

Mark 6:26

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her.

Analysis

And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. Herod's tragic choice reveals the fruit of compromised character. 'The king was exceeding sorry' (περίλυπος γενόμενος, perilypos genomenos) indicates deep grief—the Greek περίλυπος (perilypos) means exceedingly sorrowful or deeply distressed. This wasn't casual regret but genuine anguish. Herod experienced what earlier verses foreshadowed: he respected John (v. 20), feared him, heard him gladly. Now his own foolish choices forced him to execute someone he admired.

'Yet for his oath's sake' (διὰ τοὺς ὅρκους, dia tous horkous) and 'for their sakes which sat with him' (διὰ τοὺς ἀνακειμένους, dia tous anakeimenous) explain his compliance despite grief: religious obligation (the oath) and social pressure (witnesses' expectations). He prioritized these above righteousness. Herod 'would not reject her' (οὐκ ἡθέλησεν αὐτὴν ἀθετῆσαι, ouk ethelesen autēn athetēsai)—the verb ἀθετέω (atheteō) means to set aside, nullify, or refuse. He could have refused but chose not to. This epitomizes moral cowardice: knowing the right but lacking courage to do it, valuing reputation above righteousness. Reformed theology teaches that such moral failure stems from unregenerate heart—without Christ, even religious sentiment cannot overcome sin's power.

Historical Context

Herod's dilemma reflects ancient honor-culture's power: breaking public vows brought profound shame and political consequences. Before military commanders and regional aristocrats, refusing his promise would appear weak, undermining authority. Ancient rulers ruled partly through perceived power and honor; appearing to welch on oaths damaged political standing. However, Jewish law and conscience should have superseded these concerns—no oath obligates injustice. Rabbinic teaching held that vows to do evil should not be kept; repenting of foolish vow was preferable to fulfilling it. However, Herod's character—weak, compromised, people-pleasing—couldn't muster courage for this. His 'sorrow' was genuine but ineffective—emotional regret without moral courage. This contrasts with Pilate's similar situation (John 19:12-16): both knew the right, both felt reluctance, both capitulated to political pressure. Early church fathers (John Chrysostom) condemned Herod's choice, arguing that false oath-keeping is itself sin—keeping wicked vows compounds rather than remedies the initial foolishness. Augustine distinguished between proper vow-keeping (vows aligned with God's will) and wicked compliance (fulfilling ungodly commitments).

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does Herod's sorrow without action illustrate the difference between worldly grief (producing death) and godly sorrow (producing repentance)?
2. What does Herod's choice—prioritizing social pressure above conscience—teach about the cost of living for human approval rather than God's approval?

Interlinear Text

καὶ περίλυπος γενόμενος τοὺς βασιλεὺς διὰ
And exceeding sorry was for their sakes which the king yet for
G2532 G4036 G1096 G3588 G935 G1223

τοὺς ὅρκους καὶ τοὺς
for their sakes which his oath's sake And for their sakes which
G3588 G3727 G2532 G3588

συνανακειμένους οὐκ ἡθέλησεν αὐτὴν ἀθετῆσαι
sat with him not he would her reject
G4873 G3756 G2309 G846 G114

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