

John 18.28-40—The Innocent instead of the Guilty

I. Introduction

- a. As I was working through this passage, I noticed Jesus' name was often missing in the conversations and replaced with "this man." It's often easier to do evil when someone's personhood is downplayed. It's similar to how those in favor of abortion like to use "women's health" or tissue instead of a baby.
- b. But strangely, there's a name in our passage of what the other Gospel writers call, "a notorious criminal" who's name is Barabbas. It seems significant because John doesn't even name all the Twelve disciples. Yet, all four Gospels record Barabbas' name in the story.
- c. John calls him a robber. Matthew identifies him as a notorious prisoner while Mark states that he was one (Mk. 15:7) ⁷ ...among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection. Luke follows a similar description as they call for his release: (Lk. 23:18-19) release to us Barabbas"-- ¹⁹ a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder.
- d. The descriptions cause me to think that Barabbas was not alone and he seemed to be a part of a larger group of rebels. Was he the ringleader or just part of the group? It's hard to know. But you might think that some his gang or those who were sympathetic to his cause might have been the ones calling for his release to get the old gang back together.
- e. However, the ones inciting the crowd for his release were the chief priests.

II. Main Point

- a. The humble, innocent King was born and came into the world to bear witness to the truth.

III. Outline

- a. Religious Hypocrisy and Roman law fulfill God's plan of redemption!
- b. The Ancient of Days was born to bear witness to the truth!
- c. The Innocent for the Guilty—the place we learn the truth!

IV. Exposition

- a. I spent time in the introduction setting up this first point: Religious Hypocrisy
 - i. ...because it's possible that the Jewish religious leaders are doing the right thing by punishing Jesus for blasphemy. He was making himself out to be equal with God. If Jesus isn't the Son of God, then he was guilty of blasphemy. You must decide if he is who he says he is.
 1. Let me quote for the first instance someone blasphemed God and we find that in (Lev. 24:11-17) ¹¹ and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses....¹² And they put him in custody, till the will of the LORD should be clear to them. ¹³ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁴ "Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. ¹⁵ And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. ¹⁶ Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death. (holding off on Verse 17)
 - a. This was the charge for which Jesus died. It's very clear in (Mk. 14:61-64) Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" ⁶² And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." ⁶³ And the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further witnesses do we need? ⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" And they all condemned him as deserving death.
 - i. Why was it common for them to tear their clothes? It was supposed to be an outward sign that one's heart was torn.
 - ii. What's missing in this scene? Weeping. If they are genuinely concerned about the Name being blasphemed then where are the broken hearts?
 - ii. This first point is Religious Hypocrisy.

1. I held off reading Leviticus 24:17 until now. If blasphemy requires a death penalty, so does murder.
 - a. ¹⁷ "Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death.
 - b. Barabbas is a murderer and yet the chief priests lobby for his release. Was the release grace or hypocrisy?
- iii. I find it hard to believe it was grace because these same Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas, the high priest, to the Roman governor's headquarters, to manipulate the judicial system while seeking not to defile themselves by merely entering Pilate's house.
 1. It was early in the morning, around 6am. When they arrive, the Jews will not enter the governor's house. Why? Because they considered the house of a Gentile as unclean and therefore, they would have been defiled and unable to eat the Passover.
 - a. There were tons of ways that would cause them to be unclean and therefore, unable to participate in the feast.
 - b. From eating that which was not kosher to bodily discharge.
 - c. A Jewish family would prepare for Passover by removing all leaven from their home. Of course, we know leaven was a symbol for sin. They would remove any food containing leaven and would sweep the house spotless to remove all possibilities of leaven.
 - i. I find it easy to clean the house but looking into the closets of my heart would be far more difficult.
 2. However, they were seeking the death penalty of someone who was innocent.
 - a. There's something wrong with this scene. Being scrupulous about entering a Gentile's house but having a trial at night, finding NO witnesses that agreed on the charges, changing the charge from theological (blasphemy) to political (insurrection—he's claiming to be the King of the Jews)...that's why we see this a religious hypocrisy.
- iv. Is my conclusion accurate? What was Jesus' assessment of these men?
 1. (Matt. 23:25-28) ²⁵ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. ²⁷ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.
 - a. This is a danger for us all. The image Jesus gives of the whitewashed tomb is striking. Beautiful on the outside but dead on the inside.
 - b. Have you ever heard of someone putting in an empty giving envelope during the offering or something like that? The lengths for which we would go to hide our sin is quite crafty.
 - c. Let's all commit to have integrity...accountability...humility. We need brokenness because humility before the Lord is essential.
 - d. Pray this from (Ps. 139:23-24) ²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! ²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!
- v. Let's move on to how Pilate will respond to the Jewish officials waiting outside. In v. 29 it says he went out to them.
 1. This isn't normal practice but Pilate seems to accommodate them during the feast.
 2. He questions them on what charges have been made against "this man."

- a. Their response is basically, trust us. (Jn. 18:30) "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you."
 - i. If I were going to trial for a capital crime, I would want the prosecutors to bring more than this.
 - 3. Pilate's type of leadership shows up in his reply: (Jn. 18:31) "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."
 - a. We do not know much about Pilate but "Both from biblical and historical sources, scholars have come to know Pilate as a morally weak and vacillating man who...tried to hide his flaws under shows of stubbornness and brutality." (Carson, 590).
 - b. Pilate's reply isn't bad if the Jewish leaders make it sound like it's a theological problem like blasphemy. Pilate doesn't care if Jesus claims to be God. That claim means nothing to him in his understanding. He views the world through the lens of power and politics not the Bible.
 - c. However, the Jews must pitch this in political terms. They can say that Jesus claims to be the King of the Jews in a veiled sort of way. They can mean...he claims to be our Messiah while Pilate hears that statement as political. It's easy to see him as an insurrectionist and Rome would have none of it. Israel was ruled by Rome.
 - i. The Jews seal the deal with this statement: (Jn. 18:31) "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death."
 - 1. They are seeking crucifixion, not stoning as their law required.
 - 2. And it's also possible that being a slave state, they could not carry out the death penalty without Rome's consent.
 - 4. Ironically, this works out to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken about what kind of death he would die.
 - a. Back in Ch. 12 Jesus said, (Jn. 12:32) ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."
 - b. God even used the Roman law to carry out the specific details of His plan of redemption along with the weak leadership of Pilate.
 - c. And religious hypocrites too! I could go on and on how the Lord was in complete control of this plan...every detail.
 - 5. I trust that God is in complete control now...even the details of my life.
- b. This next point: The Ancient of Days was born for the express purpose of bearing witness to the truth.
 - i. First, Pilate goes inside his headquarters to question Jesus. The first thing he mentions is very important.
 - 1. "Are you the King of the Jews?"
 - 2. Either, Jesus wasn't present when Pilate asked for the charges or they had previously made this claim when they asked for Roman soldiers to apprehend Jesus in the garden.
 - 3. Because Jesus asks Pilate, "From you yourself do you say this or another said to you concerning me?"
 - a. Why is this a good question?
 - i. First, especially in cases where your life is on the line, it's really good to know what people mean. Anytime you have a discussion, it's important that both sides have the same definition of the words being used.
 - 1. Just last week in SS, we talked about how one religious group can say that Jesus is God but they mean that in the sense of little "g" god.

- ii. We shouldn't say "yes" or "no" to a question until we know what they mean.
 - b. Jesus cannot give a simple answer until he knows what Pilate means.
 - i. If Pilate meant that Jesus was the promised Messianic King then he would answer, yes.
 - ii. If Pilate meant that he was merely an earthly king who is seeking to take back control of the Promised Land then Jesus would have to say, no.
 - c. Ironically, Jesus has switched the roles. The King of the Jews questions the Roman governor and "the prisoner is the judge." (Carson 593)
 - i. We must not forget that God is in control of this. Things are not out of control. Pilate is not in control. Satan is not in control. God is.
 - ii. Next week's text, Jesus will make this very clear to Pilate and it scares him.
 - d. If Jesus is the King of the Jews, it's very strange that the Jews are handing over their King to Rome.
 - i. Was Israel happy under the reign of Caesar? Is that how it was supposed to be? It seems to me that it was a sign that Israel was not faithful to the covenant and therefore experiencing the curse not blessings of God.
- 4. To Jesus' question, Pilate replies, "Am I a Jew?"
 - a. Why did Pilate ask this question?
 - i. When Jesus asked him where he got this idea that he was the King of the Jews, Pilate contemptuously says...you think this idea came from me? You and your nation are my slaves. Why would I think you are the King of what I govern?
 - ii. In other words, "Are you, my King?"
 - b. Jesus gets his answer but it's not very straightforward.
 - i. Pilate gives the Jews up. Verse 35—Your nation and chief priests have delivered you over to me.
 - ii. There's your answer. That's where the idea came from. And obviously, Pilate has taken it politically not theologically.
- 5. Pilate asks, "What have you done?"
 - a. This obviously points out that Pilate was not satisfied with the charge given to him. He knows there's something else behind this but does he really care to find out?
- ii. Jesus explains what "King of the Jews" means. (Jn. 18:36) "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants (really officials) would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."
 - 1. Jesus wants Pilate and all of us to know that his Kingdom is not from this world.
 - 2. Kingdoms from this world gather officials and a military to take and defend what is theirs. Jesus gathers disciples.
 - 3. But where is Jesus' Kingdom from? What Psalm would I read to know what Jesus means?
 - a. Psalm 2! I should read it all here, but I don't have time. (Ps. 2:6-8) ⁶ "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." ⁷ I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. ⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.
 - b. His Kingdom is from God and its reign is not just over the Jews but the world!
 - 4. Also, Deuteronomy 17 describes what kind of King the LORD will set over the nations.

- a. You really need to go read that chapter. But one of the marks was that this King would not acquire many horses for himself.
 - i. Why is that? Why do you need a lot of horses? For an army, right?
- b. Another was this: (Deut. 17:18-19) ¹⁸ "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them
- c. In other words, God's King was not to be a military force to reckon with but rather One who lead the people by God's word in righteousness to bring glory to the Father.
- d. Is this not what Jesus is saying in (Jn. 18:37) 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."
- e. I know it is! Indeed, Jesus is the Word! He is the way, the truth and the life and no one come to the Father except through him.
- f. Indeed, don't miss part of the point. The Ancient of Days was born. Jesus claims his pre-existence and birth. God came down! He is Immanuel, God with us!
 - iii. I could say a lot right here by way of application. But God's people didn't want to be led by God's word. They wanted to lead themselves.
- c. This last point doesn't need much more to be said. I have already talked about Barabbas. But this point shows us a clear picture of the gospel. It shows us a clear picture of our story. The Innocent in the stead of the guilty. Jesus in our place.
 - i. Pilate finds no fault in Jesus. John doesn't mention it, but even Herod finds no fault in him. Two Rome governors.
 - ii. You must believe that Jesus is innocent. If Jesus is guilty, then his death cannot and would not accomplish anything.
 - iii. Pilate offers to release him. This is no small thing. He would not have even hinted at a release if he had found fault in him. This is another proof that Jesus was in fact innocent.
 - iv. There was this custom to release a prisoner at the Passover.
 - v. The Jews refuse their promised Messiah/King once again and ask for Barabbas who is undoubtedly guilty of murder and insurrection.
 - vi. And here it is...the great exchange. The Innocent for the guilty.

V. Response

- a. If you have been born again, this is what it looks like. Jesus, the Innocent One, dies in your place. And like Barabbas, the guilty one, goes free.
- b. I wonder if we have lost our amazement of what happened to us when God saved us?
- c. Even still, you not see yourself as guilty like Barabbas and have no need of Jesus. Then you can't have him. Until you see your sin and God's holy judgment against you as right then you will never turn to Jesus. But (Rom. 10:9-10) if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.
- d. For those of you who have profess to be followers of Christ, you should make our last song your prayer: "Awake, my soul and sing, of him who died for thee, and hail him as thy matchless King through all eternity"