

PEOPLE OF THE HOLY BIBLE

5. John and Herod

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“For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly” Mark 6:20.

John sought no honour among men. It was his delight to say concerning our Lord Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Yet, though John sought no honour of men, he had honour; for it is written, “Herod feared John.” Herod was a great monarch, John was but a poor preacher whose garment and diet were of the coarsest kind; but “Herod feared John.” John was more royal than royal Herod. His character made him the true king, and the nominal king trembled before him. A man is not to be estimated according to his rank, but according to his character. The peerage which God recognises is arranged according to a man’s justice and holiness. He is first before God and holy angels who is first in obedience; and he reigns and is made a king and a priest whom God hath sanctified and clothed with the fair white linen of a holy life. Be not covetous of worldly honours, for you will have honour enough even from wicked men if your lives are “holiness unto the Lord.”

Let it be written on John’s tomb, if he needs an epitaph, “Herod feared John.” Only there is one better testimonial which any minister of the gospel might be glad to receive, and it is this: “John did no miracle, but all things which he spake concerning this man were true.” He wrought no marvellous work, which astonished his generation, but he spake of Jesus, and all that he said was true: God grant that our Master’s servants may win such praise.

My subject at this time does not lead me to speak so much of John as of Herod. I desire to have no Herod in this congregation, but I am anxious about some of you lest you should be like him;

therefore I will speak out of the tenderness of my heart with the desire that none of you may follow the steps of this evil king.

I would ask you, firstly, to consider THE HOPEFUL POINTS IN HEROD'S CHARACTER. First, we find that Herod respected justice and holiness, for "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy." I like to see in every man a respect for virtue even if he himself has it not, for it may be that the next step will be to desire it, and he that desires to be just is almost so. Some have brought their minds to such a pitch of sinfulness that they despise goodness, and ridicule justice and devotion. May God grant that we may never by any process be brought into such a fearful condition as that. When the conscience comes to be so confused as to lose its reverence for that which is good and holy, then is a man in a sad plight indeed. Herod was not in that condition; he honoured justice, honesty, truth, courage, and purity of life. Though he had not these things himself, yet he had a salutary dread of them, which is a near approach to respect for them. I know I am speaking to a great many who respect everything that is good and right; they only wish they were good and right themselves. So far, so good.

The next good point I see in Herod was that he admired the man in whom he saw justice and righteousness, and that is a step further; for you may admire an abstract virtue, and yet when you see it actually embodied in a man you may hate him. The ancients recognised justice in Aristides, and yet some of them grew sick of hearing him called "the just." A man may be acknowledged to be just and holy, and for that very reason he may be dreaded. You like to see lions and tigers in the Zoological Gardens, but you would not like to see them in your own room; you would very much prefer to view them behind bars and within cages; and so very many have respect for religion, but religious people they cannot bear. They admire justice! How eloquently they speak of it, but they do not like to deal justly. They admire holiness! but if they come across a saint they persecute him. "Herod feared John," and tolerated John,

and went the length of even keeping John for a while out of the hands of Herodias. Many of you like the company of God's people; in fact, you are out of your element when you get with the profane, you cannot endure them, and from those that practice debasing vices you fly at once. You delight in choice company. So far, so good; but that is not enough; we must go much further, or else we may remain like Herod after all.

A third good point about Herod was that he listened to John. It is nothing wonderful that you and I should listen to sermons; but it is rather wonderful that a king should do so, and such a king as Herod. Monarchs do not often care for religious discourses, except such as come from court preachers, who wear fine raiment, and use soft speech. John was not the kind of man for a king's palace — too rough, too blunt, too plain-speaking; his words thrust too much home: yet Herod heard him gladly. It was a hopeful point in his character that he would hear a man who preached justice, holiness, and the "Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." It is a fine point and a hopeful point in any man that he will hear and listen to an honest proclamation of God's word, even though it come home to his conscience. Perhaps I address some of you who hear the gospel only now and then; and when you drop into a religious meeting you are like the dog in the library who would gladly have changed all the books for a single bone. There are many such people in London. Religion does not suit them: places of entertainment are much more to their minds. Some say of the preacher, "I won't hear him again, he cuts too closely; he is too personal." John said to Herod that it was not lawful for him to have his brother's wife; but, though he spoke so plainly, Herod listened to him, because "he was a just man and an holy." That was well of Herod, and it is well in you, my friend, if you are willing to hear the gospel, however practically it is spoken. So far, so good.

But there was a better point still in Herod; he obeyed the word to which he listened. Herod heard John gladly, "And when he heard him he did many things." Many of our hearers do nothing;

they hear, they hear, they hear, and that is the end of it. They learn the way, they know the way, they are expert in the way, but they do not follow the way. They hear the gospel invitation, but they come not to the feast. Some seem to think that religious duty lies in hearing first, and talking afterwards; but they are mistaken. Herod knew better than that. He was not a hearer only, he did do something, and it is remarkable that the text tells us that “he did many things.” Perhaps these were some of the many things:— he discharged a tax gatherer who imposed upon the people, or righted the wrongs of a neglected widow, or altered a cruel law which he had promulgated, or changed his habits and manners in certain respects; certainly in many points he was an improved man, for John the Baptist had an influence with him for good, “For Herod feared John, and when he heard him he did many things.” I am speaking to some who, when they hear a sermon, put a part of it into practice, and they have done many things since they first attended here, for which we are very grateful. I have known a man become charmed with the gospel, and he has given up his drunkenness, and his Sabbath breaking, and he has tried, and succeeded, in a great measure, in leaving off profane language, and thus he has greatly improved. And yet, and yet he is only a Herod, after all; for Herod was Herod, after he had done many things; and, in his heart, he was still prepared for all sorts of wickedness. Yet he did amend somewhat, and so far, so good.

There was another point about Herod, namely, that he continued to hear the preacher gladly; for it is put into the end of the verse as if to indicate that he heard John still. John touched his conscience; but after all, he still heard him gladly. He said, “Send for John the Baptist again.” Henry the Eighth would listen to Hugh Latimer though he denounced him to his face, and even sent him on his birthday a handkerchief, on which was marked the text, “Whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.” Henry cried, “Let us hear honest Hugh Latimer.” Even bad men admire those who tell them truth. However unwelcome the warning,

they believe it to be honestly spoken, and therefore they respect the preacher. A good point this. You who are present and unconverted have heard most cutting sentences from me, you have heard of “judgment to come,” and of that eternal wrath which rests upon those who die in their sins: let me warn you then, that if, after hearing the denunciations of God’s Word, you are still willing to hear, I have great hopes of you. So far, so good.

There was yet one other point about Herod, and that is, his conscience was greatly affected through the preaching of John; for I am inclined to think that a certain translation, which renders the passage, “Herod did many things,” in another way, may be a correct one, “Herod was perplexed,” or, “Herod was made to hesitate.” Such a sense is found in some manuscripts. He loved his sin, and he could see a “beauty of holiness” in religion, and he wished to be holy; but there was Herodias, and he could not give her up. When he heard a sermon, he was like a relative of his in after days, “almost persuaded,” yet he did not give up his lust. He could not go the whole length John would have him go. He could not leave his bosom sin, and yet he felt as if he wished to leave it. There was a halting between two opinions, a hesitating, a wavering: he was inclined to good if he could have good and have his pleasure too; but his pleasure was so very much his master that he could not escape from it. He was like a bird taken with lime-twigs: he wanted to fly; but, sad to say, he was willingly held, limed by his lust. This is the case with many of our hearers. Their consciences are not weaned from their sins; they cannot give them up, and yet they wish they could. They linger on the brink, and fear to launch away. They are almost out of Sodom, have almost escaped the fire shower, and yet in all probability they will stand like Lot’s wife, a pillar of salt, because they will look back, and love the sin that lingers in their heart. Consciences nowadays seem to have gone out of fashion; but to have a conscience sensitive to the preaching of the Word is an admirable thing; and if you have

such a thing, so far, so good.

There were six good points about Herod, then. But now, secondly, very sorrowfully, I want to indicate THE FLAWS IN THE CASE OF HEROD. The first flaw was this, that though he loved John, he never looked to John's Master. John never wanted anybody to be his disciple, but he cried, "Behold the Lamb of God." Herod was, after a sort, a follower of John, but never a follower of Jesus. It is easy for you to hear the preacher and love him and admire him, and yet the preacher's Master may be all unknown to you. I pray you, dear friends, do not let this be the case with any of you. I am the bridegroom's friend, and I shall rejoice greatly when the bridegroom wins your hearts. God forbid that my ministry should ever lead you to myself and cause you to stop there. We are only sign-posts pointing to Christ. Go beyond us. Be ye followers of us as far as we are followers of Christ, but in no other respect. It is to Christ you must go: the end of all our ministry is Christ Jesus. We want you to go to him direct, to seek from him pardon, from him redemption, from him a change of heart, from him a new life; for vain will it be if you have listened to the most faithful of preachers, and have not listened to the preacher's Master and obeyed his gospel. You will be Herods, and nothing more, unless grace leads you to Jesus Christ.

The second flaw about Herod's case was this, that he had no respect for goodness in his own heart. He admired it in another, but there was none of it in himself. Our Saviour described Herod admirably. What a master sketcher of human portraits was Christ! He said of Herod, "Go ye and tell that fox." Herod was a foxy man, selfish, full of tricks; timid when he was in the presence of his superiors, but both cruel and bold when he was in the presence of those who could not defend themselves. We sometimes meet with these foxy people; they want to go to heaven, but they like the road to hell. They will sing a hymn to Jesus; but a good roaring song they like also when they get merry companions together. By all manner of means, a guinea to

the church. Oh yes! admirable thing. But how many guineas are spent upon some secret lust? So many try to dodge between God and Satan. They do not want to fall foul of either; they hold with the hare and run with the hounds: they admire all that is good, but they do not want to have too much of it themselves. It might be inconvenient to carry the cross of Christ on their own shoulders and become precise and exact in their own lives, yet they never say a word against other people doing so. It is a fatal flaw to have no root in yourself — a damning flaw, condemning your own self, — to know the right and disregard it, to feel respect for it and yet trample it under foot. I judge that the doom of such will be far more dreadful than that of those who never knew the good, who were trained up in the purlieu of vice, and never had a glimpse of holiness or purity, and therefore never deliberately turned away from them.

Another flaw in Herod's character was that he never loved the word of God, as God's word. He admired John, and probably said, "That is the man for me. See how boldly he delivers his Master's message: that is the man I should like to hear." But he never said to himself, "God sent John; God speaks to me through John; oh that I might learn what John is speaking, and be instructed and improved by the word John is uttering, because it is God's word." No, no. I do pray you, ask yourselves, dear hearers, whether this may not apply to you. May it not be that you listen to a sermon because it is Mr. So-and-so's discourse, and you admire the preacher? It will be fatal to you if you treat the word in that way. It must be to you what it is in truth, the word of God, or it will not save you. It will never impress your soul unless you accept it as the word of God, and bow before it, and desire to feel all its power as coming to you fresh from the lips of God, and sent into your heart by his Holy Spirit.

Now, we know Herod did not receive the word as the word of God because he was a picker and chooser in reference to it. He did not like John's discourse when he spoke of the seventh

commandment. If he spoke of the fourth commandment he would say, "That is admirable; the Jews ought to keep it:" but when he dealt with the seventh commandment Herod and Herodias would say, "We do not think preachers should allude to such subjects." I have always noticed that people who live in the practice of vice think the servants of God ought not to allude to things so coarse. We are allowed to denounce the sins of the man-in-the-moon and the vices of savages in the middle of Africa; but as to the everyday vices of this city of London, if we put our finger upon them in God's name, then straightway some one cries, "It is indelicate to allude to these things." John dealt with the whole word of God, and he did not only say, "Behold the Lamb of God;" but he cried, "The axe is laid to the root of the trees." He spoke plainly to the conscience. Herod, therefore, had this fatal flaw in his character that he did not attend to all that John delivered of the word of God: he liked one part, and did not like another. He resembled those who prefer a doctrinal discourse, but cannot endure the precepts of God's word. I hear one exclaim, "I like practical discourses; I do not want any doctrine." Don't you? There is doctrine in God's word, and you are to receive what God gives you: not half a Bible, but the whole truth as it is in Jesus. That was a great fault in Herod; he did not receive the testimony of John as the word of God.

Next, Herod did many things, but he did not do all things. He who receives the word of God in truth, does not only attempt to do many things; but he tries to do all that is right. He does not give up one vice, or a dozen vices, but he endeavours to forsake every false way, and seeks to be delivered from every iniquity. Herod did not care for a thorough reformation, for that would call for too great a self-denial. He had one sin he wished to keep, and when John spoke plainly about that he would not listen to him.

Another fault with Herod was that he was under the sway of sin. He had given himself up to Herodias. She was his own niece, and had been married to his own brother, and was the

mother of children by his own brother, and yet he led her away from his own brother's house that she might become his wife; he, himself, casting off one who had been a good and faithful wife to him for years. It is a mess of filthy incest one hardly likes to think of.

The influence of this woman was his curse and ruin. How many men have been destroyed in that way! How many women are ruined daily in this city by coming under the vicious influence of others! My dear men and women, you will have to stand before God on your own account. Do not let anyone cast a spell over you. I pray you, escape for your life; run for it when vice hunts you. I may be sent at this moment with a word on purpose for you, to stir up your conscience, and arouse you to a sense of your danger. It is always perilous to be under the influence of an unconverted person, however moral he may be, but it is supremely dangerous to be under the fascination of a wicked woman or a vicious man. God help you to rise above it by his Spirit, for if you are hearers of the word and doers of evil, you will end in being Herods, and nothing more.

I will only allude to another point in Herod's character, that his religion, although it made him do many things, was rather one of fear than of love. It is not said that Herod feared God, but that he "feared John." He did not love John: he "feared John." The whole thing was a matter of fear. He was not a lion, you see; he was a fox-fearful, timid, ready to run away from every barking cur.

There are many people whose whole religion lies in fear. With some it is the fear of men — the fear of what people would say if they did not pretend to be religious — the fear of what their Christian associates would think of them if they were not reputable. With others there is the fear that some awful judgment would come upon them. But the mainspring of the religion of Christ is love. Oh! to love the gospel, to delight in the truth, to rejoice in holiness: this is genuine conversion. The fear of death, and the fear of hell, create a poor, poor faith, which

leaves men on Herod's level still.

I conclude by showing you very sorrowfully WHAT BECAME OF HEROD. With all his good points he ended most wretchedly. First, he slew the preacher whom he once respected. It was he who did it, though the executioner was the instrument. He said, "Go and fetch John the Baptist's head in a charger." So it has happened with many hopeful hearers; they have become slanderers and persecutors of the very preachers before whom they once trembled, and far as they could they have taken off their heads. After a time men dislike being rebuked, and they proceed in their dislike till they scoff at the things they once revered, and make the name of Christ a football for their jests. Beware! I pray you, beware! for the way of sin is downhill. Herod feared John, and yet he beheaded him. A person may be evangelical and Calvinistic, and so on, and yet, if he is placed under certain conditions, he may become a hater and a persecutor of the truth he once avowed.

Herod went a step lower, however; for this Herod Antipas was the man who afterwards mocked the Saviour. It is said, "Herod with his men of war set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe." This is the man that "did many things" under the leading of John. His course is altered now. He spits on the Redeemer and insults the Son of God. Certain of the most outrageous blasphemers of the gospel were originally Sunday-school scholars and teachers, young men who were "almost persuaded," yet they halted and hesitated, and wavered until they made the plunge and became much worse than they possibly could have become if they had not seen the light of truth. If the devil wants raw material to make a Judas, "the son of perdition," he takes an apostle to work upon. When he takes a thoroughly bad character like Herod, it is necessary to make him plastic as Herod had been in the hands of John. Somehow or other, border men are the worst enemies. In the old wars between England and Scotland, the borderers were the fighting men; and so the border people will do more harm than any until

we get them on this side of the frontier. Oh that the grace of God may decide those who now hesitate!

I may mention to you that, before long, Herod lost all the power he possessed. He was a foxy man, and always tried to win power, but in the end he was recalled by the Roman emperor in disgrace. That was the end of him. Many a man has given up Christ for honour, and has lost himself as well as lost Christ. Like the man who, in the old Catholic persecuting times, was brought to prison for the faith. He said he loved the Protestant faith; but he cried, "I cannot burn." So he denied the faith, and in the dead of night his house took fire: the man who could not burn was forced to burn, but he had no comfort in that burning, for he had denied his Lord. If you sell Christ for a mess of pottage it will scald your lips; it will burn within your soul like molten lead for ever; for "the wages of sin is death." However bright the golden coin shines, and however musical may be its chink, it will prove an awful curse to the man who sells his Lord to gain it.

Today the name of Herod is infamous for ever. As long as there is a Christian church, the name of Herod will be execrated. And is it not a solemn reflection, that "Herod feared John, and did many things, and heard him gladly?" I know that no young man here believes that he will ever turn out to be a Herod. I might, like the prophet, say, "Thou wilt do this, and do that," and you would answer, "Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing?" But you will do it, unless you are decided for God.

An appeal like this once startled me. When I was young and tender, there was a hopeful youth who went to school with me, who was held up to me as an example. He was a good boy, and I used to feel no particular affection for his name, because I was so perpetually chided by his goodness, and I was so far removed from it. Being younger than he, I saw him enter upon his apprenticeship, enter upon the gaities of a great city and come back dishonoured. It horrified me. Might not I dishonour my character? And when I found that if I gave myself to Christ he

would give me a new heart and a right spirit, and when I read that promise of the covenant, "I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me," it seemed to me like a Character Insurance Society. If I believed in Jesus Christ my character was insured; for Christ would enable me to walk in the paths of holiness: this charmed me into desiring an interest in Christ.

If you would not like to be a Herod, be a disciple of Jesus Christ; for there will be no choice for some of you. Some of you are of such powerful natures that you must either thoroughly serve Christ or serve the devil. An old Scotchman was once looking at Rowland Hill, and the good old gentleman said, "What are you looking at?" He said, "The lines of your face." "What do you think of them?" He replied, "I think that if you had not been a Christian man, you would have been an awful sinner." Some people are of that sort; they are like a pendulum; they must swing one way or the other, Oh that you may swing Christ's way tonight. Cry, "Lord, help me to cleanse my way; help me to be wholly thine; help me to possess the righteousness I admire, the holiness I respect. Help me, not only to do some things, but everything thou wouldst have me to do. Take me, make me thine, and I will rejoice and joy in him who helps me to be holy." God bless you, dear friends, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

