



Speaker:
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The Increase of Christ

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 19 of 19

9/19/2020 (SAT) | Bible: Mark 6:14-29

Let's read together from Mark's gospel, chapter 6, beginning at verse 14.

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Unusually for Mark, the spotlight is taken off Jesus Christ for a bit while he describes the demise of John the Baptist.

This King Herod was the son of the Herod the Great, infamous for his "Slaughter of the Innocents". And the son Herod, although he's called a king, technically wasn't, and made great efforts to have the Romans give him that title.

He's heard of some of the amazing things Jesus of Nazareth had been doing. Among the people there were different ideas about who Jesus was. Some thought Elijah had returned. Others thought he was merely the latest in a long line of prophets. But Herod's superstition was such that he believed Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead.

The author uses this mention of John to digress into this account of what happened to the Baptist. One of John's sayings has kept coming back to me. You'll remember he said, *He must increase, and I must decrease*. Jesus must increase, and to that end and John knew he must decrease. And I'm going to use that saying to structure my message today. We'll firstly look at the decrease of John. And I intend to do that by making some observations concerning the three main players in this drama: Herod, Herodias, and the daughter of Herodias.

Herod had mixed feelings towards John. It's not uncommon for people to have these confused feelings towards others. When I started a new job many years ago, a colleague was telling me about what the boss was like. She said he'd either hate you but respect you, or he'd like you but not respect you! So if you stood your ground and stuck to your principles, he'd dislike you but have a grudging respect. But if you were a chauvinist, a "Yes Man", you could be his friend, but he'd have zero respect for you.

Herod was like this. Part of him wanted John dead. Yet consider some of the other signs of Herod's attitude to John that we see in the scriptures:

- He held John to be an important figure, a man truly of God. After all, he believed he was risen from the dead. And what can raise a man from the grave but the power of God?
- When he heard of mighty works done by this man, Jesus, he assumed it must be John. That is, he believed John was so special that he would be able to do these mighty works.
- He felt bad about the death of John. Not only did he understand that a terrible crime had taken place, but he lost someone who was valuable to him. He knew there was at least one person in his life who'd tell him the truth, even if that truth was painful and offensive. He also took full responsibility for John's death.
- He thought of John as a just and holy man. In law, this is described as the *evidence of a hostile witness*—that is, praise coming from your enemy is worth more than character references from a hundred friends. Herod knew John to be a holy man of God, and it was for this reason he feared him.
- Herod watched out for John. He protected him from the bloodlust of his wife who wanted him dead.
- He was a keen listener to John's sermons about the kingdom of God. If John was a long time in prison, it's likely Herod would call for him from time-to-time to listen to him speak about the things of God.

But what did he do with this man who he respected so much? **He killed him.** You see, he made a rash promise. And he wouldn't be the first in scripture to do this and later regret it.

Given the moral state of the company he kept, it's widely believed Herod and his guests were watching a sexually provocative dance, and we shouldn't forget this was his stepdaughter. Even if it were a more modest type of dance, which is unlikely, it'd hardly be appropriate to have your teenage daughter parade herself in front of gang of drunken men.

When we consider the dilemma Herod faced, we shouldn't forget that he could've got out of it. When asked for the beheading of John, he could've clarified his offer. He could've said "No, no, I meant a proper gift—of money or property, etc." He could have argued her request he does something immoral hardly constitutes a gift.

But never mind what the right thing to do was. Never mind that to kill John would be thoroughly unjust. **He wanted to look good in front of his mates.** His reputation was more important than the life of a good man.

What of Herodias then? She left her husband Philip and got married to this Herod Antipas. The dancing girl was her daughter to her previous husband. The family of Herod was in a mess, and it shows as again there's "nothing new under the sun". We wouldn't have to travel far from the door of the church to find many families like this.

Herodias had taken great offence at John's rebukes. For some odd reason, Christians keep telling me we shouldn't point out individual sins in our evangelism. John clearly didn't agree

with them. It's part of Christian witness to highlight specific sins that are prominent in our particular cultural setting as well as speaking about sin generally.

The constant pestering of Herod by his wife eventually succeeded. John was thrown into prison. But this wasn't enough for Herodias. **She wanted him dead.** His mere *existence* was enough to haunt her thoughts. Like all the people of this world, she thought herself to be a good person. She KNEW she was a good person because her pride told her so! And here was this vagrant, this nobody, this uncivilised lout from the desert, telling her she was sinning!

He needed to be wiped off the face of the planet. And Herodias would do anything to accomplish that. She was even prepared to corrupt her own daughter to get her way. And when the girl came to her mum and asked what request she should make of Herod, there was no hesitation. *I want the Baptist dead. No, that's not good enough. I want him beheaded. Even better: I want his head on a plate.*

The fool of a man gave the order. The deed was done. The head was put on a plate and brought to Herod. Herod handed it over to his stepdaughter. And she then gave it to her mother. We can only imagine how elated Herodias was. She'd beaten her husband, she got revenge on John, and she did it in a way to make her victory all the greater. Such hatred!

The public, of course, don't like being told there's such a thing as sin and they've committed crimes against God. They sometimes laugh, they sometimes scorn, and sometimes they even get aggressive. But by far the worst aggression comes when *particular sins* are highlighted, as in John's case. If a man's preaching on the street, and he makes reference to the sin of abortion, he'll likely face great hostility. It seems the more the preacher exposes people's cherished sins, the more he'll be hated.

Now if you have people indulging in certain notorious sins that deep down they suspect are wrong, the last thing they want is people reminding them of those suspicions. In order to bury their consciences, they need to persuade themselves what they're doing is right. They must also have society assuring them what they're doing is right. This is why sinful movements in our society fight to silence any opposition to today's wicked lifestyle choices.

- *They tell themselves* they're doing good
- *The media* tells them they're doing good
- *Corporations* tell them they're doing good
- And just when they think they've killed off this voice of conscience, along comes a Christian and DARES to tell them they're sinning.

I've preached at various Pride parades. I've no problem using that term, by the way, because that's what they are. It is **pride** being paraded, and pride is sinful. They may as well call it the London Sin March or the New York Perversion Rally. Now there might be a small part of my message to those people to do with the specific sins they want to boast about. But they hate even the general preaching of the gospel. And you might be surprised by the level of hatred we see in them.

- Going red in the face with anger
- Screaming in our faces
- Shouting perverse things about Jesus
- Damaging our signs
- Trying to attack us
- Throwing cups of coffee, used condoms and many other things at us

And then there are the direct threats. Last time one guy said, if there were no police around, he'd love to pour petrol on us all and burn us alive. I have to be fair and say that's not the attitude of all of them. But I *can* say the general feeling among that movement is they'd rather we were all **dead**. Sinful men and women have cherished sins, and woe to you if you expose them.

There's not much to say about this young girl, her daughter. Like all of us, she came into this world with the potential to commit all manner of sin. Like all of us, she was fully deserving of God wrath. If this girl heard any of John's preaching, it doesn't sound like she took any notice. I imagine she was well aware of the viral news about Jesus of Nazareth and his power and teaching, but she wasn't interested. If she had any opinion of these men at all, it will have been instilled in her by her manipulative and bitter mother. Her upbringing would have taught her little about right and wrong.

As much as she was manipulated, she was still a sinner in the eyes of God. She was easily old enough to understand it was wrong to kill a man for no good reason. I'm sure her mother will have expressed her bitter hatred for John to her daughter on many occasions, so she knew full well her mother's request was based on pure hatred rather than some criminality in John.

This girl was fully complicit. Without hesitation, she rushed back to her stepfather and made her request. At the judgement seat of Christ, she will be held partly responsible for the murder of John. This was one of God's children. John was an adopted son of God. He was an *heir* of God, and a joint heir with Jesus Christ himself. God will not take that crime lightly.

Following Jesus will always involve rejection by this world. And this rejection could be expressed even in your murder. Christians around the world are killed every day for their faith. You happen to be in a place where God has decreed you will not face that level of viciousness at this time, that's all. But remember, believer, that you stand in the same place as John. You too are the apple of God's eye. When people oppose *you*, they oppose *God*. When they slander *you*, they SLANDER God. And if they kill you, it shows intent that, if it were possible, **they would kill God too**. But vengeance is God's, and he WILL repay.

And so it was that John's ministry was fully ended. His last moments were spent with his head on a block staring down at the dusty floor of the dungeon. From a man's point of view, an ignominious end. *Yet we can declare his demise a great victory:*

- His death was at a precise time ordained by God
- His death was of a manner decreed by God
- His death marked the end of a life spent in service to God
- And his demise, his decrease, marked the end of his grand introduction to the world of Jesus Christ the son of God. He must needs have decreased so Christ would increase.

If you go to see a stage show of some kind, say a famous guitarist or cellist, there's always a host. This is the person you see first. They lay out the event that's about to take place. They are, if you like, the herald of the one who is to perform. They fully understand they're not the star attraction. They're to make their introduction then leave.

John always knew he was there to simply introduce the Son of God. Although at first all eyes were on him, his role was to direct their gaze towards another. And so it was he pointed the people towards Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. And his job then was to slip into the shadows, out of view. Had he remained in the limelight, people may have continued to look to him as the great prophet. So he prepares to leave. *I must decrease, he says, and then Christ will increase.*

In what way did Jesus increase? That is, how did this increase, this prominence, work out? I'd like to break down the story of Jesus into four points in order to explain his increase.

1. HE INCREASED THROUGH HIS MINISTRY

Even just a few chapters into Mark's gospel, we've seen Jesus display his power and preach with great authority. He showed the world

- He had power to manipulate diseases in a body
- He had power to instruct demons where to go
- He had power to defy gravity
- He had power to change one chemical into another
- He had power to command the weather to behave as he wished
- And he had power to bring dead people back to life.

But none of these was the most important aspect of his ministry. These were performed to give credibility to his *message*. He came to tell the world he was the Messiah. He was the one prophesied from ancient times. He was the one who was going to give his life in order to eternally save others.

Luke 4:43 says, "And he said unto them, I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also: for therefore am I sent." The communication of his message was the most important part of his ministry. And I wish the churches in the modern day would take note of that example. If we could describe a general trend in the bulk of the churches in the past few

decades, it would be that singing and other activities have increased while preaching has decreased.

2. HE INCREASED THROUGH HIS DEATH

Like John, Jesus was murdered. Both killings were unjust. Both were crimes against God. But we believe in the sovereignty of God. And so we declare confidently that both of these deaths were victories! Colossians 2:14-15 tells us Jesus was “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross. And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.” What appeared commonly to be a shameful defeat was instead the greatest victory this world has ever seen! He removed the burden of the condemning Law of God from his people and killed it on the cross, and the whole event was nothing less than a grand triumph over all his enemies.

Incredible, isn't it? He volunteered to get arrested. He submitted himself to corrupt judgement. He allowed himself to be battered. And even if legions of angels *were* waiting in the wings to move in on his command, he forsook all help and let those cruel men hang him on a tree to die.

If we think of the incarnation as the centre point of all human history, we can zoom in and more specifically identify the *death* of Christ as the most crucial. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, “For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

It's strange, is it not, that something so negative should be at the very heart of a religion's doctrines? *We declare to you, we tell the world, this most central tenet of the Christian Faith: our king and saviour was brutally killed.*

Yes, there's more to the story. But we must always present to this world a message centred around Calvary. Churches may be ashamed of Calvary. They may choose to accentuate his heavenly glory, his healing ministry, his resurrection and his ascension...**at the expense of Calvary**. Not so us. In accordance with the scriptures, and as God gives us grace, “we preach Christ crucified”.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died. You may feel more comfortable believing Jesus didn't die properly. Men have devised sophisticated explanations to describe what happened to Jesus. Many will say *his body only* went into the ground but that his real essence ascended to heaven. There he would remain for a few days until it was time to return to Earth and take part in his resurrection. Shortly afterwards, he would go back to heaven...for the second time!

Unfortunately, none of that is in the Bible. And you'll be disappointed if you think I've crafted some equally elaborate but more satisfactory explanation. I'm going to stick

with the plain statements in the scriptures. I'll only venture to say this: somehow, in a fashion way beyond my ability to comprehend, Jesus Christ, both man and God, descended into the realm of the dead. That is, **the one who ascended to heaven after his resurrection is the same person as he who descended into the grave.**

3. HE INCREASED THROUGH HIS RESURRECTION

Let's remind ourselves of that joyful moment when the tomb Jesus was laid in was found to be empty. In Luke 24:4-7 we read, "And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments. And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, 'Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee saying, *The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.*'"

Jesus Christ, body and soul, went to the grave. But it wasn't possible that the grave could hold him. The Jews commonly believed a body would start to decompose after four days. I know it's not entirely scientific, but it becomes significant when we remember that Jesus was lifted out of the grave *before* the fourth day. Jesus, speaking through the Psalmist in Psalms 16:9-10 declares, "Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [the grave]; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption." He didn't experience decomposition.

This glorious resurrection broke the power of the grave. It allows us a glimpse into what our own resurrection will look like. By the resurrection, Jesus was fitted out with a new body, one that was suitable to inhabit the heavenly realm. And he promises that all who follow him will likewise get to live in this different but better form in the world to come.

4. HE INCREASED THROUGH HIS ASCENSION

Following his resurrection, Jesus spent some more time on Earth. He allowed himself to be seen in his resurrected form by many hundreds of people, leaving a wealth of evidence for his resurrection. He comforted the disciples and promised them the soon arrival of a different helper, the Holy Spirit.

Then the time came to leave. He had his eternal, resurrection body. The battle was over. Now it was time to escape the sin-polluted world and take his place as King in the heavens. Luke 24:50-51 describes it: "And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven."

And there he sits today, victorious but not inactive. He's taken on the job of our defence lawyer. Hebrews 9:24 says, "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." He exists as a constant reminder to the Father that all his children are **blameless**. And he will NEVER leave his post.

Here then is the pinnacle of the increase of Jesus Christ. FOR JESUS CHRIST TO HAVE THE PRE-EMINENCE TODAY, ALL OTHERS MUST STEP OUT OF THE LIMELIGHT. Gospel preachers who are serious about magnifying the name of Jesus Christ are happy to do this. My greatest desire as a preacher is that God would so use my efforts, not that I might earn a reputation, but that people would think more highly of Jesus Christ. If I've ever said anything that has caused you to esteem him better, with no thought of the person who preached it, I **count that as a success**. I want to deliver a message, hopefully a message from heaven, **then step aside so you see none but Jesus only**.

Our increase is not in pre-eminence, but is found in a proper view of God and ourselves. 1 Thessalonians 3:11-12 – "Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make YOU to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you".

Amen.