

Jesus Veiled

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning to you. Thank you. I, along with Dan, want to give you Lenten greetings. And this morning, when I made the announcements at the 730 service, I let them know of Lenten devotions that's been generated, produced, called Practicing Lent.

And I gave some suggestions for what people might abstain from and actually pick up. So to them, you know, if they're not in the habit of reading the Bible on a regular basis, they could abstain from that activity and pick up the other one of reading the Bible on a regular basis.

So that might work for you, too, if you don't read the Bible on a daily basis. You might want to give that up and start up reading the Bible. But then, after that one, Dan was actually talking about our gift to the world here with Lenten and the new change of time.

I thought to myself, I think I heard this past week the state of Washington wanted things to be only on Daylight Saving Time. I don't know if you heard that in the news, but I thought to myself, boy, if there's one day that I could abstain from Daylight Saving Time, it would have been today.

Being at 730, 9 and 11. But at any rate, I'm going to take up Daylight Saving Time and proceed on. Well, let's do that. Let's keep on with this sermon series in Matthew. We were in chapter 13.

[1 : 24] Almost finished that last week, but we'll finish it this week now. And turn with me to page 819. You would have noticed in the reading today that it's not a necessarily happy, kind of joyful text.

These two stories come out, and they start in celebration. The first one is like a family reunion, and also something of a homecoming of sort for Jesus that just isn't very welcoming.

And the second one is a birthday party that ends in a burial. This is a new theme that's beginning to kind of pick up or kind of reoccur in Matthew's gospel again.

And we return to this idea of a great kind of a storm or a conflict that's going on after these kingdom parables that Jesus has just preached. And up to this point, Jesus' conflict has been with the religious leaders, the Pharisees.

But now the conflict actually goes in a different direction with his own household, and also with the Roman household. The conflict and threat we learn now is not just a religious one, but it's a very personal one, and also a very public one.

[2 : 37] So this is a story of two places, Nazareth and the household of Herod, wherever this is at this point. It's not disclosed there, but the people of Nazareth and Herod's household make some choices in this.

One not to believe, and the other not to fear the Lord. And Jesus doesn't fit in with these two households, these homes, their expectations and interests of him.

The household of Nazareth won't believe, and the household of Herod just won't fear the Lord. Let me just stop a little bit and talk about those before we kind of get into the text.

First about belief, and then about fear. When we think about Christianity, we probably think that that's about belief in Jesus, and that's true. But it's interesting that only eight times does this word show up in the Gospel of Matthew, where in the Gospel of John, it turns up 84 times.

And as belief is, we know that it's about faith and trust. It's submission and surrender to the Lord.

Belief is a gift of God's grace that doesn't come by our works, but through faith in the work of Jesus Christ.

[3 : 41] Ultimately, his work on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension. And we find in this household of Nazareth that there's this incredible contempt that's shown short towards Jesus.

And we see that it's not enough to know Jesus. It's not enough to be close to him, not even enough to be in his family. Certainly not enough also to be in that region, that area of Nazareth.

Switch to faith now. When we think of Christianity, we may not actually think of fear. Right? It's probably not the first thing that comes to your mind, but fear can actually be a good thing. Some of us actually like fear. We like action, thrillers on the theater screen, the cinema. But we don't like fear in our own life, the anxiety that causes us sometimes. Fear makes us to draw back, doesn't it? It drives us away from that which we fear. It's negative. But there is a positive fear that draws us in with a sense of wonder to what's before us and what we behold.

[4 : 42] Well, we see both this negative and this positive fear that's in Herod's household. Herod's negative fear, though, gets the best of him. His fear of John the Baptist is real and right, but it's not enough.

Herod then caves into his fear of others and what they might think of him. In the end, what we'll see in these two parties, these two scenes that we'll look at now, is this incredible contempt for Jesus on the one hand, and in the other one, just utter confusion over Jesus.

If you remember from being here last week, or maybe you didn't, in that last series of parables that Jesus preached, there is this question put to the listeners and us too, and that is, do you understand?

And this kind of continues on with that. This week's questions could be this, do you believe, and do you fear the Lord? So let's look at these two scenes now.

Let's turn to this first story in Nazareth. After a recent teaching tour, Jesus returns home. We don't have an explanation, but we do have a description of his return.

[5 : 56] And the family reunion and homecoming was not a welcome one, though he may have hoped for that. The crowd treated Jesus with nothing but contempt. The reaction to him is described in verse 54 as astonishing.

Now at first that sounds pretty good. The word astonishing comes up four times in the Gospel of Matthew, and it's always in reaction to Jesus' teaching. It looks like a word of wonder. They might be, though, bewildered, shocked, though, and befuddled with Jesus' teaching.

The response is revealing about the hometown and how they see Jesus and what it is that they expected of him, and also themselves in relation to him. Jesus induces responses wherever he goes.

And at least the people of Nazareth reacted to him. They were not indifferent to our Lord. And we can at least give them that.

They cared enough to be astonished or tasered or stunned. That's not all, though. It isn't enough to be astonished by Jesus.

[7 : 04] And we see there's more to this response than that. The home crowd then raises, as you look down, there are six questions. The first and the last one begin with where, and the ones in the middle actually have to do with Jesus' origin and his family, his parents.

So the first one is where, the last one is where, and then it's is not and are not. Though we don't have to read between the lines too much to know, that the questions come with a kind of a sneer, right?

A kind of a roll of the eyes. You can imagine that. It's too bad because these where questions are what this whole section very well may be all about.

Just look down to them with me. The first one is in 54. The last one is at the end of 56. Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?

Where then did this man get all these things? Just imagine if they'd only pursued that honestly and openly. But the hometown is utterly offended by Jesus.

[8 : 11] They very well hold over Jesus' head his questionable birth. This man was conceived out of wedlock, might have been on their mind.

They say, we know his brothers by name and his sisters remain. But who does he think he is teaching us like this? And that may be the tone behind the question.

Which again is a good question. Where does he get this wisdom? Where does he get these good works? Maybe behind this though is even some jealousy and some envy. In other words, they're saying, why not us or our children or siblings?

They've heard his teaching firsthand now. Maybe they've even experienced some of his miracles firsthand. At least heard about them secondhand. They might wish actually it was them and not Jesus.

So they take great offense at our Lord. And this was described in the previous parable, if you just look back. When Jesus spoke of the angels coming and separating the evil from the righteous. [9 : 22] And the people of Nazareth are not weeping and gnashing of their teeth yet. But they're really close. So for some reason, it appears like there's this veil over Jesus.

They're just not getting him, his wisdom and his works. What they think is true of Jesus. But it just doesn't fit with their expectations. And it's not just a matter of gathering up the evidence. It's a matter of their hearts. This is a condition of their hearts. It's the nature of their humanity. And it's not that they can't believe. But it's they just won't believe that he's the Messiah.

And because they won't believe in him, they can't know who he is. It seems they prejudged him. The effect is telling. Because we learn their unbelief results in, as you looked into the last verse of chapter 3, that Jesus did few mighty works among them.

This is the first time. This is his home crowd. But what does this mean that he did few mighty works among them? It requires some explanation. Mighty works or miracles or signs and wonders.

[10 : 35] There are Jesus' work, his work of divine demonstrations. Jesus is in absolute control of them coming on. We don't crowbar or leverage or cause this to happen.

There's not a, and I know we know this, not a science to miracles. In fact, it seems that they transcend what we think is scientific. In other words, just because you believe in Jesus doesn't make the mighty works of Jesus automatic.

But because of the Nazareth's unbelief, it says he did not do many works there. Not that Jesus couldn't do them, but for some reason he wouldn't do them.

In other words, Jesus doesn't get some kind of power from our belief and then perform a miracle. Or Jesus doesn't reward us with his mighty works because of our faith. Now, Jesus gives grace and it's undeserved.

And sometimes he does it in the form of a miracle. And in this case, here's an amazing thing. Even when there is unbelief. For the text says that he performed few but not many mighty works.

[11 : 51] There was much grace actually even in that. It is only the grace of God that can break through our contempt and our unbelief. The grace of God is all around that household and they can't even see it.

It's also all around the church. It always has been. Just turn with me to your bulletin actually. There's this lovely line in the last hymn that we sung.

It reads, Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain. God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain.

I was just drawing our attention to actually the grace of God. And that unbelief won't help us to see what it is that God is doing and how he's doing that through his son and our savior, Jesus Christ. Well, that's the first party. You ready to turn to the next party? Or are you partied out? It goes from bad to worse.

[12 : 56] You must admit, you know that. This second scene is a gruesome one. It's a birthday party like I've never been to. I don't know about you. And if so, maybe you could share that with me.

Though I'm not sure I want to hear about that. Well, where the household of Nazareth were full of contempt about Jesus, towards Jesus, the household of Herod the Tetrarch was just utterly corrupt and confused.

And I could certainly make some comments right now about public leadership. But let's face it. Corruption and confusion reigns everywhere.

Not just in our politics. It's in every dimension, every aspect of life. And it's interesting that there's a real focus on households here. Let me take you back with just a bit of a survey.

Going back to verse 52. We read this. Therefore, every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house. That's the operative word, house.

[13 : 58] 58. A prophet is not without honor, Jesus says this, except in his hometown and in his own household. And here his birthday with Herodias and her daughter and the company constitutes a household.

And John's disciples, here's a really interesting thing about this, the value that God places on families and his shaping and redefining of what a household is. It's John's household, not including his father and mother, who are probably dead by now, and certainly not any siblings, given how old Elizabeth was when she gave birth to John.

He had none of them, but his new household of faith are the ones who look after his body and bury him. And so on the surface, it actually looks like the story is about John the Baptist, but only to let us know how crazy and confused the ideas are that people come up with about Jesus.

Herod thought that John had been raised by the dead, and that that's who Jesus is and how he got his power. That's what explained it.

Now here's an interesting thing, though. Not that I want to give Herod too much credit. At least he believed in mighty works and the resurrection of the dead, which was far more than some of the leaders even then as well as now could admit.

[15 : 24] Let's look and dig in a little bit more to this story, though. Herod is quite fascinated with John the Baptist. He's interested enough that he listens to him.

John is not afraid to call him out, even though he's got this great position in power. And you might actually think, well, why bother? You know, why bother with someone like this?

But John's mission isn't just to the follower of his itinerant ministry. No. You never know how far reaching the Word of God spreads.

And it doesn't require the internet. Some suggest Herod was so fascinated that he put John in prison to protect him from his wife Herodias.

Herod thought the best way to protect John was to keep him close to him. You know, keep your enemies near you. Make friends with your enemies. But the text is really, really clear that what Herod thought of John and what he wanted to do, and in verse 5, which was to put him to death.

[16 : 30] John wasn't just fascinating, though. He was faithful. He not only applied the law to Herod's life, but he also delivered the gospel.

John called people to repentance and faith, which is belief in God and fear of him. Belief for John was this, as Dan was actually describing earlier.

It's turning away from one thing and turning towards another. It's actually knowing that we have attachments and affinities with one thing, which won't do with where our ultimate loyalties, attachments, affinities, affections, and will should lie.

It's saying no to the one and yes to the other. And it's saying yes to this luring love of God. Well, Herod had other lures and lusts.

It would probably show itself in the same way in my life if I had the kind of opportunity that Herod did. But by the grace of God, only I don't, not only I, but I don't have these opportunities, or so I think.

[17 : 47] But in the case of Herod, he's just like a dry sinner. You know, kind of like a dry addict. You may know what that is. It's someone who doesn't use the substance but still is addicted to it.

That's Herod. He still wanted to kill John, but he didn't kill him. Not because he didn't want to, but because he feared the people.

That's what it says. Herod wasn't his own man. He actually feared the people, and therein lies the problem. We all have fears.

It's not that we fear nothing, or that faith removes fear altogether. But it's that the Lord wants us to fear him. That is, stand in awe of him.

Not just be astonished by him, right? But move from a negative fear, those other things that we might fear, to this positive fear of the Lord. You know, this fear that draws us actually into his reality and his purposes.

[18 : 51] The faith that he actually gives us by grace. You know what that fear is like. It's like a beautiful scenery, or a story, or this just magnificent piece of art.

Except in this case, it's living. Those other things don't have life and aren't life-giving. But here we know what Herod's, and maybe even our problem, is.

Sometimes we're just too fascinated and fear the wrong things. Some of you know that in my pastoral care, when I come to visit you, you may hear me ask a question about how you're feeling. And does that emotion say anything about your fears, your struggles, your relationship with Jesus? And if so, is there actually any way that Jesus is using that to invite you, draw you in, to see how wonderful and amazing and delightful he is?

The love that he actually has for you. And that salvation that he occurred in his greatest work on the cross is what he actually uses to work his wonder into your life, and then calls us to work that out with, as Paul says to the church in Philippi, with fear and trembling.

[20 : 13] Well, Herod was so close, I think, to letting God grip him with his work of grace, but Herod feared the people because, and get this, they held him, that's John, to be a prophet.

The thought that people might listen to a prophet scared Herod. Prophets are intriguing, but they're also unsettling.

And so Herod was disturbed. John was a prophet, and Jesus thought himself in this way too, which we heard previously, a prophet not having honor except in his hometown.

But we know that he was even more. John and Jesus had more in common, their extended family. And Jesus revealed that a prophet, yes, again, has no honor in his hometown.

So how much more a prophet than a Messiah? Well, if Jesus' cousin suffered this kind of death for applying the law to Herod, what kind of death would Jesus suffer?

[21 : 18] John's death was not only a sign of things to come, but it was leaving a big impression on what to expect with Jesus.

John's death was that of a martyr. Jesus' death was that of a Messiah. And there were similarities between John and Jesus, but there's this one big difference that you may know, and that is Jesus' death came for us personally.

John's death didn't carry the same meaning as Jesus. Jesus died in the place of you and me. You see the love of God for us then in Jesus' death, fully human, fully man.

There's an interesting kind of comparison that's going on in here too that we find out about later in Acts chapter 12. When Herod is actually declared by others to be not a man, but God.

And he no longer accepts that, that he's struck down and killed by the Lord and eaten by worms. Well, Jesus' death was totally unique.

[22 : 30] He died as God and man in our place. That we wouldn't actually have to die because of our own sin, but have life actually in him.

And so that we might enter and enjoy the kingdom of heaven. Well, these are two sobering stories, aren't they? They come as a bit of a warning to us.

The first shows us that we can actually be as close to Jesus as his household and his hometown, and not even know because of our unbelief. The second shows us that in Herod's case, you can even be sorry.

He was sorry because he was causing, he called for John the Baptist's death and actually miss that the Savior of the world is right there and that we might grow in his grace as we fear him and not the world.

But here's the good news, just in a really quick closing. The good news is that God's grace is sufficient for us. His mercy is new every morning and it is more than enough to go from unbelief to belief in him.

[23 : 38] His love is everlasting and takes us from a fear of punishment to the praise and glory of our God who's wonderful and beautiful and yes, fearful in the most positive way.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.