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## *The Gospel According to Matthew*

### *The Death of John the Baptist and the Wicked Man's Fear*

**March 24, 2019**

**Sermon Text:** Matt 14:1-12

**Scripture Reading:** 2 Kings 7:3-20

Pro 28:1 The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.

This morning we come to the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's Gospel where we read of the martyrdom of John the Baptist. I particularly want us to consider a very encouraging theme of Scripture found here and numbers of other places – *that the wicked fear and flee when no one is even pursuing them.*

First however I want to show you an

example of a widespread plague of false teaching that is what we could call a kind of spiritual “pandemic.” It is in most every church and it is a false gospel that the Apostle Paul carefully warned us against:

Gal 3:1-7 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. (2) Let me ask you only this: **Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?** (3) **Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?** (4) Did you suffer so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain? (5) Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith-- (6) just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"? (7) Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

And again:

Gal 5:16-25 **But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.** (17) For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (18) **But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.** (19) Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, (20) idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, (21) envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (24) And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (25) **If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.**

And in Romans as well:

Rom 8:12-17 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. (13) For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (14) For all who are led by the Spirit of

God are sons of God. (15) For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (16) The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, (17) and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Now, what is THE power, THE dynamic in the Christian by which we conquer sin? By which we put to death the deeds of this sinful flesh we still have with us? THE SPIRIT! The Holy Spirit resides in us. He has made us new creations. He is leading us. As we follow His leading, we put to death the deeds of the flesh. All who do not have the Spirit are trying in some other way to deal with the flesh – and they lose every single time.

Now, this vital doctrine which every Christian absolutely **MUST** know clearly, *is being typically denied in the churches today*. Unregenerate teachers and church members crave to hear that by their own doings they can please God. That is to say, they want a religion that assures them that by works of law-keeping, they can conquer sin and earn merit with the Lord. This is the plague of our day in the churches.

Let me give you an example.

It is no secret by now that I am no fan of CCEF (Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation). That group has been cranking out books and booklets and conferences for a long time now. In past years before we wised up, we used their material here in our church. Listen now to a fellow named J. Alasdair Groves (M.Div., Westminster Theological Seminary) who is the executive director for the New England branch of CCEF and is the director of CCEF's School of Biblical Counseling). People see these credentials and then they just eat up most anything that such people write.

Now, I get criticized frequently for being critical of these kind of people and what they are teaching. "These people are so godly, so wise...how dare you speak so negatively about them publicly." That kind of thing. And it was I am sure the same in Paul's day. These false teachers came into churches after Paul had been there and of them he writes:

Gal 4:16-17 Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? (17) They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.

Keeping in mind then the words of the Apostle Paul regarding *the Spirit in the*

*Christian as THE power by which we put to death sin*, listen to what this fellow wrote very recently in an article at the [crossway.org/articles](http://crossway.org/articles) sight:

### What Can We Do?

Thankfully we aren't doomed to endlessly lose our tempers! God promises to work in the hearts of those who love him. He does not merely change our behavior, but also transforms us to "will," to desire, according to his good pleasure ([Phil. 2:13](#)). The more God changes our desires to mirror what he desires,

--the more our anger will be rightly directed at true evils (rather than the self-centeredness that naturally drives our anger without his transforming intervention);

--and paired with that, the more we'll trust his ways of achieving what is good. No matter how right we are about the issue at hand, love for God resists the temptation to give our anger the reins. Instead, godly anger seeks restoration and protection for those who have been wronged without vengeance, cruelty, insult or any other form of returning evil for evil.

For those who find their temper to be a special problem, let me offer three brief suggestions:

#### What Were You Wanting?

When you've lost your temper, ask yourself what you were wanting. It's amazing how much you can learn about your desires and the underlying motives when you simply slow down and consider what desire was being thwarted. Anger is always driven by desire—the better you understand your desires, the better you'll understand how, why, when and where you'll lose your temper next time and be able to prepare for challenging situations.

And take heart. The simple fact that you are even saying "Help! I keep losing my temper!" should give you great hope. Far too many angry people don't realize they are angry at all. They just "know" they are "right" and everyone else is "wrong." The more you see and deal with your anger's underlying desires, the more you'll be equipped to value and pursue the right things in the heat of the moment....

#### Love Deeply

Ultimately, our hope isn't simply in exploring our problematic underlying desires. The only true way to reduce

the problem of your temper is to actually increasingly value and cherish bringing good and blessing to those you love. Your biggest goal is not to understand yourself (as much as this helps!), but is rather to be altogether less focused on yourself and your desires. Instead, God would have you more focused on the good of those you love around you. The more your heart desires blessing for the people around you rather than your own comfort, reputation, etc., the less you will be prone to lose your temper when you don't get what you want (and are sure you deserve) in any sudden moment.

One way to cultivate this is to daily spend a couple minutes praying [Philippians 4:8](#) for those with whom you are most in danger of losing your temper. Pray for God to grow whatever is noble, right, lovely, pure, etc. in them and pray that you will more deeply appreciate who he has made them to be.

#### Repent Thoughtfully

Get serious about repenting to the people you hurt. I'm not talking about extravagant promises to never be angry again. Instead, pray for God's protection against self-righteous anger in your heart and then go ask people you've harmed to help you

understand how you've harmed them. Then really listen to the answer. Express sorrow for how you've hurt them (not just the fact that you did something "wrong" in some abstract sense).

It will be excruciatingly difficult at times, but it will give your conscience an enormous amount of ammunition with which to guard you against further outbursts. (And remember, this isn't about you demanding forgiveness—by definition you may never demand it as it must be freely chosen).

It may also sometimes be helpful to share your awareness of the problem in your desires: "I'm sorry that I let my desire for a peaceful evening control me so much that I yelled at you when you tried to talk to me about our schedule for the week. I know that must have hurt you and been frustrating too as you're trying to plan for the next few days. Will you forgive me?"

Gaining control of your temper by taming your tongue (and the hundred ways your actions can speak louder than words) is no easy task. But no application of the call to love your neighbor and honor Jesus Christ is more urgent and important.

Thank God that in our every need he gives more grace ([James 4:6](#))!

Now, notice how pious and "godly" all of this sounds on the surface. Love deeply. Ask yourself some questions. Repent thoughtfully. Surely this is a wise Christian teacher and counselor. How can anyone be critical of what he is saying?

Well, this is the nature of the deception. We must always, always, always compare what we are being taught with what the Bible says. Here is a man claiming to be an authority on victory over sin. What is his formula for such victory? Well:

*Never once in his article does he make mention of the Spirit in the Christian leading us into righteousness and putting to death the deeds of the flesh. Not once!*

I know how CCEF and their followers will respond to this criticism. "But he did acknowledge God in this process. Of course he knows the Spirit is in the Christian." But these are groundless objections. The fact is that his formula for a Christian dealing with sin is nothing more than what any non-Christian secular counselor would tell and unregenerate person:

Do this, do this, don't do that.

And what we must be wise to is that this is a false gospel. It is the very kind of false teaching that Paul pronounced

anathema (Gal 1). It is this:

Gal 3:10 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."

Make no mistake, what this kind of false teaching dressed up in such "nice, pious, kind, merciful men and language is in reality filling the churches with unsaved men and women, creating dens of robbers where evil can hide. And THIS is why we are seeing all of the evil happening in local churches today. This is the reason for the headlines. A false gospel that claims to create people whom God accepts because of their own works.

And probably nowhere is this false gospel more rampant than in the "Christian" counseling movement. Everyone is good. We like everyone. We just need to help them by *education* so that they can learn to be good. That is the essence of it. Over and over again, we are seeing it. No matter how the person is habitually living, they are assumed to be a Christian or at least *capable of pleasing God*. They just need to be educated and taught to understand themselves better and to do right. Is that what the Lord says?

Rom 8:7-8 For the mind that is set on

the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. (8) Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

You must be born again. You must be born again. And if you are born again, the Spirit of Christ is in you, leading you. Follow Him and then you will put to death the deeds of the flesh *by the Spirit*. Any other way of dealing with the flesh is a false gospel, a means of works by which we will always fail.

### The Wicked Flee When No One is Chasing Them.

Well, I am only going to make a few comments about Matthew 14:1-12 and then we will look more carefully at it next time. If you are a Christian, there is great encouragement for you here. If you are dead in your sin and apart from Christ, here is the explanation for much of your behavior:

Mat 14:1-12 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, (2) **and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead;** that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."

(3) For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, (4) because John had

been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." (5) And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.

(6) But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, (7) so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. (8) Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." (9) And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given.

(10) He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, (11) and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. (12) And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.

Herod was afraid. He was afraid of something that was not true. He heard about Jesus and His mighty works and what happened? In his fear he embraces this crazy notion that John the Baptist had come back to life! This is a perfect example of this Scripture:

Pro 28:1 The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.

We are going to end our service this morning singing Psalm 53. In that Psalm we find:

Psa 53:5 There they are, in great terror, where there is no terror! For God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you; you put them to shame, for God has rejected them.

It is the Lord working this terror in them you see. We saw it earlier in the Scripture reading from 2 Kings 7. Rumors that John the Baptist had been raised apparently swept through the people:

Mat 16:13-14 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (14) And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

The wicked enemies of the Lord are *afraid*. They know Christ is King even if they refuse to confess Him as such. Suppressed down deeply in their minds is this knowledge that one day they must stand before Him. They are afraid and this fear most probably explains more of their behavior that we might realize.

In contrast, Christian, notice what the Lord says about you:

*“...but the righteous are bold as a lion.”*

Christ gives us this courage. He has dealt with our sin and justified us. He has cleansed our conscience and removed our guilt. What a great contrast there will be on that Day when He comes again. We will see Him and love Him – we even pray that He will come soon. Not so the wicked:

Rev 6:15-17 Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, (16) calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, (17) for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"