

# The Restless Unsettling of a Guilty Conscience

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>7</sup> Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, <sup>8</sup> by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. <sup>9</sup> Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he sought to see him. (Luke 9:7–9)

### A Surprising Discovery

A. The title of today’s message might at first seem to be coming out from left field, but I trust you will start to see where I’m getting this: The Restless Unsettling of a Guilty Conscience.

1. We’re going to talk today about guilt—the way it gnaws at a soul; the way it hounds all of us; the way that, if it’s not sufficiently dealt with, it actually sets us on a trajectory towards insanity. It eats away at a person’s mind, heart, soul, and even body. It spreads like a cancer until it ultimately consumes the host.

a. That’s that sort of thing I think we see at work here with Herod. I wonder if it’s at work with any of us as well.

B. So this morning we’re going to look at: (1) Herod’s Maddening Guilt; (2) Our Insufficient Dealings; and (3) The Only Way Out.

## (1) Herod’s Maddening Guilt

### The Backstory

A. Let me first give you some background here and we’ll start to make our way towards this point. Herod Antipas, one of the many sons of Herod the Great, was Tetrarch or ruler of Galilee and Perea during the time of Jesus’ ministry.

B. He has already made an appearance in Luke’s gospel. You might remember. We saw him a couple times back in [Luke 3](#), where we learn in particular that he was being called out by John the Baptist for divorcing his own wife in order to marry his brother’s wife—Herodias.

1. And since this would be bad publicity for a ruler over a Jewish people, we read in [vv. 19b-20](#): “<sup>19b</sup> and for all the evil things that Herod had done, <sup>20</sup> [he] added this to them all, . . . he locked up John in prison.” If you don’t like what the man is saying in the public square, you get him out of the public square.

C. But Herod will do more than imprison John, he will ultimately kill him.

1. While the other synoptic gospels record more fully for us the gruesome way that Herod has John killed, Luke only mentions it in passing right here in our text back in [Luke 9: “John I beheaded . . .” \(v. 9\)](#). That’s it.
- D. It sounds simple enough, but we know from [Matthew](#) and [Mark](#) that it was not so simple a situation for Herod. He beheaded John, in many ways, against his will per request from Herodias through her daughter in such a way that Herod’s hands were tied.
1. You see, he didn’t actually want to kill John. Though John reprovved him for his sin, and no doubt aggravated him to no end, still Herod revered and even feared John. Mark tells us: [“Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe” \(Mark 6:20\)](#).
    - a. He never intended nor thought it wise to kill such a holy man. But his hands were tied. And though Mark tells us [“the king was exceedingly sorry” \(v. 26\)](#), still he issued the command: “Off with his head.”

## Losing His Head

- A. And it seems somewhere in the whirlwind of all this wickedness, Herod started to lose his own head as well. Guilt—maddening guilt.
- B. Now, admittedly, our text in Luke doesn’t bring this out as clearly.
1. When news of Jesus’ ministry in the surrounding regions reaches even Herod in the palace here, Herod along with the rest of the people is trying to figure out who this Jesus is. It would seem from the way Luke records it that Herod is simply considering the various options being tossed around—perhaps he’s a resurrected John the Baptist, or a returned Elijah or some other prophet.
- C. But the other accounts put a much sharper point on all of this. Herod is not merely deliberating, he arrives at a certainty.
1. Mark puts it this way: [“<sup>14</sup> 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.’<sup>15</sup> But others said, ‘He is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised’” \(Mark 6:14–16\)](#).
    - a. On this, one commentator writes: [“Herod clung somberly to the view suggested by his own uneasy conscience, and the very starkness of the words ‘whom I beheaded’ \(v. 16\) emphasizes his self-torture” \(TNTC\)](#).
- D. Now here, at last, you see it: maddening guilt. His guilty conscience wouldn’t let him rest. Herod is perplexed, anxious, even terrified: “It’s John. He’s come back. I knew I would be undone for this in the end!”

1. Guilt insufficiently dealt with has a way of distorting the mind—spiraling towards irrationality, even insanity.
  - a. Herod was a man who knew he was guilty. But it seems quite clear he didn't know the right way to deal with it. And so the question that now looms large over the rest of this message is: Do we?

## (2) Our Insufficient Dealings

- A. As I considered these things, I was drawn into a reflection on all the ways we insufficiently attempt to deal with our guilt.
  1. Everyone knows we stand guilty before a holy God. We have been created in His image. His law has been written on our hearts. All have sinned and fallen short of His glory, and we know it.
- B. The question is: What do we do with it? Let me give you four of what I think are the most common insufficient dealings. I wonder if you'll see yourself here.

### (1) Denial

- A. This can take on many forms, but what you see most often is that we learn to retell the story to ourselves and others in a way that removes our guilt or justifies our actions.
- B. If you have kids, you get examples of this probably on a daily basis.
  1. I hear a battle ensuing in the living room. I walk in and everything stops. "What's going on here?" Now, it is always amazing to hear how each child recounts the same series of events so differently. The retelling is masterful. Somehow both come away from the brawl over the pink crayon totally assured of their own innocence.
    - a. I'm telling you, I have had to face judicial dilemmas I'm not sure Solomon in all his wisdom could think his way out of.
- C. But why? Why is this so hard? It's because of this impulse in us to deny guilt, to reshape the narrative, to retell the story in such a way that I am exonerated, in the right, innocent.
  1. But we know it's not always true. We know we are lying. There is still enough of the image of God in fallen man that we know we are guilty before Him.
- D. Rom 1 makes this abundantly clear: "<sup>18</sup> [M]en, . . . by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools . . ." (vv. 18b–22).

1. One of my professors spoke of this idea of “suppress[ing] the truth” (v. 18) as akin to trying to hold a beach ball down under water. The moment you stop attending to it, it just pops right back up.
  - a. This is kind of a fun game, perhaps, when you are at the beach with your kids or whatever. It’s not so fun when that beach ball is awareness of your guilt before a holy God—and no matter what you do, you can’t hide from it. It’s no longer a game at that point. It’s a nightmare.

E. Denial doesn’t work, it only engenders further madness.

## (2) Pushback

A. Often our Denial leads to Pushback. While we are trying to deny our guilt, others are often able to see it quite plainly, even in technicolor. And they point it out. So what do you do then? You push back.

1. It’s with Pushback that our Denial takes on an outward face. It’s not enough for me just to deny my guilt, I need to attack those who are pointing it out in me, blame others for my actions, redirect attention elsewhere so I can feel better about myself once more.

B. One of the clearest illustrations of this in all the Scripture is a place we go often: [Gen 3](#)—and the pointing of fingers. “Adam, what have you done?” “Don’t look at me, it’s the woman.” “Eve, what have you done?” “Don’t look at me, it’s the serpent.” And around we go.

C. An even more pronounced example of Pushback occurs when Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, with a face like an angel, stands up to indict his fellow Jews for their rejection of God and the Messiah.

1. He concludes his discourse like this: “<sup>51</sup>You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.<sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,<sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (Acts 7:51–53).

- a. And how did they respond? “You are right brother Stephen. We are sorry!” Not even close. We read in the next verses that: “<sup>54</sup>[W]hen they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. . . .<sup>57</sup> [And] they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.<sup>58a</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him” (Acts 7:54, 57-58a). “Shut him up!”

D. Let me ask: When someone comes to you with an offense, a way you have sinned against them, how do you handle it? With humility, with open ears and an open heart: “Tell me more?” Or do you shut them down before they even get a word out?

1. Sure, It’s possible that they might be wrong, they might be mistaken, but there also might be something to it. And either way, a person secure in the love of God for them in Christ should be able to listen intently with love.

E. Why do I feel this incredible compulsion to defend myself? My right standing is based on Christ's righteousness not my own. And yet I get so bent out of shape when someone calls me a sinner—as if I haven't already publicly declared that and based my whole life on the fact.

1. As the 82 year old John Newton is famous for saying: "My memory is nearly gone. But I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior."

a. I don't need to attack and accuse. I don't have to be right, even if I am right. God will vindicate me on the last day. I don't need to vindicate myself here and now. "Tell me more. How can this sinner grow in godliness?"

F. Pushback doesn't work. This is Herod casting his accuser into the prison cell, serving up his head on a silver plate. It didn't get rid of the guilt. It only engendered further madness.

### (3) Anesthetics

A. I can only deal with this in a cursory fashion, but perhaps you can guess where I am going. Anesthetics are what you use to numb the pain. It doesn't get rid of the problem, but it does get your mind off of it for a while.

B. There are all sorts of ways we try to anesthetize our sense of guilt.

1. You might numb it with work. "At least when I successfully complete a task or a project I don't feel so bad about myself."

2. You might numb it with entertainment. "Just turn on the TV, get me out of my life and into another story for a while."

3. You might put a little bit more wine in the glass than you know you should. You might eat a little bit more chocolate than you know is reasonable. "Let me just numb my sense of pain with a quick shot of pleasure to the arm."

C. But anesthetics don't work. They only engender further madness. Like placing Band-Aids over cancer they heal our wounds lightly ([Jer 6:14](#)) . . . and we just keep on dying.

### (4) The Wash Cycle

A. Maybe you deal with your guilt this way. You try to self-clean, self-wash, self-atone. You see your guilt. You're not trying to deny it, push back against it, or numb it. But you think you can fix it. You're always making promises to yourself, making even resolutions. "Here's what I'm going to do. Here's how I'm going to get better. I'm going to clean this mess up."

1. But you can't. The clothes you put in the wash today, just end up dirty again tomorrow.

B. The classic illustration of this sort of thing is found in Shakespeare's play Macbeth. Perhaps you're familiar with that scene near the end. Macbeth's wife, called Lady Macbeth, had earlier coaxed her husband into killing the king so that he could take his place and she could be queen. But she got his blood on her hands, literally.

1. And though they killed him, and though they got away with it, and though they now had the throne for themselves, the guilt drove her mad.
  - a. Act 5, Scene 1, much time had passed, and she's seen sleepwalking through the castle, rubbing her hands, attempting to wash the blood off of them. And in the course of her night terror she lets fly three famous words that echo through the castle halls: "Out damned spot! . . . Will these hands never be clean?" No matter how hard she washes, the spot, the guilt remains.
- C. I'm reminded here of Jer 2:22: "Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord God."
  1. You're not going to change this with a little effort. You're not going to fix this with a New Year's resolution. You're not going to wash this out with a little soap. Scrub as you may, scrub until your hands are raw and bloodied, the guilt remains. And it will drive you mad.
- D. Like Lady Macbeth wandering the castle at night, muttering to herself. Like Herod, haunted in his palace by the headless John. "He's back, I know he's back." Like David in Psa 32: "[W]hen I kept silent [about my sin], my bones wasted away" (Psa 32:3).
  1. My guilt is destroying me. I can't deny it, I can't push back against it, I can't numb it, I can't wash it. So what is left for me to do?!

### (3) The Only Way Out

#### I Acknowledged My Sin to You

- A. David goes on to give us the answer: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin" (Psa 32:5).
  1. Jeremiah would call the sin-stained people of Israel to the very same thing a few verses beyond what I read just moments ago: "<sup>13a</sup> Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God . . . <sup>22a</sup> Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness" (Jer 3:13a, 22a).
- B. We stop trying to cover it up ourselves. We come back to God and let Him help.
  1. This is astounding! The only One who can truly help us get better is the One we have so grievously offended in the first place. God is not only unimaginably holy, He is also unimaginably merciful and gracious.

#### An Offering for Guilt

- A. But David, Jeremiah, they didn't get to see the half of what we now see, brothers and sisters. They knew that they needed to come to God for forgiveness, for atonement. They knew that He was willing, able, and ready to do it.

1. But they would have no clue how He would finally accomplish it for them in the end—that YHWH would take our guilt, lay it on His Son and exact justice from Him for it, nailing Him to the cross of His righteous indignation.
  - a. “<sup>9b</sup> [H]e had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. <sup>10a</sup> Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; . . . his soul makes an offering for guilt . . . <sup>11b</sup> the righteous one, my servant, [shall] make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities” (Isa 53:9b, 10a, 11b).

## Herod “Sees”

- A. The crazy thing is that Herod did actually get to see this. Our text says that Herod “sought to see him” (Luke 9:9). Well, he gets his chance, much later in Luke 23.
  - B. Pilate, trying to get out of having to make a decision on the case concerning Jesus, sends Him over to Herod.
    1. Can you imagine? Standing before Herod is the very answer to the restless unsettling of his guilty conscience—“The Lamb of the God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), as John the Baptist once heralded.
      - a. But Herod saw in Jesus not a Savior to be praised, but a joke to be laughed at. He dressed Him in the splendid clothing of a king and mocked him.
        - i. And, though he found nothing worthy of convicting Jesus of, he didn’t release Him, but sent Him back to Pilate where Christ would be crucified . . . as atonement for my guilt!
- C. In all the sin and rebellion of man, God was working for our salvation. As the disciples pray in Acts 4:27-28: “<sup>27</sup> [T]ruly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”

## Come Out of Hiding and to the Cross

- A. There is no hope of denying your guilt, of pushing back against it, of numbing the conscience, of washing the stains. These are but an exercise in futility and they spiral down into insanity—a self-destructive, suicidal madness.
  1. But we do not have to follow it there. No! I am calling us with the authority of Christ to pull out of the descent. Come out of hiding. Acknowledge your guilt before God. Confess your sin. Let the heart break. Let the tears flow. Let the Spirit have His way with you. And do it all in the light of the cross, do it all with faith that God is ready and able to forgive you totally, decisively, eternally in Christ.
    - a. Confession and faith. This is the great escape. This is the only way out from the dungeon of our guilt. Here is the God-ordained means of redemption and revival. Jesus paid it all!