

Pastor Jim Lincoln

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The Demolition of a Conscience – Mark 6:14-29

Let's see now, a wicked king, scheming women, a seductive dancing girl, a birthday party out of control among the rich and famous and the violent death of a good man. It sounds like a Hollywood movie. Why did Mark include this captivating story of Herod and John the Baptist in his gospel? Remember the reaction of the hometown folks to Jesus a few verses earlier? They were offended. From this Greek word used for *offended* in v. 3, we get our English word *scandal*. It means to viscerally reject something deep in your gut. They found Jesus to be offensive and His exclusive claims to be scandalous (v.3.). And yet, His life and teaching were all about an inclusive love! He healed people, loved people, freed them from demons and He served people. Then He sent His apostles out into the villages of Galilee to heal, serve and love people in His name (authority). In Jesus, there is this amazing combination of one who makes the *exclusive* claim of divinity and at the same time acts with an *inclusive* love, and then commands others to care, serve and love people. This is so amazing because those who make exclusive claims almost always use those claims to roll over, oppress and subjugate others. Think about Mao, Stalin and Hitler and those who promote terrorism and genocide. They all claim exclusive authority and then they use that claim to violate and subjugate others. Some have claimed Christ's authority to do the same. But note, they cannot get behavior like that from Jesus. If you want to claim the authority of Christ for yourself (at home, at church or in community), to do it as a Christian, you must also adopt *the way* Jesus used His authority, which was to heal, liberate, serve and love and not to demand His prerogatives. If you are about subjugating, oppressing and lording yourself over others you did not learn that from Christ, even if you can find a Bible passage that gives you authority. This is so because it was *the use of authority* that Jesus so profoundly revolutionized. Here, however, Mark points out that what was truly scandalous is the way Herod used his authority. Herod also made exclusive claims to authority, but unlike Jesus, he used his authority to murder innocent people. This was the real scandal. And in the process Herod renounced his conscience. How did that happen? Initially, Herod experienced a working conscience. Second, he rejected what his conscience was saying to him. Finally, and in the end, his conscience became so seared that it could no longer serve him. At first he could hear it working. Then in the moment of testing, he ignored it, and over time he lost the ability to hear it at all.

Herod's Conscience: Initially Working

Initially, Herod's conscience was working reasonably well. As the disciples went throughout Galilee preaching the gospel, healing and serving people, the word about Jesus eventually reached Herod's palace. Herod Antipas was the second of four sons of Herod the Great (the first ruler of Israel installed by Rome). When Jesus was a child, Herod the Great died and his kingdom was divided up among his sons. Herod Antipas was made a ruler of Galilee. His brother Herod Philip ruled over what we call today the Golan Heights, just north east of Galilee.

After the mission of the apostles, some were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist who had returned from the dead. Others said Jesus was the prophet Elijah and still others said He was one of the prophets. But, notice that no one was yet saying that Jesus was the Christ or the Son of God. Herod was among those who thought Jesus was John the Baptist that had somehow come back from the dead to haunt him. There was a good reason for his fear. Herod had John beheaded. Here, Mark takes us back to that episode. Let's read through verse 16-20.

¹⁶But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!" ¹⁷For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married.

¹⁸For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, ²⁰because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. Mark 6:16-20 NIV

The historical background to this episode sounds a lot like a soap opera but it is critical to understanding the story. Herodias, mentioned in 17, was Herod's niece, the daughter of his brother Aristobulus. Moreover, she was also his sister-in-law married to his brother Philip who ruled the Golan Heights. Now all the sons of Herod the Great took the name Herod. The Herod in our story is Herod Antipas. In time Herodias' affections for her husband Philip cooled when it became evident that he was not going to be the next king of Israel. So, she set her sights on his brother Antipas who showed more promise. Antipas was attracted to her because she had Jewish blood and could enhance his status in Israel. She was attracted to him because he looked like the next king. The problem was that they were both married. Oh, there was one more political problem. Herod's wife was the daughter of the king of Nabatea who ruled just across the border to the south of Israel. So, here's how these two solved their problem. They both divorced their spouses. Herodias dumped Philip and then Antipas dumped his wife and then they married each other. Now, this was not well received in Israel by anyone. For most, the real violation was that Herod married Herodias while her husband Philip was still alive. So, here's the Reader's Digest version. Herodias divorced her husband to marry her uncle and brother-in-law so that she could become more rich and famous. Herod divorced his wife and married a woman with Jewish blood so that he could have greater favor in Israel. They remained married even after Antipas was exiled. So, I imagine that they also had deep feelings for each other. However, this was a violation of the Law of Moses and almost everyone saw it as unseemly and opportunistic. Well, John the Baptist (18) just said out loud what everyone else was thinking but didn't have the guts to say: the marriage was unlawful. Herodias was not pleased. In fact, she hated John and wanted to have him killed but she couldn't, because Herod feared and respected John. So Herod put John in his prison and from time to time, Herod would bring him out to listen to him preach. In v. 20 notice the effect John had on Herod. Herod feared John, but not because of the political fallout of John's preaching. He was afraid of John because John *was righteous and holy*. Herod's conscience was working, at least for the moment. He was also perplexed by John. This word used for *perplexed* means that he was torn between two actions; he was undecided. Through John's witness, Herod faced a man who was free to tell him to his face, what no one else would dare say. In John, Herod saw a man who wasn't bound to the ordinary fears and ambitions of this world that would keep him from saying and doing what was right. The only benefit to John was a prison cell. Herod was confronted with a man who would lose his status, career and even his life in order to be truthful and righteous.

Beloved, *sometimes God leads us through a loss of status, reputation, health, wealth, career or worldly honors simply to reveal to us and to others that these things are not our gods*. Ambition, power, status and success are Herod's gods. And he follows whenever they call. So God put before Herod a man who was free enough to be truthful and righteous. And, the proof of John's righteousness, in Herod's eyes, was John's commitment to righteousness and truth even if it would cost him everything in this world. Without the desperate conditions there would have been no credible witness. John witnessed not merely to the forgiveness offered in Christ, John witnessed to the liberating and freeing reality of knowing Christ. In his book, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, Richard Bauckham argues that when freedom is reduced to the absolute right of the individual or the creature to self-determination, freedom degenerates into the banal pursuit of self-gratification or the cynical pursuit of power.

What we are given [in the gospel] is new kind of loyalty or commitment. It becomes possible, through the gospel, to resist the otherwise irresistible pressures because we have something above and beyond them that enables us to see through and to resist them. Loving obedience to God is

not, as so many see it today, a loss of personal freedom, [instead it is] liberation from all the compulsions to which so-called independent selves so often find themselves subject.^{1[1]}

Some would say that Herod was free. After all, he had wealth, power, independence and almost unlimited authority. No one in Israel told Herod what to do. Yet, even with all these advantages was Herod free? Or was he, in reality, chained to his appetites? Who was really free, John or Herod? Bauckham goes on to say,

For Christians to behave as truly free people in the midst of the compelling desires and addictions of contemporary life may be what can best give tangible substance to Christian faith and life.^{2[2]}

In John, Herod couldn't account for why a man would risk everything for truth. Herod was torn or perplexed by his conscience. At the end of v. 20, Mark says that Herod liked to listen to John. He found John's courage and honesty refreshing. I'm sure it stood in vivid contrast to all those in the palace who only told Herod what he wanted to hear. John was free without an ounce of political or social power. But, Herod was bound to wickedness and John's freedom to be righteous makes him aware of it. So, here's the question for us: Will our lives stir up any perplexity, offense or attraction in others? Or will we be just as bound up slaves to compulsions, appetites, addictions and the gods of this world as our non-Christian counterparts? The gospel preached as merely the forgiveness of sins is a woefully inadequate message. It is equally about liberation from the compulsions and sins that keep us bound up in wickedness. Notice one more thing about John's witness: He *failed* to get the convert! I've never seen John's witnessing method mentioned in a book on how to be a successful witness. Why is that? Herod rejected his witness. What a waste! He witnessed and gave his life in the pursuit of reaching Herod and he failed. What did John do wrong? Where did he blow it? Nowhere. John faithfully witnessed to Christ both by his words and by his life. He bore witness to the liberating power of the gospel that has the power to set us free from the gods of ambition, status, and power. He witnessed to a gospel that can make us free to be truthful, honest and righteous. But the fruit he bore was this: In the kiln of agonizing testing, his faith proved to be as pure gold even though Herod did not convert. So was he a success or a failure? Jesus said John was the greatest man born of woman. Jesus validated John as a success. Will our lives be free enough from the gods and idols of this world for God to use them to stir up someone's conscience, cause others to become perplexed or be attracted to the source of such freedom? Others may accept or they may reject. But John shows us how to witness. Initially, through John's witness Herod's conscience was working.

Herod Rejected His Conscience.

Verse 21, finally the opportune time came... Was the opportune time for Herodias or for Herod? Well, for Both. Herodias saw Herod's birthday party as her opportunity. But it was also an opportunity for Herod to do the right thing. And when she walked through her door of opportunity Herod's closed forever. Here's how it happened: Salome danced before Herod and his elite guests. Most believe that her dance was sensual and seductive. So, Herod said to her, "Ask whatever you wish and I will give it to you up to half of my kingdom." Even though, as an idiom, this wouldn't have been taken literally, it was still a huge promise. Salome went back to Herodias and her mother told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. So she came back before the king and immediately demanded John's head on a platter. And although the king was sorry, because of his oath and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. He gave her John's head and she gave it to her mother.

^{1[1]} Bauckham, Richard. *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 17.

^{2[2]} Bauckham, *God and Crisis*, 17

Why did Herod reject his conscience (26)? Mark says he did so because of his oath and because of his dinner guests he was unwilling to refuse Salome. He didn't want to look weak in the presence of his guests. He cared more for his reputation than doing what was right. He let what others thought about him determine his life. Notice that he expressed feelings of sorrow. At times people think that feelings of sorrow and even confession will somehow mitigate culpability. Notice that he wasn't sorry enough to save John's life! Herod rejected his conscience and the more he rejected it the less influence it had on his life. That leads to the final outcome in Herod's life

Herod's Conscience Became Seared

When Herod heard about Jesus, his conscience was still registering a faint noise. But when you get to the end of Mark, Jesus comes before Herod and by then all Herod can do is to mock. At the end of his life, Herod showed no evidence of an active conscience. And Jesus didn't say a word to Him. The moment of opportunity to change his life had passed. He had rejected his conscience so many times that he could no longer hear it. Look, you must know that you don't have the autonomous power over your heart that you think you do, if you begin to reject your conscience. If you know that you should be doing something or rejecting something, but you are wavering and are torn, don't presume that that window of opportunity will stay open forever. It won't. You don't have that kind of control. The reason you don't is that you have been created to serve. And you will always serve one thing or another; it's inescapable. You will serve Christ or some other thing or god. And your heart will always become like that which you serve. In time you will become incapable of doing the thing you know you ought to do right now or ought to stop doing right now. So beloved, act now or the moment of opportunity can be gone. If you are saying to yourself, I'll change later when my circumstances change, then I'll do what I need to do - as a rule you won't. I saw my stepfather put off quitting drinking. Then he came to the place where he was incapable of changing. Putting off what you know you should do today for a later time is dangerous. If it's drugs, alcohol, bad eating habits, a little pornography, complaining, gossiping, selfish indulgence, over worrying or whatever it is that you know you should stop, beloved do it now. Or, you may reach a day when you will be incapable to make that change. This is what happened to Herod. By the grace of God don't let this happen to you. How? Well, there is an *expulsive power of a greater affection*. You can make the right choice when you know that you have been loved, chosen, called, served, healed, forgiven, transformed, empowered, and folded into the eternal fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit forever and ever. If you know that God loves you in Christ, if a love like that melts your heart, and if you receive it, love, it, cherish it, believe it, value it, rehearse it, taste it and know that it is sweet, treasure it, prize it in your heart, you will come to know that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you and has loved you and given His life for you. If you receive His love and affection, and if you let it capture your heart, and let it pull you into the sphere of His mercy and love, you will find all the power you need to make the right choice. He has given us everything we need for life and godliness. God's resources are in His love, grace, wisdom, and church. Beloved, make use of these and keep your conscience alive. Herod lost his conscience. By God's grace don't let it happen to you.