

Jesus, Barabbas, and Pilate

Mark 15: 1 – 15

In 2005, the Roche Pharmaceutical Company began an aggressive advertising campaign promoting its prescription treatment for Hepatitis C. The ads featured a close-up of an individual with a badly-marred face, and a caption that read: “*If Hep C attacked your face instead of your liver, you'd do something about it.*” That “out of sight, out of mind” attitude is pretty common in our human nature, don’t you think?

Most people in the world, especially Christians, I would imagine, believe that there is such a thing as sin. And further, most would say that it is harmful, and that sin has negative consequences in our lives. And while there would be a range of what people in our society consider sin to be – there would be some gray areas for many – yet, I think it is safe to say that if we were to hold most people to their own definition of sin you’d find, (if we could all be completely honest), that it is still very difficult for our knowledge to change our behavior.

In other words, we all *know* that we fall short – not only of God’s standards, but our *own*! We know that this ultimately makes our lives less full. Nothing good comes from moral failures. But truth be told, we don’t really think it is that big a deal. Not enough to change.

Maybe we should ask ourselves: *What if sin attacked my face?*¹

What if we could see what it is doing to our souls? What if we could have a ‘soul MRI’ that would give us a clear picture of what is happening inside us? In those secret places. (Actually, I think we already do have that ... it’s called “Lent”!)

Christians have gotten a bad rap in our culture as being people who are obsessed with sin, and particularly a few particular sins (usually those that we don’t personally have a problem with!) And maybe that’s somewhat deserved. I think the problem might be that we so easily forget Jesus’ teaching about not pointing out the splinter in our neighbor’s eye while ignoring the logs in our own! And not living up to our own words makes our observations about other people’s behavior kind of shrill sounding.

¹ Roche Pharmaceuticals, www.hepcfights.com

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On the other hand, you can't read very far in the Bible without coming to the conclusion that sin is more than just some ceremonial issue that keeps us out of the 'God club'; sin is a fundamental, foundational problem of the human condition. It has far reaching consequences.

As we observe people in our culture who 'fall from grace' – the Allan Iversons, the Tiger Woods, and the Bernie Madoffs of the world – again, if we're being honest, we can certainly relate to an observation that is attributed to the English evangelical preacher and martyr, John Bradford (circa 1510–1555). When seeing criminals being led to the scaffold in London, he is said to have uttered something like this – “There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford”, (He didn't enjoy that grace for long, however, as he was burned at the stake in 1555.)

I've always considered that to be a profound statement, an expression of an understanding of just how deeply corrupted a soul is by sin - i.e., we are *all* capable, under the right circumstance, of committing *all* those offenses, and sins that we see paraded before us practically every day in the newspapers & media. And if we think we're *not* capable, then we are probably more closely in danger of a moral failure than we realize.

Brian McClaren tried to help his congregation understand that point like this:

***If life is a **machine**, then sin is a bad gear that makes the machine malfunction.*

*If life is a **kingdom**, then sin is a terrorist movement in the kingdom.*

*If life is a **family**, then sin is a feud between family members.*

*If life is a **body**, then sin is an untreated disease that poisons the whole system.*

*If life is a **garden**, then sin is the army of slugs that eat your tomatoes.*

*If life is a **computer**, then sin is a virus that destroys your hard drive.*

On the Bill Moyers PBS special *Genesis*, panelists from diverse religious backgrounds spoke to the issues raised in the first book of the Bible. After the rest of the panel tiptoed around the problem of sin, which has beset human beings since the fall, bestselling novelist Mary Gordon got sick of all the political correctness. She simply said: “People just aren't right. There is something fundamentally wrong with us that *we cannot fix ourselves.*”

The Scripture writers, from Genesis to Revelation, would certainly agree with that assessment. [Not 'somebody else', either... US.]

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One of the things that we are trying to accomplish in our Lenten Series, 24 Hours That Changed the World, especially for those of you who are participating in our Small Group studies, is to help us all *consider* the events of the last 24 hours of Jesus' life, but also to put ourselves in the shoes (the sandals?) of the participants, the characters that are involved in this great drama.

I know in the group that is meeting in our home, we've had some honest discussions where we're realizing that we're a lot more like, say, Peter that we want to admit. The truth is, we've all denied Jesus... every time we've walked away from an injustice when we could have done/ said *something*, every time we've chosen the easy way over a way that might cost us more than we want to 'give' ... you know what I'm talking about. ("I don't know him!")

Jesus said, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" – we get that, don't we? Peter is not far from reality for any of us. (There, but for the grace of God, go I!)

And even Judas – is there anyone here who has never betrayed our Lord? It's easier not to think about it; and because of God's patience with us, we get away with a lot... there are no *immediate* consequences, typically, to our behavior, so we might come to think that those lapses, those words, those choices, are not that big a deal. ("I deserve a 'fling' ... "it's just the way I am". But we'd be wrong there.)

In this week's Scripture passage we find three more places with which we can identify – three more points of contact between ourselves and the last 24 Hours of Jesus' life: the individuals Barabbas, and Pilate, and also the collective Crowds that called for Jesus' crucifixion.

We know the song, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" The answer that the writer wants us to consider is, "Yes, I was there", in the sense that these events – the Cross, the suffering, was done for me and for you... we were there, long before we had committed our first offense, we were there long before we had any inkling of the extent of our rebellion.

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But there is another sense in which we can sing that song. “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” That answers, “O yes... I was there. I was Peter denying him. I was Judas betraying him. It was *my sin* that drove the nails into his hands and feet.

“I was Barabbas”... I love the way Adam Hamilton explains in his book the parallel that he sees between the release of another Jesus by Pontius Pilate (his full name was Jesus Barabbas) and the way that Jesus took *our* place on the Cross. Let me share a few of his words:

On this day, Pilate had two prisoners before him: Jesus of Nazareth and Barabbas. Both were charged with leading insurrections and with wishing to be king of the Jews. Pilate turned to the people and said, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” (Matthew 27: 21) Would it be Barabbas, who had robbed and murdered, or Jesus of Nazareth, who had done nothing wrong – the Jesus who loved lost people, taught them about the kingdom of God, healed the sick, and blessed many?

Pilate apparently thought the people would ask for Jesus, he was all too happy to oblige; but they asked instead for Barabbas, and in the end it was Barabbas he released. In Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*, Barabbas seemed to comprehend that this innocent man would be nailed to the cross in his place. Barabbas would be the first sinner for whom Jesus died. This is one small picture of the substitutionary work of atonement Jesus performed with his death; for we, like Barabbas, have been spared, with Jesus suffering the punishment we deserve.

We talked about this a couple of weeks ago when we looked at the Garden of Gethsemane. Theologians and thinking Christians throughout the ages have tried to understand and explain *how* it is that the Cross of Jesus brings about our salvation. And while there are some “Theories of the Atonement” that are clearly not Biblically supported, some others together, help us incorporate the wealth of history and theology that we find in our Scriptures.

The main picture that we have of the Atonement (what Jesus accomplished on the Cross) is called “The Substitutionary Theory” of the Atonement.

Theologian John R. W. Stott sums it up in this way:

“For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone. God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.”

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That is the Atonement. A powerful statement.

As Hamilton correctly points out, this theory/ explanation is confusing for many today – in our culture. It undoubtedly was easier to grasp in a day when animals were routinely sacrificed to atone for sin – and indeed, the connection between the Cross and the Old Testament system of sacrifices is critical (and something that we have been pointing out all along.) You cannot understand the Cross or Atonement apart from the Old Testament.

The problem, Hamilton points out, is that “Today we think that we are not that bad, that we do not really need Jesus to die on the cross for us... but...” (he continues) “there are moments when the idea of Christ’s death being *for us* comes into focus, moments when we have done something so awful and our shame is so great that we know there is no way we can save ourselves. It is in those moments we find ourselves drawn to the cross and the understanding that Christ suffered for us. We look at the cross and realize that a price was already paid for us.”

This is not a message of bad news. If you leave this service, and the only thing you take away from this message is that “We are bad”, or worse, “Pastor Steve thinks I’m bad” then I have failed... miserably... in this message.

What I’m trying to do is to walk with you to the foot of the Cross...and realize that this was a price willingly paid by God himself for your sin and my sin... for us.

So in Barabbas we see an illustration – a very literal illustration - of how this was going to work. Jesus took his place, Barabbas was free. And he then had his choice as to what to do with his life from that moment on. I see myself in Barabbas.

But we can see ourselves, too, in the person of Pontius Pilate. Now, Pilate, according to history, was an evil man. In this case, however, even he recognized that it was jealousy and pettiness over things that really had no effect on his life or rule that caused Jesus to be placed before him that night. And it seems that increasingly, he became more and more uneasy about turning Jesus over to the mob.

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His wife had a restless night and she told him: “This is an innocent man.” He marveled at Jesus’ lack of self-interest, in his unwillingness to respond to the charges against him (something I’m going to come back to in a moment). He asks the people: “What evil has he done?” He states: “I find no fault in him!” He goes to the length of having a basin of water brought out, and he washes his hands in front of the people – to absolve himself of any responsibility. (Which is where we get the expression ‘I’m going to wash my hands of this’, meaning to absolve ourselves from any responsibility.)

But again, can’t we see *ourselves* in this act? The ugly truth is that Pilate was willing to beat, punish, humiliate Jesus, and ultimately send him to death... to please the crowds, rather than to do what he *knew* was right, because of what it would cost him. Can I ask you once again: “Has anyone here ever gone against their conscience, against the Holy Spirit’s leading in your life because you were too afraid to stand up against a crowd? Or even against one person, who had influence over you, that you didn’t want to cross, or annoy?”

Were you there? “Yes, I was there... I was Peter... I was Judas... I was Barabbas... and I was Pilate.”

And I was part of the Crowd, too. We sing another song in church here, called “How Great the Father’s Love for Us”. It was a number of times of singing through that song before I could get through it without my voice breaking: particularly on the second verse, which goes like this

Behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon His shoulders... Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers... It was my sin that held Him there until it was accomplished; His dying breath has brought me life. I know that it is finished.

Some of the same people who shouted “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday were the ones shouting, “Crucify him!” on Friday. And we think, “I would have never done that!” Again, let me share a word from Adam Hamilton about how that came about. I think there is some great insight here:

Pilate stood before the early morning crowd offering them a choice. They would be permitted to request the release of one would-be messiah while condemning the other to death. Matthew tells us that Barabbas’ name was actually “Jesus Barabbas” (Matthew 27:16). The name “Barabbas”

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means “son of the Father,” and the named “Jesus “ means “Savior; so Matthew makes clear the crowd was being given a choice between two messianic figures. If you picture yourself as part of that crowd, which one do you pick? One is going to lead by force; throw out the Romans; reclaim your tax money, wealth, and prosperity; and restore the strength of the Jewish kingdom. The other’s leadership involves loving these same oppressors, serving them as they dwell among you, doubling the service they demand of you. Whom do you wish to see freed? Whom do you wish to see destroyed?

When we see the choice in that way, it is not so difficult to understand the crowd’s choice of Barabbas over Jesus. They chose the path of physical strength, military might, and lower taxes over the path of peace through sacrificial love.”

Because the latter was so much harder... and they couldn’t see the point of - the ‘payoff’ was too far ahead. Sin is a fundamental problem in our human condition.

Brian McClaren said this:

“You may think sin is a useless category. You may even feel sin is a psychologically damaging way to look at life. In fact, one of the reasons many people turn their backs on the Christian faith is because all the talk of sin seems depressing and sick. And no doubt there are many religious people who have a pathological misunderstanding of sin. But I hope you'll understand how important it is to have a proper understanding of what sin is and what its ramifications are for our lives. I hope you'll realize it's as important to understand sin in living a full life as it is to understand speed limits and lanes and acceleration and braking in driving a car.²”

Let me close with this: Pilate, as I mentioned a few moments ago, was amazed at Jesus’ unwillingness to defend himself against his accusers. Hamilton, and many others, have seen in his silence, not only an acceptance of the clear path that God the Father laid out for him (something he came to peace with in the Garden of Gethsemane); but they also see a conscious choice that Jesus was making (i.e., through his silence) which would bring to mind to the people a great prophecy of the coming Messiah.

In Isaiah 53 we read

² Brian McClaren, "Sin 101: Why Sin Matters," Preaching Today #243

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*He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

So, in Jesus' silence before Pilate, the people's mind went to this passage. A passage that includes these amazing words:

⁴ *Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.*
⁵ *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*
⁶ *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*
...¹² *he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*

Sin is a foundational issues in our human nature. At some point we all need to come face to face with its ugliness. And in that moment, Lord willing, we will be also be aware that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is greater than all our sins.

I want to close with a short clip from the film Amazing Grace. The film is about the life of John Wilberforce, who practically single-handedly brought down the slave trade in England. In this scene Wilberforce is meeting with John Newton – the former captain of a slave ship. And Newton is expressing his deep regret and remorse over his past...

[Show clip]

Of course, John Newton was the composer of the words to the great hymn Amazing Grace. And it is said that the tune was drawn from the melodies that he heard coming from the bowels of the ships that he commanded.

Amazing Grace... it is enough. For all our sin.