

Who is Jesus?

It's a simple question. Just three words.

Yet it is a question of eternal significance. A question that countless people over the last two millennia have tried to answer. A question that simply cannot be ignored. Even among other religions the question of the person and identity of Jesus has not been, and cannot be, left unanswered.

Atheist Friedrich Nietzsche referred to Jesus as a “fable and disguise.” Thomas Jefferson said much the same by referring to the virgin birth as a fable and as artificial scaffolding.

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev said, “Jesus was the first socialist, the first to seek a better life for mankind.”

An anonymous TIME Magazine writer wrote that Jesus is “the most persistent symbol of purity, selflessness and love in the history of Western man.”

Islam hails Jesus as one of five major messengers sent by God as a forerunner to Mohammed.

Judaism states that Jesus is one of many false Messiahs. In the Middle Ages, revered rabbi Maimonides made the claim that “Jesus is a ‘stumbling block’ who makes ‘the majority of the world err to serve a divinity besides God’.

Today, the prevailing views in our society go something like this. “Jesus was a good teacher.” or “Jesus was a good moral example.”

Many of us will recall the statement made by C.S. Lewis, that “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

And then there is perhaps the most famous, and most succinct statement on the identity of Jesus, made by Peter, that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

As we are well familiar with by this point, answering this question is one of the primary purposes of the Gospel of Mark. Today we'll look at how two key individuals: Herod and John the Baptist, or more literally, “Baptizer”, handled this question. This passage is somewhat of an anomaly in Mark's Gospel as it is one of only two sections of the Gospel to not directly tell of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus. Yet this passage can be seen as a building block, preparing the way for things to come. It refers to John the Baptizer's final days, introduces Herod and the Roman government into the story, and depicts some popular opinions as to Jesus' identity at this point in his ministry.

As we prepare to look at Mark 6:14-29, a little background is in order. We recall from the past two Sundays that Mark has conveyed the accounts of Jesus being rejected in his own hometown, Nazareth, and then Jesus sending out the twelve disciples in pairs, preaching repentance, casting out demons, and healing the sick. Jesus' fame is spreading through the region.

But there is a degree of mystery or uncertainty surrounding Jesus. The general public in Galilee knows he's not your typical, run-of-the-mill rabbi. But as to who he really is? They're not sure. Though in Jesus' own hometown, familiarity bred contempt and he was utterly rejected by those who had once seemed to know him best, outside Nazareth it is much the opposite. It seems Jesus has become an almost legendary figure, such that in the public eye there are now three well-known theories as to his identity and origin. In fact, word has even reached Herod, the tetrarch – or governor – over the region! Although Jesus' old neighbors apparently could not care less, the top official in the land has now become well aware of the Savior's public ministry – and even chimes in with his opinion as to who Jesus is.

Beginning reading at Mark 6:14:

Mark 6:14 ¶ And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, “John the Baptizer has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.”

Mark 6:15 But others were saying, “He is Elijah.” And others were saying, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.”

Mark 6:16 But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, “John, whom I beheaded, has risen!”

As Mark relays to his audience these popular opinions of the identity of Jesus, which we'll examine shortly, he also has let on to a historical fact that has not yet come up in his gospel: by this point in Jesus' ministry, John the Baptizer is no longer living! Ever had a conversation with someone where he or she is going along, talking about something, and then delivers a life-altering shocker by introducing it with something casual like, “oh, by the way...”. This is basically how Mark introduces the death of John the Baptizer. John has not even been mentioned in Mark's Gospel since the first chapter, yet at that time seemed to have a thriving ministry as the forerunner of Christ. Then, all of a sudden, with no warning, we find out he's dead – just mentioned in passing as Mark recounts the popular opinions of Jesus' identity! Out of necessity, after springing this information upon us, Mark then inserts a parenthetical account of how John's death came about.

As today's passage unfolds, you may be reminded of those movies or books where after you read the first chapter or watch the first scene, you find it's actually the closest to present-day, and then the rest of the book or movie is a series of flashbacks explaining how we got to the situation described in the first chapter or scene.

Mark 6:17 ¶ For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her.

Mark 6:18 For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.”

Mark 6:19 Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so;

Mark 6:20 for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him.

Mark 6:21 A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee;

Mark 6:22 and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you."

Mark 6:23 And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom."

Mark 6:24 And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptizer."

Mark 6:25 Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptizer on a platter."

Mark 6:26 And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her.

Mark 6:27 Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison,

Mark 6:28 and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.

Mark 6:29 When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus sheds additional light onto Herod and the gross, rampant sin of this family.

The "Herod" in this passage is Herod Antipas, not really a "king" (though he certainly wanted to be regarded as such) but rather a tetrarch, governor over $\frac{1}{4}$ of the territory that his father, Herod the Great, had governed. He was partially, but not entirely, of Jewish descent, and according to Josephus he craved popular opinion but was not regarded highly by his Jewish subjects due to his family tree and his total disregard for the Jewish law and customs, such as by building his capital city, Tiberias, over what had been a burial ground!

Herod Antipas also demonstrated his total disregard for the Law by his marital infidelity. He became attracted to his niece Herodias, who also happened to be his brother Philip's wife. (The Herods, apparently, were quite the inbred bunch!) He then divorced his wife and took Herodias, Philip's wife, as his new wife. (Incidentally, a few years later he would reap the consequences, as his ex-wife's father would deal Antipas a serious military defeat in retaliation for his treatment of his daughter!)

This was the sin that John the Baptizer came out strongly against. Though Herod was posing as a Jew, in order to win approval of his Galilean subjects, he was grossly violating the Law of God by his illicit union with Herodias, and John held nothing back in making this known.

Mark 6:20 indicates that Herod apparently held John in some degree of favor. It's possible that Herod was at least superficially interested in the message John was preaching, or, as some historians say, that Herod was quite superstitious and figured that protecting John and listening to his message might somehow bring some good luck his way. But Herod also feared John.

It may be that his conscience was pricked by John's teaching, or it may be that with John's great degree of support among the Jewish people in the region, Herod had to seem to be close to John in order to reduce his own chances of the people revolting against him.

Whatever Herod's own view of John was, one thing is made very clear by Mark:

Herodias had it in for John. She probably felt threatened, or insulted, or both, by John's condemnation of her marriage to Herod Antipas, and by extension, condemnation of her. Much like evil Jezebel conspiring against Elijah, Herodias wanted nothing more than to see John dead as a consequence for crossing the line and speaking out. But she had a problem. Her husband protected John, only arresting him rather than having him executed. That wasn't good enough for Herodias, and so she crafted a plan to have John executed.

Herod's birthday came, and he had many powerful and influential guests in attendance – men that he would certainly want to put on a good front toward. Herodias used Herod's birthday as the opportunity, and her young daughter by her former husband, Philip, as the pawn in the scheme. Herodias' daughter, whom Josephus called Salome, is described by Mark as a 'girl' using the same Greek word, *korasion*, as Mark used to describe Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter. This only makes it all the more disturbing that Herod Antipas was so titillated by his young stepdaughter's seductive dance that he rashly promised her an extreme reward he was in no position to give, half his (*quote*) "kingdom". Salome, just the pawn in her mother's system, asked for the head of John the Baptizer on a platter. Though superstitious Herod would surely have been struck with fear at this, even greater was the fear of losing face with the powerful guests in attendance, and so he complied.

And so ended the life and ministry of John the Baptizer, forerunner and herald of the Christ. It is in this context that we return to verse 14-16.

Apparently Herod has not heard of Jesus before, so when he gets wind of Jesus' ministry out in the hill country of Galilee, he's no doubt worried that his worst fear has come true. John the Baptizer is alive again and Herod is in trouble. Considering that others are saying the same thing, plus add in a conscience that's probably at least somewhat troubled, it's not hard to see why superstitious, fearful, and weak Herod Antipas is scared. But incidentally, saying John is alive again is still a very profound statement by Herod. Resurrections from the dead weren't something that just happened anytime. If there were a 6 PM newscast in Galilee, it wouldn't have ever opened with something like, "and now, the latest in a string of resurrections in Tiberias." To say that Jesus is John alive again is very bold, even unprecedented, and yet, *easier than recognizing and admitting who Jesus REALLY is!*

But this isn't the *primary* thing that Mark is conveying in this passage. The real gist of the passage is the continued unfolding of the answer to the question: "who is Jesus". This whole bit about Herod and John is just a parenthetical explanation in between the events of last week's sermon – the ministry of the Twelve – and next week's, the feeding of the five thousand. Mark continues to keep this question at the front of our minds: *Who is Jesus?* This is what the "Christianity Explored" study the "On Your Mark" groups at GRC are focusing on. This is one of the main questions that those who do not yet believe in Jesus ask. Who is he? A great miracle worker? A historical religious figure? One of the world's greatest teachers?

Who is Jesus? Some, Herod included, said he was John the Baptizer brought back to life.

Others, stating the belief held to this day by those who do not believe in the deity and personhood of Jesus Christ, considered him to be another of the great prophets, like the renowned men of old – sort of like a modern-day legend.

Still others, probably well-versed in the prophecy of Malachi stating that Elijah would return prior to the foretold Day of the Lord, viewed Jesus as Elijah reincarnate.

These popular opinions of Jesus will continue to come up at least a couple more times in Mark's Gospel. The people of Israel were right to assume Elijah's coming was to precede the Messiah. But they were incorrect in assuming that JESUS was Elijah. JOHN was Elijah. Jesus was the promised Messiah!

Finally, I want to look once more at the role of John the Baptizer. What a bold witness for the truth, going before Herod Antipas and calling sin, SIN. In all likelihood he knew the probable consequence, but that shadowed in comparison to telling the truth. To John, truth was non-optional. His mission was to prepare the way and preach repentance, and calling Herod out for his sin was part of that job description! As a herald of Christ, comfort and accolades were not in the job description!

But what a grim ending for John, just for fulfilling his mission to a "T". Had John remained silent on this issue of Herod's sin, it is likely he would have remained alive, and even remained under Herod's protection. He could have reasoned that it was prudent to keep things general – talk about sin, but not necessarily specific sin. He could have weighed the consequences and determined that he could afford to soften the message a little and still get the point across. But he stuck to his mission of preparing the way by preaching repentance, telling the truth and being a faithful witness. HE knew who Jesus was, and with this knowledge, his mission was clear. John himself knew that as the herald of Christ, his time of being an important teacher was limited. He must soon give way to Christ. The apostle John records the following exchange between John the Baptizer and his disciples.

John 3:27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.

John 3:28 "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.'

John 3:29 "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full.

John 3:30 "He must increase, but I must decrease.

Unlike those who thought Jesus was just a prophet, John knew Jesus was the Savior, the promised one. John's importance must wane. Still, I don't know if John expected that this is how he would "decrease". Being the herald of the Messiah was no easy calling, to be sure, but I'm not sure even John expected to die in his early thirties for the crime of just doing what he was called to. After he was arrested, like any other human probably would, John still wanted to be absolutely certain he was being jailed for the right cause. In a parallel passage to this, Matthew records that after Jesus sent out the Twelve to minister in His name, John sent his disciples to Jesus with an important question:

Matt. 11:2 ¶ Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples

Matt. 11:3 and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?”

Matt. 11:4 Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see:

Matt. 11:5 the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.

Matt. 11:6 “And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.”

Matt. 11:7 ¶ As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?

Matt. 11:8 “But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces!

Matt. 11:9 “But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet.

Matt. 11:10 “This is the one about whom it is written,

‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU,
WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.’

Matt. 11:11 “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptizer! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Matt. 11:12 “From the days of John the Baptizer until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.

Matt. 11:13 “For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John.

Matt. 11:14 “And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come.

And so, John, the herald of Christ and the promised “Elijah” who was to come, died at the hands of a wicked man for no crime other than telling the truth. But by no means has John been the only one to do so! Just as John was the herald of Christ when He came to earth the first time, so the Church, Christ’s bride, has been entrusted with being the herald of Christ in the world prior to His coming in glory in the future! Church history is replete with men and women and even children who, just like John, knew that as heralds of Christ, ambassadors for the Kingdom, their role was to be strong, be uncompromising, and to decrease so that Christ may increase.

These men, women, and children could have lived a quiet, peaceful, comfortable life if they had just kept their faith to themselves and not made waves. There was John the Baptizer. There was John Mark, author of this gospel, who tradition holds had riled up some heathen priests and so was dragged from his pulpit to his death as he preached a Resurrection Sunday sermon on the suffering of Christ. There was Polycarp, bishop of a church in Asia Minor the following century, who was captured and forced to deny Christ and swear to Caesar alone. His knowledge of who Christ was, and what Polycarp’s responsibility was, led him to respond: “*For 86 years I have been His servant, and He has never done me wrong: how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?*” There was Bible translator William Tyndale, who like John, spoke out against the sin of public official King Henry the Eighth of England, and who was burned at the stake for it. There was German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who tirelessly pleaded with believers to not bow to the pressures of the Nazi regime... and died in a concentration camp. These are but a few who could have kept their lives had they recanted or had they remained silent. *But!* Being a herald of the Most High is incompatible with keeping the news to one’s own self and remaining silent.

In addition to answering the question of who Jesus is, the Gospel of Mark also focuses on what it really means to be a follower of Christ. This pericope in Mark’s gospel, though not directly focused on the ministry of Jesus, still continues this theme by communicating that being associated with Jesus is not an easy thing.

Mark's own original audience was enduring persecution by Rome for this association – they were called Christ-ians. These individuals who first received Mark's Gospel faced the possibility of death DAILY. All for following Christ. Renouncing Christ, or living so passively that it was impossible for someone else to know one was a Christian, was basically the only way to guarantee survival and live freely. But even silence, just fitting in, was not an option. Following Christ essentially meant renouncing claims to anything on this earth, comfort on this earth, even life on this earth.

Today, as American Christians, this may seem foreign to us, as though it's something that only happens on the other side of the world or in history books. We have been blessed with safety here in America. Christians here are not being dragged from their homes to be thrown in prison or executed. Our churches are not being burned. We don't have government officials here this morning to round us up and take us before the authorities.

But is it possible that part of the reason for this, here in America in 2010, is that the church has remained mostly safe because it has, with a few exceptions, become good about not sticking its neck out too far or raising its voice too much? Historically, you could count on the church to rise up and speak out if there was prevalent sin, moral failures of leaders, abuses and injustices. I mentioned some already, but there are many others, such as William Wilberforce, a Christian who tirelessly fought in the British Parliament for the abolishment of the slave trade. Or Abraham Kuyper, theologian and member of the Dutch Parliament, who championed equal rights for faith-based organizations and schools. Or John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a Presbyterian pastor, whose statement that "There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost and religious liberty preserved" helped swing sentiment toward the severing of the colonies' ties with England (and is also a profound message for our day!) These are but a few Christians that are known for living their faith in the public square, and not being silent about wrongdoing but instead working to further the Kingdom into these areas of life. But more recently, something tragic has happened. By the late 1800s and especially starting in the early 1900s, the American church began to change in its understanding of the Great Commission. No longer did the Gospel seem to hold influence over all of life, all of culture, everything; but instead it was reduced to something personal. Me and God. Do this, don't do that. The Great Commission became less and less bringing all of creation under the dominion of King Jesus, and more of a message of "Get saved now, make a decision for Christ." We began to build fortresses against evil, rather than boldly going forth into battle against evil. We went on the defensive instead of fulfilling our duties as heralds of the King. The church largely gave up its influence in the public square, and to fill the void, "Caesar" moved in. It used to be that the Church was the source of humanitarian work; Christians were the ones giving willingly, freely, and unselfishly to care for the poor, tend to the sick, feed the hungry. For centuries it was so. But as the Church retreated inward in the 20th century, the government began to step in and do these things. Now today we find that it is simply expected that government will provide these services, and the Church is left with less room to work, and even finds itself subject to an increasing amount of restrictions and regulations. In the public eye, Caesar has supplanted God as provider, sustainer, and keeper. And although freedoms were previously seen as something that could only be given by God alone, they now are seemingly more and more dispensed by a government that – like Caesar – seems to view itself as almighty and be viewed by society as almighty.

This may be God's discipline on the American church for retreating, but it does not change our duty.

The spiritual climate of our land has changed, but our God has not. Popular opinion of Christians has changed, but the Great Commission has not. Throughout the ages, and even today in much of the world, Christians have not had a favorable environment for Kingdom work, but carry on against all odds.

I would like us to take this thought home today: as John the Baptizer boldly spoke truth, preparing the way for Christ, preaching repentance, and calling sin, SIN – so must we. But we must also understand that this is not an easy calling. Consider how it ended for John. We ought not be surprised that when we actually *dare* to voice our faith in the public square, we will be opposed. Consider just this past month when the Nebraska ACLU declared that Christian speakers at schools must not actually bring up their faith or quote Scripture when addressing a school assembly. Or that in many areas, such as much of Europe and parts of Canada (incidentally, places you'll hear often raised up by some as “examples which the United States should emulate”), and maybe soon, the United States, simply preaching the truth of God's word about sin can be classified as a hate crime and be subject to prosecution! But you see, Kingdom heralds cannot be silent even in these situations. The Gospel will offend! Preaching righteousness has consequences. Consider the number of people in recent years who have seen the inside of American prisons for the “crime” of stepping forward to intervene, saving the life of a preborn child!

Yes, we can expect opposition if we dare to not compromise the truth! But God's commands must always trump man's laws. They cannot silence the truth. Remember: Being a herald of the Most High is incompatible with keeping the Good News to one's own self and remaining silent.

Jesus never said that following him would be easy. It is no easy thing. The death of John the Baptizer, and the record of the many, many martyrs for the faith is a clear testimony to that. We must be willing to do the hard things. To deny ourselves. To recognize that ALL things must be brought under the dominion of Christ. To follow Christ is not an easy thing. Most if not all of us run into choices daily, although on a smaller scale, of just going with the flow or steadfastly clinging to truth and calling sin, SIN. And I'd like to think otherwise, but I have to say it is definitely possible that some of us here in this room may one day be brought before civil authorities and tried for the cause of Christ, because we made the choice, in our spheres of influence, to not compromise, not be silent, not obey man's restrictions, not back down. If that happens, whatever the outcome, let us remember the testimony of the faithful witnesses before us. Let us remember Jesus' own words to his disciples:

Matt. 5:10 ¶ “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:11 ¶ “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

Matt. 5:12 “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

And what if speaking the truth does some day, right here, result in the death penalty like it did for John the Baptizer? Or like those faithful believers in other parts of the world who maybe even this very morning have been hauled off because they identified with Christ? I hope it won't come to that. But... I don't know. If so is it the end? Would it be a preventable tragedy? Would it be a foolish end that could have been avoided by just toning down the message a little? No!

Our Lord encouraged the disciples with these words:

Luke 12:4 ¶ “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.

Luke 12:5 But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

Luke 12:6 Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God.

Luke 12:7 Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.

The ultimate penalty we can pay in this life is death. But Jesus reminds us – don’t fear.

The worst any man can do to us is to end our earthly lives, and if so, then we will be with Jesus, reigning with Him forever. There is a final destiny for all people. As Christians, earth is the closest we’ll ever get to hell. We may suffer for Christ; we may even die for Christ. But thanks be to God that this is not the end of the story. It’s just the beginning.

Who is Jesus? He is the Savior. Because He bore all sin of all believers on Himself at the Cross, bearing the greatest penalty that we could suffer – not earthly torment but eternal torment – we have no cause for fear. Christ, greater than all the prophets, greater than John the Baptizer, greater than Elijah, has conquered death itself. Death has lost its sting.

Who is Jesus? He is the King. He reigns over all the leaders on earth; even over all who do not acknowledge His rule. Brothers and sisters, do not fear what man can do to you. Jesus Himself promised that even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Go forth into all the world without fear. Take the Kingdom into your areas of influence. Be heralds for the reigning King Jesus. Long for His return.