

## Welcome

Anyone else ever have awkward family reunions? Growing up, my dad's family got together every Thanksgiving at my grandpa's church. We'd feast around 11 am, all my grandpa's brothers and sisters and their descendants - usually some 150 of us. Sometime in the afternoon, a pickup football game would start outside and run basically until it was time for dinner around 5.

By the time I was in college, the reunion had shrunk (as reunions tend to). But my aunts and uncles and cousins all still gathered. And though the football game was a lot smaller, we still played. By the time I was in college, my little brother wasn't so little anymore. He was a three-sport athlete in high school, including football. And it's possible I was feeling a little self-conscious playing against him during this particular football game.

So when I tackled him to stop a touchdown one play, it's possible I might have celebrated a little *too* hard. My dad (who was also on the other team), told me to calm down, and when I refused, he decided to teach me a lesson on the next play. But he missed the tackle, I scored on him, and I doubled down on the trash talk and bad sportsmanship.

It was one of those moments when everyone could *feel* the tone of the game shift. It wasn't about family having fun anymore. Suddenly, it was about two big egos both trying to be the biggest man on the field.

Needless to say, the game dissolved pretty quickly after that, and dinner was way more awkward than usual. At least for me.

That moment was emblematic for my dad and me because the real problem was how stubborn we both are. And it's not just him and me. My brother is the same way, and so is my father's father. In fact, if you look back through our family tree, it's pretty clear there's some kind of gene for hard-headedness that runs in the men in my family. And it's caused plenty of problems a lot more severe than just a ruined football game.

Today, I want to talk about the sins we inherit from our families. The deep patterns of pain and brokenness we sometimes can't even see because they just look normal to us.

And we'll see how we can find freedom from those legacies of sin... but more than that, we'll see how we can leave legacies of life and faithfulness for those who come after us

## Message

We're in a series called *Empathy for the Devil*. We're meeting six of the worst villains in the Bible and asking, "Why did they do what they did?" We're not looking to apologize or make excuses for them. We simply want to practice some empathy - put ourselves in their shoes. Because ultimately, we'll discover we're more like them than we thought, and reflecting on their sin will illuminate the seeds of those same sins in our own lives.

[Scripture Slide 1] Today, we're going to meet another evil queen - in fact, the Bible styles her as Jezebel 2.0. Her name is Herodias. Turn with me to Mark 6.

I'm going to warn you up front: this all gets a little bit confusing because Herodias is the granddaughter of Herod the Great. And Herod loved naming his kids after himself. So pretty much everyone in this story is named Herod something and they're all related. There's more incest than Game of Thrones.

Where we join the story, Herodias is married to Herod Antipas (we're just going to call him Antipas). Antipas is one of Herod the Great's sons. After Herod the Great died, Rome chopped his kingdom into four pieces and gave them to his sons (they were called 'Tetrarchs', which means 'Ruler of a Fourth' because the Romans were jerks). Antipas ruled over the quarter that included Galilee, where Jesus and his cousin John the Baptizer were first active.

Antipas and Herodias were both previously married. Both divorced their royal spouses to marry each other. All this matters because John the Baptizer was sent ahead of Jesus, the Messiah, to prepare Israel for his coming. John called God's people to turn away from their sin and return to God. And because Antipas and Herodias were rulers, they weren't exempt from John's criticism. He focused specifically on their divorce and remarriage to each other, insisting they had turned from God, accusing them of breaking God's laws.

Herodias was furious. She hated John. But Antipas was afraid - he saw John as God's prophet, so he wouldn't kill John. Finally, Herodias got her husband to at least arrest John. But that wasn't quite enough. Mark tells us what happens next:

Herodias's chance finally came on Herod's birthday. He gave a party for his high government officials, army officers, and the leading citizens of Galilee. Then his daughter, also named Herodias, came in and performed a dance that greatly pleased Herod and his guests. "Ask me for anything you like," the king said to the girl, "and I will give it to you." He even vowed, "I will give you whatever you ask, up to half my kingdom!"

She went out and asked her mother, "What should I ask for?"  
Her mother told her, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist!"

So the girl hurried back to the king and told him, "I want the head of John the Baptist, right now, on a tray!"

Then the king deeply regretted what he had said; but because of the vows he had made in front of his guests, he couldn't refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner to the prison to cut off John's head and bring it to him. The soldier beheaded John in the prison, brought his head on a tray, and gave it to the girl, who took it to her mother. When John's disciples heard what had happened, they came to get his body and buried it in a tomb. -- Mark 6:21-29

So Herodias kills John the Baptizer, using a plot that would make TV writers jealous. And this is why we see her as manipulative and evil. Mark presents John as Elijah come back from the dead. Everyone then knew Elijah's archnemesis was Jezebel, the evil queen, so Mark gives his Elijah returned a Jezebel returned. Herodias is Evil Queen 2.0.

It'd be nice if it were that easy - Herodias is evil. John's story needed a villain and fortunately, one had the throne. But it's not quite so simple as that.

Yes, Herodias was manipulative. Yes, she refused to listen to John. But that behavior didn't emerge out of nowhere. We should pause and ask where Herodias learned to manipulate, why she found it so easy to ignore John's voice.

And if you were as exhausted trying to keep up with her family tree as I was sharing about it, then it's not hard to guess. Herodias was shaped by her family. She learned from them never to let your guard down, to always be ready to fight for what you want, not to expect allies anywhere.

From the day she was born, Herodias was a pawn shuffled around a board by her grandfather, her parents, her uncles. Herodias learned you can't trust anyone, that not only is family not a safe space, but family might actually be the *least* safe place of all.

Like all of us, Herodias learned how to deal with conflict from her family. And in Herodias' family, you schemed, plotted and killed to get your way. For her, that was normal. It was even *good*.

From the outside, it's pretty obvious Herodias' path *wasn't* good. But when we pause for a minute and consider our own families, it's easy to see why she would think that way. We all learn to fight from our families. We all learn how to see ourselves from our families. We all learn how to see others from our families. And it doesn't matter how wrong our families are, those perspectives and habits seem pretty normal to us.

The theological term for this is generational sin. Take, for instance, what God says in the 10 Commandments:

I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. -- Exodus 20:5

When I sin, God lays those sins on my children and *their* children to the third and fourth generation.

Woah.

My sin doesn't just affect me. It affects my whole family. Sin is a legacy we pass on to our kids and they pass on to their kids.

This is obvious in Herodias. She was the very embodiment of her grandfather, Herod the Great, the king of scheming, manipulation and deception. And she passed that on to her daughter, who was caught up in her mother's schemes and plots.

I first became aware of this aspect of sin as a teenager, and it freaked me out. My parents divorced when I was young, and I worried that I too was doomed to a life of failed relationships. After all, isn't that what the Bible says? That the children inherit the parents' sins?

I raged at this. It's not fair! I didn't choose divorce... my parents did. Why should I be the one to suffer for it? You might feel the same way. You look at a parent who has an anger problem or an addiction. A parent who only knows how to criticize or walked out on you.

And first, you rage. It's not fair. I shouldn't have to suffer for their choices.

And then, maybe, you get a little afraid. Because you see some of the same habits in yourself. You lose your temper. Or carry a deep sense of shame. Or can't get away from that substance or behavior. Or you find harsh words come much easier than the kind ones do.

It's not fair!

Well, you're right. It's not fair. And Israel didn't think it was fair either. In fact, after the Exile, when Babylon destroyed Israel for their repeated unfaithfulness, the Israelites raised this very point with God's prophet, Ezekiel. They said, "Look, we get that our parents deserved this. But we don't! We've been faithful to God. We haven't done what our parents did. So why should we suffer?"

Here's what God said to them through the prophet:

'What?' you ask. 'Doesn't the child pay for the parent's sins?' No! For if the child does what is just and right and keeps my decrees, that child will surely live. The person who sins is the one who will die. The child will not be punished for the parent's sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child's sins. Righteous people will be rewarded for their own righteous behavior, and wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness.

But if wicked people turn away from all their sins and begin to obey my decrees and do what is just and right, they will surely live and not die. All their past sins will be forgotten, and they will live because of the righteous things they have done. -- Ezekiel 18:19-22

God says, Look: the person who sins is the one who is guilty. Guilt isn't hereditary. And in fact, if the people who *have* sinned turn to me, I'll forgive them and restore them.

Good news! We're not accountable for the sins of our parents. Only for our sins.

Okay, so which is it? Do we inherit our parents sins or not?

Well, it's both, with an important caveat: we inherit *patterns* of sin from our parents. We learn what 'normal' is from our families, even when the 'normal' is actually sinful and distorted.

But at the end of the day, we are accountable for our own actions. We choose life or death, sin or justice.

It means we're not destined to follow the sinful footsteps of our families. We can choose to walk the path of flourishing and wholeness.

But that requires that we become part of a different family, a spiritual family. And this is where the Church comes in. From the beginning, Jesus imagined the Church, his followers, as a spiritual family. A little earlier in Mark, Jesus is causing controversy among the religious establishment. It gets so bad that his family shows up to try to convince him to leave off teaching and come back home with them. Mark tells us what happens next:

Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him. They stood outside and sent word for him to come out and talk with them. There was a crowd sitting around Jesus, and someone said, "Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you."

Jesus replied, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then he looked at those around him and said, "Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." -- Mark 3:31-35

If Jesus' words sound harsh to you, imagine how much harsher they sounded to the people listening to his teaching, in a culture where family was even more central than it is for us. But Jesus is illustrating here that his family is in the wrong. They're asking him to abandon his God-given calling. And he won't do that. Instead, he redefines who counts as family - it's those who follow his teachings.

We know that Jesus' family comes around - his brother James becomes a leader in the early church after Jesus' death. So spiritual family doesn't automatically exclude biological family. In the best case, the Church becomes an extended spiritual family, one that embraces our biological families.

Christians have seen the Church as a family from the beginning - we've called each other 'brother' and 'sister' since the first days of the Church. That's not an accident.

In fact, the best way to learn how our families have shaped up to sin is by being around other families who do things differently. Because when we're around other people, our 'normal' suddenly doesn't seem so normal. We see other ways to live, perhaps holier ways to live.

By coming together as the Church, by embracing each other as brothers and sisters in God's family, we begin to learn new habits, new behaviors. We begin to see the sins formed deeply in us and are able to confess them, to learn new habits with our new brothers and sisters. We begin to live holy, whole lives.

And that's very good news for our biological families, too. Because sin is not the only legacy we can leave for our children. Look at the rest of God's promise in the 10 Commandments:

I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands. -- Exodus 20:5-6

Righteousness can be a legacy, too. I know this first-hand, too. If you go far enough back in my family tree, you find a man named Michael Michs, who brought the Moravian Brotherhood Church to North America. And on another branch, you find Paul Life, my great-grandfather, who was a United Methodist pastor (he actually pastored that church where we had our family reunions). Paul consistently pastored churches who were down and out, and I grew up hearing story after story of his love and self-sacrifice for other people.

So in some ways it's no surprise that I ended up pastoring a congregation of people who are constantly looking for ways to serve those who don't have a church home. Because that's a legacy I've inherited from my family. It's evidence of God's goodness and faithfulness passed down generation after generation.

Brothers and sisters, what are the legacies of sin you've inherited from your families? God has brought you here, to this Church, to this spiritual family.

God does not intend you to suffer under the weight of those sins. Here, in this family, you can learn to see the patterns of sin you've inherited. God intends to free you from those sins and give you life.

God does not expect you to pass your sin on to the generations that come after you. God intends for you to pass on a legacy of righteousness, one that will last not a generation or two but for a thousand generations.

### **Communion + Examine**

[Communion Slide] Jesus makes us part of his family.

### **Assignment + Blessing**

Talk with a family member about your generational sins. Talk with a church family member about what has always seemed 'normal' to you, but that you're learning to see differently.