

Topic: Lessons from the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
Subtopic: Taking advantage of every means of grace.

Today's Gospel of account concerning Herod Antipas contains elements that cover the gambit of "the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." Passages such as this are included in the Biblical account not only because they contain a true-to-life picture of humanity but also because there are lessons to be learned from both the good and bad examples of others.

So, let's dive in. Herod Antipas has power and wealth, and women are his for the asking. But nothing is enough. Herod lusts for his brother's wife, Herodias.

Into this drama enters John the Baptist, who boldly denounces Herod for having married his brother's wife and is arrested for it. Mark's Gospel tells us, ***"Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly."***¹

This comment from Mark makes Herod more than a one-dimensional villain. Here is a person who, though he gladly listened to John, is deeply conflicted. Mark describes Herod as being significantly "perplexed."² This choice of words depicts a person who cannot decide what to do. He was a slave to his passions, yet he liked what John had to say. He is pulled and divided, attracted and repulsed by what it may cost if he takes John's words seriously. Therefore, we have presented a classic example of a double-minded person who is knocked off balance when truth and spiritual opportunity are given to him.

¹ Mark 6:19-20

² Strong's Concordance, # 639 "aporeo"; definition: not knowing how to decide or what to do

This personal struggle is something that I find fascinating. This past week, Ellen and I viewed a documentary on Mark Twain's life, which had many of the same human characteristics as Herod. If you read his biography, you will find that he was frank about his perplexity with moral struggles. He was raised by a devoutly religious mother, who was a Presbyterian. Yet, when he left home, the world's influences pulled at him and exposed his human vulnerabilities. Later, he admitted, "In my youth, I was a little too human." The humility of such an admission is admirable and compelled me to learn more about him because he never morally put himself above others but alongside them, which is essential for us to keep in mind as we review Herod's life.

So let me ask you, "Have you ever wondered why Herod ***'liked to listen to John?'***"³ Could it be possible that Herod's attraction to him was due to John's compassionate understanding of human nature? The choice of words Mark chose to describe Herod's attraction to the things John said is the Greek word for "gladly and with pleasure."⁴ The word is derived from an adverb for sweetly."⁵ This means that John the Baptist was not as fanatically unbalanced or self-righteous as many suppose. Additionally, Herod's interest in John's teachings implies that, at least at this point in his life, he was not totally and utterly depraved. Still, some hope remained for him, even with his inconsistent and conflicted lifestyle.

If all this is true, then John was someone who could hate sin but still love the sinner, and Herod must have found this attractive. Paul says, "***While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***"⁶ This verse is good news because we all, from time to time, find ourselves conflicted. And thankfully, even in those tough times of

³ Mark 6:20

⁴ Strong's Concordance, #2234 *hédeós* (hay-deh'-oce): An adverb defined as sweetly, gladly, with pleasure

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Romans 5:8

temptation, God presents us with a window of opportunity. Herod had his window of opportunity, but he didn't take advantage of it.

Herod was a classic example of someone who was a hearer of God's word but not a doer of it. James encourages us in his epistle, ***“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (He said that) If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man looking intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and forgets what he was like.”***⁷

John the Baptist was offering Herod a way out. But his self-indulgence and pride gradually mastered him, causing him to grow worse despite warnings and God-given knowledge of the truth.

James warns that those who congratulate themselves for only being hearers of the truth are deceiving themselves. Knowledge does nothing but puff a person up if they do nothing about it. James also tells us, ***“If anyone knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, for him it is sin.”***⁸ Therefore, when called to repent, we need more than crocodile tears. The call “to do the will of God” lies at the center of all that the prophets and apostles taught.

When Herod gave a mental assent to God's word but never acted upon it, it created double-mindedness. It also causes self-deception and pride. In Herod's case, self-deception became a lifestyle, and truth became something he could easily manipulate and twist to satisfy his desires and get what he wanted. When faith has only knowledge and no works along with it, it is dead and has no life in it.

Warning about such things are woven throughout the wisdom literature of the Bible. When the personification of wisdom spoke to his sons and daughters, he said:

⁷ James 1:22-24

⁸ James 4:17

***“If you turn at my reproof,
behold, I will pour out my spirit to you;
I will make my words known to you.
But since I have called and you refused to listen,
have stretched out my hand, and no one has heeded,
because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
I also will laugh when disaster strikes you;
I will mock when calamity overtakes you.”***⁹

Such warnings should haunt us. Similarly, the impact of John’s ministry lasted long after his death. And the guilt that Herod carried for beheading John is something he took with him for the rest of his life. Consequently, he couldn’t get John out of his head. Then, when the reports about the signs and wonders that Jesus performed, Herod concluded, ***“John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”***¹⁰

The language here is graphic. The “I” is emphatic in the Greek: “I am the one—I did it!” The dark cloud of guilt haunted him wherever he went and followed him to the grave. This same sense of guilt and superstitious beliefs that went along with it is reflected in Shakespeare’s “Lady Macbeth, who is depicted as repeatedly washing her hands, crying for the bloody spot to leave.”¹¹

The warning for all of us is this: when God’s word is graciously offered to us, we need to ***“take heed how you hear.”*** So ***“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”*** Amen.

⁹ Proverbs 1:23-26

¹⁰ Mark 6:16

¹¹ William Shakespeare, “The Tragedy of Lady Macbeth,” Act V