

Text: Luke 23:6-25

Title: Jesus Takes the Place of Barabbas

Truth: Jesus took your place. Will you take Him?

Date/Location: Sunday June 1, at FBC

Introduction

When we left the situation in our last message, Jesus had been tortured, tried illegally, then tried again, and then delivered to Pilate for a final disposition of the sentence.

I. Trial Before Herod, v. 6-12

- A. Pilate dumps Jesus onto Herod. Later in these notes I will explain the conundrum that Pilate was in. For now, just understand that Pilate was passing the hot potato to Herod to see if he would handle it. This shows that Pilate could not make a clear decision despite the fact that he found no fault in Jesus.
- B. Herod was in Jerusalem at the time for the feast of Passover. He desired to see Jesus (Luke 9:7-9), at least ever since he killed John the Baptist and thought that perhaps John had arisen from the dead (Matt. 14:1-2). Herod apparently also desired to kill Jesus (Luke 13:31). If he killed John, it is no stretch of the imagination to think that he would not mind doing the same to Jesus, who was even more prominent than John.
- C. Herod had another reason he wanted to see Jesus: to see a miracle done by Him. I doubt that he really wanted a sign from God to kickstart faith. To him, Jesus was more of a curiosity, a sensation.
- D. Herod questioned Jesus but got nowhere. The priests added their two cents and accused Him of claiming to be the Christ, or God, and/or of being a rival king. Jesus did not answer the king because he was not going to believe Him anyway. Herod had previously rejected John the Baptist's word of rebuke and failed to repent. Jesus was under no obligation to give him more revelation or information.

Such is the case with God and you, dear friends. If you turn up your nose at God's self-disclosure in general revelation, or at what God says in the Bible, or you refuse to repent when confronted with

your sin, God is under no obligation to keep trying and trying to get you to listen. He may graciously provide multiple opportunities for you to hear and respond to the truth, but He may “shake the dust off His feet” and turn you over to your own depraved desires. You will drive yourself farther and farther away from Him until He seems so far away that He seems out of reach.

E. Herod’s true character is shown in verse 11 when he mocked Jesus and treated him with contempt. Herod had no respect for this great Man, even greater than John the Baptist. At least Herod feared John (Mark 6:20) and kept him alive for a time. Herod had no fear of Jesus, though he should have.

The mocking was not only verbal, but “play acted” out by dressing Jesus in a robe to mock his claim to be a king. Then he sent him back to Pilate. But he did not make a decision. He knew that Jesus was not worthy of death (23:15). He had probably seen a sizable number of criminals who *were* worthy of death, but not this one. So why did they not agree to release Him? They were chicken and did not exercise strong, righteous leadership. They maybe feared Jesus but also lacked courage to say He is innocent.

F. The friendship that started between Pilate and Herod was an extremely worldly kind of friendship. They implicitly agreed about Jesus, that He was not worthy of death, but He was worthy of mockery and dismissal. Their shared viewpoint on this odd case and the fact that Pilate honored Herod by asking his opinion on it, seem to be the only things that changed between Herod and Pilate that could have repaired their relationship. What kind of people become friends over the unjust treatment of a prisoner? That is strange indeed.

II. Barabbas Freed and Jesus Condemned, v. 13-25

A. Pilate planned a public declaration, apparently to put an end to the nonsense. From verses 13-17 everything sounds nearly right:

1. Pilate called all the parties together.
2. He declared to them that they brought Jesus to him and charged him with misleading the people.

3. Pilate reports he examined Jesus.
4. Pilate reports that he found no fault with regard to the accusation.
5. Pilate reports that Herod found nothing deserving of death.

If I am right about this much, I can commend the governor. However, there is more which is not commendable.

6. Pilate says he will chastise Jesus (for good measure?) and release Him.

If indeed Jesus had done no evil, a chastening was not appropriate. This was just a deal-making compromise. He should not have been arguing with cruel Sanhedrin members or the crowd. He was the man in charge! Call it right and be done with it, Pilate! Instead, he gave them an inch, and they used that to take a mile.

- B. Luke explains that Pilate spoke about releasing Jesus because the Roman governor would throw a bone¹ to the people by releasing one prisoner at Passover time. It was only “necessary” in a customary or traditional sense. There was no law that would be broken if Pilate did not do this.
- C. The Sanhedrin must have instructed the crowd in advance to cry out to get rid of Jesus and release Barabbas. He was a criminal who had been imprisoned for rebellion and for murder. There seems to be no question as to his guilt. He may have been something of a hero to the people because he was trying to throw off the Romans. But he was a murderer nonetheless. It shows the depravity of heart of these people that they would want a murderer released and an innocent man killed. Justice was upside down then too, not just in our own day.
- D. The multitude cried out seemingly in unison, on cue. Not only were they opposing God and Jesus, but they were also opposing the leadership of Pilate *and* Herod. They should have submitted to the

¹ An idiom that means “to offer (someone) something that is not very important or valuable especially to stop complaints or protests” (Merriam-Webster).

decision of Pilate, but they tried to sway him with their insistent voices.

- E. Pilate, Luke says, still wanted to release Jesus. So, he pushed back on their request. In fact, he *had* to release Jesus because Jesus was innocent. Not doing so would technically be illegal under Roman law.
- F. But they shouted all the louder, telling Pilate to “Crucify Him!” At this point it is becoming clear to Pilate that it will be tough to win this argument. He had previously made the Jews do things by force. But he had to weigh his actions at this particular time of the year. Furthermore, he may have figured that they would take this all the way to Caesar and charge him with harboring an insurrectionist, with the added benefit that they might get Pilate dismissed from his post or other hot water with Tiberius Caesar (John 19:12). But he also had a fear of Jesus (John 19:8). Even Pilate’s wife warned him not doing anything to Jesus, who was innocent (Matt. 27:19).
- G. Pilate tried a third time to talk sense into them. He said Jesus had done no evil, there was no reason for death, and thus he would chastise Jesus and let Him go. This all was unprecedented and there was no Roman manual as to how to manage it. It may be that He did scourge Jesus by this time to try to pacify the crowd (he did scourge Jesus, but the timing is a detail that we could study out).
- H. Finally, the crowd’s unified voice won the day. Pilate gave in, against his first and better judgment. He lacked spine and moral courage. He was a coward. And he was self-serving, trying to keep his job.
- I. Since Jesus had done no wrong, and Barabbas had clearly done wrong, it is hard to miss that a substitution was happening, a swap, an exchange. Jesus for Barabbas. Jesus in the place of Barabbas. This is fitting, for Jesus was actually becoming a substitute for more than just one man. He was a substitute for *humanity*. God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. He was imputing our trespasses

to Jesus and preparing that Jesus's righteousness could be imputed to us when we become children of God by faith (2 Cor. 5:19).

J. If you are tracking with what Luke has told us, you might be thinking something like this: "Barabbas could be *me*." I have a lot of badness in me, perhaps not in the same exact way that Barabbas did, but I am nevertheless a sinner. I have hated, which is like murder. I have coveted, which is akin to idolatry. I have rebelled against God and His authority. I have lusted, which is adultery. I have used God's name in an empty way, or even as a curse word. I have made things in my life more important than God, and not honored my parents, and stolen something, even a small thing. I have lied from time to time to make my life easier. When it comes right down to it, I am not a good person when I look at who God is and His perfection.

Jesus took your place too. I am well aware of the debate that goes on amongst theologians as to whether Jesus substituted for only those who are or will be saved, or for everyone in a provisional manner. I am not going to dive into that debate now because the actual *thing* or *act* Jesus did in dying is the same either way. Instead, I will just say this: whoever you are, Jesus's death is sufficient for you too. There is nothing lacking in terms of the utter adequacy of who He is or what He did to take YOUR place, as much like Barabbas as you are.

What grace that Jesus would do something for us at all, much less *this*.

Conclusion

If we are theologically careful, we will recognize that the truth given at the top of the notes could be misleading. Jesus hung on a cross so you would not have to receive eternal punishment for your sins. But this does not mean that if *you* hung on a cross for a few hours and died that you would have taken all the punishment due your sin. We could never take the punishment for, or absorb, or pay for all our sins, and anyway we are not a suitable sacrifice for sin. In other words, Jesus being sent to the cross was effective for you not because He did exactly what you would have to do to be saved.

Rather, what He did was effective because He was the perfect Lamb of God, infinite in His person and perfections, and took upon Himself the complete punishment due for our sin. God graciously permitted a substitutionary sacrifice of greater value than all our sin in order that we could have eternal life.

Over and over again even the secular authorities, who did not have a religious axe to grind, recognize that Jesus was innocent. He was a good man. And we know from the rest of the Bible that He was a perfect man. This makes Him a suitable Lamb for sacrifice.

It is true that Jesus died in our place, as our substitute. The wages of our sin were upon Him. His right standing with God can be upon you, if you will have Him as your Lord and Savior, if you will turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. He is the only way to be rescued from sin and death.

Why do I say all of this? Because I want you to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and the Christ, and so that in believing in Him you would obtain the gift of eternal life.

The crowd chose Barabbas. The religious authorities took Barabbas. Against his best judgment, Pilate ultimately took Barabbas as well. Who will you choose: Jesus or Barabbas? Your answer shows your innermost nature.

MAP

Notes

The Jerusalem Talmud indicates that 40 years before the destruction of the temple (70 AD), the Romans stopped the Jews from using capital punishment. If this timing is accurate, the Romans made the change just in time for Jesus to be crucified. This meant that Jesus could be “lifted up” on a tree, “as the serpent in the wilderness” (John 12:32, 3:14) instead of killed by the traditional method of stoning.