

Sermons on Matthew

His Blood Be on Us

Matthew 27:15-26

With Study Questions

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Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished. ¹⁶ And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. ¹⁷ Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" ¹⁸ For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy. ¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him."²⁰ But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. ²¹ The governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They said, "Barabbas!" ²² Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" *They* all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!" ²³ Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!"

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Introduction

In the third chapter of Acts we read of Peter and John going to the temple and encountering a man in his forties (Acts 4:22) who had been lame since birth (Acts 3:2). The man, who was brought daily to the temple, was asking for charity. As Peter and John were entering the temple, Peter told the man to look at them. The man thought he was going to get some charity. Peter went way beyond charity.

Peter said, “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.”
(Acts 3:6)

The man did walk. In fact he stood up and entered the temple, walking, leaping and praising God (Acts 3:8). As the people marveled, Peter reminded them that it was through the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that this man was healed. It was the God who glorified “His Servant Jesus” who healed the man. Then Peter reminded them of something they probably wished to forget.

Jesus was the one they had denied in the presence of Pilate (Acts 3:13). That they preferred to set free a murderer rather than Jesus (Acts 3:14). Needless to say, Peter and John were arrested. The rulers, elders, scribes, Annas, Caiaphas *et al.* once again convened, not to honor Peter and John for healing a lame beggar, but to threaten them to keep their mouths shut (Acts 4:17).

It was in that context that Peter and John “**answered and said to them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge’**” (Acts 4:19). They were threatened a little more and were set free, joined their own companions and prayed a prayer together – “**with one accord**” (Acts 4:24) – perhaps similar to our responsive reading or corporate reciting of the Ten Commandments.

The only actual request made in the prayer is for boldness in their words as they continue to perform those signs and wonders conferred upon them by Jesus. We shouldn’t view Peter or John as superhuman. They were men with fears and weakness like other men. They had seen what these horrible leaders had done to Jesus and now the same threats were aimed toward them.

Prior to the one request in the prayer is the acknowledgment of the power and attributes of the One to whom the prayer is made. They were praying to the God “**who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them**” (Acts 4:24). They were praying to the God who foretold of the rulers gathering together “**Against the Lord and against His Christ**” (Acts 4:26). But more than merely foretelling, they were praying to the God who had “**predestined**” (*proorisen* – to have determined beforehand – Acts 4:28) these events.

For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done (Acts 4:27, 28).

Christians can take courage in the face of their adversaries – in whatever form they may come (persecution, back-biting friends, illness, frustrations or discouragement) because they know that their Father in heaven ordains whatsoever comes to pass. It is our Father in heaven who **“works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11).**

So let us view this passage, among other things, as a lesson in God’s sovereign control over all events – even the ones that come from the hands of sinful men. Let us seek to follow the example of Jesus, by seeking to understand what Jesus knew.

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ²² “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”; ²³ who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed *Himself* to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Our true inner peace and contentment, especially in the face of trials and the temptation of strike back, is that we have a Father in heaven who judges righteously.

Let’s take a little closer look at the actual event.

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished. ¹⁶ And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. ¹⁷ Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” ¹⁸ For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy (Matthew 27:15-18).

A Mockery of Justice

The whole idea of releasing a prisoner as part of a festival reveals to what level of mockery the system of justice had descended. Would we set a murderer free to celebrate Christmas? It is the role of the judge to judge. He has no authority to grant an unjust clemency. Many innocent people have suffered through a system of justice where the leaders sought to play the role of God by setting evil people free in the name of leniency.

If there is a just and observable case to be made for leniency, then let it be made. But it is highly damaging to either convict the innocent with insufficient witness or release the convicted on a whim. Who, after all, paid for the sins of Barabbas that he might be set free? If we fail to respect justice, we will certainly fail to understand the cross; for God can only justly forgive sinners (1 John 1:9) because the justice of God was met by Christ on the cross.

Barabbas

Barabbas was an interesting selection by Pilate. He was notorious—a treasonous, murdering felon (Luke 23:19; Mark 15:7; John 18:40). It is not too difficult to speculate that Pilate, finding no fault in Jesus (nor did Herod—Luke 23:15), and knowing they had handed Him over because of envy, that they would most certainly free Jesus rather than Barabbas. It would be like choosing to free Charles Manson or a terrorist over some white collar business criminal or discontent political protestor. Were they so darkened that mere envy could produce such evil?

But in a twisted sense they were correct in selecting to free Barabbas rather than Jesus. Barabbas, no matter what criminal actions he would later perpetrate, would not demolish their corrupt culture the way Jesus would. There is nothing more destructive to the plans of a world seeking to advance sin and crime than a Christ free to speak as He will. And Jesus will speak as He will. Death itself could not stop Him; nor could any power in or under heaven.

All the selection of Barabbas actually accomplished was setting yet another example before us of how Jesus would suffer in the place of vile sinners. He who had always done that which was pleasing in the eyes of His Father (John 8:29) would remain imprisoned and be executed while a known and notorious criminal would be set free.

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him."²⁰ But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.²¹ The governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They said, "Barabbas!"²² Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" *They* all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!"²³ Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!"²⁴ When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather *that* a tumult was rising, he took water and washed *his* hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see *to it*."²⁵ And all the people answered and said, "His blood *be* on us and on our children."²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered *Him* to be crucified (Matthew 27:19-26).

Pilate's Wife

It's difficult to comment on Pilate's wife. Was her dream of a supernatural nature as with Nebuchadnezzar or was it standard dream that you or I might have? We don't know. What we do know is that she had a disturbing dream about Jesus and somehow drew the conclusion that He was a just (*dikaio* – righteous) man.

Since that is all we actually know, I think it is safe to draw the conclusion that Matthew records this as yet another declaration of the Christ's innocence in the face of treachery. Pilate doesn't heed her suggestion.

Persuaded Multitude

We are then introduced to a persuaded multitude. The chief priest and elders are able to persuade the multitude to do their bidding. I have never been part of a mob but I understand that it is a powerful force. I have, on the other hand, been the victim of well-marketed fashions and

ideas. I wore tie-dye shirts and bell-bottoms. I had long hair, wore fat ties and shirts with gigantic lapels.

I thought rock stars and comedians were the smartest people on earth and my entire life revolved around the influence of these people on me and my friends. And all the while I thought I was a non-conformist. The Latin phrase that best described me was the following: “Protestatio non valet contra factum” – “In vain does he protest against the deed which at the same time he perpetrates.”

We, quite frankly, see the similar weakness in today’s infatuation with tattoos, funny hair, sagging pants, etc. These may be relatively harmless, but they reveal how easily we follow suit. Today’s biggest perpetrator of influence may be the demand of the academic community to submit to their authority and dubious conclusions without question.¹

In our current text we see the danger of submitting to, perhaps, the darkest of all societies – an apostate clergy. It was their responsibility to serve God’s people by pronouncing sound judgments (Deuteronomy 17:8, 9). But here they serve the devil by inciting a mob.

Pilate offers them either Jesus or Barabbas, and they want to release Barabbas. He then asks what they would have him do with Jesus – as if he just can’t understand their choice. They want Jesus crucified!

We hear about people doing amazingly awful things to each other – things I choose not to mention for the sake of the youngsters. But it forces me to ask myself if I could ever do such a thing. It seems impossible. But we should never underestimate the power of the sinful nature – especially if it gives the devil a foothold (Ephesians 4:27); when God not only grants them to follow their sinful desires, but also as with Saul sends an evil spirit (1 Samuel 16:14, 15, 16, 23), or as with Abimelech and the men of Shechem:

Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech (Judges 9:23).

It could be that this crowd, subdued by ungodly leadership and sinful hearts found themselves in the same condition as Judas when Satan entered into him, at which time Jesus said **“What you do, do quickly” (John 13:27)**. It is not beyond the power of God to grant supernatural evil

¹ As my column published on 9/11/08 sought to bring to light.

to those committed to ungodliness. There is little doubt that the chief priests and elders were thrilled at the response of the crowd. Little did they realize that God, for His own just, holy and glorious reasons (in this case the redemption of the world in Christ) ordained that evil would have its way with them. They want Jesus crucified.

There's No Talking to These People

Again, Pilate seems confused. **"What evil has He done?"** seems to be the obvious question. But there was no talking to these people. Instead of strengthening their argument they raised their voice. The Greek text shows their cry was one word, "Crucify."

Never underestimate the value of seeking to be able to explain yourself. A lack of willingness to seek to explain your position comes from (not always wittingly) people who don't want to be forced to be reasonable. There are numerous brands of theology who have hopped this ship of irrationalism. Studying up on one of them, they expressed their Christianity in the metaphor of a dancer who danced a beautiful and expressive dance. When asked what the dance meant she responded, "If I could put it into words, I wouldn't have to dance it."

Friends, the devil is the father of lies (John 8:44). It is really quite clever, but if the position is not spoken clearly, it is difficult to reveal it as the truth or a lie.

When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather *that* a tumult was rising, he took water and washed *his* hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see *to it*." ²⁵ And all the people answered and said, "His blood *be on us and on our children*." ²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered *Him* to be crucified (Matthew 27:24-26).

The Blood of Jesus

Pilate, seeing that a riot was brewing, in an effort to somehow absolve himself, takes water and washes his hands symbolically displaying his innocence – something he borrowed from the Jewish law (Deuteronomy 21:6, 7).

But shirking his responsibility as a ministry of God's justice hardly exonerates him. **"Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves" (Romans 14:22)**. Sins of negligence are sins nonetheless (Proverbs 24:11). The crowd obliges Pilate's effort by taking full responsibility. Perhaps the scariest words in Scripture are **"His blood be on us and on our children."** This prophecy would come true some 40 (or so) years later when upon them (and their children) would come **"all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah" (Matthew 23:35)**. And the parallel passage is equally disturbing; a passage where, in my opinion, we see an example of a people taking upon themselves the mark of the beast.

But they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar!"¹⁶ Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. Then they took Jesus and led Him away (John 19:15, 16).

They preferred the judgment of God to the grace of God. They preferred an earthly tyrant to a loving, wise and benevolent Father. The madness of this crowd had reached its apex.

There may not be a single religious phrase that, depending on context, can mean the exact opposite thing as much as speaking of the blood of Christ being upon us.

In this context, having the blood of Christ on them meant to take responsibility for putting Jesus, an innocent man, to death. It was a vow made in history and it had a historical fulfillment when Israel, as a people – as Luke called it, **"the days of vengeance" (Luke 21:22)**.

In another context, having His blood on us is the gospel. As the Apostle Paul would write it, **"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin" (Romans 4:7, 8)**.

If what Jesus says is true, that He who is not for Him is against Him (Matthew 12:30), let us ask ourselves what our relation to the blood of Christ is. Do we find that we are enemies of the cross of Christ, judged by His blood, or, as Paul would write, **"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13)**. I pray it is the latter.

Questions for Study

1. In what context does Peter mention the events of the passage when looking at Acts (pages 2, 3)?
2. How does the knowledge of God's sovereignty in the face of adversity console and encourage us (pages 3, 4)?
3. How did the practice of releasing a prisoner during the feast make a mockery of justice (pages 4, 5)?
4. Why is it important to understand justice (pages 4, 5)?
5. What do we know of Barabbas (page 5)?
6. Why do you think Pilate chose Barabbas (page 5)?
7. Discuss our ability to be persuaded. Has this happened to you? What are some examples you see around you (pages 6, 7)?
8. Is it possible for God to ordain evil events for just, holy and glorious reasons (page 7)?
9. Why is it important to be able to actually explain things (page 8)?
10. How can the blood of Jesus on us be either good or bad (pages 8, 9)?