

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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## Mark 6:14-29 “The Death of a Conscience”

Intro. This is one of the darkest episodes in the entire Bible. It is the record of how Herod murdered John the Baptist in cold blood.

Now we are primarily interested in Herod. Mark called Him a “king,” which is what Herod wanted to be called, and he was from a royal family. But in reality, godless Herod was only a tetrarch, the ruler of a fourth part of a Roman Province. When Herod the Great died, the Romans divided his territory among his three sons; and the Herod of our story today was made tetrarch of Peraea and Galilee. Although in the Gospels he is simply called “Herod,” elsewhere his name is frequently given as “Antipas,” which means “like the father” (literally “in place of the father”). He inherited from his father all of his cruelty.

One day word came to him about the Lord Jesus Christ. He was doing mighty miracles, & tens of thousands were flocking to Him from all over. Who was this Jesus? Some said, “He is Elijah” for Elijah’s return had been predicted by Malachi. Another group was convinced that Jesus was at least one of the great Old Testament prophets. But Herod said in fear, “He is John the Baptist risen from the dead.” Now that statement from the lips of King Herod gives a classic statement of what can happen to the human conscience. As we shall see, his conscience was haunted by what he had done to John. We all have a conscience. One little boy was asked what a conscience is. He replied, “It is something that causes you to tell your mother what you’ve done before your sister does.” Someone has said that the conscience is the red warning light that goes off in your soul. But probably the best definition of the conscience is found in Roman 2:15, where Paul says the conscience either accuses or excuses.

It is very important that you understand about the conscience, and how you should respond to its voice. What do you do when your conscience accuses you of doing wrong? You should confess your sin, & forsake it. But too many people will try to stifle the voice of conscience. But watch out! The Bible warns of that you can sear & deaden your conscience as with a hot iron. God gave the conscience to drive the guilty sinner into the arms of a loving, forgiving Heavenly Father. Your conscience is very important, both for leading you to Christ, and to help keep you morally right.

Since Herod is a sad example of what can go wrong with a conscience, let’s follow the steps to the death of a conscience, & avoid making the same mistake. From his example, we see first of all:

### I. WE CAN HAVE A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE

Let me give you some background, so you will understand the rebuke of John the Baptist. What we have beginning in v.17 is a flashback to the time John first confronted Herod for his sin. First, who was this Herodias, mentioned? She was the daughter of Aristobulus, who was a son of Herod the Great by Mariamne I. She had married her half-uncle (her father’s half-brother) Herod Philip. To this Herod Philip she bore a daughter who Josephus called Salome. Now Herod Antipas, on a visit to Herod Philip, became infatuated with Herodias. The two illicit lovers agreed

to separate from their present marriage partners and to marry each other. Now Herod Antipas had married the daughter of King Aretas IV and then divorced her so he could marry Herodias.

Now let's see how Herod developed a troubled conscience:

A. The Message of God Can Trouble Your Conscience - The scene is a palace near the Dead Sea. That area has a tropical climate. Now God was faithful to the soul of Herod, and so he had sent John the Baptist to rebuke him. In v.18 notice that John had said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Even if what Herod & Herodias did was legal according to Roman law, it was not permitted under God's righteous law. Such a marriage was incestuous since his brother was still alive (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). Was it not also adulterous (Rom. 7:2, 3)? According to Jesus, if you divorce your spouse so you can marry someone else, you are still committing adultery in the eyes of God (Matthew 19:9). Furthermore, Herod was a political leader of the Jewish nation, and he was setting a poor example. Herod knew about the Jewish Scriptures. I believe his conscience was bothered to some degree by this message of God.

Here we see that John boldly denounced sin in high places. John was the Billy Graham of his day. Perhaps he had a personal meeting with Herod. Perhaps an aid briefed John about what he should and should not say, and how to speak to the king. Well, when John got into the presence of the King and his wife, he let loose like a fireball country preacher! And the tense of the verb "said" (imperfect) probably indicates that John spoke more than once about their sin. Perhaps Herod and Herodias were out on a chariot ride, and they happened to come up to the place where John was preaching. He would yell out at them, rebuking them for their sin, right in front of a large Jewish audience! John did not excuse himself from speaking out, thinking it was not prudent, or politically correct, or just useless to speak out. He did not say smooth things. He told his royal hearer the plain truth, regardless of the consequences. Proverbs 28:23 says, "He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue."

Here is a pattern that ministers of the Gospel ought to follow. We ought to boldly rebuke open sin. The first step in salvation is to come under conviction of sin. Furthermore, rebuke of sin tends to deter its practice. It may give offense. It may entail immense unpopularity. But we must do our duty, and leave the results to God. Of course it requires great grace & courage to do this. Yet too many preachers no longer denounce sin. They are too interested in being popular with the people. However, Jesus said in Luke 6:26, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets."

What did John get for his faithful preaching? He was put in prison. Those who preach against sin will often suffer for it.

Herod was not only troubled by the message of God, but we also see that:

B. The Man of God May Trouble Your Conscience – You can't separate the message of God from the man of God. The message of God must have a voice to be heard by men. So you will notice in v.19 that Herodias was not content with shutting up John's voice in prison. She wanted to kill the messenger of God. However, Herod would not permit it. He knew deep down in his heart & conscience that John was right. He could not bring himself to adding to his sin by killing him. While this was going on, Herodias was in a slow burn. Can't you just see her? V.19 says that she "held it against him." Literally, she "had it in for him" (*enecho*-imperfect tense), & she never rested or let up, but kept looking for her opportunity to get rid of John for good. We see how bitterly people hate a reprovener when they are determined to keep their sins. She hated John, but according to v.20 Herod feared him. Isn't that strange? A powerful ruler afraid of a preacher! He knew that

the man of God was right in what he was saying. He knew that John was a holy & righteous man. So he had great respect for John the Baptist.

Some people act like they are afraid of a godly, righteous preacher today. Over the years I've tried to visit people, to talk with them about their soul, but too often they have avoided me. I wonder how many crooked politicians are afraid of preachers today? The fact is there are very few preachers like John the Baptist today. And if you find one, you ought to support him regardless of your politics. Whether the president is a republican or democrat, if he is doing something morally wrong, the man of God should speak out against such sin.

So here we see the amazing power of truth over the conscience. A solitary preacher, with no other weapon than God's truth, disturbs & terrifies a king! Here lies the secret of a faithful minister's power. Hebrew 4:12 says, "the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, ... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." This is the reason why Governor Felix "was afraid" (Acts 24:25) when Paul was before him. Preachers & Bible teachers, because people have a conscience, there is great power in proclaiming the truth of the Word of God.

Now from time to time Herod would go down to the prison cell and hear John. On the one hand he did not like what John had to say, but part of him wanted to hear more, & did so gladly (v.20). Was this admiration due to the very fact that, in sharp contrast with the flatterers usually found in the company of rulers, here was one man who dared to speak the truth that Herod needed to hear? He loved the beauty of a holy life, but he loved sin as well. Textual evidence suggests that though he heard him gladly, he was also "much perplexed" (πολλα ηπορει, not πολλα εποιει). His conscience was pressuring him one way, & his wife was pressuring him the other way. We are going to see who got the best of Herod!

So when we sin, we can have a troubled conscience. Next we see an example of the fact that:

## II. WE CAN HAVE A TRAPPED CONSCIENCE

We can get trapped into doing something we know is wrong. As I mentioned, Herodias was not satisfied with John's imprisonment. She craved nothing less than John's murder. She probably feared that Herod might come under John's "spell," and who knows what might happen if those words, "It isn't right for you to have your brother's wife" continued to be drummed into the adulterer's ear! So she found a great opportunity to carry out her plot against John. V.21 says, "Then an opportune day came...." Herod's birthday was "opportune" or "suitable" because it was exactly right for the purpose Herodias had in mind, namely, to settle her score with John the Baptist and to make sure that she would not be cast off. This was the opportunity she had been waiting for. She probably had a big part in setting up a grand celebration of his birthday. That's because she was about to trap her husband like a spider. Herod was about to get trapped into doing what his conscience knew was wrong. So let me warn you that:

A. Your Passion Can Trap You – Now at this birthday supper for Herod. According to v.21, three kinds of guests were invited: a) the "high civil officials," b) the "Chiliarchs," thus literally a commander of a thousand men, but the more general sense of "military commanders"; c) "the chief men of Galilee," probably those wealthy, socially prominent friends of Herod who did not hold any civil or military position. The guests arrive, the musicians play, the finest food is set out in abundance, and the wine freely flows. Perhaps after supper, Herod received a note from

Herodias. King, I want to do something special for your birthday. If you would like, I will send in my daughter Salome to dance for you and your guests. Herod already had eyes for his stepdaughter, and so he said, "Bring her on."

Then, the attractive teenage girl,<sup>1</sup> probably only half dressed to entice, came in and began to dance. She began to go through those motions that would entice and stimulate the passions of Herod and all those ungodly men who were looking on. It is not surprising that both "king" and guests were enchanted. They looked on with voluptuous delight.

Isn't it awful when a young lady sacrifices her modesty and moral virtue to do such a thing? Isn't it a sad commentary on a mother who would send her own daughter out to do such a thing before a group of men? What kind of mother is this that would expose her daughter to the indecent stares of wicked men? Such dancing was an almost unprecedented thing for women of rank, or respectability. It was typically performed by professionals. Nevertheless, Herodias stooped so low to degrade her own daughter like a common dancing girl in order to carry out her set purpose against John. By the way, the Jews would not have permitted a woman to dance before a group of men. Herod was just adding to his sin by permitting his stepdaughter to do such a thing.

We have similar things taking place today. There was a time when such dancing would only take place in a houchy coochy show at a fair, or at some bar in the wrong side of town. But now this sort of thing takes place in millions of homes through HBO TV, MTV, and Dancing with the Stars! God knows that the same kind of dancing is being watched even in the homes of professing Christians. And we have too many mamas who are more concerned with their daughter's popularity than their purity, and allow them to dress in a most immodest fashion, & even pay their way to go where rather lewd dancing takes place.

Well, the trap that Herodias set worked. By the time Salome finished her dance, Herod's mind was inflamed, his brain was muddled with wine, his eyes were burning with lust, and his breath was hot with passion. And so he foolishly offered to give her whatever she wanted, up to half his kingdom! You better watch out what you offer to a wicked person.

We should take a solemn warning from Herod's behavior. Sin & foolish behavior may easily follow feasting, reveling, & drinking alcohol. People do things at such times from passionate feelings, which they afterwards deeply regret. Happy are those who keep clear of temptations, and avoid giving opportunity to the devil. Music, dancing, & late night parties may seem harmless to many people, but the Christian should never forget that to take part in these things is to open a wide door to temptation.

After Herod makes his foolish offer, Salome rushes from the banquet hall to her mother to find out what she should ask for.<sup>2</sup> Little does Herod know but that the python of passion is about to wrap around him and crush his conscience. When Herodias found out what Herod wanted, she realized that her scheme had worked! Her fondest hopes as to what just might happen if her daughter would dance were fully realized. Mother and daughter are a perfect match...in cruelty! And so she sent Salome back in to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Now that was a complement to John. Just think, his head was worth half a kingdom! The brutality of this woman boggles the mind. She seems to have sunk even deeper in sin than Herod. This royal brat has no conscience at all.

And so Salome rushed back in before the heat of passion had cooled, and seemingly without any sense of conscience calmly asked for the murder of John. She added that she wanted his head

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<sup>1</sup> In v.22 she is called a "girl", a *korasion*, a maiden, an unmarried young woman. The same word is used in Esther 2:9 (LXX) of Esther, a young woman of marriageable age. Salome was probably 15-19 years old at this time.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that she went and spoke to her mother proves that she had not been told beforehand what to ask (Robertson).

to be brought in on a platter! Notice also in v.25 that she wanted the head of John the Baptist “at once.” Right here and now the murder must be committed, because there must be no chance for John to escape, no chance either for the “king” to escape from the snare in which he has entangled himself. What kind of upbringing did this girl receive that without hesitation or a troubled conscience she asked for a murder to take place! When Herod heard her request, he was very sorry. The drunken Tetrarch had been caught in the net of Herodias. He knew he was drowning in sin, and it seemed he could do nothing about it. Oh how sin enslaves people!

Oh friend, when your conscience is bothering you, you had better listen to it, and do something about that sin in your life. If you don’t, you will find yourself getting deeper and deeper into sin. You may find fun and pleasure in sin for a while, but the day will come when you will be enslaved by your sin.

B. Your Pride Can Trap You – In v.26 we read, “And the king was exceedingly sorry; yet, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her.” Another weakness of Herod is revealed here. He was caught once again between his conscience and his environment. He was afraid of what his friends might think and say. He had to be true to his promise or lose face before a group of influential people. This was one way he had of impressing his guests, but it backfired. Herod had not been courageous enough to obey John’s word, but now he had to obey his own word! Herod’s stubborn pride, his dread of losing face before his cronies, gets the best of him. Herod thinks, “What would they think if I back out?”

At the same time his conscience is making a last effort to stop him. He could get out of the foolish offer by saying, “How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God by killing a righteous man.” He could have said he was too drunk to make such an offer. But false pride won the victory over all other considerations, including even the voice of conscience.

There may be some in the service today who know that they should turn from sin and believe in Christ. Your conscience is bothering you about some things you have been doing. But your pride says, “What will those people think if I go down front during the invitation?” Which will win out in your life, the voice of conscience, or the voice of pride? In Herod’s case, pride won out, as well as his love of sin. ■

Here we also see how far people may go in response to God, & yet miss salvation. He “feared John.” He knew him to be “a righteous and holy man” (v.20). He even liked to listen to him” (v.20). But there was one thing Herod would not do. He would not cease from his incestuous, adulterous relationship. He would not humble himself & cast aside his pride. So he ruined his soul forevermore. Let us take warning from Herod’s case. Let us keep back nothing that stands between us and salvation.

So he gave the signal to the executioner, who promptly pulled the sharp sword and went to the cell. I’m sure he had killed many men for the king, and one more did not bother him any more than it does for most people to step on an ant. He quieted any voice of conscience that he may have had left by saying, “I am just obeying orders.”

When John saw the executioner, he knew that it was his time. Like a sheep to the slaughter, I believe that he willingly laid down his head, dying bravely like many a prophet of God in the past. John was willing to give the ultimate sacrifice. He could have sung, “All to Jesus, I surrender...” Then, with one blow of the sword, he was gone. But don’t you feel sorry for John; he got an instant ticket to heaven. For 2000 years he has been in glory, a wonderful place, with a wonderful God, and with wonderful people. Don’t feel sorrow for John. Instead, feel sorrow of Herod. He has

murdered John, a righteous man, and he is killing the voice of his conscience. In their evil character and lawless deeds, these two remind us of Ahab and Jezebel (I Kings 18-21).

Before long, the party is over. Herod's guests leave and sleep off the effects of wine. I doubt if Herod slept very well that night. Now the scene shifts to chapter 6, v.14. In a period of time Herod hears a report of Jesus. And so now illustrates the fact that:

### III. WE CAN HAVE A TORMENTED CONSCIENCE

"Who is this man that I hear about?" As we see from v.14, one thing Herod heard was that Jesus was working mighty miracles. John wrought no miracles (cf. Jn. 10:41), but if he had risen from the dead perhaps he could. With his conscience tormenting him he can't help but think that John has come back to haunt him! Notice what we read in v.16, "This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead!" His fears got the best of him and so Herod settled down on this nightmare. He could still see that platter containing John's head coming towards him in his dreams. Notice he said, "Whom *I* beheaded." Before, he may have blamed it on Herodias, or Salome. He may have shifted responsibility to his guests or even to the executioner. But he knows in his heart that he was responsible for the murder, and his conscience won't let him forget it.

When a convict escapes from prison, they would often get the bloodhounds and chase after the convict. He might run and hide, but often he would hear the voice of those hounds following him, no matter where he would run. That's a picture of Herod. He's afraid that John has risen from the dead, and he is on his trail! Oh friend, you can run from God, but the voice of conscience will hound you until you get right with God. And if you never do, your conscience will often drive you crazy. Herod knew enough of the teachings of the Old Testament to know that God is righteous, and He judges sin. He probably believed with the Sadducees that there was no afterlife, but in v.16 his theology has changed. He believed John lived on, and he knew in his heart that his soul would live on after death. He was tormented with the thought of what would happen to the soul of a murderer and adulterer.

King David was also perplexed, and having similarly committed gross sins, including adultery, he wrote:

When I kept silent, my bones grew old  
Through my groaning all the day long.  
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;  
My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah  
I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden.  
And You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah (From Psalm 32:3-5)

But Herod Antipas refused to follow David's example of humble confession. Instead he became hardened. Dark forebodings clouded his mind when, with respect to the rumors concerning Jesus he exclaimed, "The man whom I beheaded, namely John, he is risen."

What happened to Herod? Did he repent? Did he ever do something about the voice of his conscience? Now in Luke 23:7-11 we read of Herod sitting before Jesus Christ Himself, about 1 year later. But something has happened to Herod. He no longer fears that Jesus might be John the Baptist risen from the dead. No longer is his conscience tormenting him. Instead, he looks upon Jesus as hardly more than a source of entertainment. He hoped Jesus would perform a miracle or two for him, like some magician. After Jesus refused to perform any miracle or even speak to Herod, then we read that Herod and his men treated Him with contempt and mocked Him. But why should Jesus speak to Herod? After all, God has spoken to him time and time again through the

voice of John the Baptist, and with the voice of conscience. Herod refused to listen then, and so now he has lost all opportunity to hear the voice of the Son of God, and be saved. Now Herod has a dead conscience. Several years later (A.D. 39), Herod Antipas was deposed and sent into exile. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36)

Conclusion: Some day, you too will stand before Jesus. God has appointed Him as Judge of all men. But many will realize that it will be too late to be saved at that point. It is not too late for you now. The very fact that you are here today is a good indication that your conscience is alive and well. You know you ought to come to church, and you did. So listen to the Word of God, “Today, if you hear His voice, harden not your heart...” Don’t suppress the voice of your conscience. Don’t let any sin keep you from being saved. Christ died on a cross to save you from your sin. You can be forgiven & have eternal life. Trust in Christ as your Savior today!

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through Online Bible); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon tape of 9/11/83); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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