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CONDEMNED OR SET FREE?

Luke 23:13-25

By

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Luke Lesson 106

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Throughout history, people have made some bad decisions. An inventor named Alexander Graham Bell made an appointment with Western Union to sell them on the idea of something called a telephone. Western Union's president gave his answer: "What use could this company make of an electrical toy?"

A Michigan banker advised Henry Ford's lawyer not to invest in the new motor car company, assuring him, "The horse is here to stay, but the automobile is only a novelty."

A more recent inventor named Chester Carlson came up with a new machine that was able to make copies of documents. He approached IBM, but they told him they weren't interested. Kodak told him the same. Finally, Carlson approached a small company called the Haloid Corporation, which took the idea and renamed itself Xerox.

We look at these bad decisions from the standpoint of history and laugh, but those who made them did not have our vantage point. We all can look back on bad decisions that we have made and say, "If only I had known then what I know now, I would have decided much differently!" The more consequential the decision, the more important it is to make wise decisions.

The most consequential decision that any person can make is one that affects his eternal destiny. To blow it on that decision is to fail utterly, even if a person makes financial or career decisions that succeed fabulously. Thus the Jews' and Pilate's decision to condemn Jesus Christ to die was the worst decision in the history of the world. It brought awful judgment on the Jewish nation, which later revolted against Rome and was wiped out. The Jews were scattered among the nations for almost 1900 years. Pilate and every Jew who condemned Jesus and did not repent suffered God's eternal judgment for their sinful decision regarding Christ. Their mistake is portrayed for us in the gospel accounts so that we will learn from it and avoid this worst of all possible decisions.

But also in this great drama we meet another character who is a type of those who have sinned by rebelling against God, yet in spite of their sin, they go free. That man is Barabbas, who was in prison for insurrection, murder, and robbery. He was set free that day through no merit of his own, but simply because Jesus died in his place. This story teaches us that,

Those who condemn Jesus will be condemned;
those who have Jesus as their substitute will be set free.

In this segment of the story, two characters show us how *not* to decide about Christ:

1. The Jews and Pilate condemned Jesus and were condemned to judgment.

The Jews were the active force, pushing hard to condemn Jesus. Pilate was more passive, reluctantly getting dragged inch by inch until he yielded to the Jews' demand.

- A. The Jews actively condemned Jesus and were condemned to judgment.

Both the Jews and Pilate were guilty, but as Jesus told Pilate, the Jews had the greater guilt (John 19:11). We looked last week at how the Jewish leaders willfully, knowingly rejected Jesus as their Messiah. But here, not only the Jewish leaders, but also some from the people (23:13), make this worst of all possible decisions, to crucify the Lord of glory. This is a significant turn of events, because now the leaders have won over at least a sampling of the populace. Perhaps they persuaded them that Jesus would never deliver the nation from Rome's thumb. Thus the Jewish leaders were playing off the people's desire to be free from Roman domination so that they could lead a better life, arguing that Jesus wasn't the leader they needed. But they were also portraying Jesus to Pilate as one who was a threat to Roman sovereignty.

For us who believe in Christ, it is hard to fathom how a person can know anything about Christ and yet willfully reject Him. But it shows us how strong the power of sin is in the fallen human heart! Often, like the Jews, people mistakenly think that following Christ will not get them the happiness and freedom that they desire, and so they go their own way, only to discover too late that their way is the way of destruction.

Aaron Burr was the third Vice President of the United States. He actually tied Thomas Jefferson in the number of electoral votes for President, but he lost in the vote in Congress, largely due to the efforts of his opponent, Alexander Hamilton. Burr later challenged Hamilton to a duel and killed him. This discredited him politically. He was later tried for treason, but acquitted. He lived a long life, but he was an unhappy man. Sadly, Burr was the grandson of the godly pastor, Jonathan Edwards. Although Burr never knew his grandfather, who had died while he was a young boy, he had a godly heritage, but he walked away from it. Late in life he said, "Sixty years ago I told God that if He would let me alone, I would let Him alone, and God has not bothered about me since." Aaron Burr got what he wanted, but it was a tragic mistake!

The Jews got what they wanted: Jesus was crucified. They later revolted against Rome, but it did not get them what they wanted. They were slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands, and those who survived were scattered. The temple and the city of Jerusalem were totally destroyed. Willful, knowing rejection of Christ always results in awful judgment, if not in this life, certainly in eternity.

B. Pilate passively condemned Jesus and was condemned to judgment.

Luke shows Pilate as a man who was dragged inch by inch in this tug of war against the Jewish leaders, until finally he gave way and delivered Jesus up to be crucified. He made several attempts to free Jesus, whom he knew to be innocent. After his first meeting with Jesus, he told the Jewish leaders, "I find no guilt in this man" (23:4). That should have settled it, but they kept insisting that Jesus was guilty. Next, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod in an attempt to pass the buck. But Herod mocked Jesus and sent Him back to Pilate, implicitly acknowledging that Jesus was innocent. So for the second time, Pilate told the Jews that he had found Him innocent and, he added, Herod concurred. (23:14-15).

At this point, either because of actual objections which Luke does not record or because he could sense the continued opposition of the crowd, Pilate tried another tactic to spare Jesus' life: he offered to punish and release Him (23:16). He uses a mild term for punish, probably to salve his own guilty conscience, but he was referring to scourging, a terrible punishment that sometimes re-

sulted in death. A man would be whipped with leather thongs containing pieces of metal, so that his back would be shredded into ribbons of flesh. Pilate was hoping to appease the crowd and spare Jesus' life, but they would not have it.

So Pilate tried another tactic. There was a custom of him releasing one prisoner to the people at the feast (verse 17 was probably not in Luke's original, but was added by a later scribe to explain this). Perhaps Pilate suggested what he thought would be a clear choice of extremes: Jesus or Barabbas, a notorious rebel who was guilty of both robbery and murder. But to Pilate's shock, they called for Jesus' death and Barabbas' release (23:18). Pilate still wanted to release Jesus, so he addressed them again, but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify Him!" For the third time Pilate asked, "Why, what evil has this man done? I have found no guilt demanding death; I will therefore punish Him and release Him" (23:22). But they kept loudly insisting that Jesus die. John 19:1 indicates that Pilate actually did scourge Jesus in hopes of placating the mob. When that didn't work, finally, tragically, Pilate caved in and pronounced sentence that their demand should be granted. Barabbas was released; Jesus was led away to be crucified.

Pilate seems to have meant well, but to have been overwhelmed by forces stronger than himself. But while his sin was not as terrible as that of the Jews (John 19:11), he still was guilty of crucifying Jesus. In Acts 4:27-28, the early church prayed, "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur." The fact that all these various people did what God predestined to occur does not absolve them of guilt. It merely shows that wicked people cannot thwart the sovereign purpose of God. But even though they fulfilled God's purpose by crucifying Jesus, they were guilty and stand condemned.

There are probably far more people like Pilate than like the Jewish leaders, people who mean well, but they get carried along by forces stronger than they and end up rejecting Christ. What can we learn from his mistakes so that we avoid the same?

- 1) Deal with past sins so that they do not pull you to destruction.

As I explained last week, there were several incidents in Pilate's history with the Jews that hindered him from doing the right thing in this situation. He had been brutal toward them. On their part, they had gone to Rome and brought down a censure on Pilate. At this point, he could scarcely risk the threat of another disgruntled Jewish delegation to Rome. The Jewish writer, Philo, says, "He was afraid that if a Jewish embassy were sent to Rome, they might discuss the many maladministrations of his government, his extortions, his unjust decrees, his inhuman punishments" (cited by James Stalker, *The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ* [Zondervan], p. 67).

Stalker adds, "There is nothing that so frustrates good resolutions and paralyzes noble efforts as the dead weight of past sins." If people know things about us, we are afraid to do anything to displease them, for fear that they will use the past against us. Because of his past sins, Pilate did not rule the Jews; they now ruled him. Those sins were sucking him, like a giant whirlpool, toward this fatal decision regarding Jesus Christ.

The only way to break away from the power of past sins is to confess them and resolve to obey God now, no matter what the cost. Yes, you will probably pay a price to break away from the old life, but you will pay a greater price if you do not!

- 2) Set godly goals, not worldly ones.

Pilate's obvious goal in life was to hang onto his power and to promote his political fortune. Jesus taught that our goal should be, "Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). On one level, this was the best day of Pilate's life. He patched up a quarrel with his political neighbor, Herod. He placated the difficult Jewish leaders and avoided a riot and the certain reprimand from Rome. He was able to hang onto power for a few more years. But spiritually, it was the absolute worst day of Pilate's life. Although he didn't want to do it, he ended up condemning the innocent Son of God and brought down God's condemnation on his head. What led Pilate down the wrong fork in the road was his worldly goals.

Many who profess Christ as Savior adopt worldly goals. Like Pilate, they approve of Jesus. They go to church; they call themselves Christians. But the thing that determines their direction in life is the goal of worldly success. They are in a mad pursuit to collect more things. If a promotion promises more money, more prestige, a better chance for future advancement, they take it without considering what it will do to their service for the Lord or to their family life. Their goal is success in this world, not success in God's kingdom. Set godly goals!

- 3) Determine to please God even if it means alienating people.

Pilate didn't want to kill Jesus and he didn't want controversy with the Jews. He just wanted peace. He really wanted to be neutral about Jesus and get on with his life. But, as we saw last week, that is never an option. Pilate's downfall was that he was concerned about pleasing the Jews and pleasing Caesar, but he did not consider pleasing God.

The Bible is clear that if we take a strong stand for Christ, we will alienate some people at least some of the time. We should never deliberately alienate anyone. As Paul says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Rom. 12:18). But both Paul and Jesus had many enemies because they determined to please God above all else. As Paul told the Galatians, "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10).

Concerning political leadership, Winston Churchill said, "People who are not prepared to do unpopular things and defy clamour are not fit to be ministers in times of stress" (James Humes, *Churchill: Speaker of the Century* [Stein and Day], p. 275). The same is true spiritually. Determine to please God in obedience to His Word, even in your thought life and private decisions. If that is your habit, you won't be led astray in a time of difficulty.

- 4) Do not compromise your conscience, even if you think it will gain what you want in life.

In some situations, compromise is wise and necessary. But it is never wise, necessary, or right if it involves violating God's moral

law and compromising your conscience. When Pilate declared that Jesus was innocent, he should have stood on principle no matter how loudly the Jews yelled nor what they threatened. Why offer to scourge Jesus if He was innocent? Pilate was compromising his conscience, thinking that it would gain the Jews' favor and Jesus' life. But what he thought was a loophole of escape became a noose around his neck (Stalker, p. 55). Pilate thought that he was gaining his political life by this compromise, but he was losing, not only his political life, but his spiritual life as well.

There are men who will compromise even in the ministry because they think that it will gain them success. They make wrong alliances with those who hold to liberal theology because it wins them a bigger platform. They don't speak out on unpopular issues or confront those in sin, because they're afraid that people won't like them. But any success, whether in ministry or business or personal life, that is gained by compromising your conscience is not success with God. If you jettison a clear conscience, you will eventually make shipwreck of your faith (1 Tim. 1:19).

So the Jews warn us against actively rejecting Christ. Pilate teaches us that we must not passively reject Christ by allowing outside pressure to lead us to compromise. If we do, no matter how much worldly happiness or success we gain, we will lose our souls. But there is another character in the story who offers us a valuable spiritual lesson:

2. Barabbas had Jesus as his substitute and went free.

Although there has been much speculation, we do not know anything about Barabbas' personal life after he was released. It would be wonderful to know that he personally trusted in Christ and was reformed from his life of violence and sin, but we don't know. But even so, Barabbas stands on the biblical page as a type of sinners who do trust in Christ. Note four parallels:

A. Barabbas deserved to die.

Apparently he had led an insurrection that had resulted in people being murdered. Perhaps he had killed some himself. He supported himself and his cause through robbery (John 18:40). He had violated the law and he deserved to die. Ironically, Barabbas was guilty of the very crime of insurrection of which the Jews ac-

cused Jesus. If Barabbas had been executed, no one would have questioned it. He should have been on the cross.

As such, Barabbas represents every person who has violated God's holy law. We all stand guilty as charged before God's bar of justice. The Bible declares, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Like Barabbas, we deserve God's sentence of death.

Perhaps you protest: "I'm no robber or murderer! I live a decent, clean life. I'm a law-abiding person. It's not fair to compare me with this criminal!" But God's Word is clear that we have all violated God's holy standards hundreds of times. The Jews who crucified Jesus would have defended themselves as keepers of God's law. But, as Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount, God's law is not just outward; it's inward. If we have been wrongly angry, we have murdered. If we have secretly lusted, we have committed adultery (Matt. 5:21-32). Which of us could rightly claim that we have always kept even one of God's Ten Commandments, let alone all ten? Like Barabbas, we deserve to die.

B. Barabbas did nothing to earn his pardon.

He didn't get out for good behavior in prison. He didn't make any promises to reform after he got out. He didn't promise to do 100 hours of community service. The factors that resulted in his pardon were totally apart from himself. All that he could do was to accept the pardon. He could never congratulate himself later because he got out of his death sentence. It was totally due to factors apart from him and even in spite of him. It was free grace.

That's exactly how God's salvation is offered to every sinner. If you think that you deserve it or if you offer to somehow pay for it, you do not understand. All you can do is recognize that God offers it freely apart from any merit and humbly accept it.

C. Jesus died in Barabbas' place.

That was literally true for Barabbas. He received a pardon and Jesus died instead of him. In his newfound freedom, if Barabbas followed the crowd to Golgotha that day and watched as they nailed Jesus to the cross, he must have thought, "That should have been me! Those nails were intended for my hands and feet! That man is dying in my place!"

This is the good news that the Bible proclaims: we all deserve to die for our sins, but Jesus, the innocent Lamb of God, took our place on the cross as our substitute. He gave His life as the ransom for many (Mark 10:45). He bore the wrath of God that should have fallen on you and me, satisfying the penalty. "[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). Thus, God "might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). If your faith is in Christ, His death means that you will not face God's condemnation.

D. Jesus' death resulted in Barabbas' life and freedom.

There is a great irony here: Barabbas' name means "son of the father." The real Son of the Father, Jesus, suffered and died so that this human son of the father could live and go free. John states that he wrote his gospel "that you may believe the Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). If you do not believe in Christ, you are like Barabbas in prison: in bondage to sin, under the sentence of death, and unable to free yourself (Eph. 2:1-3). Only Jesus Christ can free you from sin and impart eternal life to you so that you become a true "son of the Father," a child of God.

Conclusion

Every year in countries that are predominately Roman Catholic, such as the Philippines and Mexico, you can find pilgrims who torture themselves in an attempt to atone for their sins. They sometimes crawl on their knees on broken glass toward the crucifix. They go so far as to hire men to flog them and to put a crown of thorns on their heads. Some even allow themselves to be nailed to a cross. Others do other deeds of penance. Sadly, these people do not understand the heart of the Christian gospel.

That gospel is that Christ fully paid the penalty we deserved and that we can do nothing except receive His salvation by faith. Human pride wants to say, "At least let me help. Let me do my part." But the Bible says, "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Ps. 3:8). If Jesus Christ crucified is your substitute and your hope, you will know the salvation of God.

Discussion Questions

1. Someone says, "Pilate seems to have been a basically good man who got overwhelmed by forces stronger than he. Surely God would not judge people like that, would He?" Your response?
2. How can a person who feels trapped by his past sins break free?
3. What should we do if we feel that we have violated our conscience? Is the conscience always a good guide?
4. Why is it crucial to the gospel that we can do nothing and that God does everything?

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