

## *Evidence of a Depraved Mind*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 22, 2019.

*At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, 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." For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus (Matthew 14:1–12).*

Herod the tetrarch, not to be confused with his father King Herod the Great, was known as Herod Antipas, the Roman-appointed governor over the Galilean and Perea regions. The title "tetrarch" was a Roman title given to a governor meaning literally "a ruler of a quarter." Herod Antipas is sometimes referred to as a king but technically he was a regional governor, although his liberty and lavish lifestyle was far more like a king than a governor. Such liberty is witnessed in the historical account of our passage. He could apparently imprison and execute at will. While the Prophet John the Baptist returns to the narrative, Herod is the focus. The prophet is tragically executed as a mere party favor, but the actions of tetrarch are far more revealing. In Herod we witness not only the thoughts and actions of a wicked ruler, we also witness evidence of a depraved mind.

In the first chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul describes "the wrath of God" as it is "revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). The description the apostle gives is a grave list of wickedness lived out by fallen humanity, apart from God's saving grace. In the midst of his list, however, Paul reveals God's response to such wickedness stating, "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done" (Rom. 1:28). Consider the tragic consequence of not acknowledging God with wicked living: "God gave them up to a debased [or "depraved"] mind." Can you think of anything more horrible to hear on this side of eternity?

God of course does not lead one into sin nor is He the cause of it, but for the one who wishes to be freed from the seeming-shackles of God, his wish is granted. It is this perspective that I want us to consider in the mind and life of Herod the tetrarch, specifically his irrational deduction, his immoral devotion, his illicit declaration, and finally the irreverent dedication.

## **Irrational Deduction**

As Jesus' earthly ministry continued, His fame spread reaching the ears of Herod. Through the historical accounts of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) we are able to discern the popular understanding of Jesus' ministry: He called for repentance and preached the gospel of the kingdom of heaven; He taught with authority and unlike anyone else; He performed physical and spiritual miracles, healing the sick and freeing the demonically oppressed. He even raised the dead to life. These are the facts of Jesus' ministry available to Herod by first-account witnesses.

Disregarding all of this, what did Herod deduce? "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." A depraved mind leads one to irrationally deduce falsehood as a result of sinful behavior. Herod had disregarded John's preaching, unjustly imprisoned him, and illegally executed him. He had heard John's preaching and likely knew he had broken the sixth and seventh commandments, yet he had not repented.

However repressed it may become, the God-given conscience craves justice. We may deduce that Herod believes he is guilty, at least of John's murder, and therefore due justice. As Paul explains, "[those given over to a depraved mind] know God's righteous decree that those who practice such [sinful] things deserve to die" (Rom. 1:32). This is revealed through the conscience whether acknowledged or not. But Herod's guilty conscience does not lead him to repent, nor does it lead him to believe the truth about Jesus, rather he conjures up a cosmic conspiracy theory: John the Baptist is raised from the dead. This twisted form of retributive justice reveals both his guilty conscience but also the depraved mind's willingness to believe absurd fiction rather than truth.

As it was with Herod, such irrational deduction continues in the depraved minds of fallen humanity. The depraved mind would rather believe in creation by no one than believe "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). The depraved mind would rather believe in the macro-evolutionary origin of the human species than believe "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). The depraved mind would rather believe in the creation of religion manifested in the worship of the god of your choosing rather than believe that the Lord God is the first and the last and besides Him there is no god (Isa. 44:6). The depraved mind would rather believe anything about God *not* revealed in Scripture rather than believe the truth of God's holy Word. And the depraved mind would rather believe in the vengeance of a resurrected prophet than believe that "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

It is in Christ that the Christian is delivered from the irrational deductions of the depraved mind but let us not forget that we remain susceptible to depraved thinking. Sin can lead the Christian mind down paths of depraved thinking that no Christian should ever go. So powerful is sin that it can distort the Christian's perception of spiritual reality, but Christ leads us to protect our hearts and minds from the sinful thoughts of this world.

One way we do this is by actively engaging our minds in remembering, something we are encouraged to do continually throughout Scripture: We remember by reading God's Word and

the witness of the gospel. We remember the gospel daily thinking on the grace of God and our redemption in Christ. We remember through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, witnessing the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace and being spiritually nourished in Christ. In these ways and more we protect and train our minds in godliness by the Holy Spirit rather than the irrational deductions of the depraved mind.

But irrational deduction is not the only evidence of Herod's depraved mind. We witness also his immoral devotion.

### **Immoral Devotion**

A depraved mind leads one to be devoted to people or things that are either immoral in themselves or lead one into immorality. Herod had an adulterous affair with his sister-in-law, Herodias, who became his wife. While such immoral behavior may have been dismissed in the royal Herod family or by his social peers, the Prophet John did not dismiss it. John the Baptist, who served not only as the forerunner of Christ but also the last of the Old Testament prophets, feared no one in his preaching, including Herod.

He also had no hesitation in preaching morality to a pagan ruler in office. In an age where we dismiss the moral lives of our leaders as irrelevant to their office, John's preaching is a refreshing voice of courageous truth: "It is not lawful for you to have her." You can imagine the response of our politicians today: "Whose law governs my private sexual behavior?" To which the prophet would reply: "God's law!" But John's preaching fell upon the deaf ears of a depraved mind. While Herod clearly did not fear God or regard His law, he did however fear people. Locked away, John might preach but not to the public, further exposing the sins of their regent.

The Gospel Mark reveals that Herod actually listened to and was intrigued by John's preaching. Apparently, Herod "feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly" (Mark 6:20). Such is the intrigue of the depraved mind: One can recognize holiness and even be intrigued by it yet not repent of sin. I am reminded of how Benjamin Franklin loved to hear George Whitefield preach yet never professed saving faith in Christ. Perhaps Herod was similar. John's preaching was some form of moral entertainment, never penetrating his heart and mind, rendering Herod perplexed but neither convicted nor converted. In contrast, when first confronted by Jesus Christ, Simon (Peter) cried out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8); the conviction of his sin nature was overwhelming.

But ultimately, it was Herod's immoral devotion to his wife that led to John's execution. Just as Jezebel led Ahab further into pagan idolatry, it was Herodias' grudge against John that led Herod to the sin of murder. Seizing upon the opportunity of Herod's birthday party and the suggestive dance of his step-daughter, Herodias positioned her new husband before his greatest fear: Not the fear of God but the fear of man. Herod's immoral devotion to Herodias led him not only to adultery but to murder as well. This is the downward spiral of the depraved mind.

As if describing Herod and Herodias, but describing all of a depraved mind, Paul states, “they not only do [evil deeds] but give approval to those who practice them” (Rom. 1:32). The depraved mind leads to feet that are quick to rush into evil rather than the blessed one “who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:1-2).

The depraved mind is blinded not only by his unregenerate heart but is susceptible to the deceptions of others. As Paul, quoting the Greek author Menander, cautioned the Corinthians, “Bad company ruins good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33), we may have the best of intentions but be led into sin by the company we keep. In our culture, I see this as one of the greatest impacts on the modern Christian. I see Christians given to a secular worldview because they surround themselves with non-Christian friends. Christian, be careful of the company you keep today, because “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7-8).

Of course, in the case of Herod, his depraved mind was simply encouraged, leading him at the right moment to pronounce John’s death sentence with one illicit declaration.

### **Illicit Declaration**

The Gospel of Luke reveals that John the Baptist’s preaching included not only an open rebuke for Herod’s adultery but also reproof “for all the evil things that Herod had done” (Luke 3:19). Though unpopular, John declared the truth of God’s commands and confronted the sin of the governor. John’s declaration heralded the fear of God and the sinfulness of man. In contrast, Herod’s declaration heralded the sinfulness of man and disregarded the fear of God. A depraved mind leads one to disobey conscience and openly profess evil.

In what was certainly a sensual celebration, Herod hastily declares to his step daughter, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you,” adding, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom” (Mark 6:22-23). Such a declaration, likely encouraged by intoxication and driven by lust, reveals a depraved mind trapped in a compromising moment. No consideration is given to the consequences of his declaration. No sooner had the words left his prideful mouth Herod reaped their reward: the guilt of martyring a righteous man and prophet of God. Herod’s declaration resulted in an unexpected execution and the added guilt of murder.

The depraved mind may spout and spew its illicit declarations, promising even up to half the kingdom, while “a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Prov. 25:11). The depraved mind rants and raves like “an idiot, full of sound and fury. Signifying nothing,” while the sanctified mind is “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). Christian, do not forget “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:5–9). If an illicit

declaration is evidence of a depraved mind, then may the words the world hears from our mouths testify to a mind submitted to the lordship of Christ.

As if Matthew's depiction of Herod's depraved mind were not bad enough, Matthew concludes his narrative with the scene of an irreverent dedication.

### **Irreverent Dedication**

Upon Herod's command, John the Baptist was beheaded, without trial without justice. He was guilty of nothing more than proclaiming the truth of God's Word and calling sinners to repentance. And for his faithfulness to God and his calling, he was executed. In celebration of her achievement Herodias' daughter delivered John's head on a platter as an irreverent dedication. A debased mind leads one to rejoice in the accomplishment of evil.

Like a trophy for the depraved mind, John's mouth was silenced. No longer would John reprove the sins of the royal couple. Herodias had seemingly silenced the prophet. Jezebel once thought the same on a grander scale. So widespread was the execution of prophets in Jezebel's day that Elijah thought he was the last of the faithful. What Jezebel did not understand and Herodias after her, is: You may slay the preacher but you cannot stop the Word of God. As God spoke through the Prophet Isaiah, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:10-11).

Herodias thought she could stop the Word of God by severing John's head, but little did she know that "the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). With John's head upon a platter surely the reproof would cease, but her depraved mind could not grasp that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16).

God sends forth His preachers, like John, to preach the Word of God calling those given over to a depraved mind to repentance and faith. For "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Working through the preached Word, the Holy Spirit sanctifies the depraved mind by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And while Herodias held what she perceived to be her trophy of triumph, the Word of God triumphs through the faithful preaching of the Word that by the work of the Holy Spirit the depraved mind be conquered and sanctified by the Word of truth.

Indeed, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa. 40:8). Amen.