

Not Everyone Repents

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Date: 09 March 2025

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Do you keep your Bibles open there to Mark chapter 6 as we continue along in our Gospel of Mark. Well, many of you are probably too young to appreciate this, but the government actually does a few good things in this country.

And some of it is, I mean, you do appreciate that, I'm sure. But the good things that you don't appreciate in particular is that they often give out a few freebies when it comes to health checks. Most of them are sort of like cancer screening type tests or, you know, bulb billing for blood tests. And you guys don't have to really worry about it. But for people like me, they are often very useful because they give us early warning for any hidden health issues.

And if you're like me and you're sort of above 50 years old, there is a particular government gift that you get every two years in the mail to prompt you to get your bowels checked.

Now, as I said, it's all free, you know, costs us nothing. And sometimes they can literally be life-saving. Because when we catch the cancers or the diseases early, it increases the success of treatment.

[1 : 14] Now, despite all of this, upside, not much downside, there are still some people that don't take advantage of this. We can only guess why, but I suspect that sometimes it's because they're afraid of what they might uncover.

It seems illogical, but this fear causes them to hide from the truth, even if it means they can get help in a timely way. And I think what's true of the physical is also true of the spiritual.

As we've journeyed with Jesus through the Gospel of Mark, we've seen what he's been doing, haven't we? He's preached the good news, telling people how they can be saved, how to belong to the kingdom, how to have eternal life.

And, of course, the good news begins with the call to repent. And we saw that in Mark 1, verse 15, when Jesus said, the time has come, the kingdom of God has come near.

Repent and believe the good news. Repent. That is, recognize that there's something wrong. And turn away from how you're living.

[2 : 25] Because the good news is only good news when we recognize what's wrong with us and turn to Jesus as the only person that can save. But, sadly, throughout this Gospel of Mark, we have seen people that have refused to repent, despite the offer of the good news.

And, today, we find more of those. The first lot we find right in Jesus' hometown. So, verse 1 and chapter 6, let's read again. Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples.

When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who had heard him were amazed. Now, where did this man get these things, they asked? What's this wisdom that has been given him?

What are these remarkable miracles he's performing? Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son? And the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon, aren't his sisters here with us?

And they took offense at him. Now, I'm not sure if Jesus was expecting a different reception, but there is no welcome for the hometown hero here, is there?

[3 : 35] I'm sure they've been hearing about Jesus and what he's been doing around in Galilee, and now they see and hear firsthand what he's been up to. And you have to say that, actually, they were impressed, weren't they?

Because those who heard him were amazed. They had no doubt that he could perform miracles, that his wisdom and his wonders were clearly undisputed.

And yet, what we read is that instead of believing, they took offense. As they realized his humble origins, they began to cast aspersions on him.

And so this prompts Jesus to say in verse 4, a prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives, and in his own home. He could not do any miracles there except lay hands on a few sick people and heal them.

He was amazed at their lack of faith. Now, I don't think Jesus is saying that this is true always for all prophets, probably a generalization.

[4 : 40] He's quoting perhaps a proverb. But although the generalization is true, because there is a tendency for all of us to form preconceptions after which it's hard to shake.

We tend to think that we're very logical, that if presented with evidence, we will change our minds. But that's actually not the case. We've all encountered situations, haven't we, where it's so hard to change people's minds, even though we've tried.

It seems so obvious that they should, you know, present it with our logic and the evidence that they should see things our way. But habits die hard, don't they?

And once formed, we tend to stick to what we're familiar with, to our worldview in life. And that's what we find in Nazareth, because look at the questions they ask, the preconceptions that they've built based on what they knew.

This is Mary's son. They've probably seen him play with their own children in the past. You know, he's just a carpenter, working with his hands. How is it that he suddenly can do all these wonders and signs, and teach with authority, without any formal training?

[5 : 59] You know, it's a bit like a child that you might be currently leading in kids' church. And then one day, they become your boss at work.

And then they try to tell you what to do. And so they failed to believe. But more than that, they actually took offense at him.

Why? Well, because remember what Jesus was preaching back in chapter 1. How dare this local lad command us to repent, they're thinking.

Their pride and their ego were exposed, and so they took offense. And so in contrast to last week, where we saw Jairus and his daughter and the woman who was bleeding heal because of their faith, it says here that Jesus didn't heal many in Nazareth, because he was amazed by their lack of faith.

They were amazed at him, and he was amazed at them, but amazed at their lack of faith. Now, I don't think this means that Jesus lacked the power to heal, but I think Jesus prevented himself from doing so because, unlike last week, there was little faith to respond to reward.

[7 : 23] But let's move on to the next section because despite this lack of faith, Jesus continues to preach. He's moving from one village to another, and he enlists his disciples to get in on the work so that more towns can be covered.

So verse 6, calling the twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. These were his instructions.

Take nothing for the journey, accept a staff, no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals, but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust of your feet as a testimony against them. They went out and preached that people should repent.

They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. Now, it's clear, isn't it, that Jesus has given them his authority to do the work that he himself was doing.

[8 : 25] This is the same message of repentance, and they had the same power to drive out demons and to heal the sick, just as Jesus did. So all of this they were doing on behalf of Jesus and in his name.

And it would appear that actually they were having more success than Jesus, weren't they? We read that they drove out many demons and anointed many sick people, a bit more than Jesus could or wanted to.

Presumably, I think, because as they went from village to village, there were more people that were responding in faith. Now, Jesus' instructions here in verse 8 to 11 were for them to travel lightly. He wanted them to be able to move around easily. But it also meant that they were reliant on the hospitality of the towns they visited. You see, it actually became a test for those to whom they preached.

Their welcome, the village's welcome of the disciples was actually an indication of their faith. Because if they accepted the message to repent and to believe, they would welcome them.

[9 : 38] If they were healed, then it would be natural to reciprocate by offering hospitality, especially when they saw that the disciples had nothing. This all had to be provided for free because the disciples didn't bring any money to pay, did they?

And as the disciples stayed in their homes, that was also an opportunity to hear more and to learn more about the Lord Jesus. But Jesus also warned that they might not be welcomed in every town, in which case they were to simply shake off the dust from their feet as a testimony against them and just move on.

Now, this is a test for the villages, but it was also a test for the disciples, wasn't it? Because they had to trust God to provide as they moved from village to village.

And while these instructions are specific to them because their situation is different to us, I think we are called to exercise the same faith as we serve as Jesus' disciples.

You see, just as it was with Jesus in Nazareth, not everyone who hears will repent. Faith is not given to everyone just as we saw in the parable of the sower where it was only one type of soil, the fourth soil, where the seed did take root and multiplied to a great crop.

[11 : 09] But at the same time, neither is Jesus nor God going to reveal this ahead of time. The disciples were not going to know before they preached who will believe and who won't.

And so, the disciples, therefore, had to sow the seed indiscriminately, almost, randomly, preach, believing that God might save some, but not knowing beforehand what the outcome might be.

Friends, you know, I think often when we try to share the gospel, the attention we put is on the hearers, right? We want them to pass the test of faith. We pray for them.

And we ask, will they believe or not? And that is, of course, right. But actually, before any hearer can believe, there is actually a prior test of faith for those who share the word.

Us. Do we believe that God can and will call people to repentance? And if we do believe this, will we then step out in faith and preach the word?

[12 : 22] We actually have to exercise faith first, don't we? And then afterwards, pray that our hearers will as well. And for us, you know, I think our job is even slightly easier than the disciples because we don't have to worry about our empty bellies, do we?

We get to share the gospel and then knowing that at the end of the day, we have a home to return to. We have a hot meal waiting for us. But it's still a test, isn't it, of our faith to see whether we will open our mouths and tell others about Jesus.

Will we reveal to our colleagues and friends that we are a Christian at work or at uni or at school? Will we invite them or just open our mouth to invite them to come and hear about Jesus?

And we do that not knowing beforehand who will welcome such a question and who will reject us. But we speak up anyway, right? Trusting that God will use us to save some.

Now in our third section, we encounter Herod who made John the Baptist pay for speaking up. Herod is mentioned here because he's come to hear about Jesus. You know, Jesus and his disciples are doing a lot of things in Galilee, right?

[13 : 44] Even hometown Nazareth has heard about it. And Herod's domain, that is the area where he ruled, was in this part of Israel in Galilee. Thus we read in verse 14, Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known.

Some were saying John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him. Others said he's Elijah, and still others claim he's a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.

But when Herod heard this, he said, John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead. Now I think, you know, suspect that Herod here may be slightly threatened, maybe, or triggered even, because there were parallels between Jesus and John.

John 2 had preached a message of repentance. And so Herod is connecting John to Jesus, or Jesus to John, and then thinking that John has come back to life, to haunt him.

And what follows now in the rest of the passage is a recounting of what Herod did to John. And I guess the question we have to ask at this point is, why does Mark insert this here in the gospel?

[15 : 00] Because, in a sense, what John did to Herod was something that happened in the past. It's not something that's actually going on when Jesus was preaching in Galilee.

It's almost as if Mark mentions Herod here in order to bring back the story between John and Herod into the gospel at this point. And so, I think what Mark is doing is to give us a little vignette or case study on what preaching to the unrepentant entails.

And in particular, what costly consequences can result for those who preach the good news. So, yes, people are being healed, you know, the disciples have great authority, but, you know, the message is don't get too carried away because look at the lengths to which hard hearts will go to block out the message.

And we've had some inkling of this when Jesus was in Nazareth. Jesus then also warns them that some villagers might not accept them. But in John, what we see is that when hard hearts and unfettered power meet, what the full extent of evil that results can be.

So, let's first look at the unrepentant, that's Herod and Herodias, and see what motivates and drives their actions, verse 17. For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested and he had him bound and put in prison.

[16:29] He did this because Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because of Herodias, his brother's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

So, this is where it all started, right? this initial sin of adultery by Herod and Herodias, she was a willing accomplice, and specifically by Herod taking his brother's wife, not just any other man's wife, and worse than that actually, we know from history that Herodias was actually related to Herod. She was, I think, a niece of Herod or something, and so there's even incest here as well, right? And John had dared to call Herod and Herodias out for repentance.

Not a general call, you know, repent and be saved, but a specific denouncing of that sin. And it's at this very point when their initial failure to repent sets in train everything else that follows.

This, my friends, is where it all starts. At the point when we realize our sin, what we do there and then has far reaching consequences.

[17:52] And that's why we had the other reading in Ziah chapter 55 verse 6 and 7 for it says, seek the Lord while he may be found. Call on him, not at your leisure, call on him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on them. And to our God for he will freely pardon. And because Herod and Herodias failed to repent, when John called it out, verse 19, Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him.

But she was not able to because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled, yet liked to listen to him. one sin leads to another, isn't it? And then it snowballs. First for Herodias and then for Herod as well, who is caught up in this web.

But initially he was actually fearful and intrigued by John, which is a really funny kind of reaction, because knowing John was righteous, he still refused to repent from John's rebuke.

[19:09] But yet he still said, keep talking to me, I kind of quite like what you're saying. A bit bizarre, isn't it? But the reason is not hard to see, is it?

His heart was captured by lust, first for Herodias and then for the status and approval of the people around him. So sin therefore was festering in his heart, in Herodias' heart, until there was an opportune time to get its way.

And that finally occurs on his birthday. Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, ask me for anything you want and I'll give it to you. And he promised her with a note, whatever you ask, I will give you, up to half my kingdom. She went out and said to her mother, what shall I ask for?

The head of John the Baptist, she answered. At once the girl hurried in to the king with a request, I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

[20:20] Now, please don't let your imagination run too well here, but this is not a wholesome scene at all. I suspect there's a lot of debauchery and seduction happening at this party.

And Herod is doing all he cares to impress his officials, the people gathered. And this was therefore an obscene show of his power and wealth. But he gets carried away, doesn't he?

And so offers the girl, under oath, up to half his kingdom. And sadly, such was Herodias' grudge that she would even squander half the kingdom for it.

Imagine, you're bypassing half a kingdom just to have the head of someone you wanted revenge for. That is a lot of hate, isn't it? But the request puts Herod in a bind.

It says there, the king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. [21 : 21] The man went, beheaded John in the prison and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in the tomb.

Herod didn't realize, did he, that his initial refusal to repent would lead all the way to this very end. And so consider why he was so distressed. It was actually because he knew, he knew that it was wrong to behead John. And yet, he was willing to sear his conscience because he couldn't bear being embarrassed before his guest.

And so no wonder, isn't it, that he's been haunted by that afterwards, such that when Jesus arrives on the scene, he says, oh, it's John, come back to haunt me.

Friends, the urge to harden our hearts so we don't have to face up to the shameful truth about our sin may be strong, but the harsh reality is our sin will always catch up with us eventually.

[22 : 40] We cannot run away from God and we cannot run away from our unrepentant heart because one day, all of us will be called to account. You know, there are times when I've done the wrong thing and been exposed for it there and then.

And you know, I've since learned that actually, I've since learned to thank God for it, for He is being merciful to me for doing so.

Because had I not been pulled up for it straight away, but been allowed to keep going, who knows how hardened my heart would have continued to be.

And so friends, when the Lord pricks you, thank Him for it. He's actually being merciful to you. He's loving you. He's pulling you up now before it gets too late.

Now, on the flip side, we need to realize that when we speak the truth, and sometimes we do it even when we do it in love, it can be costly. Preaching the good news of Jesus, where we do faithfully call people to repent, can be risky business.

[23 : 51] It cost John his life, didn't it? And Mark tells us this story here to flag to us that eventually, it will cost the life of one greater than John because Jesus, when He preached, so incensed the Jewish leaders that He paid for it with His life.

And yes, this was all part of God's plan, not a surprise, but the means by which God did it was to use the unrepentant hearts, not of Herod, but of the Jewish leaders and Pilate, because remember, just like Herod, Pilate also didn't want to kill Jesus, did he?

But he did it anyway. Why? Because we read that he was afraid of the people. John, even though his death was excruciating, actually died pretty quickly and painlessly.

But Jesus, on the other hand, dying on the cross is actually a worse death than dying by being beheaded. And as another comparison, whereas John had disciples who lovingly laid his body in a tomb, we read in verse 29, what happened to Jesus?

His disciples scattered, didn't they, when he died? Didn't go and get his body, no. It took Joseph of Arimathea, who was on hand to, and it says there in chapter 15 of Mark, boldly asked for Jesus' body in order to lay him in a tomb.

[25 : 29] Thankfully, unlike John who did not rise from the dead, Herod was wrong, Jesus did. And so we have that chance to repent and believe and be saved.

Jesus' death, costly as it was, because he preached repentance, was ultimately worth it. Worth more, more valuable than half of Herod's kingdom, worth more than this entire world.

So friends, if there's anyone here today who knows that today at this moment you need to repent or turn your life over to Jesus, then draw near to God now while he is near.

Don't say no, because you risk hardening your heart, and then who knows where it may end up, sadly. And for those of us who have believed in Jesus, then we are called to follow in Jesus' footsteps as well, to share the good news, even when it may be costly.

Tell others, even though it's hard, it may embarrass us, tell them that believing the good news first requires us to recognize that we have to repent, to see the failures in our lives, that our sin is our fault, it's not somebody else's fault, it's not the system's fault, we're not victims of the system, but to own our own sin, so that we realize that only Jesus can save.

[26 : 58] Some may reject us because of this, but let's pray that by God's grace, many will believe, repent, and have that same eternal life that we have, and therefore be able to rejoice like we do.

Let's pray. Father, search our hearts and guard us against the hardness of heart of not repenting when you reveal to us our wrongdoing.

Teach us the blessing of finding forgiveness through faith in Jesus, and give us the courage to preach the good news even when others may reject it. In your mercy, humble many so that they may respond rightly, and find eternal life in your son.

In his name we pray. Amen.