

No One Like Jesus: Health and Wealth
By Jason Huff
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Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3-5; Matthew 14:1-12

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 14:1-12. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: “It is not lawful for you to have her.” Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet. On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.”

I visit hospitals every now and then, and I get so used to them that I barely notice signs I've passed by a hundred times. But a week or two ago, a sign I saw driving away from a hospital got my attention. It said first, “remember to buckle up.” No surprise there, right?

But the second half of the sign was what was most interesting. It said, “because your health is the most important thing.” Now that idea is heard all the way around the world. Ghandi said, “It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold or silver. The English poet Leigh Hunt wrote, “The groundwork of all happiness is good health.” The Buddha said, “Health is the greatest gift.”

So we're all agreed? Health is the most important thing? Right? From a worldly perspective, it's obvious. But it's not the biblical example. The Bible mentions the word *health* less than a dozen times, and the closest we get to anything like these sayings is Proverbs 3:7-8: “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.” Scripture doesn't say we should be unhealthy, but the most straightforward perspective is when Paul writes his first letter to his young friend Timothy: “Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”

All of this plays into our passage today, because it's a doozy. It's deeply disturbing for a lot of reasons. Yet it teaches us so much in ways we might not immediately see. It shows us a central role of the pastor, preacher, prophet, and church. It warns us about our responses to accountability. And it shows us there is something far greater than worldly health and wealth.

This passage can be a little confusing because it's not in chronological order. We start with Herod's response to Jesus' fame – "it's John the Baptist raised from the dead!" Since Matthew hasn't yet told us John's fate, he then backtracks and fills in the details.

We hear the name "Herod" a lot in the New Testament, and so we'll start with a little history to make sense of the situation. "Herod" was a family name, not dissimilar from "Smith" or "Jones." Herod the Great was the Herod that tried to have the infant Jesus murdered. He died shortly after Jesus' birth. He left his kingdom to his three sons by different mothers. The southern territory went to his eldest son Archelaus. He was so awful that Caesar removed him in 6AD. (That's why Pontius Pilate, a Roman governor, was the one to judge Jesus.) Antipas, referred to as "Herod" in this passage, got Galilee, the middle territory and the area where Jesus lived and did most of His ministry. The third son, Philip, got the northern territory.

Long story short: Antipas ditched his wife for his niece Herodias, who was married to his half-brother Philip. This would lead to Antipas' downfall. The father of Antipas' wife declared war, and Antipas lost both territory and money. Herodias inspired Antipas to ask Caesar to be made an official king and not just a provincial ruler. Instead, Caesar exiled him to Western Europe where he died in poverty.

So back to the story. John the Baptist tells Antipas, "You can't do this. It's against God's law for you to be with Herodias." The relationship broke the Old Testament law in multiple ways – not only was the relationship too close by blood, they were committing adultery. Under the law, divorce was only permitted if the other party had committed adultery. John was acting in his role as God's prophet, calling out the ruler over the Jewish people for breaking the law he was supposed to uphold.

Mad at being called out, Antipas has John arrested and thrown into prison, but he doesn't know what to do with him. Matthew says he wanted to kill him but was afraid of the people. As the gospel of Mark tells the story, Antipas liked to listen to John; he was puzzled by John; he knew John to be righteous, so he feared John. Mark reads like Antipas had John thrown into prison to keep his wife happy. While both Matthew and Mark approach it from different angles, they agree that John was a thorn in Antipas' side.

Finally, a solution presents itself. Antipas has a birthday feasts with tons of guests. Wine is flowing freely. Everyone's having a good time. Then Herodias' daughter Salome dances for them. A ruler's daughter wouldn't typically do this; it would have been debasing. Who knows what kind of dance she's doing! Antipas is so drunk that he makes an oath – ask for up to half my kingdom, and it's yours! It's clear the plan is already in motion. Kill John the Baptist.

All of a sudden, Antipas gets nervous. He knows too late what he's done. There's no going back now. To break an oath was to be cursed. No one would want to have anything to do with you because the wrath of God was upon you, even if your promise was rash or caused you to do something evil or sinful. And so Antipas did what Herodias and Salome requested and had John beheaded. Once the evil act is done, John's disciples give his body a proper burial and tell Jesus the news of what has happened to His cousin.

When Antipas hears of Jesus, he's beside himself. This has got to be John the Baptist returned from the dead! He was excited and frightened both. Eventually, Antipas would meet Jesus for himself, when Pilate sent Jesus to him during His trial. But rather than bowing before Jesus, he mocked him. Antipas was a degenerate who let his lusts so command him that he killed God's greatest prophet and betrayed God's own Son.

It's an unpleasant story, but it says so much to us in our modern world. The first aspect I want to look at today is this: *we were not made for health and wealth in this world, but righteousness*. John the Baptist is a fearless example of this. He did nothing to deserve poverty. But as the unique prophet called to usher in the Messiah, he intentionally impoverished himself, making his meals out of locusts and honey and dressing in camel hair. When he taught, he didn't shrink back. He confronted sinners and told them what to do to get right with God. In the end, that got him killed. He wouldn't back down, even at the point of death.

We don't need prosperity preachers. Why not? Health and wealth is what the world believes in already. To the world, John the Baptist is a madman with a death wish. Who would intentionally confront a ruler without a conscience who had enough power to have you imprisoned and murdered without a trial? John is imprisoned so long that he sent his disciples to make sure Jesus was the messiah – he needed reassurance because he was sitting there rotting. Why would someone do this? Why would John give up his freedom and his life to confront an adulterous king? There have been a lot of adulterous leaders in our world!

It's because John knew that, as the servant of the one true God and a disciple of His Son Jesus, righteousness was the only option. He was called by God to tell the people to repent – to change their ways and to return to God. That calling was not just to the poor or the Pharisees, but even to the rulers of the world. He followed in the footsteps of countless other prophets and martyrs in the history of faith.

Noah built an ark to please God, though everyone else on the earth was wicked beyond compare. Abraham left his family and everything he knew to travel to a land he had never seen because God promised it to him and his descendants. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt even though he was so scared that he pleaded with God to send someone else. Joshua led the armies of Israel into battle, even though the Canaanites looked like giants to the smaller-statured Hebrews. David left King Saul alive, even though he had gone mad and wanted David dead, because David would not harm the man that God had declared King. The list goes on and on of saints who did what was righteous even though it put them in harm's way.

You know what? Nobody is impressed with a god of health and wealth. You know why? Because ungodly people often have health and wealth in abundance. Your god gave you your wealth? My work got me my wealth. Your god gave you health? I ate right and exercised. And if you follow that theology, when you don't have your health and wealth, suddenly it's because you displeased God. It's because you don't have enough faith, that you don't think positively enough, that you don't speak goodness into reality. And all of that is complete and total bunk as far as the Bible is concerned.

You know what the Bible tells us? That the real God gives joy to people who suffer. That He will see His prophet John through to the end, even though it costs him his life, and will resurrect John at the last day. That despite incredible suffering, God gave Job hope; He gave Joseph grace; He gave Elijah reassurance; He gave Paul perseverance. A god that inspires hope of material goods and safety from pain isn't much. The God who is so good, so merciful, so kind and loving that He inspires loyalty in the midst of intense distress is the One worth serving.

I think of two modern examples of this. One is Angie, Catha's former roommate, suffering with MS. Another is Michelle, one of my teammates in Russia twenty years ago, who has more medical conditions than I can count. Angie is a teacher, yet her legs and tongue are failing her. Michelle's heart is sharing God with friends in Russia, a place her doctors say she can never return to again. And yet both of them continue, in whatever ways they can, to spread the love of God wherever they go. They both have used their illnesses to speak to doctors and patients they never would have met otherwise about Jesus. And while we pray for their healing, we see God working through them. God hasn't given them health and wealth. But He has, through His Son Jesus Christ, given them both joy and righteousness.

Are we thankful for the health and wealth we have? Absolutely. If we lose it all, will we still rejoice? If we wind up persecuted for standing up for the gospel, will we sing God's praise? Can we use our sufferings for God's glory? Are we willing to be righteous no matter the cost? That is the question of John the Baptist for us today.

John's testimony reminds us of something lost in many Christian churches today, something so vital that it's our second point: *the role of the pastor and prophet is to bring people to repentance*. As 17th century pastor Matthew Henry put it, "Ministers are reprovers by office...they are obliged to reprove those that are under their charge." It's our charge to confront those in our care when they actively sin. Henry goes on to say that it's the "duty" of "magistrates, ministers, and Christian friends." Our theology says you can tell a true church by three things it does: the proper preaching of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. Without those three things, you don't have a true church.

When John called out Herod Antipas on his sin, John wasn't being spiteful or mean or cruel. He wasn't being a busybody or a know-it-all or holier-than-thou. *He was doing his job*. Nothing more, nothing less. His calling as a prophet was to warn those around him about God's judgment and preach a return to God. His job was to see sin for what it is, call it sin, and plead with people to stop sinning. We should respect that God has put church leaders in place to help us fight sin in this way. As Matthew Henry noted, though we aren't to confront every wrong in every place, regular church members have a duty to our friends when they sin in plain sight.

I don't like this part of my job. I would prefer there would be no sin in our world or our church to confront, and I'm sure you'd agree. But the difficult thing is, we are tempted. We face trials. And sometimes, we step over the edge. It is the duty of those Christians around the person who's fallen into sin to do what they can to lead them into repentance and restoration. Jesus sets a pattern in Matthew 18: first confront someone privately, then bring a couple of witnesses, and then bring it to the church for resolution. I am often the last to know and the last line of defense. But it's still my job once I know, as it is yours.

Why does this matter? Because we live in an era when many church members don't even know what God considers sinful, and if they do, they want the church to stay out of it. A church member once told me that if she started living with a man, that was just between her and God. I had to point out that the church is to keep its members free from sin in as much as it depended on us, and that if the elders or I knew about it, we'd have to confront it. And all sins matter. Gossip and slander and wrath and abusive language may have lesser consequences, but they are just as spiritually deadly as murder, adultery, and theft. Some sins have more dire consequences, but all of them separate us from God. We must deal with them all head on.

This has become harder in the modern age because the Internet has given us the ability to sin anonymously, whether it's through things we watch, do, or say online. We can hide from accountability. We may even think that what we do in secret won't count. Yet Scripture says that everything we do will be revealed; nothing is hidden from God. Before you post a rant online, remember the warning of James 3:6 – “the tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body...[it] is itself set on fire by hell.” Before you click that button or make that choice, remember that you have the ability to be salt and light for Christ in your daily life, online or off. Do not let the lack of visibility keep you from being accountable for your actions.

And let it lead into our final point today: *take with grace the loving rebuke of a friend*. Proverbs 27:6 teaches us, “You can trust the wounds of a friend, but not the abundant kisses of an enemy.” John was not Herod Antipas' enemy; John was trying to save him! A friend tells us the truth and it hurts. But it's far better than someone who flatters us who actually hates us.

Today marks the 15th anniversary of 9/11. We were all moved by the heroic sacrifices of the first responders, a great number of whom lost their lives trying to save others. They believed that the safety of those trapped in the Twin Towers was more important than their own. We honor them today for faithfully carrying out their duty and oath to protect the people they served.

In the same manner, when someone rebukes us for our own good, to preserve us from sin, let's be thankful. For while first responders are interested in our physical health, our Christian friends, pastors, and elders are concerned about our spiritual health. That is truly the most important thing. If we abandon our relationship with God, if we sin without regard to Him and lose our spiritual life, we truly have nothing. If we listen to those who love us and take to heart their concerns, if we will repent to please God, we will avoid Herod's fate. Anyone who repents of sin, asks forgiveness of Christ, and becomes His disciple will enter the Kingdom of God.

Friends, we are not on this earth for health and wealth. We are not here to seek after our own pleasure at the expense of others. We aren't here to be coddled, or lulled into thinking that we can ignore the ways of the most holy God. We are here to grow holy, to be made righteous in the sight of God. By our faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, we have been declared holy. Now the Holy Spirit works to make us that way. Don't give up holiness for the momentary pleasures of sin. And don't shrink back when a friend goes astray hoping they might figure it out on our own. May we help one another grow in grace, may we call each other into account, so that when the final day of this age arrives, we will look around in the Kingdom of God and see each other there, shining in the light of our glorious Savior.