

The Suffering Servant: Condemned for You

Mark 15:1-15

In 2017, a Michigan man, named Ledura Watkins walked out of the Wayne County jail in Detroit after 41 years in prison for a 1975 murder. Here's the thing about Watkins release that's crazy. He didn't commit the murder. He had been convicted based on a single hair found on the crime scene that had been analyzed using a faulty technique. A witness who said he had committed the murder with Watkins later said he had lied about it and police reports that would have discredited the lying witness were withheld from Watkins defense team, which was illegal.

So, based on a series of lies and bad evidence, this guy goes to prison for 41 years for a crime he didn't commit. I don't know about you, but my stomach turns when I hear stuff like that. 41 birthdays. 41 Christmases. Missed out on his kids. It's horrifying. We are made in the image of God and so we have a very natural desire for justice and we hate to see an innocent person suffer.

This morning we are going to watch a scene unfold that is the greatest miscarriage of justice our world has ever seen. If you get uncomfortable thinking about that Detroit man being locked away for 41 years, then this scene in Mark 15 should impact you in a deeper way. Why? Because the injustice being perpetrated on an innocent man in Mark 15 is ultimately our doing. We are the reason this is happening. He doesn't deserve to die and I don't deserve to live. Yet, Mark 10:45 informs our reading of Mark 15. *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

This morning I want to give you a summary statement of this passage and then we'll tell the story and then circle back to that summary statement and unpack it a bit more with some implications for our lives. So, here's what this passage is teaching: **Jesus, the innocent king, was unjustly condemned to die so we could go free.** It would be a good idea to jot this down and keep it in mind as we walk through the story and then we'll come back to it.

Last time we saw Jesus before the Sanhedrin and Peter before the servants and soldiers in the courtyard. The rooster crowed twice while Peter was being confronted about his relationship to Jesus so morning is clearly approaching. Look

at the first part of 15:1. After deciding that Jesus was worthy of death and finding the charge of blasphemy they all come together to decide how to proceed. Keep in mind that the Jewish leadership cannot carry out capital punishment since Rome is in charge. So, they know they must convince the Roman governor to put Jesus to death. But what is interesting is that this charge of blasphemy wouldn't convince a Roman ruler to put anyone to death. He doesn't care about Jewish religious squabbles. So, they must work on what crime they will charge Jesus with before the Romans. That's what this consultation is most likely about.

Look at the rest of verse 1. They treat Jesus like a criminal now that he has an official charge and they are taking him to the Roman prefect or governor. We know Pilate's name, but who was this guy? We don't know a ton about him, but he was the Roman provincial governor or prefect of Judea from AD 26-37. Judea was under Roman occupation at this time and they governed the local areas by placing a Roman ruler over the province. Judea was a particularly volatile province and Pilate had multiple tense run ins with Jewish religious customs. He was a competent ruler but had no special feelings for the Jews or their leaders and he could be counted on to do whatever was most politically expedient at the time.

Normally the Roman governor would stay about 70 miles from Jerusalem in Caesarea, but he would travel to Jerusalem during Jewish festivals to help maintain order. So, he was staying in the city at this moment and he's the man the Sanhedrin need to see if they are going to have Jesus crucified. They bring Jesus bound to Pilate and clearly they would have told Pilate what the charge was and this leads Pilate to question Jesus. Look at verse 2.

This question from Pilate should be read like a statement framed as a question. Like this, "You are the king of the Jews?" The High Priest had asked Jesus if he was the Messiah and Jesus had answered yes to him. Now it appears the Sanhedrin have translated that to Pilate with all the political aspects front and center. It was not a crime to the Romans to claim to be Messiah. But, if you were claiming political authority or kingship above that of Rome, this would clearly be a problem for Pilate. Make sure you read Jesus' answer correctly. He says, "You're the one who said it." It's not a denial, but it's certainly not an affirmative answer. It's pretty much a non-answer. If Jesus would have answered in the affirmative, Pilate would have had every reason to pronounce the death sentence right then.

But Jesus' answer isn't clear, so the chief priests continue to accuse him. Look at verse 3. Pilate is no friend to the Sanhedrin. Based on his history with them he would probably like to stick it to them by letting Jesus go just to annoy them. If Jesus has a defense against these accusations he wants to hear it. Look at verse 4. But once again, Jesus isn't defending himself. Look at verse 5. Jesus is fully surrendered to God's will and so he maintains his silence. Notice Pilate's reaction. He is amazed. This word sometimes has a note of admiration in it. He is marveling that Jesus won't defend himself in contrast with the Priests angry accusations.

Now, if you read this story in the gospel of Luke there's a huge break between verses 5-6. Pilate finds out Jesus is from Galilee so he sends him to Herod and then Herod sends him back to Pilate. Why doesn't Mark include that portion? I think because he wants to keep our attention focused on the injustice being done in the condemnation of Jesus. So he continues from the silence of Jesus to the opportunity for his release. Look at verse 6.

Pilate, the Roman governor had the sole authority to release or condemn prisoners. The practice described in verse 6 was not required by anyone and it was something that Pilate apparently did as a way to gain political points with the people. Jesus isn't the only one being held at this point. Look at verse 7.

Needless to say that Barabbas is not a nice dude. We've mentioned before that there were people in Israel who desperately wanted to see Roman authority removed and who were willing to even use violence to try to make this happen. Barabbas was one of these guys and since we get his name here he was probably a well-known leader in the revolutionary movement. He had a following.

With this tradition in mind let's look at verse 8. A new and rather important character is suddenly on the scene, the crowd. Keep in mind that it is early in the morning, right around day break, so why was this crowd outside the governors residence? Were they expecting Pilate to release a prisoner and were looking to get Barabbas out of there? Had they been gathered quickly by the Sanhedrin to help convince Pilate that Jesus was a dangerous criminal worthy of death? We don't know, but they do play an important role in the story.

Pilate sees their request as an opportunity to potentially get Jesus out of custody. Keep in mind that he had marveled at Jesus' silence and he really only has the accusations of the chief priest to go on at this point. So, he asks the crowd

because He doesn't trust the priests. Look at verses 9-10. Pilate isn't a big fan of the chief priests so if he can let the crowd choose to release Jesus he can annoy them in the process. But they have managed to outmaneuver Pilate this time. Look at verse 11.

You can picture the scene growing increasingly tense here. If Barabbas goes free, what happens to Jesus? Look at verse 12-13. Again, the chants are probably getting louder and Pilate offers one last attempt to show that he really doesn't believe Jesus has done anything worthy of death. Verse 14. Pilate has the power to release him. He doesn't really care about Jesus, but I'm sure he's not thrilled with giving into the chief priests and the crowd.

I don't know if you've ever been in a crowd that is growing increasingly hostile and loud, but when a crowd turns to a mob it can get quite scary. I was in a group one time in Nepal of people waiting for hours to get our canceled flights rebooked. After spending all morning in the hot sun some of the guys got frustrated and rushed the building where the flight office was located. The securities guards shut the gate but the guys began climbing the gate and trying to pull them down. For an instant I felt like things might go haywire. Pilate is the focal point of a crowd that has been stirred up and wants death by crucifixion. He has not political option but to give in at this point and ultimately, he probably doesn't care all that much.

Look at verse 15. It's quite clear that Pilate's motivation was purely political. Barabbas goes free, no doubt to cause more violence and attempts at revolution and Jesus is prepared for crucifixion. What do they do to prepare him? Mark states it so simply near the end of verse 15 when he says that Jesus was scourged but let me briefly explain this. Jesus was stripped down and his torso was completely exposed. His hands were tied to a post and a leather whip with multiple ends with chunks of metal and bone tied in them was used. The whip would lacerate the back and torso so badly that bones and vital organs would be exposed. There was no limit to how many times one could be hit. After all of this, Jesus is delivered over to be crucified.

Now, let me remind you of our summary of this passage. **Jesus, the innocent king, was unjustly condemned to die so we could go free.** Let me draw your attention to a couple of elements of this statement. First, this entire passage makes it quite

clear that Jesus was innocent of any wrongdoing worthy of death. We already saw that the trial before the High Priest was a joke and this one turns out to be much the same. Pilate is not convinced Jesus has done anything wrong and the question Pilate does ask Jesus is his ultimate true identity. He is the King of the Jews. Pilate only ends up condemning Jesus to death because of the crowd.

It is vitally important to the story of Jesus and ultimately to our salvation that Jesus be free from sin and innocent of any wrongdoing. Imagine for a moment that you had an employee at your job to whom you assigned a task, say picking up an important set of documents from the courthouse. The job had to be done within 1 hour or it couldn't be completed. You gave him your personal vehicle and warned him of a giant Michigan pothole on the route that he must avoid. He leaves for the job and intentionally drives the car into the pothole, damages the car badly, and is unable to pick up the documents from the courthouse.

Not only has this employee specifically transgressed your command to avoid the pothole, but he has also rendered himself unable to complete your original task of picking up the documents. Because the car is damaged he lacks the ability to pick up the documents. This is exactly the situation we find ourselves in as human beings. We have disobeyed God's commands with intentionality and rebellion. But in doing this we have also become unable to fulfill his commands to love God and love others and properly represent Him on earth. Our sin is a failure to do what God has commanded and an intentional disobedience.

This is why the Gospels picture of Jesus is so important for our salvation. In order to be saved from our sin we need a representative who has never transgressed God's law and has perfectly obeyed God's law. The gospels give us this picture and then the rest of the NT makes absolutely clear the ramifications of Christ's sinless obedience for our salvation. Listen to 1 Peter 2:22-24. You can see in verse 22 that he committed no sin, therefore He is able to bear our sins in His body on the tree. What is the outcome of Christ bearing our sins in his body? Twofold. That we might die to sin. That sin would no longer have a hold on us because Jesus paid for all of it. And, that we might live to righteousness. We are now covered in the righteousness of Jesus Christ and are given the ability, through the Spirit to obey God.

But in order for this to take place Jesus had to be free from sin. He had to be innocent. And because He was innocent, he did not deserve to die. This is the point where the injustice of the trial before Pilate comes in. I hope as you read this it was quite clear that Jesus did not deserve to die. It was a miscarriage of justice for his back to take the scourging and for him to be condemned to die.

But not only was He condemned to die, but his condemnation resulted in the freedom of an incredibly wicked man. It's quite easy to see the idea of substitution played out in this story. This concept of a substitutionary sacrifice is prevalent throughout Scripture. The whole point of the Passover was that a lamb had to die instead of the 1st born Son. Notice something about that story. Israel was not exempt from the judgment of God that fell on Egypt that night. The only reason the people of Israel were spared was because of the death of a lamb.

I think it's entirely appropriate to see ourselves in Barabbas here. I realize we aren't insurrectionists and murderers, but we are no less in need of a substitute. And God has provided a substitute for us who both obeyed and walked in perfect holiness without sin. Listen to 2 Corinthians 5:21.

This morning we have gotten to the heart of the Gospel message in many ways. Paul expressed that gospel message like this in Romans 5:8. Think of the sinless, substitutionary condemnation of Jesus as the crown jewel of the gospel. We can pick that crown jewel up and view it from many different angles and see new facets that impact daily life. The gospel is not a set of ideas that we encounter before we are saved that lead us to Christ and then we put aside. The NT epistles are the application of the gospel to every facet of life and we do well to consider how these truths ought to shape us and form us. One of my all time favorite little books is called *A Gospel Primer*. The author tells about his realization that gospel truths, such as the substitutionary condemnation of Jesus dramatically impact daily life. Here's what he says:

"God did not give us His gospel just so we could embrace it and be converted. Actually, He offers it to us every day as a gift that keeps on giving to us everything we need for life and godliness. The wise believer learns this truth early and becomes proficient in extracting available benefits from the gospel each day. We extract these benefits by being absorbed in the gospel, speaking it to ourselves when necessary, and by daring to reckon it true in all we do." – Milton Vincent

So, here we be my encouragement to us today based on what we've read in Mark 15. Let's absorb ourselves in the gospel story, speak to ourselves these truths and their application, then get together with other believers here at WBC and speak these truths to one another. Then, let's live as if the gospel is true.