

“John the Baptist, and This Merciless World”

Mark 6:1-32

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Opening Prayer

There is a stark contrast, Beloved, when it comes to how the Lord operates and how the world operates. The Lord is full of mercy, grace, justice, peace, patience, righteousness, holiness, intolerance for sin, and love. The world, specifically the world without any Godly influence, is given over to corruption, immorality, greed, selfishness, pride, anger, impunity, avarice, and mercilessness. Like fish, who don't understand how wet they are until they are out of the water, we won't fully understand just how sinful our world really is until we arrive at our eternal home in heaven. The world is depraved to its core, and we once were just as depraved too until Christ saved us. Beloved, in this season as we study God's mercy as revealed in the Gospel of Mark, we can also recognize that stark contrast between God's mercy and the world's mercilessness. In the account of John the Baptist's beheading, we see the exact opposite of the Lord's wonderful grace and mercy.

Mark chapter six begins with Jesus in His hometown of Nazareth. As He teaches, He is accosted by His own fellow townsfolk and even His own family, and they do not believe Him. He states the honest truth “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household.” How interesting it is, that we as humans are more apt to recognize God's wonderful work in strangers over His work in our close friends and family. Leaving Nazareth, He sends out His disciples to teach and perform miracles. They go out and do what Christ has commanded, given power through Him. It extends Jesus's fame throughout the region, and the news of this man who just might be the Messiah reaches the ears of the puppet king, Herod. Many were speculating that Jesus might be a raised prophet, like Elijah or some other, but Herod is convinced that Jesus must be John the Baptist raised from the dead. It is at this point that Mark gives the fate of one of God's most faithful men. John the Baptist, as we read, was beheaded by Herod in prison.

Mercy, Beloved, is not receiving that which one deserves. It is a positive trait, meaning that mercy is always a good thing. (An employer is not merciful if they withhold wages for example.) The true opposite of mercy, is giving someone

something they don't deserve that is negatively impactful. The parent who punishes a child who doesn't deserve it is acting in the opposite of mercy. The world, so very often, with all of its sin and impropriety, acts this way. John does not deserve to be beheaded, obviously, but the wicked puppet king is engrossed in his sin.

It is worth noting too, Beloved, how Herod's sin grows the more he became engrossed in it. While he likely didn't set out to be a merciless, horrific murderer, his unchecked sinful nature continuously pushed him down that road. His first sin is adultery, shortly followed by falsely imprisoning John for jealous reasons. "Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'" Beloved, take note that calling sin sinful is dangerous in our world. The world will mercilessly protect its sin. The next sin of Herod was keeping John imprisoned, even though he knows John is innocent of all wrongdoing. "For Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man..." He kept John's life in peril, out of fear of his illicit wife. There was no righteousness to be found in Herod's actions here. But what really pushes him over the edge isn't his adultery alone or his unwillingness to do what is right, what really gets Herod is his pride mixed with all these things.

"A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask for me whatever you want and I will give it to you.'" The girl asks for the head of John the Baptist at Herodias's urging, and with that Herod is caught. Amidst a drunken, sinful, lust-filled gala, his pride will not let him go back on his word, even if it means murdering an innocent man. So John the Baptist is killed in prison. What began with adultery turned into falsely imprisoning John, which then turned into murder that was fueled by pride, greed, and even lust for his illicit wife's daughter. It is tragic how Herod continues down this road. It is a striking account, one that foreshadows Christ's own innocent murder. It also, unfortunately, shows very clearly where we go when the Lord is not at work within us Beloved. When sin runs rampant, mercy is done away with and the opposite is doled out to anyone in the world's way.

To end, I would leave us with two thoughts to ponder Beloved. The first is how easy it is for us to find ourselves in Herod's shoes if we do not heed Christ's call. Sin left unchecked only grows, and as it grows it gets harder and harder to resist, until we don't resist at all. This merciless world has no problem with sin in every form. Adultery, immorality, greed, idolatry, pride, they are all just fine by the world's standards. In fact, our sinful nature will revel in such things if left unchecked. So be aware, recognize sin for what it is, recognize that sin exists in this world, and don't be surprised if the world hates you for being moral, as it hated John. Secondly, I pray we would recognize that it is immoral, evil, sinful people that Jesus came to save. That includes you and me. While the world is merciless in its actions, Jesus is most merciful. On the cross He cries out such words as "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do" to His murderers. He says such words as "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also" to His Beloved disciples who will desert Him only hours later. Beloved, the wonderful and merciful truth is, that if even Herod had repented after all this and returned to the Lord, he would have found mercy. Your Lord, knowing full well what we are capable of as sinners, having done much as sinners, still chose to go to the cross in our stead. While the world may be merciless and cruel, our Savior is not. Let us pray.

Closing Prayer