that conscience became increasingly darkened and desensitized.

## II. A DESENSITIZED CONSCIENCE (v.21-25)

While Herodias had been previously retrained from acting on her harbored grudge against John for a period of time, there came a perfect opportunity for her to put her plan in motion. Look at verse 21. Mark writes, "But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee."

A birthday celebration was a lavish event for nobility. Royal feasts were extravagant both in their display of wealth and in their provision for pleasure. These parties often included well-stocked "bars" that operated late into the evening. As the drinks flowed and laughter heightened, moral inhibitions became shadowy if not non-existent. This is the opportunity that Herodias capitalized on. Mark notes that that Herod had invited his nobles, military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee – this banquet was the who's who of Galilee.

The celebration takes an interesting turn in verses 22-23. Mark writes, "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." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom."

Herodias's daughter, though not given to us in Mark's account, is named Salome. She is not the biological daughter of Herod, but rather the daughter of Herodias and Philip, making her Herod's niece and stepdaughter. She was probably in her middle teens. As she danced, these men were unusually delighted. Mark writes that her dancing pleased Herod and his guests. They had seen professional dancers in the past. Such dancing was normally performed by court dancers or prostitutes – never by respectable women of nobility. The Jews would have never permitted a woman to dance before a group of men, and most Gentile mothers would have forbidden their daughter to do what Herodias asked of hers.

After the enjoyment of Salome's dancing, Herod made an oath, or vow, to the young girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." Verse 23 goes on to say that Herod offered up to half his kingdom. It's probable that Herod's offer was a mere jest in the presence of important company. You see, Herod ruled, if you can even call it that, under the authority of Caesar and you can bet that Caesar wouldn't allow Herod to remunerate a teenage girl with a piece of the kingdom for her dancing services.

Salome didn't even know what to ask for. Look at verse 24. Mark writes, "She went out and asked her mother Herodias, 'For what should I ask?'" And here is the opportunity Herodias has been waiting for. She told her daughter, "The head of John the Baptist." In verse 25, Mark says that she came in immediately with haste to the king, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The grim detail "on a platter" seems to be her own.

### III. A SEARED CONSCIENCE (v.26-29)

What was Herod's reaction to Salome's request? Look at verse 26. Mark says, "And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her." It's interesting to note that the Greek verb translated "sorry" or "distressed" is used only one other time in the New Testament. As Jesus agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane he said to His disciples, "My soul is *deeply grieved* to the point of death; remain here and keep watch" Mark 14:34. In a moment, Herod was thrown from delight to dilemma. Only moments before Herod had reveled in boisterous festivities, but now he sat conflicted - filled with deep feelings of grief and sorrow.

Whatever request Herod thought he might receive, as he offered Salome up to half the kingdom, the head of John the Baptist wasn't on the list. Herod stood at yet another fork in the road. He could renege on his offer, but then he would look weak in front of all his guests and become the laughing stock of imperial administration. Instead of doing what he knew was right, he caved to the pressure of his guests' curious eyes. Notice the influence of others... His conscience said, "No", but his pride said, "Yes". A wise man once told me, "Sin will take you farther than you are willing to go, keep you longer than you are willing to stay, and cost you more than you are willing to pay."

The Bible warns of the possibility of a seared conscience (cf. 1 Timothy 4:2). The word seared is the Greek word, **καυστηριάζω** (kausteriazō). This is where we get our word cauterize. The meaning of the word "seared" in 1 Timothy 4:2 is to be branded with marks of guilt, or to be seared into insensibility.

Mark writes in verse 27-28, "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."

Look at verse 29. Mark writes, "When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb." It is probable that John's disciples remained somewhere close to Machaerus while John was imprisoned so that they could minister to his needs. The final act of ministry that John's disciples had to him was to recover his body and bury it. If you're anything like me, you can be tempted, at times, to think about how little reward some of God's best servants receive in this world. But we must remember that the true Christian's rest, crown, wages, and reward are all on the other side of the grave – and Heaven will make amends for every "perceived" earthly loss.

#### **IV. A LIFELESS CONSCIENCE (LUKE 23:6-11)**

We meet Herod Antipas one more time in the gospel narratives. Turn over to Luke 23:6-11. Luke writes, "When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he 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 some 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."

What we see here is a man who had denied his conscience too many times. Cold, calloused, and careless, Herod and his soldiers treat Jesus with contempt and mock Him. Herod's conscience is lifeless at this point. As he listened to John preach about the coming messiah he was perplexed, but yet somewhat stirred. Now the Son of Man stands in his very presence and rather than being stirred, Herod scorns Jesus. Though Jesus will ultimately die by Pilate's permission, Herod treated an innocent man as if he were guilty. Herod's conscience no longer felt the prick of unrighteousness. It no longer responded to truth.

Herod is a clear picture of a man who possessed everything but the main thing. Do you remember what Jesus said to the crowd in Mark 8:34-36? Maybe you remember the same words from Matthew 16:24 or Luke 9:23... Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"

#### **A WARNING FOR US ALL**

What shape is your conscience in? Is it tender and responsive? Or, is it dull and unresponsive? The death of a conscience starts with small things that invariably become larger things. When you do something you know is wrong, continue on and try to cover it up, your conscience becomes hardened, callous and resistant. How do we protect our conscience against being dulled, even seared?

- A. Cultivate your conscience by filling your heart and mind with God's Word and obeying it.
- B. If your conscience is biblically informed, listen to it (The devil wants you to ignore your conscience). Each time you suppress your conscience, it grows quieter and quieter. A neglected conscience will suffer progressive desensitization to God so that we don't hear Him when He speaks.

C. Keep your conscience clean through confession of sin and acceptance of God's forgiveness (Hebrews 9:14).

## **V. A SOBERING PICTURE OF DISCIPLESHIP (v.30)**

It's interesting to note that Mark follows the martyrdom of John the Baptist with a one-sentence summary of the evangelistic mission of the disciples. Look at verse 30. Mark writes, "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." It seems as though this verse would have naturally followed verse 13. Why do you suppose that Mark sandwiched the account of John the Baptist's death in between the disciples being sent out to preach? Is it possible that Mark is highlighting the inseparable relationship between mission and martyrdom and discipleship and death? God's mission takes place in a hostile world, opposed to Jesus and his followers. Nonetheless, this passage shows that despite persecution and even death, a hostile world cannot thwart the purposes of God and His mission.

## **CLOSING BLESSING**

As we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning, hear these words of blessing from the writer of Hebrews, "May the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" Hebrews 9:14. And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace!