

Fear and Desire

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Date: 03 April 2022

Preacher: Matthew Capone

[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us.

We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good.

They don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word, because we believe God has something to say to everyone.

He has something to say to people who've been Christians their entire lives. He has something to say to people who've been Christians for a very short amount of time. And He has something to say to people who would not consider themselves Christians, people who have objections or doubts or questions about Christianity.

And so that's why we open it up every week and read and learn together. We're continuing our series in the Gospel of Mark, and you'll remember that the Gospels tell us the story of Jesus and His life and His death and His resurrection.

[1 : 10] And we come this morning to an interesting and rich passage, which in some ways takes us away from Jesus and returns us to the story of John the Baptist, which we left off much earlier in the Gospel.

Now, because this is a rich passage, there's many different directions that we could take it in. We could talk about the relationship of Christians to the government. I could talk about the dangers of the type of party that Herod throws in this passage.

Thankfully, though, we're not left to wander or fumble around, because we have our two questions that arise from within the text that are going to guide us. And so we're going to continue to focus on those. First of all, who is Jesus?

And second, how do we respond to Him? And really what we're looking at this morning is two different pictures of a response to Jesus. And so it's our second question that we're going to focus on.

As we've seen before, this question is something that comes from within the text. And so at the very beginning, verses 14 through 16, we're going to see this is on the minds of these people. They want to know who Jesus is.

[2 : 14] They're asking about it. We're also going to continue to see something that I've been warning you guys about as we go through this gospel, which is that as we proceed, it's been pointed out that the middle ground disappears.

In other words, at the beginning, we see those who are following Jesus, those who are opposed to Jesus, and then we have these onlookers. The onlookers disappear as we go on in the book of Mark to make the point that at the end of the day, there are only two groups.

Either we follow Jesus or we reject Him. It's those two pictures, those two responses that we're going to see in this story about Herod and the John the Baptist.

And I'll say one more thing, which is that we're asking this question about how we respond to Jesus. Technically, Herod is responding not to Jesus, but to John the Baptist. But John the Baptist is preaching the message of repentance to prepare the way for Jesus.

And so we're going to continue to ask that question. This passage, these two pictures, one of Herod, one of John, the perplexing thing is this. If Herod is afraid of John the Baptist, if he knows that he's a holy man, which verse 20 tells us he does, why doesn't he save him?

[3 : 31] Why is it that we make the foolish and stupid decisions that we do? Why is it that Herod makes a foolish and stupid decision? We're told, in fact, verse 26, that the king was exceedingly sorry.

He hates it and he still does it. Why? It's with that we're going to turn now to our passage. I invite you to turn there with me in Mark chapter 6. You can find it in your worship guide on page 6. You can turn in your Bible. You can turn on your phone. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's word. And God tells us that his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, which means that God has not left us to stumble alone in the dark, but instead he's given us his word to show us the way to go.

And so that's why we read now Mark chapter 6, starting at verse 14. Verse 17.

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.

[5 : 03] 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. Verse 21. 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.

And he vowed to her, Whatever you ask, 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.

Verse 25. 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.

[6 : 14] 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. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you and we praise you that you are a good and loving Father. And so you instruct us day by day, week by week in your word.

We ask for your help because we need it, that you would honor your promise in Isaiah 55, that your word will not return to you empty, but it will accomplish the purpose for which you sent it.

We ask that it would accomplish your purpose in our lives, that you would change us, that you would encourage us, you challenge us. More than that, you would show us Jesus and his beauty and his glory, that our affection and our love, our reverence and our all for him would grow and grow.

[7 : 19] We thank you that we don't have to ask these things afraid of whether we've earned them or deserved them. We know that we haven't, and so we ask them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

I had a conversation recently with the woman who designed our new church logo, and she shared with me that she had just celebrated her son's birthday. I think her son is seven or eight.

And for his birthday, they gave to him the great Lego pirate ship. Now, this reminded me of when I was that age, long ago, back in the 90s.

As a kid, I desperately wanted the Lego pirate ship. We would get these Lego catalogs in the mail, and we would pour through them, dreaming about all the Lego sets that we couldn't afford.

And I can still remember exactly how much it cost. In the 1990s, the Lego pirate ship cost \$50. I checked. It's \$100 today.

[8 : 23] So that's inflation for you. Now, some of you know that I was raised by two parents who met and married in a graduate program for economics, which is to say that we talked about money a lot growing up.

And we got, at that time, \$2 a week in allowance. We had to split it up between different envelopes and bins, so we had to put aside 10% for tithe. Then we had to put aside a certain amount for birthday and Christmas presents, so that when that came around, we wouldn't be caught without

any money to buy something for our siblings or our parents.

We had to put some in long-term savings, and then the rest we could spend. And so the question is this. Why did I not buy the \$50 Lego pirate ship?

You could say that I couldn't afford it, right? You could say, well, he only got \$2 a week. It was outside of his ability. But that's really not true.

I could have saved, let's say I put all those things away. I could have saved \$1 a week. If I had gone for a year, I would have had enough for the pirate ship. So what was the problem?

[9 : 36] Problem is not that I couldn't afford it. The problem is that I didn't want it enough. I wanted other things, and I tried to remember what it is that I spent my money on as a kid.

I think I bought a lot of double bubble bubble gum, and there were some baseball cards in there somewhere, and who knows what other trash I spent my money on, okay? The point is that I wanted those other things more.

Many times when people say, I can't afford that, what they really mean is that's not a priority. I'm not willing to spend that much on that particular item.

It's not in the budget. Now, I don't mean to make light of the fact that's not always true, right? Yes, there are things that none of us can afford, and there are times in our lives, in the past, and times in some of our lives right now where we struggle to make ends meet, right?

So I'm not trying to make light of that. What I am trying to say is for those who are middle class, upper class, upper middle class, our life is one of choices and priorities when it comes to finances.

[10 : 43] Now, you're probably wondering, what in the world does this have to do with Herod? Life is a game of priorities and choices. Many, many people will say, I can't, when what they really mean is I won't.

Many, many people will say, I can't, when what they really mean is I won't. We have many more choices than we often are willing to admit.

What does this have to do with Herod? This story that we're looking at this morning is a story about priorities and choices. It's a story about what it is that our hearts love, why something is more valuable than another thing.

We're taking a break from the story of Jesus, in a sense, to finish this story about John. We see in verses 14 through 16 that Jesus' miracles have raised this question of who he is.

And so once again, that question for us is coming not outside of the text, but from inside of the text. And one of these possible answers that we're given is that maybe Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead.

[11 : 49] That's the idea that resonates with Herod because Herod has an anxious mind that's at work. And this is what anxious minds do. They come up with worst case scenarios to protect themselves.

The worst case scenario for Herod is that this is going to be the reincarnate version of someone he killed who he shouldn't. And so that's the idea that keeps him awake at night.

It's with that that we go back to this flashback so we can understand why it is that Herod is so afraid. And we find out that he's the one who put John the Baptist to death.

Verse 17, Herod has married his brother's wife. And this is wrong on multiple levels. We know from other sources that Herodias was the one who divorced Philip, Herod's brother.

So we have that problem. On top of that, it's against Old Testament law to marry your brother's wife. And on top of that, the fact that her name's Herodias and his name is Herod helps us understand this is an incestuous marriage.

[12 : 48] His marriage is wrong on multiple levels. And it's with that that John, in verses 18 through 20, comes as apparently the only person who's willing to speak truth to power.

The only person who's willing to say what no one else wants to say, which is that Herod has put himself in a terrible and embarrassing situation. Verse 19, we find out Herodias is so angry about it, she will kill John.

But Herod is conflicted. And so he protects him. Verse 20, we're told he keeps him safe. Some people think he actually keeps him safe by putting him in prison.

In other words, Herodias is so incensed that prison's the only place that he can be kept safe from her plans to kill him. We also see that Herod is conflicted. Again, verse 20, on the one hand, he fears John.

On the other hand, he likes to listen to John. And so he's caught. He won't respond to him, but he'll protect him. He won't act on what he says, but he'll listen to him.

[13:51] Herodias, though, is just waiting for her moment. It's with that background that we come to this party that's thrown where the trap is set. His daughter comes forward to dance. Most likely, Herod is thinking under the influence at this point.

He offers her anything she wants, up to half the kingdom, not thinking of how persistent Herodias is. Daughter goes to her mom, says, what should I ask for?

And she says, I want the head of John the Baptist. This is my chance to finally put this man to death. And this is where we have perhaps the most important quote here of this passage.

Verse 26. He did not want to break his word to her. Notice the importance there.

He didn't want to. It doesn't say he couldn't. He didn't want to. It doesn't say he couldn't.

[14:57] Herod had a choice. So our question is this. Why did Herod choose not to do the right thing? Why did he not save John in this situation?

If it's true, as we're told in verse 20, that he knows he's a holy man and he's afraid of him. Well, this passage here gives us several answers that help us understand the response of Herod to John the Baptist.

And by his response to John the Baptist, ultimately his response to Jesus. First of all, Herod is someone who is always listening, never acting.

Herod is someone who is always listening, but never acting. We see in verse 18 here, John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

We get the sense here that this is not one conversation that John had with Herod, but many conversations. This was an ongoing theme, most likely in their conversations. John was saying over and over, this is bad.

[15:57] It needs to end. Then, verse 20, we get the sense that he's okay with listening to this. 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. John was constantly talking. Herod was constantly listening.

But listening was all Herod was going to do. The point is this. Herod demonstrates the danger for us of just listening.

Herod demonstrates the danger for us of just listening. Herod shows us that there is no middle ground or neutral ground when it comes to our response to Jesus.

Not following Jesus is by default to reject him. Not making a decision is a decision. He protects John.

[17:01] He listens to him, but he won't repent. He will not give up his marriage with Herodias. In a sense, Herod is the perpetual skeptic, but the middle ground that he's standing on, it is an illusion.

You do not stand on neutral ground when it comes to Jesus. You always stand in one kingdom or another.

You are always choosing obedience or rebellion, worship or rejection. Those are the only options. You cannot remain a skeptic forever.

Either you are for Jesus or you are against him. Either you follow Jesus or you reject him. And maybe you like coming to church.

Maybe you like coming to listen. That's great. It's also not enough. You have to choose a camp.

[18:13] In fact, it's worse than that. It's not that you have to choose a camp. It's that you're already in one. There is no middle ground. There is no neutral ground.

As we continue in Mark, as I mentioned before, it will become clearer and clearer and clearer that there are only two responses to Jesus. Follow him or reject him.

Worship him. Rebel against him. Colossians chapter 1 says this about Jesus' work. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Notice there's only two places that you can be. You're in the domain of darkness or you're in the kingdom of his beloved son. That is true right now of each and every one of you.

You are in one of those two places. There is no third option. Not making a choice is a choice. Okay?

[19:17] You don't get the luxury of just listening and standing in the middle. And to go from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of the beloved son, you have to do more than listen.

Jesus' call is not less than listening to him, but it is so much more than that. Remember, we've talked before about Mark chapter 8, which we haven't even gotten to yet, when Jesus says this, 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. Maybe you've been listening for a long time.

Maybe you've been listening for a long time.

The time to do more than just listen is now. Jesus calls us to and demands of us more than that. He calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

[20 : 28] Herod loved listening to John. Herod, we find out here, believed in Jesus, right? He's asking this question, who is this?

He doesn't deny that Jesus exists, right? He listens. He believes. He doesn't act. That's what James warns us about in chapter 2. He says, You believe that God is one.

You do well. Even the demons believe and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you foolish person?

That faith apart from works is useless? And then we get this warning in chapter 1 of James.

Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.

For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. That's what we see with Herod. He loves to listen. Sees what he likes.

[21 : 27] Walks away. Does nothing. Following Jesus is more than listening. Now that partially answers our question.

Why is it that Herod did not save John the Baptist? Well, reason one, he only listened. He never acted. It raises that next question though. Why was it that he wasn't willing to act?

Why? What was going on in Herod that caused him to only listen and never respond? We see this conflict internally for him throughout the passage. Verse 20, we're told that there's this fear that he has of John.

Why would he need to fear John? Herod is the one in control, right? We find out he's actually the one who's able to kill John. He's the one with all the power and yet he is the one that's scared.

Well, Herod recognizes that there's a higher power at work in the world. And so in one sense, Herod is the more powerful one. In another sense, in an ultimate sense, it is John who is more powerful.

[22 : 31] So he's conflicted when it comes to his relationship with John and his standing in the world as a man and a ruler who can put people to death. He's also conflicted when it comes to John's message.

Verse 20, we're told he's perplexed and he hurt him gladly. He hurt him gladly as verse 17 and 18, John was rebuking him about his marriage. He's doing two things at the same time that don't make sense.

He's listening and loving John's message and he's refusing it. Herod is a deeply conflicted man. If he's afraid, if he's perplexed, if he likes to listen to John, why is it that Herod will not act?

Herod does not act because it is desire. It is the heart that always wins. Why did I not buy the \$50 pirate ship?

It wasn't because I couldn't afford it. It's because I didn't want it enough. Why does Herod choose not to save John? It's not because he couldn't.

[23 : 38] It's because he didn't want it enough. It's because at the end of the day, Herod feared man more than he feared God. This story before us this morning is a story about want-tos.

In fact, we see the idea, concept, and word come up over and over. Verse 17, why do you think it is that Herod married Herodias, even though she was related to him and the wife of his brother?

Because he wanted to. Verse 19, what is Herodias thinking? She wants to put John to death. Verse 22, what does he say to his daughter?

Ask me for whatever you wish. Verse 25, I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Verse 26, but because of his oaths and his guests, he did not want to break his word to her. What do you want?

[24 : 48] Herod wanted many things. He wanted to be protected from the power that John represented, enough to protect him in prison.

He did not want it enough to save his life. At the end of the day, what Herod wanted, what his heart loved, more than anything else was what he was unwilling to lose.

Power, pleasure, wealth, and status. Herod knew the truth, and he loved those things more.

It is our hearts and our desires that always win. Herod loved comfort and power more than he loved God. Herod feared man more than he feared God.

You can listen all you want. You can know all sorts of things about God.

[25 : 46] And the gospel requires a change of heart. The gospel requires a change in our desires and our wills.

It requires and demands a change in what we love. We have to love the things of God more than anything else.

I'm going to invite you to turn with me on the back of your worship guide, which I warned you about during the announcement time. This quote lays it out for us.

Herod's mind understood.

His heart disagreed. He loved many things more than he loved God.

[26 : 52] That's why John the Baptist was put to death. That is why Herod refused to protect him despite knowing the truth. That is why Herod put him to death even though he knew that he was a holy man.

That is why Herod kept his oath. Not because he couldn't break it, because he didn't want to. His heart, his desires were in the wrong place.

Now I told you we had two pictures. Herod is one of them. He's our negative example. Our other example here is John the Baptist. John follows after Jesus no matter what. Verse 18, he has the courage to tell the truth to an extremely powerful person.

He, I'm sure, knew the risk and he gets to experience the consequences because he ends up having one person, Herodias, trying to kill him actively and another person protecting him by putting him in prison.

Now I want you to think about that for a second. His situation was so bad that Herod did him a favor by putting him in jail. That's how bad off things were. That's how much commitment he had to his words.

[28 : 03] He could have easily turned a blind eye. He could have easily ignored what was going on in the life of Herod, but he loved God and his truth more than anything else.

He loved what God loved more than comfort and pleasure. He was willing to sit in prison to do what honored God. And then he's in prison, verse 17, he has the courage to remain there.

We don't see him relent in his prophetic word. John's courage and truth-telling reward him with death.

John's courage and truth-telling reward him with death. And that reminds us also of Jesus' words in Mark 8. Verse 18.

John refuses to gain the whole world to forfeit his soul. He gives up the world and he keeps his soul. John loves Jesus more than anything else.

[29 : 36] John loves the truth more than anything else. John accepts the consequences because what he wants is radically different than what Herod wants.

Now, it's strange that this story appears at this point in the Gospel of Mark. You might be asking why in all the places it could have shown up, does it show up here?

We certainly could have heard earlier about the death of John. He's a character from many chapters ago in the book of Mark. And I believe there's two reasons, at least two reasons, that Mark tells us the story here.

First of all, if you remember our last episode, Jesus has just sent out his disciples. This helps us understand what it is they're going to face as they follow Jesus.

This is the kind of opposition that his people will experience in this world. One, he's sending them out. Two, we get a story of what happens to people who represent Jesus. Following Jesus is a path of suffering.

[30 : 38] There's a second reason, though, which is that John the Baptist, remember from earlier in the book, prepares the way for Jesus. John baptizes, then Jesus baptizes. John dies.

Jesus will die. This is a foreshadowing of what waits for Jesus and for those who follow him. And so we see a picture of what happens in following Jesus in the gospel, that God is going to send his son to die for us.

That is his path. That is our path, a path of suffering. But we know how that path ends. It ends in Jesus being risen from the dead, being resurrected, and having all power and authority that God gives him.

And so this is the same dynamic that we talked about when we looked at the letters written by Peter, that what's true of Jesus is true of us. Jesus suffers. We will suffer. Jesus is glorified. We will be glorified.

That brings us to the hardest question of all for this passage of Herod, is a warning of the dangers of the heart. And if John is an example of right and true love, what are we supposed to do?

[31 : 56] The story of the gospel is this. We must change. Our hearts and our desires must be different. One. Two. We cannot change ourselves.

We cannot change our hearts and our desires. We're actually incapable of doing it. And so there's a trap. There's a catch-22. What are we supposed to do with the fact that on the one hand, we must change, and on the other hand, we cannot change ourselves?

Well, we get the answer here. I'm going to invite you to turn again to the back of your worship guide and finish this quote. The trouble with human nature is that we are born with a heart that loves ourselves over and above everything else in this world, including God.

That's why, if left to ourselves, we will always love those things that make us feel good about ourselves, even as we depart more and more from God and His ways.

Therefore, God must intervene in our lives in order to bring salvation. What do we do with the fact that we must change and we can't change ourselves?

[33 : 01] We recognize that that's true and we have to have help that comes to us from outside. We recognize that God and God alone, by His Holy Spirit, can turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh.

We recognize that God and God alone is the one who's able to change our desires and our hearts and our wills. And so as we look at Herod, we see ourselves more in Him than in John.

We see the tendency of our hearts, which is to love what's good for us and our pleasure and our comfort and our power, to fear men more than we fear God, to be warned of that response and to know that by ourselves, there's nothing we can do.

And so simply, we cry out to God. We ask God to be at work in our lives by His Holy Spirit. We ask that He would do this, that He would intervene to bring salvation, as it says here on the back.

We would recognize that we are helpless unless He helps us. We recognize that the heart of prayer is dependency, as our worship guide says.

[34 : 04] And so we come to God, bringing Him our need, confessing that like Herod, our hearts want many things more than Him. And we know that He is the only one who can change us and transform us.

And so that's the basics. It's the basics of response to Jesus, that to respond correctly to Jesus, we have to be like John. We love Him more than anything else.

We're willing to give up anything to be with Him. And we know that's not what our hearts want by themselves. And so rather than pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps to be like John, instead we cry out to God and we say, I'm like Herod.

I desire many things. Make me like John by your Holy Spirit. Change me and transform me that I would want one thing. Herod here trades a heavenly feast for an earthly feast.

He makes a terrible bargain. He's not willing to be embarrassed at this birthday party, this small feast on earth.

[35 : 20] Revelation 19 tells us how the story of the world ends. Our story, if we're Christians, ends with a feast. It ends with a wedding feast of the Lamb.

Now I say ends, it's really the end that's a beginning, right? It's the beginning of our life with God. Herod trades a heavenly feast for an earthly feast.

Herod takes something that is worth little, gives up something that is worth much. John sits in prison, looks forward to a feast at the end of the world.

Herod sits at a feast, he looks forward to prison at the end of the world. Brothers and sisters, we do the same.

No matter what we face in this life, no matter what sufferings come our way, opposition from within and without, we keep our eyes focused, not on what we can enjoy and experience here and now, not on the feast that we can see, but on the feast that we can't see.

[36 : 30] We look to the feast at the end of the world. And so we're reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 10. 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. Our hearts must change. We cannot change them.

God does change them. We listen and we ask. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and thank you for your word that you've given to feed us.

We ask that you would stir it up in our minds and our hearts that we would see and recognize the many things that we want and desire more than you and that you would be at work doing for us the thing that we are incapable of doing ourselves, that you would change our minds and our hearts and our affections and our loves that we would love you and follow you no matter what.

We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.