

Sermon for Sunday, August 23, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WHEN A 'BUT' MAKES YOU THE GOAT"

St. Matthew 14:112

Text: "And the king was sorry, but..." St. Matthew 14:9

Our text for this morning says that the king was sorry. I don't suppose there are any more tragic words in the English language than the word, "I'm sorry." I remember reading in the paper once of an incident that happened some years ago. A mother stood at the door waving goodbye to her three children as they started off to school. A driver came around the corner going too fast and lost control of his car. When the accident was all over, the three children lay dead in the street, killed in a moment of carelessness. Every year on the anniversary date of the accident, flowers were delivered to that home--flowers that came from the driver--a driver who could never forget and who, in some small way was trying to say, "I'm sorry." But his sorrow could not bring back three small children and the mother would never know about the flowers. She was in a home for the incurably insane.

Yes, to say, "I'm sorry" may be very important, but sometimes it is not enough. Once I was working with a man who had run around on his wife and done other terrible things. Finally, she could take no more and her love for him died in her heart. When she filed for divorce he awoke to the fact that he really did love her and didn't want to lose her. But it was too late. He kept saying how sorry he was, but his sorrow came too late to rekindle love in her heart. Do you remember how Omar Khayyam put it? He wrote, "The moving finger writes, and having written moves on. Nor all your piety nor wit can lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all your tears wash out a word of it."

Yes, sin leaves its scar and no matter how sorry we might be, the scar remains. When you commit some sinful act, some unkind deed, say some thoughtless word, it can never really be undone and a scar remains.

In our Scripture this morning the Bible tells us that King Herod had John the Baptist put to death and he was sorry about it. The Bible says, "And the King was sorry, but..." Yes, the King's sorrow had a "but" and he made himself a goat. Undoubtedly he must have spent many a sleepless night wishing he had not acted as he did. Undoubtedly he must have often wished he could have undone the terrible thing he did. As a matter of fact, he was so eager for his sinful deed to be undone that when he heard of the fame of Jesus, he was so eager to believe that somehow his deed had been undone that he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist, he has been raised from the dead." Have you ever had that kind of experience? Have you ever done something so bad, so dreadful, that you are ready to believe that somehow it has all been made right?

Many of our young people have already left for college and some will be leaving soon. But let me say one thing to all of our young people this morning. Be very careful about what you do with your life. It is a terrible thing to have to live with something all of your life that you are sorry for, but can never undo. If you cheat in a course, steal from a friend, have an affair with someone, you will never forget it. It will burn in your conscience like a fire and until the day you die you will always remember it. Not long ago I read the book entitled, Collision Course. It is the story of the sinking of the luxury liner, the Andrea

Doria. The captain of the Andria Doria did not take all of the precautions he should have as his ship sped through the fog with hundreds of people aboard. When it was all over and his ship rested on the bottom of the sea, the captain never sailed again. He said, "When I was a boy, I always loved the sea. Now I hate it and never want to see it again." His career ended in tragedy and sorrow. If he could have done it over, I'm sure he would have acted differently. But his sorrow and regret will never restore life to dead men and women and children, nor will a proud ship ever sail again. So be careful! Be very careful of what you do.

Did you ever wonder why Herod did what he did? If we could understand why he acted as he did, perhaps it would help us in dealing with sin in our lives. Notice in the first place that Herod was already living in sin. Herod had arrested John because he was living with his brother's wife and John had told him it was not lawful according to Jewish law. Isn't it a fact that sin breeds sin? Recently one of our local papers carried the story of a young woman hooked on drugs. Because of her expensive habit she turned to prostitution, to stealing, to lying, and to any other means that would provide money to buy a "fix". She abandoned her husband, her home, her children, and all of her family for her sin.

Haven't we found this to be true in our own lives? Our sin entangles us in a web that leads to other sin. Well, that is what happened to Herod and it happens to us, too. The second thing we notice about Herod is his inability to admit he was wrong. Do you have that problem? I know I do. It was Herod's birthday and his wife's daughter danced at his birthday party. He was so pleased with her dancing he promised to give her whatever she asked. Being instructed by her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist. And the Bible says, "and the king was sorry, but..." He didn't have the courage to admit he had made a bad promise and back down from it. No, he just couldn't admit he was wrong.

Don't you find it hard to say that you are wrong about something and that you will have to reverse yourself? Have you ever made a promise to your children and then need to back down? It is hard, isn't it? Or have you ever made a commitment to friends or business associates and then discover you really need to reverse yourself? It is hard to do, isn't it? I remember reading recently of a man who put his money into a business deal only to discover that he had invested in something illegal. He had two choices: either stay in and make a profit or pull out and lose his money. What would you have done in those circumstances? He chose to stay in. And when the thing was exposed publically, he could not face up to prison or to the shame he had brought on his family, so he took his own life. Yes, when we have done wrong, it is so difficult to admit our error and to say we are sorry. Some of us this morning are involved in things we know are wrong. Some of us are carrying resentment or hostility or other bad attitudes. Are we at a point that we can say we are sorry without adding, "but"? Are we at a point we can admit our sin and turn away from it? If we aren't, we will always end up making ourselves the goat.

So Herod was already involved in sin and he was unable to admit he was wrong. Notice thirdly that the Bible tells us that Herod let his actions be determined by what others would think. Do you ever do that? Do you ever let what you say or do be determined by what other people will think? I know I am guilty of that. And that's what happened to Herod. The Bible tells us that "the king was sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given." Who do you think attended the King's birthday party? Why, all the important people of the whole country. Herod didn't want to be embarrassed before all those people by going back on his word. So, even though he knew what he was doing was wrong, he

didn't want to change because of what his friends might think.

How often do we do that? Isn't it a fact that even what we wear or where we eat out or the places we go will be determined in large part by what other people will think? Does your spouse ever embarrass you in public? Why? Isn't it because of what other people will think? When you were getting ready to come to church this morning, weren't you careful about how you would look because of what other people will think?

But let me tell you a secret. When we get to heaven and stand before God, what other people think isn't going to be important! No, the only thing that will be important is what God thinks. George Orwell has written a book entitled 1984. In the story, the average man has been reduced to a mindless robot, trapped in a world where love is forbidden by government decree, hatred is aroused against one's will, and two-way television has made a privacy a punishable crime. The state is called "Big Brother" and everywhere are posters saying "Big Brother is Watching You!" Here, in the extreme, is the pressure to conform, to be like everyone else, and to do and say and think and act as everyone else does. But Jesus says, "whoever heard my word and does it, is like a man who built his house on a rock." You see, in eternity, God isn't going to be very interested if we did as our friends did, he is going to be interested if we did as Jesus did.

The fourth thing I would like for you to notice is what Herod did with his sin. He ordered that the body be buried and the disciples of John came and the Bible says they "took the body and buried it." Do you ever try to do that with your sin? I think most of us do. We try to bury our sin. We try to forget it and to put it down into the deep recesses of the unconscious mind. It really doesn't work very well, does it? You see, there are two things about buried sin. First, it doesn't stay hidden from us. Instead, in the sewers of our souls it is still at work, spewing out poison into our hearts and lives. Second, it isn't hidden from God. Our Scripture for this morning says that the disciples of John came and took his body and buried it. But that isn't all it says. It goes on to add, "and they went and told Jesus". Yes, God knew. And though Herod did his best to bury his sin, still Jesus knew. And that is true for the sin in your life and mind. It isn't really hidden from us and it certainly isn't hidden from God.

Well, one way or the other, all of us this morning are sinners. Herod's problem was he was sorry, but... And that made him the goat. Do you know what kind of sinner God wants? He wants a sinner who is sorry without any buts. Isn't that what the Bible says? The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John 1:9) So the first thing to do with sin is to confess it to God. But Jesus says something more. In Luke 13:5 he says, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." To repent means to turn from our sin. It means to put it away, to turn away from it, to walk away from it. Are you doing that with the sin in your life? Yes--to be sorry for our sins and to turn away from them: that's what God wants.

Jesus once told about the day of judgement(Matthew 28:31ff) and how the people would be separated as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Jesus said the sheep would be on God's right hand and the goats on the left. To those on the left, God will say, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire." Do you know the difference on that day between the sheep and the goats? Well, the sheep will be those who were sorry for their sin, who confessed it and found forgiveness, and who repented of their sin--who turned away from it. The goats will be those who were sorry for their sins, but...

When you get to judgement day will you be on God's right hand or the left? Will you be a sheep or a goat? You see, that all depends on whether or not there is a "but" when you say you are sorry to God.