

SLIDE 1. Series: Who Is this Man?: A Study of the Gospel of Mark

Teaching: *Beheadings, Hypocrites, and Dogs.*

Sunday March 9, 2025

READ: Mark 6:14 – 8:10

PRAY

TEACH

Let's begin with the bizarre story of John-the-Baptist's beheading.

Cuz – this is church!

Here's the scene...

A castle on a lonely ridge, surrounded by terrible ravines, overlooking the east side of the Dead Sea – quite a fortress. To this day – the dungeons are there, and a traveler can see the iron hooks in the wall – where John was shackled.

A desolate place for the last act of John's life.

And then there are the characters...

Herod – the king who killed all those babies when Jesus was born – was married a number of times – making his family tree a little bit complicated - grew insanely suspicious, and murdered member after member of his own family, until it became a Jewish saying, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son."

So, not super stable!

Then there is Herodias – the daughter of Herod's half-brother – making her his niece – whom he... married.

And because of this adulterous marriage – because of Herod's deliberate seduction of his brother's wife – John had the nerve to publicly rebuke him – which would have taken enormous courage for him to call out this despot who had the power of life and death over John.

Ironically – Herod feared and respected John – knew him to be a sincere and moral agent. Not so much Herodias. She bristled with John's public rebuke and was determined to eliminate him.

And then she got her chance. Enter Salome – her daughter – who danced before the king at a feast he was hosting. And by dancing – this was not Dancing With the Stars dancing. It was a solo dance. And by solo dance – this was not ballet or jazz or modern – it was the dance of a professional prostitute.

The very fact that she did this is a commentary on her character and of the mother who allowed and encouraged her to do so.

But Herod was pleased and offered her any reward – up to half his kingdom!

What might we possibly learn from this little drama? Well, because human nature is human nature – there are always things to learn from the stories of other humans.

Take John, for instance. He was a man who lived for the truth – and died for it. He preferred death to falsehood.

Now, it would be hard for us to imagine dying for speaking the truth – but there are other deaths: the death of a friendship, the death of our reputation, the death of a co-worker relationship, the death of ego, the death of relationship with a family member – for speaking the truth.

SLIDE 2. How do we speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15)?

Let's pretend we're sitting down for lunch – where lots of good conversation happens – and we're talking about this question. I might offer these thoughts...

1. Assume you're the biggest sinner in the room (1 Tim. 1:15).

2. Be mindful of the plank in your eye (Mt. 7:3-5).

SLIDE 3.



⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? ⁵ Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Matthew 7:1-5

In other words – let's posture ourselves in humility. Then...

SLIDE 4

1. Assume you're the biggest sinner in the room (1 Tim. 1:15).

2. Be mindful of the plank in your eye (Mt. 7:3-5).

3. Pose a question vs. pronouncing a judgment.

4. Sometimes, just say it. In love.

Now, take Herod, for instance. He was – among other things – a man who acted on impulse and who feared what others might say. And whereas his role in this whole drama is a character study in what-not-to-do – it is here where we might most relate – and here where we might pause and wonder: Am I becoming a man who – more and more – thinks before he speaks; a woman who – less and less – is concerned about what other people think and – more and more – ready to speak the truth in love?

Now the feeding of the 5000: the only miracle of Jesus which is related in all four gospels.

The crowd sat down on the green grass in rows of 50s and 100s – tired and hungry. So, Jesus fed them – all - using 5 barley rolls (Jn. 6:9) – food of the poorest of poor – and 2 fish – the size of sardines.

This is an interesting micro-study of contrasts between the attitude of Jesus and the attitude of His disciples.

It shows 2 reactions to *human need*. "Send them away," said the disciples. "Give them something to eat," said Jesus.

We may find these responses warring within us at times – we see someone in need – and for whatever reasons (we're tired and hungry, we're on our way somewhere, we're less able to help than someone else – whatever) – we choose to make helping someone – someone else's responsibility. Or we see someone in need – sometimes – and for whatever reasons (we have energy, we have time, we have ability - whatever) – we choose to help someone.

It shows 2 reactions to *human resources*. When Jesus asked the disciples to "give them something to eat" – they were incredulous. In their minds – anything they had was no use at all! So, we could rightly paraphrase their response to Jesus this way, "We could not earn enough in more than six months of work to give this crowd a meal."

But they did have 5 and 2 at their disposal. And they did have Jesus!

As do we.

And that is all the difference!

Jesus took 5 rolls and 2 sardines and worked wonders.

We may think that we have little talent or substance to give to Jesus. And yet what this story invites us to imagine is that - in the hands of Jesus – little is always much.

With Jesus – we can do what we can, when we can, with the energy God gives us – to help whoever we can in the name of Jesus. With Jesus - we can offer what little we have to Him – and see what wonders would happen.

Perhaps what we did last Sunday – after our worship gathering – illustrates the point.

There is nothing big about stacking chairs or rolling out tables. But there is something big in that little – that we unstacked those chairs we just stacked, and put 8 of them around each table – different people counting the numbers of tables and chairs to make sure we had enough – SO THAT – we could offer our space – our not-so-little space – to a not-so-little group of people who needed it to grieve together and to remember the life of a 13-year-old boy who died by suicide just over a month ago.

A gym becoming - sacred space. We gave it as the gift we have been given by God to be used as a gift in service or our community. And the family was uber grateful.

All because – in the hands of Jesus – little is always much.

I'm proud of you SLC. And it was a wonder – and it always is – to me - when I see you – when we transform this space – as we do every Sunday, now – and more so last Sunday – in what seems like always less time than it should – with your energy and your willingness.

Moving through Mark's gospel – we read again – how Jesus calmed a windstorm and made people well – everyone who touched the tassel of His robe.

Who is this man?

And yet again – those pesky Pharisees and some scribes (the rule keepers and the rule writers, respectively) took issue with Jesus and his disciples for not following the ritual cleaning of their hands.

Again, in response to those religious leaders, Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah –
SLIDE 5. *This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me...* (Mk. 7:6).

Effectively, Jesus accused them of a. hypocrisy and b. substitution.

Hypocrisy in this sense – “a person whose whole life is a piece of acting without any sincerity” (**The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark**, William Barclay, p. 168). Anyone to whom religion is about rules, regulations, rituals, and routines – who believes that he is a good man – a God man – when he carries out such prescribed acts and practices – no matter what his heart and his thoughts are like.

A legalistic Jew in the day of Jesus, for instance, might hate his fellow man, might be full of envy and conceit and bitterness and pride – but saw himself as o.k. if he observed the rules of the Pharisees and scribes – because legalism takes account of a man's outward actions – not his inward feelings. He may well be serving God on the outside, and yet bluntly disobeying God on the inside – and that is hypocrisy.

A schism between action and values. A disintegration between belief and behavior.

Like when we might come to church and smile but yell at our spouse or children or another driver on the way in. Like when we might have a special place for a bible in our home or never put it on the ground but regularly fail to keep its precepts. Like when we say we care about the orphan and the widow, the hungry and the poor, the sick and the imprisoned but we do nothing to help them.

And substitution in this sense – they substituted the laws of God for the laws of man. They didn't depend on God for guidance – they depended on their clever interpretations of God's law and their related rules.

So, there are cautions and encouragements here for us.

SLIDE 6.

Don't be a hypocrite. Step into a whole-hearted life with God.

Don't lean on your own understanding. Acknowledge God in all your ways

(Prov. 3:5-6).

SLIDE 7. Because – as Jesus goes on to say: ***What comes out of a man – that defiles a man... evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, evil actions, deceit, lewdness, stinginess, blasphemy, pride, and foolishness...*** (Mk. 7:21-23).

Mind-blowing! This was revolutionary religious thinking at the time. Orthodox Jews thought the exact opposite. But Jesus was telling them that what made a person unclean – wasn't dietary laws as they knew them – but – instead – what a person did – the product of their own hearts.

So, let's take a quick, closer look at this vice list:

First - *evil thoughts* because evil actions are born in the brain – inward to outward.

Next – *porneiai* – in the Greek – every kind of sexual vice – incl. (later) adultery.

Then – *thefts* – like Barrabas as an outlaw and like Judas who stole money.

Then – *murders* and *adulteries* – which are self-explanatory.

Then comes *greed* – snatching at what is not right to take – to spend in lust and luxury.

Then follows *evil actions* – the desire to harm others and to do so.

Next – *dolos* – in Greek = intentional trickery. Classic example = the Trojan Horse.

Then – *lewdness* – or “wanton wickedness” – sin to shock – sin without shame.

Then – *stinginess* – unwillingness to give – to be miserly.
Then comes *blasphemy* – to insult God or to slander man.
Then follows *pride* – comparing oneself to others – having a contempt for everyone.
Lastly – *foolishness* – not a weakness of mind but of moral folly.

Now that we have looked at this terrible list and briefly explored the meaning of the terms – I'd like to ask, "How did you read it? What did you make of it?"

Did it convict you? Did it make you shudder? Did it make you feel bad? Did you – like I am inclined to do – look at it and – like a checklist – check off the things you do and you don't do – as if to prove Jesus' concern – that we can sometimes be preoccupied with maintaining outward actions at the expense of inward motivations?

These are things that come from the human heart and land in our actions. None of us are exempt. This is not a list for sin management – to get a sense of how bad or good we are doing.

This is a heart check.

So that we might more and more live lives of integrity – matching belief with behavior – in partnership with the Holy Spirit within us – towards the abundant life Jesus promised.

So that we would be mindful of our thoughts, godly in our sexuality, content with what we have, treasure our lives and the lives of others, do good to others, lead with honesty and transparency, be generous, speak well of and to God and man, celebrate self-improvements, and make good, moral choices.

Hmm. Sounds good, doesn't it?

And when we fail – and when we fail – and when we fail – to remember that we would, to know that we will never perfectly keep the list (and maybe that's part of the function of the list), and to humbly turn to our God and gratefully acknowledge – again and again – His forgiveness – His love – His restoration of our relationship with Him – through His Son, Jesus Christ.

And now – a last look at this section of the gospel of Mark.

Maybe you saw it too – in your reading – in chp. 7:24-30 – and marked it with a question mark like me – the story of a mother's faith. It's a curious and hard (for me) story to understand.

It's the story of a Gentile woman who came to ask Jesus' help for her daughter.

So, in context, Jesus had previously declared all foods clean (because it's not what goes into a man that defiles him but what comes out of his heart, right?), and now He finds Himself in Gentile territory – perhaps as an escape from the hostile rejection of the Jews – perhaps, then, the opportunity for the Gentiles.

Will he now wipe out the difference between clean and unclean people?

Jesus answers her by saying it isn't right to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs. In other words - it isn't right to give to the Gentiles (whom Jesus calls "dogs") what is meant for Israel - the Jews.

And just so we're clear – calling the Gentiles "dogs" - not a term of affection – it was a known derogatory. Make no mistake – it would have sounded like an insult.

SLIDE 8. Did Jesus intentionally insult this woman?!

Does that sound like something Jesus would do?

Hence – the question mark :)

So, here's what I learned in my study...

Jesus used a diminutive word here for "dog" – which describes a lap dog – which are – in Greek – and in my home – where we have a dog named "Tanner" - characteristically affectionate. This distinction alone takes the sting out of the word.

And here again – we are presuming that Jesus' face and tone of voice matched the distinction he was making.

Like when we say, "Aww, bless your heart!" Depending on context and tone – it can imply *condescension*, or it can imply *pity*.

DEMO. both.

Taking these thoughts into consideration is helpful – but most helpful of all is that Jesus did not shut the door.

First, He said, the children must be fed; but only first; there is meat left for the household pets. True, Israel had the first offer of the gospel – but as we will see here – and as we will see later – there were others still to come!

And – it seems – this woman saw the open door. In those days – it was not uncommon for people to eat with their hands, wipe them clean with chunks of bread, and toss those scraps to the house dogs.

With this – no doubt in both of their minds – she said to Jesus, "I know the children are fed first, but can't I even get the scraps the children through away?"

And Jesus loved it! This woman had a sunny faith that would not take no for an answer. Her faith was tested and found real. Her prayer was answered.

And so it seems that this mom stood symbolically for the Gentile world who eagerly wanted the bread of heaven which most Jews rejected and threw away.

The difference between clean and unclean people – wiped away.

SLIDE 9. Application Questions

1. Have I been avoiding speaking the truth to someone? How could I do that in love?

2. Are there any areas in my life where I suspect (or know) I am being hypocritical? What would the Spirit of God do with you about that?

SLIDE 10. Homework

Read Mark 8:1 – 21. Jesus feeds 4000. The yeast of the Pharisees and Herod.