

THE IRONIES OF THE CROSS

Expositional Study Matthew 27

Matthew 27:1-26

Written By

©Dr. Marty Baker

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Good Friday. Knowing that Jesus died in the most gruesome, painful, and horrific fashion on this Passover Day 2,000 years ago, causes logical minds to see the apparent irony of the ancient phrase. This reality leads us to raise a logical question: How could it be called Good Friday when we consider how Jesus died?

Scholars debate the origins of this phrase. Some say it originates from the German Gottes Freitag, or God's Friday, while others say it is from the German Gute Freitag, or Good Friday. Either way, of course, the phrase is ironic regardless of where it came from originally.

What we do know is the day is good insofar that God the Father providentially determined to sacrifice His only Son for the sins of all mankind. The Son, of course, willingly and obediently laid His holy life down for that which is unholy. This, in and of itself is ironic, but it, by no means, detracts for the goodness of the day. No, the death of the Messiah, Jesus, is good because He did what we could never do for ourselves because we are wicked by nature. As Paul states in Romans 5:

¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

The holy dying for the unholy, the Friend dying for His enemies is the essence of good, and it is also highly ironic. What is the purpose of God's use of irony where the cross of Christ is

concerned? That's a great question. The ironies embedded in Matthew 27, which contains the Roman trial of Jesus and His crucifixion, serve one major divine purpose:

Irony Is Designed To Spiritually Educate And Motivate Unbelievers To Turn To The Messiah (Matt. 27)

From the opening ten verses, we have learned this timeless principle:

They Who Judge Unjustly Will Be Judged Justly (Matt. 27:1-10)

The religious/political leaders arrogantly, vehemently, and blindly disregarded the evidence of Christ's divinity and role as the true Messiah, opting instead to purposefully manufacture evidence to falsely accuse Him of committing a capital crime. Their goal, of course, was to silence Him forever for He dared to purge their spiritual swamp of its outright evil masquerading as true spirituality.

The religious side of Christ's trial dripped with irony because the religious/political leaders unjustly judged the One who is the true Judge. He will, from what we know from His teachings in the gospels, have the last word when He judges them, along with all of the lost, on Judgment Day (Matt. 25).

All of this should make you stop and ask yourself, "Am I guilty of unjustly judging Jesus?" How you answer that question will most certainly impact you in eternity. For those who repent of their unjust judgement and embrace Jesus by faith will be declared righteous before Him. Those who relish in their supposedly "just" judgment will wake in an eternity without Him in a place no man would ever want to go.

A second powerful irony is woven carefully in verses 11 through 26.

They Who Seek Innocence By External Personal Works Really Need The Divine Internal Work

As I have said, the Jews did not have the power to execute a man. For that they had to rely on Rome, and Pontius Pilate, the sixth Roman procurator to serve in Judea, was their man of the hour. Ushering Jesus before him at the Antonia Fortress, located on the northern wall of the temple, they quickly and unjustly brought three false charges against Jesus. Dr. Luke gives us the content of the charges:

² And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King" (Luke 23).

Those seeking to silence their opponent unjustly typically throw out all kinds of charges, hoping that at least one of them will stick so they can get what they unrighteously want. As we see, and know, Pilate, the politician picked up on the last charge. Why? Because Pilate could not afford having any kind of Jewish insurrection on his watch or he might lose his power, position, and wealth.

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And Jesus said to him, "*It is as you say.*" ¹² And while

He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He did not answer.¹³ Then Pilate said to Him, “Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?”¹⁴ And He did not answer him with regard to even a *single* charge, so the governor was quite amazed.

Jesus’ answer was to the point. “Yes, I am the King of the Jews,” and, indeed He was. His pedigree was Davidic (Matt. 1), and His miraculous works verified He fulfilled the prophecy of the coming messianic king. Somewhere during this exchange, the Jewish leaders, who suffered from what we might call in modern times the Jesus Derangement Syndrome, continually hurled unjustified criminal charges against Him. Jesus, of course, did not waste His breath in responding to their unfounded rantings.

According to John, Jesus said more beyond His admission to Pilate.

³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “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.” ³⁷ 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.” ³⁸ Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” (John 18).

Again, more irony drips from the judicial encounter.

- Pilate: Is this your question or did the Jews put you up to it? Ironically, the procurator had been pressured by the Jewish leaders, but he was not about to admit it.
- The one who should be doing all the questioning, Pilate, is questioned by the One who is on trial. Really, you must stop and ask yourself, “Who was on trial here, Jesus or Pilate?” I think you know the answer to that query. One must be quite careful when they start asking Jesus questions. One must also be prepared for His divine rebuttal and questioning of your life.
- Pilate speaks of an earthly king and kingdom, while Jesus speaks of a heavenly king and kingdom.
- Jesus who is the essence of absolute truth speaks to a man who is a true relativist where truth is concerned: What is truth? You Jews have your religious truth, while we Romans have ours, so there is no true truth. Obviously, there is true truth for Pilate at least believed that premise was absolutely truth. But I digress.

As I have said, the ironies are placed here by the Spirit of God for one main, inexorable reason: to cause sinners to see their sin and to turn to Jesus, in faith, as the Savior. Has God arrested your attention? Do you see yourself in the unjust religious mob? Do you see yourself in the smooth, evasive and polished politician, Pilate? Ah, there is no such thing as complete spiritual/religious truth, is what you typically say to yourself. Are you absolutely sure about that?

After Pilate's initial exchange and summary conclusion that Jesus was innocent of all purported charges, the procurator, according to Luke, sent Jesus to Herod Antipas (who just happened to be in the city of Jerusalem), the ruler of Galilee where Jesus was from (Luke 23:6). This shrewd move, of course, was designed to just pass the problem of Jesus off to someone else. It was also probably a way to build a bridge to the Herodian leader after Pilate had killed some of his citizens according to Luke 13:1. So off to wicked Herod Antipas Jesus went (Herod 23:6-12). Once again, Jesus did not respond to the unjust mockery of a trial before this wicked king. How ironic, *he who was an unholy king stood before THE holy king* and he didn't even realize it. Further, *he who openly mocked the true king would, as we read in Psalm 37:12-15, will be mocked on the Day of Judgment.* What spiritually goes around does, in due time, eventually come around. Are you ready for that day?

Once Jesus returned from His "trial" before Herod Antipas, Pilate was faced with an issue, which in his mind, would give him a way to get Jesus, an innocent man, out of this capital crime pickle:

¹⁵ Now at *the* feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people *any* one prisoner whom they wanted. ¹⁶ At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" ¹⁸ For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over. ¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him *a message*, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him."

At Passover, the Roman tradition called for a touch of mercy. I'm sure this was designed to somehow win over the adoration of the Jewish subjects. On this occasion, Pilate used his political power to choose the meanest, most vile man in his prison for potential release: Barabbas. He was nothing more than a robber (John 18:40) and a murderer (Mark 15:7). Even his name is filled with irony. Bar abbas, literally means "son of the father." Interesting. He who is the true son of the Father, Jesus, is going to die for the sins of a man who did not live like a son of his father.

I am sure Pilate thought there is no way the Jews would chose Barabbas, a guilty man, over a guiltless man. This, of course, was his political way of getting out of condemning a man he knew was innocent. His ploy did not go as he had anticipated:

²⁰ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. ²¹ But the governor said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." ²² Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Crucify Him!" ²³ And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!"

I'm sure Pilate could not believe his ears. How could the Jews condemn a man who had committed nothing worthy of a capital crime? But in the end, Pilate was a politician, and as a politician he was concerned about his job and influence over the people. And he had learned the hard way how not to lead and/or respond to the Jews under his ruthless rule.

On one occasion, he arrogantly and thoughtlessly sought to overthrow Jewish laws based on the Torah by ordering his armed troops to bring statues/images of Caesar to Jerusalem. He did

this all under the cover of darkness, of course. Josephus, the Jewish (turncoat)/Roman historian tells us what happened:

1. (55) But now Pilate, the procurator of Judea, removed the army from Cesarea to Jerusalem, to take their winter quarters there, in order to abolish the Jewish laws. So he introduced Caesar's effigies, which were upon the ensigns, and brought them into the city; whereas our law forbids us the very making of images; (56) on which account the former procurators were wont to make their entry into the city with such ensigns as had not those ornaments. Pilate was the first who brought those images to Jerusalem, and set them up there; which was done without the knowledge of the people, because it was done in the nighttime; (57) but as soon as they knew it, they came in multitudes to Cesarea, and interceded with Pilate many days, that he would remove the images; and when he would not grant their requests, because it would tend to the injury of Caesar, while yet they persevered in their request, on the sixth day he ordered his soldiers to have their weapons privately, while he came and sat upon his judgment seat, which seat was so prepared in the open place of the city, that it concealed the army that lay ready to oppress them: (58) and when the Jews petitioned him again, he gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass them round, and threatened that their punishment should be no less than immediate death, unless they would leave off disturbing him, and go their ways home. (59) But they threw themselves upon the ground, and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their death very willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed; upon which Pilate was deeply affected with their firm resolution to keep their laws inviolable, and presently commanded the images to be carried back from Jerusalem to Cesarea.¹

From this incident, Pilate learned how committed the Jews were to their Law and religion, coupled with how quickly and readily they would die to protect it. The Jews also learned they could pressure the politician to back down and permit their viewpoint to prevail.

From Josephus we learn that Pilate was not a quick study. At another time he arrogantly and thoughtlessly stole money from the temple to build an aqueduct.

2. (60) But Pilate undertook to bring a current of water to Jerusalem, and did it with the sacred money, and derived the origin of the stream from the distance of two hundred furlongs. However, the Jews were not pleased with what had been done about this water; and many ten thousands of the people got together, and made a clamor against him, and insisted that he should leave off that design. Some of them also used reproaches, and abused the man, as crowds of such people usually do. (61) So he habited a great number of his soldiers in their habit, who carried daggers under their garments, and sent them to a place where they might surround them. So he bade the Jews himself go away; but they boldly casting reproaches upon him, he gave the soldiers that signal which had been beforehand agreed on; (62) who laid upon them much greater blows than Pilate had commanded them, and equally punished those that were

¹ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 479–480.

tumultuous, and those that were not, nor did they spare them in the least; and since the people were unarmed, and were caught by men prepared for what they were about, there were a great number of them slain by this means, and others of them ran away wounded; and thus an end was put to this sedition. ²

I recount the history of Pilate prior to his trial of Jesus to demonstrate several things: One, this was not the first time radicalized, angry Jews assembled in his presence demanding something; two, from this murder of innocent Jews he probably did not want to have a repeat of that on this Passover for that would not bode well in Rome.

So, what did Pilate do? He, as he had done before, quickly caved to pressure. Don't you find this utterly ironic? He who caved to pressure regarding his false god, Caesar, caved to pressure regarding the true God, Christ. The man had absolutely no backbone when it came to truth. Equally ironic are the actions of the Jews. They who would die for the fact they did not want false images of god portrayed in their land (and thereby break the first two commandments, Ex. 20:3-6), wanted to kill the true God, Jesus, standing before them. Further, they who would die for desecration of the temple through robbery, wanted to destroy the true Temple, Jesus, standing in front of them. Oh, how spiritually blind sin makes a sinner.

All of this historical intrigue between Pilate and the Jews came to a head in the trial of Jesus. Knowing how explosive the Jews could be, coupled with the anger he knew they had against him for his murderous ways, he must have felt he skated on thin ice with them. Truly, the last thing he wanted on Passover was a full scale riot, especially with the city swarming with thousands of extra Jewish worshippers. So, despite the fact he knew Jesus was innocent, he did what he did well: He caved to peer pressure:

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves."

Amazing, isn't it? Even though Pilate was absolutely convinced about the innocence of Jesus, he acted out of personal gain, not personal integrity. And to secure cleansing for the sin he was about to permit he made sure he washed his hands thoroughly. Ironically, he needed more than his hands washed, for his entire spiritual man was stained with sin. Put differently, Pilate needed to humble himself before the Lord and ask for his cleansing for it was, and is, only through His sacrifice is the sinner truly cleansed of the contagion of sin.

The author of Hebrews reminds us of the cleansing power of Jesus:

¹¹ But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;

¹² Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption *for us*. ¹³ For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: ¹⁴ How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God (Heb. 9)?

² Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 480.

Only your personal faith in Jesus's redemptive work on the cross can purge your soul of its sin. An old country hymn I grew up signing puts all of this in perspective:

Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?
Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?
Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour?
Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?
Are you washed in the blood
In the soul-cleansing blood of the lamb?
Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow?
Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?
Lay aside the garments that are stained with sin
And be washed in the blood of the lamb
There's a fountain flowing for the soul unclean
O, be washed in the blood of the lamb
Are you washed in the blood
In the soul-cleansing blood of the lamb?
Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow?
Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?

The song asks questions Pilate-types need to come to terms with this Good Friday. Are you, like Pilate, caving to pressure to believe that some other means other than faith in the redemptive work of Jesus has cleansing power? Are you washing yourself with a false belief system which will never been able to make you spiritually clean and alive before God? If so, Jesus extends an invitation to you right now to learn from the irony of Pilate's mis-guided, mis-informed life. Come right now and be washed for all eternity by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus, the true Christ.