Discipleship According to Mark

Jesus Tried (Mark 15:1–15)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at Houston Chinese Church on October 25, 2026

Introduction

- In our series through Mark's Gospel, we've seen opposition rise against Jesus from various sources. Most notably from the religious leaders of his day—from the scribes, Pharisees, and chief priests in Jerusalem. This was opposition coming from the elite of the Jewish community. But now starting in chapter 15, the Gentile (non-Jewish) authorities are added to the mix. The Roman prefect over the province of Judea is dragged into this conspiracy against Jesus, and so are his soldiers in the praetorium.
  - **Though their motivations might be different, the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities were equally culpable in placing Jesus on the cross.** Pilate might try to argue that he was trying to exonerate Jesus. Trying to get him released. Or the soldiers might defend their actions by saying they were only following orders. They were merely doing their duty. But even though the opposition towards Jesus was instigated by the Jewish leaders, the Romans are not off the hook. Both the biblical record and church history has held both groups equally responsible.

- But making a distinction between the two is helpful on one level. **It's helpful in recognizing that opposition to Jesus—unbelief in the gospel—can manifest itself in two forms—one harder and one softer.** Hard opposition or hard unbelief is represented by the Jewish religious leaders. It's an antagonism towards Christ in particular or the Christian faith in general. It can be seen in those who are deeply devout in their own religion or in those who are staunchly skeptical or atheistic in their worldview. You probably know somebody vehemently opposed to Christianity. Maybe that was you and your attitude towards Christ before God's grace interrupted and changed your life.
  - But that's not the only form that opposition to Jesus takes. **There's a softer version, and this soft unbelief is best represented in our text by Pontius Pilate.** I'm sure he would prefer to claim a stance of neutrality towards Jesus. He's going to say he doesn't have a strong opinion one way or the other. He's going to wash his hands of it all. But while he certainly isn't vehemently opposed to Jesus like the chief priests, Pilate can't claim to be a neutral bystander. He still stands in opposition to Christ.

- **You probably know a lot of non-Christian friends who fall into this category of a soft opposition and unbelief.** Because they're still your friends, they're unlikely to be hostile towards your faith. In fact, they're probably quite respectful. And perhaps you're here today, and this is describing you. You probably wouldn't be in church, in a worship service, if you were openly hostile towards Christianity.
  - **But my point in drawing this distinction between a hard and soft unbelief is because I don't want you in particular—with the softer stance—to soothe your conscience just because you're not vehement and hostile towards the faith like some other non-Christians out there.** Because, as we'll see with Pilate, no one can claim a stance of neutrality towards Jesus. You may be nice and respectful about it, but you still stand in opposition to Christ. Now if that worries you, then just know that I've got some good news for you by the end of this sermon.

- **As we walk through this morning's passage, I want us to look at Jesus's trial before the Roman authorities from three different perspectives.** (1) From the perspective of the religious leaders who dragged Jesus before Pilate. (2) From Pilate's own perspective as he conducted this trial. (3) From the perspective of a criminal who was brought to Jesus's trial and came out on the other side a free man.

Hard Opposition Triggered by an Insecure Identity

- Let's start by looking at this text from the perspective of the Jewish religious leaders, and what we'll see is that their **hard opposition to Jesus is triggered by insecurities as it pertains to their core identity**. This is the case for many who represent a hard opposition towards biblical faith. It didn't come out of nowhere. Hard unbelief usually arises when our core identity feels threatened and, in this case, threatened by Jesus and *his* identity.

- Let me first set the stage for our passage. Starting in Mark 11, the story zeroes in on the last week of Jesus's earthly life. He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and by Friday, in the wee hours of the night, he's arrested and hauled before an illegitimate assembly of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. They rough him up. And in the early morning, they bring him before the Roman authority. Before Pontius Pilate.
    - Look at v1, "*And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate.*"

- **So these members of the Sanhedrin (the whole council) are identified as the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes.** That term "*chief priests*" would include the high priest that year (who interrogated Jesus in chapter 14), any former high priests, and other members of the high priestly family. In John's Gospel (Jn 18:13), we learn their names. Jesus was first brought before **Annas**, the former high priest and then to the current high priest **Caiaphas**. They were the chief rulers who were collaborating with their Roman overlords.
    - And along with the scribes and Pharisees, the chief priests are depicted as the primary antagonists to Jesus, opposing him, criticizing him, trying to trap him in his words. **And it didn't take long for Pilate to see behind their actions and discern their true intentions.** Look at v10. It says Pilate, "*perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.*"

- So envy was their driving motivation. **Their jealousy of Jesus colored all their actions.** For so long these chief priests had enjoyed the respect of the people. They were the recognized religious authorities. The crowds came to them for answers, for advice, for atonement. But now all they hear is, "*Jesus said this. Jesus did that. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.*" They're jealous.
    - **And what's beneath all forms of jealousy? Insecurity. Jealous people are the most insecure people.** Because they've been building their identities on shifting sand, on a shaky platform. Which is why they feel easily threatened by other people. Because when someone else can do what they do but do it better—they don't appreciate it, they fear it. Because it feels like their life is coming apart.

- Jealousy is you trying to recover whatever gave you a sense of stability or security. **If you're jealous of a rival, it's because that person somehow threatens the shaky foundation of your identity, exposing its weaknesses.**
    - For these chief priests and scribes, their entire identity had been built on being the smartest guys in the room. The most learned. The most knowledgable authority on what the Scriptures taught. Everyone used to go to them. **But suddenly, this Galilean carpenter with no formal training appears out of nowhere.** Outdebating them, preaching with an authority surpassing theirs, performing signs and wonders they could only dream of. You can imagine how insecure they felt.

- Jesus has that kind of effect on people. He can be viewed as a threat. **Because if his claims are true—if he truly is the Christ, the Son of God, the Daniel 7 "Son of Man" who has been given all dominion and authority—then he threatens all the sources we turn to for an identity.** He exposes the fragility of the foundations we've been building our lives upon.
    - Jesus already alluded to all of this back in chapter 12 when he told the **Parable of the Tenants**. Which was a parable about the chief priests and scribes (Mk 12:12). They're the wicked tenants in the story who reject the landowner's beloved son. Which Jesus connects as a fulfillment of Psalm 118:2, "*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*" (Mk 12:10) **The stone that threatens and offends people, the stone that they reject—that same stone has become a sure and steady cornerstone that we are invited to securely build our lives upon.**

- When confronted with the Son of God, Scripture says there are basically two responses you can make. **You can reject his claims, and he'll become to you a "*stumbling stone, a rock of offense.*"** (1 Pet 2:8) Jesus's words, his presence, will offend you. Because they threaten your security. **If who Jesus is and what he says is true, then you've been building your life on the wrong foundation, on sinking sand.** Such a claim is offensive.
    - When the chief priests and scribes heard Jesus claim to be God's cornerstone, to be the Christ, the Son of the Most High God—they didn't fall of their faces in worship. No, their faces twisted with rage. They tore their garments and accused him of blasphemy (Mk 14:63-64). That's one potential response.

- But, of course, the other response is to accept his claims. **You repent and turn to Jesus in faith, and he becomes your "*cornerstone.*"** (1 Pet 2:7) He becomes that secure stone capable of holding up your entire life and bearing the weight of all your expectations. **Jesus becomes that solid rock and foundation for your identity. He could be that for you.** So who is Jesus to you? Your stumbling stone or your cornerstone?

Soft Opposition Rooted in a Fear of Man

- Now some who see him as the former will react strongly like the Jewish leaders and will outright reject him with hostility. But others, equally viewing Christ as a stumbling stone, will react more softly and adopt a more neutral stance. Like what we see in Pilate's response to Jesus. **His was a soft opposition rooted in a fear of man.**

- ❖ Now when you try to look at it from Pilate's perspective, you realize that he was put in a tough situation. The Jewish leaders brought Jesus to him because they didn't have the legal authority to condemn a man to death. Only Pilate could make that call.
    - But this put him in a precarious situation. **Pilate didn't want to come across as too harsh nor as too lenient.** You see, he had already developed the reputation of being cruel and merciless. In **Luke 13:1**, news was going around about how Pilate killed a number of Galilean Jews and mixed their blood with their sacrifices. That cruel reputation stuck with him. The historian Josephus records that it was Pilate's heavy-handed response to a Samaritan disturbance that led to his eventual removal. So he was on the hot seat and knew that too harsh a response would threaten his job.
        - But at the same time, he didn't want to come across as too lenient. **Caesar wouldn't tolerate a provisional governor turning a blind eye to rebels.** And that's how Jesus was presented to him—as a seditious rebel, claiming kingship, undermining the Emperor.

- ❖ So in v2, Pilate asks Jesus, "*Are you the King of the Jews?*" That was the charge brought by the chief priests. Jesus is claiming to be a king. Now notice Jesus's reply. He's careful with his answer. **He doesn't answer with a direct yes or no.** A simply Yes would've confirmed Pilate's suspicion that Jesus is an earthly king making an earthly claim to power. But a No would've been a lie. Since Jesus *is* a King—just not of a kingdom of this world (Jn 18:36).
    - So he responds with, "*You have said so.*" **The implication is that Pilate already knows the answer to his question.** Jesus doesn't need to say it. "Pilate, you know I am a King but not the kind they accuse me of claiming to be. I am the Messiah, the Anointed King of a kingdom not of this world." All of that is summed up in those words, "*You have said so.*"

- ❖ Now beyond that, Jesus doesn't say anything else. **In fact, Pilate is surprised at how he could remain silent and not defend himself.** Look at v4, "*4And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." 5But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed."*
    - We learn in Luke's account, in **Luke 23:2**, that Jesus was being accused of (1) perverting their nation, (2) forbidding people to pay taxes to Caesar, (3) calling himself a king, and (4) stirring up people by his teaching. **His opponents were trying their hardest to paint him as the leader of a people's rebellion.**

- ❖ But Pilate saw right through all that. He knew they were just envious because of Jesus's popularity with the people. **So since he had no sympathy for the religious leaders, Pilate tried to find a way to release Jesus but without doing it directly.** The crowd would do it for him. Jesus was popular with the people after all.
    - According to v6, there was a custom between the Jews and Roman that formed over the years of occupation. At every Passover, Pilate released one prisoner of the people's choosing. This was a way to celebrate the Passover. **In this way, judgement was allowed to pass over another son of Israel by means of substitution.**

- So in v7, we're introduced to a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. **We're told that Barabbas had recently taken part in an insurrection where he killed a man.** Well, Pilate figured he had the perfect opportunity before him. Let's give the people a choice between releasing a local insurrectionist who committed murder or a popular Galilean carpenter who spent his days walking from village to village, preaching, teaching, and healing the sick. It seemed like a no-brainer. They'll release Jesus for me.
    - Let's pick back up starting in v8, "*8And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. 9And he answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" 10For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.*"

- But Pilate's plan backfires. **V11 says the chief priests were able to persuade the crowd to choose Barabbas and demand that Jesus be crucified.** Pilate misread the situation. He thought this crowd loved Jesus. But this wasn't the crowd which had so warmly welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem five days prior. That crowd featured plenty of pilgrims to Jerusalem, including many from Galilee, from the home base of Jesus's ministry.
    - But this crowd in chapter 15 was comprised mostly of locals gathered together by religious leaders. **So given the choice between a man who, you could argue, is perceived as a local hero who stood up to the Man versus some Galilean we don't know from up north, who our leaders are calling a blasphemer, who threatened to destroy the temple—why wouldn't we choose our guy Barabbas?**

- Pilate clearly misread the situation. But he sees clearly that this is a travesty of justice. **He knows Jesus doesn't deserve death—much less by means of a gruesome crucifixion.** In v14, he makes a final appeal, "*14And Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him." 15So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.*
    - That phrase, "*wishing to satisfy the crowd,*" tells us all we need to know about Pilate. It might appear like he's trying to help Jesus, but in reality, he was merely helping himself. **He was acting out of fearful self-interest.** He was trying to get out of this sticky situation unscathed, without creating any trouble for himself.
        - **He's being driven by fear—by the fear of man.** He feared the crowd and their reaction if he was too lenient and released Jesus. And he feared Rome and their response if they hear that once again he overreacted and imposed an excessively cruel punishment. He feared Rome. He feared the crowd. Apparently the only one he didn't fear was God.

- **In Matthew's Gospel, we're told that Pilate tried to wash his hands of Jesus's fate. Matthew 27:24** says, "*So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.*"" **But no matter how much Pilate wished to wash his hands of this, he couldn't.** He couldn't excuse himself.

- **Because to willfully ignore evil (or not to stop it)—when it is in your power to do so—makes you as culpable as the one who actively committed that evil.** Sins of omission are as bad as sins of commission.
    - So Pilate was *not* innocent of this man's blood. **He was wrong to assume that could take a neutral stance towards Jesus.** Scripture holds Pilate accountable (cf. Acts 4:27). Church history doesn't do him any favors either. The *Apostles' Creed*—the most well-known ancient statement of faith—directly names Pilate as responsible for Jesus's death. It doesn't name the chief priests Annas or Caiaphas. Only Pilate.

- **It just goes to show that, when it comes to Jesus, you can't excuse yourself and claim neutrality.** That's a warning many of you need to hear. Look, like I said before, if you're not a Christian and yet you're here with us this morning, it's a safe bet that yours is a soft unbelief. **And if I were to ask you, I'm sure you would be equally appalled by the stories you hear of the Church being persecuted in countries like China or North Korea.** You would stand with us in opposition to that kind of cruel treatment of Christians. And, of course, that's appreciated. **Thank God that *not* all forms of unbelief are hard and hostile.** That's a relief for the Church's sake.
    - But for *your* sake—for the sake of *your* eternal good and happiness—I want to stress this point: **As soft as your stance might be, it still stands in opposition to Christ.** You can try the agnostic position and say you don't have a strong opinion about Jesus. You can try to wash your hands of the matter. But I hope you see, from Pilate's example, that it doesn't work. You're still on the hook. You're still culpable.

- **The fact is—we are all guilty of Jesus's death.** The reality is that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. No one can claim innocence or neutrality. We all have a part in putting Jesus on that cross. **We all find ourselves in this story, in one way or another.** Some respond to Jesus with an active rejection like the religious leaders. While others respond to Christ with a more passive negligence like Pilate. Either way, we're found guilty and responsible for his death.

Forgiveness Found in a Substitutionary Sacrifice

- **But the good news is that forgiveness is available when you find yourself in a third character in this story—when you identify with Barabbas.** I know you might think he's pitted as another rival to Jesus. But that's not how the story presents him. There's no record of what he said or how he responded. He's a blank figure. He's not written as an opponent of Jesus like the chief priests or like Pilate.
    - I think that's on purpose. **I think Barabbas is presented in this nebulous fashion because we, as readers, are supposed to put ourselves in his shoes.** I'd argue that we need to see this story from his perspective if we want any hope of salvation. This leads to our final point—forgiveness can be found in a substitutionary sacrifice.

- **It starts by recognizing that Barabbas was scheduled to be crucified that day.** It's commonly said that Jesus was crucified along with "*two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.*" That's what it goes on to say in v27. That's a possible translation for the Greek word (*lestes*). **But, in this context, it could also be translated as two insurrectionists.**
  - In John 18:40, Barabbas is also identified as a robber (*lestes*), but my ESV has a footnote saying it could also read "*an insurrectionist.*" And we saw in v7 that Barabbas "*committed murder in the insurrection* (some recent unidentified event)." My point is that these weren't your run-of-the-mill robbers being crucified with Jesus.
    - **It's likely these were insurrectionists and co-conspirators with Barabbas.** Which means Barabbas was scheduled to be executed with them that morning. That's why three crosses were prepared. That middle cross belonged to him.

- **So when Jesus went to the cross that day, he was literally substituting himself for Barabbas.** That cross was reserved for him, but Jesus took his place. And friends, that's not all. There is more happening here.
  - Think about his name. **Barabbas means "son of the father."** *Bar* (son). *Abbas* (father). So when Pilate brings forth the two prisoners and presents them to the crowd —one on his left and one on his right—**there were two "sons of the father" standing there on the steps.**
    - There's more. Some ancient manuscripts include a first name for Barabbas. You won't believe this—it's Jesus. **His name was Jesus Barabbas.** If you're using an NIV, turn to Matthew 27:16. That translation includes it, "*At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas.*"

- Most ancient manuscripts don't include a first name, which is why it's not there in most English translations. If it was there in the original, it was probably omitted at some point out of reverence to the Lord. **You can't have a notorious criminal like that sharing the same name as Jesus!** That's probably what they were thinking in dropping his first name.
  - But that misses the point. That misses the heart of the gospel—the message of substitution. This is the good news of the gospel on display. **Here you have two sons of the father. Two men named Jesus.** One was rebellious and a murderer. The other was righteous and a healer. One deserved condemnation and death. The other merited blessing and eternal life. **On that Good Friday, the Innocent One bore the cross intended for the other. And the guilty one walked away a free man.** Jesus literally took Barabbas's place. Could there be a clearer picture of divine substitution?

- **Try to put yourself in Barabbas's shoes.** You wake up that morning in your prison cell. This is the day of your death. You and your co-conspirators are scheduled to be crucified. **You try to distract yourself, but you can't stop thinking about what it's going to be like to have nails driven into your hands and feet.** To be lifted up into the air hanging on a cross. You wonder, "What's going to kill me first? Will I bleed out from the scourging? Will it be because of asphyxiation? Or will I simply die of exposure? How long will it take and how painful will it be?"

- ❖ While you're lost in thought, suddenly your prison door swings open and guards come in. Strange—they're early. They put chains around your wrists and ankles and haul you to Pilate's steps, to his judgment seat, where your fate was pronounced days earlier.
    - When you arrive this time, you notice a large crowd has assembled. They're agitated about something. They're yelling and shouting—at someone. There's a man there also in chains, standing beside Pilate. **He has the most peculiar expression. His face is calm.** It's resolute. He's not yelling back at the crowd. He's not answering his accusers. He's not defending himself. That's different. Different than how you handled yourself the other day when it was your turn.

- ❖ And as you're staring at this prisoner in amazement, you hear your name called out. Can it be? **Is Pilate giving the crowd a choice to release one of us?** But before you get your hopes up, you realize you've got no chance. "Why would they choose me? I'm a convicted rebel. I'm a murderer. I deserve this crucifixion. But that man over there looks as innocent as a dove. As faultless as a spotless lamb. They're obviously going to choose him."
    - **But to your great surprise, the crowd is chanting your name.** They want you! Pilate seems exasperated. He washes his hands and walks away. The guards start taking the chains off your wrists and ankles. You're free to go. **But you just stand there staring at this other Jesus, who is called Christ.** As he's led off to be scourged, and then to bear *your* cross to Calvary.

- ❖ I wonder if Barabbas followed the events all the way to Calvary. Did he go to support the two friends he thought he was going to die with that morning? **Did he go to take another look at this other Jesus—to see this man who took his place?** As he stood there with the crowd, staring up at Jesus, I bet the only thought running through Barabbas's head was, "**That should've been me. That should've been me.**"

- ❖ That's what every Christian ought to say. **If you understand the gospel, then you understand that, in this story, *you* are Barabbas. I am Barabbas.** *That* judgment, *that* cross, *that* death was reserved for us. It should've been you. It should've been me.
    - **Where do you see yourself in this story? Who do you identify with?** With the chief priests and their intense hostility? With Pilate and his insistent neutrality? Or do you identify with the speechless wonder of Barabbas?
        - The good news is that freedom and forgiveness is available to all who believe in this Jesus as the One who took our place on the cross.