

Jason Upchurch - Mark 6:14-20 - The Good News Is Worth Dying For - Part 2

Alright, this morning as we look to Mark's gospel we are in one of the most unique sections of the gospel. It's unique because not only does it involve Herod and one of the most barbaric scenes in the ministry of Jesus, but at the same time it gives us a behind-the-scenes look at how unbelievers think and act in light of the gospel message being preached.

Remember this is one big long section from **7-29** where Jesus sends out the 12 to go preach and teach in various towns throughout Israel. The ministry is growing and Jesus is commissioning these guys who will eventually take over the ministry once he ascends into heaven.

And the swell of enthusiasm is so big that even the political leaders of the day are hearing about it. This is not some fringe thing.

The big picture this morning that I want you to take away is that unbelievers are way more religious than we often give them credit for.

What we're going to see here is that Herod is a very religious person. Not in a saving faith kind of way. But nonetheless, when we slow down and look at his beliefs it might be surprising what we see.

Now let's talk about Herod for a few minutes. I'll be honest, I struggled this week with how much to expand on this but I think it might be helpful for you to understand a little of what's going on.

There were a whole bunch of people called Herod in Bible times and they're all related and the Bible doesn't really even distinguish them. But they all ruled in some way in Israel.

The Herod Mark is talking about here is not Herod the Great. Herod the Great is who most of us think about when we hear the name Herod. He's the Herod who reigned over most of Israel during the time when Jesus was a baby. He's the one who tried to put Jesus to death by killing all the male children under 2 years old in Bethlehem.

He's also known for his amazing building projects. He built the world's first man-made harbor in Caesarea, he built countless palaces throughout Israel. Most famously, he rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem what we commonly call Herod's Temple. He had an amazing skill for planning and executing building projects.

He also had a knack for marrying and executing his own family. Herod had many wives, and many children by those wives, many of which he put to death because they either tried to kill him or he was paranoid and thought they were trying to kill him.

There was a saying at the time that it was better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son because at least the pig had a chance to live.

Herod the Great died in 4BC and when he died he divided his Kingdom into 4 parts among his family. The red part was his son, Herod Archelaus - later Pontus Pilate would rule this territory. The green part was ruled by Herod Antipas, that's the guy in this passage we're reading about. The brown section in the north was given to Herod Phillip. And the little purple along the coastal section was given to his sister, Salome.

There were 4 territories and the people that ruled those territories were called tetrarchs - literally meaning ruler of 1/4. Now I'll keep this map up here because this will play into the story in a little bit.

Again, the Herod here is Herod Antipas. Part of the confusion of all this is that the biblical authors just assume you know who they're talking about.

Side: It gets even more confusing in the book of Acts because this map changes again and there are 2 more Herods, both named Agrippa.

Agrippa I is the Herod who kills the apostle James in **Acts 12** and is also the one who God kills with worms for his arrogance. Agrippa II is the Herod at the end of Acts who Paul preaches the gospel to.

All that to say, don't be surprised if you're confused about which Herod the Bible is talking about. This is Herod's son, Antipas.

And Antipas rules over the green section. He lives in Tiberias which is at 9 o'clock on the lake of Galilee - he was right in the middle of where Jesus launched his ministry. So he hears what's going. He knows about Jesus.

Now, that's just by way of background so you know who this guy is, where he's at and why he knows about Jesus.

Now what we're going to do is look at this passage and walk through this section but I want to use it as a means by which we understand some of the mindset of unbelievers.

Sometimes as Christians because we've grown up in the church, or been a Christian so long, we lose a little bit of perspective on the unbelieving world. Here we're given here a very candid look at heart of Herod Antipas as he wrestles with the spiritual realities that John proclaims to him and that hears Jesus is also proclaiming.

So let's unpack this section seeing that unbelievers are more religious than most of us given them credit for. Not all of these points are true of every unbeliever. But it is helpful to keep these in mind.

1. Unbelievers see what Christians do. **Read 14-16**

Twice in these few verses we're told that Herod heard about it - **Vs. 14** and **16**. Heard about what? He heard about Jesus because Jesus's name had become known.

The ministry in Galilee was spreading and really it couldn't be stopped. More and more people were hearing about this prophet from Nazareth: Jesus.

From Herod's perspective, this is significant. Israel was known in Rome as a religious stronghold. The Jews were known to be particularly religious even over the Romans who had basically adopted the Greek pantheon of gods and had temples to Roman gods everywhere. Everyone believed in something.

It was just that Israel was a religious powder keg. There was always something going on religiously in Israel. A lot of times it was just noise because everyone in Rome knew the Jews were religious zealots.

Interestingly, Rome didn't care about Israel all that much. The rulers over Israel had just 3 goals: collect taxes, keep the peace, don't offend the Jews because they go nuts if you offend their religion. The only reason Israel was important to Rome was because it was a land bridge between Asia Minor and Egypt.

So when there's a massive religious stir going on Herod's going to know about it. And that's really the bigger here: unbelievers see what Christians do.

The non-Christian world does keep tabs on Church. As a whole and individually. For good and for bad. Our lives are continually on display whether people tell us or not.

During the Covid lockdowns several years ago Canadian 3 pastors gained international fame for taking a stand against the government by keeping their church open. People were watching and the government was watching.

When we started RBC in 2017 and I launched our website in October of 2017 that month was the highest internet traffic month for us by almost double that we've ever had. And as people stopped in to say hello they told me they had looked us up to see about us. People watch Christians. They see us. Our lives are on display.

They always have been watching. Let me just show you this in 2 other places. **Look at Acts 24:22-27** for a minute. When Paul visited Jerusalem a riot broke out because the Jews thought he had brought a gentile into

the inner court of the Temple - that would be a no no. Paul didn't do that, but he is falsely accused and is on trial here for starting a riot.

So Paul is giving a defense to Felix who took over for Pontus Pilate in the red area. This is Felix's response.

Read 22-27

Isn't this crazy? Felix knows about the Way. He understands the truth claims. But did you see what made him upset? When Paul started making moral claims on his life: righteousness, self control and the coming judgement. He didn't like hearing all that.

Felix wants to win money to line his pockets, Paul wants to win Felix to the faith. They talked a lot over 2 years about Jesus.

This continued to go on. **Look at 26:1-3, 24-32** here we see Paul in front of Festus and Agrippa. This is Herod Agrippa II - the second guy. **Read 1-3**

Agrippa knows about Jewish customs and traditions. Even now, people who have never stepped foot in church many times know some things about Jesus or Christians. Christmas, Easter, sin, judgment, repentance. We can usually explain those things. Look at the rest of the conversation between Paul, Agrippa and Festus. This is Festus replying to Paul. **Read 24-32**

Did you notice that Paul even tells Agrippa that he knows about these things. He knows the prophets. He knows something about Jesus. This isn't obscure - he would have heard about Jesus.

Interestingly, all three of these unbelievers know that Paul didn't do anything wrong. That's not the official position. They don't say that in public. This is behind the scenes.

Here's what I want you to understand. When people respond to Christians and the gospel in the public, it's often a show. It's often towing some political or cultural line. But there are many times when something else is going on in their heart or in private. They see who we are. They know who we are. They can tell when Christians are giving a rational defense for the faith. They see our manner of life.

That doesn't always mean they'll be saved. But it does mean they know. By the way: how do we even know these conversations took place? How do we know this was being said? Did the Holy Spirit just reveal this to Luke?

Maybe. I think it's because we had spies on the inside. Not real spies, but Christians who worked in government. Remember in **Luke 8:3** one of the followers of Jesus was Joanna. You remember what her job was? She was the household manager of Herod along with Susana and many others. Christianity had infiltrated the government.

Cornelius was one of the top ranking soldiers in Judea. Luke compiled his gospel and Acts from eye-witnesses. I think there were people serving that overheard these conversations and reported them later to Luke.

Unbelievers see what we do. **Look back in Mark 6.**

2) Unbelievers have faith in something. **Read 14-16**

I don't know if you caught this but Herod is not an atheist. He actually has quite a robust theology.

He believes in miracles. He hears the stories of Jesus's miracles and believes them. He hears the stories of the miracles of the apostles and believes them.

He believes in resurrection. There were several theories about who Jesus was circling around. Maybe he's Elijah from of old. In the last few verses of the OT in **Malachi** God promises to send Elijah. Well, Elijah never

literally came but many people were expecting him to. It turns out Elijah was just a type. Malachi was talking about John the Baptist who came in the spirit and power of Elijah.

But a lot of people didn't know that so when Jesus was doing these miracles they assumed Elijah had been raised or one of the prophets had been raised.

Herod seems convinced it's John the Baptist come back to haunt him. Interestingly, the Bible does not record that John did any miracles. He preached with fire and wore weird clothes and had a weird diet - kind of like Elijah. But nowhere do we have any miracles. But it seems like Herod thinks John is back with a vengeance.

But that brings us back to the point: unbelievers have faith in something. And oftentimes it's weird.

See, here's the deal: a lot of times I think we're concerned that when people hear what we believe they'll think we're weird. Sin, hell, Trinity, judgement, resurrection, no evolution, worldwide flood, angels, demons.

Built have you checked out what unbelievers believe? That's where it gets crazy. **Rom. 1** says they suppress the truth about the creator God and trade it in for a lie. They worship birds and animals and creeping things.

People believe blindly in evolution: that somehow everything we have come from nothing over the course of billions of years.

Aliens, fairies, and Norse mythology. There are actual Wiccan witches who live in our area who believe in gods and spirits and crystals and potions.

Sometimes it's a hodgepodge of their own religious beliefs that good works will save them, that God doesn't really care. In our modern day saturated with homosexuality many people believe in a god that is a woman or a non-binary it.

It's the old saying that God made man in his image and we've been returning the favor ever since.

Paul tells the pagans at Ephesus: I can perceive that you are very religious. That's true, because everyone is very religious - you've just got to pinpoint what they actually believe.

Because God has put eternity in our hearts, according to **Ecc. 3:11** we know there is something to come. We know God is there, he has revealed himself. But humans will distort that reality in their sin.

So unbelievers will have faith in something. They do believe in something. Don't be afraid to tell them the truth from the Bible.

So unbelievers see what Christians do / have faith in something.

3) Unbelief in the true God is often rooted in sin. Read 17-20

So here we have a backstory in the middle of a side story. The side story is Herod heard about Jesus and the apostles. John the Baptist was killed.

But the backstory is that that alarmed Herod because of what happened with John. What happened with John?

John was beheaded. Why was John beheaded? Because he was preaching repentance to Herod.

Alright, let me put this together for you. Herod the Great had 9 wives. His son, Antipas, was his son from wife 4. Antipas ruled the green area. And his son Phillip was son from wife 5, Phillip ruled in the brown.

Antipas and Phillip were half brothers and they ruled their own areas after Herod the Great died. But at some point, Phillip's wife Herodias decided to divorce Phillip and marry Antipas.

Now, we live in a day and age where most of us have seen an episode or 2 of Jerry Springer so these kind of things don't even phase us. Plus, we live in the most sexually perverted generation our country has seen so in reality this probably seems kind of mild to us. But in ancient times that was a national scandal. That was obscene - especially in religiously conservative Israel that held very steadfastly to the Law of Moses.

Well, John has no problem preaching against anyone, does he? He's preached against the religious leaders, he preached against soldiers who are in sin, he preached judgement and hell and fire. And so who does Herod think he is?

Now here's the cool thing. Look at that map again. John baptized Jesus just a little north of the Dead Sea in the red area. That wasn't Antipas's territory, Antipas is the green area. Antipas couldn't have arrested John in the red territory.

So here's what we think happened: John crossed over the Jordan river into the green area to preach at Antipas. He could have stayed in safety and preached from afar in the red area. But the fact that Antipas arrested him means that John very likely crossed into the green territory to go hunt down Antipas and preach at him that he should not have his brother's wife.

John was no coward. John knew the truth and preached the truth and didn't care what happened to him. And so it seems like he went out of his way to go preach repentance to Herod Antipas.

And Antipas got tired of that really quick, so he seized John. He arrested him and put him in prison because Herodias didn't like what John was preaching at them.

He was saying over and over: It's not lawful for you to have her. "Antipas, what you're doing is sin."

What's John getting at? What John is getting at is that oftentimes unbelief is rooted in a love for our sin.

See, we often think that people don't believe because they have bad theology, or are confused.

No, most often they don't believe because they love their sin.

John 3:19: This is the judgement: the light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

That's the reality in the world: people love their darkness. They love their sin. They love their wickedness. They don't want Jesus because they don't want to give that stuff up.

We see 2 things in John. First, he's telling Antipas and Herodias to repent. A lot of times we think we can't tell unbelievers to repent. We can't tell them to turn from their sin. I mean they're not Christian, right? How can we call them to Christian morality? Because the Bible calls all men everywhere to repent. Unbelievers don't get a pass on this. It's not like we wait for people to become Christian and then tell them what they need to do. No; we call them to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus. They need to hear both.

The second thing we see with John is that he is very specific with his call to repentance. Stop sleeping with your brother's wife.

Lev. 18:16, 20:21 both condemn incestuous relationships: You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife, it is your brother's nakedness...if a man takes his brother's wife it is impurity. He has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.

This is important: the marriage covenant is binding even on unbelievers. There is a sacredness in the marriage covenant that John was calling Herod to, even though Herod wasn't a practicing Jew. This was crazy scandalous.

And I think something we need to consider when talking to unbelievers is that when we tell them about Jesus we need to confront them with their specific sins. Not just in vague terms. But specifically.

I think we often get a little sheepish when we're talking to unbelievers about the obvious sin in their lives because maybe that will push them away, or maybe we'll offend them, or maybe they won't like us.

Listen, we don't have to be rude or jerks about it. But we have to be honest. John was always honest with people about their sin:

Soldiers, stop embezzling.

Greedy people, share what you have.

Tax collectors, take only what you should.

Very specific calls to repentance to very specific people. Why? Because their unbelief is often rooted in desiring their sin. They want their sin, they know what their sin is. So it's incumbent on us to show them what true obedience to Jesus looks like.

Repenting in every area of life.

We'll come back to this more next week.

Pray