

## **The Best Friend of the Wicked**

Scripture: Matthew 27

Code: 82-7

This is an appropriate way to reflect on the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ as we have, through the music tonight and through the Scripture reading, looked in particular at His suffering and at His rejection the fact that He was stricken, smitten, afflicted by God and by men as well. And that is the theme that I want to speak to you about tonight: "The Wickedness of Calvary."

Wicked treatment of Jesus did not start at the cross; it actually pursued Him from His birth. It was wicked men who, seeking to kill Him, slaughtered babies in and around Bethlehem. It was wicked men who tried to discredit the Lord Jesus when He taught. It was wicked men who tried to destroy Him because He was a convincing, miracle-working prophet of God who condemned their false religion. It was wickedness that eventually secured His condemnation to death by violating every standard of justice and truth, equity and honor, in both Jewish and Gentile law.

Wickedness had already betrayed Him. Wickedness had already kissed Him. Wickedness had arrested Him. Wickedness had framed Him, denied Him, slapped Him, punched Him, spit on Him, mocked Him. And it was wickedness that would execute Him, the wickedness of men, so it says in Acts chapter 2. Wickedness it was that, from the human viewpoint, fastened Him with rusty nails to a cross suspended in humiliation and torture. His life and His death were a kind of portrait of the work of wickedness.

One writer said, "For thousands of years wickedness had been growing. It had wrought deeds of impiety and crime that had wrung the ages with agony, and often roused the justice of the universe to roll its fiery thunderbolts of retribution through the world. But now it had grown to full maturity. It stands around this cross in such gigantic proportions as had never been seen before. It works an enormity before which the mightiest of its past exploits dwindle into insignificance and fail in words. It crucifies the Lord of life and glory."

And wickedness did not just kill Him, it tormented Him. He was not allowed just to die with the agonies of the cross, as fierce as they were. No, until His very last breath His enemies filled Him with every kind of hostility, expressing their wickedness, endeavoring by actions and words to torture Him all the way to death. It seems to be Matthew's responsibility to show these agonies attendant at the cross; and the scripture that I read identifies four groups of wicked people. If you want to look at your Bible in Matthew 27, I want to point them out to you. Each demonstrates a kind of wicked hatred of Christ.

There are four groups of wicked people in this account. There are the ignorant wicked; there are the informed wicked; there are the hypocritical wicked - fickle wicked - and the religious wicked. The ignorant wicked, the informed wicked, the fickle wicked, and the religious wicked. Everybody falls into those categories who rejects Christ. There are people who are ignorant; there are people who are informed; there are people who are mildly interested in Him; and there are religious people who see Him as a threat to their religion. In this story we see all four of them. But that's not how the story

ends, as we will find out.

First of all, we meet the ignorant wicked, illustrated by the callous soldiers. Starting in verse 27, “The soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him.” These are the soldiers of Pilate who has just released Jesus to them while releasing Barabbas back into the population.

Pilate had already sinned against the dictates of his own conscience: he had already sinned against conviction; he had sinned against truth; he had sinned against justice; he had sinned against character; he had sinned against integrity. He was a miserable man whose desire for popularity and security caused him to do evil blatantly and publicly – and he knew it – rather than release Jesus whom he repeatedly pronounced to be innocent. He had Him scourged, hoping to satiate the blood-thirsty mob before the judgment that they called for, namely crucifixion.

As the passage opens, Jesus has now endured the scourging, verse 26, and is now released from Pilate into the hands of the soldiers back into their custody - Roman legionnaires who, for the most part, were not even Italians, but rather recruits from many places, likely from Syria, other countries nearby, who could speak Aramaic commonly spoken by the Jews. And so, they were useful to the Romans in interacting with the Jewish people because they knew Aramaic, and that was the language the Jews spoke. They were not Jews, they didn't know anything about Jesus. They were troops brought by Pilate, maybe brought in from Caesarea, normally not even stationed in Jerusalem, with no knowledge of what was going on. So whatever they did they did in absolute ignorance.

They saw Jesus as a kind of strange, pathetic character; a fraud, a fake, maybe even mentally deranged, worthy only of mockery. And that's why what you have in the gospel of Matthew is a picture of what I've called the comedy at Calvary. It was all a joke to them. And this Jesus never spoke. In all the circumstances that they were involved in we never have a record of anything that He said. They surely questioned His intelligence, if not His sanity. They played with Him like a clown. They played with Him like they would an idiot boy in the street, like a mentally deficient man worth nothing to them other than to be the object of their jokes. And they fully owned Pilate's plan to mock the Jews using Jesus. What they did was likely under Pilate's eyes. He emerged later with Jesus to face the crowd.

So they took Jesus to the Praetorium. And what did they do there? It says that they stripped Him, and they put a scarlet robe on Him. This is the beginning of the game they're going to play. Pitiful is this man, already bleeding from the scourging. His upper torso must have been shredded down to the bone. And to make matters worse, they strip Him naked and then put a scarlet robe on top of His horrendous wounds. His flesh is opened up and blood is pouring out; and now He has a coarse robe throne on His body to add to the agony.

It says there's a band of soldiers there, a cohort of soldiers. That could be somewhere up to six hundred soldiers. All the soldiers appear to want in on the fun. Their hatred of the Jews only intensifies the glee with which they mock the Jews by making Jesus like a comedic king. The Jews are not inside, because they would never go into a place that was occupied by Gentiles; they would defile themselves at Passover. So the soldiers have Jesus to themselves and their wicked minds. This is remarkable insight into the basic evil of the human heart: many men with no interest in alleviating agony, no concern for this man's suffering, no interest in healing His wounds, only bent on

aggravating His pain for their own fun. This is ignorant wickedness.

Remember, they have no personal reason to dislike Jesus. He'd never been a part of their lives. They'd never been in conflict with Him. He didn't come against their goals and their ideals and their prejudices, yet they found this immense joy in inflicting on Him devastating pain. They undressed Him, put a *chlamus* – is the Greek word – on Him. It was a robe that was scarlet. John says purple, which probably means it started out purple and faded into scarlet. Was to be the purple robe of a would-be king, a mock imitation of royalty. And then to give Him a crown twisted together, in verse 29, a crown of thorns – a cheap imitation of a royal wreath worn by Caesar – and they crushed it onto His head.

They put a reed in His hand like a mock scepter, and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews," sarcasm and ridicule to humiliate Him. Verse 30 says, "They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head." Of course, the ultimate indignity is to spit on someone. "This is nothing but a fool to spit on; this is a hopeless, helpless person. We are free to do whatever we want to Him, because there's no possibility that He would ever retaliate. He is powerless." It's a brutal amusement.

"After this, they finished the mockery," verse 31, "took the scarlet robe off Him and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him." Crucifixion procession to the hill of Golgotha. "As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross."

They were coming out of the Praetorium and out of the city, because executions were always done on the outside of the city gates. So the procession of humiliation went through the main streets with a sign in front, and the sign is indicated down in verse 37. The same sign would have been put on the cross. The crime: "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS."

Execution was always near a highway. During this period of history the Romans probably crucified about thirty thousand people, lining the highways always to create fear in any who would take any action that threatened Rome. A man named Simon from Cyrene - an old Greek settlement in the north coast of Africa, south of Greece, west of Alexandria - in the area of Libya, was found to carry the cross.

They came to the place of a skull. It takes that name from, I think, it's configuration. Verse 34, "They gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink." Gall was used as a narcotic to some degree stupefy the victim, not for mercy, but so the victim would settle down and not fight them as they tried to crucify him. He wouldn't drink it; He would not fight them; and He did not want His senses dulled.

"And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots." That's a direct fulfillment of Psalm 22:18 which says that's what they will do. Every Jew had essentially five articles of clothing: shoes, head covering, belt, inner garment, outer cloak. So they gambled for those.

"And then," verse 36 says, "sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there." What a statement. Why were they guarding Him? Did they think someone would come and rescue Him?

Was such a force there, and the whole crowd screaming for His death?

“And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, ‘THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.’” That is the pinnacle of their mockery. It’s cynical, sarcastic, back at the Jews who had blackmailed Pilate into killing this innocent man. The soldiers are then the innocent in the sense that they are ignorant, not innocent in the sense that they are sinless, but they have not committed a crime that is at the level of the rest of the crowds that are there.

There is no such thing as real innocence. But they’re just doing their duty; they’re following orders. They needlessly make much of it to heap scorn on Jesus, but they intend no blasphemy by this. They reject Jesus out of ignorance. And there are always people like that who reject Him because they don’t know anything about Him.

But when we come to verse 38 we meet a second group. These are not the ignorant; these are the informed wicked. Verse 38: “At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left.” Two robbers – *lēstai* is the Greek word – “bandits.” Maybe they were part of the gang that Barabbas led. They were plundering robbers.

They were not ignorant Romans. They were Jews, and they knew about Jesus, because all the Jews knew about Jesus. They knew about Jesus clearly, because down in verse 44, “The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words.” What words? “He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

So they knew His claims. Casting the same insults at Him, they mock His claim to be the Son of God. These are secular Jews; these are crass Jews. These are criminal Jews who lived for the loot with little thought of right and wrong and morality. Their guilt is greater than the ignorant, but less than the next crowd: the fickle wicked.

Verse 39: “And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’”

Who are these passing by? The crowd, just the people who a few days earlier - in fact, on Monday when Jesus came into the city - hailed Him as Son of David, Messiah. Here they are on their way somewhere, just passing by, life as usual. They stop and they gaze at the one they praised on Monday. Maybe they were part of the screaming crowd, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” - the One that they praised as the Son of David, the One to whom they offered hosannas, and the One before whom they threw down their robes and palm branches is now just a dying, unrecognizable mass of bloody flesh, executed by the very Romans that they hoped He would have overthrown.

They were wrong on Monday, they concluded. This is not their Messiah, though they had heard Him teach, though they had seen His miracles, though they most likely knew of the resurrection, even of Lazarus so recently. Now, where once they were hurling hosannas at Him, verse 39 says, they were hurling abuse at Him – literally “blaspheming.” The verb form is “in a continual action.”

Jesus hadn’t given them what they wanted in the time between Monday and Friday. They wanted freedom from Rome; they wanted prosperity. They weren’t interested in forgiveness of sins and

salvation. They're even wagging their heads, which is exactly again what Psalm 22 says they will do. It's a gesture of ridicule and scorn, and out of their lips comes the mockery of verse 40: "You're the One who said You'd destroy this temple, and I'll rebuild it in three days."

He had said that. He had said that and He meant it. He was talking about not the temple building, but His own body and His own resurrection. But they're mocking Him. "If You're the Son of God, come down from the cross." They just said this sort of incidentally as they passed by.

There are the ignorant wicked, and there are the informed wicked, and there are the fickle, indifferent wicked. But the worst of all are the religious wicked, and we meet them in verse 41: "In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying," – so far everyone is mocking Him, everyone. The Roman soldiers in their ignorance are mocking Him; the robbers are mocking Him; the passersby from the crowd of Jews are mocking Him; and now the chief priests, scribes and elders – the religious leaders – were mocking Him and saying, "He saved others, He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel." Say that with sarcasm. "Let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him."

These are the religious wicked: chief priests, scribes, elders made up of the Jewish council called the Sanhedrin. They were Old Testament experts, Scripture experts. They were supposed to be the righteous, and they're mocking. Whatever power He did display they attributed to Satan; they only understood power for self-interest's sake. They're glad to see the One they hated being executed. They attack Him; they attack His relationship to God: "He trusts in God, let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

How ugly are the religious wicked, claiming to know and serve and represent God - they blaspheme the Son of God. False religious leaders lead people to hell; they are called blind leaders, false shepherds, thieves, wolves, hypocrites, whited sepulchers, blind guides, deadly snakes. They are doomed to the hottest hell.

So this is the scene, four groups of Christ-rejecters: the ignorant wicked, who are just callous; the informed wicked, who are crass - they're more occupied with material things - that's why they're thieves and robbers; the fickle wicked, who are just careless, passing by and joining the scorn; and the religious wicked, who are fully corrupt. And mark it: Satan always disguises himself, and so do his ministers, as angels of light. So the highest level of wickedness and corruption is always in religious garb.

But, a few moments ago in our service we sang, "Jesus, What a Friend for Sinners," didn't we? Well, here's a good group of sinners to start with.

From the cross, according to Luke's gospel, Jesus looked out and said, "Father," – What? – "forgive them, for they know not what they do." That was a prayer for salvation. That was a prayer for salvation. And the Son of God always prays according to the will of God, and His prayers are answered.

One of them was answered very quickly. Go down to verse 54: "Now the centurion," – part of the Roman cohort who led the execution – "and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus," – the ones who had done all that to Him, and then sat there and watched Him, the ignorant wicked –

“when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’” Salvation came to a centurion, and maybe to the other soldiers. We might meet some of them in heaven. For them to say, “Truly this was the Son of God,” may not have been the moment of their salvation, but it may have been that after that they sought to find out the truth.

What about the informed ones? What about the thieves? Oh, one of them, according to Luke chapter 23, said to Jesus, “Remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” He knew a lot about Jesus. He knew He was a king and He had a kingdom. And Jesus said to him, “Today you will be with Me in paradise.” Our Lord’s prayer for forgiveness was answered. Soldiers were forgiven and redeemed. A thief was forgiven and redeemed.

What about the third group, the fickle crowd? It wasn’t long after His resurrection that Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost and preached a sermon in the city of Jerusalem to the crowd. Three thousand of them believed (Acts chapter 2). In chapter 4, five thousand more believe. Prayer of our Lord was answered on behalf of soldiers, thief, and thousands out of the passing crowd.

What about the worst of the worst? What about the priests? In the sixth chapter of Acts we read this in verse 7. The number of disciples is increasing in chapter 6, and come down to verse 7: “The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and” – not a small number – “a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

There were four groups there. There were ignorant soldiers; there were informed thieves; there was the fickle mob; and there were the religious leaders. And by the time you get to the sixth chapter of Acts, souls from all of those groups have been saved, because Jesus is a friend to sinners. And He said, “Father, forgive them,” and the Father did. The friend of sinners saved the very wicked who had rejected Him.

How evil is the evil that required the Son of God to endure such a rejection of death? But on the other hand, how gracious is God to save those guilty of the rejection that put Him there?

So, the wickedness of Calvary is monstrous, which makes the grace of God even more glorious. Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. Let’s pray.

Father, thank You again for revealing Your truth to us. Thank You for the scene; such a horrifying scene; such terrible, undeserved treatment. People who should, on the basis of justice, been sent to hell, but Your prayer, Lord - “Father, forgive them” - was answered, and they made up the early gathering of true believers. Jesus died not only as a sacrifice, but He died as a friend to the very ones who put Him there. Scripture says that whoever rejects Christ “crucifies Him afresh and puts Him to open shame.”

There are still the ignorant, the informed, the fickle indifferent, and the religious hypocrites who reject our Savior. “Father,” we pray as He prayed, “forgive them, for they know not what they do.” There may be some here, this hour, tonight; surely there are. Be gracious to them. Forgive them. Receive them as Your own beloved children. Draw them to Yourself through Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.

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