

Good morning, everyone. Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 14. Our plan over the next three weekends is to walk through Matthew 14, a chapter with two stories that reveal the power and the glory of Christ (feeding of 5,000 and walking on water), and one story that reveals the pain and depravity of this fallen world. This morning, we're looking at the painful story. The story of the death of John the Baptist is disturbing. It's hard to read. But as you know, the Bible does not shy away from stories like this.

Not long ago, I was talking to a friend about a movie I had seen. He said he thought his kids would like it, and I warned him about a few scary parts. He listened, and then replied, "Well, they read the Bible... it's nothing they haven't encountered before." The Bible is a remarkably realistic book. It offers us an honest account of what life in this world is like: including the good, the bad, and the ugly. As one author says, "Scripture plainly faces the tragedy of death, the absurdity of evil, and the irrationality of sin." And all of that is here in this passage today. The question is, what do we do with a passage like this? What are we to learn from a passage like this? Well, I've always been helped by a series of questions that Pastor Colin suggests we ask as we read the Bible.

As you consider any passage of Scripture, you can ask yourself:

- Is there a promise to believe?
- A sin to avoid?
- A command to obey?
- A warning to heed?
- An example to follow?

And here's what I found this week as I prepared for this message: there's an answer to each of those six questions in this passage. Herod the tyrant gives us a warning to heed and a sin to avoid. John the martyr gives us an example to follow and a command to obey. And Jesus the savior gives us a promise to believe. So that's how I want to structure our time today. And we'll start with Herod...

1. The Tyrant

Let's pick up the story in verses 1-2. Matthew tells us, *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."*

The Romans entrusted Herod the tetrarch with authority over the region of Galilee, which was where Jesus carried out much of his public ministry. So, Herod has heard about Jesus's growing fame, as well as his miracles, and he comes to an interesting conclusion. He says, "This must be John the Baptist, raised from the dead, and full of power."

Why would Herod think that? Well, in the first century there was a popular superstition that someone might return from the dead in a ghostly or physical form, especially if they were killed in an act of injustice. Which is precisely what happened to John at the hands of Herod, who now finds himself haunted by what he has done. And in the rest of the passage, Matthew recounts the story of why Herod killed John. And as we consider what Herod did, we find...

A. A warning to heed

Look at verses 3-4. Matthew takes us back to the time before John was killed and says, *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."*

When John tells Herod, "It is not lawful for you to *have* Herodias..." He is saying, "It is not lawful, it is not right in God's sight for you to be married to Herodias." And the reason for this is obvious. Herodias was Herod's brother's wife. This is an ugly situation. But, as you get to know Herod's family, a family that is well documented by other ancient sources outside the Bible, you will find this is only the tip of the dysfunctional iceberg. Let me tell you a little more about this family. Herod the tetrarch and Philip were two sons of Herod the Great (the ruler during the time when Christ was born). And Herod the Great was not so great. In many ways, he ruled like a mob boss. People who crossed him sometimes died "accidentally," like one unfortunate priest Herod the Great disliked who just happened to drown at his palace.

He also had no problem pressing false charges against his enemies, leading to their execution, even when those enemies came from within his own family. Ever suspicious, and often paranoid, Herod the Great had his first wife, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, and some of his own sons killed on charges of sedition. But Herod the tetrarch and Philip survived, and when they were grown, they both got married. Herod the tetrarch married a woman named Phasaelis, the daughter of an Arabian king named Aretas. Philip married a woman named Herodias, who also happened to be his niece. Incest was common in this family. Philip and Herodias had a daughter named Salome, who shows up later in this story. When she was grown, Salome married another one of her uncles, who was her father's half-brother. And by marrying him she became her own mother's aunt and niece. It's all enough to make your head spin... and your stomach sick.

But back to Herodias, while she was married to Philip, she and Herod the tetrarch fell in love. So, they divorced their spouses, causing a rift between the brothers, and eventually a war between Herod the tetrarch and his father-in-law, Aretas. If you thought your family had issues, it probably doesn't hold a candle to this one. Why were they like this? Why were they so messed up? Well, listen to this quote from Dan Doriani. He writes, "Wealthy, proud, [and] murderous, the Herods married as they wished, often incestuously." I think Doriani hits the nail on the head with those three words: *as they wished*. Herod's family did whatever they wanted. They did whatever was right in their own eyes. They followed all the inclinations of their hearts. And this led them into all kinds of discord, dysfunction, and even death.

That's a warning to heed. There are obviously many things the Herods did that you and I will never feel tempted to do. But, we all have desires within us, inclinations of the heart, that will lead us into disaster if we follow them. As James puts it, *Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death* (James 1:14-15).

Notice the progression! Temptation begins as a desire and inclination of the heart, which left unchecked will bring forth death. You see, if we're honest enough to admit it, when we sin, we are doing what we want. Even if what we want is mixed with all kinds of shame, frustration, and regret. Sin entices us by awakening desires and stirring up passion within us. So that, at least in the moment, sin seems appealing. Which is why we need God to not only cleanse our guilt (which he does for us in Christ!), but also to change our hearts, and keep our passions in check. Which he also mercifully does for us in Christ.

He sends us his own Holy Spirit to convict us and prevent us from following sinful desires. And he grows new desires within us that we might live to honor him. So, when you feel the allurements of any temptation, run to Christ. Ask him, as the Psalmist prays, to hold back your feet from every evil way, and to make his testimonies your joy (Psalm 119:101, 111). By his grace and in his strength, resist the sinful inclinations of your heart. Herod and his family lived as they wished, and it led to all kinds of evil, that is a warning to heed. And, next, I want you to see a particular sin to avoid.

B. A sin to avoid

There are many sins in this story. Extreme sins and uncommon sins. Not many of us are tempted to commit the immorality and injustice that we see here. However, I want you to notice a sinful struggle within Herod's heart, which you and I know very well, which we all face and which we all must fight. I want you to notice that Herod is struggling with the fear of man. Look at verse 5. Herod has arrested John. *And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.*

Herod has decided that John should die. But he won't do it. And that's good! But he's doing the right thing for the wrong reason. He's not keeping John alive because he wants to. He's keeping John alive because he fears the people. And if you live in the fear of man, idolizing what people think, concerned most with their opinions, that will lead you into all kinds of trouble. Which is precisely what happens next in this story. The murder of John is kept at bay for a while. But then look at verses 6-8: *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."*

There is plenty of sin and foolishness on display in these three verses. The debauched party and the way the guests objectify this girl. The rash oath. The murderous request. But watch what ultimately leads to John's death. In verses 9-10 we read, *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...*

Herod is conflicted. Now, he doesn't want to kill John. So why didn't he cancel his oath? *Because of... his guests.* In Mark's Gospel we learn that the guests consisted of *"his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee."* In front of so many powerful and influential people, Herod didn't want to appear weak. He didn't want to look like a coward. So, he gave into the pressure and killed John. Proverbs 29:25 tells us that

the fear of man lays a snare, like a wire trap that a hunter uses to snag an animal in the wilderness. The fear of man will grab hold of us and lead us into all kinds of folly. It is a sin to avoid.

So how do you fight against the fear of man? By pursuing the fear of the Lord. To fear the Lord is to give him the respect and reverence he deserves. To care far more about what he thinks of you than what anyone else thinks of you. To strive to honor him in all that you do. That's the path of wisdom and righteousness. And the more you fear him, the less you will fear people. But Herod had no fear of the Lord, and it led him to commit this great evil. The tyrant gives us a warning to heed and a sin to avoid.

And then there's John...

2. The Martyr

John offers quite the contrast to Herod and his family. And as we consider his part in this story, I want us to see how he gives us an example to follow and a command to obey. First, John is...

A. An example to follow

Look back at verses 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, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."*

In Mark's Gospel, we learn that Herod the tetrarch and John the Baptist had an interesting relationship. Mark tells us that Herod heard John speak on many occasions, that Herod considered John a righteous and holy man, and that even though Herod was perplexed by John's teaching, he listened to him gladly. Herod the tetrarch was interested in the ministry of John the Baptist. He liked to hear John speak. And clearly, they sometimes spoke to one another directly and personally. And this could have easily tempted John to turn a blind eye to Herod's sin so that he might maintain a good relationship with him and perhaps benefit from the privileges of power. But John would not do it. He was willing to tell Herod, "Your marriage to Herodias is a violation of God's law." And, given what we know about John's ministry, we can safely assume he not only called out the evil in Herod's life, but also pleaded with Herod to repent.

Matthew summarizes John's overarching message in chapter 3, verses 1-2. He writes, *In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Matthew 3:1-2). Surely, this would have been his message to Herod. He was not calling out Herod's sin to condemn him, but to save him. And this is an example for us to follow. James 5:19-20 says, *My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins* (James 5:19-20).

To bring back a sinner from his wandering is to save his soul from death. To help someone

we know and love to see that they have strayed from the Lord, and to lead them back to him, will bring them to the one who can cover all their sins. It's one of the greatest things we can do for someone. But, as you know, it can also be one of the hardest. Because we've got to check our motives, and make sure we're not calling out sin in a spirit of self-righteous pride, trying to remove the speck in someone's eye without first getting the log out of our own.

But it's also hard, because even if we speak in a spirit of humble love, we cannot control the response. We may not face execution like John did, but we sure might face rejection. When you try to help someone see that they are wandering from the Lord—a friend, a spouse, a child—they might misunderstand you, they might slander you, they might rage against you. And that can be very painful, as it was for John, who gives us this example to follow. And, through his example, we are also reminded of...

B. A command to obey

We've already talked about fighting against the fear of man by fostering the fear of the Lord. And this is not simply a nice piece of practical advice. This is a command of Christ. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says, *Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell* (Matthew 10:28).

John knew Herod could kill him. But he did not fear Herod's wrath. John feared the Lord. Again, to fear the Lord is to give him the respect and reverence he deserves. To care far more about what he thinks of you, than what anyone else thinks of you. To strive to honor him in all you do, no matter the cost. Herod had no fear of the Lord, and it led him to commit this great evil. But John feared the Lord, and it led him to persevere even unto death. And as we grow in the fear of the Lord, our fear of people will diminish, and we will remain faithful too.

So, the tyrant gives us a warning to heed and a sin to avoid. The martyr gives us an example to follow and a command to obey. But at this point someone might say, "If this is all true, if honoring the Lord might get you killed, why would anyone pursue this kind of life?" It's a fair question, and as we conclude our time this morning, I want us to leave reflecting on our Savior, Jesus, who gives us this wonderful promise to believe.

3. The Savior: A promise to believe

Jesus is only mentioned at the beginning and end of this passage. But Matthew's Gospel is all about him. John's story serves as a preview of where Jesus's story is headed. Jesus, who will also suffer injustice at the hands of Herod and other rulers, who will also face execution, who will also die. And Jesus, who will rise again!

In his resurrection, Jesus paved the way for the resurrection of all his people, including John the Baptist! You see, Herod may have killed John, but Herod did not end John's life. John the Baptist lives, right now! And one day, he will rise again! This is our Savior's promise. He says *I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and*

everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

And then he asks, *Do you believe this?* (John 11:25–26). John the Baptist believed that! And so, he lives, and he will never die again. In fact, in Revelation 20:4, John the Apostle writes about the resurrection and says, *I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God... They came to life and reigned with Christ...* (Revelation 20:4).

They came to life and reigned with Christ! Herod the tetrarch reigned for a few years in the 1st century. But for all of eternity, John the Baptist will reign with Christ! As the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said, “The tyrant dies and his rule ends, the martyr dies, and his rule begins.”

Brothers and sisters, hear this promise today. Following Christ is not always easy, sometimes it's very hard, sometimes it's very costly. We can face misunderstanding, opposition, and rejection. We may even face persecution. But 2 Timothy 2:12 says, *If we endure, we will also reign with him* (2 Timothy 2:12). Jesus is the resurrection and the life! Whoever believes in him, though he die, yet shall he live. Therefore, ultimately eternally, everyone who lives and believes in him shall never die. That is our Savior's promise.

Here's the question: Do you believe it? If you believe in the resurrection, you will follow him, no matter the cost.

Conclusion

Matthew 14:1-12 is not a pleasant passage. Like many other Scriptures, these verses “plainly face the tragedy of death, the absurdity of evil, and the irrationality of sin.” In Herod the tyrant, we find a warning to heed as we consider the destructive outcome of following our own evil desires. And we see a sin to avoid, many sins, really. But it was the fear of man that drove Herod to kill the man of God.

Still, there's a light shining in the darkness of this passage. John the martyr gives us an example to follow, as he tried to help Herod see the danger of his ways, and as he remained faithful to the end because he feared the Lord. We're also reminded of our resurrected Savior, who promises that if we endure with him, we will reign with him. May God help us believe his promise.