

Mark 6:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.

Analysis

For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. This verse captures John's prophetic message that cost him his life. 'John had said' (ἔλεγεν γὰρ ὁ Ἰωάννης, elegen gar ho Iōannēs) uses imperfect tense indicating repeated proclamation—John persistently confronted Herod, not merely one-time rebuke but ongoing prophetic witness. 'It is not lawful' (Οὐκ ἔξεστιν, Ouk exestin) declares divine law's verdict without diplomatic softening. 'For thee to have thy brother's wife' (σοὶ ἔχειν τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου, soi echein tēn gynaika tou adelphou sou) directly applies biblical law (Leviticus 18:16; 20:21) to Herod's specific situation.

John's confrontation exemplifies biblical prophetic ministry: clear proclamation of God's word, courageous application to powerful persons, unwavering faithfulness despite personal cost. He didn't flatter, excuse, or remain silent about sin because the sinner was politically powerful. This stands in stark contrast to court prophets who told kings what they wanted to hear (1 Kings 22:1-28). John prioritized God's approval above human favor, truth above political expediency, and righteousness above personal safety. His martyrdom demonstrated Jesus' teaching: 'Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness' sake' (Matthew 5:10). Reformed theology emphasizes that true preaching applies God's law to all without partiality, calling sinners—regardless of status—to repentance.

Historical Context

Prophetic confrontation of kings has biblical precedent: Nathan confronted David over Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12), Elijah condemned Ahab's idolatry (1 Kings 21), Isaiah challenged Hezekiah (2 Kings 20). John continued this tradition, demonstrating that divine law binds rulers no less than subjects. Ancient Near Eastern kings typically surrounded themselves with sycophants who reinforced royal decisions. John's contrary voice was rare and dangerous—most people accommodated rulers' sins to preserve access and influence. The Levitical prohibition Herod violated (18:16; 20:21) was clear: marrying brother's wife was forbidden except in Levirate marriage circumstances (Deuteronomy 25:5-6), which didn't apply here since Philip lived. Herod would have known this law, making his sin deliberate rebellion against divine command. Josephus indicates Herod arrested John partly from fear of rebellion—John's large following could be politically destabilized by his critique of royal immorality. Early church interpreted John as model martyr: faithful witness even unto death, refusing to compromise God's truth for political convenience or personal safety.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does John's fearless confrontation of Herod's sin challenge modern reluctance to apply God's law to powerful or influential people?
2. What does John's persistence ('had been saying') rather than one-time rebuke teach about faithful prophetic ministry to those resistant to correction?

Interlinear Text

ἔλεγεν	γὰρ	ό	Ἰωάννης	τῷ	Ἡρώδῃ	ὅτι	Οὐκ	ἔξεστίν
had said	For	G3588	John	G3588	unto Herod	G3754	not	It is
G3004	G1063		G2491		G2264		G3756	G1832
σοι	ἔχειν	τὴν	γυναῖκα	τοῦ	ἀδελφοῦ	σου		
for thee	to have	G3588	wife	G3588	brother's	thy		
G4671	G2192		G1135		G80		G4675	

Additional Cross-References

Leviticus 18:16 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife: it is thy brother's nakedness.

Leviticus 20:21 (Parallel theme): And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.

1 Kings 22:14 (Parallel theme): And Micaiah said, As the LORD liveth, what the LORD saith unto me, that will I speak.

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