

Getting Your Life Together

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Date: 08 December 2002

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[0 : 00] We the world as people who enjoy our leisure and our partying.

We're known for that. If you've only got anyone who's done any travelling overseas and talked to people, they expect that Australians will be wild revelers. Now you might not look like that this morning, but deep down we Aussies like to party.

Unlike Americans who work hard simply because working hard is important, by and large Australians work hard so that we can play hard, or maybe retire hard, or do something other than work.

Because we like our leisure. And we know that we like to play big parties, and when those of us who are really wealthy have the opportunity, we demonstrate how powerfully we like to party. I think a few of you would have forgotten the wedding of James and Jodie on Saturday the 23rd of October 1999. The Packer wedding.

[1 : 13] The wedding to end all weddings. Where Elton John, Jimmy Barnes, Human Nature all played, where the dress cost \$30,000, where each guest received gold cufflinks or a gold necklace.

Everyone had their own hire car to pick them up and bring them and take them back. The menu, one of the reasons I think I kept it was that the menu was so terrific, I thought it would be great to sort of have some of this food, since I have a thing about food, which is fairly obvious.

The Packer wedding. A wedding that tantalised all one's senses. And we are a nation who maybe we don't indulge ourselves at that level, because we don't have the resources to do so.

But deep in our hearts, we do like to attend to our senses, our touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing. We are among the biggest drinkers of alcohol in the world.

We are the biggest gamblers per person in the world. And we are known as people who worship sun, sport, surf and sex, and who love overseas travel. We are, if you like, a sensual people.

[2 : 18] And you could be forgiven for thinking that we were convinced, as Aussies, that the reason for living was in fact to indulge ourselves. Do we live our lives to satisfy our senses?

The motto that I once had to preach on a few years ago at a university was given to me, live fast, die young, leave a good-looking course. Captures something, I guess, of the Aussie mindset, I mean, young people maybe at least.

Living to satisfy our senses, though, may seem very attractive, but surviving it is another. I'd like to read you some simple rules that I latched onto for dating my daughters.

I know some of you may not have daughters and may think this is funny, but those who have daughters will know this is not funny. These days, with young men having their senses running wild, if they're going to date my daughter, they'd better follow some of my rules.

Here's just three of them. You do not touch my daughter in front of me. You may glance at her so long as you do not peer at anything below her neck. If you cannot keep your eyes or hands off my daughter's body, I will remove them.

[3 : 25] Rule four. I'm sure you've been told that in today's world, sex without utilising a barrier method of some kind can kill you. Let me elaborate. When it comes to sex, I'm the barrier and I will kill you.

Third rule. The last I'll give you. Do not lie to me. I may appear to be a pot-bellied, balding, middle-aged, dim-witted has-been, but on issues relating to my daughters, I am the all-knowing, merciless God of your universe.

If I ask you where you are going and with whom, you have one chance to tell me the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I have a shotgun, a shovel and five acres behind my house. Do not trifle with me. If you'd like to live by your senses and date my daughter, you might find it hard to survive. The reality is, of course, when people live by their senses, they often do not survive.

There's a tragic story in a newspaper article a few years ago of a young teenager who'd filled herself with drugs and alcohol, packed five people into her car and killed three of them. A friend of mine who lives in Ulladulla was at a pub one night.

[4 : 34] He wasn't a close friend, but I knew him. He was in a pub one night and a fight broke out and he tried to stop it. The guy who was going ballistic hit him. He fell down and he died.

The man who hit him, who was having a wild party that night, is in prison now for manslaughter. Is it possible for us then to party and follow our senses and live?

Now these are extreme examples, but as we follow this morning, I think you'll begin to see that as the movie said, reality bites. Reality will get you in the end if you don't follow paths that are wise and discerning.

These things raise the issue for me. Is it possible to party and keep one's possessions intact? Can we indulge our senses and sustain good health? Can we party and maintain solid relationships? Is it possible for us to satisfy our senses and keep our sanity and our morality? Is it possible to party and survive? Of course, as we know, the pack of marriage didn't survive.

[5 : 38] How much partying, how much living by the senses is too much? The bottom line to that question for me is this. When you lose your soul in the process, when you place senses before soul, you are partying too hard.

Even if it's living your life mildly, but without your soul at the centre, without the divine element of life being given attention and the right attention.

You see, without our soul we aren't whole. As Jesus says, what does it profit for a person to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? And the answer is, it doesn't profit anything.

If we ignore the soul, the spiritual aspect of our persons, the God dimension of our being, partying, living by our senses, is a dead end.

The story that's read for us this morning from about Herod and John the Baptist is a story of a first century ruler of Israel. He appears to have it all, but he had nothing of substance.

[6 : 52] His personal life was marked by violence, pride, guilt and superstition. We know this both from the text of the New Testament and from other writings. It is a tragic story of foolish choices.

It's a story, sadly though, that is still being played out in the lives of men and women and children and teenagers today. Indeed, some of us here, although not on a grander scale, may be rehearsing the very history of Herod in our own lives and we are unaware of the precarious nature of doing so. So attend. Let's look at Herod and the two sides to this person. First of all, we notice that Herod is a person who seems to attend to his senses as a priority, at least the way in which the narrative here unfolds for us.

It appears that way. Herod was the head honcho in Galilee, a Jewish ruler under Roman authority. Some of the details point to his worldly success. He was a man for whom power was extremely important.

We know both from the New Testament and outside that he was a person who grasped for power and influence. He wanted to be king. He wanted to have the title of king and not simply that of tetrarch.

[8 : 05] He mixed with the power brokers. Notice the people who were invited to his party in census 21. On his birthday, Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

Pleasure was also extremely important to this man. He appears as self-indulgent. If you see your brother's wife and she's attractive and better than yours, well, you just apparently take her.

It appears that's what Herod had done. So his brother Philip's wife, he had taken and married. That is Herodias. And then he loves to throw parties. He throws a party for himself.

A great big bash, it would appear. And prestige was also extremely important for this man. Keeping faith was far more important than keeping his faith or his integrity.

Notice sentence 26. The king was greatly distressed after Herodias and her daughter had planned to have Herod's head on a platter.

[9 : 05] We're told he was greatly distressed. But because of his oaths and because of his dinner gifts, he did not want to refuse her. He huffed and puffed and flexed his muscles and he wasn't willing to back down, even when he realised the request was inappropriate, unethical and spiritually deadly for him in the end.

We're reminded of people who led up companies like WorldCom, WorldCom and Enron. People who had great power and influence and who kept fiddling the books because of pride and arrogance and in the end found themselves devastated and totally and utterly embarrassed.

It appears that Herod had all that anyone might need to party hard and to satisfy his senses. But that is only one side of the story. Herod was also a troubled and confused person.

Yes, he knew how to enjoy life and party, but he was also a person with an uneasy soul. A few years ago, Boris Becker was interviewed by 60 Minutes, fairly soon after he had attempted to commit suicide.

He was gently asked about that issue. His reply, People try to fill their lives with things, power, influence, wealth.

[10:36] Surround themselves with these things. We think they're the answer. For us, it may be simply paying off a mortgage. It may be just being married and having a couple of kids. It may be a holiday at Christmas at the beach.

We're not all having grandiose plans, but our plans are so often to set our own course and to bring satisfaction and joy to our life on our terms and our categories. Like Boris Becker, we might realise there's something missing as a whole.

Like Herod, all of us have a spiritual dimension. He may be a party animal and immoral, but he wasn't godless. Notice that he likes to spend time with John.

He protects him from being killed. You see, Herod presents the classic picture of a person torn between two worldviews, two worldviews tugging at him, each claiming absolute loyalty.

And when you have two things tugging at you, claiming absolute loyalty, you can end up with a sort of love-hate relationship with one of them. I have a love-hate relationship with the gym that I attend.

[11:42] The cardio equipment, the aerobic circuit and the universal machines, I love them. I love the fitness they help produce and make me feel better when I go there. But I hate the pain.

I hate those guys and gals who make me look like a wimp by getting on the machine I've just got off and upping the weight. I hate the communal showers when someone else is there because I can only hold my breath for so long.

I share this love-hate. I'm tugged. I love the concept of fitness and being healthy and having less weight on, but I hate the embarrassment that sometimes comes and the pain that's attached to that.

And Herod has a love-hate relationship with God, it appears, represented by the person of John the Baptist, the bearer of the word of God. You see, he loved the word.

Notice sentence 20. Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled, yet he liked to listen to him.

[12:48] Notice, Herod kept exposing himself, exposing his inner soul and his spiritual centre, allowing it to be stretched and disturbed by John's challenge.

He kept going down, it would appear, to listen to John from time to time. This was the man that kept telling him, you've got to get rid of that wife because she's not yours. She belongs to somebody else.

But he kept exposing himself to this because he knew that John's manner and message had the hand of God written all over them. The word had the ring of truth.

It was authentic. It disturbed him. And yet he couldn't leave it alone. And I wonder if you love the word of the Lord, whether you love the scriptures and the message of Jesus, because of its morality and its promises, maybe because of its integrity, its offer of forgiveness and its eternal life.

It touches your deepest yearnings for belonging and meaning and true purpose and direction in life. Do its Christmas and Easter stories of Jesus have great appeal?

[14:00] For they speak of a God who has entered our world and who has given his all for us. Are you impressed by Christian friends who have integrity and seem to have something you don't have?

Herod's soul was perplexed and troubled by God's word represented by John the Baptist. His manner and his message intrigued him and disturbed him at the same time.

But he also hated the word of God or at least he struggled with its demand to let them be given the appropriate priority they should have had on his life. While he partied in life pursuing power, pleasure and prestige, Herod largely ignored his soul.

He may have spent an afternoon or two with John, but each evening he returned to the alluring, pleasure-filled, adulterous bed of his stolen life. And what about you and I?

Is there a sense in which we don't like the word of God, that we hate it almost? Because it calls for restraint of passion, moderation, downward mobility, the change of direction and power in our lives that heightens our personal awareness of value and guilt.

[15 : 20] Because it says contentment is found in giving up, not in giving in. That it says true joy is found in generosity, not greed. That relationships are rooted in self-sacrifice, not self-indulgence.

So Herod's, maybe our senses are satisfied, but our soul remains uneasy. You see, this powerful man was not whole. Soul and senses were in conflict.

And how many of us find ourselves in bed with a world which opposes the word of God? A world which avoids any serious attention to the soul, the spiritual dimension, which might impact our morality and our plans.

Do you flit between the world which offers pleasure in the area of our senses and the word of Jesus which offers salvation, rescue from sin? Are you torn between personal power and divine pardon? Between personal popularity and God's eternal purpose? Between instant pleasure and lasting eternal peace? Between pride in self and the praise of God?

[16 : 34] Between prosperity now and paradise in eternity? Are you torn between two loves? Two world views? Two ways of looking at life?

Is it just possible that like Herod, after hearing the Bible, we quickly return home or to work and climb back into bed with this adulterous world's delights?

Beware, you cannot serve both God and money and materialism. You just cannot have both.

There's a story that comes out of a winter scene in North America where we were living in Pittsburgh.

I took it out of the newspaper. There's a story of where a power pole had come down in a terrible ice storm and the power pole which was still alive at the time, the wires, were dancing on this massive big pine tree in the front of a house that had snow and ice on it.

And it was just spectacular when the wind blew and the sparks flew. This tree just looked magnificent. And a policeman who was sent to Garda spoke to a journalist and he made this comment and it was recorded in the newspaper.

[17 : 48] He said, I stood there wondering how anything so beautiful could be so deadly. I want to say, we are among the luckiest, sorry, we are among the most favoured people in the world.

We live in a country that is beautiful, that is spectacular in so many ways with its freedoms and all the things that we can do with the resources we have.

We are richly favoured by God. But this world has much that is beautiful and spectacular but if you make it the centre of your lives it will destroy you just as if you reached out and touched that tree. That the power would go right through you and ruin you. Are there some of us here who are very attracted to the gospel of Jesus but are fearful?

Afraid of what you might lose if you took God's truth seriously and changed? Unwilling to let the creator be your navigator so you resist surrender? Don't persist in this course.

[18 : 58] Stop attending to your senses and attend to your soul. If Herod's posture rings true let me attempt to persuade you from it. Being whole is putting soul before senses.

It's putting God before self. Look at the opening paragraph. We haven't looked at it yet but this sets the context for why this story has been told.

Why have we been told this strange story of John the Baptist and Herod when we're in them? This part of the story of Mark's gospel were all about Jesus. Well these words explain why the story is told.

We're told the disciples went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. King Herod heard about this for Jesus' name had become well known.

And some were saying John the Baptist had been raised from the dead and that is why miraculous powers were at work in him. Others said he is Elijah and still others claimed he is a prophet like one of the prophets of long ago.

[20 : 03] But when Herod heard this he said John the man I beheaded has been raised from the dead.

The key question in life is who is Jesus? Herod got it wrong.

In murdering John Herod actually had eliminated the one who could have explained who Jesus actually was. For that is why John had come.

But by not listening to John he eliminated the solution to his question. that now he answers in a way that demonstrates he is plagued by guilt.

It isn't John the Baptist he said raised from the dead it's John the one I killed the one I beheaded. And he misreads the powerful actions of Jesus and his disciples to being the powers of one who had been raised from the dead and superstition rules.

[21 : 04] Here is the big question for people to answer. Who is Jesus? What is your answer to that question? A little later I provided this verse from the later in Mark's Gospel in Mark 10.45 Jesus says of himself that he is the son of man who has come not to be served but to serve and to give himself as a ransom for many.

Who is Jesus? He is a ransom. He is a servant figure. Jesus actually came to rescue humanity even the Herods of our world by dying on the cross.

The choice to put senses before soul self before God is defiance. It is what the Bible calls sin. It is the disobedience.

It puts you out of relationship with God. But God has sent his son to deal with that. God has bent over backwards even more than that so that you and I could be forgiven.

and in a little while we will be given the opportunity to come forward and to take a piece of bread and to drink a little wine. Symbols of Jesus death and the pouring out of his blood, his life blood for us.

[22 : 28] What's this all about? Why is the cross the central symbol of the Christian faith? Because it brings you to the very heart of who God is and what God is concerned to do.

He is concerned to have a people for himself for eternity. And the death of Jesus on the cross is him paying the ransom price so you could be brought back out of judgment, out of enslavement to your senses that you might have your soul put back in shape and be restored to God for eternity.

So how should you respond? Well you ought to respond as this text tells us. Notice the top sentence. They went out, these disciples, and preached that people should repent.

And John had been telling Herod that he needed to give, verse 18, it is not law for you to have your brother's wife. He was saying, change your mind.

Stop living with her and give her back. She doesn't belong to you. We need to repent. A few years ago, Mark Rousset, who was a professional tennis player, was due to go on a flight, the Swiss airline flight 111.

[23 : 48] He was feeling very tired and felt he stay another night rather than fly home. So he changed his flight. When he awoke the next morning, he read the newspaper that the flight he had been booked on had gone down and everyone on it had been killed.

When the press realised this had happened, they interviewed him. And in the interview he said this, I changed my mind and I saved my life.

If you will change your mind about who sits on the throne of your life, it will save your life. Stop living by your senses, as we are so prone to do in Australia and live by God's way, that Jesus be number one in your life.

I want to say to you that God wants what's best for you and what's best for me. Jesus Christ is the best way to live and he is the only way to die.

The only way of being sure that when you die you'll live in his presence because there will be nothing outstanding against you before God because he's paid the judgement, he's paid with Christ, you are free.

[25 : 02] So where do you sit this morning in terms of your relationship to Jesus? Is there a little Herod in your life? Roll the camera back a moment.

Imagine that you have not yet locked off the head of the word of God. Imagine you still have the opportunity to respond and you do have this morning.

What decision will you make? Will you make a mature decision? I want to close with an illustration. Maybe a your illustration that makes a point.

My wife Sue and I used to have a little tradition on Friday nights when our children were very young. We'd buy a big bag of lollies and get a video they'd like to watch.

On a Friday night they got to stay up late. The video would go in and we'd open the bag of lollies and the rule was everyone had one lolly and then you had to wait until everyone had finished it and then everyone could have another.

[26 : 04] Just kept things in order. But I used to like cobbbers. Cobbbers are hard. They take about five minutes if you suck them, which is the way I eat lollies. My wife Sue and my children always go for the sugary sweet ones.

Chomp, chomp, they're gone. Then you've got to wait for me to finish. See, it was a sign of my maturity that I chose the harder lollies and a sign of their immaturity that they chose the stuff that satisfies quickly but doesn't have any staying power.

My friends, I have no doubt that some of you have been making decisions that have no staying power. That you are living life by choices that bring a moment of pleasure here and a moment of joy there.

And you may keep coming here and something happens when you come here and there's something true about this but you've never surrendered. You've never said, yeah, this has got to be the focus and centre of my life. Today's the day.

You have the opportunity to fill the void that Boris Becker knew was there and that I'm sure many of you know was there without Christ at the centre. And the way you do it is by praying, by asking God to be number one.

[27 : 26] That is why again as last week we've got a prayer, a prayer of commitment. I'd like you to look at that sheet, all of you if you would take the yellow sheet and look at that prayer. The prayer is fairly straightforward, it's an ABC prayer if you like.

the first part talks about admitting our guilt and our sorrow. Let me read it for you. I admit that I've ignored you and therefore my soul. I know I'm not whole, I'm very sorry, please forgive me.

The second part is the belief, trust part of the prayer. I believe you died on the cross and rose to life to make me whole and give me an eternal relationship with God. And the third part of the prayer is the commitment.

I commit to following you. Please help me to do this properly and stop being a slave to my senses. If you agree with that prayer you say that's what I'd like to have.

I'm going to pray this prayer and if it's a prayer that you need to say to God this morning then I want to urge you to say it quietly in your head as I say it. God will hear you. He doesn't need you to make it loud.

[28 : 35] He can read your mind. He can read your will. But it needs to be serious, not magical. You've been making a commitment not just mouthing the words. I want to urge you to do that.

Jesus said as it says on the top of the ship, Mark 8, what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit their soul? It profits nothing. So gain God by putting your trust in him and gain everything else as well.

So let me pray and if you have never done this before then I encourage you to do it now. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, I admit that I've ignored you and therefore my soul.

I know I'm not whole. I'm very sorry. Please forgive me. I believe you died on the cross and rose to life to make me whole and give me an eternal relationship with God.

I commit to following you. God, please help me to do this properly and to stop being a slave to my sisters. Amen.

[29 : 46] God, Use but