

Condemned
By Jason Huff
Isaiah 53, Amos 5:14-15, 21-24, Luke 23:13-25

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Luke 23:13-25. Listen now to God's Word. "Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him." With one voice they cried out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.) Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him." But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will."

Injustice is on a lot of minds right now down in the Gulf. As the story of the BP oil spill continues to dominate the news two months after the accident happened, we've learned that it was likely preventable. Choices made to cut corners and costs have wound up costing billions of dollars. And while BP has made strides towards justice, paying over \$16 million already to businesses who've lost money directly due to the spill, it's hard to imagine that justice can ever be complete. Even if every dollar lost was paid, there's still an environmental toll that we cannot truly comprehend yet that will affect that region for years. Events like the BP spill frustrate us because we see an injustice and have no power over it. Much of the world is like that, unfortunately.

Our passage today, the condemnation of Jesus, brings justice to the forefront of our minds. It's an issue we have to tackle because God is so concerned about justice. Throughout the Bible, we read of God's concern for justice, particularly for those who have no voice – the orphan, the widow, and the poor. As Christians, we live our lives aware that God is ultimately the judge who will eventually bring about perfect justice tempered with perfect compassion. So today, we're going to look at what happened to Jesus as a model for us to understand injustice and how we can live our lives following His lead.

Here's the first lesson we can learn from Jesus' condemnation: *injustice starts when we break the rules to serve our own ends*. Although Luke shares how the religious leaders hated Jesus for opposing them, he doesn't explain just how much of their own law they broke when putting Him on trial. The Mishnah, a 3rd century collection of Jewish oral law, details the laws concerning religious trials. In Jesus' case, they broke at least a half dozen of them. A trial that could result in capital punishment wasn't to be held on the eve of a Sabbath or festival. Capital sentencing had to happen a full day after the judgment was rendered. Witnesses against the defendant had to present testimony, and if their testimony conflicted in any way, it had to be thrown out. Stoning was the only method of execution. Injustice was clear under their own law.

But the religious authorities aren't the only ones who break the rules. Pilate doesn't break any laws by ordering the whipping of Jesus. It's unjust, but Pilate was attempting to avoid an even more unjust fate by ordering a lesser one. That said, he does break the law when he hands Jesus over to the Jewish authorities to be crucified under the watchful eye of Roman guards. The prefect was charged with keeping the peace, but he also was to administer justice. Three times Pilate says that Jesus is innocent, yet he sends him to his death without any finding of guilt. He too gets what he wants – peace – but at the cost of the only truly innocent man ever to appear before him.

While breaking the rules is nothing new, we live in a society that is quickly becoming disenfranchised with the whole concept of law. Whether it's driving too fast or downloading movies off the Internet, much of our society says that you're not guilty if you break the law – you're only guilty if you're caught. Some morality-based laws that were once on the books like cohabiting before marriage have simply been ignored or are disappearing altogether. I think it's true in all cultures, but in particular, Americans don't like being told what to do or what not to do. We often break the rules thinking that there will be no consequences – that nobody else will be hurt. But what Jesus has taught us through the church is that we are interconnected. If one person suffers, the rest of us do whether we know it or not. There is no victimless crime.

The reason for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the injustice we do to God and to others. All of us are guilty of it. We get especially angry at BP because we see it as a nameless and faceless corporation, but we are especially responsible for our injustices because we hurt others personally. While the law God gave to Moses gave clear moral and legal structure to the nation of Israel and set them apart as a unique people dedicated to Him, that wasn't its only purpose. The spiritually wise person would realize that it was impossible to keep every tenet of the Law entirely, that we are unjust people, each and every one of us, and that realization turns the wise person to God to ask for forgiveness and mercy. Jesus made this truth clear. But through His death, He redeems us and washes us clean of the injustices we've done to God and to others. We do not need to live in fear but in joy. When we believe in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!

We do, however, need to be reminded of what Paul said in Romans 7:12 – “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.” The next time you are tempted to break the law – whether it's a human law or God's law – remember that we have a higher calling, not to sin but to holiness, not to injustice but integrity. Forgiveness is given to us to free us to live in righteousness – as Paul says in Romans 6:2, “We have died to sin; how can we go on living in it?”

Injustice starts with breaking the rules, but the second point shows us why injustice continues: *injustice flourishes because of cowardice, the “blame game,” and superficiality.* Pilate was spineless, plain and simple. He knew Jesus was innocent and repeated it three times to the crowd. In the midst of the uproar, he loses his nerve and gives in to the insane request to have Jesus crucified. This was a man who had Roman garrisons under his command; he could have protected Jesus. But in his cowardice, when he comes face-to-face with the angry mob, he caves. But that's not the only thing he does. Verse 25 says that Pilate “delivered Jesus to their will.” He refuses to take responsibility. In Matthew, Pilate makes it more clear, literally washing his hands and saying, “I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.”

We can clearly see Pilate's cowardice and refusal to take responsibility, but superficiality? That charge lies with the crowd. The crowd isn't made up of Jesus' closest disciples; they feared for their lives – part of the whole issue of cowardice. But at the same time, many in this crowd cheered Jesus as He entered into Jerusalem. They sang songs and praised Him. But now they want Him crucified? Maybe it's because He didn't meet their expectations of the warrior king who would defy Rome...funny, then, that they would appeal to a Roman to have Him executed. Maybe His message was too difficult. Maybe they were convinced by the religious leaders they trusted. Or maybe it was human nature...they followed the prevailing winds where they blew, one day praising Jesus, the next demanding His death, because that's what everyone else was doing. They were superficial in their faith; when things didn't turn out just as planned, when they didn't gain sudden health and wealth, when they didn't see Rome fall in a day, they fell and fell hard.

Now the parallels in our modern day are pretty obvious. Injustice continues not so much because people do evil but because others are unwilling to say "no." I'm reminded of the famous poem by Pastor Martin Niemöller, who was arrested by Hitler in 1937 for opposing his regime. Many of you will know it. It says, "They came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me and by that time no one was left to speak up." We hear of this every day on the news, when neighbors watch a crime but stop nothing, when politicians make speeches about the terrible things going on but plan nothing, when we ourselves feel great concern about poverty and homelessness and suffering right in front of us yet do nothing.

There are three problems, but one solution to them all – self-sacrifice. It's not something we like to think about, but had Pilate or members of the crowd dissented, while the injustice may have still occurred, they would have had no guilt. They might be remembered as the truly just in the middle of a great evil. But in our own lives, even little self-sacrifices can make a big difference. Let's say you want to stand for the rights of the Chinese to worship without threat of persecution. As a nation, we help that injustice because we are indebted to China; we like to buy stuff that they make at a low cost. It might take not buying items made in China, which these days would be a cost sacrifice. It would be a sacrifice of time to write a congressperson urging for China's human rights record to play a part in trade negotiations; it would be a sacrifice to get to know some Chinese here in America that have fled persecution. But if that's what God has laid on your heart, that's something you can do. Buying fair trade coffee where farmers and laborers in other countries are paid fairly for their coffee beans costs more money, but once you're aware of the ramifications, it's a just thing to do. We can't fix every injustice, but we can make a difference.

And that leads us right into the final point: *even in the middle of injustice, Christ saves, redeems, and restores.* There's something lost to us in translation of this story, and it's the significance of Barabbas. Barabbas was a murderer and an insurrectionist; John adds the charge of thief to the list. Of anybody we've met in Luke, Barabbas is the only person who actually has committed any of the crimes charged against Jesus. But the parallels don't end there.

Aramaic was the common language spoken in Israel at the time of Jesus; Jesus knew Hebrew and perhaps Greek, but He would have normally spoken Aramaic. It's why even the gospel writers may not agree exactly word-for-word on what Jesus said; it's because they were translating His words from Aramaic to Greek, the language of the Roman Empire. Here's what gets interesting...the word "abba" is an endearing term for "father" in Aramaic, and it was sometimes a proper name. "Bar" is an attachment that means "son." That's how you knew who someone was...Jesus's full and complete name would have been Jesus bar Joseph. The gospels don't tell us Barabbas' first name, but they tell us the important part. The true Son of God, the real "Son of the Father," dies in the place of Barabbas, the "son of the father" who deserved death.

Jesus dies for the crowd too, and for us. Notice in Isaiah 53, which we heard this morning, Jesus goes as a silent lamb to the slaughter. We've been seeing the parallels the last several weeks. But also notice how Isaiah 53 says that "by oppression and judgment he was taken away." In today's passage, Luke tells us how with one voice they all cried, "Away with this man!" It's yet again fulfillment of prophecy. But what's more, we were once a part of the crowd, ones who said "away with Him!" We condemned Him by our words and actions. But as Romans 5:8 says, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus came to be justice in the midst of injustice. His own unjust death tipped the scales, and He forever conquered death by rising again. He is proof that there is true justice...and true mercy and compassion.

Now we have the chance to show His love and justice to all people. We can take on injustice one hug and one dollar at a time. Mother Teresa reminds us how we can combat injustice in our world. She said, "Very few people in the world can do great things. But many people can do small things with great kindness." We can offer Christ's salvation and redemption and restoration each and every day by the way we act and the things we do. Christ didn't tell us that we could rid the world of injustice – He made statements like, "you will always have the poor with you." Until His return, we will live in a world made imperfect by sin. But Christ is coming, and as citizens of God's Kingdom, we have the responsibility to live as if that kingdom was already fully in the here and now. We don't have to wait for God to make everything right. He wants us, His children, to start that process, through giving of ourselves. This week, I encourage you to pray and ask God, "How can I show the love and kindness of God to someone this very week?" Even simple acts of compassion, a soda given to a stranger or a big tip to your waiter after church today, can show the love of God in the middle of an unjust world.

This Sunday is Father's Day. It's not always the most recognized holiday. We don't respect fathers like we once did. Our culture's legacy of divorce and abandonment have made many homes fatherless. But Jesus was known as God's own Son, the Son of the eternal Father. He prayed to His Father, He did what He saw His Father doing, and He went to the cross to please His Father, who raised Him from the dead and has given Him an eternal Kingdom. As we remember our fathers today, let us remember most our Eternal Father, the one to whom the Son gave all glory, the one who Psalm 9:8 tells us will judge the world in righteousness and govern the peoples with justice. As we await the savior's coming with joy, let us pray that justice be done, and pray that the Holy Spirit would guide us to defend the oppressed in our own midst today.