

Matthew 14:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her.

Analysis

'For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her.' This verse summarizes John's prophetic message to Herod. The phrase 'It is not lawful' (Οὐκ ἔξεστίν/Ouk exestin) means 'it's not permitted,' referring to divine law (Leviticus 18:16, 20:21), not merely human custom. John's message was clear, direct, uncompromising: Herod's marriage to Herodias constituted adultery. No diplomatic softening, no political calculation, no self-preserving ambiguity—just straightforward declaration of God's standard. Reformed theology values this prophetic clarity: faithful preaching names sin specifically, calls for repentance explicitly, and refuses to accommodate cultural or political pressure. John's courage is remarkable: confronting a ruler with absolute power, risking (and ultimately suffering) execution. His message also demonstrates that God's moral law applies universally—kings aren't exempt. Herod couldn't claim ignorance; Jewish law was clear. John's responsibility was proclamation; the result was in God's hands. This models faithful witness: speak truth clearly, leave results to God, accept suffering if it comes.

Historical Context

Prophetic confrontation of kings has biblical precedent: Nathan confronting David (2 Samuel 12:1-15), Elijah confronting Ahab (1 Kings 21:17-24), Isaiah confronting Ahaz (Isaiah 7), Jeremiah confronting Zedekiah (Jeremiah 38). These prophets risked execution to declare divine judgment. John continued this pattern. Leviticus 18:16 prohibited sexual relations with brother's wife; 20:21 pronounced childlessness as judgment. Herod's marriage violated clear Torah command. John's

public proclamation of Herod's sin was especially bold given Herod's reputation: he'd executed potential rivals, divorced his first wife, and ruled with paranoia. Josephus records that Herod feared John's influence over people might spark rebellion. John's preaching threatened both Herod's moral authority and political stability. Herodias particularly hated John—he threatened her illegitimate position as queen. Her eventual revenge (orchestrating his beheading, v.6-11) demonstrated the danger prophets face. Church history records many who spoke truth to power and suffered: Polycarp, Hus, Tyndale, Bonhoeffer. John exemplifies this costly faithfulness.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How do you practice prophetic boldness in declaring God's standards in contexts that resist or punish such declarations?
2. What distinguishes faithful prophetic witness from self-righteous judgmentalism or politically-motivated attacks?
3. How should Christians respond when declaring biblical truth on controversial issues brings persecution or loss?

Interlinear Text

ἔλεγεν	γὰρ	αὐτήν	ὁ	Ἰωάννης	Οὐκ	ἔξεστίν	σοι
said	For	her	G3588	John	not	It is	for thee
G3004	G1063	G846		G2491	G3756	G1832	G4671

ἔχειν	αὐτήν
to have	her
G2192	G846

Additional Cross-References

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.

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