

Luke 23:13-25
The Choice We Make
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In the last few weeks we have looked at the various trials faced by Jesus. First before the Jewish Authority who is looking for the Messiah, just not the kind of Messiah Jesus will be. They wanted Jesus on their terms, but Jesus will only be the savior on his terms for those courageous enough to ask and seek.

Last week Jesus stood before Herod, who was really just interested in seeing the miracles. He had heard about Jesus, but was not interested in faith, instead he was just bored with regular life. Jesus invites us to seek him in the silence when it's not a sign, but only him standing before us.

Today we come to the final trial Jesus will face. And this one is the most dangerous, because it's often the most unpredictable--it's the court of public opinion.

Text

Have you ever wanted something to be true so badly you were willing to ignore facts to believe it's true? Take this photo for example. This was posted online by a Huffington Post contributor at a scene in Ferguson MO. The question he asked: can anyone confirm that these are rubber bullets? Turns out they're not rubber bullets, they are ear plugs. But the writer's mind he was so convinced that's what they were, that's what he saw.

Sometimes we shoehorn reality into our context to make it make us feel good. We see this in media preferences all the time. It's called Confirmation Bias, people pick and choose what they will pay attention to in order for it to confirm their view of the world.

For many in Jesus' day they knew the Old Testament Scriptures. They had heard those texts from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, in which a Messiah was promised. Their hope was a conquering to set to right all the wrong that Israel had endured at the hands of the Babylonians, Egyptians, and Romans. But, when Jesus came and didn't conform to their agendas, didn't bring them the political and military victory and power they had hoped for, things got more than a little tense. Does this feel familiar in a way? Ok God, when will you come and finally set things right by putting "*those*" people in their place? God when are you going to come and do that thing I need you to do? When are you going to come set things to my way?

But Jesus didn't make a practice of being what people wanted him to be, that's called idolatry. But what he does is protect us from our blind spots by revealing the gaps in coverage. In football terms this is what the Left Tackle does, he identifies and protects the quarterback from the blindside rushers. Jesus is always showing us a side of ourselves we didn't realize existed, or at least didn't want to face on our own, and that doesn't feel good.

Spouses, how many times have you found yourself worked up about something you see the other person doing, like the way they load the dishwasher or the way they put the toilet paper on the roll. And we can get a little self-righteous, can't we? Look at what they're doing, how could they? But

then the other person points out the other side of the story and it totally catches us by surprise. Jesus is really good at getting to the root of our blindsides.

The crowd that day were incensed by Jesus, but interestingly Pilate and Herod weren't convinced that Jesus was guilty of anything. It was the religious leaders who were intent on pressuring the political leaders to do something about the issue of Jesus. Can you imagine that? Religious leaders claiming moral authority and trying to influence political leaders?

After having been bounced back and forth from Pilate to Herod and back to Pilate, Pilate invites the chief priests, the leaders, and the people to come and make a ruling. Interesting, Pilate, the one who was the judge, was now the defense attorney making his case in front of the people, why Jesus was innocent. Now the final verdict would be issued by the people, as to whether Jesus lives or whether he dies.

Did you notice? Three times Pilate implores the crowd that Jesus is innocent. The first time he says: listen, neither Herod nor I found this man guilty. Nothing deserving death was done by him. He even inserts a plea bargain: "I will punish him and release him." But the crowd cries louder, "Away with him, give us Barabbas." Then a second time Pilate tries to release him, and once again the crowd shouts louder, "Crucify, crucify him!" And a third time Pilate protests "what evil has been done by him?" But at this point, the crowd has reached a fevered pitch, crucify him, crucify him!

But did you notice how those in authority assert Jesus' innocence. Why does Pilate, and the Gospel writer Luke, and later a thief next to him on the cross, and a Roman Centurion after Jesus has died, why do they make such a relentless point about Jesus' innocence?

One reason may be to point out just how far Jesus actually was from what the crowd wanted him to be. They were so upset that Jesus didn't conform to their expectations of him, and rather than face the truth of the Messiah who actually will be, better just to do away with him and hope for another who fits the bill. The crowd may have had such an entrenched confirmation bias that it would even drive them to murder.

But I think there is a deeper theological point Luke is trying to make—one that gets us right here (heart). I think the deeper point Luke is trying to make is that we know Barabbas, we want Barabbas, because we are Barabbas. We are all looking to find freedom from the guilt we carry.

Barabbas, it says, was a member of an insurrection group and a murderer—in other words Barabbas is guilty and he and everyone else knows it. Barabbas was a Jew who like so many others hated the fact that Roman soldiers patrolled the streets of Jerusalem, stealing their money, and usurping the power of their kings. Periodically bands of men would lash out against Roman soldiers, Barabbas was a part of one of these resistance movements. And like so many examples of people who seek change in oppressive situations, perhaps there was no way to get rid of the Roman soldiers without hurting innocent people. Maybe Barabbas was not all bad, maybe he had good intentions, but along the way someone got hurt. Whatever the case, he was guilty and deserved to die for what he'd done.

Even people with good intentions, who seek to do good and have good motives, can get reckless and end up hurting others along the way. Do you know what I'm talking about. In our family we

have a saying: “no one wakes up in the morning and says how can I screw up my life or someone else’s life today.” Maybe we’re just trying to provide for our family, and we stay a few extra minutes each day and those minutes become hours, and now our families are paying the price. Or maybe it’s just that one drink that becomes just six drinks. Or perhaps the most dangerous someone who is trying to do good, but is really mean and nasty along the way. Some of the most hurtful people in the world are people who have a good agenda to accomplish and will stop at nothing to see it through.

I bet if we all stop and think for a moment we can probably come up with a name or two of someone you’ve hurt along the way. The truth is that we will all face the reality sooner or later that we are not innocent men, we are not innocent women. And what happens when these things happen, even if it was long ago, we carry the guilt along with us. We all have the baggage of the sins we have done and the things we have left undone. One of the most difficult things to do is to pick up the phone and call a person who for whatever reason we hurt, whether it was malicious intent, or blind negligence.

And the fact that this is true of all of us reveals the truth of the guilt that is literally all around us. Even when we are at our best.

The name Barabbas means “Son of the Father.” We are our parents’ children, and the Bible says that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children and grandchildren. We are born into sin. That is our tragic inheritance. We didn’t invent greed, prejudice, sloth, wrath and the rest of the deadly sins. But we are all impacted and infected by them all. This is how we understand the doctrine of Original Sin. It’s the contagion that we all have. We are all like Barabbas.

So, when the crowd is confronted with a choice between Barabbas the guilty or Jesus the innocent, are we really surprised that they screamed for Barabbas. We too want to be released from our guilt. We too are in the crowd with the others and in Barabbas see ourselves standing up there next to Jesus. We are confronted by the question who will we set free. What are we going to say? I’ll tell you who we’d better say, we’d better say “give us Barabbas.” Set us free from our guilt. And that can only happen when Jesus takes our place up on the cross.

If we had asked for Jesus and Pilate had given Jesus to the crowd the innocent man would have continued to live face to face with our judgment, and the Son of God didn’t come to add to our judgment, but to free us from it. This was Jesus’ mission from the start, Jesus didn’t die because we chose Barabbas, he died because this was the only way to free us from the guilt we all know so well.

This means that you are forgiven. And to be forgiven is to be free from guilt, that means you no longer have to try and pay for your sins. Nothing is more offensive to the atonement of Christ than for us to try and pay for our own sins. The only thing you can do, your only hope in the world is to accept the fact that you are a guilt person AND to accept that you are even more free and forgiven by Christ’s grace than you could ever imagine.

We don’t know what happened to Barabbas after Jesus took his place on the cross. There’s no record of him. Maybe that’s because he truly was a freed man, and because he was free anything was possible—the same freedom that is possible for you as well. Amen.