

Betrayed by a Friend and the Justice System

Matthew 26:47-68

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47 While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. 48 Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." 49 And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. 50 Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. 51 And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" 55 At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. 56 But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left him and fled.

57 Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. 58 And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. 59 Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, 60 but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward 61 and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" 62 And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" 63 But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." 65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." 67 Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, 68 saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?" (Matt 26:47-68).

Last week we were able to join Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as he poured out his heart to his three closest friends and in prayer to his heavenly father. We observed his great grief ("my soul is very sorrowful, even to death" – v 38) and his struggle to do the will of the Father ("if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" – v 39). But we also were able to see his commitment to the Father's will ("not as I will but as you will" – v 39).

If Matthew 26 were a movie or a syndicated television show, last week's text could have ended with the words "To Be Continued" because the paragraph closed with a bit of cliff-hanger:

"Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand" (Matt 26:45-46).

It is the middle of the night, and it is likely that they could hear a crowd of people coming up the side of the Mount of Olives. What happens next is the most infamous betrayal of friendship and justice that our world has ever seen. This is why the phrase "betrayed by a kiss" is well-known and why there are no kids named Judas in the nursery this morning.

Jesus experiences unfairness in a way that is both striking and deeply disturbing. He is betrayed by one of his own disciples, and he is betrayed by the justice system. He experiences injustice that is both personal and formal; he experiences pain from a follower and from the "system." Both are painful but in different ways.

Today we're going to unpack this dark moment in Jesus's life, and see what lessons we can learn about Jesus, our experience with injustice, and how all of this relates to something the Bible calls "Good News."

Personal Injustice

Immediately after Jesus says "my betrayer is at hand," Judas appears. Verse 47 says:

"While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people"

Notice all the irony. Judas is well-known but he is specifically described here as "one of the twelve." The crowd has come well-armed, and it includes the religious rulers, the "elders of the people." There is nothing about this scene that is right – a friend shouldn't be leading a group of religious leaders to arrest the Son of God. Matthew wants his readers to see the tragedy of this moment because it is all a part of the path of the suffering Messiah which will culminate with his death on the cross.

We learned previously in Matthew 26:14-16 that Judas had sold-out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, the price of a common slave, and he was fulfilling his end of the deal. Earlier that night, Judas had left the Passover Meal (John 13:27-30). Some commentators suggest that Judas may have led this mob first to the upper room, and when he found it empty, took them to the next likely spot where they would find Jesus – the Garden of Gethsemane.

Since it was dark and some of the religious rulers had not met Jesus personally, Judas arranged for a sign so that they would know who Jesus was: a kiss. He told the religious leaders, "the

one I will kiss is the man; seize him" (v 48). Now a kiss was a common greeting among friends in the Near East much like what is still practiced today. It is intriguing to me that Judas uses this means of identifying him because it would have pretty obvious why he has come. Approaching Jesus with a band of soldiers and religious rulers would have made his intentions clear. Further, he could have simply pointed Jesus out (e.g., "The one on the left."). But instead Judas says, "Greetings Rabbi" and then he kisses him. What's going on here?

I think it is very possible (especially given Jesus's response) that Judas's actions were not intended to be deceptive – as if the kiss was a secret sign. Rather, it seems that everything about this was a calculated insult. He calls him "Rabbi" instead of "Lord," and some suggest that it was an insult for a disciple to take initiative like this in greeting Jesus.¹ In other words, this is a cold, calculated, and vengeful act. It is reminiscent of the words of the Psalmist in Psalms 41:9 – "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me." Yet in the midst of this, Jesus is completely controlled – "Friend, do what you came to do (v 50)."²

From there the scene turns chaotic. Jesus is seized by the soldiers, and one of the disciples (Peter according to John 18:10) wielded his sword, cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant. No doubt there was bedlam as the servant is screaming in pain and the rest moved in for what looked to be a "bench-clearing fight."

Jesus intervenes with a strong warning and a statement about what he could do:

"Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matt 26:52-53)

Jesus sharply instructs the disciples about their misreading of the moment. He tells Peter to put the sword away because violence in defense of Christ is unacceptable.³ In recording this Matthew clearly ends the speculation that Jesus and his followers were a part of the Zealot movement which attempted to overthrow the government, specifically Rome, by force. Further, Jesus tells them that he has the power to call for twelve legions of angels, a number chosen because of its symbolism (12 disciples) and its sheer number (72,000).

Jesus doesn't lack the power to make this stop. He is intentionally bearing the pain – even the pain of a personal betrayal. He is a part of a divinely ordained moment. "But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" The NIV gives a more fluid translation: "But

¹ See footnote on page 1012 of R.T. France's Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew

² John's account (John 18:4-7) emphasizes this even further as he records the falling of the mob the ground when he told them who he was.

³ D.A. Carson, The Expositor's Bible Commentary – Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1984), 548.

then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that said it must happen this way?" Jesus knows that all of this – including the insulting, personal betrayal – is all a part of God's plan.

Then Jesus turns his attention to the mob and addresses their bad process. In verse 55 he addresses the fact that they sought him out at night as a robber with swords and clubs even though he was daily in the temple teaching. In other words he knows and they know that they are doing this at night for a reason.

Yet in the midst of personal injustice from a friend and from a very questionable process, Jesus knows that this is a vital part of God's plan. Verse 56 is enormously important: "But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Notice that he says, "all this." Do you know why that is significant?

Jesus is in effect saying that even the painful personal betrayal of a friend and the deceitful process used to arrest are all part of God's plan. Nothing is accidental or pointless. Personal injustice that takes place because of a bad person or a bad process doesn't short-circuit God's plan. Further, God is even able to use personal injustice for good.

There is no greater example of this than Joseph in Genesis 37-50. He was part of a very dysfunctional family with a father who treated his children differently because they were born from different women. Joseph was a beloved child, and he was famously given a coat of many colors. Because of the favoritism, he was hated by his older brothers. They eventually conspired to sell him into slavery and from there Joseph was falsely accused of sexual assault and wrongly imprisoned for years. However Joseph eventually became the second most powerful man in Egypt because he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams about a coming famine. In his high position Joseph was able to save his family from starvation, and when his father died his brothers thought that Joseph would surely take his revenge. But I want you to hear what Joseph said to them. Notice how Joseph connects his pain to the plan of God:

19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good..." (Gen 50:19-20).

Joseph and Jesus understand something very important. They both know that personal betrayal and bad process do not trump God's purposes. Is personal betrayal painful? Absolutely! Is bad or sinful process outrageous? Definitely! But both were a vital part of God's plan to make salvation possible. In other words, Jesus endured the pain and the outrage of personal injustice in the path of securing forgiveness for those who put their trust in him.

So when personal injustice comes your way, go back to the cross and remember that Jesus endured the same thing. Take the issues of personal injustice to cross. Give them to Jesus, knowing that while pain may be unfair, it is never useless.

Formal Injustice

The second injustice in this passage is less personal but just as painful. This injustice is systemic, institutional, or legal. The betrayal in the previous passage came from a friend, but this betrayal comes from the "system." It reflects the greatest miscarriage of justice in history. It is filled with trumped-up charges, kangaroo courts, political expediency, false accusations, and the wrongful execution of innocent man.

After being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is taken to the home of Caiaphas the high priest.⁴ Verse 57 tells us that the scribes and elders had gathered at his home. This group was called the Sanhedrin which was the highest Jewish ruling body in the land, and it was comprised of 70 members (leading priest, teachers of the law and elders).⁵ However, the problem for them is that their power is limited mostly to religious matters, and they have no authority to execute anyone. Only the Roman government could authorize an execution.

Their aim was to find a legal way to kill Jesus. There is no sense of justice here. It is all a shell game; something intended to have the appearance of justice. Therefore, the best strategy was to charge him with statements about destroying the temple (v 61). They chose this path because action against the temple was treasonous to the Jews and seditious to the Romans.⁶ Rome's policy of tolerance and religious pluralism forbid anyone to destroy another religion's temple because of the disorder and violence that it would create. Therefore they charged him with temple terrorism.

59 Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, 60 but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward 61 and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" 62 And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" 63 But Jesus remained silent (Matt 26:59-63).

Everything about this proceeding is improper according to the established laws governing the Sanhedrin. Let me give you an overview:⁷

1. The proceedings took place in Caiaphas's home, not the temple area
2. The trial happened at night and not during the day

⁴ John 18 indicates the Jesus was first taken to Annas. Apparently, Annas was the rightful high priest but he was deposed of his power by secular powers in AD 15 and replaced by Caiaphas. By OT law the high priest could not be deposed except by death so there were some who viewed Annas as the true high priest. That is why he is first brought to Annas.

⁵ Carson, 553.

⁶ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 639.

⁷ Carson, 550

3. Jesus was not offered a defense attorney
4. They allowed (even encouraged – Acts 6:11) false testimony
5. He was charged with blaspheming even though he didn't pronounce the name of God
6. The verdict was enacted without the required delay of two days in capital cases

So this is – to use our vernacular – a lynch mob. The intention of the Sanhedrin is to kill him, and they are using just enough legal procedure so that they can hide behind it.

Since Jesus refuses answer, the high priest puts Jesus under oath. "And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matt 26:63). He asks Jesus directly, "Are you the Christ, the Son of God?" If Jesus refuses to answer, he will break a legally imposed oath, but if he denies that he is the Messiah, then the whole crisis is over.⁸

Jesus's answer is cryptic at one level and stunning at another. He makes two statements in verse 64: 1) "You have said so" and 2) "But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

What is Jesus saying? His first would be similar to saying "You said it."⁹ And this didn't get him into much trouble. However the second statement moved the Sanhedrin into chaos:

Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." 67 Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, 68 saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?" (Matt 26:65-68).

Jesus's second statement was loaded. He refers to himself as the "Son of Man" which a reference to a great Messianic Passage in Daniel 7 and to his position as Davidic ruler in Psalm 110:

"Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (Dan 7:13-14)

The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool" (Ps 110:1)

Jesus is telling – even warning them – them that while they are judging him; he will be judging them. "From then on they would not see him as he now stands before them but only in his

⁸ Carson, 554.

⁹ Notice the similar response to Judas in Matthew 26:25

capacity as undisputed King Messiah and sovereign Judge."¹⁰ Do you see what he is saying? "You are judging me, but this is not over!" No doubt that when some of these same men heard about his resurrection a few days later, they must have remembered this moment.

Jesus is telling them something very important, something we need to hear. He is saying that legal, formal, or institutional injustice is not ultimate. In other words, there is another day yet to come in which the court room of heaven will convene and this seated Judge and King will make the ultimate and final determination of justice.

The Sanhedrin may charge him with blasphemy. They may make false accusations against him. They may spit upon him, mock him, and abuse him. But they will not have the final word. The system may be corrupt, bigoted, and evil but it is not ultimate.

Connecting the Cross to Injustice

So what do we make of all this injustice? How do we connect the dots between this personal and legal injustice, the sacrifice of Jesus, and our own lives? Let me give you some connecting points.

Theologically:

1. There was never a greater injustice than the cross

Jesus was the innocent Son of God. He was falsely charged, abused, horribly executed, and bore the wrath that he didn't deserve. There is nothing that could ever compare to the injustice of that moment.

2. The Devil and sinful men were pawns in the hands of a sovereign God

It is profoundly amazing that the most important moment in redemptive history *includes* the unjust actions of the devil and sinful people. God is always working his plan, even through the sinful actions of others.

3. The beauty of forgiveness was born in the putrid soil of injustice

There no better news in all of the Bible than this: Jesus died for our sins. He made it possible for us to be forgiven by a holy God. Jesus's death on the cross satisfied the cosmic demand for sin's offense to be covered. And even though unfairness and injustice were all over the moment, it still produced the best news ever known.

¹⁰ Carson, 555.

Personally:

1. Injustice in this lifetime, while inevitable, is not comparable to the joy of the next for those who know Christ

Listen to what Paul says in Romans 8:18 – “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” In other words, you can expect some level of injustice in this lifetime. The hope – found only in Christ – is that it pales in comparison to what that injustice is doing for us in the next.

2. Unfair doesn't mean useless or ultimate

This text reminds us of two great truths that we need to cling to when personal or formal injustice happens. First, we need to remind ourselves that there is divine purpose for this. What you are experiencing is not pointless, meaningless, or useless! Remember Joseph – “What you intended for evil, God used for good.” There is always divine purpose. Even personal betrayal and bad process!

Secondly, we need to remind ourselves that it is not ultimate. There is a plan for divine justice. A friend of mine says, “The scoreboard is in heaven.” So when the entire system seems to be biased, bigoted, unfair, and hurtful, just remember – “this is not ultimate.”

Unfair is not fun; but it is not useless or ultimate. There is a point, and they won't get away with it! The Bible and the cross declare these truths boldly. It was Job who said, “25 For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth (Job 19:25). So when injustice happens to you, come back to the cross. Remember Jesus.

No other music form better expresses the pain of personal and formal injustice than Negro Spirituals. Our African American brothers and sisters have known more historical injustice than many of us will ever know. And that is why I think that the song “Give me Jesus” is so powerful.

“In the morning, when I rise / In the morning, when I rise / In the morning, when I rise. Give me Jesus
Give me Jesus / You can have all this world / Just give me Jesus.”

When I am alone / When I am alone / Give me Jesus. Give me Jesus / You can have all this world,
Just give me Jesus.”

When I come to die / When I come to die / When I come to die / Give me Jesus. You can have all this
world / Just give me Jesus.”

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