

We Are Barabbas

Mark 15:1-15

Intro: Irony of the Cross

I've mentioned in the past that, several years ago, I came across a book called *Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus* by DA Carson and I was blown away, once again, by the gospel—the good news about what Jesus accomplished for sinners like us. The first chapter of the book is called “The Ironies of the Cross,” where he takes several parts of the crucifixion account and draws various ironies to highlight the significance of Jesus' death for us.

Do you know what irony is? Carson defines irony like this: “Irony expresses meaning by using words that normally mean the opposite of what is actually being said.” (D.A. Carson, *Scandalous*, 14.) Let me give a few examples of irony:

- o It **WOULD BE** ironic for someone to express their hatred of music by composing a song about their hatred of music.
- o It **IS** ironic when cancer nurses/doctors relieve their stress from caring for patients by taking a smoke break.
- o It **WAS** ironic that my college Health and Physical Training Professor was morbidly obese.

We've entered into a section of Mark that is chalk full of irony. The way he tells the events leading up to the death of Jesus on the cross is through irony. So over the next several weeks, we're gonna consider the various ironies of the cross. And the irony in this morning's passage is this: *The innocent are punished as guilty and the guilty are pardoned as innocent.* The one who is truly innocent is declared guilty and condemned, but the one who is truly guilty is declared innocent and set free. OR, to use some of the language in our passage, we could put it like this: *Jesus, the righteous King, is questioned and condemned, while Barabbas, the murderous insurrectionist, is released.*

I have one simple goal for this message: that you might glory in the gospel of Jesus Christ; that your heart might soar in worship as you reflect upon what Jesus accomplished for you. So let's break down that ironic main point into three parts, beginning with...

The Righteous King is Questioned [v1]

So remember where we are in the story: It was late into the night, Jesus was praying in the garden of Gethsemane with his disciples, when a large crowd, headed up by the Sanhedrin (the religious court of that day), approached Jesus and arrested him, while his disciples fled for their own safety.

Then Jesus was led to a bogus trial, which served as sort of a pre-trial for them to try to find something they could accuse him of that was worthy of death. So make up a ton of lies about him, none of which stuck. And they (ironically) charge him on the basis of blasphemy for saying he is the Christ, Son of God, though that's true. They condemned him for the truth!

So they take him to Pilate, a Roman Governor, because they know he has the power to DO what they want to be DONE—namely, they want Jesus dead! So, here we are: Jesus standing before Pilate and Pilate seems to be sincerely trying to figure out what Jesus did wrong that deserves a trial like this. And so, he begins to question him [v2a]

Now why would he ask that question? Think about it: The charge against Jesus by the religious leaders was a charge of blasphemy for referring to himself as the Messiah, Son of God. But that kind of a charge wouldn't fly with Pilate because it is a religious claim. Pilate couldn't care less if Jesus claims to be the Messiah. But what WOULD interest him is if Jesus claimed to be King. Why? Because that could be a threat to Roman rule.

So the religious leaders made it clear to Pilate that Jesus' claim of Messiahship was not merely a

religious claim, but also a political claim. “This guy thinks HE’S the king, not the Emperor. So he’s a problem! He might try to overthrow the Roman government.”

Now, that puts Pilate in a very sticky situation BECAUSE he is under the authority of Emperor Tiberius, who, in the words of one author, was “a man who would show no mercy to a governor [like Pilate] who condoned treasonable activities.” (Morris, 699) So if Jesus really was truly a threat to Roman rule, Pilate better take him out, or Pilate could be taken out.

So Pilate asks him straight up, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Notice how Jesus answers. [v2b]

It’s not that straightforward of a response. It’s almost like he’s saying, “That’s something you need to consider.” It’s tough because Jesus knows that if he answers with a simple “yes” that Pilate would misunderstand him to think he means that he is leading some political movement to try to overthrow the Roman government and release the Jews from the tyranny they’ve experienced under Roman rule for years.

But that’s not what it means that Jesus is King of Jews. So Jesus doesn’t answer with a simple, “yes.”

Rather, he says (somewhat ambiguously), “You have said so.” I don’t think that answer is satisfying to Pilate because the religious leaders had brought all these charges against him. [vv3-4]

MANY accusations are brought against him and Pilate is trying to figure out if they stick. “You do hear all that’s being said of you, right? Like, what do you say for yourself? Defend yourself!” [v5]

This is a man who could not be more innocent, and he doesn’t even attempt to defend himself, leaving Pilate amazed. He’s in awe of his silence in the face of such intense accusations. Like, “Who would stay quiet in a situation like this? Who is this guy?”

I’ll tell you who he is: He’s the righteous King! That’s who he is! And that’s WHY he’s not defending himself. He remains silent BECAUSE he is righteous. And I think Pilate’s picking up on this, as the irony of this passage continues to unfold, and so we move to the next part...

The Murderous Insurrectionist is Released [v6]

Apparently, there was a common practice of amnesty during the time of the Passover feast where Pilate would release for them a convicted prisoner. So the religious leaders, familiar with this tradition, seek to take advantage of it. And notice the way Mark

describes the man whom they're asking to release.
[v7]

Don't miss this! Barabbas was one among other rebels who had committed murder "in the insurrection." In other words, Mark is saying, there were several who were in prison for committing murder in their attempt to overthrow the Roman government—and Barabbas was one of them.

So he, along with others, had ALREADY been convicted of their crime—they're in prison, awaiting they're final punishment...which everyone knew in that day, if someone tries to revolt against the Roman government, punishment was death by crucifixion. Which means...what? Barabbas was awaiting death by crucifixion.

Do you know what the name Barabbas means? "Son of the father." Get this! "Do you want this guy whose name means 'son of the father' or do you want this guy who actually claims to be the Son of the Father." Remember the question the high priest asked Jesus? "Are you the Christ, the Son of the blessed?"

There's a lot of irony here. In fact, did you see the way Mark introduces Barabbas to us? [v7, "called..."]

In other words, he's CALLED "son of the father."
That's what he's CALLED, but that's not who he truly
IS! That's who JESUS is! He IS the true Son of the
Father.

And so this is the choice: A convicted,
already-declared-guilty murderer, who was part of an
attempt to overthrow the Roman government, who is
CALLED "son of the father" OR the one who truly IS
the Son of the Father, righteous, innocent, true King
without fault. Who do you think the crowd picks?
[vv8-9]

So, the two of them are standing there before a
crowd (which is instigated by the religious leaders),
and Pilate says, "Do you want me to release you...."
And what does he call him again? "The King of the
Jews!" Why would he call Jesus that when, not only
does HE not believe Jesus is truly king, but he knows
the religious leaders don't believe Jesus is truly king?

That's what they're mad about! That's the accusation
they brought against him! So why would Pilate call
him that? [v10]

Pilate can see right through their motives. One
person defines envy as "anger caused by another's
success." (Edwards, 462) "We're mad that he is
getting the glory! We're angry that he's gotten all the

attention and spotlight.” That’s why they want him dead. NOT because he actually did anything wrong, but because THEY are envious. And notice what their envy causes them to do. [v11]

See that? They’re stirring up the crowd. They’re envious and so they want Jesus dead, but they know the crowd gets to decide who is released, so they get the crowd on their side by stirring them up. To do what? Look closely at the language Mark uses: [v11, “instead”]

Instead of whom? They want Barabbas, the murderous insurrectionist, released/set free **INSTEAD** of Jesus. And this leads to the final part of the irony of this passage...

The Righteous King is Condemned [v12]

Now that just inflamed the crowd all the more, especially the religious leaders. “We don’t call him the King of the Jews; that’s what he calls himself! Which is why he needs to die!” And that’s exactly how they respond. [v13]

They don’t just want him dead. They want him tortured. They want him **CRUCIFIED**. Why does that form of death come to mind for them? Why death by crucifixion? Think about whom they want released. Barabbas. And where was Barabbas heading? To a

cross. Hmmm...are you seeing what's taking place in this passage?

"Crucify him!" But Pilate, one who was known for his ruthless disregard for life...even he recognizes that Jesus is not deserving of crucifixion! [v14a]

Answer: None! He hasn't done ANY evil, let alone any evil deserving of death by crucifixion! Are you seeing the irony? The one who is entirely pure and righteous and innocent and never once committed even the slightest sin in thought, deed, or speech, is condemned as guilty of death of the worst kind—crucifixion.

And notice, the crowd can't even give an answer to Pilate's question, can they? [v14]

You can't reason with those whose hearts are filled with envy. They are not reasonable. They are not rational. They want blood. "Crucify him!" And they get what they want. [v15]

See it? Do you see the heart of the gospel in v15? Barabbas is released; Jesus is delivered to be crucified. *The guilty are pardoned and the innocent are punished.* I want us to ponder what's taking place here. We know that Jesus ends up being crucified along with two "robbers" on either side, and that's

actually a word that could also be translated “insurrectionist.” So it’s unlikely those guys were just thieves. It was not common in that day to be punished by crucifixion for stealing a loaf of bread from the market.

AND, we know, Barabbas was an insurrectionist, and v7 said he was “AMONG the rebels (plural) in prison who had committed murder in the insurrection.” So it’s likely the two men crucified alongside Jesus were part of a violent revolt against the government, with Barabbas. And therefore, they were the rebels who were in prison with him.

Moreover, we know that there were three crosses prepared that day, and Jesus ended up on one of them. It took time to prepare for death by crucifixion...it didn’t just happen on the spot, like it seemed to happen with Jesus. The crowd said, “Crucify him!” And that DAY he was crucified. It didn’t normally happen that quickly.

Which means, Jesus’ cross was *already prepared for someone ELSE!* Pilate had already made the proper preparations for three convicted rebels to hang on those crosses. So who was supposed to end up on Jesus’ cross? BARAABBAS!

But he didn't end up there; he was *released*. And who took his place? Jesus. The innocent one is pronounced guilty and the guilty one is pronounced innocent. The Author of life is sentenced to be murdered, and the murderer is given life. The one who had done no evil is being punished as if he had and the one who had done much evil is pardoned as if he hadn't.

This is a picture of the gospel! Why? Why should this account of Jesus being condemned in the place of Barabbas remind us of OUR salvation? Answer: Because WE ARE BARABBAS!

- WE are the guilty sinners who deserve to be punished, but INSTEAD get to go free.
- WE have committed evil deserving of punishment, but instead get released.
- WE are the sinners deserving of condemnation but instead we hear from GOD HIMSELF: "There is now NO condemnation on you!"

WHY? Because the innocent one...the one for whom the crowd had now answered the question: "What evil has he done???"...HE was punished in OUR place.

This is the irony of the cross. Listen, this account will have no impact on you if you don't identify yourself as Barabbas. *The gospel is NOT good news for people who...*

- o don't know themselves in desperate need of a sinless substitute.
- o think they are basically good.
- o constantly compare themselves to others who are "worse" than they are.

Listen, in the eyes of God, left to ourselves, we are ALL Barabbas! And when we recognize that...when we see what we deserve (condemnation), but then realize what we get instead (freedom), it changes us. Grace changes us.

- o It removes the shame and baggage of our past because we are no longer the person we once were! We're no longer Barabbas; we are in Christ!
- o It alleviates our guilt because he was declared guilty in our place.
- o It lifts the burden we're feeling when we try to make up for all the horrible sins we've committed—because we can't! But Jesus can!

Because the innocent one was condemned so that the guilty would be set free.

Conclusion

Would you embrace Jesus? Would you come and receive his grace and be set free? Stop carrying the burden of your sin. Stop trying to make up for all you've done wrong. Instead, trust the one who stepped in your place, bore your condemnation, and set you free. May we glory in this great gospel.