

The Death of John the Baptist

“Herod silences the Herald— but cannot silence the Kingdom.”

(Matt. 14:1-13a; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9)

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November 2, 2025

Introduction – in Matthew 14:1-2.

“Herodias was a member of the Herodian dynasty, a family notorious for its complex and often scandalous relationships.”

Context: Mission. Persecution. Ministry.

1. John’s Courageous Witnessing – in Matthew 14:3-4.

- John rebukes Herod’s *illegal* marriage.
- John is loyal to God, not to political leaders.
- App: In a culture of social compromise, are we willing to speak the truth?

2. Herod’s Paranoia – in Matthew 14:5 & Mark 6:20

- Herod feared John, knowing he was a righteous man.
- He was perplexed; he liked to listen to John.
- App: Many admire truth, but resist repentance. Do you know someone like that?

3. Herodias’ “Grudge” – in Matthew 14:6-11 & Mark 6:21-29

- The grudge, the manipulative dance, and the naive vow.
- Revenge, pride, money, sexuality, debauchery, and power = a recipe for disaster.
- App: Righteousness is not rewarded in here— it is rewarded in eternity.

4. Jesus’ Reaction – in Matthew 14:12,13a

- Jesus withdraws to a solitary place.
- John’s death foreshadows Jesus’ own rejection and sacrifice.
- **Illustration: John was not the head.**

Following our last sermon, today we'll look at the death of John the Baptist—a unique and pivotal event in the Gospels. There are several reasons why this moment is narrated here:

- As we've seen in recent weeks, the disciples were sent to preach repentance. John's courage exemplifies that mission.
- They were also warned about persecution—a harsh reality in their time. John's beheading illustrates it vividly.
- Above all, this story fits into God's salvation plan. John was such an emblematic figure that many associated him with the Christ. His death clarifies that he was a prophet—not the Saviour.

Historical Context: The Herodian Family

Before we dive into the sermon, let me briefly introduce the Herodian family:

- Herod the Great—the one who killed all children under age two out of fear of Jesus.
- Herod Archelaus—his son, who ruled Judea after his father's death. He was so evil that Jesus' family fled to another province for safety.
- Herod Antipas—the Herod in today's text. He was in an adulterous and incestuous relationship with Herodias.

"The Herodian dynasty—a family notorious for its complex and often scandalous relationships." (Unknown author)

Political Context: The Herodian Family

- The Herodian dynasty had no Israeli blood. They were descendants of Esau, Israel's brother.
- Esau lost his birthright to Israel, and during Jesus' time, no Israeli accepted Herodian rule.
- They were considered illegitimate rulers—puppets of Rome.
- Yet they remained in power, which speaks volumes about their influence, wealth, and political maneuvering.

Illustration: *Think of Hamas in Palestine, Maduro in Venezuela, or Lula in Brazil—leaders or parties who devastate their countries, are hated by their people, and yet remain in power.*

Today's Sermon Structure: 1 Story, 4 Characters, 4 Lessons.

My goal is that you'll step into each character's shoes and draw practical lessons—things to do, or avoid.

1. John's Courageous Witnessing – in Matthew 14:3-4.

Why was John in prison?

- He committed no crime.
- He didn't claim kingship or incite rebellion.
- He simply told the truth.

In Canada, freedom of speech is protected. In Herod's land, truth-telling was treated as a political crime. John knew Herod was stiff-necked, yet he preached righteousness anyway—rebuking the king both publicly and privately. Herod locked him up to silence him.

John feared God and His Word more than man or the sword. He warned Herod and Herodias that their marriage was incestuous and adulterous. In return, they persecuted him.

Application: In a culture of compromise, are we willing to speak the truth?

2. Herod's Paranoia – in Matthew 14:5 & Mark 6:20

Herod was a tormented man. His family history was riddled with:

- Incest
- Bloodshed
- Bribery
- Public rejection
- Opposition from Zealots, Pharisees, and Essenes
- Pressure from Caesar

When John confronted him, Herod was caught:

- He wanted to kill John but feared public backlash.
- He kept John alive, but his wife demanded his death.
- He knew John spoke truth, and visited him in prison, conflicted.

Herod was trapped:

- Kill John, and face public outrage.

- Keep John alive, and face domestic pressure.
- Obey John by divorcing Herodias, and lose power.

It's in life's crossroads that the core values are revealed—and Herod failed. He admired truth but refused repentance.

Application: Many admire truth but resist transformation. Do you know someone like that?

3. Herodias' "Grudge" – in Matthew 14:6-11 & Mark 6:21-29

Revenge, pride, money, lust, debauchery, power—a recipe for disaster. Herodias held a deep grudge. Imprisonment wasn't enough. Perhaps Herod kept John locked up to protect him from her.

Birthday parties are meant to celebrate life—not politics or executions. But Herodias hijacked the occasion for revenge.

She exploited the drunken king and used her daughter (Salome, according to Josephus) to seduce and manipulate. The Bible doesn't specify the dance, but the context suggests it was sensual. The king was "pleased" and made a vow.

In Israel, vows were sacred—whether to God or pagan deities. Herod was trapped by his own words.

He killed John:

- Against his will
- In the wrong place
- For the wrong reasons
- Embarrassed before his guests
- Deceived by his own family

Instead of a sweet birthday cake, he received a bloody head on a platter. John died in prison, "forgotten"—once the greatest prophet, the herald of the Messiah, now assassinated.

Application: Righteousness isn't rewarded here—it's rewarded in eternity.

4. Jesus' Reaction – in Matthew 14:12,13a

"When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place."

Jesus mourned the death of a friend, a partner in ministry, a righteous man.

He withdrew to avoid conflict with Herod. Earlier, Herod—tormented by guilt—thought Jesus was John reincarnated.

Jesus wasn't interested in political rivalry or premature death at Herod's hands.

John's death foreshadowed Jesus' own rejection and sacrifice. His death was appointed from the beginning—the cross, His resurrection, the salvation of all who believe.

In Matthew 10:40, we read: *“He who receives you (the messenger) receives Me (Christ).”*

The Herodian family rejected the messenger—and ultimately rejected Christ.

Luke 9:9 says Herod was curious about Jesus and wanted to see Him. Years later, during Jesus' trial under Pontius Pilate, Herod finally saw Him—but mocked and dismissed Him.

Jesus gave Herod the silent treatment. He didn't speak a word. Herod had killed the messenger (John)—and lost the message (Jesus).

Conclusion.

John finished the race and kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7). He had the honor of heralding the King—and did so faithfully. “He must increase, and I must decrease.” (John 3:30) John lived out his motto.

Final Illustration: “John Was Not the Head”

It may not sound romantic, but the spiritual message behind John's beheading is profound and eternal. John was beheaded so that all would know—he wasn't the head. Jesus is the Head and the Saviour of the world.

A poem to conclude the sermon:

The room is filled with laughter, music, and indulgence. But one candle stands apart—quiet in the prison. It simply shines. John was that candle.

In Herod's court—a place of compromise, manipulation, and moral decay—John stood as a lone light of truth. He didn't shout to be heard; he simply burned with conviction. And though the banquet swallowed him, his light was not extinguished. It became a beacon that pointed to Christ.

“The banquet ended. The music faded. But the light of truth kept burning.”

