



We Are All Barabbas

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 27:11-26

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Beloved, as we have been preaching through the arrest and the trials of Jesus, there are certain themes that continue to resound throughout the story – the sovereign will that ensures that Christ will be condemned to death on a cross by wicked men and through which Christ would redeem elect sinners from the curse of the Law; the submission of Jesus to the will of the Father and His active determination to give up His life as an atonement for sin – to suffer injustice in order to satisfy the just wrath of God against sinners in His body on the tree; the compassion and faithfulness of Christ to His people despite the momentary failure of their faith; the total depravity of man – of Judas, of Caiaphas, of the Sanhedrin; and of course, the utter impeccability, excellence, perfection and innocence of Jesus Christ. In fact, that is one of the main reasons behind all of these incessant examinations of Jesus. It is to prove that He is the Lamb with spot or blemish who can take away the sins of the world, the beloved Son with whom the Father is well pleased, to prove that He is holy, undefiled, separate from sinners. We see more of the same today in the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate, the procurator, the Roman governor of Judea. As this text describes the trial and conviction of Jesus and the pardon of Barabbas, Matthew does not give to us the full account of Jesus trial before Pilate. So we are going to bring in some of the other gospel accounts, as we trace the actual trial of Christ before the civil authorities, a trial that would end in Christ's crucifixion. Let's look at the trial of Jesus.

The Trial of Jesus (v. 11-14) Immediately after finding Jesus guilty of blasphemy and sentencing him to death, the Sanhedrin set out to see Pilate in order to see their wishes come to fruition. Now they had to come up with some kind of charge that would matter to Pilate. Pilate would not be very concerned about some kind of religious squabble. He would not get involved in something like that. So they have to come up with a charge that they thought would catch the ear of Pilate and get them what they were looking for. John actually gives us a picture of the opening exchange between the religious leaders and Pilate in John 18: "Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but

could eat the Passover. (The actual Passover meal had already been eaten and so John is referring to the Feast of unleavened Bread that followed it that was collectively referred to as the Passover) So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you." Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die." (John 18:28–32, ESV) Now do you see the foolishness of the Sanhedrin? Pilate plainly asks them the charge and their answer is in essence is to tell Pilate that they wouldn't have brought Him before the governor if He wasn't doing something bad! It is a farce, right? But the Sanhedrin do give their end game away – they want Jesus dead and only Pilate can do that.

Conspiring on the fly, they come with some charges that will force Pilate to take them seriously. Luke says: "And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king." (Luke 23:2, ESV)

Now let's give Pilate some credit for at least a little intelligence here. Clearly one sight of Jesus was enough to make this seasoned governor know that Jesus that was no insurrectionist, no terrorist, no revolutionary, and no earthly king bent on overthrowing the Romans. Still, in order to cover his bases, he has to ask the question. And that is where our text picks up this morning.

"Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." (Matthew 27:11, ESV) We have heard these words before from Jesus, haven't we? Pilate asks the question, expecting to get a denial from Christ but instead Jesus says to him – "You say so. You are confessing the truth." At that Pilate is a little confused and John tells us that in order to talk to Jesus more freely and to question Him without the watching eyes of the Sanhedrin, he takes Jesus into his palace. John records that conversation for us. Let's look at it in John 18, starting in verse 33: "So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" (John 18:33–35, ESV) Pilate is clearly confused and bothered as to why Jesus would not defend Himself. He was used to people shouting their innocence, accusing other people, turning suspicion away from themselves but not Jesus. So Pilate has to know, "What have you done? Who are you? Why does everyone want you dead?"

And Jesus answers: "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him." (John 18:36–38, ESV) My Kingdom is not of this world – Christ's kingdom is greater than anything this world could hope for. It is eternal, untouchable, unchanging, unshakable, incorruptible, powerful, and beyond human comprehension. It is the Kingdom that takes precedence over every other Kingdom, it is a kingdom which demands the supreme loyalty of all of its subjects. Christ's followers do not pursue an earthly throne for Christ – that is too small. His throne is in heaven.

Jesus is saying, "I am a king. All those who receive the truth know that I am a king. For this reason I was born like other human beings, and for this reason I have come into the world (from another realm, from heaven, descended into this sin ridden world) to bear witness to the truth."

Jesus bears witness to the truth because He is the truth incarnate. Truth is certain and it is embodied in Jesus Christ. It is not subjective, or something that is decided by majority opinion. It is not my truth or your truth. This is the truth --not the Baptist truth or the evangelical truth – this is the Truth, capital T. We have a real God who sent a real Savior, into a real world, to save real sinners, from real sin, that they might experience real forgiveness, in order to live real life, and inherit a real heaven. No other religion makes those same claims. That is why one religion is right and the others are wrong. That's the absolute truth. It is true whether anyone believes in it or not. It is true whether anyone agrees with it or not. It is true whether anyone likes it or not. This is the absolute truth because it comes from an absolute God, and it is the foundation of life itself. God created truth, and the world has been built upon it. You don't break God's truth, it breaks you if you fail to follow it.

When Jesus spoke the truth to Pilate about his Kingship, Pilate could not comprehend what Jesus was saying because He could not understand the eternal nature of truth. What Pilate couldn't see ... what the Jewish leaders couldn't see -- what even Jesus' disciples couldn't see at this point was that Jesus was indeed a king -- that he would rule over more people than King Herod or Tiberias Caesar or any king or queen since then. None of them could imagine that

billions of people would call Jesus “Lord.” They couldn't imagine that people in unknown lands on far-away continents would build churches like West Salem, and hospitals, and orphanages and colleges in praise of His name. None of them could foresee that men and women all over the world, like us, would bow our heads and raise our hands and lay down our lives and sing our songs to worship Jesus. None of them could envision that Jesus' reign as Messiah would be inaugurated with his crucifixion or that his life and death and the resurrection that followed was part of God's plan to save His people from sin and death and create His church. None of them could see, because they would not receive the truth.

But even more, beloved, Pilate did not care about the truth. He cared about one thing – himself – that was it – self-preservation ruled his soul. Truth meant nothing to him; pragmatism, what would work out best for him, what would preserve him, was all that mattered. He wanted to stay in power and he wanted to keep his head. Though some pastors kind of romanticize who Pilate was (no pun intended), the truth is, he was a cruel, manipulative, crass kind of man. He absolutely hated the Jews, hated dealing with them since they were self-promoting manipulators just like him. He hated being stuck in Judea, was hoping for some kind of promotion out of this place. His desire to release Christ was less about the truth of Christ's innocence – although that was a nice bonus and added an air of respectability to Pilate – and more about wanting to stick it to the Jewish leaders. You see, Pilate was barely holding onto his governorship. He had done some foolhardy and deliberately provocative things. Too much to list here. Suffice to say, both his judgment and his fitness to rule Judea were already being questioned by his superiors in Rome. One more notorious incident could result in Pilate's removal from office.

Pilate's driving force -- his proclivity for self-preservation -- made him resistant to recognizing and believing and acting on the truth. And that is the characteristic of most, if not all, rejecters of the gospel. Though they will offer resistance to the truth, might try to mount some defense, calling it unbelievable or try to poke holes in it, the real issue is that they want desperately to preserve themselves – to preserve their imagined autonomy, to preserve their pet sin, to preserve their reputation, to preserve their appearance of godliness, to preserve their self-esteem. Self-preservation is a damning sin.

Pilate had to do something with this Jesus, but what? How could he use the “truth” to his advantage? He's on the horns of dilemma. Hoping he can pass the buck and avoid all of this, he tells the Sanhedrin: “I find no guilt in him.” Luke records the response of the Jewish leaders: But they were urgent, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.” (Luke 23:5 ,ESV) The leaders are adamant. They kept accusing Jesus

over and over again, trying to get Pilate to bite on something, anything. Jesus must be dealt with.

Pilate, however, does pick up on something the chief priests had said – specifically that Jesus was stirring up the people in Galilee. Hoping to get rid of the problem, he ships Jesus off to Herod, who was the tetrarch, a sort of king, so that he can deal with this Galilean problem. But it is to no avail. After Herod mocked Jesus, he did nothing but ship Jesus back to Pilate. Pilate must have been shocked and bothered when the Sanhedrin returned with Jesus and a huge crowd of onlookers in tow. Things were only getting further out of hand, and now it would be harder than ever for Pilate to end the matter without creating a scandal that might get back to Rome—or worse, starting a riot on the busiest day of the year in Jerusalem. Either way, Pilate’s career was hanging in the balance.

The accusations begin to fly again: “But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?” But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.” (Matthew 27:12–14, ESV) Why won’t Jesus defend Himself? Why won’t he give Pilate the pretext that he is seeking to let Him go free? Here’s why -- He says nothing and offers no defense to ensure that He will die for your sins. In His silence, Jesus is speaking deafening truth – that He loves and desires to obey His Father and that He loves and desires to deliver you from hell. How would not do anything that would stand in the way of the torture and death appointed to Him by His Father to redeem you from the bondage of sin and death and eternal wrath. In His silence He thunderously proclaims His love for His sheep.

And again, Pilate is forced to do something. This problem is not going away. He has to preserve himself, but how? In what I am sure Pilate thought was a stroke of genius, he comes up with a plan, a plan that will turn the tables on the Sanhedrin. He will manipulate the crowd of Jews standing before him to set Jesus free. He will give them a choice between the worst criminal in custody and Jesus. Yet, much to his chagrin,

The Crowd Chooses Barabbas (v. 15-26) Look at it with me. “Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.” (Matthew 27:15–16, ESV) It was a tradition to set one prisoner free during the celebration of the Passover feast, anyone that the crowd wanted to have set free and so Pilate offers them a choice. He deliberately chooses the worst of the worst – Barabbas – and puts him up against Jesus. To call Barabbas a “notorious prisoner” is an understatement. Barabbas was, according to the testimony of the other gospels, an insurrectionist, a thief and a murderer. He was the worst of the worst.

“So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.” (Matthew 27:17–18, ESV) Do you see what he is doing? Pilate knew that the Sanhedrin were jealous of Jesus – jealous of his character, jealous of His popularity with the people, jealous of His ministry. So his plan is to have the people release Jesus, and further tweak the Sanhedrin, infuriating them and getting their goat. It is a great plan, he thinks. But before the people can answer, he is interrupted by an important message from his wife.

“Besides (better translated “and then”), while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.”” (Matthew 27:19, ESV) Pilate’s wife, Claudia, interrupts the proceedings sending to him an important message. That was never done. Whenever Pilate was on the judgment seat, no-one was supposed to interrupt him but this is important. To the Romans and the Greeks, a dream carried heavy, heavy weight. No mention of the content of the dream or of its source, but it is enough to shake Pilate’s wife and no doubt to strengthen his own resolve to be done with all of this and it is further testimony to the sinlessness and perfection of Jesus.

The Sanhedrin seizes the opportunity that the interruption provides and Matthew says: “Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.” (Matthew 27:20, ESV) Interruption over, Matthew says: “The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.”” (Matthew 27:21, ESV) Pilate had to be shocked. How could he be outmaneuvered? This was a slam-dunk! This cannot be happening. It is then that he asks the question of questions: “Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?”” (Matthew 27:22a, ESV)

Without realizing it, He asks the question of questions. Pilate found himself in an inescapable dilemma as to what to do with Jesus Christ. But Pilate is not alone. Every human being on the face of the earth faces that very same question, what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ? That is a question that faces every man and woman alive. And the answer to it that you give will determine your eternal destiny. The response of the people is unanimous and resounding. “They all said, “Let him be crucified!” And he said, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”” (Matthew 27:22–23, ESV) Stirred up by the religious leaders, the crowd, some of whom had lauded His triumphal entry, not all but some, now all together they cry out for Christ’s blood.

And Pilate knows that it is wrong. It's wrong, it's unjust and he knows it but he does not have the courage or the will to do anything to stop it. All he can think to do is to preserve himself. He is the consummate politician, trying to pass the blame, trying to evade his responsibility. With great pomp, he acts. "So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."" (Matthew 27:24, ESV) Pilate was expressing contempt for the fact that they had railroaded him into becoming a part of the conspiracy against Jesus. He was giving them what they wanted, but he wanted to make it clear that he was not doing it willingly. Of course, no ritual hand washing could truly absolve Pilate of the guilt he bore. He was as guilty as the rest, and the fact that he participated out of political expediency rather than overt hatred for Jesus did not nullify or minimize his guilt in the least. He could wash his hands raw, but he knew he was guilty. No amount of water cannot wash away bloodguilt, only the blood of Jesus can. Pilate tries to absolve himself of guilt, but not the Jews that were gathered.

"And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"" (Matthew 27:25, ESV) That is my prayer, but not in the way that they meant it. Willful unbelief gripped their hearts and souls. Together they declared that the Son of God was guilty, less to be desired than an insurrectionist, murderer, and thief. They rejected Christ and cried for His death and in the same breath accepted the full responsibility for doing this. The truth is, this is the cry, the heart of every rebel sinner, of everyone who refuses Christ – hold me guilty for His blood if He is innocent!! I will not have Him to rule over me. It seems unbelievable, but, beloved, it was the cry of our own hearts until the day that God gripped us by His grace and drew us to Christ as our Savior and Lord. And listen, whenever we choose that which is more appealing, more to be desired, more to be valued over Christ we make the same choice, the same kind of decision that prefers Barabbas over the Son of God.

The scene ends Matthews tells us in verse 26: "Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified." (Matthew 27:26, ESV) Christ was scourged – beaten and mocked, whipped with a cat –o nine tails, the flesh torn from His back, treated with contempt and scorn, mercilessly abused in preparation for His coming crucifixion. And Barabbas, the criminal, the rebel, the murderer, the thief – someone else had taken his place, someone else had been found to hang on his cross between two others – the place of infamy— someone else was punished and took his place on the accursed tree and he was set

free. It was the most serendipitous day in his life, the most providential moment of his life. He must have thought how lucky he was. The guilty went free, the innocent One took His place.

So what is the point of Matthew recording these events for us? Is it simply to set down the facts of Christ's trial, of Pilate's self-preservation, the Jews self-delusion and bloodthirstiness, the serendipitous release of Barabbas? Is that it? No, that's not all. Not by a long shot. What we need to see this morning is that we are all Barabbas.

We Are Barabbas. Do you see that, beloved? We are all Barabbas. Hidden in plain sight in this text is the amazing picture of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ in our place, a testimony to His saving work. God, through all of these mock trials, orchestrates an unforgettable scene for us – the picture of our own deliverance.

Do you see? We are all Barabbas –all of us, by nature – we were that man. Just think about the way that he is described. First his name, Barabbas -- it means "son of his father". We could all be called that. We are all sons (or daughters) of our natural father Adam. His fallen nature is present in us all. He was a rebel, an insurrectionist. We are all naturally rebels, proud resisters of the rightful authority of God. We have sinfully rebelled against God's holy law. We are all born with and manifest a rebellious nature toward God.

We were robbers – determined to rob God of His authority, of His honor, of His glory by refusing to worship Him or obey Him, determined to take His good creation, even our lives, and use them for our own glory without regard to Him.

And we were murderers in our hearts. Before we knew the grace of God, we were God's enemies; if we had the chance, we would have murdered God. There was nothing innocent about us, nothing innocent and sweet about our heart when it came to God.

Yet, the sinless One, the Lord Jesus Christ, was made sin for us and suffered the just punishment due to our sins as our Substitute. When the holy Lord God made Christ sin for us, sin was imputed to him, and he was slain in our place. God hung his Son up in our place

between two thieves. God forsook his well-beloved Son. God killed his Son as our Substitute. And by a marvelous transfer of grace, all for whom Christ Jesus was made sin are made the very righteousness of God in him through faith.

In the very same way that the Lord Jesus Christ died in Barabbas' place at Calvary, in a physical sense, and Barabbas must be set free, so too everyone for the Son of God died at Calvary must be set free. It is not possible for the law to punish my Substitute and punish me too. Justice will not allow it. Not one soul for whom Jesus Christ died shall be found in hell. The cross of Christ can never be discovered a miscarriage. The blood of Christ cannot be spilled in vain. That is real substitution.

How that ought to cause us to rejoice that our great Substitute was proved in every respect to be perfect and innocent, righteous beyond compare. Who among us can number his sins? No one. It is impossible. We do not do the things we ought and do the things we ought not to do every day of our lives. But here is our comfort. Jesus Christ the righteous stood in our place to pay the debt we owed and fulfill the demands of the law, the penalty of the law we have broken and despised. He satisfied all its demands. He accomplished all its requirements. In him God's elect have perfectly fulfilled all the law. The eyes of a holy God behold us in Christ, clothed with Christ's perfect righteousness, and made the righteousness of God in him. For Christ's sake, God can now say of the believing sinner, what Pilate said of Jesus Christ "I find no fault in him at all." This is the glory of substitution, the very picture that we see illustrated in the substitution of Christ for Barabbas – everything that Christ has done for us. O the blessedness of substitutionary redemption! Because the Son of God was arraigned and condemned before Pilate's seat of judgment, according to the eternal plan of the Father, no believer shall ever be charged or condemned for sin before the bar of God. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1, ESV) There is no condemnation because Christ chose to be condemned for us.

What a continually amazing scene this is as it continues to unfold. Consider what we have seen this morning and ask yourself: What rules my heart, the truth as it is in Christ or the idolatry of self-preservation? How real is the truth in your life? How weighty? What is your ruling passion – the truth of Christ or self-preservation? Self-preservation, self-justification it is so common and it must stop. Jesus died for the ungodly. Stop preserving a false reputation, an imaginary standing, some attempt at preserving our self-esteem. We are all sinners – sinners who need a substitute. Sinners who need to be saved by grace and to continue to be saved by grace.

Here is the truth. I needed Christ to be falsely accused. I needed Christ, to remain silent before Pilate, needed Jesus to be unjustly condemned, needed Jesus to suffer and bleed and die in my place and to rise three days later. I needed Jesus to do all of this for me and so do you! What will you do with Christ? Do you know Him as your only Substitute before the Holy God? The Lord Jesus Christ has offered atonement for sinners, and He is able to cleanse you. He is able to forgive you and remove the penalty of your sins forever, and to give to you everything that you need in order for the fruit of righteousness to be produced in you.

We are all faced with the choice every day, Christ or something else – represented here by Barabbas. How will you choose? What will you do with Christ?

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