

DYING CONSCIENCE TO LIVING CHRIST

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
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Let's Begin

Mark Twain wrote: "Good books, good friends and a sleepy conscience: this is the ideal life." Twain was a literary genius. But he got it entirely wrong that time. While good friends and good books may go a ways toward creating the "ideal" life, a "sleepy conscience" is the perfect formula for a ruined life. That's what we learn from our lesson today in Matthew 14.

Conscience is not the easiest thing in the world to define. After all, one can't see the conscience or even hear it. In fact, conscience will not be gauged by the five senses at all.

To understand conscience, we must observe the results of conscience in action. The first part of Matthew 14 affords us a look at conscience by examining three primary characters—Herod, Herodias, and John. Afterward, we'll glean the text, searching for the perfect remedy of a ruined conscience—a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The following outline assists us as we proceed:

I. The Ruin of a Dying Conscience (vv. 1-12)

II. The Remedy of the Living Christ (vv. 13-36)

I. The Ruin of a Dying Conscience (vv. 1-12)

As we've already observed, defining the conscience is a relatively hard thing to do. It could be likened to a red warning light in the soul. Perhaps a better image is a beeper going off on the inside when one does something wrong, God paging us that what we're about to do violates His will.

Paul speaks of the "law written on [our] hearts, [our] conscience also bearing witness" (Rom. 2:15). It must be clearly stated, however, that while conscience is real, it is not perfect. The conscience itself is affected by sin like every other facet of our life. No character affords us the luxury of a lamentable look into the progressive death of conscience like Herod.

First, let's note Herod's troubled conscience (vv. 3-5). Herod had heard about the fame of Jesus (v. 1). Who hadn't? Jesus' ministry was growing in unprecedented popularity. Just as many theories presented themselves as to who this strange Rabbi from Galilee was, so Herod had his own concoction: Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead, the death of whom Herod himself had overseen (vv. 2, 10).

Consequently, Herod was troubled by the message of God (vv. 3-4). Stealing his dear Herodias from his own brother's home, he married her, violating all standards of decency and morality. Even more so, he violated God's law revealed in Scripture. John the Baptist courageously confronted Herod about his dishonorable lifestyle before God and before the people who were under his watch-care.

Confrontation may be a mild description from what we know of John. With flashing eyes, thundering voice, and deep conviction, John called down God's wrath on Herod. The result was predictable. John was imprisoned for faithfully delivering God's message, an inevitable consequence for all God's prophets. But it was not just the message of God that troubled Herod's conscience. It was also the man of God himself – John (v. 5).

Herod actually feared John (cp. Mark 6:20). Fear was such an odd response from Herod, a monarch, a power-broker in the Greco-Roman world. But he shuttered in John's presence. How different from today when politicians no longer fear the man of God. Or, sadly it could be that there are far too few prophets who are of the ilk of John the Baptist.

Second, Herod's conscience was not only troubled, it was trapped (vv. 6-12). John's preaching was like a magnet. Many times, Herod would go down

Reflection Connection

Think on the poplar saying "Let your conscience be your guide." Is it your experience that your conscience is always right? What does the Bible say? Share a time when you were led astray by your conscience. Allow others to share.



Reflection Connection

Reflection Connection: Why would a powerful man like Herod be scared of a preacher? Can you name a preacher today toward whom powerful people express fear?

to the dungeon just to listen to John. That's the way it is with men of God who have a message from God. How often even the unbeliever like Herod still wants to hear the Word spoken. Yet the troubled conscience progressively becomes a conscience trapped.

Sin is similar to a spider building a web of guilt. It starts with a single strand. Thread after thread is spun until a trap is formed for its victim. Herod himself was weaving a web of sin, ignoring his troubled conscience; but, unlike a wise spider, he entangled himself in his own web of deceit. Two strands stick to him in particular.

The first is *passion* (vv. 6-8). It was his birthday and thus the palace was primed for a party fit only for a prince. The table was spread with royal delicacies worthy only of a king. Herod's special treat for which he yearned was to bring Herodias' daughter, Salome, to dance for him. What an immoral spectacle that Salome agreed to in order to please the passions of drunken men. Too often young ladies and lonely women become the sad objects of the personal pleasure of wayward men. Salome knew how to please with her artful trade. As an indication of his uncontrolled passion, Herod offered her a blank check, one he'd soon regret.

Pride would become the second strand of sticky web that Herod spun (vv. 8-12). Salome had consulted her mother on precisely what to do. Herodias needed little thought for the vindictive hatred she held toward John. His courageous confrontation concerning her marriage to Herod was evident. Her embarrassment was more than sufficient cause for his death.

Salome returned to Herod and wished for John's head to be brought to her. Herod was trapped by his own web! The guests awaited his decision. Not desiring to be seen as either weak or unwilling to carry out his offer, Herod called for John's death. Pride followed heavy on passion's heels and the king fell.

Pride has trapped more people than can be counted. Just the simple thought, "what will my boyfriend think?" has ruptured the purity of a beautiful young lady. The simple, "O.K. I'll try it once," brands the young boy who now is a grown man hooked on alcohol because he cared too much about what his friends would say if he had said, "no thanks" to that first can of beer. Pride is at the center of it all.

Third, the ruined conscience travels down the road from troubled, to trapped and now finally to tormented (vv. 1-2). Looking back at the beginning of the chapter, we hear in Matthew's description of Herod, the conscience of a tormented man. We're unsure how much time goes by. We don't know. Perhaps Herod attempted to suppress his troubled, trapped conscience. Yet two things cannot be suppressed.

First, our sense of **responsibility** cannot be suppressed. No matter how hard one tries, when sin is committed, the sense of responsibility seems to seep right through.

Second, neither can **accountability** be suppressed. Herod thinks Jesus is John back from the grave (v. 2). Interestingly, Herod was probably a Sadducee who held that resurrection was a myth. A tormented conscience quickly melts theological conviction. Fear ruled his heart. He saw Jesus but he recalled John.

Reflection Connection

Reflection Connection: Why does pride seem so powerful? Name some practices that can lead to pride. Think of ways to overcome pride.



There is no remedy for a troubled, trapped and tormented conscience—at least on earth. Only Heaven offers a remedy.

II. The Remedy of the Living Christ (vv. 13-36)

We come to a passage, the centerpiece of which contains the only miracle included in all four gospels—the feeding of the five thousand. Many of us get concerned when we are planning a social event with a couple of families coming over for a weekend supper. How would you react if five thousand hungry men showed up along with their wives and children (v. 27)?

After Jesus got news of the horrible fate of John the Baptist, He went away to be alone for a time (v. 13). As He went, the crowds followed along as they usually did (v. 14).

As we focus the remainder of the study on the remedy of the living Christ, *let's first note the multitude that came to Jesus* (vv. 15-16). Matthew describes this multitude as not only having sick among them (v. 14) but also as being destitute of any supplies (v. 15; cp. Mark 6:36). No better picture could we imagine of the world than Matthew gives us. The world is a needy place, devoid of any hope that help would spring from it.

Jesus was “moved with compassion” toward the multitude, as we have come to expect (v. 14; cp. 9:36). Many

times we get the impression that God is unconcerned with our physical needs. This is decidedly not so. Here we see Jesus taking care of the people's physical needs by healing their bodies and feeding their hunger. But that is not all. Jesus also assisted people's emotional needs. These people were like all the others Jesus came across: they were worn down emotionally (9:36).

Most of all, Jesus healed people's spiritual problems, meeting each and every spiritual need people had. He still does! Notice precisely how differently the disciples reacted: “send them away” (v. 15). Is this the solution the church offers to the downtrodden today—send them away? Is this the strategy the church employs when “undesirables” come to their high class church—send them away? How stark the contrast with the Son of God!

Jesus responds to the disciples' solution—sending the multitudes away. He says, in effect: “Send them away? Why? They don't have to depart; you give them of your supply” (v. 16). While we don't have Philip's answer in Matthew, John thankfully recorded it for us: “Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one may have a little” (John 6:7).

Not one disciple caught on to what Jesus was doing. Nothing they could have individually or collectively gathered could supply the multitude's needs. Their solution was insufficient; their remedy incomplete. But Jesus was there. He was their Messiah, their Savior and He wanted to be others' Messiah and Savior as well.

Reflection Connection

Reflection Connection: Why would Jesus want to be alone instead of going to comfort the disciples of John? How difficult is it to minister to one who has lost a loved one to tragic circumstances like John? Share a time with the class when you have had to minister in such a situation or allow another to share.

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Reflection Connection

Reflection Connection: Did Jesus place spiritual needs ahead of material needs? Does this make material needs unimportant? Why or why not? How can meeting material needs assist in sharing Christ?



Let's look next at the Master Who ministered to the multitude (vv. 17-19). We learn much from this passage about how personal the Master is (vv. 17-18). Again not recorded in Matthew, but mentioned in John, Andrew brings a "young lad" to Jesus (John 6:8). The boy had five barley loaves and two fish. What the disciples possessed could not so much as feed them much less the thousands of people there.

Observe, however, what we bring and put into the hands of Jesus will always do more than we ever dreamed. Even a little boy's lunch is blessed to feed multitudes. What is it that you possess? Do not be afraid to place it in Jesus' hand. He will use it more than you ever imagined. Maybe you have a knack for repairing things. Why not put that in the hands of Jesus and help somebody? When you have repaired their roof shingle, share your faith and repair their ruined heart.

Perhaps you have a knack for planning. Host a party, make a friend and then share Jesus with somebody you meet. Whatever it is you have, Jesus wants it. It will never be blessed until you give it to Jesus.

Notice also how *practical* the Master is (v. 19). He had them sit on the grass. Mark tells us how they were organized (Mark 6:39). God is a God of order. All creation proves this. Jesus was a man of order as well.

Finally, notice the miracle the Master performed (vv. 19-21; 22-36). Carefully, we are informed of the source of the miracle: "looking up to heaven, he blessed, and broke, and gave the loaves to his disciples, and distributed to the multitudes (v. 19). All good gifts come from above, James would tell us later (James 1:17; cp. Phil. 4:19).

The substance was the meager little lunch the boy provided. The miracle took place in the hands of Jesus. The One who created the universe, with its billions of stars and galaxies, is the same One Who multiplied the loaves.

The bread was placed into the hands of Jesus; but Jesus placed it right back into the hands of the disciples. Know that God's blessings flow through us to others. That's the precise way He set it up. We are God's pipes to the world. We distribute the living water to the masses. We are the serving line on which the bread of God is delivered to the destitute, downtrodden and depressed. The "disciples to the multitudes" (v. 19) is a principle the church cannot afford to forget. The miracle succeeded. The multitudes were filled with fragments remaining (v. 20).

Afterward, Jesus and the disciples hopped a ship and headed to the other side of the lake. Thoroughly fatigued, Jesus spent a long time in prayer (v. 23). The disciples sailed without Jesus, not suspecting a storm that later came up on the sea (vv. 23-24). Jesus came walking to them on the water, scaring them greatly (vv. 25-27). Peter then did what no other disciple since has done: he walked on water (v. 25). Jesus allowed him to do so, yet later had to rescue him (vv. 31-32). Once again the Master performed the miracle and the disciples worshiped Him (v. 33).

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Reflection Connection

Reflection Connection: Do you know anyone who has the gift of hospitality? What qualifies them? Explain. How does hospitality serve the Kingdom of God?

Reflection Connection

Reflection Connection: Why was Peter the only disciple that walked on the water? Do you think the others could have but didn't? Should we focus on Peter's sinking or his walking? Explain.



Golden Greek Nugget

Jesus allowed Peter to walk out on the water with Him (v. 29), but as Peter saw the winds and waves, he began to sink. Jesus then gently questioned Peter pertaining to his “doubt.” The word Jesus used of Peter here is used only one other time in the New Testament and that is also in Matthew (28:17). Some doubted Jesus’ resurrection. The word comes from a Greek term meaning “two times” and was used in the ancient world of hesitating between two different perceptions or opinions. Peter saw the miracle first hand but hesitated—doubted—because of the wind and waves. Jesus wondered why Peter focused more on the things surrounding him than on Jesus, who obviously controlled those very things.

Wrap Up

We began this chapter with the tragic story of how a conscience dies out of ruin. Sin ruins everything it touches. But all hope does not vanish. Jesus is Heaven’s remedy for a ruined conscience. We see the power of Jesus Christ as He heals the sick, and meets the needs of every person with whom He engages. If only the world could know Jesus Christ is the remedy they need. If only the church could understand that the world will never know if we do not tell them.

