

SUFFERING FOR GOD'S STANDARDS

Mark 6:14-29

I wish it were true that everyone's story in this life ended with a happily ever after. That it didn't end in pain and grief and loss and hardship. That every time someone innocent suffered wrongly or cruelly, that they received perfect justice without delay. Or that God would intervene before it even happened in the first place. And that every ruler in this world promoted righteousness, even if only for its incredibly practical benefits on society. But that's just not the case we have this world. That's not what we're seeing. We're living in world that calls evil, good and good, evil. It's a world characterized by disaster and destruction and death, where evil appears to get the last laugh.

Throughout history, for Christians in particular, countless of them have suffered atrocity after atrocity for their faith. Millions of professing Christians have been martyred throughout the course of history for being unwilling to give up their faith. It's a reality many believers live with every day – some putting their lives on the line just going to church in some places. The only reason we are able to read the Bible this morning for ourselves in the first place is because the courageous of God before us gave their lives to translate it – some were burned at the stake like William Tyndale. And our time this morning in the book of Mark reminds us of this grim reality once again – that **those who will live and stand for God in this world often suffer for it. But is that really the end of the story?** That's what we'll look at in this part of chapter 6.

Last week we left off with the disciples of Jesus working their way throughout all the towns and villages in Israel pointing people to Christ and they must have doing a good job because in verse 14 it says, "And King Herod heard of it, for His name 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." But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!"

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. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; 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.

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 me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." 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." And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb."¹

First, one of recurring themes we keep coming across is the peoples' opinion of who Jesus is.

I. THE PEOPLES' OPINIONS ABOUT WHO JESUS IS (VV. 14-16)

Of course we know that Jesus Christ is God (not *a god* or *of* God but the very God Himself, God in human flesh) and that explains His incredible teaching and incredible power to do all sorts of miracles. But the religious leaders, the Pharisees, have come to the conclusion that He's possessed by Satan because He won't accept their hypocritical, man-made system of religious works. But according to this text **the majority of the people it seems now have 3 other opinions:**

A. Opinion #1 – Some think He's just another prophet.

They were saying that He's like one of the prophets from the OT – just another human prophets such as Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Joel, Habakkuk, etc. It's a huge mistake Muslims make today because the Koran teaches Jesus is just another prophet and not God in the flesh. But it would be a misguided conclusion though to say He's just another prophet since He claimed to be God – because if He isn't God, then He's not another prophet, He'd be a false prophet. Jesus was more than prophet. Remember though, it's been a long time, some 400 years since a genuine prophetic voice was in Israel. God hadn't sent them any prophets in a long time so they'd know when John and Jesus came, something big was happening.

B. Opinion #2 – Some think He's a specific OT prophet named Elijah.

You can read about Elijah's unique prophetic ministry in 1 & 2 Kings. He lived 800 years before Christ came and did powerful miracles as well, like resurrecting a widow's son, calling down fire from heaven, ceasing rain, sending rain, parting the Jordan River. Why would they come to the conclusion that Jesus is Elijah? Other than the **miraculous power**, we find two main reasons: #1) **Elijah didn't taste death**. One day God just took him up to heaven by a fiery chariot led by heavenly horses (2 Ki. 2). He went up like a whirlwind and disappeared out of his younger successor's sight (Elisha). Based on the way he went, he could come back and there was biblical reasoning for that which is reason #2) in the last couple verses of our OT in the book of **Malachi**, it was prophesied that before the great and terrible day of the Lord, God would send Elijah again. "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the great prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord."

But Jesus said that this prophecy was actually witnessed by John the Baptist's coming. We'll study that more in chapter 9 of Mark, where Jesus said, "If you're willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come." John ate like Elijah and dressed like him. The difference between the two is that John never did one miracle... all he did was preach and he was considered the greatest prophet to ever live.

C. Opinion #3 – Some think He's the resurrected John the Baptist.

John the Baptist, remember, was Jesus' frontrunner that we studied in chapter 1. He started his ministry about a year before Jesus did and preached that men should repent and look to Jesus who could usher in the Kingdom of God for them. His whole ministry was to point people to Jesus Christ and he did that for approximately 12-14 months. However, because he had an emphasis on repentance and he stood for God's standards of morality he ended up in prison for the last 2 years of his life. And as this text reveals, it was at the hand of Herod Antipas that he was put in prison and eventually executed.

This is **Herod Antipas** is different from his dad, Herod the Great. Herod the Great is the one who tried to kill Jesus when he was born and had every male under 2 years old murdered. That's how paranoid he was about protecting his throne when he heard a king had been born. In fact, he so wanted to protect his throne that he had his some of his family, including his own sons killed after suspicions that they were eyeing his throne.ⁱⁱ When he died, however, his wealth and land was divided among his remaining sons and one of them, **Herod Antipas, was given the areas of Galilee and Perea**. And even though Mark calls him a king, he really wasn't. It is what he wanted to be, just like his father, but only ruled an area ¼ of the size of his father, under **Tiberius Caesar**. Better than the word king would be tetrarch – a client king. His job was to keep everyone happy and maintain peace.

And we learn a lot about Herod from the text and from history. Both describe him as a **nominal convert** to Judaism.ⁱⁱⁱ What I mean by nominal is that he was a **convert in name only, not in practice**. A nominal Christian today is someone who says they're a Christian but they really don't go much beyond that. They may be baptized or give an offering here and there but they never let God's Word or the Gospel penetrate their hearts. They go and listen, but never respond. They never face their sin when their conscience prompts them too. Nominalism plagues churches everywhere. The mindset is, *"I want to go to heaven and I realize I'm not the best person but I'm not the worst, and I guess I'm willing do some religious thing to get there like get baptized, but God must not interfere with my life beyond that."* That was the case with Antipas. And it's the reason why he liked to listen to John preach but was left perplexed by his preaching. He wanted John's God without the devotion to God. And there's a dire warning in that: so long as we are unwilling to be open and honest about our sinfulness and need to trust Christ, we can be left in a similar state – unconverted in the heart, without the Spirit of God to illuminate God's Word for us.

And the idea of John the Baptist raising from the dead really became this man's **greatest fear** because it was at his command that John was put to death. He literally thinks John has come back to haunt him. The historian Josephus actually said that after John was beheaded, Herod lost a great portion of his army and rumor was going around it was a divine judgment for John's death. There's no way to prove that but it does help us understand his fear at this point. He killed **the most revered man in Israel for a time and in was stuck in his conscience**. **Everyone was afraid to touch him John**, even the religious leaders who disagreed with him (Mt. 14:5; 21:26). So not only was he afraid of John because he was righteous but he was afraid that if he killed John, the people would cause an uprising as well and if he wanted to be a happy tetrarch-king then he had to keep Rome happy by keeping the peace in his district. But that didn't last long because at his own birthday party, under the pressure of his own foolish oath and the pressure of his wife and peers to keep that oath, he had John executed anyway. That's what we look at next.

In reflecting on Herod's false conclusion that Jesus is John the Baptist, Mark goes into great detail to reveal the highly immoral corruption behind John's death.

II. **THE ARREST & DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST. (VV. 17-29)**

If we were to go into great detail about the Herods or the Caesars during this time, it would be a mistake because they were *unspeakably immoral*. Murder, incest, pedophilia... from one generation to the next. And remember, **these are leading men and women of the times! We need to pray for the integrity of the leadership of our country**. But sticking to the details of the text,

originally Herodias was the wife of Antipas' brother Philip which would've been her half-uncle, then became a mistress of her step-uncle and eventually married Antipas. Antipas actually left his wife for Herodias and John the Baptist is the one who called them out on it, saying it was "unlawful". Leviticus 18:12-16 and 20:19-21 says these kinds of relationships are abhorrent to God.

But because John called them out on it, Herodias wanted to have him killed. She doesn't want to hear anyone say that what she's doing is wrong so she tells her husband to kill him, but there Antipas knows in his conscience that John is right and tries to appease both her and his conscience by putting him in jail instead. And John was in there so long that he started questioning if Jesus was the one they were waiting for. It reminds us of the big theodicy question we ask when we're suffering or looking around at this world, "If God is good and sovereign, why are You allowing this to happen?" He was expecting the Messianic kingdom of God to come then and he'd be freed, but since Christ's rejection, awaits His Second Coming, right? But John was never freed.

In fact, a "strategic day came" for Herodias to finally get her desire. Antipas throws a big "stag party" for all the leading men around and at this party, his niece **Salome** (according to Josephus), the daughter of Herodias, comes and does this dance for him and all the guests and he is apparently so pleased with this that he makes her a ridiculous offer, saying, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you – even half the kingdom." And she's just a teenage girl who has no idea what to ask for so she goes to her mom and asks her and it's incredible that out of all the things in the world that she could've asked for, she asks for the head of John the Baptist – it's like saying, "Give me anything but moral standards!" And her daughter Salome is so immoral herself that she doesn't even question it. She goes straight to Herod and says, "I want, at once, you to give me on a platter the head of John the Baptizer." That tells us something about the impact we can have on our kids. They can be trained in good or evil.

? How are your kids being trained? In good or evil? Do they even know the difference? Many kids today growing up don't even believe in moral standards or think they can create their own, as if morals are just relative or subjective to change. The reason they believe this is because their parents and teachers have denied the source of moral standards, which is God.

This text makes you angry and mournful at the same time because it's terrible to see this young girl so lost. It's just like many of our kids today who after being led astray into thinking Hollywood's prescription for love and relationships is the way to go have ruined their lives. The most satisfied people in this world in the long run and the most satisfying marriages are those who go about it God's way, saving sex until marriage and keeping the marriage bed pure – Hebrews 13:4 says that **God's design for marriage like that is to be held high in honor**. But I think we do them a great disservice if all we do is set the standard and don't equip them to keep it. Otherwise, we're just setting them up for failure so I want to give us **a few equipping principles** for knowing how to possess our own vessels, Paul said – how to steer our own ship as those who know God (1 Thess. 4:2-5).

1. Get the Relationship Picture – the theology behind sex & marriage.

Until we find God as our all, we will greatly struggle with that and not be satisfied in that area of sexual purity since marriage & sex is theologically designed to reflect God and our relationship with him. I talked about this in our last study of Creation (Gen. 2) available online on our website. Sex is the most intimate thing in this world and carries the intimate picture of God. When the God created man, the Godhead deliberated saying, "Let us make man in our image, according to our

likeness.” He gave us a personality like Him but He also made us male and female so that after marriage, the two become one flesh. Just like there is a oneness to God in three persons, so there is a oneness to the husband and wife and their relationship with God. But sex, as theological as it is, is a picture and not a replacement for our relationship with God. A lot of people try to satisfy their longing for intimacy with God through intimacy with another person, but when someone finds God as their all, that drive is greatly curbed because we were created first for a relationship with Him.

2. Run

There are always going to be times where it is necessary to just run away from temptations. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:18, “Flee immorality”. It’s a graphic picture of Joseph in Genesis 39:12 who had to literally run away from Potiphar’s wife who was trying to get him to do commit adultery.

3. Refocus

Refocus on God’s Word. In Psalm 101:3, David learned to set no evil thing before his eyes. Refocus by memorizing Scripture like that to bring to mind when temptation comes.

4. Replace

Read Romans 13:11-14. In the same context Paul says, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provisions for the flesh in regards to its lusts.” Stop providing opportunities for the flesh to lust and provide opportunities for the Spirit – like replace your late night internet browsing with prayer.

5. Realize & Rely

Realize you cannot do this on your own but you must rely on the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16). Apart from Him we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5) and by Him we can do all things (Phi. 4:11).

The next one is straight from our text. **We need to care more about obedience to God than what others think of us.** There’s good reason to believe that Herod legally could’ve been loosed from his oath because for one, it was made in *error*, two, in *exaggeration* and three, her command *transgressed the Law* and didn’t have to be granted. But here’s the thing, **Herod cared more about his cool reputation than he did his obedience to God.** There’s nothing like a little peer pressure to test what we really believe, right? When the pressure is on, we find out if we really believe something, if it has become a personal conviction or if we just sort of intellectually agree with it.

Chip Ingram gave a great example of the difference between when we **intellectually agreeing** with something and when it is actually a **personal conviction**. In his book called *Love, Sex, and Lasting Relationships* that when he was in college he was a Resident Assistant. And during their training, certain statements were made like “*Premarital sex is wrong.*” And the RA’s who agreed with the statement were told to go to right side of the gym and those who disagreed, go to the left. And with the sexual revolution raging at that time, out 70 students in the room, 67 went to the far left side saying they disagreed. 2 of them though, Christians in his Bible study, walked to the far right, unconditionally agreeing with the statement. What did Chip do? He said he walked about two steps to the right of the middle line. He said “I had a problem. I was willing to move a little in the right direction, but I wasn’t committed and I wasn’t definite. I had an intellectual belief that sex before marriage is wrong, but my conviction wasn’t fully developed. I didn’t believe the point of openly acting on that belief 100 percent of the time.” He said, “There’s nothing like social pressure or peer pressure to demonstrate the strength of our convictions (or lack of them).”^{iv} So I want to ask you guys this morning? Are your beliefs definite?

? Are your beliefs definite when the pressure is on?

Are we like John who would suffer for the standards of God no matter what or like Herod who when all the eyes are on him, forgets the all-seeing eyes of God? Herod caved under pressure against his conscience. He sends for the executioner and has John beheaded in jail and the platter brought to Salome who brought it to her mom. At least we find a bit of rest in that John's disciples were able to come and give him a decent burial.

And this word Mark uses for **executioner** is not a Greek word like the rest of the words around it. It's a Latin word, *spekoulator* (like speculator), which basically means a lookout officer. And this little Latin word reminds of the **original, Latin speaking audience** in Rome Mark is writing too. He is writing to believers in Rome undergoing persecution for their faith, facing similar fates as John the Baptist because they were unwilling to deny Christ. They too, were living in an incredibly immoral culture under unspeakable immoral rulers. Mark knows they will relate to this story and know that they're not alone – **persecution is not strange for God's people.**

? God allows it, but why? Why does He allow those who make a stand for Him to suffer? Why doesn't He prevent it? Why didn't He prevent John's?

I want to give us a few reminders why in closing:

We live in a fallen world that's in a spiritual battle

One thing to remember is that we live in a fallen world that is marred by sin. God didn't create us as robots or machines that only do what we're programmed to do. He gave us the ability to choose. He created us as beings who out of a display of our love for Him, will choose to obey Him. The death and destruction and disasters in this world are the result of our lack of love for God. It's the depravity of our own sin and we can't blame God for it all. On top of that, there's a spiritual battle going on that we can't see the details of. We see some in Job, where Satan afflicts Job, trying to get him to denounce God, but Job doesn't. He trusts God is good even if God slays him.

God is glorified in the face of His enemies by faithful witnesses

When someone is willing to die for Christ, that's not a total win for Satan because as it's been said, the blood of Christians is seed. Their courage to die for what they believe in triggers other people to question the worth of what they believe.

Suffering produces Christlikeness

Suffering produce an eternal weight of glory (Rom. 8). 2 Corinthians 4:6 says **we don't lose heart because even though our outer man is wasting away but our inner man is renewed day by day.** What are we being renewed too? To the image of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul embraced becoming like Christ in His death and sufferings. Paul said, "I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." He understood God works all things for the good of those who love Him.

He'll use it for ministry

One of those ways He uses it for good is by equipping us for ministry later. When someone else is going through the same affliction that you went through, you're the one He will send to comfort them in their affliction. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in our affliction so that we will be able to

comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor. 1:3-11).

It make us long for our heavenly home and resurrected bodies

And that’s a good longing. Longing for our heavenly home makes us live for it and not this world. There’s nothing wrong with longing to be clothed with our heavenly body and at home with the Lord. “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight – we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. There we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. 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.” The mention of judgment leads us to the last point.

God patiently waits to settle the scores

The reality about this story is that for John, it’s just the beginning of eternal bliss free of judgment. Don’t feel sorry for John. Feel sorry for Herod who gained the world but lost his soul and will be judged for it. **God allows evil to exist and sinners to sin because He is patient and merciful and gracious. He gives men time to repent and be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.**

If you’re here today and you’ve never accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, I want you to know that you can be set free from the judgment you deserve through faith in Him. Whatever you do, do not go home from this message thinking that if you just try harder to be a good person you’ll get to heaven. You can’t do it. You need Christ for salvation and the power of His Spirit to live for Him. The Bible says believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and your record of sinful deeds can be wiped clean. “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. **He who believes in Him is not judged**; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” Believe on Christ today.

ⁱ *New American Standard Bible* translation.

ⁱⁱ Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 2* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 159.

ⁱⁱⁱ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of Messiah from a Messianic Jewish Perspective, Volume 2* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries), 503.

^{iv} Chip Ingram, *Love, Sex and Lasting Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015), 190-192.