

**Evergreen Presbyterian Church**

**Beaverton, OR**

**10/13/2024**

**Pastor Adam Parker**

**Sermon Title:** Not What You Think It Is

**Sermon Text:** Matthew 27:27-44

**Matt. 27:27 ¶** Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him.

**Matt. 27:28** And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,

**Matt. 27:29** and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

**Matt. 27:30** And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head.

**Matt. 27:31** And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

**Matt. 27:32 ¶** As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross.

**Matt. 27:33** And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull),

**Matt. 27:34** they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

**Matt. 27:35** And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots.

**Matt. 27:36** Then they sat down and kept watch over him there.

**Matt. 27:37** And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

**Matt. 27:38** Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.

**Matt. 27:39** And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads

**Matt. 27:40** and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

**Matt. 27:41** So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying,

**Matt. 27:42** “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.

**Matt. 27:43** He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

**Matt. 27:44** And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

**Main Point:** In the crucifixion of Jesus, it appeared that God was punishing a cursed man, when in reality God was punishing mankind in his blessed Son.

### **Outline:**

What *appears* to be happening?

1. This man is Powerless
2. This man is Criminal
3. This man is Condemned by God

### **Introduction**

Especially in Scripture, one of the biggest themes that we see is our own limitations as human beings to understand what is really happening. God is

constantly at work, using what we as human beings do to accomplish his larger purposes.

One word for this is irony. Irony is when something said or done implies its opposite. And in Scripture there are really two kinds of irony.

Sometimes there is retributive irony where God punishes people by means of their own sin. An example of this would be in the book of Esther, how Haman hated Mordecai and had a gallows constructed to have him hanged on. And yet the next day, instead, *Haman* is hung on the same gallows that he had built for Mordecai. That's an example of retributive irony. God uses someone's own sin to judge them.

Here's a non-scriptural example of God retributive irony. The Nazi War criminal Joseph Mengele, died in Brazil on the run after the end of World War 2. And Otto Frederick wrote this five years later in Time magazine:

“[Josef] Mengele did not entirely escape punishment... The aging fugitive... ‘lived apprehensive and afraid, fearful of being found by Jews.’ ...He suffered migraine headaches and slept with a Mauser pistol by his bed... Though there was never a punishment that would fit the dimensions of Mengele's crimes, is it not peculiarly appropriate that he was condemned to a lifetime of fearing his own victims, and that his punishment should be inflicted by himself?” (as quoted in Beale, Gregory K. *Redemptive Reversals*, p. 22).

He spent his life being punished by his own sin. That's retributive irony.

The Psalmist talks about nations who “have sunk down in the pit which they have made” (Ps. 9:15). They made the pit. But *they* sink in it! Retributive irony.

But there is another kind of irony, which is redemptive irony where “the faithful appear to be cursed, but as they persevere in faith, they are really in the midst of being blessed” (Beale, *Redemptive Reversals*, pg. 19).

So for example, in Genesis, you have Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery. But what's really happening? They think they are getting rid of their annoying little brother, so they sell him and tell his father that he has died. Later on, God uses Joseph to save his whole family and God says, “What you meant for evil, I meant

for good.” The Lord says, “You intended to commit this sin, and you did. But actually, I was using your evil decision for something bigger: to save your family.” That’s redemptive irony. Someone appears to be cursed, but really they’re in the midst of great blessings. People think they are doing one thing, and it turns out because of God, they are doing something else entirely.

We are rarely equipped to actually identify divine irony when it’s taking place. Instead, the whole point of irony is that we *can’t* see it as it’s happening, and can only really see it afterwards.

Of course today’s passage is perhaps the most potent example of redemptive irony, not only in all of Scripture but truly in all of human history. Because here you have the powerful, the influential, believing that they are doing one thing, and in their sin they are putting the Son of God to death. But the irony is, God is using their sin here to do something incredible.

And so today I want to look at three ways that redemptive irony is happening right under our noses at the cross.

Three ways that the participants and observers of this moment misunderstand what happens. So our three points are the three ways this moment is misunderstood. First, they misunderstand by thinking that this man is powerless. Second, they misunderstand by thinking this man is one of the criminals. Then third, they misunderstand by thinking that this man has been condemned by God.

In this moment where Jesus seems so cursed, he is actually redeeming his people. Let’s see the irony at work.

## **1. This man is Powerless**

The first mistake they make is believing that this man is Powerless.

Think of it this way: if they believed that he was the God of the universe, the creator of all things... would they do any of this here?

Think about this. They gather about six hundred soldiers before Jesus, and then they put on a mock ceremony where they treat him almost like a clown.

There are so many mistakes here, but consider this: the soldiers mistake their numbers for power. Right? They have this whole battalion gathered to mock him.

This is a mistake people make even today. They see the statistics: fewer and fewer people (in the west at least) identify themselves with Christianity. And it is tempting from our perspective, as Christians, to be discouraged by those numbers on one level, right? Maybe we make the mistake of these soldiers and think this is a numbers game. That somehow there's strength in numbers.

But Scripturally speaking, it's a mistake. For one thing, we don't really know the numbers. Do you remember that moment in 1 Kings 19 when Elisha is almost in despair, and he thinks all God's people have disappeared along with true worship of God, and Elisha even says, "I alone am left," and he's wrong. Instead, God tells him, "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal" (1 Ki 19:18). One lesson from that amazing moment is that we don't really *know* the numbers. That's the first thing. The numbers game is not as easy to calculate as we think. The Lord is at work, and we don't even know it. We just don't know.

But for another thing, numbers just don't determine the truth anyway. Look at this: six hundred soldiers! So much power! They mock him. He can't possibly actually be the king of the Jews. Can this many be wrong? Absolutely. Truth by democratic vote is not a real thing, at all. H.L. Mencken has that great quote, "Nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public." Right? The crowd decides what they want, but they don't decide what is true. The numbers don't mean the crowd is right. Their numbers don't mean that the soldiers are right.

Here's something else: they also mistake their *ability* to mock with the right to mock. They think he must be some kind of imposter or they wouldn't be able to do this. They wouldn't get away with it. Surely someone would stop them if what they're doing is wrong. They mistake their position with privilege: because we *can* mock him, then they think, "we *may* mock him."

The fact that they are able to mock him leads them to believe that perhaps they really do have the moral authority to do everything that's coming.

All of us can fall into this trap of believing that because things seem to be going badly that perhaps God has forgotten us, or that we are in his disfavor. But the whole point of the book of Job and the book of Habakkuk is to say, we cannot read what God is up to through providence alone. We must be very careful not to mistake our own suffering with God's indifference or his displeasure. We are notoriously faulty readers of God's providence.

Think of this moment as he is standing before them with this crown on his head, mocking as it is – painful as it is. He holds the scepter in his hand... even though it's a joke prop. Imagine that moment. For these men, it is all a joke. You can imagine the laughter: "look at this 'king.' Look at this loser. We've got our foot on his neck. Some king."

And yet it's actually so real. They are bowing before the *real king*. They really are bowing before the sovereign and ruler of the universe, the one in whom they live and move and have their being... the one whom Colossians 1:17 says "is before all things, and in him all things hold together." The one who holds *them* together, even as they mock him. The one whom Hebrews says "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3). And he lets them live, and he gives them the breath that fills their lungs, and he gives them the spit that they spray at him. And even more terrifyingly, this same man they are mocking will one day stand before them in this same pose. They will be struck with *deja vu*... he'll be there in front of them again, crown on his head again. Scepter in hand again, and yet for them, every knee will be bowed in ultimate and true unavoidable submission.

I feel afraid for these men as we read this passage. If there is anyone that we should pity as we read this, yes of course we should pity the Lord in the moment. But it is hard not to be afraid for these mockers.

Think of the restraint as Jesus holds this joke scepter, that he *doesn't* call down fire upon the men. That he doesn't call his legions of angels to deal with their insolence and hatred. Think of the restraint that he doesn't trade places with them in that moment. Think of the resolution it took for Jesus to say, "This keeps going. I

will not stop it. I will continue to hold them together by the word of my power as they do this thing to me.”

Why? Because he had to be despised and rejected. It’s what the Scriptures predicted. It’s what our sin deserved. And so he faced it for all those who place their trust in him. He did it to save his people from their sins.

## **2. This man is one of the criminals**

Second today, the onlookers mistakenly believe Jesus to be just another one of the criminals.

The passage tells us in verse 38 that two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. Verse 44 even tells us that “the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him.”

Remember this: crucifixion was truly the worst, more horrible punishment that existed in Rome. There was no more terrible or torturous way to put someone to death than this. The Romans only reserved this for the worst of the worst. It was reserved for those who tried to overthrow the empire. They reserved it for the worst people. It was so horrible that it was against Roman law for a citizen to ever be crucified. It was one of the little bonuses of being a Roman citizen that no matter what might happen, or what you might do you always knew that they at least couldn’t crucify you.

So to be crucified *already* meant you were an outsider. You’re certainly not a citizen. You’re not one of us. And in this case, people passed by, which was normal to do. The crucifixion was intentionally in a visible and public place along the outskirts of the city. And it was also normal to treat crucified people with disdain... if people could even bring themselves to look at you, then they would look at you in judgment. “You’re a threat to society. You’re a threat to order. You’re a threat to all of us. You’re probably a threat to me and to my family.” Jesus is numbered with such people. He’s executed alongside of them... between them, actually.

But here is the mistake: They mistake the position of Christ between the two thieves with real guilt. Just because he is among sinners, and is dying like a sinner does not make him a sinner. He was not a sinner. No one could accuse him of sin.

And yet what did God do? According to Paul, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). There is a theological term for what Paul is talking about here. It’s called “substitutionary atonement.”

Atonement means to have sin wiped away and forgiven. When we use the word “substitute” here, it means that Jesus took the place of his people so *that* their sins could be removed.

The substitutionary atonement means that Jesus was treated like us, and those who trust in him are treated as if they were him. In Christ, we are treated like a righteous man who never sinned. While Christ was treated like a sinner. He was made sin. We are made righteous. This is why Paul tells us in Romans that Christ is the righteousness of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

This man is treated as a criminal. But the mistake here is in thinking that he actually was a criminal. In reality, he was a good man. A clean man. A pure man.

When the prophet Isaiah predicted the death of Christ centuries before it happened, one of the things he predicted was that “they made his grave with the wicked... he was numbered with the transgressors” (Is 53:9, 12). This act of putting him to death with wicked men was God’s idea. God is at work here, even though he appears to be absent.

Isaiah predicted all of these things, even the disdain of those watching all of this: “He was despised and rejected by men” (Is 53:3). Rather than a sign that men’s rejection also meant God’s rejection, it’s actually a sign that this man is the one Isaiah knew was coming. It is the very rejection of Jesus that becomes our salvation. Redemptive reversal. Redemptive irony.

Those who mocked and jeered at him were playing into God’s hands and bringing the Scriptural promises true. They despised him and rejected him because that’s what should have happened to us. **They gave him what was coming to us.** If you keep going in Isaiah it says, “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed



for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Is 53:5).

He is wounded. He is struck. He is spit upon. He is killed.

We go free. The innocent for the guilty. The just for the unjust. My friends, this is the gospel in a nutshell. If you trust in Christ, you go free. That’s the good news of Jesus.

### **3. This man is Condemned by God**

Third, the onlookers mistakenly believe that this man has been Condemned by God.

Specifically, those watching say something to themselves. They say, “He trusts in God, let God deliver him now, if he desires him.” And Isaiah 53 offers helpful commentary on this moment, too when it says, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted” (Is 53:4). It goes back to what we said. We see one thing, and another is happening. We misunderstand and misinterpret the providence of God. It’s not just that he was condemned by man, but we looked at him and assumed he was also condemned by God.

In fact, it's even darker than that, really. Think of those words again: “He trusts in God, let God deliver him now, if he desires him.” Here’s the implication: this is God’s issue to deal with. It’s actually a way of handing this off to someone else. Because look: what they’re doing is, they are blaming Jesus’ death on God.

When they say “let *God* deliver him now,” they are acting like Pilate washing his hands and passing the blame. “This really belongs to God. Yes, we’re here. Yes, we’re crucifying, but if you really think about it, God could stop this any time. This is really on him. It must be that what we’re doing is the will of God, or else he would stop it. Right?”

To the very end, even with Jesus’ dying breath they are standing there and thinking, “This really isn’t our fault.” There is always someone to pass the blame

to. People, let me encourage you, as you think of the cross, not to write yourself an exemption, not to write yourself out of the story.

Instead, let's sing with the hymn,

“Behold the man upon a cross/My sin upon his shoulders/Ashamed I hear my mocking voice/call out among the scoffers. It was my sin that held him there/until it was accomplished/His dying breath has brought me life – I know that it is finished.”

Let's write ourselves into the story, because we really do belong there.

If we will not own our sin, then we cannot say, “I know that it is finished.” Only in refusing to wash our hands, and refusing to excuse our guilt can we recognize him as the one who lived and died as our substitute.

And this is the great redemptive reversal of the cross. When Peter preached the death and resurrection of Jesus in acts 2, look at how he preached it. You can see the redemptive irony in how Peter says it: “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23).

God planned this. He predestined it. He was at work at the cross.

“You meant this, but God meant that. You had a plan. God had a greater plan.”

## **Conclusion**

How can all of us escape the force of God's ironic judgment? God's word is clear: Not by joining the crowds in rejecting Jesus, but by trusting in Christ as our Savior – the one who took our judgments upon himself at the cross. There we find our substitute. There we find our Lord. There, at last, we will find our peace. Only then can we say, “I know that it is finished.”

*Let's pray.*