(Matthew 14:5 vs. Mark 6:20)

Question:

In Matthew 14:5, it says that Herod wanted to kill John the Baptist, but in Mark 6:20, we read that Herod feared John, respected him, and even protected him. Are these two Gospel accounts contradicting each other?

Matthew 14:3–5 (NIV):

> “Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife,
> for John had been saying to him: ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’
> Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.”

This passage highlights Herod’s initial reaction: he *wanted* to kill John, but he was held back by fear of public backlash. The crowds revered John as a prophet, and Herod’s political position could be threatened if he acted openly against such a respected figure.

Mark 6:17–20 (NIV):

> “For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’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 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 he liked to listen to him.”

Here, we get more nuance. Herod initially imprisoned John at the urging of Herodias, but over time, he developed a measure of respect and even admiration for John. Though John’s words disturbed him, Herod enjoyed listening to him. The passage indicates a change of heart at least temporarily.

Is There a Contradiction?

No, these accounts are not contradictory, but complementary. The Gospels are presenting different moments in Herod’s evolving relationship with John:

- Matthew 14:5 refers to Herod’s initial intention a reaction driven by anger and

pride after being publicly rebuked.

- Mark 6:20 describes Herod's subsequent internal conflict after having time to reflect and hear John's messages, he grows fearful and protective of him.
- Herod's heart was divided: torn between his sin and his conscience. This mirrors the biblical truth that sinners often waver under conviction drawn toward the truth, yet unwilling to fully submit to it (cf. James 1:8, *"A double minded man is unstable in all his ways."* KJV).

The Role of Herodias:

The Gospels are also clear that Herodias, not Herod, was the one constantly scheming to have John killed.

Mark 6:19 (NIV):

> "So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to."

Herodias represents unrepentant sin resentful and vengeful toward the truth. She couldn't stand being confronted by John's message of righteousness and judgment.

Herod’s Moral Weakness and the Trap of Oaths:

Eventually, Herod was manipulated into executing John during his birthday banquet. Herodias used her daughter (traditionally known as Salome) to request John’s head.

Matthew 14:6–10 (NIV):

> “On Herod’s birthday, the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much
> that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked.
> Prompted by her mother, she said, ‘Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.’
> The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted
> and had John beheaded in the prison.”

Herod did not act from personal conviction, but out of social pressure and fear of losing face. His conscience was overruled by his pride and public image a tragic pattern seen in leaders throughout history.

This highlights the danger of rash vows and valuing human praise over divine approval (cf. John 12:43, *“For they loved human praise more than praise from God.”* NIV).

1. Sin hardens the heart.

Herod’s initial guilt gave way to compromise. Though he respected John, he did not repent. Conviction without repentance is spiritually dangerous (see Hebrews 3:12–13).

2. It is not lawful to divorce and remarry unlawfully.

John’s rebuke to Herod “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” was rooted in Levitical law (Leviticus 18:16; 20:21). Jesus later affirmed this moral principle:

Luke 16:18 (NIV):

> “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Marriage, in God’s eyes, is sacred. Adultery and wrongful unions

are not simply “private matters”; they carry public and spiritual consequences.

3. Fear of man brings a snare.

Herod feared both the people (Matthew 14:5) and his peers (Matthew 14:9), more than he feared God. As Proverbs warns:

Proverbs 29:25 (ESV):

> “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.”

There is no contradiction between Matthew 14:5 and Mark 6:20. Rather, they show different stages of Herod’s internal struggle:

- Initially, he wanted to kill John.
- Later, he feared, respected, and even protected him.
- Ultimately, he succumbed to pride and pressure, ordering John’s execution against his better judgment.

The tragic end of John the Baptist is a sobering reminder that the cost of proclaiming truth is often high but so is the cost of

ignoring it.

As we consider this narrative, may we be like John bold in proclaiming truth, regardless of the cost and not like Herod, torn between conviction and compromise.

Maranatha the Lord is coming!
(1 Corinthians 16:22)

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