



# CAPITOL COMMISSION

## A First-Century 'Tell-Tale Heart' (Mark 6:14-29)

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*No doubt I now grew very pale; --but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased --and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound --much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath --and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly --more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men --but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! What could I do? I foamed --I raved --I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder --louder --louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! --no, no! They heard! --they suspected! --they knew! --they were making a mockery of my horror! --this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now --again! --hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!*

*"Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! --tear up the planks! here, here! --It is the beating of his hideous heart!"<sup>1</sup>*

Just like the murderer in Edgar Allen Poe's story, a first-century murderer did not sleep well at night, for he believed that one he had killed had actually risen from the dead.

Mark brings into his gospel in chapter 6 a flashback scene that had taken place possibly a year or so earlier, so that the reader may understand the king's weird reaction to the news he had been hearing about Jesus.

Today, we will read the story, examine the major players in this gruesome tale and draw out principles and warnings relevant for us today.

**Mark 6:14-29** *And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him."<sup>15</sup> But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!"<sup>17</sup> For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her.<sup>18</sup> For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."<sup>19</sup> And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so;<sup>20</sup> for 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.<sup>21</sup> And a strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and*

*military commanders and the leading men of Galilee;<sup>22</sup> and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you."<sup>23</sup> And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom."<sup>24</sup> And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."<sup>25</sup> And immediately she came in haste before the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me right away the head of John the Baptist on a platter."<sup>26</sup> And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her.<sup>27</sup> And immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison,<sup>28</sup> and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.<sup>29</sup> And when his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.*

### THE MAJOR PLAYERS

#### KING HEROD

The King Herods of the Bible can be known for whom they killed. Herod the Tetrarch was the king who had John the Baptist beheaded. Herod the Great (the father) ordered the deaths of all the baby boys in Jesus' infancy (Matthew 2:13-18). Herod Agrippa I (a nephew) had James the Apostle killed in Acts 12. It was a family tree filled with murder, deceit and adultery.

After his father died (Matthew 2:19), the kingdom was divided into four parts by the Roman overseers, hence "Herod the Tetrarch". In reality, Herod was a minor ruler with no real power outside his district. In addition to this, the Herods were not Jewish. Thus, the people whom Herod governed hated and despised him and his family.

Herod the Tetrarch (aka. Herod Antipas) carried on his family tradition. The Jewish historian, Josephus, recorded that in order to marry Herodias, Herod had to first divorce his wife, the daughter of King Aretas. King Aretas was so angered by this betrayal that he destroyed most of Herod's army. He would have slain the Tetrarch as well, if the Roman army had not intervened. Herod's adultery led to the deaths of many people.

In this story, Herod is also a man driven by lust (22), pride (26) and stupidity (23). He was also controlled by his fears--fear of Jesus (14-16), fear of John (20) and fear of losing his reputation (26). John MacArthur sums up Herod: "Herod Antipas was evil, debauched, shameless, henpecked, lustful, and given to every kind of sinful excess. He had more

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# MISSOURI

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of a conscience than his bestial father, but he did not have the courage to follow it. It could be said that to the extent John was admired and honored, Herod was despised and feared.”<sup>2</sup>

### JOHN THE BAPTIST

Mark introduced John the Baptist at the beginning of his book as the tying link between Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. John’s birth was miraculous as he was born to aged people who had no children (Luke 1). His mission was unique as he was to prepare the people of Israel for the arrival of their promised Messiah (Mark 1:3-8). His preaching was quite simple: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:3).

John dressed in the “typical” dress of an Old Testament prophet (Matthew 3:4) and proclaimed a fearless message, like the prophets of old. Matthew 3:7 says of John, *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? He was also noted for his humility. As the crowds gather around him, John deflected their admiration to the one who was to come after him; of whom he said “the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (John 1:27b). As Jesus’ popularity increased, John knew this was proper. He stated, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).*

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PROVERBS 14:14--*THE BACKSLIDER IN HEART WILL BE FILLED WITH THE FRUIT OF HIS WAYS, AND A GOOD MAN WILL BE FILLED WITH THE FRUIT OF HIS WAYS.*

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But John was noted as great. Even Jesus said of him, “among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). It seems that John found in his humility what Herod never achieved in all his “glory.”

In the story of Mark 6, John shows a strong nerve in confronting the leading governor concerning his sin. The verb in verse 18 informs us that this was a continual confrontation. John would not back off speaking the truth while Herod remained in his sin.

### HERODIAS

The next player in this sad tale is Herodias. Her family tree is the same as Herod’s for she was his “half-niece” and also his “half sister-in-law” (17).

According to Josephus, Herod stole her from his half-brother, Philip, while Philip was gone away to visit Rome. It was this breach of the Mosaic law prohibiting one from marrying his brother’s wife while the brother was still alive (Leviticus 18:16; 20:21) that prompted the continual rebuke from John the Baptist.

Herodias also continued the notorious family tradition of sin and murder. As noted, she also was an adulteress (17). She held such a grudge and bitter hatred of John she sought an opportunity to have him killed (19). She then allowed her daughter to dance to the delight of her drunken husband and his royal guests (22). Many scholars believe she purposefully sent her out to dance to bring about this type of offer from her drunken, lustful, proud husband. In the end, she proved to be a murderer, just like the others in her family. She was the one who asked for the head of John the Baptist; even when she could have had anything else (24-28).

### THE MAJOR PRINCIPLES

The Apostle John wrote

**1 John 2:15-17** *Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.*

In this passage, there are three basic “things of the world” which can bring down any man or woman: 1) the lust of the flesh, 2) the lust of the eyes, 3) the pride of life. All three of these things can be found in this sordid story. Herod desired to have Herodias as his wife so he stole her away from his brother. Herod looked upon the dancing daughter and in his lustful stupor made a ridiculous offer. And then his pride led him to foolishly fulfill the offer when the daughter came back with her mother’s request.

Therefore, what is one to do? First of all, learn from Herod and guard your heart.

### GUARD YOUR HEARTS

Just before Cain killed his brother Abel, God said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it” (Genesis 4:6-7 ESV). Cain was angry with Abel because God received Abel’s sacrifice but not his. But instead of seeking God and changing his offering, he grew more bitter and more incensed; eventually murdered his brother.

# MISSOURI

## A First-Century ‘Tell-Tale Heart’ (Mark 6:14-29)

Now, you may be thinking, “Well, I’m not going to murder anyone like Herod and Cain.” That may be true, but ask yourself this: What sinful act have I committed out of envy, pride, lust, or any other selfish desire?

- Have you lied in order to bring someone else down or to get yourself out of a sticky situation?
- Have you gossiped to undercut someone else’s name and reputation? It does not have to be a lie, but was it necessary for you to talk about it?
- Have you cheated—on your taxes to gain a few extra dollars or on a test so you can get a better score?
- Have you stolen anything because you wanted it, but could not afford it?
- Have you had a sexual relationship outside of marriage because it was something you wanted regardless of its appropriateness?
- Have you verbally or physically assaulted someone simply to restore your reputation or to make yourself “look better”?

James warns, *For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing* (James 3:16). And again, *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask* (4:1-2).

Over and over the Scripture instructs its readers to guard their hearts. The wise King Solomon, who gave better advice that living out the advice, issued the following Proverbs on this subject:

**Proverbs 4:23** *Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.*

**Proverbs 14:10** *The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy.*

**Proverbs 14:14** *The backslider in heart will be filled with the fruit of his ways, and a good man will be filled with the fruit of his ways.*

**Proverbs 19:3** *When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the LORD.*

### BE FEARLESS

Second of all, learn from John the Baptist and be fearless. If you find yourself in a position of needing to go against the grain or to tell someone that what they are doing is wrong, do so in love and out of concern, but do so fearlessly. John the Baptist understood his position, his mission and his God. Therefore, he did not waver in upholding the truth when he stood before King Herod. He exemplified the proverb, *The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted* (Proverbs 29:25).

Jesus later taught... *do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!* (Luke 12:4-5)

Concerning John the Baptist, the French theologian, John Calvin, penned,

“We behold in John an illustrious example of that moral courage which all pious teachers ought to possess, not to hesitate to incur the wrath of the great and powerful, as often as it may be found necessary: for he, with whom there is acceptance of persons, does not honestly serve God.”<sup>23</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Two important lessons to learn from this sad, violent, sorry event: Learn from Herod that one must guard his or her heart from the pride and jealousies that constantly attack it. Learn from John the Baptist to be fearless before men in upholding righteousness.

Friend, there is only one way you can overcome and pay heed to this warning—and that is through Jesus Christ. You must have your sins forgiven—which God has provided for in the life, death and resurrection of His Son on your behalf. You must repent of your sins—turning your back on these actions and turn to God. LOOK, if Herod had obeyed the message of John the Baptist to repent, he never would have come to this point. And you must continue to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what the will of God is” (Romans 12:2b).

You must not let the inward sins (sins we may think are not so bad) take root. Instead, repent of those sins and renew your mind.

**Colossians 3:5-6,8-10, 12-15** *Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed...For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come...But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him...And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.*

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, *A Tell-Tale Heart*, From [www.poemuseum.org/selected\\_works/tell\\_tale\\_heart.html](http://www.poemuseum.org/selected_works/tell_tale_heart.html)

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 8-15* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 419.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Wessel, “Mark” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapid, Mich.: Regency Reference Library/Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 670.