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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL  
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## God's Righteousness Is Worth Dying For

Mark 6:14–29

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

### Mark 6:14–29

<sup>14</sup> Now King Herod heard *of Him*, for His name had become well known. And he said, "John the Baptist is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him."

<sup>15</sup> Others said, "It is Elijah."

And others said, "It is the Prophet, or like one of the prophets."

<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard, he said, "This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead!" <sup>17</sup> For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. <sup>18</sup> Because John had said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

<sup>19</sup> Therefore Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not; <sup>20</sup> for Herod feared John, knowing that he *was* a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

<sup>21</sup> Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief *men* of Galilee. <sup>22</sup> And when Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I will give *it* to you." <sup>23</sup> He also swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

<sup>24</sup> So she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?"

And she said, "The head of John the Baptist!"

<sup>25</sup> Immediately she came in 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."

<sup>26</sup> And the king was exceedingly sorry; *yet*, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her. <sup>27</sup> Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, <sup>28</sup> brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. <sup>29</sup> When his disciples heard *of it*, they came and took away his corpse and laid it in a tomb.

This Word of the Lord is spoken for you.

We pray, O Lord, sanctify us by Your truth, Your word is truth. Amen.

How far are you willing to stick out your neck? There was a special on TV a few weeks ago having to do with bullying. It was one of those “what would you do” programs. They placed a group of five teenage girls into a room with a hidden camera where they were supposed to be working on a project together. Three of the girls were actresses, and the two more attractive, better dressed, more well spoken were ganging up on the other girl who was another race, less attractive, more modestly dressed, wearing glasses. The question was, whether the girls who were not aware of what was going on would respond. Would they join in? Stand up? Or say nothing? The bullies went on and on, teasing the girl – the one with bad ideas, the one who was ugly, the weirdo.

So what would you do? What happens when your friends, your reputation, your feelings are on the line? For John the Baptist it was even more than his reputation or friends, but his own neck was on the line. So how much are we willing to lose? At what point does this faith we believe actually become something that we would consider losing our own lives for? Today we consider whether this righteousness that comes from God is something worth dying for. And we’ll look at three situations of Christians whose necks are on the line; when pressure is on: we’ll talk about John the Baptist, we’ll talk about a Christian in the 15th century named John Huss; and we’ll talk about the situation we find ourselves in today.

### **1. A righteousness for which John the Baptist died**

I am sometimes troubled by these “what would you do” specials, because so often when I see it, I think, what would I do? And it is not usually much. I often think of how awful I would probably seem to people watching at home – flashbacks to when I was a child and a teenager; and how many times I failed to do what was right; flashbacks to years gone by, months gone by, days gone by. How troubling to think of having a secret video camera on us in those moments when we knew what they were doing was wrong or what we were doing was wrong, dreadfully wrong, and we pulled our head back into our shell and kept silent; or worse yet, we held our head high and joined right in!

King Herod was wading about in his own mess, lost in a conscience that is tormented by flashbacks. Herod was lost in a conscience tormented by flashbacks. His conscience was a mess; he had violated God’s gift of marriage. And he can still hear the

voice. The voice crying in the wilderness. That told him his marriage to his brother's wife was wrong. His conscience was a mess: accused, excused, confused, grieved, threatened and saturated with superstitions. So when word reaches him of another man who comes in mighty works and mighty words, Herod becomes lost in a conscience tormented by flashbacks.

He thinks back to the platter and the pressure and the politics. All eyes on him. Nobles, officers, and the leading men of the land. And he had made a promise. He wanted to impress his peers and improve his politics. And so he brought out his wife's daughter to dance. He offers her anything, up to half his kingdom; anything to impress his peers and improve his politics.

He remembers the platter. For there he had cut off his own sensitivity to God's righteousness and he became saturated in superstitions. He had not grasped John's message. He could not recognize the saving work of Christ when it came to his ears. He did not believe or see that righteousness could not be found in his own powers or efforts or dealings. But righteousness could only be found in God when one repents.

But John knew otherwise. But John, had found something worth sticking out his neck for. He had found something more valuable than his own life. He had found a righteousness worth dying for. And that is because he had found a righteousness that was not subjected to the whims and superstitions of his conscience, but it was a righteousness that originated in God.

For John knew that God's righteousness is something different than ours. God's righteousness doesn't come from us, it comes from Jesus; and it arrives in Jesus; and it is ours in Jesus. This is a righteousness which leaves no room for superstitions or misunderstandings about who Jesus is. God's righteousness comes to us in Jesus and by knowing Jesus and how he has come to make everything right.

That is what compels John to stick his neck out. To stand up for what is right. Not because we live up to God's righteous standard, but because that righteousness is delivered to us in repentance. He preached of a baptism unto repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He preached of the righteous one who was coming after him, whose sandal straps he was not worthy to untie. This righteousness was found in Jesus and brought into our world a change – a kingdom that comes ruling and reigning in righteousness, and it declares sinners like John and you and me and Herod to be righteous.

For this he stuck out his neck and told Herod that his marriage to his brother's wife was sinful, and called him to repentance. And for the sake of God's institution of marriage, and for the sake of the saving righteousness that can be found only in Jesus, he was willing to die.

*Matthew 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

## **2. A righteousness for which John Huss died**

However, John the Baptist was not the only John to stick his neck out. We can think back 600 years to another John – John Huss. It was in the 15th century that this man would also stick out his neck for the sake of righteousness. This last Monday marks the 600th anniversary of the day John Huss demonstrated that this righteousness was worth dying for.

Huss' had become a threat to the Rome and its religious power. It seemed all eyes were on him. Nobles, officers, leading men. Just 100 years before Luther, John Huss would pave the way for the reformation. He preached against the indulgences that Rome was selling to crusaders. He also taught that the foundation of the church could not rest in popes and councils. In fact, he claimed many have been heretics. For Huss, Christ was the head of the church; and the authority for truth was to be found in the Bible alone. Perhaps most significantly, he taught the people that when a pope is taken astray by ignorance and love of money, that a Christian's obedience belongs to Christ and not Rome.

In 1415, he was summoned to the Council at Constance where they imprisoned him and demanded that he recant his writings and teachings. He responded by saying that he was willing to be corrected and to submit to the Council, so long as it didn't go against God or his conscience. But he maintained that Councils and popes can make errors and do make errors. So he responded, "I appeal to Jesus Christ, the only judge who is almighty and completely just. In his hands I plead my cause, not on the basis of false witnesses and erring councils, but on truth and justice" (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/martyrs/huss.html?start=2>).

On July 6, 1415, while tied to the stake, with one last chance to recant he prayed, "Lord Jesus, it is for thee that I patiently endure this cruel death. I pray thee to have mercy on my enemies." John Huss was condemned a heretic, tied to a stake, and burned alive. He had found a righteousness that was worth dying for.

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### **3. A righteousness for which we die**

So what about us? What about our necks? If you are like me, you probably have flashbacks to all the ways you've failed to stand up or stand out or stick your neck out for what is right. We so easily can think of times when we are more like Herod than John the Baptist – pulling our head back into our shell and kept silent; or worse yet, we held our head high and joined right in! Is God's righteousness really worth dying for?

As we look at the state of marriage; or the attitude toward human sexuality and sexual freedom in our country, we can see things just aren't righteous. But who is willing to stick their neck out? Notice how few politicians are ready to take a position on this issue. Notice how few presidential candidates are willing to address their beliefs on same sex marriage. And that is because, if a Christian candidate were to come out as saying that same sex marriage is wrong, there would be consequences. Lobbyists, special interest, campaign donors, media voices. But you don't just need to be a politician to face the same sort of pressures.

In Oregon, it came in the form of \$135,000 in damages. Just days after the Supreme Court's ruling legalizing same-sex marriage, the judge declared his ruling. The owners of Gresham bakery had been sued for refusing to bake a wedding cake for two lesbians in 2013. Two years later, just days after the ruling this past June, the judge ordered them to pay \$135,000 in damages for the emotional and mental anguish that the women suffered ([http://www.oregonlive.com/business/index.ssf/2015/07/sweet\\_cakes\\_state\\_orders\\_orego.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/business/index.ssf/2015/07/sweet_cakes_state_orders_orego.html)).

Nobels, officials, leading men – they are all seated at the banquet of this world. And the validity of the king's marriage is being called into question. Charges of unrighteousness are against him. Whatever the sin might be: divorce, homosexual practice, heterosexual practice, sex before marriage, marriage redefined, marriage undefined, marriage unnecessary; the pressure is on. Because there is a banquet, and the world is watching. The world is joining in. Up to half the kingdom is promised, so long as John the Baptist is silent. What is a Christian to do? We know if we speak up, we'll be in the minority. We know we might be labeled bigots. We know we may lose friends, a job, money; we know we feel like hypocrites, since we all have our own sins. Is this a righteousness worth dying for?

The girls are seated at the table. You can tell, they are nervous and uncomfortable. The bullies are going on and on teasing the girl, and all the while these other two just kept their eyes on their smart phones. Will they say nothing at all? Well, come to find out later, they were actually texting each other. Back and forth they were talking about what was going on, how it was wrong and mean. Back and forth they were trying to encourage the other, to say something, to do something, to stand up for the girl that was being teased.

And that is where it starts for us. A united dialog. For us, that is where it starts. That we would be texting, talking, trying to encourage each other. For here we are seated at the table, and who is being picked on? Fellow Christians. We can't do it alone. We don't have the righteousness to accomplish it. And that is why it can't be about us as individuals standing up against the world.

A pastor's sermon can't reach all the members with all their friends in every situation. But we are seated at this table together. And our confession of the truth is a united confession. A confession that this righteousness that we are talking about is not ours. This is not a conversation about how righteous we have been in our marriages, in our relationships, in our thoughts and lusts. No. It can't be. This is about God's righteousness. This is about the righteousness which comes to us through Jesus. Something which rescues us from sin and which declares us righteous. A righteousness worth dying for.

A righteousness that Jesus was willing to die for; that would actually come from Jesus' willingness to die. So the death of John the Baptist would not be the end of this righteousness. John was just the forerunner, always pointing ahead, always pointing to the Lamb; so he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." And Jesus would increase. His righteousness would continue to grow and make itself known. For he was willing to give up it up – not just half his kingdom, but his whole kingdom for you. To come in all humility, unnoticeable and unknown to Herod. He came as such a servant, that the world could not recognize him.

And he offered up a righteousness that saved the world from sin. That would free us from the pressures of the Law and the pressures of our failures and the threats of the politics around us. Jesus was righteous in every way, and in his death and resurrection, he delivered that righteousness to you, to free you, that your life might no longer be bound to the pressures of this world, but might free you to the reign of God against all opposition and in the midst of all confused consciences.

You may not have your head cut off. You may not be tied to a stake. But you will be seated at the table. And you can know that whatever the cost: \$135,000, the loss of a job, prosecution; you can know and confess that this is a righteousness that doesn't die with us. It lives on in Jesus. And it saves. It is what saves marriages, saves those in slavery to sin, saves sinners, saves you. This is what we are texting each other, talking about over dinner tables, talking about to friends. It doesn't change or shift or get corrupted by the culture or the courts. It is always right. It is always good. It always saves. It always shapes our conscience into something clean, and free. It is eternal. It is a righteousness worth dying for.

*Matthew 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Amen.