

## Matthew 14:1-12 – “Church, State, and a Clean Conscience” – Nov. 26, 2023

1. One of the themes that keep rising to the top in the gospel of Matthew is the unity between old and new testament
  - a. This gospel is written for a Jewish audience and so Matthew is sure to show how Christ is the true Israel, how there is one unfolding plan of redemption from Genesis to Revelation for one covenant people of God
  - b. Matthew frequently invokes typology – sometimes very directly and sometimes in a more subtle manner
    - i. What seems subtle to us would have been obvious to his early Jewish readers, however
    - ii. They lived in that world and were alive for the transition from the old covenant to the new – from the types and shadows and promises of the old covenant to the substance and the fulfillment of the new covenant
2. Two themes emerge when we encounter this story of Herod and John the Baptist
  - a. **1) The Civil War Between Kingdoms**
    - i. John came preaching the kingdom of God
    - ii. the vast majority of Christ’s preaching has been spent on describing the kingdom that He is building, and how it’s work is to progressively dismantle and displace the antichrist kingdoms of earth
    - iii. this civil war is depicted in various ways in the stories of the Old Testament
    - iv. one of the most well known is the civil war that starts in the womb of Rebekkah

1. two nations are striving against each other, and through a fascinating story of God's promises, deceit and counter-deceit, a desperate negotiation and tricker, Jacob becomes the head of a great and godly nation and Esau becomes the head of an unruly nation
2. Jacob is the first Israel and Christ is the final and true Israel
3. The descendants of Esau become known as Edomites or Idumeans
  - a. When the Romans take control of Jerusalem, they set up local rulers
  - b. The Herods are Idumeans, or descendants of Esau
4. John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus are Israelites, or descendants of Jacob
- v. So when John the Baptist squares off against Herod, this is just another installment of the long war which started in the body of Rebekah
  1. This is another installment of Jacob vs. Esau

**b. 2) The Relationship Between King and Prophet**

- i. All through the stories of the OT are interactions between the kings who rule the nations and the prophets who act as the conscience of the nation
- ii. Prophets can be seen as God's lawyers, enforcing the terms of God's covenants
- iii. John the Baptist is the last in this line of old covenant prophets and his fate is in keeping with his line of work
- iv. In Matthew 11:14 we saw that Jesus called John the Baptist?

1. *“Elijah who is to come”*
2. If John is Elijah, then Christ who is greater than him must be?
  - a. We will see next week in the feeding of the 5000 just how like Elisha Jesus really is
  - b. 2 Kings 2 says that Elisha received a double portion of Elijah’s spirit, just like Christ is even greater than John
- v. In Matthew 17:10-13 Jesus explains again to the apostles how John the Baptist was Elijah
  1. This does not mean he was Elijah physically resurrected, but that typologically these two men are connected
  2. Elijah was an ancient type of John the Baptist
  3. Elijah ministered in the days of a wicked and unstable king, Ahab
    - a. John ministered in the days of a wicked and unstable king, Herod
  4. Ahab was made more volatile and more tyrannical because of his even more evil wife Jezebel
    - a. Herod was made more volatile and more tyrannical because of his even more evil wife Herodias
- vi. This is all background information to help us see the unity and significance of this story
3. V.1 – *“At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus,”*
  - a. We may read the name Herod and think that this is all one guy, but this is a family name/title kind of like ‘Caesar’ that keeps transferring

- b. There are many Herods in the Bible
  - c. When Herod the Great died, he divided his kingdom into quarters (a tetrarch is a ruler of one quarter, or one fourth) between his sons Archelaus, Phillip, and Antipas
  - d. Herod Antipas ruled the region of Perea and Galilee, where Jesus ministered
    - i. The tensions that were building among the Jews in Herod's region was catching his attention
    - ii. He's realizing that an internal religious squabble among the Jews is starting to become a political problem for him and the Roman rulers
4. V.2 – *“and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.”*
- a. Fear starts to strike at Herod when he hears of Jesus because he remembers how he treated John the Baptist
  - b. What follows is a flashback to help us understand that the instability Christ was creating wasn't just in the world of religion but was just as real in the world of politics
    - i. As Christians who want to see that all truth meets at the top – all truth is God's truth, we simply may not and can not separate the world into those disciplines which have to do with God and those disciplines which operate without reference to God
    - ii. All things exist in reference to God, and the story of John's beheading demonstrates this truth
  - c. Herod is scared because he has a guilty conscience (rightfully so)

- d. One of the curses of sin is that it makes us confused and cowardly
- e. Unforgiven sinners unravel into fear, paranoia, panic, and delusion – this happens at both the personal level as well as at the corporate level, as can be seen in our society today
- f. Leviticus 26 explains the psychology of those who don't know forgiveness or union with God:
  - i. *“And as for those of you who are left, I will send faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight, and they shall flee as one flees from the sword, and they shall fall when none pursues. 37 They shall stumble over one another, as if to escape a sword, though none pursues. And you shall have no power to stand before your enemies. 38 And you shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up. 39 And those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies' lands because of their iniquity, and also because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall rot away like them.”*
  - ii. Is it any wonder at all that we have an epidemic of anxiety and depression in our society?
    - 1. After all, we're told that we're fine just the way we are, we're enough, we can define who we are, we are free from any moral obligations that we didn't choose for ourselves.
    - 2. These lies come straight from the pit of hell, and men and women who believe them won't see any covenantal obligations to their

grandfathers or their grandsons, nor can they ever be forgiven if they keep being told they're enough and beautiful and lovely and wonderful and amazing as they are.

- g. Herod represents the antichrist kingdom of Esau, and because he has not been forgiven, he remains at war with God, and that war has him scared that his sin against John has come back to haunt him
    - i. He fears that Jesus is the resurrected John the Baptist
  - h. The story now moves to a flashback to help us understand the turmoil happening in Herod's conscience
    - i. What unfolds here could be a movie – it is filled with seduction, adultery, murder, lies, false honour, the breaking of political alliances, feuding in a royal family, multiple layers of incest, and a prophets claims of moral authority over a king
5. V.3, 4 – *“For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, 4 because John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.”*
- a. We sometimes hear about the separation of church and state
  - b. This is one of those things that was once a true concept but has become so corrupted and confused that many no longer understand it
  - c. The church and the state are both God's ideas, and He has established both to be His ministers in creation
    - i. The church administers God's grace through the sacraments and the preaching of the gospel

- ii. The state administers God's justice through the sword (Romans 13 calls the state God's 'deacon')
- d. So they are set up as distinct bodies, but each one operates under the limits and the authority of the one God who established them
  - i. Our radical concept of church and state has come to mean that the state operates independently from God – that it is somehow free to set up its own rules and its own job description
  - ii. But this has never been the case and it can never be the case
  - iii. God frequently sends his messengers to remind the king that he too must answer to God
  - iv. For some of us who have grown up with the very radical kind of 'Two Kingdoms' theology that teaches pacifism and that Christians shouldn't be involved in state affairs, the story of John the Baptist poses a significant challenge
    1. After all, if the state operates on its own terms without reference to God, and it cannot be redeemed because the whole idea of nations and governments is itself something that cannot and will not be redeemed, John the Baptist got himself killed unnecessarily
    2. In fact, *he was sinning* by injecting himself in 'secular' matters when he should have just been teaching his followers more spiritual things like private piety
    3. Can't you just hear radical two kingdoms Christians today shushing John for having such a poor testimony

- a. After all John, the world is watching and you're getting involved in secular matters. Way more people would become Christians if you'd quit insisting that Christianity has something to say about laws and public morality. Worse yet, Jesus is going to get caught up in this political intrigue. Maybe Jesus's life could have been spared if He had just acted a little more Christ-like.
- e. But John and Jesus both know better – they know that kings and rulers and nations exist by God and for God, so they must be reminded of God's expectations
  - i. The state is a thing, and Romans 11:36 teaches that all things exist *from God, through God, and to God*. Herod has an obligation to glorify God in the way he rules his people.
  - ii. The objection today often comes that the only people who are obligated or expected to obey God's law are believers
    - 1. But when John confronts Herod, he's not confronting a Jew who is in covenant with God
    - 2. He's confronting a pagan Idumean who is an employee of the Roman empire
      - a. According to Scripture, this is good and right and normal
      - b. Nobody has an excuse which gives them permission to act autonomously from God



- c. Repentance is not merely an offer but a solemn command for all people everywhere from the Most High God
- d. When we shrink away from the public square and treat the claims of Christ like they're only for believers, or like Jesus doesn't have crown rights somewhere, we are failing to take Christ on His own terms. We are sinning.
  - i. Jesus says He has *all authority* in heaven *and on earth*
- e. If your approach to the Christian life is incapable of thinking through a consistent theology of culture and of the state, then you are failing to take reality seriously, you are failing to take the authority of Christ seriously, and you are going to head in the opposite direction of John the Baptist
- iii. So what exactly was the issue over which John and Herod were at odds?
- iv. V.4 says it was because John had told Herod that it was not lawful for him to take his brother's wife
  - 1. This is true enough as a standalone statement – adultery is unlawful, even for political rulers
    - a. We may even say *especially* for political rulers since they serve as covenantal heads and moral guides over their people
- v. But this was also not garden variety adultery

1. Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus IV, the brother to both Philip and Herod Antipas.
  - a. If you're following me, you're realizing that her first husband was her uncle Philip
  - b. She left that uncle and moved on to another uncle Herod Antipas
  - c. This means that the woman Herod was sleeping with was not only his sister-in-law, but she was also with his niece
  - d. Further, in order for him to take her, it meant sending away his wife Phasaelis, who was the daughter of a neighbouring king
    - i. This divorce turned a dependable ally into a political and military enemy
  - e. Time will not permit to tell the full story of Herod Antipas' complete mental and moral breakdown, but he becomes so angry and dysfunctional and paranoid that the Roman Emperor eventually relieves him of his duties and exiles him to present-day France (Gaul)
6. V.6 – *“5 And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.”*
  - a. Here you see Herod's unstable mind at work
  - b. John's preaching was a constant reminder of Herod's rebellion and hatred against God

- i. People who are in sin always have options at their disposal
  1. The best is to repent and enjoy peace with God
  2. For those who refuse to do that, they will either fill their time with meaningless nonsense which usually involves surrounding yourself with other miserable people so you can all lie to each other about how good you all are, and complain about all those self-righteous people like John the Baptist
    - a. In modern times, this is the psychology behind PRIDE, behind #selfcare, behind the useless fellows who all agree together to neglect their responsibilities and drink and play cards and complain together, and behind the feminists who no longer lying about abortion being ‘safe, legal, and rare’ but are now shouting their abortion
  3. For those who refuse to get right with God, and who aren’t satisfied with building a miserable little empire around themselves, there is another option – censorship
    - a. Just make preaching illegal
    - b. This is the option that Herod took
    - c. Today this takes the form of ‘anti-hate’ laws (C-4; C-11), and these are especially effective if you bury these laws in language that sounds like they’re promoting neutrality and love and harmony

- d. You can't get away from the fact that someone is always imposing their morality on another, however
  - i. When Herod doesn't like John imposing his morality on Herod, Herod imposes his morality on John
  - ii. The fact that there are moral expectations in society is inescapable – it is a 'which', not a 'whether'
  - iii. All societies have a mandatory moral code that expresses itself in the form of laws, and either these will be antichrist laws, or they will be laws that honour the living God
  - iv. As Christians, we want to be like John and not like Herod – we want to be on the side of God's perfect law, not on the side of man's arbitrary and confused law
- 4. Herod's moral dilemma means he wants to kill John, but like all heavy-handed tyrants, deep down he fears the people, which is why they keep moving to more and more heavy-handed measures
  - a. People with a clear conscience like John were courageous in speaking the truth, but his courage was real courage knowing that he was right with God.
    - i. People with a clear conscience have enough confidence that they don't need to resort to

unnecessary violence. John is working with persuasion.

- b. People with a guilty conscience use force because they lack courage. Force is all they have. This is why you can't use logic with an angry campus mob or why you can't explain the importance of history to revolutionaries. They lack the moral integrity to think straight. At bottom, they are conflicted cowards.
5. Herod is too scared of the people to do what he wants, so we get a glimpse into the unstable turmoil of this man.
6. All of this is in keeping with the wisdom of Proverbs 28:1 – *“The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion. When a land transgresses, it has many rulers, but with a man of understanding and knowledge.”*
  - a. Sin makes men cowards
  - b. Righteousness makes men courageous
7. VV.6-11 – *“6 But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, 7 so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. 8 Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” 9 And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. 10 He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, 11 and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother.”*

- a. If you thought that the sexual depravity was already vile, it's about to get a whole lot worse here
- b. Now Herod and his worthless buddies have a big blowout planned for his birthday
- c. The daughter of Herodias comes to dance for the boys, and Herod likes it so much he promises to give her whatever she wants
- d. Men, we know from experience and from the biblical accounts of men like King Abimelech, Samson, King Ahasuerus, King David, Absalom, or King Solomon what it is that motivates men to make rash promises to women
  - i. We can imagine what kind of a dance this is that pleases Herod enough to promise this girl that he'll give her whatever she wants
- e. But now keep in mind who this girl is
  - i. She is the granddaughter of Herod's brother Aristobulus
  - ii. She is the daughter of Herod's other brother Philip
  - iii. She is the daughter of Herod's new woman Herodius, who also happens to be Herod's niece
  - iv. This girl, Salome, is Herod's great-niece, his niece, and his step-daughter, and the Jewish historian Josephus notes that she was 12 or 13 years old when this happened
- f. MY GOODNESS!
- g. Herod is a real textbook case
- h. Just like Jezebel prompted Ahab into deeper evil, so Salome and her mother Herodias prompt Herod into deeper evil

- i. No doubt the very existence of John the Baptist made them feel shame (rightfully so!)
  - i. In today's language, they may have said that John was patriarchal, toxic, and that he made them feel 'unsafe'
  - ii. If he's in prison, he can't really say much, but again, if we consider the psychology of sin, his very existence is an indictment on the lifestyle of this royal family, so these Jezebel type women ask for John's head on a platter
  - iii. It is one thing for men to be given to sexual depravity and violence, and these things are just as sinful for men as they are for women, and yet in terms of moral restraint, women tend to hold on longer than men
    - 1. When women give themselves up to this level of debauchery, it is generally in the very final stages of societal collapse, and this is consistent with the description of Romans 1
    - 2. We may ask how this could have ever happened, but here we are mutilating the bodies of young girls and paying for them to butcher and behead their babies in cold blood
    - 3. A guilty conscience that will not be reconciled to God will keep inventing worse and worse evil to keep itself distracted and entertained
- j. Herod is not some helpless victim here either, despite the fact that Matthew describes the torment he's in
  - i. He made a rash promise

- ii. He's obviously terrified of John, because we know from v.1 that the reason he fears Jesus is because he thinks He's the resurrected John
  - iii. So on one level, as he's making this decision, he's likely not even convinced that John can truly be killed for good
  - iv. He knows he's going to compound his trouble by killing an innocent man
    - 1. John's death will not ease his guilty conscience, but will only make it worse
  - v. But he has a twisted sense of honour which makes him think he has to follow through because he gave his word and because there are guests present
  - vi. All this palace intrigue and volatility is fueled by guilt, and stands in sharp contrast to the closing verse in this section
8. V.12 – *“And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.”*
- a. While Herod's family is in disarray due to their unresolved guilt, here we have the reverent and sober and tender actions of the godly
    - i. These people seem unaffected by fear despite everything that's happened
    - ii. They are steadfast and honourable
  - b. The disciples come to bury John's body and then they tell Christ
  - c. Burial of the dead is the consistent pattern all through Scripture, both Old and New Testaments
    - i. This is because we believe in resurrection
    - ii. Burial of the dead is done as much for the living as it is for the deceased



1. God can resurrect bodies no matter what kind of shape they are in; He does not need the raw materials in a certain condition for resurrection to happen
- iii. However, burial communicates the correct message about the value of the human person and the certainty of resurrection
  1. handling bodies in a way that communicates that they are temporary or disposable is consistent with paganism but not with Christianity
    - a. cremation / sky burial / recycling all communicate religious assumptions
    - b. all agree that the body is done for good or that it's part of some kind of endless cycle
  2. burial communicates that physical bodies are in fact permanent and eternal features of God's eternal creation
    - a. they go down into the ground like seed (1 Cor. 15) in order to sprout back to life at the resurrection
    - b. further, we face them east, towards the rising s-u-n, fitting because they will be knit back together with their souls just like the rising of the s-o-n Jesus Christ was
  - d. there is a confident and quiet reverence in this closing sentence

## 9. SUMMARY

- a. The contrast is so clear here – the power of a clean conscience is real

- b. Those who are at peace with God have the confidence to go about their business without fear
  - i. What's the worst they can do to me? Kill me and send me to my Saviour?
- c. Those who are not at peace with God do not enjoy this confidence, and their lives will be marked by more and more discomfort, inconsistency, unrest, double mindedness, frustration, bitterness, complaining, and wicked actions
- d. John the Baptist had a clean conscience which means he didn't fear Herod or his family
  - i. He knew that even the most powerful must submit to God, and that rulers of nations have an obligation to glorify God in their conduct and in the way they govern and in the way they live
- e. When we think of how we are to live in a guilt-soaked world, we need to think carefully about what guilt and moral deceit do to the human mind
- f. Guilty people are easy to steer, which is why dictators and communists and revolutionaries are so intent on removing God from the public square
  - i. If they cut people off from God, the people remain in their guilt
  - ii. They are fearful, and fearful men follow orders, no matter how ungodly they are
- g. The fact of history is that nations and empires are known for tyranny, slavery, idolatry, and arbitrary laws. Christianity alone, and particularly its Protestant and Reformed expression has been capable of producing just weights and measures, of limited government, freedom of speech and commerce, and lasting intergenerational prosperity for the general population.

- i. This is simple to understand – if God is not above the government, then the government becomes God. Without God, the king becomes the law. With God, the law becomes king.
  1. If the king becomes the law, we are setting ourselves up for arbitrary and inconsistent rules (conversion therapy is allowed in one direction; NHL coaches had to wear a mask for the camera while the players were sweating and spitting on each other, etc.)
  2. Rules for thee, but not for me
  3. Arbitrariness and inconsistency are *sinful*
- ii. Theodore Dalrymple – *“Political correctness is communist propaganda writ small. In my study of communist societies, I came to the conclusion that the purpose of communist propaganda was not to persuade or convince, not to inform, but to humiliate; and therefore, the less it corresponded to reality the better. When people are forced to remain silent when they are being told the most obvious lies, or even worse when they are forced to repeat the lies themselves, they lose once and for all their sense of [decency] probity. To assent to obvious lies is in some small way to become evil oneself. One's standing to resist anything is thus eroded, and even destroyed. A society of emasculated liars is easy to control. I think if you examine political correctness, it has the same effect and is intended to.”*
- iii. Every time we acquiesce to participating in the obvious lies in our culture, we are making ourselves weaker

- iv. We are surrounded by lies, which are either tolerated and often even enforced by those who govern us:
- v. These ploys only work on people who have a guilty conscience
  - 1. Do you think your great grandparents would have pretended that Bruce Jenner was woman of the year? Or that Ellen Degeneres and Portia de Rossi are actually married?
  - 2. Can you imagine John Knox and the Scottish Covenanters “staying home and staying safe” instead of being fed by God through word and sacrament in gathered worship?
  - 3. Can you imagine Jonathan Edwards riding horseback around the American colonies telling Christians to have fewer children in order to make the weather safer?
  - 4. One has to be compromised to go along with these things, and going along with them will compromise one even further
  - 5. Sin makes men cowards, and cowards are easy to control
    - a. The masculine godliness of John, the kind of godliness that comes from a clear conscience and submission to God’s law instead of man’s law is not always institution-friendly
  - 6. It is absolutely no wonder at all that a culture that is soaked in the guilt of pornography and failed masculinity and feminism, and has the blood of millions of innocents crying out to God from the ground is so willing to take a pinch of incense and say ‘Caesar is lord’, to pretend that taxes will change the weather, to pretend that

it makes sense that it's safe to buy a bag of weed and watch strippers, but it's not safe to gather for worship, it takes the cowardice of guilty conscience to play along with the most obvious lies of all, which is to use lying pronouns under the guise of love

- h. Do we have the prophetic courage of John the Baptist?
  - i. Not to be rude and provocative, but to be steadfast and plain speaking?
  - ii. Chesterton noted that 9 times out of 10, refined words are designed to excuse sin, while the crude word condemns the sin
    - 1. Commonlaw vs. fornication
    - 2. Same sex marriage vs. sodomy
- i. Now be clear – I'm not encouraging being rude or inconsiderate, but the prophetic example, including John's is to be unmovable
  - i. Don't be cocky or obnoxious, but by all means speak plainly, speak clearly, be confident and assertive not because your pride is on the line, but because you are zealous to push the crown rights of King Jesus all the way into the corners
  - ii. And most of all, if you have a clear conscience, you are equipped to be a free man as part of a free society
  - iii. We are the ones who are not threatened by idols and coercion, so we need to carry ourselves accordingly
  - iv. Our cool, calm, and confident reverence equips us to show a clear alternative to the guilty, panicky, arbitrary double-mindedness of those who persist in their rebellion

## 10. CHARGE

- a. *The account of John the Baptist's beheading lays out the most obvious of contrasts. John is right with God and as a result has a peace and a confidence that allows him to be bold and clear even when calling the most powerful men to repentance. Herod and his household are not right with God and as a result, they have an unstable and double-minded spirit that leads to cowardice and panic. God made both church and state to function alongside and in harmony with each other, both under His sovereign authority. In order for us to enjoy the blessing of a calm and peaceful social order, we will need the courage of a clear conscience. This will not and cannot happen apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ. The blessing of a free and stable state has only come when the church has taken her prophetic role seriously. On the personal or on the corporate level, forgiven men are free men, and free men create free societies. Let us all find the calm, cool assurance in the gospel that makes our peace and our freedom contagious.*

## 11. BENEDICTION

- a. Proverbs 28:1, 2 – *“The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion. 2 When a land transgresses, it has many rulers, but with a man of understanding and knowledge, its stability will long continue.”*