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SERIES: *THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Luke 23:13–25

82nd Message

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March 8, 2015

In many movies we encounter a common story line where one person takes the punishment of another or even dies in someone's place. For example in the movie version of *Last of the Mohicans*, the two daughters of Colonel Munro, Cora and Alice, along with the English military officer Duncan Heyward are captured by Magua, the Huron warrior. The Huron chief decides that Cora is to burn alive to atone for Magua's dead children and that Magua is to take Alice as a wife to heal his heart. Hawkeye, a frontiersman raised by the Mohicans, pleads with the Huron chief to take the place of Cora but Duncan deliberately mistranslates and sacrifices himself instead of either Cora or Hawkeye so that Cora and Hawkeye can go free.

We find the same story line in books. For example in the Dickens classic, *The Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton exchanges identity with Charles Darnay and dies in his place. Maybe you have not read the book but you might recall the famous words that Carton speaks to himself before his death: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."¹

I am sure you can think of other examples. But this story isn't just fiction, it is the story of the gospels, the story of Jesus. Jesus was not just a worker of miracles, or a wise man, or a great teacher. He was the Christ, the Son of God, God himself taking on the flesh of mankind and dying in our place, trading places with us and bearing the punishment we deserve for rebellion and sin. And this what is pictured for us dramatically in our text today.

We return to Luke's precise ordering of the trials of Jesus. After a night of interrogation by the high priest and mocking and beating by the temple soldiers Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin. When the Sanhedrin gets from Jesus what they want they take him to Pilate since they did not have the authority to put anyone to death. The Jewish leaders lay out their accusations against Jesus, but Pilate determines that Jesus is innocent. When the Jews press the issue and when Pilate finds out that Jesus is a Galilean, he passes the buck by sending him to Herod. Herod also finds Jesus innocent and, after making sport of Jesus, sends him back to Pilate. The Jewish leaders, Pilate, and Herod form a three-ring circus.

When I was a boy growing up we recited the Apostles Creed every Sunday. And I always remember the phrase "suffered under Pontius Pilate." Now for a second time Jesus stands before this Roman governor.

Jesus Before Pilate Again

Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him." (Luke 23:13–16 *ESV*)

Upon Jesus' return from Herod, Pilate calls a meeting. Perhaps Pilate is showing initiative but most likely Pilate is too fearful to release Jesus on his own without the consent of the Jews.

The company of Jews has expanded. Previously the group before Pilate consisted of the elders, scribes, and chief priests. But now the rulers are included which is a reference to the social leadership. And although Pilate spoke to the crowds in verse 4, the people are now more involved. At one point the people were very supportive of Jesus but now have been persuaded to side with the religious leaders. As is often the case with a group mentality the people are fickle and have a shallow allegiance.

Pilate reiterates the accusation of "this man" the Jews claim, that Jesus is misleading the people. This is similar to what the Jews said in verses 2 and 5: "We found this man misleading our nation" and "He stirs up the people." (Luke 23:2,5).

For the third time the word "accuse" is featured in these proceedings. This had been the goal of the Jewish leaders for a long time, for back in chapter 6 we read that the Jews were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus when Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath:

And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him. (Luke 6:7).

For a second time Pilate reiterates his position that he finds no guilt in Jesus. Herod is a second, corroborating witness to this conclusion. The double use of the word "behold" (behold and look) in verses 14 and 15 punctuates Pilate's conclusions. Repetition is a key feature in the narrative.

Pilate offers to punish Jesus and then release him. Punishment is a word that means "discipline" or "instruct" and in this context would refer to scourging or whipping that would draw blood and tear the flesh. Luke does not tell us that this scourging actually happens, while the other three gospels tell us it does. Luke seems to omit unpleasant acts like the kiss of Judas, the soldiers spitting, and the charge of blasphemy.

This is a half-measure to appease the crowd. If Jesus is innocent we expect Jesus to be released immediately without any punishment. This second appearance before Pilate features typical Roman procedure—an arrest, charges, verdict, and acquittal.

Give Us Barabbas

[Now he was obliged to release one man to them for the festival]. But they all cried out together, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas"— a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. (Luke 23:17–19)

Although some manuscripts have verse 17, in all likelihood it was not part of the original. But we know from the other gospels that it was the custom of the Roman governor to release a prisoner on the

Passover. And we know that Pilate asked the gathered Jews whether they wanted Jesus released.

In the movie *National Velvet*, Mrs. Brown says to her husband: “That’ll be a dispute to the end of time, Mr. Brown: whether it’s better to do the right thing for the wrong reason or the wrong thing for the right reason.” Pilate is trying to do the right thing for the wrong reason.

But “all cried out together,” we assume with a loud voice, to take away or execute Jesus and release Barabbas. Barabbas is a convicted and incarcerated criminal for insurrection and murder. John tells us that he is a “robber” and Matthew says he is a “notorious prisoner” (John 18:40, Matt. 27:16)

In Acts 3, Peter describes that the “all” includes the whole nation of Israel:

But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. (Acts 3:14–15)

Barabbas means “son of the father.” The crowd would prefer Barabbas instead of the true Son of the Father. Barabbas did what Jesus is being convicted of. The crowd wants to free the sinner and execute the innocent. This is startling to say the least.

Crucify Him

Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” (Luke 23:20)

Pilate tries again to release Jesus. But the crowd reiterates its desire to see Jesus executed. The double use of crucify is emphatic. This is a battle of wills between Pilate and the crowd.

Not Guilty

A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.” (Luke 23:22)

Now for a third time Pilate states that Jesus is innocent. We see the same word used in verse 4 and 14:

Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.” (Luke 23:4)

“I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him.” (Luke 23:14)

The number three reminds us of the three-fold denial of Peter and perhaps foreshadows Jesus rising from the dead on the third day. For a second time Pilate tells the crowd he will punish and release Jesus. Indeed, Jesus will be released on the third day.

Crucify Him

But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. (Luke 23:23–24)

The crowd continues to pressure Pilate. Each time Pilate tries to release Jesus, the crowd opposes him with louder and louder cries. With a “great voice” they demand Jesus be crucified. The word “crucify” appears for the third time.

Finally the crowd wins the test of wills. Their voices are louder and stronger than Pilate and Pilate capitulates. Pacifying the Jews and keeping the peace is more important than justice. “Mob violence

here trumps justice, denies truth, and makes a mockery of the legal sanction and due process it claimed to have sought”²

Delivered Over

He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will. (Luke 23:25)

Barabbas is released and Jesus is delivered over, a significant idea in the passion of Jesus. At last Jesus’ prediction comes to fruition.

“Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.” (Luke 9:44)

For he (the Son of Man) will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. (Luke 18:32)

When Judas delivers Jesus over to the priests the word “betray” is the same word as “delivered over.”

He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them.

So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd. (Luke 22:4, 6)

In Matthew we see that the priests delivered Jesus over to Pilate out of envy; “For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.” (Matt 27:18).

And now Pilate delivers Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified.

Once again we see the silence of Jesus in the face of his accusers and judges. We talked about that last week. So, today I would like us to consider for a few moments the various people in the trial scenes and how they relate or respond to Jesus.

Pilate

First, there is Pilate. Pilate doesn’t want anything to do with Jesus. He knows Jesus is innocent and wants to release him. He attempts passing the buck and trying halfway measures. He wants to wash his hands of the whole affair, a literal detail Luke does not include. But in the end Pilate is a weak and spineless man who capitulates to the Jewish leaders and crowd.

Pilate represents people who are noncommittal to Jesus, without conviction, and indifferent. They know there is something more than meets the eye but they keep Jesus in the background. The people and events of the world control them. They might even be believers who are secret about their faith and wilt in the face of persecution. Indifference to Jesus is dangerous and just as bad as opposing him. Indifference allows injustice to continue and ignores God’s activity, plans, and presence. John Stott writes:

Anxious to avoid the pain of a whole-hearted commitment to Christ, we too search for convenient subterfuges. We either leave the decision to somebody else, or opt for a half-hearted compromise, or seek to honour Jesus for the wrong reason (e.g. as teacher instead of as Lord), or even make a public affirmation of loyalty while at the same time denying him in our hearts.³

The gospels urge us to not be neutral or indifferent to Jesus.

Herod

Second, there is Herod. We talked about him last week. Herod is also noncommittal but in a different way. For him Jesus is a form of amusement. When Jesus stands before him Herod is hoping to see a sign, a miracle with his own eyes. He mocks and humiliates Jesus.

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He laughs and does not take him seriously. He is more interested in his political friendship with Pilate than a relationship with Jesus.

Herod represents people who mock and scoff at Jesus, church, faith, and Christianity. Like Herod they might have a religious background but for whatever reason they have decided that it is silly and irrelevant to their lives. They want to live their life their way. These are the people who crack jokes about Jesus with their friends or send out email cartoons depicting the folly of religion.

Jewish Leaders/People

Third, the Jewish leaders—and now the people—have a prominent role in the passion of Christ. They are violently opposed to Jesus. The reason is that Jesus does not fit into their categories and doesn't play by their rules. "He was an irregular...had no credentials, no proper authorization...he courted controversy by his provocative behavior, fraternizing with disreputable people, feasting instead of fasting, and profaning the Sabbath by healing people on it."⁴

The Jewish leaders cared more about the rules than people. They were full of self-righteous indignation. Matthew tells us they were envious of Jesus. In the trial scenes they became agitated and vocally loud in their opposition to Pilate and in their desire to kill Jesus. Pilate wanted Jesus to just go away. The Jews wanted to get rid of him.

The Jewish crowds represent those people in the world who are adamantly opposed to Jesus, who get angry at the mention of this name, who fight the ideas of public prayer or nativity scenes, and who say harsh things to people of faith in public. Perhaps they have been hurt by religion or by churchgoers, but they will argue vehemently as to the reality and reason for Christ.

But the Jewish leaders also represent Christians who are more concerned about the rules than they are about people, who are convinced that there is the right way to do things, and who get agitated, stirred up when somebody wants to change the status quo. They fight and quarrel over non-essentials such as appropriate music in the worship service. They become envious of the gifts of others and the attention they receive. They are imprisoned by self-righteous superiority. Unfortunately churches are full of these types of people. We can expect to encounter these types of people and it is something we all have to guard against becoming.

Barabbas

And finally there is Barabbas. Despite being polar opposites, Barabbas and Jesus are inexorably linked. One is a life-taker, the other a life-giver. One is guilty, the other innocent. One is a law-breaker, the other a righteous man. One is the son of Adam and perhaps even the devil and the other the Son of God. But what we see in the story is that Jesus takes Barabbas' place. He suffers the punishment for all that Barabbas did. Jesus dies and Barabbas is released.

The word "release" is used five times in this last trial scene. Often this word is used for the release of a prisoner or a release from a disease, but in Luke 6 it is translated "forgive." Forgiveness is being released from our sins and iniquity, released from the judgment due or debt of sin. The picture of Barabbas shows us that we are released from the sentence of death because Jesus stood in our place.

Barabbas is a picture of every person. We might identify with Pilate, Herod, or the Jews, but we all can identify with Barabbas. We are dead in trespasses and sin. We are in prison without the chance of parole, sentenced to death without the possibility of appeal, waiting for execution. But then Jesus takes our place and dies our death.

We are released and we are set free. What keeps us from becoming hard-hearted and religious without relationship is to see ourselves as Barabbas.

Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Franciscan, was at Auschwitz during World War II:

When a number of prisoners were selected for execution, and one of them shouted that he was a married man with children, "Father Kolbe stepped forward and asked if he could take the condemned man's place. His offer was accepted by the authorities, and he was placed in an underground cell, where he was left to die of starvation."⁵

Can you imagine someone doing that for you? Well, someone has. His name is Jesus. This is what Jesus did for Barabbas and for us. Isaiah's words express this truth:

**But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed. (Is 53:5)**

And Paul adds in 2 Corinthians: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21).

Who was responsible for Jesus' death? The early believers made it clear that everyone was culpable—Herod and Pilate, Gentiles and Jews, leaders and ordinary people:

For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel. (Acts 4:27)

Each and every one of us was there when they crucified our Lord.

But was the cross the random outcome of a series of events that never should have happened? Was Jesus the helpless victim of evil and irresponsible men? Was he simply the pawn in a horrible game? Not hardly. Jesus was delivered over by Judas, the Jewish leaders, and Pilate but the real reason Jesus died is out of love. Paul writes:

The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20)

Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:2)

The word "gave" in these verses is the same word as "delivered over" in our text. The reason Jesus took our place and died our death was because of love. The Father sent the Son; Jesus submitted to his will and endured the cross all for love. Octavius Winslow summed it up neatly: "Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear; not the Jews, for envy;—but the Father, for love."⁶ The religious leaders and people were motivated by hate. God was motivated by love.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:6–8)

I wish I had a good story I could tell of someone taking my place in jail or someone paying a large fine that I owed. But I don't have any story like that, maybe you do. But I do have one instance that I will share. When I was a teenager, my dad and I were playing golf. On one hole I hit a lousy drive, so I teed up another ball and hit a

second drive. A man who was playing behind us was upset that I hit two balls and took more time than necessary. As we passed each other a little later he let me have it. I felt some measure of guilt and shame and remained silent. But on the next hole when we passed by this man again, my dad let him have it. He took my place under this man's wrath. My father did that out of love for me and as I think back on that memory I feel incredibly loved by my father. And this is what we are supposed to feel as we meditate on the passion narrative—the incredible, unimaginable love both the Father and the Son have for us.

If we don't get this right nothing else matters, we will not understand anything. We won't understand the love of God. We won't understand forgiveness and grace. We won't worship and we won't love God with all of our heart. Imagine yourself sitting in a cell, doomed, waiting for execution. And then the jailer comes with someone else, opens the door, puts the other person in the cell, and lets you go free. This is the picture of Jesus trading places with Barabbas and trading places with us.

When we sacrifice ourselves for another person sometimes we do it out of duty, but more often than not we do it out of love. This is what motivates God to sacrifice his own son. The gospel is the story of forgiveness and love. Love drives the whole action. Love determines who we are and who we are becoming.

1. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, no pages. Cited March 2015. Online: <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2956372-a-tale-of-two-cities>
2. David Jeffery, *Luke*, (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2012, 271).
3. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Downers Grove, IVP, 51)
4. *Ibid*, 52
5. *Ibid*, 136
6. *Ibid*, 61

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