**The Righteous One**

Matthew 26:57-66

Today we reflect on the arrest and trial of the Lord Jesus. Friday we will focus on His crucifixion and death. Next Sunday, of course, we will celebrate the resurrection. The clear and repeated **emphasis of all of the accounts of Jesus’ trials** - and they are substantially documented in Matthew, Mark and Luke - is ***the innocence of Jesus***.

Other themes play into this section, like the fulfillment of Scripture and the will of the Father, but what keeps coming up, over and over again is ***the unassailable innocence and righteousness of Jesus***. He didn’t even speak up in his own defense, as was his right. He remained silent and let the Pharisees and the Jewish council parade false witnesses before the Sanhedrin. They couldn’t get any two of these liars to tell compatible stories so nothing held up.

In the end, all they could convict Jesus on was **a religious technicality they labelled blasphemy** based on their accurate assessment that his use of the title Son of Man was a reference to Daniel 7 where one by that name comes before the throne of God and is given power and dominion and glory and authority - obviously the Messiah.

***Even Judas, the betrayer***, has a change of heart and returns the 30 pieces of silver saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood” (27:4). And then Pilate, the Roman governor, tries to have Jesus released using the annual tradition of granting amnesty to one convicted criminal. But the crowd chooses Barrabas - a notorious criminal and insurrectionist. ***Even Pilate’s wife warned him about the innocence of Jesus***. But Pilate made the always fatal error of not listening to his wife and said:

“‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.’ And all the people answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children.’” Matthew 27:24-25

What a profound statement: ***“His blood be on us and on our children.”*** Jesus must have nodded at that one - “Yes, that is the whole point.” But they didn’t mean blood of atonement, they meant blood of execution. They were taking responsibility for having Jesus killed. In effect, they were acknowledging that there was no legal basis to have Jesus crucified, but they insisted on doing it anyway.

So in the trial of Jesus we see **the most unjust legal proceeding in history**. The one and only truly innocent person was convicted of the only thing they could pin on him - that he was, in fact, the Son of God. Guilty as charged. But on all other counts - innocent. Here in Matthew’s gospel and also drawing on the book of Hebrews, we will see **three implications of the righteousness of Jesus**. First:

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Proved his full **Divinity**

“I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Matthew 26:63

Jesus remained silent as all the false witnesses were brought before the Jewish ruling council. He refused to defend himself until this moment. Rumors had circled for the three years of his ministry and they hovered around the title he most often used for himself: Son of Man. At this point **the high priest calls for the question**: Ok, Jesus - just tell us once and for all - ***are you the Messiah or not?***

It’s interesting that the high priest adds the qualifier, “Son of God,” because that was very much a disputed point among the Jews. Was the Messiah expected to be the Son of God or just an anointed King from the line of David? Was the Messiah divine - fully God? The Jews had different ideas on that, and if there was a consensus it was that the Messiah probably wasn’t divine. But look at Jesus’ answer:

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Proved his full **Divinity**

“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.” Matthew 26:64

This is a clear reference to **Daniel 7:13-14**, when “one like a son of man” comes before the throne of God in heaven - arriving in glory on the clouds - something only a divine figure could do. And to this son of man God gives dominion and authority and a kingdom that will last forever. So obviously that is the Messiah of Israel who would reign on David’s throne, forever.

But to be seated at the right hand of Power means to be exalted to a position as regent of the universe, prime minister acting on behalf of God. And the high priest rightly interpreted this statement as a claim to full divinity, calling it blasphemy, tearing his robes and enacting the penalty for such a claim - which was death.

The Jews approached the trial of Jesus as a way of proving his guilt and justifying his execution. ***But Jesus used the trial to prove his righteousness and clarify his claim to full divinity***. He was intentionally subtle and vague through his three years of ministry, but now all pretense and subterfuge is set aside and **Jesus goes public with his claim**. “Yes, I am the Messiah. Yes, my kingdom will last forever. Yes, I am the Son of God. And yes, that means I am one with God, equal with God.”

Now, fast forward to the crucifixion - at the moment Jesus died the earth shook, the sky went pitch black and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Proved his full **Divinity**

“When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’” Matthew 27:54

The way Jesus died and the events that accompanied his death proved to the Roman soldiers that this was no ordinary human but was, in fact, the Son of God. Luke recorded the centurion’s observation a little differently:

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Proved his full **Divinity**

“Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’” Luke 23:47

Part of what the Roman soldiers were responding to was the **goodness of Jesus** - His obvious mercy and love even while he was ***dying in terrible agony***. No doubt these soldiers had the grim responsibility of watching a lot of people die by crucifixion and never had they seen anyone die in this way. Jesus’ righteousness, even through the worst kind of pain and mockery, was one more proof of his full divinity. Second:

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Perfected his full **Humanity**

“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will but as you will.” Matthew 26:39

Think about what **perfect righteousness** really is. To be considered absolutely perfect you have to avoid all sin - entirely. Never once do, say or think anything wrong. Never. But that’s just half the battle. You also have to do, say and think everything right. You can’t leave anything UNDONE that ought to be done or said. Every word correct. Every act lovingly and wisely carried out. Even every thought and intention must be brought in line with God’s perfect will. And you have to maintain this perfection your entire life.

So Jesus wasn’t done when he went to pray in the garden of Gethsemane. ***His battle was still ongoing.*** In fact, that was the fiercest part of the spiritual battle Jesus fought - wrestling with his human desire to avoid pain and his spiritual anticipation of being cut off from the Father.

C.S. Lewis has pointed out that ***none of us actually knows the full power of temptation because we always give in at a certain point***. If the devil only has to go to level five to get you to worry then you don’t know what a level 10 temptation feels like, because you gave in to worry at only level five. If your old sinful nature only has to tap your selfishness and materialism to a 3.5 and you’ll hit “buy with one click” on Amazon, then you don’t know what a level 10 covetousness feels like because you gave in at the 3.5. Apply this to food or any appetite; to relational conflict, to suffering and doubt…

The only way to know what the full force of a temptation feels like is to resist it and keep resisting it. Then you feel the desire escalating past five to a 6, 7, 8. Then you feel the fear pressing on you. Then you feel the ***power of the alternative plan.***

There was Jesus on his knees in the garden, wrestling with the alternative plan. ***“Let this cup pass from me.”*** What cup?

The prophets wrote about a cup that one day someone would have to drink - a steaming, boiling goblet - ***the original goblet of fire***, for you Harry Potter fans. And Dumbledore would later have to drink that toxic potion the bad wizard left for him - drinking every last drop to break the spell.

The cup Jesus feared - the cup that made him sweat drops of blood - was **the cup of God’s righteous judgment**. This represented the stored up justice for all the nations that had oppressed Israel. It stood for the punishment and condemnation deserved by everyone who had disobeyed God and dishonored Him or His people.

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Perfected his full **Humanity**

“Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; the bowl of my wrath you shall drink no more; and I will put it into the hand of your tormentors.” Isaiah 51:22-23

Isaiah promised the day when ***God would take away from Israel the cup of their sin and judgment*** -the wine of their pagan revelry, the strong drink of their idolatry and rebellion - the sin that made them stagger like a drunk fool. Isn’t it fascinating how consequences are woven into the fabric of life? Drink too much alcohol and what happens? You stagger and get sick. Your body can only take so much.

But what Isaiah promises is that ***God would take those consequences away from His people***. Though they were the ones who drank, someone else would stagger. Though they were the ones who should be sick, someone else would suffer for them. This prophecy is in Isaiah 51, just a few verses away from the powerful Messianic prophecy in chapter 53.

Jesus, in the garden, was wrestling with the fulfillment of that promise. He knew that he was about to drink every last drop of the sin and rebellion of the world. We sinned but he staggered. We rebel, but he suffered. We deserved the consequences but he took them all into his own body. ***He drank in our sin… and it killed him.***

Jesus knew **what the cross would cost him**. Physical suffering and death were just graphic imagery to help us appreciate the real suffering he endured as he took our sin into himself and experienced the full wrath of God that our sin deserved. ***“God made him who had no sin to BE SIN for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”***

Everything was according to plan. Everything was in submission to the Father’s will. Here is what Jesus said when he was betrayed by Judas and arrested:

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Perfected his full **Humanity**

“But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Matthew 26:56

The next line: “Then all the disciples left him and fled.”

The righteous one was left all alone. His obedience had to be completed utterly by himself. Peter followed at a distance but went on to deny every even knowing Jesus. The Lord was alone before the Jewish council. He was alone overnight in the pit under the high priest’s house. Jesus was alone.

***I’ve actually been in that holding cell.*** I was blessed to go to the holy land in 2007 to visit a lot of the places Jesus went. Many of them the exact location is uncertain. The garden tomb, for example, they aren’t sure it’s the real spot. Similar, but probably not the same. Bethlehem where Jesus was born - maybe Constantine’s mother got the location right but it doesn’t matter because it’s a huge cathedral that couldn’t be more unlike the stable where Jesus was born.

But the pit under Caiaphas’ house is one of the handful of places that ***we know with certainty is where Jesus spent the night*** before he was crucified. It’s a small cellar cut out of the rock, maybe 10 or 15 feet across. Our group of 20 was able to be in there mostly together, some on the curving stairs going down. But I’ll never forget singing Amazing Grace together in that spot - touching the stone on which Jesus sat. Kneeling where Jesus knelt. Feeling the cost of his obedience. **His amazing grace that saved a wretch like me**.

Here is what the writer to the Hebrews said:

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Perfected his full **Humanity**

“For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.” Heb. 2:10

Did you catch that last phrase? Jesus was **made perfect THROUGH SUFFERING**. In order to bring many sons to glory, Jesus had to himself be perfected by enduring the full extent of suffering and thereby fulfilling all righteousness.

So brothers and sisters, ***should we expect any different?***

If our Lord had to learn obedience through what he suffered, should we expect to be perfected in some other way? Should we expect an easier path to glory? ***Or should we expect to follow in the steps of our Rabbi?***

***What suffering are you experiencing right now?*** Maybe it’s your health - as your body struggles in this broken world. Maybe it’s your work - the thorns and thistles, the frustrations and challenges of the world. Maybe it’s a relationship or two or three - the struggle of doing life with other sinners. Here is what Peter says about suffering:

**Being Perfected through Suffering:**

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 1:6-7

We rejoice first of all, Peter reminds us, in our great salvation - even though FOR A LITTLE WHILE, he reassures us, we must endure various trials. But these trials, like the refining fire that purifies gold, test the genuineness of our faith - our precious, wonderful faith by which we glorify our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the sweetest moments in the Chosen is ***when little James comes to Jesus to talk about his deformity***, his disability. You see it right away as he hobbles around with his staff. And as you go through season one and season two and Jesus starts healing people left and right, you start to wonder - what about James?

It comes to a head in season three when Jesus sends out the twelve in pairs, commissioning them to heal people. And James says to his rabbi, “Look at me! How can I pretend to heal someone else when I haven’t been healed myself?”

And Jesus looks on him with such love and tenderness - and gently explains ***the PRIVILEGE it is to NOT be healed.*** He says, “I can only trust a very few people with this calling.”

***Can Jesus trust YOU with the privilege of NOT BEING HEALED?*** Will you still praise Him for His love and grace, even while you suffer? I know it’s a lot to ask - and Jesus knows it’s a lot to ask. But what is being tested is the tested genuineness of your faith. Oh, may it come out like pure, radiant gold! May it prove to be a beautiful tribute to the glory and honor and sufficiency and goodness of our Lord!

Jesus’ righteousness proved his full divinity, it perfected his full humanity and third:

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Provided a full **Atonement**

“But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so the governor was greatly amazed.” Matthew 27:14

Pilate was stunned to see a Jewish religious leader silent. They were usually very talkative. It must have been very uncommon for anyone to stand before Pilate and not make a passionate case in their own defense. Probably it was unprecedented. But the Jewish leaders should have made the connection Pilate could not have made - the silence of Jesus was intentional. ***By not speaking, Jesus was making a powerful statement.***

**Jesus’ righteousness:**

1. Provided a full **Atonement**

“Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” Isaiah 53:7

Isaiah’s conclusion - from chapter 40 through 66, which we will study after Easter btw - reaches its climax here in chapter 53. All of Isaiah’s prophecies about the coming Servant of the Lord culminate here with the Messiah presented as a suffering servant - **like a LAMB**.

What were lambs used for by the ancient Jews? Yes, they provided wool for clothing and yes, they provided tasty chops. ***But lambs were primarily animals for SACRIFICE***. And specifically lambs were a reminder of the Passover Lamb. The only way to be protected from the angel of death that passed over Egypt was to slaughter a one year old lamb and paint its blood on your doorpost. The blood of the lamb provided a shelter, a protection - it provided an ATONEMENT, which means covering.

So when John the Baptist saw Jesus and shouted, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” the baptizer was reminding the Israelites of the Passover lamb and of Isaiah’s prophecy. When Jesus stood silent before Caiphas and Pilate he was reminding all who had ears to hear of Isaiah’s prophecy. By saying nothing he was shouting out, ***“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”***

Here is how it is written in Hebrews:

**Our full Atonement**

“For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.” Heb. 7:26-27

The first rule of any **animal sacrifice** was that it had to be a healthy, ***unblemished animal***. You couldn’t game the system by bringing an old, weak, sick and dying lamb. That would not be accepted on your behalf, because it wasn’t actually costing you anything. There had to be a cost to cover sin - and it had to be paid in blood. A living thing had to die.

For Jesus to pay for our sin, he had to be ***fully human*** so he could stand in our place. And he had to be ***fully righteous*** - absolutely perfect, unblemished by any sin - so he could be a worthy sacrifice. Plus he had to be ***fully divine*** so his sacrifice would have infinite value, to cover the sins of all people from all time. But because Jesus was fully human, fully righteous and fully divine, his single sacrifice provided a perfect, eternal, unbreakable atonement.

**Our full Atonement**

“But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” Heb. 10:12-14

Jesus laid his totally human body on the altar of sacrifice that was shaped like a Roman cross and there **became the Lamb of God** who could take away the sin of the world.

Now, the way it worked in ancient times was that you would bring your lamb to the temple area as part of your Passover celebration. The father of the family would bring the lamb up to the priest and place his hand on the head of the lamb, ***confessing over it his own sins and the sins of his family***. Then the priest would take a sharp knife and slit the lamb’s throat, placing the dead body of the lamb up on the altar and burning it up as a sacrifice of atonement.

Bloody, gruesome ordeal. The priests were basically sacred butchers. But did you catch the key detail - ***you placed your hand on the head of the lamb*** while it was still alive - and spoke your sins over it. You transferred your sins from you onto the animal that was about to die.

That is exactly **how it works with Jesus**. He IS the Lamb of God who can take away your sins. But you have to speak them over Him. You have to place your hand on His head and confess your sins over Him so they can be transferred.

Once you make that confession God makes that transfer and listen again to Hebrews 10:14

“By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

At the moment you ask Jesus to forgive you and save you **that sacrifice makes you PERFECT**. Your sin is transferred to Jesus and His righteousness is transferred to you. It is the great exchange.

Don’t you see - **you and I are Barrabas**. We are rightly in prison for our sin and rebellion. We deserve to die for our sins. There is an innocent man in prison beside us named Jesus - and he does not deserve to die. He is a preacher of truth, a healer, a miracle worker. He is the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, the one true King.

But in a miracle of grace, ***Jesus the righteous one offers to take your place***. It should have been Barrabas on that third cross that day. Two thieves and a revolutionary should have died. But instead, Barrabas went free and Jesus died.

That is your story and mine as well. The righteous one was nailed to the cross, and the convicted criminal went free. Come back Friday to reflect more on the cost of our salvation. For now give thanks for the glory of our salvation. Jesus, the Righteous one proved his full divinity, perfected his full humanity and provided a full atonement. ***He is the Lamb of God!***

Let’s pray.