

## *When Telling the Truth Makes Others Angry • Luke 3:19-20*

In every generation questions may arise as to whether or not high government officials must have leadership, character and morality in order to be effective and appropriate for the position they hold in politics. Does a leader's immoral behavior disqualify him or her from holding high office? Who has the right or responsibility to confront the sins of our leaders?

This was a major issue during the life of Jesus Christ although it was not Jesus who confronted the king, it was the prophet John the Baptist. The time in history was just before Jesus went public. It may seem strange that political events were interjected into an otherwise supernatural spiritual series of events but it is also typical. Politics and the circumstances of the times are always woven into the spiritual issues that everyone faces.

In those days the politician was King Herod. The prophet was John the Baptist. The story is told in a single sentence in Luke 3:19-20:

*But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.*

The historian Luke summarizes a moral mess in a single sentence. It may boggle your mind and it will surely twist my tongue but I will try to explain it.

The first and most famous Harold was called "Herod the Great." He ruled in Palestine with enormous power for a very long time. He had lots of wives and plenty of children. As if his story and lineage were not confusing enough he divided his kingdom between his sons, all of whom were named Herod (sort of like George Foreman who named all of his sons George).

The son referred to in Luke 3:19 was Herod the tetrarch. "Tetrarch" is a title of political position, not a name. His name was Herod Antipas. He was the son of Herod the Great by a wife named Malthake.

The other person mentioned in this short story is Herodias. She was also from the Herod family; in fact, her name is the feminine form of Herod. She was a granddaughter of Herod the Great. Her father was Aristobulus whose father was Herod the Great and whose mother was a wife of Herod the Great named Mariamne.

Another son of Herod the Great was also called Herod and was the son of another wife whose name was also Mariamne. (It was almost as if Herod the Great wanted to confuse us by adding as many twists and turns to the story as possible, so he not only had multiple wives but some of those wives shared the same name!) This Herod never entered politics; he was a private citizen who lived in Rome. He married Herodias who was his niece. It was an incestuous relationship by standards then as well as now because her father and her husband were both sons of Herod the Great although by different wives.

One day while Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, was on a trip to Rome he visited his brother Herod. While staying in his home he lusted after his brother's wife, Herodias, who was both his sister-in-law and his niece. He seduced her and took her back to Galilee with him as his wife.

Now all of this may be thoroughly confusing to you, but let me explain the relationship between Herod the tetrarch and Herodias: she was his niece, his sister-in-law and his wife.

All of this was morally outrageous to the Romans but it was far more so to the Jews who realized that it clearly broke God's law in the Old Testament. Herod and Herodias

had no right to be together, but he was the king so who is to tell the king that he's wrong! He did whatever he pleased. He had the power of life and death over his people. It was life-threatening to criticize him no matter how outrageous his immorality.

John the Baptist made a clear moral and personal choice. He was convinced that he should di-

***Sin is not only doing what is wrong sin is also failing to do what is right.***

rectly and publicly condemn the sexual immorality of the king. John was a wise man so he had to know that he was risking imprisonment and death. Herod the tetrarch had enormous political and police power. He had dealt harshly with his enemies in the past. There was every expectation that Herod would crush John the Baptist.

According to the rest of the story which appears elsewhere in the New Testament that is precisely what happened. Herod had him arrested and imprisoned. In case you don't know what eventually happened I'll turn the story ahead and tell you. Herodias hated John the Baptist for what he had done. She plotted against John and convinced Herod to have him beheaded in prison and his head presented on a platter to Herodias and her daughter. The decision to condemn the king cost John the Baptist his life because he was convinced that this immorality could not be left unchallenged.

John not only risked his life but he risked his mission, too. John had not been sent to criticize royal behavior. He was commissioned by God to prepare the way for the Christ, the Messiah. When he focused on Herod he ended his public ministry of preaching, proclamation and preparation. In other words, this was no small or easy decision John made. It changed his life, risked his mission and eventually led to his death. He knew the risks and he took them anyway because the immorality was so great.

This lays a powerful challenge at our feet. What immorality would so outrage us that we would be willing to risk everything to confront it? What would it take for us to risk our jobs, our life's work and our lives? Is there any sin that we are so much against—that is so outrageous—that we would risk everything to take a stand?

This whole story raises all kinds of moral issues. This is neither unusual nor surprising because even the worst of moral messes and the clearest cases of sin are always complicated.

The first moral issue deals with the fact that there are two sides to every story. We have a common saying and belief in our culture that there are always two sides to every story. That is usually true although it would not seem to be the case in the story of Herod the tetrarch and Herodias. This appears to be a clear-cut case of moral sin. They were wrong. They should not have been together. John

told them they were wrong. Herod should not have had John arrested. He should not have had him killed. It is one story that has one side, the morality is obvious, and that's that.

But there was another side to the story. Herod had a different perspective. His side of the story is not reported in the Bible but it is in the writings of the most famous Jewish historian of the time, Josephus. Josephus wrote that Herod "feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it in his power and inclination to raise a rebellion; for they seemed ready to do anything (John) should advise." In other words, Herod said that he had arrested John and eventually had him beheaded for reasons of national security and public peace. The king totally skirted the issue of his own moral behavior and placed the blame on his accuser. He accused John of being an insurrectionist. He made John the issue rather than take responsibility for his own sin. The people of the time had to choose whom to believe, the prophet or the politician.

Almost always there are two sides to every moral issue we face today—every lawsuit, every job termination, every divorce, every business deal gone wrong, every argument between individuals. The moral mistake we too often make in modern America is to believe that both sides are true. Somehow we have elevated our idea of fairness to believe that every argument has merit and every excuse is legitimate. This is simply not true and it is not moral.

While it is usually appropriate to hear both sides, we must make moral choices. We must decide which is right and which is wrong. There are moral and ethical issues where neutrality itself is sin and failure to take sides is itself immoral.

In the case of John and Herod there were two sides. Josephus, the historian, sided with King Herod. God and the Bible sided with John the Baptist. A moral choice had to be made.

John's moral choice raised a second moral issue. John had to choose between doing something that was wrong and suffering for doing what was right. These are very difficult decisions to make.

Once John concluded that the king had to be confronted and that he was the only one positioned to do it, John knew that it would be a sin to remain silent. He had a moral obligation to speak out. To remain

silent would be sin. After all, sin is not only doing what is wrong sin is also failing to do what is right.

The problem for John was that he knew that if he did what was right suffering was guaranteed. It meant imprisonment and death. John was arrested and placed in a dungeon prison of Machaerus Castle on the shores of the Dead Sea. Prisons are never pleasant places to be and ancient dungeons were particularly terrible places. Yet, it must have been especially horrible for John. He was a man of the outdoors. He lived in the desert. He was used to preaching to great crowds of people who came to hear a word from God. Confined alone in a dungeon cell was a crushing cruelty.

All of this teaches us some very important and practical lessons. First, right and wrong must be determined by God. Probably Herod and Herodias argued that they were not doing anything wrong. Some people today would say that as long as they had a loving and committed relationship it didn't matter that they were relatives or that she was married to another man. The truth is that morality is God-defined not self-defined. We are often poor judges of what is right and wrong when dealing with what we want for ourselves. That is why the standard must come from God and the Bible not from us and our culture.

Another lesson we can learn from this story is that doing what is right does not always end well. John did not end the marriage of Herod and Herodias. The king did not repent of his sin. John was not exonerated or set free. Doing what was right cost John his life!

The same goes for us today. Sometimes we must do what is right even if it doesn't make any difference. As Christians we should live morally, speak the truth, do good and confront evil even if it turns out lousy and even if it costs our jobs, our marriages, our reputations or our lives. To do what is right and to please God is sufficient reason all by itself even if the consequences are far different than we would choose.

Another lesson from this story is that we must wisely choose when and where to take a stand.

Herod and Herodias weren't the only immoral people in the kingdom. There were plenty of other people John could have confronted. It should never be easy or taken lightly to confront the sin of another person.

Many of us never confront sin because we are so keenly aware of our own problems and sins. We frequently quote the words of Jesus that whoever is without sin should cast the first stone and figure we are never qualified to accuse. At the other extreme are some self-righteous people who assume that their calling in life is to point out the faults of others. They almost seem to take a delight in exposing the failings and iniquities in other people's lives.

So, how do we choose what to do? The lesson we find from John is that he had to be selective. He had to decide when it would make a difference. Then he would step up and be willing to do whatever it would take, even to die, because it was the right thing to do.

I am reminded of the story about the manager of a prizefighter who was asked to arrange a fight with a competing boxer. He declined and when asked why he replied, "My boxer only has so many fights in him, so I can't accept every offer."

The same goes for the moral battles we are going to fight. It isn't possible to fight them all. Even John the Baptist only had so many fights in him . . . and so do we. So we should seek God's wisdom and choose confrontations carefully and wisely.

The third moral issue raised in this story is the necessity of repentance for salvation. It is a different kind of issue than the previous two but it is the most significant. It helps explain why John would be willing to give up his public ministry of preparing for Jesus in order to confront Herod and go to jail.

To understand how big a deal this was we need to back up a second and see why Jesus came to earth. The New Testament explains that Jesus the Son of God came to seek and to save those who are lost. His purpose was to die on the cross to pay for human sin and provide a way for forgiveness, a right relationship with God and forever in heaven.

***Without repentance there is no salvation. If a person will not turn from sin then that person can't turn to Jesus Christ.***

But there is a question that needs to be answered: “Can a person become a Christian without first repenting from sin?” Let’s put it in today’s terms. Suppose someone comes to church, hears that Jesus died for him (or her) on the cross and is invited to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. But this person is currently involved in a sexually immoral relationship. Or, maybe this person has stolen money and never been caught, never admitted to stealing, never offered restitution. Or, perhaps this person has wrecked another person’s life by maliciously using information, whether true or untrue. Can this person really accept Jesus Christ and become a Christian if she (or he) is unwilling to first repent of sin, ask for forgiveness and promise to stop sinning and do what is right?

John would say that without repentance there is no salvation. If a person will not turn from sin then that person can’t turn to Jesus Christ. John fervently believed this because this is God’s standard and it is an essential part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This puts the whole story of Herod and Herodias into a different light. John wasn’t out to punish or hurt them. He wasn’t mean or vindictive or vengeful. John was deeply burdened for their souls. He knew that their only chance for salvation and heaven was for Herod and Herodias to admit that what they were doing was wrong, break off their relationship and turn to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. If they didn’t they were doomed to be alienated from God for the rest of their lives and the rest of forever.

Also, John knew that focusing on Herod would communicate the message to the rest of the nation. Others would realize that if the king must repent to be saved then they, too, needed to repent and do what was right to be saved. So, John not only did what he did because it was the right thing to do but also because he cared about them and he knew that if they would repent and turn to Jesus Christ it would be a wonderful example that would impact all kinds of other people.

This brings us full circle back to today. When we hear moral confrontations of those in high leadership position is our first response greater awareness of our own sin? Does the sin of others make us realize what is wrong in our own life and make us want to repent and turn to God for forgiveness

and restoration? That’s what God wanted in Herod’s time and that’s what God wants in our time as well.

The Bible is not merely a book of information. It’s a book of transformation. It’s not just about history, it’s about the difference God can and will make in our lives. That’s true of this short story in John 3:19-20. It’s here for us to apply to our lives; it’s written for our good.

What would John the Baptist ask you if he were doing the talking today? Do you need to repent of sin in your life? Is there something you need to confess? Do you need restoration? Is there someone you’ve hurt that you owe an apology to? Have you stolen something that needs to be returned or money that should be repaid? Have you committed a crime and need to admit it? Are you involved in a sexually immoral relationship that God wants ended? Does God want you to say or do something that is the right thing to say or do even though you may suffer as a result?

Talk to God about whatever it is. Tell him you repent of that specific sin. Tell him you are willing to do whatever he wants you to do to make it right. Ask God what he wants.

Don’t be like Herod and Herodias who turned the blame on John and refused to change a thing. Instead, do what is right because it is right. Do what is right because it is for God.

*Father God, speak now to our souls. Listen to the honest confessions of our hearts. Point out our sins. Show us what you want us to do that we haven’t done. Show us what to stop that we shouldn’t be doing. Help us as we follow the encouragement and example of the Bible to turn our backs on sin and turn our faces to Jesus Christ our only Savior and Lord.*

*We pray this sincerely in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

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