

“Fear God and Die; Fear Man and Perish”

Mathew 14:1-12

March 17, 2019

I want to invite each of our men who are available to join us at 6 am on Thursday mornings. We have recently begun a new study in the book of Isaiah. This last week in Isaiah 2, we got a taste of the terrifying greatness of God that left us with a fresh sense of the sweetness of God’s grace to undeserving sinners. There are 3 things that Isaiah provides for every man to live a God-pleasing life. 1) a magnificent view of the greatness and holiness of God, 2) and honest and transparent view of our sin, and 3) inexpressible awe for God’s mercy to undeserving sinners.

What we saw in Isaiah 2 last Thursday and what we will see in Matt 14 today, have something deeply in common: the tension between living in the fear of God or acquiescing to the fear of man. Every believer, at some point in their life, must choose between the two. And the counsel of the Scriptures, both old and new, is to make our decision based on the last day, regardless of how intimidating the world may be today.

Isaiah says it this way: *“The Lord of hosts will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is proud and lofty and against everyone who is lifted up, that he may be abased....The pride of man will be humbled and the loftiness of man will be abased; and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day, but the idols will completely vanish. Men will go into caves of the rocks and into holes in the ground before the terror of the Lord and the splendor of His majesty, when He arises to make the earth tremble...Stop regarding man, whose breath of life is in his nostrils; for why should he be esteemed?”* (Isa 2:12, 17-19, 22).

But what about those days when evil seems sure to triumph? Will we remember the last day of God’s reckoning or will we cave in to the fear of man. This is the question John the Baptist faced in Mt 14. Here’s the crux of what I hope we’ll see in today’s passage:

Because believers face a dangerous tension between fearing God and living in a world that’s driven by the fear of man, we must faithfully live in light of the ultimate judgment of God rather than fearing the momentary judgment of this world.

Let’s set the stage for what is happening in Matthew 14. Verses 1-2 give Herod’s response to what he hears of Jesus’ ministry. The next 10 verses explain the background that leads him to that conclusion. His response to what he hears of Jesus’ miraculous power is that Jesus must be John the Baptist risen from the dead. On one hand Herod’s conclusion is a reflection of the prominence of John’s prophetic ministry (even though we no accounts of miracles through John). On the other hand, it demonstrates the paranoia and fear that plagued Herod for being responsible for John’s death, as someone who was largely respected as a man of God, a true prophet.

In order to understand what’s happening here, we need to untangle the complicated web of personal and political drama represented here. It is no less complicated and stunningly evil than the kinds of things we see in the news today. Its been said that his is an account of “infidelity, divorce, remarriage, incest, political [conspiracy], jealousy, spite, revenge, lewdness, lust, cold-heartedness, cruelty, brutality, violence, ungodly remorse, and godly [grief].”¹

This is not the same Herod that we read about in Matthew 2 that was approached by the wise men after Jesus birth and who slaughtered all the baby boys in Bethlehem. The Herod in Matthew 2 was Herod the Great who whose death was noted in Matthew 2:19 when Jesus was still a boy. The Herod referenced in Matthew 14 is one of Herod the Great’s sons, known as Herod Antipas.

When Herod the Great died, the Romans divided the kingdom among 3 of Herod’s sons: Antipas (Mt 14), Archelaus (Mt 2:22), and Philip (Mt 14:3). Herod Antipas was not nearly as powerful as his father and had little power or influence outside of his immediate jurisdiction in Galilee. This is why he’s

¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur NT Commentary: Matthew 8-15*, pg. 416.

referred to as Herod the tetrarch, which literally means “ruler of a fourth part.”²

This family is dysfunctional at best. Herod Antipas is the son of Herod the Great’s 4th wife. Philip is the son of Herod the Great’s 3rd wife. So Herod Antipas and Philip are half-brothers. Now its going to get messy. Philip was married to Herodias, but on a visit to Rome, Herod Antipas seduces Herodias to leave Philip so he can marry her. Not only is she his half-brother’s wife, but also his niece (the daughter of his half-brother, Aristobulus). In order to pull this off, not only must Herodias divorce Philip, but Herod Antipas must also divorce his wife, who was the daughter of King Aretas. The whole reason Herod Antipas had married the daughter of King Aretas in the first place was to secure a political and military alliance with King Aretas. So now you have two divorces, an incestual marriage, and a very angry ex-father-in-law, King Aretas, who declares war on Herod Antipas and wipes out Herod’s army and would have killed Herod Antipas himself had the Roman army not intervened.

Now along comes John the Baptist, this fiery preacher who not only calls the Jewish people to repent, but also publicly denounces Herod Antipas, saying, “You shouldn’t have done that! Its not lawful for you to have Herodias as your wife.” This of course does not sit well with Herodias who is used to getting whatever she wants, and she pressures Herod Anitpas to imprison John, which he does. He has John the Baptist arrested and bound in prison.

But Herodias was not satisfied to only have John imprisoned. Mark 6 tells us that Herodias had a grudge against John and wanted him to be executed but Herod would not do it because he feared the crowds, knowing they regarded John as a prophet. So Herodias waited for a strategic day—Herod’s birthday. When Herod and his guests had been drinking, she sent her daughter (Salome), Herod Antipas’s step-daughter, out to dance before the guests. No doubt this was a lewd, sensual dance, that aroused Herod and His military men. In that moment of weakness, Herod made a foolish oath to Salome, that He would give her whatever she asked for. At her mother’s urging, Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Verse 9 says, “Although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests.” In other words, he didn’t want to look bad by going back on his word. He’s a people-pleaser, acting out of the fear of man. What’s perplexing here is that vs. 9 says Herod was *grieved* while vs. 5 says that Herod wanted to put John to death, but feared the crowds. So what is Herod’s attitude toward John?

Mark 6:20 says, “*Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him.*” So Herod resents John for calling out his sin (who wouldn’t be uncomfortable with that); He’s afraid of John because He knows John is a righteous man and fears his popularity among the people; Yet when he heard John speak, he was amused by him—perhaps is was entertaining for Herod to observe his peculiar ways. [By the way, it was this same Herod to whom Pilate would eventually send Jesus during His trials and Herod was glad to finally meet Jesus because He was amused by Him too.]

So John, this radically righteous servant of God, fall prey to a fickle, insecure and fearful ruler and his controlling wife. And the only earthly honor that the Baptist receives in the end, is the burial of his decapitated body by his faithful, God-fearing disciples. Doesn’t this leave you a bit perplexed yourself? Where’s the kingdom of God that John (and Jesus) preached? It appears as though evil has triumphed.

Perhaps the most helpful way for us to interpret this account of John the Baptist is to highlight the remarkable contrast between John the Baptist and Herod Antipas and then see the relationship between this account and the kingdom parables that just preceded it.

John the Baptist vs. Herod the Tetrarch

² Ibid., pg. 417.

1. *John* was radically righteous, publicly denouncing sin and preaching repentance. *Herod* was a man of lustful perversion, publicly brash with his sin.
2. *John* cared nothing for the things of this world. He wore camel's hair and ate locust and honey. *Herod* craved political power and prestige.
3. *John* was bold and courageous, calling out religious and political leaders. *Herod* was paranoid, afraid of everyone including his wife, John the Baptist, the crowds, and his birthday guests.
4. *John* was a truth-man. *Herod* was a superstitious man.
5. *John* was regarded as God's prophet, despised by the powerful. *Herod* ruled with "power", but was despised by God.
6. *John* was a man of unwavering conviction. *Herod* was a fickle man with no true course.
7. **John was driven by the fear of God. Herod was driven by the fear of man.**
8. **John feared God and nothing else. Herod feared everything but God.**
9. *John* suffered in prison. *Herod* was pampered in a palace.
10. *John* died and inherited the kingdom of heaven. *Herod* sought to preserve his life and perished in the lake of fire.

So we see the contrast between John and Herod. One feared God, one feared man. But is there more to this passage? What does it have to do with Matthew's overall purpose regarding the kingdom of heaven? I think the greater purpose for us to see here is how this account of John the Baptist correlates with the parables that Jesus just told in Matthew 13 regarding the kingdom of heaven. Let me make 4 connections:

1. **The parable of the seed & soil** (Mt 13:1-23)

In the parable of the soil we discovered that every person's response to the gospel will be determined by the condition of their heart, whether hard, rocky, thorny, or good. John the Baptist and Herod are examples of very different kinds of soil, different hearts. John's heart is characterized by good soil. He is responsive to God's work in His life, he has spiritual vision to live as though he is not of this

world but to live with an eternal perspective, and his life and ministry produce a harvest of righteousness as many turn back to God in repentance.

Herod's heart, on the other hand, is a combination of hard and thorny soil. He is so concerned with the worries and cares of this world that his fear leaves no room for the Spirit to work in his life. His hardness of heart (along with Herodias') will result in John's unjust execution and in the end his desperate attempts at self-preservation will lead to his eternal demise. In the words of Jesus, "*Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it (Herod); but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it (John)*" (Mt 10:39; 16:25).

2. **The parable of the wheat and the tares** (Mt 13:24-43)

Jesus told the parable of the wheat and the tares to illustrate how the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil will co-exist in this world. There will be an intermingling of the righteous and the wicked in this world, and they will not be separated until the last day when God judges this world. We see this conflict between the Kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness in the strife between John and Herod. John's preaching advocates for the advancing of God's kingdom values while Herod wars against him according to the values of Satan's dark dominion.

3. **The parable of the Pearl of Great Price** (Mt 13:44-46)

Jesus said, "*The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it (13:45-46)*. Remember, the point of this parable was that the kingdom of heaven (which is only found in Christ), is worth relinquishing anything and everything in this life. For John, it meant forfeiting his life to be a faithful ambassador for Christ. John saw no lasting value of anything in this world, not even his own life, because he saw the overwhelming value and joy of the kingdom of heaven.

We should not overlook the fact that John's death foreshadowed Jesus' death, and not only His death, but also the death of Jesus' disciples (all but one). John was Jesus' forerunner not only in life but also in death. But don't think that John was mistaken about joy and the profit of selling all to have this Pearl of Great Price, even at the cost of his own life. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus promised that on the last day when the wicked will be judged, "*the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father*" (43). John's reward would not be limited to this small world. Rather, his reward would be infinite and eternal.

4. **The parable of the Dragnet** (Mt 13:47-50)

Much like the parable of the wheat and the tares, this parable illustrates how the righteous and the wicked, like fish, swim in the same water. Yet when the dragnet is pulled in, the good fish will be separated from the bad fish as a picture. This is a picture of the angels separating the wicked from the righteous on the last day. And while the righteous will shine forth in their Father's kingdom (43), the wicked will be thrown into the furnace of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (49-50).

Perhaps this is one of the most important connections for us to see regarding John the Baptist and Herod. It may appear as though evil is triumphing now when we see John beheaded, or the persecuted church suffering, or Christians marginalized and targeted by powerful special interest groups. Yet, Jesus reminds us that in the last day God's people will be saved while the wicked and all evil will be forever subjected to God's unrelenting wrath.

Beloved, death is what we all deserve for our sin. Everyone of us deserves God's wrath and just recompense for our sin. But God, in His great love, has made a way of mercy through the cross of Jesus. He holds out to undeserving sinners like you and me, the offer of forgiveness and eternal joy.

You face a dangerous tension in this world between fearing God (at all cost) and living in the fear of man. Will you choose life in this world over eternal life or will you choose eternal life over preserving your life in this world?

In light of the coming day of judgment, in light of the promised reward for those who forsake all for God's kingdom, will you continue living in the fear of man, seeking to preserve your life on earth at all cost, or will you take up your cross and follow Jesus, knowing that whoever loses his life for His sake will find it (Mt 16:24-25)?

You can be faithful to Christ even when evil seems to overtake you because the Lord alone renders the final judgment between the righteous and the wicked. Those who stand with Christ, and even die with Christ, will be saved.