

Chapter 56: Seeking a Good Conscience

Matthew 14:1–12

At the beginning of Matthew 14, we learn about the tragic end to the story of John the Baptist. Here, we find out that John has already been murdered by the wicked ruler, Herod Antipas. Strikingly, though, we see in this passage the firm limits of Herod's power in his struggle against his conscience. Whereas John the Baptist spoke faithfully and clearly from the Word of God against Herod's sins, Herod is haunted by his crime. This story underscores a dire need in every generation, namely, to *get and keep a good conscience*.¹

The Condemning Conscience (Matt. 14:1–2)

The Herod mentioned here in v. 1 is not the same Herod as Herod the Great who talked with the wise men and sought to put Jesus to death after his birth, for that Herod died before Jesus returned from Egypt to live in Nazareth (Matt. 2:1, 19). This is the son of Herod the Great, and he is distinguished from his father by the name Herod Antipas.² We will study his sordid story a bit further below, but two facts are important for us to notice in these opening two verses of the chapter.

First, Herod is now hearing about the “fame” (or, the news/report) of Jesus. This does not necessarily mean that Herod had previously known nothing about Jesus, but only that the news about Jesus is becoming increasingly impressive and widely known. Especially, Herod is hearing about the miracles that Jesus is performing: “these miraculous powers are at work in him” (v. 2).

Second, Matthew wants us to see that Herod is so paranoid that he believes Jesus must be John the Baptist, raised from the dead. Matthew will explain the reason for this paranoia in the rest of this passage, but the summary is that Herod is dealing with a guilty conscience. While wicked men may seem undisturbed by their evil, the human conscience is not so easily cast aside. John Calvin writes, “as bad consciences are wont to tremble and hesitate, and turn with every wind, [Herod] readily believed what he dreaded. With such blind terrors God frequently alarms wicked men; so that, after all the pains they take to harden themselves, and to escape agitation, their internal executioner gives them no rest, but chastises them with severity.”³

Herod's paranoia, then, provides us with an important reason for hope right from the beginning of this tragic story: evildoers cannot get away with their evil. Even those in high places of power

¹ William Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas (1596; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 86–94.

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 585–86.

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:218–19.

who escape temporal judgments in this life will not escape the judgment of God on the last day; however, neither will they escape their own consciences in this life. Thus, the judgment that the wicked will face in eternity and the torment that they receive by their consciences today are connected, for the word “conscience” means *shared* (“con-”) *knowledge* (“-science”). That is, our consciences share *God’s* knowledge not only about what we have done, but about God’s evaluation and judgment against what we have done. Thus, Puritan William Perkins wrote that God has set out consciences within us to give us a preview of the eternal judgment that he will declare on the last day:

To give judgment is to determine that a thing is well done or ill done. Herein conscience is like to a judge who holds an assize, and takes notice of indictments, and causes the most notorious malefactor that is to hold up his hand at the bar of his judgment. Nay, it is (as it were) a little god sitting in the middle of men's hearts, arraigning them in this life as they shall be arraiged for their offences at the tribunal seat of the ever-living God in the day of judgment. Wherefore, the temporary judgment that is given by the conscience is nothing else but a beginning (or a forerunner) of the last judgment.⁴

The torment of Herod’s guilty conscience foreshadows the torment of hell that he will experience in the life to come.

The Clear Conscience (Matt. 14:3–5)

The rest of this passage gives the back-story for why Herod’s conscience is tormented. The first section tells us about the faithful witness of John the Baptist—a witness that ultimately led to Herod’s giving the order for John’s execution. First, Matthew tells us that Herod has imprisoned John “for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife” (v. 3). Matthew describes the situation with simplicity that subtly brings out the heinousness of Herod’s crime. As we learn in the next verse, John had been preaching that it was not lawful for Herod “to have her”—that is, for Herod to have his (half-)brother’s wife (v. 4). Thus, we learn one of the reasons that John the Baptist condemned Herod: his adultery with his brother’s wife.

What makes this crime far worse was that this adultery also involved a multiple cases of incest. Philip was the half-brother of Herod Antipas, since both were the sons of Herod the Great, but by different mothers. Herodias, however, is also the half-sister of both of these men, being the daughter of Herod the Great, but born to yet another mother.⁵ It was incest for Philip to marry Herodias, and

⁴ Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” 12.

⁵ “This lady was a granddaughter of Herod the Great, being the daughter of his son Aristobulus. She married her uncle Herod Philip (who is to be distinguished from the tetrarch Philip, Luke 3:1), who was half brother to Herod Antipas. Herod Philip and Herodias had a daughter, Salome. Herod Antipas married a Nabatean princess (whose name is not known), the daughter of King Aretas, but he and Herodias fell in love. They agreed to marry, and Herodias left his half-brother Herod Philip; (as Matthew says, she was *the wife of his brother Philip*; she was also his niece). The daughter of Aretas got wind of what was happening and fled to her father, who promptly went to war with Herod and defeated him (which provoked Roman intervention). It was

it is incestuous adultery for Herod Antipas to steal his brother's wife for himself. The law forbid the actions of Herod Antipas on both counts (Ex. 20:14; Lev. 18:9, 16; 20:21). At great personal risk, John the Baptist faithfully declared the implications for this law for this relationship, and he was imprisoned for it. The only thing that saved John's life at this juncture was that Herod Antipas "feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet" (v. 5).

The Cleansed Conscience (Matt. 14:6–12)

By imprisoning John the Baptist for faithfully declaring the word of God, Herod has already committed a great evil. Nevertheless, Herod's crimes are just beginning. In v. 6–7, we read about Herod's birthday party, when his half-sister/wife's daughter (that is, Herod's niece) danced in such a provocative way that it pleased Herod enough for him to swear "an oath to give her whatever she might ask" (v. 7). When the girl (whose name is identified as Salome, according to extra-biblical literature) asked her mother about what she should ask for from Herod, we learn that Herodias was also offended by John's preaching: Herodias asks not only for John to be executed, but for John's head to be given to her on a platter as a gruesome gift (v. 8).

While Herod had wanted to kill John at some level (v. 5), it seems that his desires for murder were more conflicted than his wife's. Yet, while the king "was sorry," he nevertheless commanded the execution of John the Baptist "because of his oaths and his guests" (v. 9). In the Bible, oaths are serious things. An oath, as defined in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, "is a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth, or promiseth, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth" (WCF 22.1). In general, oaths are binding on the person, even when someone swears an oath to his own hurt (Ps. 15:4) or when the oath is made to someone who is not a believer (Gen. 21:22–24; 26:31; 31:51–54; Josh. 9:18–19; 2 Sam. 21:1). Nevertheless, oaths are not binding when we swear to do something that is sinful (1 Sam. 14:24–26, 45; 25:22, 32–33). As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* summarizes, "An oath...cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man's own hurt. Nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics, or infidels" (WCF 22.4).

Herod's reasons for following through with his oath seem to arise less out of a concern for doing what he promised God to do, and more from losing the favor of those who were at his party ("because of his oaths and his guests"). Lenski rightly notes that the real reason for Herod's sin was his pride: "His sworn promise was intended to impress the guests, in fact, had been made for their sake not for that of the girl. To deny her request appeared like a disgrace in the eyes of those reclining with him at the feast."⁶ So, Herod "sent and had John beheaded in the prison," and then made arrangements to bring John's head to Salome and her mother, as requested (vv. 10–11). Herod not only wrongfully imprisoned John, but also wrongfully executed him. It was this murder of a righteous man that particularly troubled Herod's conscience to lead him to imagine that Jesus was John raised from the dead.

a tangled and complex situation, but what is clear is that the marriage of Herod Antipas and Herodias was contrary to Old Testament law (Lev. 18:16; 20:21)." (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 370.)

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 560.

In the last verse of this section, we read that John’s “disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus” (v. 12). The Bible takes special care to honor those who care for the bodies of the dead, not only here, but also in 2 Samuel 2:4–7, when David honors the men of Jabesh-gilead who had valiantly claimed the body of Saul back from the Philistines in order to bury it (see 1 Sam. 31:10–13). It is also striking that the disciples of John should go to tell Jesus. They knew the admiration of John for Jesus, and this probably suggests that the disciples of John began to follow Jesus in place of their earlier master.⁷ John would have wanted it this way, and perhaps had even instructed the disciples to do so in the case of his death, for John is the one who famously declared of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Even so, this does not mean that Jesus is callous to the death of John. On the contrary, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Ps. 116:15). In the next passage, we will discover that this news will lead Jesus to withdraw as he grieves John’s death (Matt. 14:13)—although that grieving will be interrupted by the pressing needs of ministry. More than that, John’s death will be honored by the way that John is completing his work of preparing the way for his Lord (Matt. 3:3), for “John’s bloody death pointed forward to that of Jesus.”⁸ Just as John had first preached the message that Jesus himself later preached (Matt. 3:2; 4:17), so John’s faithfulness unto death becomes a worthy precursor to the immeasurably greater faithfulness of Jesus unto death.

Discussion Questions

1. What had Herod heard about Jesus? What did Herod think concerning the reports about Jesus? Why was Herod’s conscience so troubled? What kind of troubles can a guilty conscience cause in our souls? Why do you think that our consciences can be so painful? How does our conscience relate to God’s own judgments? Where has your conscience struggled with past or present sin? How have you dealt with your conscience?
2. How many sins had Herod committed in taking Herodias to be his wife? What did John the Baptist risk by speaking out against this unlawful relationship? Why is speaking the truth important for the sake of keeping a good conscience before God? What are the blessings of keeping a good conscience? Where have you struggled to speak the truth when it was risky? How did you feel if you declared God’s Word? How did you feel if you shrunk back from the truth?
3. How does Herod compound his crimes with Herodias through the offer he makes to Herodias’s daughter? What do you make of Herod’s conflicted “sorry” feelings to behead John (v. 9)? What might this tell us about the confused souls of the wicked? What do oaths require of us? Should we carry through with oaths where we promise some kind of evil? Where have you rashly promised to do something that you knew was wrong? What did you do about it?
4. Why did the disciples of John the Baptist report their master’s death to Jesus? How does the preparatory mission of John the Baptist help to explain why he suffered a bloody death in advance of

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 556.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 561.

Jesus? What does the Bible say about the blood of Jesus in relation to the conscience (Heb. 9:13–14)? How does the bloody death of Jesus help to purify our consciences? How have you trusted in Christ's atoning death to soothe your own conscience?