

The Powers That Be

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 6:14-29

May 28, 2017

PD Mayfield

[Special music was “People Need the Lord.”]

Amen. I need the Lord. Even as I stand before you today to preach from his Word, I need the Lord.

If you have your Bibles with you or have a tablet or a screen or scripture memory in your head or eyes to look at the screen or ears to hear—there's all kinds of ways to hear the Word. We're going to be looking at Mark 6:14-29 today. In this Gospel account that we're looking at, Mark consistently invites the reader, the hearer, to see Jesus clearly. And today's passage follows Mark's narrative, where Jesus has experienced rejection. He's been misunderstood by his family. He's been rejected by people he knew, potentially grew up with, in his hometown of Nazareth. He has experienced forms of rejection in growing controversy with religious leaders. And as we see here in this section of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus's ministry is beginning to expand beyond the region of Galilee, and we'll see the conflict will continue to grow.

Particularly today, we're going to look at how this message of Jesus—his fame and his reputation—shows how it has made its way into the courts of Herod, and Herod was just a regional governor of the area. And so based off of where Jesus has already been rejected, you can't help but wonder what will happen to Jesus if the political leaders start to reject him, too. With that, let's read this passage, and follow along as I read from God's Word, Mark 6:14-29.

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.” ¹⁵ But others said, “He is Elijah.” And others said, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” ¹⁷ For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, ²⁰ 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.

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.” ²³ And he vowed to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom.” ²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, “For what should I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.” ²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head

of John the Baptist on a platter.”²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Let's pray together. Lord, we do pray for this time. Would you go before us, by your Spirit, to quicken our minds and enliven our hearts to receive your message from your Word, that we would be quick to listen and quick to act, of how you are speaking to us through your word. Help me, the teacher. Be with us at this time as we look at your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Bowie State University had their graduation this past Tuesday, as many institutions have been having graduations. And at this particular university there was an empty seat. It was empty because Richard Collins had been killed just two days prior. A family spokesman said this: The parents are totally devastated that their young son, that was at the peak of his career, about to take off, and his life was taken away senselessly. This young man was a son and a brother, perhaps—I'm not too familiar with his family—but he was a friend. He also was commissioned to serve in the United States Army upon graduation as a second lieutenant, and by all accounts of friends and family he also was a brother in Christ. In Egypt on Friday at least twenty eight Christians were killed. This is on top of the attacks against Coptic Churches there in Egypt, that happened not too long ago on Palm Sunday. England is reeling from an attack.

These are of course tragedies, and acutely painful. But other events in our lives can be chronically painful. The couple that wishes to have a child, the younger man who wishes to be married, the older woman who wishes life had gone differently. the addiction that seems to win day after day. Do you ever feel like evil is winning? Do you sometimes wonder if God is really present, or even if he's real at all.

Perhaps you do have faith. You see Jesus clearly for who he is, and you trust him fully. But your conversations with him begin briefly with whispered praises of his power, put prolonged, thunderous petitions for his help—to show up in your life. These moments of reflection contain a mixed bag of emotions. Perhaps anger, confusion, anguish, fear, despairing of hope, perhaps even doubt. Those very next moments are incredibly important. Those next moments of being swirled over with emotion. How do you make sense of it all? What do you do next with them?

Christianity is both a declaration and a demonstration that Jesus, indeed, has the authority and he has the power to bring about God's kingdom. And though it may not seem like it in every moment of our lives, this is a beautiful truth of Christianity: Jesus is holding all things together. The Gospel of Mark gives account after account of how Jesus fixes brokenness, how he offers peace even to his enemies. And likewise today, Mark invites us to see Jesus as the Messiah, the King who is worthy of our faith and who is able to act. And Mark invites us to see that it's actually because Jesus holds all things together, we must live faithfully in his kingdom. It's because he is holding all things together, we can live faithfully.

So how do we do that? How do we live faithfully in his kingdom? Well, we're going to look at this passage that may seem odd. It's sandwiched between the sending of the disciples in verses 7-13, and then verses 30ff when the disciples return from their short-term mission. We have this episode, this little snapshot, of John the Baptist. And though Jesus is mentioned at the very beginning, Jesus is absent from this passage. He's in the background.

And so we're going to look at what we can glean from this. There's always more that can be said, but we're going to look at three primary things. And they're in your bulletin, but I'm going to flesh them out a little bit more. We live faithfully in his kingdom in these ways. It's because Jesus proclaims a **Message of Change**, that we must respond with repentance. That's point number one. Point number two, it's because Jesus provides a **Community for Growth**, that we must engage one another in humility. And because Jesus models a **Path to Power**, that we must follow him.

So first let's look at the **Message of Change**. And at its core, that's exactly what the gospel is. It's a message of change. We first learned this in Mark 1:14 where Mark writes, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" [Mark 1:14-15, ESV] And then again last week we looked at verses 7. . . well, 1-13, but particularly 7-13. We see Jesus sharing his authority with his disciples, and he sends them out to proclaim a message "that people should repent," verse 12. [Mark 6:12, ESV] To repent is simply to change one's mind. More specifically, though, it refers to changing one's life as the result of a complete change of the way you think, the way you see the world, the way you form your attitudes. And it certainly involves a feeling of remorse, but it also is much more than remorse. It's a changing of your mind. Simple, right? Not hardly.

But you may be saying sure, OK, we know this—that repentance is central to the message of Christ. We see it in verse 12, but it's not here in our passage. And you would be right to say that. But you see, today's passage isn't directly about Jesus. [Mark] goes on into this detail about John's life. These final moments, the motivations of Herod, and the people in his family, and the people that are surrounding him—of what happens to John. But though Jesus isn't directly present here in the passage, he is certainly in the background.

Verse 14 gives us the occasion for the passage. I've already mentioned that it's sandwiched between two passages, before and after. And really this section begins a much larger section of Mark. It's shifting from a more local region that Jesus has been ministering, and he's expanding beyond into Galilee. And we see the rising tensions, the controversies that Jesus will be engaging with. And this really goes all the way to Chapter 8:26-30. There's kind of these bookends of this section of Mark. And it's leading into my favorite part of Mark, which goes from that part of Chapter 8 all the way to the end of Chapter 10. The middle section, the heart of the Gospel of Mark, where we see Jesus and we hear his call to discipleship, and we see what discipleship looks like as we follow him.

And so the occasion is, Herod is hearing of Jesus. His reputation, his fame is going before him. Mark calls Herod a king, though he wasn't actually a king. There are a couple reasons why Mark calls him such, and I think it's kind of a combination of several. But he may call him 'king' to honor, maybe, what he might have been locally called. Kind of an honorific. He had local

authority, but he didn't have any regional. . . It didn't go beyond that. He ultimately was under the authority of Rome. The regions that he was a governor over were provincial districts of Rome, and he was under the bidding of Rome.

Herod. There's so much that can be said of his family of origin and how he came to be in power with his family, and who, you know, who are they. They're nominally Jewish, but they're not ethnically Jewish. And all of this is kind of going around. He's ordering his household, his court, off of the Roman ways. And so there's this disconnect between the culture, the people, and the rulers.

And we have this occasion where we see he's wondering, OK, who's this Jesus. And he's being presented, and we're being told some of the common responses for who Jesus might be. Verses 14 and 15. The first theory being that John the Baptist was raised from the dead. So we see that John is already dead at the time of where Mark is in the flow of his Gospel. At this point in Jesus's ministry, [John] has already been dead, and Mark is calling back to that situation. The second theory is that Jesus is Elijah. Now this would have been interwoven into the widespread expectation of the Messiah and the messianic age that was to come, the end of days. And this was very much imbedded into the expectation that it would, indeed, be Elijah, himself, to return, and then soon after would be the coming judgment. Or someone else, kind of in the line of Elijah, and that's the third mention, of one of the prophets of old. Some people speculated a literal prophet, such as Elijah, or just one in that pattern of old prophets. This pattern we see of John the Baptist being raised, Elijah, one of the prophets—this is mirrored later in Chapter 8:27-30 when we see Peter confessing that Jesus is the Christ. So those are kind of our two bookends that we're going to be in for the next few weeks.

And so with John's message, Herod is perplexed, the text tells us. We see that he respects him as a righteous and holy man, but yet he doesn't care much for his rebuke. And neither does Herodias, his wife. John is quoting Leviticus Chapter 18 and a verse there, and another verse in Chapter 20 of Leviticus, of how it's unlawful to marry your brother's wife. And so there is something going on that a prophet, such as John the Baptist, is calling the rulers of the day to account. To account of how they are to be living under God's law. Remember that kind of confusing relationship that Herod has with the people, nominally being Jewish, taking on some of the customs, but also being very assimilated to Greek and Hellenistic understanding of the world. John calls them to account. Herodias didn't like it, either. And so we see this scheme. That's the verses of relating to what's happening at the banquet, verses 17 and following.

So we see in this passage Jesus isn't present, but yet Mark is telling us something about John. He's done it at the beginning, and he's going to do it once or twice more. There is a weaving of John's ministry and Jesus's ministry. And where they overlap, where they parallel, is what Mark is drawing our attention to. And it's important to see how Herod misses the message. He's misunderstanding what's going on. And so for us it's important that we understand what's going on. Herod, likewise, may have been given over to a mix of superstitious fear of what resurrection might look like, what judgment might look like, as well as potentially having a guilty conscience of having John the Baptist killed.

So the message to Herod, the message of the gospel, is to repent. To change your mind, to move from one way of living and live in a different way. Change is often easier said than done,

because it requires much of us. It requires our whole being. It involves our thinking, our attitudes, our loyalties, our motivations and desires. And these things must together in tandem change, that influences and informs our actions, our behaviors, customs, our habits, the ways of our living. And so the message is quite simple, but the response is not always that simple, because it involves death. It involves a dying to your desires, your will, your sense of what is good for you. And it's saying putting that in to conformity what is best for you, what is God's good intention for your life. That's messy, that's disruptive. We don't want to do that. That in that involves our families. Look at the dysfunction here in Herod's family.

And it goes well beyond what Mark entails. Change is hard, and yet it's free. G.K. Chesterton, in one of his writings, "What's wrong with the world," he says this. "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried." So as we apply the message of change, this message of the gospel to us, it's to repent. It's to change one's mind about who Jesus is. Are you seeing him clearly as he's being presented in the Gospel. And are you then redirecting your steps to be in line with him, to follow after him. It's a two-fold step. And so for us, as it was for Herod and his family, do you hear Jesus's message to change? The Gospel invites you to change by responding with repentance.

And secondly, as we move on, we look at how Jesus provides a **Community for Growth**, and how to do that—and living in community, that necessarily means we're engaging with one another with humility. It takes humility. Now to be fair, I'm inferring much of this point. Because we can't directly pull this out of the narrative, because this narrative is about a banquet, where there is probably a lot of drinking, a lot of. . . It's a party. It's a feast. It's for Herod's birthday. There's intrigue, there's conniving, there's manipulation there is—maybe in our current nomenclature and current vocabulary—there is family abuse. The girl who's a teenager.

Now the Word itself doesn't mean or doesn't tell us what type of dancing, but the context can give us a lot of clues for our imagination. And all of this being woven together for the community, as you could say, around Herod, his family, his brother's wife who is now his wife which means that he's dismissed his other wife. It gets more complicated, because the daughter of Herodias. . . They're all family. It's all in the family. And so there's a lot of community that actually is not for growth. But it's actually embedded into itself for its own desires, its own end, its own purposes. And as we see from Herodias, it's because she has a grudge. It's what we do when we don't want to repent. It's when we say I don't like what you're saying. I don't like the truth that you're speaking to me. I like the way I am. And we have to wrestle with that tension, so we dismiss it. Maybe we do what she does and we try to find a way to have it ended. That's perhaps on the extreme, but it happens.

Likewise, there is a community around Herod with the leaders. Notice who's around him: his nobles, his military commanders, his leading men. These would be high ranking government officials in the region of Galilee, it would be military commanders, obviously, it would be officers leading men, warriors, and the leading men would just be potentially wealthy and prominent men in Galilee. So what do we glean from this? Well, contrast who is around Herod and who is around Jesus. Contrast with who seeks to be in the entourage of Herod. Notice where Herod's spending his days: in this banquet, luxury, excess, abundance. And observe in

the course of the Gospel how Jesus lives his life, who he invites to be disciples, who seeks him out for healing, for touch.

The community that Jesus provides for our growth is around him. Not what we naturally or more intuitively think becomes the picture of what community could be, with esteem and reputation, fame, riches, comfort. This is where our personal motivations reveal a lot about who we associate with. Do you seek to be with people that reflect better on you? Or do you seek to follow Jesus where people have nothing to offer you, and it actually comes at great cost to you. It could sully your reputation. It could actually make you sick. The community Jesus intends is to be marked by humility and self-sacrifice. Notice what Herod does in his community.

So we asked the question. Here's just a list of questions for us as we think about this particular point: Who are you associating with? In your spheres how are you leading? In your spheres how are you following? Who are you following? Who are you leading? Are you self-interested or are you interested in others? Is Jesus in the backdrop of your life? Or is he actually the person that you're wanting to follow, to the very places that are uncomfortable to you? Are you living out of principles that protect yourself, or are you living out of response to Jesus's leadership in your life? This will bleed into the next point. But basically, the gospel informs what constitutes community. It tells us what shapes it. It tells us who is welcomed. It tells us who is brought in from the outside and made inside. The gospel informs how we are to conduct our lives in that community, for what purpose and to what ends. Community in the kingdom involves humility and it involves seeking the interests of others ahead of your own.

And this goes into the last point, this **Path to Power**. Jesus himself models a path to power. And it's contrasted to Herod's path to power. And so the gospel response with this is, well, who do we follow? Herod seems to be an anti-model, the very definition of the opposite of what Jesus is calling us to in discipleship. We've already covered some of this. He values the company of men of esteem and luxury. He is hasty with his words and makes haphazard vows. He is ruled by the opinion of others. He rules out of self-protection, instead of self-sacrifice. And ultimately he kills John to save his own reputation—contrary to how Jesus is killed to save others, despite his reputation.

So how do you understand power and what steps do you take to get there? The gospel challenges our very notions of what those words mean and how we get there. Jesus is modeling a leadership style in his kingdom that begins by following him, the King. That goes back to the irony of Mark calling Herod a 'king.' He had somewhat local authority, and yet he refused to live his life in a way that a righteous king should live, for the sake of his people. Jesus, who had no esteem among the people as king, truly is king, and lives like a king. Not in opulence, but with compassion, recognizing our plight and our need. And we see his approach.

Robert Capon says this about power. He calls it . . . He borrows a term from Martin Luther called 'left-handed power.' But such a paradoxical exercise of power, please note, is 180 degrees away from the straight-line variety. It is, to introduce a phrase from Luther, this left-handed power. Unlike the power of the right hand, which interestingly enough is governed by the logical, the plausibility-loving left hemisphere of the brain, left-handed power is guided by the more intuitive, open, and imaginative right side of the brain. Left-handed power, in other

words, is precisely paradoxical power, power that looks for all the world like weakness. Intervention that seems indistinguishable from nonintervention.

The path to power that Jesus goes down is one of suffering, and he invites us to follow. Everything Jesus said and did exemplified this path. He redefines terms. He enables and strengthens and equips and empowers by his Spirit those that follow him to do likewise. As a trained counsellor I could spend a lot of time in this passage just around the dysfunction in Herod's family. The reality is, in our brokenness we're all dysfunctional at some level. We have rebellious hearts, we have scars that are sometimes healed, not always fully healed. And yet Jesus still invites us to suffer for the sake of others. You can not suffer for the sake of the gospel for others, when you yourself are suffering, out of your own strength. It's just impossible. It is human nature to pull away and say: Suffering? No, thank you. I'm going to do everything in my power to prevent that, avoid that, run from that.

But brothers and sisters in Christ, that is the message of the gospel. And the beauty of the gospel is, not only can you not do it, but Jesus does it first. He goes before you. He doesn't tell you to go suffer so that he doesn't have to suffer. And this is this is getting ahead of ourselves, but this is the culmination in Chapter 10—the beautiful, the beautiful reality of our Savior. He came to serve, and not to be served. He suffered and he died so that others might live and have life abundant, to be free, to have peace, to be healed, to be renewed. To experience joy, to experience reconciliation with their Creator.

And so Jesus flips the script upside down. Because it's our experience, just as we mentioned, we can turn on the news every single day and be overwhelmed with the injustice. And injustice—just as it is with John the Baptist—is often meted out in the most opulent of locations. The furthest place is removed of where the injustice happens. The fate of a person's life is often held in the balance of another person's grudge. The birthplace of these grudges reflect our thirst for control over outside circumstances and satisfaction that we crave when we've been slighted. It's a thirst for power. We crave power because we feel so powerless.

But the Gospel of Jesus is a declaration and a demonstration of a very different approach to power. When we feel out of control, and the powers that be are dictating our lives or ruining our lives, the Gospel of Jesus is always there. When it feels absent, when it feels so far away, it's the overarching promise of the Bible is that God is with you. He is with you in your suffering. He is with John the Baptist when his head is getting cut off. He is with Jesus on the cross as he's taking the full wrath of God. And yet Jesus's experience of that is of suffering and of grief, as if he's forsaken, that feeling of being forsaken. And he is acquainted with our griefs.

And as John and Jesus' ministry are woven together, this is where it's picking up steam, it's picking up focus. Because if John, a prophet of God that the people are recognizing, this is his fate? This is a foreshadowing of the fate of Jesus. And so we're left in this tension. We're in the middle of the Gospel. Of course we know the end of the Gospel, but if you're not aware of the end of the Gospel, this is sitting heavy. What's God going to do? Where is he going to be? Is he going to show up? He didn't last time, or at least I didn't think he did.

And Jesus, again and again, says, I am with you. I am with you in suffering, and more than that, you are going to be my disciple, and I'm going to equip you to also suffer in my name for the

sake of others. Jesus lived and died and rose again to free us to live this way in his kingdom. He invites us to change from our approach to his. He invites us to engage in relationships very different than the way the world values relationships. And he invites us to follow him down the path of suffering for the sake of others—not for our glory, but for his. That is a mystery of the gospel, that we share in his sufferings and we share in his glory. That is a mystery of our union with Christ. Do you hear the message of the gospel? Where do you need it this week? Where is your thirst for good news this week? It's there. Do you have ears to hear it, recognizing that Jesus holds your life together, and he is not absent. He is not silent.

Let us pray. Our Father in heaven, we give you thanks. Lord, I am often overwhelmed by the news. I'm overwhelmed with the many heartaches, even in our own congregation, the many needs that we have. And yet you hold it all together. Help me to grasp your power. Help me to see it and have renewed hope. Help us to see you fully and clearly. May we know and taste and crave and swim and marinate in the hope that is in your gospel. Help us to walk after you. In Jesus' name. Amen.