

“The People on the Road to the Cross”

// Luke 23:1–26 // In Step #19

Luke 23, if you have your Bible...

If you’ve ever driven along the **Blue Ridge Parkway**, you might have seen a little sign that says, “**Eastern Continental Divide**.” It’s the divide that marks the Eastward and Westward slopes of our continent. Everything on the East side of the divide flows down to the Atlantic; everything on the West toward the Gulf of Mexico.

Two **little raindrop friends**, casually falling together from the sky, chatting it up on the way down, the best of friends, land one centimeter apart, on opposite sides of that line, and end up on opposite sides of the planet.

Luke 23 is **the dividing line of eternity**. In Luke 23 we meet several people whose different responses to the cross literally divide them for eternity. Luke records their stories for us **not just because they were part of the historical record**, but because *their* stories are emblematic of how people in all places at all times respond to Jesus.

If you listen close, you’ll hear yourself in one of these groups. I’m going to take the 1st 5 today, and we’ll cover 2 more next week. I want you to think about your life in light of these stories. Which of them best depicts how you respond to Jesus? Because just like those 2 raindrops, two people, existing side by side in this life—sharing the same cubicle; part of the same family; maybe even part of the same small group or sitting next to each other in church—end up eternities apart because of how they respond to the cross.

Here we go: **23:1 Then their whole assembly rose up and brought him before Pilate. 2 They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”**

3 So Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

POI #1: is Pilate: (and we’ll call him) The Preoccupied

Pilate the Preoccupied. Pilate is **too preoccupied with other matters** to give serious consideration to who Jesus actually is.

In asking the question, “Are you the King of the Jews,” Pilate’s concern is not whether Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah, but whether Jesus is a political threat to him and Caesar. His question is a response to what the Jewish leaders had said in **vs. 2:** *“Hey, Pilate, Jesus is trying to pull people away from your and Caesar’s political program and into his own.”*

Jesus, in response, gives Pilate a deliberately evasive answer. Vs. 3, **He answered him, “You say so.”**

“You say so.” Now, what does that mean? Literally in Greek it is, “You say.” Some translations, like the NIV, interpret that positively, “It is as you say.” Others interpret it more negatively: “Well, that’s what *YOU* say.”

So which is it? Positive or negative? The answer is “Neither.” It’s deliberately slippery. Why? Jesus is saying, “Wrong question.” He hadn’t come for earthly political reasons one way or the other, and to **answer Pilate’s question would be to concede that the question has merit**. Think about it this way: If I ask you, “Have you stopped kicking your cat?” answering either “Yes” or “No” implies that you *have* been kicking your cat. But if you own no cat, because you don’t like to have things in your house that remind you of the devil, you won’t give a direct answer, because the question has no relevance.

By answering this way, Jesus is saying, “**Pilate, you’re asking the wrong question.**”

Well, this leads to a lengthy back and forth, which concludes with Pilate saying: 4 “I find no grounds for charging this man.”, a statement he repeats 3 times in this chapter. Again in vs. 14, vs. 15, and vs. 22. Pilate is **absolutely convinced of Jesus’ innocence**, and yet— **and YET, in vs. 23** he consents to Jesus’ execution anyway.

Why? Pilate is more concerned with appeasing the crowd than he is doing right by Jesus. You see, **historians tell us that at this point** in his career, Pilate was on pretty thin ice. Jerusalem had undergone several riots under Pilate’s watch, and Caesar had told him, ‘Pilate, you’re on your last leg. One more blow up, and you’re finished.’ In fact, we know Pilate ultimately lost his position because he **mishandled another disturbance** in Samaria, where he was banished to Gaul and, according to Eusebius, committed suicide.¹

The point is that Pilate is so preoccupied with keeping the peace that he is not *really* concerned with who Jesus actually is, or what he’s communicating about God; he just wants to know if Jesus can help or hurt him politically. To him, that’s what he’s most concerned about with Jesus.

In fact, in John’s account of this trial there is a particularly revealing moment: When Jesus tells Pilate that he was sent to testify to the truth about God, Pilate shrugs his shoulders, John 18, and says, “**What is truth?**” *“I don’t have time to think about that. I’ve got a province to run. I’ve got political pressures you would not believe. I don’t have the luxury to think about these kinds of questions—they’re just not relevant to me.”*

That’s why I call him “the preoccupied.” Pilate’s is not so much a rejection of Jesus as it is indifference to Jesus.

Friend: **DISTRACTION sends far more people to hell than disbelief ever did.**

Pilate represents the person too distracted by their circumstances, too engulfed in the cares of this life to really consider what Jesus is claiming and make a bold decision on him one way or the other. Their whole lives they’ve been laser-focused on, ‘How to get the right career. How to get married. How to have a happy family. How to make these kids turn out right. How to be wealthy and financially secure.

And so, when they counter Jesus, that’s the grid through which they are evaluating him. Like Pilate, they ask the wrong questions about Jesus. You’re asking, “Jesus, can you fix my family? Can you give me a happy life? Can you provide me with a husband and kids? Can you give me fulfillment in my career?”

And Jesus says, “YOU say.” He’s not saying he can’t, just like he wasn’t telling Pilate he’d never be King of the Jews. He is saying, “**Wrong question right now.**”

What if Jesus was here to testify to a reality so important that all those OTHER questions paled in comparison? What if all your life you’ve been asking the wrong questions? You’ve been focused on, “How to get ahead. How to find the perfect marriage partner, how to be happy and healthy and financially secure.” But what if the most important reality is not any of those questions, but who God is, and if you know him, and if you’re prepared to meet him, and if you’re living out his plan.

¹ Easton, M. G. (1893). In Easton’s Bible dictionary. New York: Harper & Brothers

What if you took all your questions, and put them aside, and said, “Jesus, forget MY questions for a minute. Who are you and what do you want?”²

The **PREOCCUPIED**. Is that you this weekend? Again: **DISTRACTION sends far more people to hell than disbelief ever did.**

Let’s keep reading, because we’re about to meet POI #2: 5 But they kept insisting, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he started even to here.” Real quick: By bringing up Galilee, the religious leaders think they are being shrewd. A stroke of political genius, they presume. Galilee, you see, was a hotbed of dissension. Think Ferguson or the South Side of LA. Buy bringing it up, they are hoping Pilate will respond with panic. But it backfires: **6 When Pilate heard this, he asked if the man was a Galilean. 7 Finding that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem during those days.** Pilate was like, “Oh, Galilee? That’s not even under my jurisdiction. This is my lucky day. That’s Herod. So, you understand I’ll have to recuse myself. Not my problem. Let’s send you to Herod and let him deal with you.

(You see, Herod was the Jewish puppet king Rome had placed over the rural parts of Israel, and he is--

POI #2: Herod: we’ll call him--**The Superficial**

8 Herod was very glad to see Jesus; for a long time he had wanted to see him because he had heard about him and was hoping to see some

² The opposite of Pilate’s response is the woman with the alabaster flask who, just a few days before, broke the flask over Jesus’ feet. (We often focus on how valuable that alabaster flask was. What we overlook is what it represented to her. For women in those days, that represented their sexuality. Their desire to get married. It was something they would use only at their marriage. In breaking it over Jesus’ feet, she was saying, “Jesus, I’m not coming to you because you can get me a husband. I’m coming because you are the point of it all--knowing you is more important than having a husband. And because you are the point of it all, you can have it all!

miracle performed by him. **9 So he kept asking him questions, but Jesus did not answer him.**

This Herod is an interesting guy who has a long history in the NT. This was **Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great**, who was the Herod that had had all the babies younger than 2 killed when Jesus was born.

Herod Antipas, whom we have here, the son of Herod the Great, was the Herod confronted by John the Baptist for having an affair with his brother’s wife (Lk 3:19). If you remember that story, his brother’s wife had been so offended by being called out in her sin that she demanded JtB’s head on a platter and Herod complied.

Well, Matthew tells us (Matt 14) that Herod had been guilt ridden over this that he thought that Jesus might be John the Baptist raised from the dead come back to haunt him!³

Here, in this chapter, we find him curious about Jesus—he wants to see some miracle, see Jesus do some magic trick—but he doesn’t want to press in too much, because that would require some reckoning with a painful history--so he keeps Jesus at arm’s length. He dabbles in Jesus; he’s curious about him on a **superficial level**.

Herod represents the person today that comes to church but never really gets serious about Jesus because that would cost too much. You feel like to really deal with the mess you’ve made of your life--to really come clean with Jesus and acknowledge the wrongs that you’ve done and seek restitution--would be entirely too costly.

Maybe, like Herod, you feel like your sin has painted you into a corner. Herod is like, “Look, I had an affair, then murdered an innocent man to cover it up. There’s no going back now.” Maybe you think, “Pastor, I’ve got mistakes built upon mistakes and lies covering up lies, and there’s no way I can come clean now.”

³ Matt 14:1-2

Listen: I've got good news. It's hard news, but it's good news. The good news: Jesus can forgive every sin. Break every chain. Through the power of the resurrection he can reverse every curse.

Do you hear King David testifying from the OT? Herod, I did the same thing, and God forgive and cleansed me. He washed me with hyssop and made me white as snow. He restored the joy of my salvation and re-established me on my throne. He can do it for you too, Herod."

One of my favorite OT verses from the book of Joel--God says to Israel after he had sent swarms of locusts to punish them for their persistent sin: "I will restore to you the years the swarming locust have eaten." (Joel 2:25) The locusts had destroyed their crops and devastated their country, but God says, "If you repent, not only can I make the locusts stop, I can actually restore to you the years of crops and wasted harvests that they destroyed."

Let that sink in: You may think that your sins have so destroyed and disqualified your life that there's no returning, **but you're wrong.** This is the God who resurrects the dead. The God of creation. The God who calms the storms and stills the seas. The God who says, "Behold, I make all things new" and "call unto me and I will answer you and show you great and mighty things you do not know," and "come now, let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white as snow."

Never underestimate his power to forgive, heal and restore. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to ALL who will receive it.

That's the good news. The hard news is that to get that you've got to come to him on his terms, and that means honesty, transparency, and surrender. Real repentance. Surrender. No more games. There is more grace and love waiting on you than you could ever imagine, but it's only available who come into the light and surrender.

- **Listen, I beg you:** Some of you are being tempted right now to retreat farther and farther into sin. To keep hiding. To let shame keep you in the shadows. Don't do it! There is grace for you. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
- I know the road to repentance, the humility required to open yourself up and admit mistakes and come clean, may seem difficult, but, I'm telling you, the path of hiding is even more so.
- And let me warn you: Continuing on in sin deadens you; it's like a dark cloud that chokes out your spiritual life.
- The Bible talks about how your conscience can become hardened-- calloused, seared--through unconfessed sins. You start to lose the capacity even to feel conviction of sin anymore.
- **My mom used to always tell me,** "Son, whatever you do, don't deaden your conscience. If you sear your conscience you lose your capacity to hear God. Secret sins, unconfessed sins, corrupt and deaden you. **What beautiful advice.**
- **Don't let that happen to you today.** Today, you're listening to me. That means there is still a glimmer of hope. Don't grieve the Holy Spirit again. Don't silence him. LISTEN: You might not have another chance like the one I'm going to give you today, in a moment. I'm talking to somebody specifically. You're sitting there thinking, 'I feel like he's talking right to me.' I am. The Holy Spirit is talking TO YOU.
- **No matter where you are, he opens his arms to you now to come home.** He can rebuild what sin has destroyed. He can restore the years the locusts have eaten. **Come to him.**

Look how Herod's story ends: **11 Then Herod, with his soldiers, treated him with contempt, mocked him, dressed him in bright clothing, and sent him back to Pilate. 12 That very day Herod and Pilate became friends. Previously, they had been enemies.**

When Jesus wouldn't satisfy his curiosity, which Jesus never will for those who aren't seriously seeking him, Herod's interest turns to mockery. **This is where this refusal to come clean always ends, BTW.**

If you are not seriously seeking Jesus; if you have unconfessed sin, you will find that you begin to resent and mock those who do seek him. It's your guilty conscience that fuels that mockery. You better be careful. "Do not be deceived," Galatians says, "God will not be mocked." If you don't deal with your sin, that will lead you to the most extreme hostility toward Jesus. Notice vs. 12: 12 That very day Herod and Pilate became friends. Previously, they had been enemies. Deadening the voice of your conscience ends up making you friends with Jesus' worst enemies! Don't do it.

There is a 3rd group in these verses in vs. 10 The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.

POI #3: The Chief Priests: The Religious

The chief priests were powerful people, proud people, and Jesus insulted their pride. **Jesus had taught that these religious leaders, you see, despite their lofty status,** were no better than any other sinner, as sinful as tax collectors and prostitutes and they needed to be forgiven just like them. But they had spent their whole lives trying to demonstrate that they were better. Made of better stuff. Of a higher class. Endowed with greater wisdom and moral strength and they felt like they had proved their point, and they hated Jesus for insulting their pride. So they opposed him. And not just a little, they "vehemently" (vs. 10) accused him. Their opposition to him was the strongest of any group.

Coming to Jesus requires **a humility and a surrender** that most people, particularly proud religious people, are unwilling to show. **Churches today are full of 'chief priests.'** They are hard to spot, because they are faithful at church, often in leadership positions. They frequently use the name of Jesus, but in their heart they've never really come to him. Never reckoned with how sinful in God's eyes they are. They've excused away their sins as "not that bad compared to others."

They underestimate how sinful their sin is in God's eyes. Charles Spurgeon, said to a room full of religious people: "Every sin in the essence of it is a killing of God. Do you comprehend me? Every time you do what God would not have you do, you do in effect, as far as you can, put God out of his throne; you disown the authority which belongs to his God-head; you do in intent, so far as you can, kill God. That is the drift of sin—sin is a God-killing thing."

Jonathan Edwards concurred: "(The holy God that we have sinned against) dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire; because of your sin, he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire. He is of purer eyes than to bear you in his sight; (because of your sin) you are ten thousand times as abominable in his eyes as the most hateful, venomous serpent is in ours."

It's only by the grace of God that any of us don't fall into hell this very moment. **Are you willing to admit that?**

You and I are so corrupted with sin it taints everything. **Imagine you KNOW somebody has Covid.** Everything they touch has to be wiped down. The chairs they sit in; the doorknobs they touch, even the air they breathe is contaminated. That's how we are to God.

If you think that that's a little harsh, or you think that basically you are a good person and God understands, you're a chief priest. **Listen, when I ask most people why they think they are going to heaven,** they usually tell me about a bunch of things they do that make them better than the average person. "I don't break the law, I'm a good person, come to church."

That's the answer of a chief priest. And you will oppose the true Jesus and resent his rule over your life. **Billy Graham** used to say that it's not people's sins that usually send them to hell, it's their good works, because their good works keep them from coming to Jesus.

(And let me tell you a little secret: When you think you have some goodness that sets you apart and makes you worthy of praise, you will resent God's absolute claim over your life. You will want to negotiate: "God, I'll give you this area and this area and this area, and because I do, I expect you to (bless my career; heal me; find me a spouse, make my kids turn out right)" And when God doesn't do that, you'll resent him, because he is not living up to his end of the bargain. He OWES you!

But see, when you realize how sinful you are, how utterly worthy of judgment, you have no choice but to cast yourself down in complete surrender on God's mercy. Everything is grace.

Your pride and your independent claim over your life cannot coexist with Jesus. It's like I always say, "In every heart there is a throne and a cross..." What does it mean to be 'on the cross?' To die to your pride and your worthiness. *"When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride."*)

So, we have the Preoccupied, the Superficial, and the Religious. Let's keep reading: 13 Pilate called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, 14 and said to them, "You have brought me this man as one who misleads the people. But in fact, after examining him in your presence, I have found no grounds to charge this man with those things you accuse him of. 15 Neither has Herod, because he sent him back to us. Clearly, he has done nothing to deserve death. 16 Therefore, I will have him whipped and then release him."

18 Then they all cried out together, "Take this man away! Release Barabbas to us!" 19 (He had been thrown into prison for a rebellion that had taken place in the city, and for murder.)

POI #4: Barabbas: The Guilty

To try and get himself out of this mess, Pilate turns toward an old custom of letting one prisoner go free at Passover. And, in what HE considers **a stroke of genius**, he offers them an easy choice: Barabbas or Jesus.

It should have been no question. Barabbas, as indicated here, was a truly bad dude. An enemy of the people. He was guilty of domestic terrorism. He had murdered fellow Jews. The Jewish leaders should be the last ones to want Barabbas freed, because revolutionaries like Barabbas hated the religious leaders; they thought they were part of the problem--sell-outs to their own people and they wanted to kill them. This Barabbas was a genuine threat to the safety of the people and he **had been rightfully sentenced to execution.**

So, why choose Barabbas?

For one, Barabbas did not insult their pride and they could control Barabbas. **Tom Skinner**, an African American pastor in Harlem, probably said it best; *"Barabbas is the guy who's gonna destroy the system. Barabbas is the guy who's gonna burn them out, because they were part of the establishment. Barabbas was gonna kill them. Why would they want Barabbas? Here's why: If you let Barabbas go, and he starts another disturbance, all you have to do is push a few tanks into his neighborhood. You can find where he's keeping his guns. You can always stop Barabbas. But how can you stop Jesus? How do you stop a man who has no guns, no tanks, no ammunition, but is still shaking up the whole Roman empire?"*

Jesus was starting something they couldn't control. A revolution that turned everything upside down, starting with their own pride and hatred.

And people then, like today, didn't want to give up their pride and power, so they chose Barabbas.

But here's where the story becomes really personal for me and you. We're supposed to see in ourselves that we are Barabbas.

Barabbas was rightfully condemned in his sin, and so are we. He gets to walk free because an innocent man dies in his place. Barabbas is **the first in a long line of people** who are going to be set free because Jesus dies in their place.

Pastor Ricky said last week that we tend to forget that the people in the Gospels were real people and to put ourselves in their shoes. Think about Barabbas later that day peering out toward the hill where Jesus was dying and thinking, "That should have been me! I should have died. He died in my place." **Friend, that's the gospel!** He died for me. Not just for me, he died instead of me.

All of us who come to Jesus have to get in line after Barabbas, to identify with him. Another bore my guilt and died in our place.

Let me tell you something interesting about Barabbas' name. In Aramaic, it literally translates as, "son of a father." BAR--son of; ABBAS--a dad. Son of a dad. Talk about a generic name! But that's because he represents all of us. His story is our story.

This is the essence of the gospel.

By the way, one thing to notice: This whole trial is unjust. **No one really cares about the truth.** Jesus is just a pawn as politicians tried to protect their position and proud people try to protect their privilege and get their revenge: **23 But they kept up the pressure, demanding with loud voices that he be crucified, and their voices won out. 24 So Pilate decided to grant their demand 25 and released the one they were asking for, who had been thrown into prison for rebellion and murder. But he handed Jesus over to their will.**

Jesus dies a victim of horrible injustice. The trial is a sham. And I hope, btw, that gives some of you comfort when you suffer unjustly.

The most innocent man ever to live was tried unjustly and died under unjust pretenses. So he understands. Pastor Thabiti said: "We should stop and consider the fact that Jesus--the most innocent man to ever live--was falsely accused and condemned by a court," so that when it happens to us, we know we have a Savior who understands, who entered into that injustice with us, feels it with us, and came to deliver us from it. **(vs. 31: Wood is green)**

MUSIC

So why did Jesus go through with this? He was bearing *our* injustice. Luke tells us in the midst of all this unfairness and all this unjust accusation, he "stood there silent." Let me ask: **When you stand silent before your accuser silent,** with no response, no objection, **what are you conceding?** Guilt.

Why was Jesus conceding guilt? He was pleading guilty to our sin. Behind the chief priests and religious leaders pointing their fingers at him and accusing him, he saw the finger of God the Father pointing at him and accusing him of OUR sin. And he pled guilty to my sin. And Barabbas sin. And your sin. And he died in our place. *Guilty vile and helpless we, spotless lamb of God was he...*

We are Barabbas!

But there's **one more person** I want to show you really quickly before we close: **26 As they led him away, they seized Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, and laid the cross on him to carry behind Jesus.**

POI #5: Simon the Cyrenian: The Disciple

Question: Why do you think Luke stops to tell us this man's name and where he is from? I can understand why Luke would record this moment when Jesus staggers under the weight of the cross and a guard has to grab an outsider to help him carry the cross. That shows

us how much Jesus was suffering. **But why give us his name—and, btw, not just his name, but where he was from?**

In fact, in Mark's account of this, he also mentions the names of Simon's 2 sons—Rufus and Alexander. Gospel writers didn't typically mention the bios of other random people in the Gospels—"And the guard who gave him vinegar to drink was named this, and the one who saw the veil torn in two was named this..." So **why all that detail about Simon?**

It's because Simon of Cyrene was known in the early church. The first readers of Luke's book would have said, 'Oh, Simon of Cyrene, the dad of Rufus and Alexander? I know him! I didn't realize he was there for all this!'

BTW, in Romans 16:13, Paul says to "...greet Rufus, who is chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me also." And scholars say it is almost certain that this is the same Rufus mentioned in Mark as the son of Simon.⁴ **That means Simon went on to become a follower of Jesus, and not only that, he led his wife and 2 sons to faith in Christ.**

BTW, in Paul's greetings in Romans 16, Rufus is the only one Paul describes as "chosen in the Lord." **Paul recognized that there, on that road to Calvary, even as Jesus' body staggered under the weight of cross, he still sovereignly is choosing a man to follow him and be his disciple.** When you pull back the veil, you see, this was not a weak Savior needing help; this was a strong and Sovereign Savior extending salvation to those he chose, even in his death.

And that leads to my **last bit of good news. Simon's story is an invitation to you.** He's extending that invitation to you. He's calling

⁴ Why else would Luke and Mark record their names? They didn't mention the names of other random people on the road—"The guard's name was Fred, and the one who hit Jesus was named Bob—Luke and Mark record their names because they were well-known in the early church.

you to be his disciple. Not just to believe, but to lead your family and your friends to Christ and to carry his cross into the world. Just like he chose Simon, he's choosing you. He's got great things for you. He's got a specific mission for you to fulfill, a role to play in his kingdom that will impact eternity.

Will you accept?

So, **Who are you?** Are you

1. The Preoccupied, like Pilate?
2. The Superficial, like Herod?
3. The Religious, like the Chief Priests?
4. The Guilty, like Barabbas?
5. The Disciple, like Simon of Cyrene?

(The first 3 are why people resist Jesus. Even people in church. When you realize you are #4, you are on your way to becoming #5.)

The good news is Jesus died for these 3 groups.

- To the distracted, he says (Isaiah 1:18);
- to the superficial and and religious, he says 1 John 1:8–9...
- To all of us, he says (John 1:12).

Will you receive?