

"The Price of Truth"
Matthew 14:1-12
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One of my favorite stories has always been "The Emperor's New Clothes." It is the tale of an emperor who was swindled by a supposed tailor. The man claims to sew a new special suit for the monarch. He says it is special because only those who are wise will see the clothes, while the foolish will find them invisible. Not wanting to be labeled a fool, the emperor pretends he can see the suit, pretends to put it on, and then proceeds to walk around the castle in his underwear. Not wanting to be considered fools, all his advisors and servants pretend to be able to see the clothes as well and comment on how beautiful they are.

As the emperor leads a parade through the city, his loyal subjects "ooo" and "ahhh" over clothing they cannot see. Everyone is lying, because they are afraid to tell the truth. If they admit they see the emperor in his underwear, they will certainly be ridiculed as fools by their neighbors. Finally, however, one young boy exposes the deception. He blurts out that the emperor is not wearing any clothes. And his words encourage others to speak that truth as well.

Folks, sometimes it seems much easier, much safer, to tell people what we think they want to hear. Yet a willingness to speak the truth, even if that truth is not popular, is a great virtue. Today, we look at a story, a true story, of a man who was not afraid to tell the truth and was willing to pay the price for speaking what he knew to be true. As we continue our journey through the gospel of Matthew, we come to chapter 14:1-12. Here we find the account of John the Baptist's execution. Now, on the surface the story may seem a little gruesome, but I think it has important implications for us as Christians in the 21st century. Let's pause and pray the Lord would help us to hear that today.

This is the story of Herod Antipas and John the Baptist. So far in Matthew's gospel he has told us about Jesus, a man saying and doing incredible things. His teaching has folks in awe, and His deeds include things like healing the sick, casting out demons and commanding weather patterns. He has certainly caught the attention of the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders of that

time. They see John as a threat to their privileged position. And John has also caught the attention of a political ruler. **Matthew 14:1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus,** the king whom the wisemen visited and who then killed all the infants of Bethlehem was known as Herod the Great.

This Herod is one of his sons, Herod Antipas. He had been appointed by Caesar Augustus as tetrarch or governor, in North Israel for almost 30 years he ruled over two regions, Perea and Galilee. The first is the place where John the Baptist conducted his ministry and the second is where Jesus' ministry was taking place. When Herod hears about this Jesus, and expresses a startling conclusion. **Matthew 14:2 He said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."** Those words are rooted in superstition and a very guilty conscience. At this time John is dead because Herod had killed him. Matthew then tells us what had happened probably a few months earlier.

Matthew 14:3,4 For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." There was a scandal in the palace. Herodias had been the wife of Herod Philip, a half-brother to Herod Antipas. Incidentally, who was also Herod Antipas' niece, being the daughter of another half-brother Aristobulus.

Herod Antipas apparently had an affair with Herodias, divorced his first wife, and then married the mistress. He sinned against his brother, against his wife, and most importantly, against God. This was too much for John, a righteous man and a godly prophet. John had been continually saying to Herod Antipas, "What you are doing is wrong." And Herod did not like that.

He threw John in prison. **Matthew 14:5 And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.** John was a popular figure, and Herod

didn't want to see his poll numbers go down. **Matthew 14:6,7 But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.**

The girl's name is Salome; the daughter of Herodias and Philip and she is maybe about 13 years old. Reading between the lines we can assume a couple of things. First, her dance was probably "R-rated" if not "X-rated." Second, Herod probably had too much to drink. He has promised this girl whatever she wants. Salome consults with Herodias and **Matthew 14:8 Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist head on a platter."** Herodias apparently liked John even less than Herod. **Matthew 14:9 And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given.** He feared the political consequences of killing John, but he didn't want to break his promise and be embarrassed in front of his friends.

So, Jesus hears about Herod and now, back to verse 1, Matthew says Herod is hearing about Jesus. And hearing about the miracles Jesus performs, he wonders, maybe this is John the Baptist risen from the dead. And I don't think he finds that a comforting thought.

Okay, that is our text. What is God saying to us today through this passage? We could spend some time exploring the nature of human evil. They murdered John simply because they didn't like the truth he told. In his commentary Don Carson suggests these two people have as their mentors, Ahab and Jezebel, the wicked Old Testament king and queen of Israel. Like Ahab, Herod is wicked but weak, while Herodias, like Jezebel, is wicked and ruthless. They make quite a pair, and they illustrate how political power often corrupts people and makes them even worse than they were before.

Today, however, I want to focus not on them, but on John the Baptist. He plays a very unique role in history. He was the forerunner of Jesus, the prophet sent to prepare the way of the Lord and help people be ready for the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

Yet this story raises some very practical questions. Should we follow John's example? Should we speak the truth even if it might get us into trouble, big trouble? Or did John make a mistake when he kept reminding Herod that what he was doing was wrong? I want to note four important principles to keep in mind.

#1 When we speak up, we need to make sure we are speaking the truth. Many of you remember Jesse Ventura, the pro-wrestle, and governor of Minnesota from 1999-2003. A lot of people liked Jesse because he was not a normal politician. He was in the habit of speaking his mind, saying what he really thought, always giving honest answers to questions.

Yet honesty by itself is not enough. Uninformed opinions that are contrary to the facts, something Ventura shared on more than one occasion really are better left unexpressed. I don't think anyone should be congratulated for sharing his/her honest opinion if that opinion has no connection to reality.

When John spoke up against Herod's sin, he knew what he was talking about. He had his facts straight and it was by the authority of God's Word that he condemned what Herod was doing. Today, as Christians, we need to make sure we do the same thing I have learned the hard way that it is not wise to open my mouth unless I know what I am talking about. We need to be very careful we don't say critical things about someone or to someone unless we know what the truth is.

It is also very important that we be able to distinguish between what God teaches in the Bible and our own opinions. Telling someone it is wrong to view pornography is very different from telling someone it is wrong to use credit cards. Jesus tells us (Matthew 5:28) that lusting after a woman to whom one is not married is adultery of the heart and a violation of the sixth commandment. Whether or not one should use credit cards, however, is merely an opinion, because the Bible doesn't talk about credit cards at all.

And folks, I think it is actually wrong to express our opinions as if they were facts, because it is not telling the truth. I fear Christians, especially pastors, fall into that trap with some frequency.

Or maybe we make blanket statements that just are not accurate.

For example, I have heard pastors shout from the pulpit, "Divorce is wrong. It is a sin." Yes, it often is. But I believe the Bible teaches divorce is sometimes not a sin. If one partner has been unfaithful or has abandoned the marriage, then divorce is permitted. Yes, we should be bold in speaking the truth. But we better first make sure that it is the truth that we are going to speak.

#2 We need to speak the truth at the right time. This is where much wisdom is required. We need to address appropriate topics at appropriate times. I don't think John the Baptist was constantly sharing his opinions on all of Herod's tax policies and road construction plans. He focused on the blatant immorality in which Herod and Herodias were engaged, which was something he, as God's prophet, needed to address. These days, many people share their opinions on many topics with many people. They do this through Facebook, Instagram, "X," and other social media platforms.

However, many other people, maybe because of the chaos they see on social media, keep all their opinions to themselves. They remain silent, even as a darkness seems to be enveloping our culture. As ambassadors of Jesus Christ, which all Christians, not just pastors, are called to be, we need to speak up and let out light shine as we seek to dispel that darkness. Christians voices need to be heard. But we need to be wise, discerning when it is a good time to speak and a good time to stay quiet.

Now, whether you should speak up on a particular topic or not is something you need to decide. That isn't my call. But let me share some things I consider when I decide if I should post something on social media or say in a sermon. My basic thought is that I want to focus on those things related to Jesus and the gospel.

Folks, I have opinions on most topics. I have strong opinions on many topics. But I am somewhat hesitant to share these opinions in public forums, if they are not related to the things that matter the most. If there is a discussion on Facebook about whether all religions are equal, I

am going to say something. That is a topic filled with eternal consequences. It really matters.

Let's say there is a discussion about whether the Hibbing and Chisholm schools should consolidate. Oh, that can be a hot topic. Do I have an opinion on school consolidation? I sure do. But I will never express it in a sermon, in a newspaper article or on social media.

Why? Because when I share that opinion, those who disagree with me may be less likely to listen to what I have to say on other topics, such as Jesus. "That Pastor Dan. Did you hear what he said about consolidating the schools? He is crazy. I am not going to read his columns in the newspaper anymore."

Friends, if I think sharing my opinion and arguing for the can advance the cause of the gospel I need to speak up. But I am not really interested in getting bogged down in arguments about other things. Even though I have lots of good opinions, I want to focus on what matters the most.

#3 We need to speak the truth in the right way. What do I mean by That? Well, the right way is spelled out in the instructions God gives us through the Apostle Paul in **2 Timothy 2:24-26** **And the Lords' servant must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.**

Friends, when we are talking to a friend about our faith in Jesus, or confronting a family member about behavior we know is wrong, or responding to unfair criticism at work, this is how the Lord expects us to speak. Maybe you are thinking, "But Pastor Dan, is that how John the Baptist spoke about Herod?" I don't know. But the Lord tells us through this text that gentleness and respect should always season my speech and yours.

I was leading a bible study on this topic at another church, and one fellow got a little irritated. He said, "Pastor Dan, it sounds like you want us to be wimps. We should go out there and blast sinners so they will wake up. Non-Christians who are

getting drunk, fornicating, cursing, and viewing pornography, need to be told they are heading for hell.” I responded, “Yes, they do, but they need to be told that with kindness, gentleness and respect.”

We need to speak that way because God has told us to do so. And we need to speak that way because we are likely to be more effective in persuading others when we do so. The proverb, “You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar” is not found in the Bible, but it is still true. The Holy Spirit can use our words however they are spoken to accomplish His purposes. But He is more likely to use words that are spoken with gentleness and respect. Yelling at people is not the answer. Telling them the truth in the right manner is.

But we need to remember that our goal is not just to speak the truth. It is not good enough to let people we know what *we* think. We want to change what *they* think. Our desire should be that the Lord would use our words to persuade people who disagree with us to change their minds and hearts. So, Paul’s words, **2 Timothy 2:26 they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.**

#4 We need to accept that we will sometime pay a price for speaking the truth. John the Baptist certainly did. He paid a very high price. Other Christians have as well. Some, like John, died as martyrs. Many others sacrificed comfort and security because people didn’t like what they heard when these Christians chose to speak the truth.

Some significant changes have occurred in our culture in recent years. In the past, as long as you spoke in a gentle and respectful way, most people didn’t get mad at you for speaking the truth. Oh, they might have disagreed with you. They may not have liked what we had to say, but most of the time they would not become angry with you.

That has changed. Now, no matter how nicely and lovingly you speak the truth, more and more people will not only hate what you say, but they may hate you as well.

That means there are times when speaking the truth may get you into trouble at work or school. It may even get you fired. I guess you don’t get fired at school, but you might get sent to the principal’s office. I think the first grader in Syracuse, NY, who was told to make a poster about how to save the earth from environmental disaster. He drew a picture of Jesus. His poster was banned from the art display.

Or there is Paivi Rasanen, a leading politician in Finland, not Finland, MN, but the country in Europe. She is being charged with hate speech and may face jail time for quoting Bible verses that teach homosexual behavior is sinful. Or there is the biology instructor at a community college in California who was fired because he insisted on telling his students the truth that Darwinism evolution is a theory, not a fact. Or a few years ago Baptist churches in Houston, TX, were picketed by Hindu’s because they told the truth—that men and women can only find salvation through Jesus Christ.

Folks, I am not saying it is likely any of these things will happen to you or to us, but if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, and committed to telling others the truth as He leads you to do, then you better accept the fact you may pay a price, even a high price for doing so. But if we are going to be faithful to the Lord Jesus, it is what we need to be willing to do.

“But, Pastor Dan, wouldn’t it just be better to keep my mouth shut and not get anyone upset?” No, that would not be better. The Lord calls all of us to **Psalm 97:3 (NLT) Proclaim his glorious deeds among the nations. Tell everyone about the amazing things he does.** You are to encourage and sometimes challenge both believers and unbelievers by Ephesian 4:15, speaking the truth in love. But, when you speak, make sure you are speaking the truth at the right time and in the right way. When you do so, you may pay a price but far more importantly, you will be honoring the Lord, sharing words that people very much need to hear.