

# Herodias

MARK 6:14-29

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This morning we continue in our series of lessons on great women of the Bible. Two weeks ago, we looked at Lydia, last week we looked at Priscilla, and last week we opened it up a little bit: Instead of asking for favorite or inspiring Bible characters, we widened the scope to include any women in the Bible we need to study, either good or bad. We know, of course, that we can learn some great and very practical lessons from positive and well-behaved characters in the Bible. But on the other hand, we can also learn some very important lessons from Bible characters that are not good at all. And that is certainly the case this week.

This morning, I would like for us to look at the life of Herodias. Herodias, of course, was the wife of King Herod, and many people have described her as the New Testament equivalent of Jezebel from the Old Testament. Only Herodias is actually much worse. You might remember that Jezebel only tormented God's prophets. Herodias, on the other hand, is actually responsible for the murder of John the Baptist, a man referred to by the Lord himself in Matthew 11:11, where Jesus said, ***"Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!"***

Whenever we discuss anybody in the Herod family, we need to pause as we try to at least make some effort to figure out who these people are and how they are connected. Have you ever heard the song, "I Am My Own Grandpa"? If you have ever heard that song, and if you understand it, then perhaps you might have some chance of understanding the Herod family tree. Several people have tried to diagram the situation, and it is complicated to say the least – there are political alliances, there are marriages between nieces and uncles, there are divorces and remarriages – it is messed up!

I have put an overly simplified family tree on the wall up here, and by way of brief summary, you will notice one of the most famous Herod's at the top, Herod the Great. This is the King Herod who met the wise men on their way to see Jesus. This is the Herod responsible for having all of the baby boys of Bethlehem murdered. From secular history, we know that Herod had somewhere between 5-10 wives (depending on which sources we believe), but we have names for at least five of those wives. And as you can imagine, with that many wives, Herod the Great had a number of children. He actually executed a number of his sons. We know that he also murdered his first wife. He was extremely paranoid, and so he would much rather murder a wife or a son here and there than to risk losing his throne. I have read that it was safer to be Herod's dog than to be his son. Herod the Great died in 4 BC. He was a vicious human being.

Well, when Herod died, his territory was divided up among his four surviving sons, and that is the second level down up here. At some point, Herod the Great's son Philip married Herodias, who was the daughter of another one of Herod's sons, a man by the name of Aristobulus. I am not too good at family relationships, but it seems to me that means that Herod Philip I was married to his niece. Or to put it another way, Herodias married her uncle. But since her uncle came from a different mother, it was slightly more complicated than that, and I don't even know what you would call that. I might refer to him as her half-uncle.

Well, these two (Herodias and Philip) have a daughter by the name of Salome, and Salome figures in to our lesson this morning, so we will get back to her in just a moment.

Herod Antipas also figures into our study this morning. At one point, Herod Antipas was married to the daughter of Aretas, the king of Arabia. Well, somewhere along the line, Herod travels to Rome, falls in love with Herodias, leaves his first wife, convinces Herodias to leave Philip, and the two of them get married. Basically, Herodias jumps from one uncle to another (in marriage), and she brings along her daughter, Salome.

And we are just barely touching the surface here! I think you might agree with me, then, that after looking at King Herod's family tree, being your own grandpa isn't really that much of a big deal anymore! How did King Herod justify leaving his wife of more than 20 years to marry his half-niece Herodias? I don't know! But I do know how people justify all kinds of similar things today, "We are in love with each other!" Or, "Love wins," as many around us will say. "We are in love; therefore, this relationship is okay." Perhaps others will say, "But surely, God wants me to be happy!" Others will say, "But my first marriage was just a mistake, and so it doesn't really count." Others will say, "But I wasn't really in love in my first marriage." Others will say, "That first relationship doesn't really count, because it happened so long ago." Others will say, "But the government sanctions this. I have a marriage license; therefore, it must be okay." I know that I personally have heard all of these. But the idea here at the beginning is: Herodias is deeply imbedded in a messed up, completely dysfunctional family dynamic.

This morning, then, as we look at Herodias, I want us to keep in mind that this account is here for a reason. There is something we can learn from this woman; otherwise, this reference to her life would not be in the Bible. So we need to keep in mind: This woman serves as an example – not an example of what to do, but an example of what NOT to do, because what happened to her could also happen to us. She is an evil human being blinded by sin who hears the word of God and finds a way not only to ignore the message from God but also finds a way to silence it as well.

As we think about the life of Herodias, then, I would invite you to turn with me to Mark 6 (p. 1568). In Mark 6, we find Jesus sending out the twelve apostles. He sends them out in pairs, giving them the ability to do some amazing things, and their mission is to preach. If you are in Mark 6 already, notice what the text tells us in Mark 6:12-13. As the twelve were sent out, Mark says that, ***"They went out and preached that men should repent. And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them."*** Well, at this point, King Herod hears what's going on, he hears that there is a prophet with huge crowds and that this man and his followers are preaching ***"repentance,"*** and King Herod has something of a flashback, a little bit of PTSD kicks in as he thinks back to something that happened a few years earlier with John the Baptist. This brings us to Mark 6:14-18.

<sup>14</sup> ***And King Herod heard of it, for His name [the name of Jesus] had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him."*** <sup>15</sup> ***But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others***

*were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." <sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" <sup>17</sup> For 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. <sup>18</sup> For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."*

- I. I hope you will keep your Bibles open, because we will look at the next few verses in just moment, but as we look at this first paragraph, and as we focus in especially on Herodias here, I would point out, first of all, that **HERODIAS SEES HERSELF AS BEING ABOVE THE LAW - SHE DOES NOT LIKE THE MESSAGE THAT IS BEING PREACHED BY JOHN THE BAPTIST.**

Again, the text tells us (in verse 18) that John, *"had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'"* I would emphasize here: This is not something that John just happened to mention a while back, but this is something that John *"had been saying."* In other words, the message was repeated – over, and over, and over again.

I would also point out that Herod and Herodias are described here as being *"married."* Again, in verse 17, the text tells us that Herod had *"married"* this woman. We need to let that sink in a little bit. It is possible for two people to have a ceremony, to have it recorded down at the courthouse, to perhaps even have a preacher sign on the dotted line, and yet to be living together in a marriage that is *"not lawful"* in the eyes of God. Society saw these two as being married, Rome saw these two as being married, but God's verdict on that relationship was that it is *"not lawful."* If you believe in writing in your Bible, I might suggest circling *"married"* (in verse 17), circling *"not lawful"* (in verse 18), and then connecting those two circles with a line. This is so important for us to understand: Just because the State of Wisconsin might put their stamp of approval on something, and just because the Dane County Clerk might put his stamp of approval on something, does not necessarily mean that it is *"lawful"* in the eyes of God.

There is so much more we could examine with this, but our focus this morning is on Herodias. Here she is, *"married"* to the king, and this preacher keeps on saying that this relationship is *"not lawful."* He was saying, *"You guys have got to knock it off. You think you are married, but in God's eyes your marriage is not lawful"* [paraphrased]. He was saying, *"You two need to get out of this relationship!"* [paraphrased].

And thankfully, John was consistent with this message. To John, it did not matter that this man's father was a madman who had murdered thousands of children. To John, it did not matter that King Herod was a powerful ruler with the power of imprisonment or even death. But to John, all that mattered was his responsibility to preach repentance. There were a thousand ways he could have avoided this situation. He could have kept quiet, he could have invented a loophole, he could have reasoned that it was none of his business, he could have compromised on this issue (as so many have done today), but in the spirit of Elijah, in the tradition of great prophets like Amos and Ezekiel, John would not give in. God's law applies equally – it applies to me, it applies to the President of the United States, it applies to the rich and the poor, it applies to all people in all cultures and in all situations, it applies regardless of what our secular law might say about it, it applies to everybody in this room. And the same is true for every sin – drunkenness, murder, adultery, and the same goes for God's law on marriage. In Matthew 19:9, when Jesus said, *"...whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual sin, and marries another woman, commits adultery,"* that statement applies to *"whoever,"* everybody.

Well, this obviously didn't go over too well with Herodias! In verse 17, the text tells us that Herod had thrown John in prison *"on account of Herodias,"* specifically because John had been saying this (verse 18). You see,

when Herodias considered God's law on this issue, she figured perhaps there should be an asterisk by this commandment, perhaps some fine print explaining that she personally was exempt from this one. And that is the first problem we have with Herodias: She thought that she was above the law. Do we ever see this in politicians today? "Sure, that is what the law says, but I am me! And the law does not apply to me!" That, however, is not a quality limited to the rich and powerful, is it? We think about our own weaknesses. Many times, we might try to do the same thing. "Yes, I know this is what the word of God says, but I am special!" Herodias reminds us, then, that all of us are accountable to God's law, even if we disagree with it. Herodias, though, failed to accept this. She lived her life as if she were above the law.

**II. As we continue in this passage, I want us to move on to verses 19-20 as we find that HERODIAS IS ALSO A TERRIBLE EXAMPLE IN THAT SHE HELD A GRUDGE.**

Notice, please, how Herodias reacts as John keeps on preaching – Mark 6:19-20,

***<sup>19</sup> Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; <sup>20</sup> for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him.***

And so, in her anger, in her stubborn refusal to get out of this sinful relationship, we find here that Herodias holds a grudge. Literally, she is held, as if in a snare. She is trapped, in a sense. On one hand, she refuses to change her behavior, and on the other hand, there is this preacher who refuses to back down on this issue. And so she is trapped. And her husband, Herod, is trapped as well. He won't end this marriage, but he also isn't quite ready to put John to death, either. Matthew's account of this tells us that, ***"Although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet"*** (Matthew 14:5). And so this spineless coward of a king thinks he has found the perfect compromise: He will keep John in prison in an effort to keep his wife happy, he also wants John dead but doesn't have the guts to do it politically; plus, he loves listening to John, so he keeps him alive. Herod tries to walk this narrow line. But all along, his wife is just burning up inside. She is holding a grudge.

I am assuming that some of us have probably experienced holding a grudge from time to time – basically, we're mad at somebody – but as many of us know from experience, there is a great danger in holding a grudge, and the danger is: It has a way of making us bitter against another person, the kind of bitterness that can tear us up inside, the kind of bitterness that has a way of making us miserable. But, that is how this evil woman dealt with hearing the preaching of John the Baptist. The anger inside just kept on building. Of course, she should have just said, "Okay, John, I realize what God says on this issue; I will take my daughter and get out of this situation." But, she has no intention of separating from the king, so she digs in, and it just eats away at her on the inside. And over time, she gets more and more angry at this prophet who refuses to compromise. She holds a grudge. This leads us to what happens next. Unresolved bitterness almost never ends well.

**III. So let's go on to the last paragraph here – we already know that Herodias thinks she is above the law, we know she is holding a grudge, and we find in this last paragraph that SHE IS ALSO A MANIPULATIVE MURDERER WITH NO CONSCIENCE.** Notice, please, Mark 6:21-29,

***<sup>21</sup> A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; <sup>22</sup> 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 me for whatever you want and I will give it to you.”<sup>23</sup> And he swore to her, “Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom.”<sup>24</sup> And she went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.”<sup>25</sup> Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”<sup>26</sup> And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her.<sup>27</sup> Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison,<sup>28</sup> and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.<sup>29</sup> When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.***

Starting in verse 21, we find that Herodias apparently waited for a **“strategic day,”** a strategic moment when she could use her own daughter to so arouse her husband that he would be willing to do just about anything. And that is how it happened. What price would we pay to continue in a sin? This is the price Herodias paid. She is a bitter woman so hateful of the gospel message that she would use her own daughter to murder God’s messenger. John was in the way, and so she made him disappear. She could have asked for anything here, but “anything” was not the plan; the plan was to murder John the Baptist. She was so in love with sin that she would do anything except repent, and that is what she did.

You know, from John’s point of view, he obviously did not want to die. And yet John was more afraid of defying God than he was of defying this woman. And so to John, the choice was clear. In love, John had to keep on sounding the alarm on this marriage.

What is especially sad is that once John is dead, his death changed nothing about that marriage. Even with John gone, it was still not **“not lawful”** for Herod to have this woman as his wife. Herodias was still living in sin, only now, instead of just being an adulterer, she is also now a murderer as well.

### **Conclusion:**

As Herod sobers up from this party, and as the reality of what happens here really starts to sink in over the coming months and years, Herod seems to be haunted by what he had done. And I say this because of what we noticed at the beginning. This episode is not in time sequence. Remember: The reason we have this account here in the gospel record is because Jesus and his disciples are out there preaching repentance (Mark 6:12), and speaking of a powerful preacher preaching repentance, King Herod hears what Jesus is doing, and his first reaction is that John the Baptist has come back from the dead. As I see it, whether he would admit it or not, Herod was at least somewhat bothered the rest of his life by what happened here, perhaps even horrified. I’m thinking about Lady Macbeth trying to wash the blood off of her hands. I’m thinking of the Tell-Tale heart, the short story by Edgar Allan Poe, as the narrator of that story has committed murder and continues hearing the beating of the heart that he has hidden under the floorboards of the house. Perhaps in a similar way, King Herod hears about Jesus preaching repentance and talking about a kingdom coming, and he immediately thinks Jesus is John back from the dead. I guess the only good thing we can say about Herod is that at least he had a conscience, unlike Herodias.

In a story such as this, many of us would like to think that we are John. “I am the one who would speak truth to power.” But, in any story like this, we need to ask ourselves who we REALLY are in the story. So I would ask as we end this morning: Are we Herodias? I certainly hope not, but is there some sin we are holding on to, even to the point of maybe taking steps to cover up what we’re doing? Do we ever think that we personally

might be above the law? “Sure, this is what the word of God says, but I am special.” Would any of us ever hold a grudge against someone telling us the truth about sin? And would we lash out if we had the opportunity? Earlier this week, I read one man who said that if he had the power that Herod had, his own living room would probably be decorated with the severed heads of those who stepped on his toes. That’s pretty gruesome, isn’t it? But at least he’s honest! So the question is: Who are we in this story?

It seems the main idea in this passage is the importance (yet difficulty) of repentance. Repentance is the most difficult step in God’s plan, the challenge of having a change of heart and turning away from sin. For many people (just like Herod and Herodias), repentance will involve getting out of a second marriage, a marriage violating God’s law. For some, repentance might involve taking steps to tackle an addiction. For some, repentance will involve making changes in the family budget. For some, repentance might mean breaking up with a boyfriend or a girlfriend, moving out of the apartment, putting a stop to sexual sin. On the radio this morning on my way to worship, I heard a financial advisor give some advice to a boyfriend and girlfriend who were moving into a condo with each other without being married, and her advice was to get a “no-nup.” We’ve heard of a “pre-nup,” but the new thing these days is apparently a “no-nup,” a written agreement between those who are not married, outlining how to split up the stuff if they ever break up. It is so common these days. And so repentance can be incredibly difficult. There is terrible danger in being so in love with a sin that we refuse to give it up. Even as Christians, we need to keep on thinking about how we’re living – is there something we struggle with? Do we need to get help by confessing it to a Christian friend? Do we need to take it to God in prayer?

But like John, and like the Lord, we are looking for people (and we want to be people) who have counted the cost and are willing to do whatever it takes. At that point (if you are not already a Christian), the Bible teaches that we must then allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water so that our sins can be forgiven. And what a blessing that is, to reenact the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, to be born into God’s family. As my dad read for us earlier, there is a great day coming, ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”*** (2 Corinthians 5:10). There is a day coming when John the Baptist will face God in judgment. There is a day coming when Herodias will face God in judgment. There is a day coming when all of us in this room will face God in judgment. If you have any questions concerning how to prepare for that day, please ask. But if you are ready to follow Jesus, we hope you will let us help in some way. You can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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