

On a Plate

Mark Heath, 17 September 2004

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

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.¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not,²⁰ 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.

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.²² 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."²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom."

²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."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."

²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

The Ultimate Question v14-16

There are lots of theories about who Jesus is. Some people say he was simply a good teacher, others a failed revolutionary, yet others claim that so much myth has built up around him that we can't be sure of anything about him. Strange theories about him abound – he was an alien, or perhaps a time traveller. Most religions claim him as a holy man or a prophet and Christians believe that he is God in human form – the second person of the Trinity.

The reason for all these theories is that Jesus is impossible to ignore. His life has dramatically changed the course of history, and he is honoured or worshipped by millions even today. His message was that people needed to repent and believe in him. His ministry was accompanied by a large number of remarkable miracles. This makes it impossible to be neutral towards him. Atheists deny the miracles, despite their strong historical attestation. Other religions deny the message; yet try to keep him as an important figure. Christians believe that he is, quite literally, the most important person who has ever existed.

So we must all come to some kind of conclusion about Jesus, and Herod was no exception. His theory was that John the Baptist, who he had beheaded earlier, had come back to life. Perhaps this was due to the guilty conscience he had for the unjust

execution. Probably also Jesus' message of repentance was strikingly similar to the one that John had proclaimed.

Sadly, it seems that Herod's thoughts about Jesus never went beyond speculation. To him, Jesus was an interesting character, but with a message that made him feel rather uncomfortable. He had effectively shut John up, and it was not long before he was part of the process of shutting Jesus up too (Luke 23:7), only to find he rose from the dead and sent his followers out to the ends of the earth with gospel message.

The Prophetic Voice v17-20

So what had John done to get himself into jail? Well he had stood up in public and criticised Herod for an unrighteous marriage – he had married his sister in law. John should have known this would get him into trouble. You don't go about criticising those in high positions of authority and expect to get away with it. What could have possessed him to issue such a daring challenge?

The answer is that he had a prophetic calling that he was determined to fulfil. Many accepted his message, but many did not. He had already come into conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 3:7) because they wanted to accept him but not actually repent. He warned them to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt 3:8). He was not out for popularity, or gaining a large following, but to remain true to his calling and taking whatever consequences came his way.

Herod seemed to have the same approach as the Pharisees and Sadducees. He actually liked to hear John speak. There was something impressive about his ministry. But he didn't like the personal application part. Just like Felix in Acts 24:25, he got uncomfortable when the subject got on to repentance, righteousness and judgement.

True prophetic preaching can never avoid the difficult issues. It is true that the Christian message is indeed "good news", but people need to know why they need salvation (they are sinners), and how to receive salvation (repent and believe). This message will always be unpopular with some, which is why many churches are tempted to water down the gospel to make it more palatable. But we do no favours to people by hiding the truth from them. John warned people candidly of the "coming wrath" and for that, he earned himself the "martyrs' crown".

The Birthday Present v21-22

It was Herod's birthday and he was having a party. All his best mates had been invited, along with important men and army leaders. It would seem that this was an all-male gathering. No doubt the wine was freely flowing and everyone was in high spirits when the climax of the evening came. Herod's step-daughter came in to dance for them. And we are told that this dance so pleased this crowd of drunken men, it inspired Herod to promise to give her whatever she wanted.

As James Edwards discretely puts it, "we can only imagine what kind of dance prompted Antipas to promise 'up to half my kingdom' to Salome". It was more than likely highly pornographic in nature. We do not know whether she performed this dance willingly or not. In any case it is a disturbing situation where a man and his friends gather to be sexually entertained his own step-daughter.

Our modern day media are well aware of the male appetite for sex. It provides them with endless moneymaking opportunities. Pornography has never been easier to get

hold of, and with the advent of the television and internet it can be viewed in total anonymity. Few men are immune from the temptation to view this kind of material, and the spiritual consequences of doing so are devastating. To resist requires being persuaded in your mind that it is wrong, being prayerfully dependent on the Holy Spirit to help you say no, and taking practical steps to avoid being in situations of temptation.

But someone may ask, “what’s wrong with pornography?”. Is it just art – an appreciation of the human form and of beauty? It has become so socially acceptable that some Christians have started assuming that it is harmless. It is not just found in top-shelf magazines and adult rated videos any more, but in mainstream movies, daily newspapers and lifestyle magazines.

And the problem is not even limited to nudity in publications. Today we see sexually explicit dancing at pop concerts, topless bathers on beaches, scantily clad women on advertising hoardings (or sitting next to you in church), and teenage girls wearing t-shirts bearing suggestive slogans. The invitation to let your imagination run riot is forever being pressed in our faces. This is the sex soaked society we live in; we can’t escape it. We need strong Biblical values that will shape our mindset so we can behave in a truly counter-cultural way. If you are not sure why something is wrong, you will not have much resolve not to do it. So let’s consider some of the reasons why pornography and the value system behind it are wrong.

Firstly, and most fundamentally, it is *sin*. Jesus explicitly taught that “everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:28). The whole point of pornography is to produce sexual desire. Whether naked or clothed, the pictures are designed to make you want more than you can have. This is the essence of covetousness – desiring what is not rightfully yours (Ex 20:17). Coveting is not just about materialism, it is about greed. Greed for money, sex, power, and popularity will lead us to compromise our values to satisfy our cravings.

Second, it is *addictive*. Tasting it brings pleasure but not satisfaction – you need more. The stages of addiction to pornography are well known¹. The more you look at it, the more you want and you become ‘addicted’, constantly thinking about where you can get more. After this, you move on to a stage called ‘desensitisation’, where the images no longer have the impact they used to because you have seen so much. This leads on to ‘escalation’ where more and more explicit images are required for sexual stimulation to occur. Finally the process ends in ‘acting out’ – the images will no longer satisfy, and the addict seeks sexual experience at all costs. This might be in the form of a long string of sexual partners, or prostitutes and sometimes even involves rape.

So if even the secular world recognises a potential slippery slope to depravity, how much more should Christians be aware that this is a path into bondage. Once addicted, breaking free can be a long and painful process. Pornography promises what it can never deliver – at best it will leave you frustrated, at worst bondage.

More could be said in criticism of pornography. It *promotes a demeaning attitude to women*, treating them merely as objects of sexual desire, rather than as equal to men, and made in the image of God. It *supports an exploitative industry*. Only a few women earn a good living from the sex industry – the majority are effectively working as slaves, robbed of their self-esteem and dignity. It *perverts the true*

¹ The stages I mention were proposed by Dr Victor Cline of Utah University, who is widely acknowledged as an expert in the field of sexual addictions and their relationship to pornography.

meaning of sex, which was created by God to be an expression of love, not a monument to self-gratification. True love is demonstrated by a self-giving, life-long commitment to the other – being there for them through sickness and pain, holding their hand on their deathbed. A one-night stand can never be “making love”.

On a more personal level, it *undermines the family*, as the man indulges in it in secrecy, robbing his wife of the openness and exclusive intimacy that is rightfully hers. It threatens the very foundation of the marriage and sows the seeds for divorce, and as such it is a betrayal of your children as well as dishonouring to your wife. It *weakens the resolve to do what is right*, and as you gradually lose your self-control, you open the door to all kinds of more serious sins with far-reaching consequences. In Herod's case, he had lost the moral plot completely. This was his own step-daughter (and niece) – he should have been protecting her innocence, not publicly degrading her.

Finally, and most seriously, it *grieves the Holy Spirit*. Your relationship with God will suffer as you persist in disobedience. The Christian mind is not a place for impure thoughts (Phil 3:19, Col 3:2), and the Christian body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:18-20). To welcome sexual impurity into your life is to push the Holy Spirit out. Filling your mind with these things is spiritual suicide.

As for women, it would probably be unfair to use Herodias' daughter as a bad example seeing as we don't know whether she was forced to perform the dance. But there is growing pressure on women in our society to flaunt their sexuality as a means of gaining power over men. 1 Pet 3:3-4 teaches that it is the beauty of character that is far more important and that women should not buy into the world's mentality of being preoccupied with appearance. Don't be tempted to use your body to gain the attentions of men – you will not find real love or genuine friendship that way.

The Rash Promise v23-29

Herod's drunkenness and lust had weakened both his resolve and capacity to do what was right. He started off making a ridiculously foolish promise. He was under Roman authority. He couldn't have given away half his kingdom even had he wanted to. And it had clearly not crossed his mind that Salome might ask her mum for advice.

When she comes back with the request we see an ironic justice. He has humiliated her and made her act against her wishes; now she humiliates him and makes him act against his wishes. He is too proud to back down on his promises; worried more about the opinions of those around than doing what is right, so he adds to his growing catalogue of sins by executing an innocent prophet.

Jesus taught that we should not be people who make vows, but simply be those who keep true to our word (Matt 5:33-37). Suppose you make a promise that later you come to regret. Do you keep the promise? The answer is very simply – *do what is right*. Don't sin to fulfil a promise – whether if it means letting someone down, losing face, or even being punished. Herod should not have executed John, but he was too weak to do what was right.

In most cases, the right thing to do is to keep the promise. This may be very costly. If it is impossible for us to fulfil, we may have to humbly ask to be released from the promise and again accept whatever consequences that may bring. Clearly, it would be far better if we did not make rash promises in the first place.

Right at the end of this somewhat depressing passage of Scripture, we see the courageous solidarity of the disciples (v29). They could have hidden away, fearing that they would be next to be executed. But they were not afraid to be associated with John, and to identify with those who are suffering. In Hebrews 10:34 we see the early disciples were willing to visit those who had been thrown into prison, and they were rewarded for that kindness with their own homes being plundered. Standing with those who are persecuted is costly, but it is the right thing to do.

Conclusion

This passage shows the vast difference between the choices of the righteous and the unrighteous. The righteous do what is right whatever the consequences. John spoke out because God had commissioned him to, and the disciples stood with him. The unrighteous know what is right, but lack the power or inclination to do it. Herod, enslaved by his sexual greed and desire for popularity, had an innocent man imprisoned and put to death, and a young girl dishonoured for sport.

We have the Word of God to teach us what the right way to live is. And we have the Spirit of God to empower us to live that way. We must repent of any areas of life where we have allowed our earthly appetites to cloud our judgement and weaken our resolve. The good news of the gospel is that there is forgiveness, and hope for the future, no matter how far we have fallen.

Heb 11:24-26 tells us that “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.” There are pleasures in sin, but they are short-lived. There is cost to obedience, but it is outweighed by the glorious inheritance we have in Christ, both now and in the age to come. Resolve in your heart to always do what is right, trusting in the grace and power of God to help you.