

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

MARK: OPPOSITION TO OUR MISSION

MARK 6.14-29

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In this text we encounter another Markan Sandwich, stretching from 6.6b all the way to verse 30, and including both the commissioning of the 12 with their return, along with the martyrdom of John the Baptist Sandwiched in between. Recall that these sandwiches provide for us a comparison between the stories, sometimes with the middle story providing the key for understanding the outer story. "The force of this sandwich is to show what the followers of the kingdom can expect from the kingdom of Satan as they advance the mission of Jesus. The fate of John indicates what all disciples should expect as they engage the world with the Gospel." Because this textual sandwich is so long we only considered the first part last week; this week we'll look at John's martyrdom and how it sheds light on the meaning of Jesus' mission.

The mission of the 12 is the defining theme of 6.6b-30. The sandwich in this case forces readers to consider what John's death means for discipleship and mission with Jesus. Consider the following quotes in this regard:

"An ambassador of the kingdom of God is called not only to a mission of restoration and deliverance, but also to a conflict of which John's fate provides an extreme example."

"The sandwich structure draws mission and martyrdom, discipleship and death, into an inseparable relationship. This is precisely what Jesus will teach in 8.34, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" "John's martyrdom not only prefigures Jesus' death, but it also prefigures the death of anyone who would follow him."

In addition to the sandwich communicating about the nature of the disciple's mission, it also may point to the eventual fate of Jesus himself, linked as he is with John in public perception and soon to be linked with him in martyrdom. William Lane says there are many points of similarity between the passion narrative of John and that of Jesus, including the respect of Herod/Pilate, the hatred of Herodias/Jewish leaders, the yielding of the former to the latter, and the remarks about the burial of both by their followers.

Today's story begins in v14 with Herod hearing about the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Herod was a wicked ruler from a wicked and debauched family whose history reads like a soap opera.

"The Herodian family tree was as twisted as the trunk of an olive tree. No fewer than four rulers bear the name "Herod" in the NT. The Herod of our story, Herod Antipas, was the second of the four, who ruled from the death of his father Herod (the Great) in 4BC until AD39. His official title was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea...**although he popularly enjoyed the title "king."** 'Tetrarch' (lit. "ruler of a fourth part [of Palestine]) was the title given to Herod's sons who ruled over the four divisions of the kingdom after his death. Herod the Great (Matthew 2) had ten wives, Antipas being son of the fourth wife, Malthace. Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, Antipas' half-brother who was murdered by his father Herod. Herodias was thus a grand-daughter of Herod the Great through his second wife, Mariamne I, and hence a niece of Herod Antipas."

Herod's "total disregard for Jewish sensitivity was displayed not only in his marriage to Herodias, but in the selection of an ancient cemetery as the site for his capital, Tiberias. By this choice Herod virtually excluded Jewish settlers, for residence in the city would render them perpetually unclean in terms of the ritual law."

"**The description of Antipas as king...is not technically correct, since Augustus specifically refused to grant Antipas this title enjoyed by his father, so that he**

remained tetrarch only until he was deposed in AD39...it was his active campaigning for that title which led to his eventual dismissal and exile."

"As ruler of Galilee and Perea throughout the period of both John's and Jesus' **ministry...he had cause to be concerned about any new religious movement which** carried the potential for fostering a popular uprising. The large scale popular enthusiasm for the preaching of both John and Jesus, and reports of the latter's politically sensitive language about an incoming 'kingdom of God', could hardly fail to arouse his suspicion."

Mark records that along with Herod hearing of Jesus he hears something of the popular estimation of Jesus; the consensus is that he's some kind of prophet, maybe even one from OT times, but apparently no one is identifying him as Messiah.

"Although Jesus is not reckoned as the Messiah in the popular mind, he clearly **ranks among the greatest figures of Israel...The glowing estimate of Jesus in v15** reminds us that holding a high opinion of Jesus is not the same thing as faith."

Herod himself, reflecting his superstition and guilty conscience supposed Jesus was the Baptist raised from the dead, whom Herod had killed. Herod "may have been influenced by a superstitious Hellenistic belief in the dead returning to haunt their killers."

Mark's recounting of Herod's killing of John begins at v17. The whole depraved incident has as its basis Herod's taking of his brother Philip's wife, named Herodias, which would have been a notorious scandal to the Jewish mind. "Even after a brother's death this would have been unacceptable (except in the specific case of a Levirate marriage), but the offence was compounded by the fact that her **first husband was still alive...Jewish law** did not allow a woman to divorce her husband, but Herodias apparently took advantage of her Roman citizenship to divorce her first husband under Roman law. The marriage was thus doubly **scandalous...**"

John had been condemning Herod's unlawful marriage, maybe even to his face, which led to his imprisonment and attempts by Herodias to have John killed. This Herod would not allow because of his own indecision, guilt and fear. Herod even enjoyed listening to John, which offers a confused picture, but a real one.

The time came, however, when Herodias saw her opportunity. During a banquet in celebration of Herod's birthday, when many of the leading officials of Galilee were present, Herodias' daughter danced before Herod and pleased both him and his dinner guests.

The idea of Salome dancing before the male audience is said to be "culturally unthinkable" by some, but France points out that Herodian culture was more influenced by Rome than Judaism, and given the excesses that were known in first century Rome it is not at all hard to believe this story.

"The dance was unquestionably lascivious, designed to captivate and further the ends of the dancer."

Mark "dwells more expansively on Antipas' indecision, the party, and the dance, so as to create a more memorable atmosphere of the sordid injustice of an oriental court. The hold of Herodias over Antipas reminds the reader of Ahab and Jezebel, and John's role as the disapproving prophet reflects Elijah's in that story. The degenerate nature of Antipas' splendid banquet contrasts vividly with the wholesome simplicity of the very different feast which will follow next in Mark's narrative."

As we see from the quotes above, the general atmosphere of this situation is a seedy one.

Herod responds either in formality or in pompous folly, offering the daughter a gift. "Extravagant gifts to successful entertainers are a favorite means of displaying wealth in many cultures, though Antipas' limit of 'to half his kingdom' is more **traditional hyperbole than a serious offer...**Antipas was not, of course, king, nor

was it for him to dispose of the authority which he held only as a client of Rome...His repeated oath suggests a drunken loss of control, as does the remorse of v26."

The girl asks her mother what gift she should request, and Herodias directs her to have John beheaded; when the girl asks Herod, she adds the detail about the platter. "The grim detail 'on a platter' seems to be her own, an expression of black humor inspired by the banquet yet in progress."

This Herod has no desire to do, but because of his oath and guests, he submits to her request. "V26 describes a man in a trap, forced by social pressure and by his own thoughtless promise into doing what he knows to be wrong."

The executioner is sent and the head is brought. The story closes in v29 with John's disciples burying the body.

Now let's return to consideration of the central meaning of this story, and why it is sandwiched together with the story of Jesus sending the 12 out on mission.

As we saw above, the meaning of the sandwich seems to be that as Jesus' disciples carry out the mission they can expect treatment such as John received. The kingdom of God advances with difficulty and danger. Satan and evil men will not allow their ground to be taken without contest, and sometimes that contest will end even in the death of disciples. So with this principle in hand, let's consider what this means for our mission in Texarkana.

First, the opposition John experienced was undignified opposition. It was certainly below the honor of a great prophet of God to have his fate decided by a bunch of drunks excited over a dancing girl. The whole thing is undignified, absurd, sordid, and disgusting. We can expect to suffer similar opposition as we pursue the mission of God. We should not let this discourage or amaze us, since it has been this way long before we came along into God's mission. God's prophets and people

have always suffered this way, and while we don't like it, we must not therefore shrink from our task.

Second, opposition to God's mission does not always come in the obvious forms of arrest and execution. The obstacles to kingdom advance are often bizarre, seemingly irrelevant and awkward. Because we might be expecting government persecution we are surprised when Satan stirs up church controversy over the color of the new carpet! This in turn causes us to fail to identify these seemingly trivial annoyances as opposition to the kingdom, but they often are. This doesn't mean every single discomfort we experience in mission is from Satan, but just that Satan will work in many unforeseen ways, often which seem petty, bizarre, and unexpected, and which come from people whom we wouldn't expect to oppose kingdom advance. Of course if asked, they would not believe they are opposing the kingdom; and sometimes even Christians do so from folly and sin. Many people are opposed to the kingdom of God, even many who don't know it, even many in the church; we should not be surprised by such opposition. The answer is to go on patiently advancing the Gospel into every part of Texarkana we can, constantly self-evaluating and making necessary adjustments to increase and facilitate that advance.

Third, opposition will often come from our open denunciation of sin, such as in John's denouncing of Herod's marriage. This doesn't mean we back off from such denunciation, since it is part of the mission of the church. Being salt and light means pointing out rot and darkness, and lost people like rot and darkness; consequently they don't like being called to account for it. The social evils of our day are fair game for the preaching of the church. Just because we point out these things does not mean we have drifted from the mission of God. Teaching against abortion and sexual perversion, for example, are fair game. However, it is true that many Christians start off doing the mission and trying to be salt and light, but they end up in mission drift; they forget what exactly Jesus called them to do in the first place. This can be seen in churches who expend more energy in political advance

than in Gospel advance. They have drifted from the mission God gave them. Jesus never told us to change the world, he told us to make disciples as we wait for him to destroy the world. Of course, if we have a chance to make some part of the world better, so long as we have not abandoned Jesus' mission as our central task, we should do so. If through political action we can end abortion, let's work for that. But the central message and effort of the church can never be anything other than advancing the Gospel or else we are guilty of mission drift. As long as this is not the case, we should continue speaking against social evils and we can be certain opposition will come from this.

Fourth, opposition is going to result in unforeseen tragedies and sorrows; I don't think John ever foresaw rotting in Herod's dungeon until the executioner came. Judging by his preaching and his questioning of Jesus in Matthew 11, I think John expected Jesus to come in like a whirlwind, destroy the enemies and renew the world, none of which included John losing his head after a depressing stay in prison. The wise Christian must balance strong hope for the future with submission to the will of God in allowing tragedy and sorrow. In our mission as a church we will hit rough waters; it's a fact of life in a fallen world and through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. This should sober us, but it should not take our joy. I think we need to take care to keep cool heads when we meet difficulty in our mission, though. Perhaps we don't always control our emotions like we should when things get hard? Let's think that over some and work to get better at handling hard things with patience and peace.

Fifth, sometimes our greatest opposition in the mission is ourselves! This is similar to our individual Christian lives. Sometimes Satan doesn't need to attack me, since I'm doing a fine job tripping over my own feet without his help. So we want to examine how we might be hindering our own mission, be willing to ask uncomfortable questions, and be ready to change whatever we find is getting in the way.

Sixth, opposition in the mission is a good sign! The church which is not waging war on Satan never gets hit with any missiles. Of course we don't want opposition, nor hardship and sorrow, but even less should we desire to get stalled in our mission just so that Satan will leave us alone. This is a very real temptation for Christians and churches at times. We desire to stop rocking the boat so that there won't be any more waves. But Jesus called us to make waves on Satan's pond; it's our job to do damage to his kingdom and so we can actually be grateful when he hits back. Heaven forbid we should be so ineffective as to never draw his attention.

Seventh, opposition to the mission, while it comes from Satan, is guided and controlled by God, and is used as discipline and training for our good, as we see in Hebrews 12. There the Christians were suffering persecution from those antagonistic to the church, and the writer describes this opposition as the fatherly discipline of God, without which we ought to fear we are not really God's children. God disciplines all his children and part of that discipline is persecution and opposition from lost people under Satan's power.

Eighth, it is very important for us to see opposition as a normal part of the kingdom process. We will have a fight until the end. If we expect it and see it coming, we will not be as taken aback when it comes. Let's not be surprised by these kinds of hardships as if something strange were happening, but just accept they are coming, know they are normal, and peacefully continue on with our mission, faithful until the end.

Ninth, opposition to the mission doesn't always come in a grand and obvious form. And many things which are not exactly from Satan and evil men may become very successful opposition. For example: Some difficulty or distraction in our life becomes so prominent that we withdraw our focus from church attendance, personal worship of God, sharing the Gospel, etc. Understand this: Whatever turns your attention from the mission of God effectively becomes opposition. What things in your life are preventing you from being fully involved in Gospel advance?

Identify those things and make the necessary changes. In the end, even very good things, if they stand in Jesus' way, become opposition to his mission.