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Mark 6:14-29 "When Corrupt Politics Confront God's Kingdom"*

Main Idea: In Mark 6:14-29 we see what happens when corrupt politics confront God's kingdom. There are four scenes in the story of John the Baptist.

- I. We see confusion (14-16).
 - A. Herod heard rumors about Jesus (14-15).
 - B. Herod identified Jesus as John the Baptist (16).
- II. We see confrontation (17-20).
 - A. It involved Herod (17a).
 - B. It involved Herodias (17b).
 - C. It involved John (18-20).
 1. John confronted Herod's sin (18).
 2. Herodias wanted to kill John (19).
 3. Herod heard but did not heed John (20).
- III. We see corruption (21-28).
 - A. There was moral sin (21-24).
 1. We see a self-absorbed leader.
 2. We see a sensual daughter.
 3. We see the folly of lustful living.
 - B. There was ethical sin (25-28).
 1. Two women chose to murder an innocent man.
 2. A leader chose expedience over righteousness.
- IV. We see consequences (29).
 - A. It's a tragic ending.
 - B. It's not the end.

The Point of the Story: We see why Jesus came...

1. We are sinners and powerless to change.
2. We will die and spend eternity somewhere.
3. We need a Savior.

The following is a true story. There once was a ruler, a wicked ruler indeed. His dad was actually worse, for his dad, a king, mercilessly killed several of his own sons to prevent them from taking his throne. In time, however, his dad did die and the kingdom he hoarded was divided into four parts with four surviving sons each getting a part. That's how the man I'm telling you about became a ruler in the first place.

After he took over his quarter of the empire he married a woman, another king's daughter to be precise, to gain political advantage. Later he paid a visit to one of his brothers and while there seduced his brother's wife—a woman who was actually his biological niece—and persuaded her to leave her husband and follow him home. He divorced his present wife so he could marry his brother's wife, who as I mentioned was also his niece. Words that apply: adultery, incest, and flagrant sensuality.

Sound bizarre? It gets worse. It leads to murder, as I'll verify momentarily. For now, consider this. The leader I just described to you is in fact the man who ruled in Galilee when Jesus lived. His name was Herod Antipas, the son of the notorious Herod the Great.

Solomon once pointed out that there's nothing new under the sun. That includes corruption in politics. Herod Antipas is gone, but the spirit of corruption lives on.

It's interesting to examine the attitudes various politicians demonstrate towards religion. On the one extreme is communism whose atheistic approach is to eliminate God and religion from public life. Case in point, North Korea, where the very mention of the word "God" brings torture and execution. If you identify yourself as a Christian today in North Korea you will receive unfathomable treatment that makes Stalin look like a Sunday School teacher.

On the other hand, instead of seeking to eliminate religion, some politicians try to use religion for personal, political gain. They know there are votes to be had in reaching out to *people of faith*. And so they tell people what they think they want to hear.

That's the political world in which we live. The question I'd like to pose is this. What happens when corrupt politics confront God's kingdom? Know this. God in heaven isn't dependent upon any particular political system or leader to accomplish His will. The fact is, God is King over all and God's kingdom will prevail. We already know the end of the story. God's side wins—just read the book of Revelation.

But that doesn't mean God's people won't at times take it on the chin in this age. They will, and according to the Bible, it will happen *often*. The reason of course is rooted in a spiritual conflict. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12)." The battle is real.

Our text today is Mark 6. It's the story of the confrontation between wicked Herod Antipas and God's man, John the Baptist. Significantly, this is the only story in Mark's gospel that doesn't center on Jesus. In Mark 6:14-29 we see what happens when corrupt politics confront God's kingdom. There are four scenes in the story.

I. We see confusion (14-16).

As our story begins Jesus has just finished up His second year of public ministry. He's about to begin His third and final year of ministry, the year of opposition. It's the winter of A.D. 29. The Lord's popularity had recently peaked in Galilee, with crowds gathering wherever He went. Sadly, the folks in His hometown of Nazareth gave Him the cold shoulder and consequently Jesus left there "amazed at their lack of faith (6:6)."

As we saw last time, this rejection actually initiated the reproduction phase of Jesus' ministry, for at this point He began to send out the Twelve two by two. The disciples filled the region with the good news of Jesus. Eventually, the news reached Herod.

Two things happened to Herod which resulted in his confusion.

A. Herod heard rumors about Jesus (14-15). Verse 14—"King Herod heard about this [that is, about the miracle-worker Jesus, perhaps through the testimony and miracle-working of His disciples], for Jesus' name had become well known." That's not surprising. Thus far Jesus has: healed a Capernaum woman from a twelve year bleeding disorder, cast a legion of demons out of a man in the Gerasene region, calmed a raging storm, healed a man with a lame hand, and healed dozens and dozens of others.

As verse 14 continues we see the effect of Jesus' increasing popularity, "Some were saying, 'John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.'" John the Baptist was the prophet-like forerunner of Jesus who preached repentance and prepared people to receive the Messiah. More about him in a moment.

Verse 15—"Others said, 'He is Elijah.'" Elijah was an Old Testament prophet. Malachi 4:5 predicted that God would send Elijah just before the day of the Lord.

"And still others claimed, 'He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.'" The point is, people knew

there was something special about Jesus, but they're not sure just who He is.

But Herod is. Luke's account says that Herod kept trying to see Jesus (Luke 9:9). That would happen, but not for another year. Having heard the rumors...

B. Herod identified Jesus as John the Baptist (16). "But when Herod heard this, he said, 'John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!'"

Herod ordered John's murder just prior to this, in the early winter of A.D. 29. And he can't shake the memory. Everything that comes into his life now reminds him of John. He hears of Jesus and jumps to the conclusion, "It's John, the man I killed! He's come back to life, to haunt me no doubt!"

When a man commits sin and refuses to deal with it God's way, he begins to see the whole world as his enemy. Professionals call it *paranoia*. Herod was guilty of killing John the Baptist and now he's living in fear that someone will expose his wicked deed and that his consequences will catch up with him.

Barclay tells the story about a convict who escaped from prison. After forty-eight hours of freedom he was recaptured, cold, hungry, and exhausted. Ironically, he said it wasn't worth it. "I didn't have a minute," he said. "Hunted, hunted all the time. You don't have a chance. You can't stop to eat. You can't stop to sleep."

That's the word that describes the person who, instead of confessing it, tries to cover up his sin. *Hunted*. Herod can't escape his crime. It hunts him down. When he hears about Jesus, his mind races back to John the Baptist. The memory of his sin haunts and hunts him. My friend, sin may be fun at the time, but sin is never worth the cost.

At this point Mark inserts the story of John the Baptist. Why this parenthesis about John in a biography about Jesus? Possibly when Mark wrote this there was still confusion about who John was (as in Acts 19:1ff) that was hurting the church. Furthermore, the persecution experienced by John, and his resolute faithfulness, would encourage Mark's readers who themselves were facing persecution.

Scene 1—the confusion. Now scene 2...

II. We see confrontation (17-20).

It's interesting that Mark here uses fourteen verses to present John's death, but elsewhere devotes only three to his ministry. His death (and the reasons for it) can teach us much. It had to do with a confrontation involving three parties.

A. It involved Herod (17a). "For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison..."

B. It involved Herodias (17b). Verse 17 concludes, "He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married."

C. It involved John (18-20). Verse 18—"For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'"

We need some background if we're to appreciate this confrontation. There were actually several men who went by the name "Herod." I'm indebted to Barclay for bringing clarity to the very mixed up Herodian family:

When Jesus was born Herod the Great was king. He's the one responsible for the massacre of the children in Bethlehem (Matt 2:16-18). Herod the Great married many times. As he grew older he became insanely suspicious and murdered member after member of his own family, until it became a Jewish saying, "It is safer

to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." Quoting Barclay:

"First, he married Doris, by whom he had a son, Antipater, whom he murdered. Then he married Mariamne, the Hasmonean, by whom he had two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, whom he also murdered. Herodias, the villainess of the present passage, was the daughter of this Aristobulus. Herod the Great then married another Mariamne, called the Boethusian. By her he had a son called Herod Philip. Herod Philip married Herodias, who was the daughter of his half-brother, Aristobulus, and who was therefore his own niece. By Herodias, Herod Philip had a daughter called Salome, who is the girl who danced before Herod of Galilee in our passage. Herod the Great then married Malthake, by whom he had two sons—Archelaus and Herod Antipas who is the Herod of our passage and the ruler of Galilee. The Herod Philip who married Herodias originally, and who was the father of Salome, inherited none of Herod the Great's dominions. He lived as a wealthy private citizen in Rome. Herod Antipas visited him in Rome. There he seduced Herodias and persuaded her to leave her husband and marry him."

By the way, to complete the picture, Herod the Great finally married Cleopatra of Jerusalem, by whom he had a son called Philip the Tetrarch. This Philip eventually married Salome, the unnamed daughter of Herodias in our story.

Now the story comes alive. Mark says that...

1. *John confronted Herod's sin (18)*. Hear him, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." It wasn't lawful for more than one reason. For starters, Herodias was the daughter of his half-brother, thus she was his niece. This was an incestuous relationship. In addition, she was already a married woman for she was wed to his half-brother Philip. This was an adulterous relationship.

And John said so. Matthew records John as saying, "It is not lawful for you to *have her* (Matt 14:4)." Note that John isn't sharing his opinion. He didn't make up the standard. The Lord did. What Herod was doing was a violation of God's law. It was wrong, and John told him so.

When a man breaks his marriage vow to go after a married woman, he's violating God's law and needs to be confronted. It's not a matter of personal liberty and freedom of choice. He can say all he wants, "Well, my wife didn't make me happy and I deserved better," but the fact remains, the man (and the woman, too) has broken God's command and is liable for divine judgment.

By the way, when people today seek to redefine marriage and morality, asserting that it's okay for those of the same sex to marry, realize what's happening. Listen to John again. *It is not lawful*. Whose law is being violated? God's law. This is God's world and God has written the rules that govern behavior, rules designed for our good and His glory. To go against the law is to go against the Giver of the law, God Himself.

Some today will argue, "What happens in an individual's personal life is nobody else's business. If he wants to break his marriage vow, that's his business. If she wants to terminate her pregnancy with an abortion, that's her business. If a young man wants to gratify his lusts with pornography, that's his choice. If two people of the same sex want to cohabit, that's their choice. Freedom of choice—it's our right!"

But this isn't our world, it's God's. And we don't have the right to live however we want in God's world. He commands us to live in obedience to His law.

You say, "But nobody's perfect. We all break God's law." Yes, that's why we need Christ, the perfect law-keeper. The solution isn't to scrap the law, it's to receive Christ, for Christ died to pay the penalty for our law-breaking and to bring us up to God's perfect standard.

It is not lawful, John said. John wasn't being hypocritical. He's not saying, "You're breaking God's Law, something I've never done!" Nor is he looking down his nose at Herod, speaking with a smug glee. He's

speaking as a sinner to a sinner, offering a sober warning. "You're a law-breaker. You need to do what I've done. You need to repent and get right with God."

Calvin said it well, "We behold in John an illustrious example of that moral courage, which all pious teachers ought to possess, not to hesitate to incur the wrath of the great and powerful, as often as it may be found necessary: for he, with whom there is acceptance of persons, does not honestly serve God."

What effect did John's confrontation produce? About the same as it does today.

2. *Herodias wanted to kill John (19)*. Verse 19—"So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to..."

As Manson puts it, Herodias knew that "the only place where her marriage certificate could safely be written was on the back of the death warrant of John."

You see, if you are guilty of sin and someone confronts you, you have two options. One, you can repent and leave your life of sin. Or two, you can take steps to try and get rid of your guilt in other ways. Some try to drown out their guilt with a bottle. Others choose to heap sin upon sin and thereby produce a calloused heart so they don't feel guilt any longer. Others resort to get rid of the standard that reminds them of their guilt.

That's what Herodias wanted to do, to get rid of John, but she lacked the necessary authority. So she did the next best (worst) thing. She nursed a grudge. Bitterness destroys, my friends. Just give it time and it will destroy others and yourself.

3. *Herod heard but did not heed John (20)*. Verse 20—"But she was not able to because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him."

That's interesting. Herod has the power to decide John's fate, but Herod fears John. He knows John's right. He knows John is what he isn't and yet needs to be, a *righteous and holy man*.

Mark indicates Herod even *likes to listen to John*. How ironic! He enjoys hearing God's Word at the very time he is living in blatant adultery. A man named Boswell, in his *London Diary*, tells how he would sit in church and enjoy the worship of God, and while there he would be planning how to pick up a prostitute in the streets of London later that night.

Beloved, the sad fact is that hell will be full of former church goers, folks who in this life enjoyed listening to good preaching, people who like Herod *heard* the Word but refused to *heed* it.

Scene 1—the confusion. Scene 2—the confrontation.

III. We see corruption (21-28).

We see two evidences of corruption in the third scene.

A. There was moral sin (21-24). "Finally the opportune time came."—for Herodias, that is. She's been chomping at the bit to get at John, and her time has come. As the scene unfolds we see three things that all add up to moral sin.

1. *We see a self-absorbed leader*. Verse 21—"On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee." Watch Herod, throwing his own birthday party! And he pulls out all the stops. The guest list includes every high ranking official he can find. Of course, he's scratching their back so they will in turn... *scratch his*.

2. *We see a sensual daughter.* Verse 22—"When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests." Josephus gives her name, *Salome*. Salome is like her mother in so many ways. She's a schemer. She is physically attractive and knows how to use her body to get what she wants from men. She's willing to lower her standards if the price is right.

Barclay comments on the entertainment that day, "Solo dances in those days in such society were disgusting and licentious pantomimes. That a princess of the royal blood should so expose and demean herself is beyond belief because such dances were the art of professional prostitutes. The very fact that she did this is a grim commentary on the character of Salome, and of the mother who allowed and encouraged her to do so."

Sometimes the question is raised, "What does the Bible teach about dancing? Is it okay for a Christian?" Often the example of David is cited to justify dancing. "See, David *danced before the Lord*, so there's nothing wrong with dancing." Hold on. We *might* use David's example to make the point that not all dancing is wrong, but what about our text? Does it not indicate that at least one type of dancing is a provocative and sensual time-bomb? And young people, which type of dancing more closely resembles the typical school dance, David's dance or Salome's?

Salome's dance says as much to us about Herodias as it does her daughter. She's behind the whole plot, as we'll see shortly. Parents, I urge you to pay attention. If you won't deal with your sin problems for your own sake, then think of your kids. They're learning from you, and your example speaks louder than your words. You are paving the road they will walk down in life. Herodias learned God's Word from John, but rejected it. Now her daughter follows suit.

3. *We see the folly of lustful living.* Verses 22b-23—"The king said to the girl, 'Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you.' And he promised her with an oath, 'Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.'"

Sex is a wonderful gift from God intended for the enjoyment of two people in a marriage relationship. But Satan loves to pervert God's gifts. Here we see that sex can be used as a powerful tool, one that causes men (and women) to make decisions they'll later regret.

"Ask me for *anything* you want," Herod blindly blurted out. Herod lived to satisfy his lusts. Salome used her body to feed those lusts and get what she wanted.

Verse 24—"She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?'" She's got a blank check in her hands and she invites mom to help her cash it in. What is it you want most in life? Just think of what Herodias could have asked for: a new house, a vacation, designer clothing, furniture, or money. But she wanted something else.

Her answer? "The head of John the Baptist." You see, as long as John was around, the possibility remained that he might convince Herod to get right with God, and that would mean the end of their relationship. So she made her choice. She chose the fleeting pleasures of sin. *Ask for John's head.*

There's the first evidence of corruption in Herod's household, moral sin. Here's a second evidence.

B. There was ethical sin (25-28). There are two stages to this ethical sin.

1. *Two women chose to murder an innocent man.* Verse 25—"At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: 'I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'"

Note a couple of things that make it clear that Solome is no innocent accomplice in this crime. First, don't

miss the beginning words of verse 25. It's not, "No, Mom, that wouldn't be right," but rather, "*At once* the girl *hurried* in to the king." Secondly, notice her instance, for she told Herod she wanted John's head "*right now*." And thirdly, did you catch how she added to her mother's instructions? "Give me the head of John the Baptist *on a platter*."

Here's a case where it was *wrong* for a daughter to obey her mother, for obedience to God always comes before obedience to any lower authority. That's the basis of ethics, putting God and His will first. But ethics wasn't too important in this house, the result being that two women chose to murder an innocent man. Stage #2...

2. *A leader chose expedience over righteousness.* Verse 26—"The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her."

Mark says that Herod was "greatly distressed." First he had sin problems, now he's got emotional problems. Is there ever a connection between the two?

Suppose that at that very moment Herod went to a 21st century secular counselor. "What are your symptoms, Mr. Herod?" "Anxiety is a big one, doc," Herod replied. "I can't sleep at nights. And I'm fearful. Everybody's out to get me, my step-daughter and even my wife (well, she's not really my wife but she is now; ah, skip it, that's another story). And I get really nervous when I think about this guy who told me I shouldn't have married my wife in the first place. I'm an emotional basket case. I need help, doc. Can you help me get my emotions under control?"

Answer this. Is that Herod's problem, his *emotions*? No. His emotions are working just fine, exactly as God created them to work. His fear and anxiety are God's built-in alarm system designed to say, "Warning! Warning! Something's wrong! Corrective steps needed, and soon!" Does Herod need a sedative so he can sleep? Does he need an anti-depressant so he's not anxious and fearful? No, those would just mask the symptoms. Herod needs to repent and experience God's forgiveness. If he does, his fear and anxiety will be gone. If he refuses to repent, his fear and anxiety will remain—and the worst thing he could do is cover them up for unless he repents he's heading for something infinitely worse than a sleepless night.

Here's Herod's dilemma. If he does the right thing the result will be John's life and his own clear conscience. But his friends will laugh at him and say he's weak. John will keep talking to him about "his sin." And worst of all, his wife will hound him and make his life miserable.

In the end it's a no-brainer to Herod. Here's his choice, verse 27—"So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head." No wonder Jesus later called this Herod a "fox" (Luke 13:31-35). Here's a man who chose expedience over righteousness.

The ethical sin gives birth in verses 27-28—"The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother." Note the lack of shame and repulsion for Salome. Mark says she coldly took the head and gave it to her mother.

The confusion, the confrontation, and the corruption. Now scene #4...

IV. We see consequences (29).

Verse 29—"On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb." Some would say, "What a raw deal! John did the right thing and got nailed for it. Herod and his cronies did the wrong thing—blatantly so—and kept right on sailing. It makes no sense."

The fact is, two things are true of the way this story ends.

A. It's a tragic ending. Corruption galore, for sure. But realize this...

B. It's not the end. The story isn't over.

"But John the Baptist died!" you say. Yes, he died, but his story isn't over. Death isn't the end. There's more to life than these seventy years or so we spend on planet earth. This is the pre-game warm-up.

Herod and Herodias lived on a few more years in their self-centered ways, and then died and unless they repented first, entered eternal torment. The moment John the Baptist's head hit the ground he woke up more alive than ever before in paradise. So who really won?

I don't know what Herodias did with John's head. Perhaps she spoke to it in mockery, "There, preacher John! Your lips will never speak judgmental words against me again!" And if she said that, she was wrong, for in the day of judgment John will rise up to condemn her for her brash refusal to conform to the will of God.

About a year later Herod met Jesus, the morning of the crucifixion. According to Luke 23:8, "When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle." Sadly, Herod began by neglecting John. He ended by mocking Christ.

About ten years later, in A.D. 39 Herod's own nephew (Herod Agrippa, mentioned in Acts 12:1) denounced him to the Roman emperor and Herod lost his throne and was sent into exile. *Be sure your sins will find you out.*

If only Herod had listened to John, how different things could have been. Yes, his sin was terrible, but God was willing to forgive. King David committed sin as black as Herod's. David seduced Bathsheba and authorized the murder of her husband, Uriah. But there's a huge difference between these two kings. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David listened, humbled himself, repented in dust and ashes, and cried out, "O God! Be merciful to me!" And God forgave him. So complete was the forgiveness that David could later testify in Psalm 32:1-2, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit."

Sadly, on the other hand, when confronted by John, Herod listened—he even listened to the point of being perplexed—but he refused to repent. J. D. Jones is right, "Herod might have been where David is; he might have sat at the same King's table as David does; he might have worn the same white robe which David does; he might have joined in the song which David sings; he might have been called 'a man after God's own heart,' as David is—if only he had listened to John and humbled himself and repented."

The Point of the Story: We see why Jesus came...

There are three fundamental realities.

1. Reality #1: We are sinners and powerless to change. You see, the problem for Herod, Herodias, and Salome was at the core no different from our problem. We, too, enter the world with a self-focused bent. We, too, live to gratify our sinful lusts. We, too, resist God's standard. We, too, look for ways to get rid of God's Word—it's why it's so easy to miss church or our morning quiet time. We, too, feed our lusts by watching things we ought not watch and going places we ought not go.

Our stories may be different, but our problem is the same. We are sinners, and we are powerless to change.

2. Reality #2: We will die and spend eternity somewhere. With God or separated from Him. Heaven or hell. Those are the two and only two options.

3. *Reality #3: We need a Savior.* You can be set free from your lusts and self-centeredness. How? There's only one way. Look to the Savior. His name is Jesus Christ.