

“The Revolutionary”

Saint Matthew’s Passion, Pt.4

We are continuing our study of Saint Matthew’s Passion, which is the gospel writer Matthew’s account of the last days of Jesus and his suffering, death and resurrection. In a sense, all of the gospels - all the Bible really – are leading up to these chapters. Christians believe that these events are the pinnacle – not just of their faith – but of human history. Jesus began the night sharing a Passover meal with his disciples – the Last Supper. They then went out to a garden where Jesus prays intensely to his Father over what was about to take place...and then very rapidly the events began to happen.

One of the disciples, Judas, shows up with a group of armed men to arrest Jesus. Everybody scatters and Jesus is led off, alone, for a late night tribunal before the religious establishment leaders who so desperately wanted to get rid of him. We’ll understand why today. But I want to get to our text for the morning. We’re switching chapters and beginning the events of the day that will lead to the crucifixion. Let me just read you the story before we examine the details.

Matthew 27:1-2, *“Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.”* Jumping down to **v. 11-24**,

11 “Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” “You have said so,” Jesus replied. 12 When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” 14 But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

15 Now it was the governor’s custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. 16 At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. 17 So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” 18 For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

19 While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.” 20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

21 “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” asked the governor. “Barabbas,” they answered. 22 “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” Pilate asked. They all answered, “Crucify him!” 23 “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” 24 When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!””

Now, I love Biblical literacy. Even if you're not a Christian, it's important to be knowledgeable of the Bible just to be a well-informed English speaker – so many of our words and phrases come from the Bible. Some of you may have just now discovered where the phrase “to wash my hands of it” comes from. It means to publicly state that you don't take responsibility for a decision you are on record against. Of course, that doesn't guarantee that you're not going to be held responsible for it anyway. Leadership is tricky like that.

But it's a dramatic scene, isn't it? More than any scene in the gospels, the show trial before Pilate in which there is no crime, no witnesses, no morally courageous judge, and in which Jesus refuses to play the role of the accused, begs for a director to set the stage for us. How do you picture it? From whose point of view? The angry crowd? Pilate? Jesus? Maybe Peter and the other disciples hanging in the back row?

In a brilliant move, the Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini in his 1964 film, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, depicted the scene through the tearful eyes of the young disciple John, who stands timidly at the rear of the crowd, catching only glimpses of the action and fragments of the dialogue. [**Pasolini :41**]

Now, each week, we've been featuring a piece of art – not film, but paint on canvas – that depicts the scene from our text. I'll let you know that because of the unusual circumstances we find ourselves in, I've had to postpone our original series that was to kick off on Easter, so I've added an extra week to this series so that we finish with the Resurrection painting on Easter Sunday itself. So today's painting isn't in the series graphic that you've seen. But there's nothing second-tier about it.

Painted in 1566 by the great Venetian artist, Tintoretto, *Christ Before Pilate* – in contrast to the film clip - takes us with clear eyes, to a front-row seat. And what do we see? Pilate is seated on the impressive marble throne, the pinnacle of power. But he is in the shadows, unable to even look at what's unfolding under his watch. It's Jesus, silent, radiant and regal who is really on the pedestal. Front and center he appears to be the one really in the power position. Nearly everyone looks away from the near-glow of his white robes – a foreshadowing of his burial shroud perhaps, but also a promise of the victorious picture painted in Revelation 7 of saints and martyrs in “robes made white by the blood of the lamb.” It's enough to make you wonder who is *really* in charge here.

In Matthew, Chapter 27, for the first time, we have Jesus *not* in front of the religious establishment but the political establishment. He is not in front of the religious leaders – we skipped over the story of his appearance before the chief priest and the ruling body called the Sanhedrin, they wanted him dead but they didn't have the jurisdiction, so they sent him to the one who did. The government, the state, the power of Rome. And so this encounter with Pilate encourages us to ask the question, "What is the relationship of church to state? Of Jesus to politics? Of Christianity to the government?" And that's a pretty hot question, isn't it? I mean, the nation is a powder keg of anxiety – why *not* talk politics?!

There are three questions basically that Pilate asks. He says, "*Are you king of the Jews?*" He says to Jesus, "*Why aren't you fighting back?*" Then he asks the crowd, "*What shall we do with the king?*" And the answers to those three questions are a lens by which we will explore what this passage teaches us about the relationship of Christianity to politics.

Three questions, three answers - the **ambiguity** answer, the **revolutionary** answer, and the third is the **substitutionary** answer. And these answers help us understand something about the relationship of Christianity to politics.

First, The ambiguity answer. Look at **verse 11a** and you'll see that there Pilate says, "...~~the governor~~ *asked him*, "*Are you the **king of the Jews?***" And we must keep in mind that he is *not* asking Jesus a theological question; not at all. He is not saying, "Oh, are *you* the prophesied Messiah from the Hebrew scriptures?" Pilate doesn't care about that! He doesn't care about theological truth versus heresy.

All he wants to know is, "Are you the *king* of the Jews?" That is, "Are you in *any* way, shape, or form a political leader? Will your movement have *any* political implications? Will you, as a leader, have any impact on the patterns of political power?" That's all *he* cares about. "Are you a political leader? Is this a political movement?"

And it's crucial for us here this morning to see that Jesus Christ is deliberately and significantly ambiguous in his answer. And it's more ambiguous than the English translation reveals, because literally, when he is asked, "Are you king of the Jews?" what does the text say? (**v.11b**) "**You** have said so," *Jesus replied.*" With the emphasis on *you*.

In the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Pilate replies to Jesus' statement with "What do you mean by that? That is not an answer." And that's right! It's not a denial or an affirmation. Or another way to put it is it's *both* a denial and an affirmation. See Jesus could have said, "No, no, no, of course I'm not a political leader. I'm a *spiritual* person, and all I do is give people spiritual peace and happiness in their personal lives, and what I'm doing is not going to have *any* impact on the political order." He doesn't say that.

On the other hand he doesn't say, "Yes, of course I'm a political leader." His answer is, "I am, and I'm not. What I'm doing is going to have a lot of political ramifications, but I am not a political leader in your category." The answer to "Are you a political leader, is this a political movement?" is "Yes and No!" and it is absolutely crucial you stay on that fence, friends. If you want to follow Jesus at all, you can *not* fall on one side or the other.

Now this is not normal in historical religion. If you say to Buddha, "Are you a political leader?" the answer is clear, "No." And if you say to Mohammed, "Are you a political leader?" the answer is clear, "Yes." But if you say to Jesus, "Are you a political leader?" the answer is clear, "Yes and No." And if you don't see the difference, you don't understand Christianity. Let's go into this a little bit. Jesus is deliberate.

Now, there's another famous place where Jesus demonstrates this church-state ambiguity, and that's in **Matthew 22:17** where the religious leaders ask him, "*Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?*" Have you heard this story? And Jesus says, "Somebody give me a coin." And they do and he says, "Whose image is on the coin?" and they say, "Caesar's." And Jesus says, **(v.21)** "*So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.*" And *again* it's a deliberately ambiguous answer. And here's why.

When he says, "Whose image is on the coin?" the depiction was an image of Tiberius Caesar, but the inscription on a denarius said, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." So what it actually said on the coin was, "Tiberius King, Son of God." And it was a claim to absolute allegiance. We have to keep in mind that up to the time of Jesus *all* governments claimed absolute allegiance.

All governments were totalitarian. The temples and the state mutually supported each other. The governments were *always* established in the name of the gods. The emperor or the king in many cases was *considered* a god! There was no idea of a limited state, no idea of a state in which you had human rights, or even space for human rights, or space for conscience or protest.

And Jesus Christ, from what we can tell, was essentially the first thinker to do this. He calls for a limited state and basically says, “Well, Caesar’s image is on the coin. Give him the money. It’s his. But God’s image is on *you*, and you must only give your ultimate allegiance to God.” See on the one hand he says, “Sure, political engagement, of course! Pay your taxes!” He’s not for withdrawal.

On the other hand, “When any government makes totalitarian claims over you, don’t you dare agree to that, because when God’s law and human law - the state’s law - contradict, God comes first.” And that was revolutionary. So when Jesus called for a limited state, when he said, “Be politically involved, but don’t you dare ever allow political power to be ultimate, not in your life, and not in society,” what was he doing?

On the one hand, he was creating a tradition - a *powerful* tradition - in which Christians, because of Jesus’ ambiguity about this - his political yes and no - Christians call into question and resist totalitarian claims of any government. Jesus created space to bring governments into judgment by a higher power – unheard of. But this is the legacy of the global church ever since.

This is the reason why in Eastern Europe, communism, the totalitarianism of the *left* - who brought that down? Who resisted them? It was the churches. I spent some time in Poland and they revere Pope John Paul II who before he was Pope was the Archbishop of Poland and had an enormous impact for freedom by standing up to the Communists again and again.

But on the other hand, in World War II, Nazism, and the totalitarianism of the *right*...you have Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church – Protestants – who resisted Hitler’s Reich, called him to account, at the cost of their lives even. Why? Why did they do civil disobedience? Because there was a higher authority than the state, namely God. The state – *any* state - could *never* make totalitarian claims.

And Jesus set the *perfect* example for this tradition when he said - on the one hand - “Don’t you ever think that political power is the ultimate power. Don’t let any government actually speak in the name of God and say, ‘God and us, we’re the same.’ You must subject the state under the judgment of God’s law.”

If you want a perfect example of this balance, you couldn't look further than Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." He was in jail because he was doing civil disobedience. He was protesting segregation in the South by disobeying the laws peacefully and going to jail. And a lot of people, basically white ministers, said, "How dare you do civil disobedience. If you're a Christian you should be a law-abiding citizen. You shouldn't question the government. You shouldn't do that."

And Martin Luther King Jr., right out of what we're talking about here, right out of this teaching of Jesus, says in the letter, well, let's let him read it to us, [MLK :52], "One may well ask: 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust." "Well, how does one determine whether a law is just or unjust?" you ask. A just law is a man-made code that squares with the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law of God...One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty." Isn't that amazing! There you have it. On the one hand, yes, be involved, but on the other hand, don't...

On the one hand, Jesus says, "Resist totalitarianism," but on the other hand...when Pilate says, "Are you the king of the Jews? Are you a political leader?" Because Jesus doesn't say "yes", what he's actually

saying here is, "My leaders must not take power and rule in my name." The one place in the whole world where Christianity is not thriving is Europe, because that's a place where people created state sponsored churches, where they set up the same relationship between the state and Christianity that Jesus said shouldn't be set up.

And because of that there's a deadness and a stagnation. We have missionaries we support who are planting churches in Estonia – Estonia has an official church, the Lutheran Church – they get money from the government to run. And .02% of Estonians go to church. Listen the separation of church and state is a brilliant American invention – thank you, James Madison – but it comes from Jesus. It's a fragile separation, you have people trying to dismantle it on both sides.

But that's no different than in Jesus' own day. First century Judaism had opposing groups on the church-state issue. They had the Essenes who said, "Withdraw. Move into the wilderness. Don't pay taxes. Don't be involved politically. Just come out and be holy. It's so impure, all that political stuff." On the other end of the spectrum, you had the Zealots. And the Zealots said, "*Take* political power and *rule* in God's name. Violently if need be."

And Jesus was saying, “On the one hand, I want my followers to resist totalitarian claims, but on the other hand, do *not* put your hopes in political power. That’s *not* the way you bring in the Kingdom of God.” On the one hand he’s saying, “I don’t want you to withdraw,” but on the other hand he says, “I don’t want you to think that power politics is how you make the country Christian.”

“Are you a political leader?” “Yes and no.” If you say, “No, he’s not a political leader, he’s just spiritual,” you don’t understand - as we’re going to see under point two - the radical, political rearrangements that happen when Christians live their lives out in the world. But on the other hand, if you say, “Yes, he’s a political leader,” then you’re in danger of saying, “And there’s *one* particular Christian blueprint for how government has to go, and how political parties have to go, and how economics have to go, and how everything has to go.”

And Jesus says, “Don’t make that mistake. Don’t be seduced into thinking political power is the ultimate power. That was the Romans’ problem. Don’t think *that’s* the way to do it. It’s not the ultimate power. Political power is an inadequate vehicle for the enormous changes I’m going to be bringing into the world.” Isn’t that amazing!

So, class, is Jesus Christ leading a political movement? Yes and no. And if it’s *too* yes or *too* no, we’re in trouble. Well, you say, “Okay, then how does Christianity, if it’s not just taking power and ruling in Christ’s name, how *does* Christianity change culture? How does it change the social order?” And that brings us to our next question and answer.

Number two, The revolutionary answer. The second question is where Pilate sees Jesus refusing to pick up power and counter what’s happening to him. Do you see verses 13 and 14? What we read here is the chief priests were making all these accusations against him, so **v.13**, “*Then Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?”*”

Pilate is saying, “They’re railroading you! Look what they’re doing! Look at these bogus charges. Look at everything they’re doing! Aren’t you going to fight back? What’s your countermove? What’s your counter-strategy?” Pilate was a man of the world – he would have had to been a political wizard to get and maintain the position he had - and so he was trying to figure out what Jesus was going to do next, because that’s what *he* would have done.

And look at the answer, v.14, “*But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.*” Now, “amazement” here doesn’t mean Pilate is thinking, “You idiot.” He wasn’t amazed like that. The Greek word – *thaumazo* – used here, is a very positive word. It means “to honor, admire or worship”; Homer used it in the context of “showing great respect to a person.”

So Pilate saw something Jesus was doing that he *marveled* at. I believe he saw the contrast between Jesus and his enemies. On the one hand, his enemies were frantic. They were afraid he might be set free...but Jesus is so calm. On the one hand, his enemies are using power to harm him...but Jesus is actually laying down his power to forgive his enemies.

This is pretty astounding, because every revolution that has ever happened in history happens by *taking* power and excluding or destroying your enemies. And here Jesus Christ is about to start a revolution through loving his enemies and forgiving his enemies. Now the two things you see in Jesus Christ, this new personal peace and this new pattern for using your power, was picked up and imitated by his followers, and I can demonstrate that through the first couple of centuries of the church.

We know that Christians followed their Lord in these two ways: in this incredible inner peace, and in this new approach to laying down and using their power in service instead of accruing it and using it for exploitation. The new personal peace, and the new pattern for power that Christians - by the thousands, tens of thousands, and hundreds of thousands - went out into Roman society with and totally changed the social order.

There’s been a big move among social historians over the last few decades – secular and Christian – to study why early Christianity was so effective in changing the ancient Greco-Roman pagan society. It’s just a fact that huge changes happened. For example, in most of the cities the ratio of males to females was 140 males to every 100 females. Do you know why? Female infanticide. When baby girls were born they could be just thrown out. Exposed to the elements to die. Perfectly legal. You know, daughters didn’t have the economic advantages that sons did in that day. So they’d just kill them – well, technically, let them die. But Christians wouldn’t have any of that.

And if the girls did live, it was not a very woke society, gender-wise. Did you know that women in pagan society, when you were married, women could not have any other lovers. Ladies had to be sexually faithful, but your husband could have mistresses if he wanted. Talk about a double standard. But Christianity said, “Nope, none of that anymore. Marital fidelity for husbands *as well* as wives.” Radical.

You have to understand how radically feminist Christianity appeared in it's day. Another example; the pagans said if you're a woman and your husband dies and you're a young widow, you have to be married within two years, because a woman makes no contribution to society unless she is married to a man. It was required that you remarry – you *had* to - whether you wanted to or not. Roman law.

And yet the Christian communities supported widows so they didn't have to get married unless they wanted to. Do you understand why women *flocked* to Christianity? They flocked. It's very, very clear. They saw a dignity that was available to them. They saw a humanity in the new Christianity. It *utterly* began to change the social order.

Let me give you another example. Christians loved the poor. Loved the poor! So for example, we have a letter from the Emperor Julian, who was really not a fan of Christianity. It was already legal in the Empire by the time we was in charge but he tried to limit it's influence because he didn't like how paganism was on the decline because Christianity was winning everybody over. And so he was trying to reverse course. The church has dubbed him Julian the Apostate.

And he wrote a letter to the pagan high priest of Galatia and basically laid out the problem; he said it's not about worship – they had pagan worship rituals down pat – but it was about ethics. People were attracted to the compassion of the Christians – who he calls “Galileans” after where Jesus was from. He says, “no wonder we're not winning...” look at the quote, “For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support **not only their own poor but ours as well**, all men see that our people lack aid from us.” (Julian the Apostate to Arsacius, High-priest of Galatia, AD 362)

See, the way of the world is you watch after your own. You know, “The Jews take care of the Jewish poor, and the Greeks take care of the Greek poor, and the Romans take care of the Roman poor, and the Africans take care of the African poor, but these Christians, they take care of *everybody's poor!*” Do you see why nationalism can't be a valid option for a Christian? So not only do they care for outsiders, but then they bring them *into* the community, and you've mixed the races, because they have this idea that everybody is a sinner, and therefore, we're all equal before God.

These were the political values of the early church as they followed the example of Jesus. So let me ask you, were they conservative or liberal? Is this red state or blue state? I mean, you see, some of that stuff about infanticide, early Christians were against abortion – modern evangelicals didn't invent this by the way, there's a church document from 50-70AD called *The Didache* that says, "thou shalt not procure abortion, nor commit infanticide" (2:2) that's while most of the apostles were still alive. Christians cared about the unborn. Christians were against the double standard of sexual sin for men. That all sounds conservative, doesn't it?

But what about all the stuff about the poor? What about all the stuff about mixing the races, and mixing the classes? That sounds kind of liberal, doesn't it? Is Christianity political? Yes and no. Is Christianity conservative? Yes and no. Is Christianity liberal? Yes and no. Do you see the revolutionary ambiguity of this?

But let me give you one more. We talked about this a month ago at the end of the Jonah series, but with recent events, I've gone back and studied it in more detail and I can't help but share it with you today. From AD 249 to 262 – 13 years! – an pandemic swept through the cities of the Roman Empire called The Plague of Cyprian. We think it was very similar in symptoms to the Ebola virus. But at its height, it is said that 5,000 people *a day* died in Rome alone of the plague.

It was suspected that it originated in the Egyptian city of Alexandria – although even the pagans didn't call it "The Egyptian Flu" because that would be racist and wrong – but the Christian bishop of Alexandria, a man named Dionysius, was a first hand witness to the suffering. His account is recorded in Eusebius' *History of the Church* written in the fourth century.

Here's what he says about how the pagans – "the heathen" – responded to the pandemic, "But with the heathen everything was quite otherwise. They deserted those who began to be sick, and fled from their dearest friends. And they cast them out into the streets when they were half dead, and left the dead like refuse, unburied. They shunned any participation or fellowship with death; which yet, with all their precautions, it was not easy for them to escape." [Eusebius *Church History*, Book 7, 22:10]

The *Statesman* ran a front page article on Friday about how UT research scientists say that if we don't get social contact down to 90% isolation, we could have 18,000 people in the Austin-metro area in need of hospitalization. We currently have a daily capacity of 4,000 beds. There's a reason you are at home! But how will we, church, respond to the crisis?

Can I tell you, the crisis is not, “Oh, we don’t get to come to church.” The crisis is not, “How are we going to get enough offerings to pay the bills.” The crisis is going to be, “How are we, the church, going to be the hands and feet of Jesus toward the sick and dying, the suffering, in our communities?”

Well, let me tell you how those early Christians did it, Dionysius says, “The most of our brethren were unsparing in their exceeding love and brotherly kindness. They held fast to each other and visited the sick fearlessly, and ministered to them continually, serving them in Christ. And they died with them most joyfully, taking the affliction of others, and drawing the sickness from their neighbors to themselves and willingly receiving their pains. And many who cared for the sick and gave strength to others died themselves, having transferred to themselves their death... Truly the best of our brothers departed from life in this manner, including some presbyters and deacons in those of the people who have the highest reputation...” (22:7-8)

Many of the Christians cheerfully took their neighbor’s disease on themselves by nursing them back to health, but in the process, died in their stead. *Why?* What would cause someone to do that instead of run off and leave people dying in the streets? Don’t you see? First of all, Jesus gave them that personal peace. So much personal peace and contentment, that their neighbors didn’t have, so that they could handle the loss of their comfort. They could handle the loss of their safety.

They could handle the loss of their money. They could even handle the loss of their *lives* if it meant pouring themselves out for the needs of their neighbors.

They looked at the social needs. They looked at the sick. They looked at the poor. They looked at the needs of the people around them in their city, and they poured themselves out. One of the reasons was because of that new personal peace that Jesus showed before Pilate, but *also* because of that new attitude toward personal power.

They did not idolize power. They looked at the sick. They looked at the women. They looked at the children. They looked at the slaves. They looked at the poor. And they *loved* them, and they drew them in...and that changed society. That changed it radically. You have to remember, only one percent of one percent get really involved in politics. What about the other 99.9 percent of the Christians?

They were *all* doing political change because they were changing social arrangements! They were changing the way power operated in the Roman Empire. Are you a political leader? Yes...and no. So there was the ambiguity answer, and there was the revolutionary answer – and that’s the reason why Christians were having such an impact on society.

But that leaves us with our question...How do *you* get what those Christians had? Isn't that the million dollar question with where we are today? You know, it sounds very inspiring, but do you have what it takes to look at, for example, the injustices or the needs of the people in this city and to pour yourself out for them because you have both an inner peace and a new pattern of how you use your power, and how you use your wealth, and how you use your leverage, and how you use your time? Do you have what they had? I bet a lot of us are going to say, "I don't know. That's pretty scary."

Well, point 3, The substitutionary answer. This is the last question and it's not to Jesus this time, but to the crowd. In fact, in reality it is a three-part question because Pilate turns to the crowd and basically says, "Should I release Jesus or do you want Barabbas?", then after that answer he asks, "What do I do with the king of the Jews, then?" And then after *that* answer he says, "Why? What has he done?" And the answer of the crowd - to all three really - is substitution.

I don't know if you've noticed, but we've talked about substitution every week during this series. It's critically central to what Jesus came to do. And this week you have it dramatically contrasted as possible in the persons of Jesus and Barabbas. One is guilty and one is innocent. It's clear as day. Pilate sees it himself.

And in this last question he asks them, "What has Jesus done?" Did you notice they ignore the question? "Crucify him!" "Why, what has he done?" "Just crucify him!" See they don't even answer the question. It's a way of saying, "We know he's innocent, but we want him dead. Here's the innocent; here's the guilty...switch 'em! Substitute! Put the innocent where the guilty should be. Put the guilty where the innocent should be. Take the innocent one and punish him. Take the guilty one and let him go.

Substitution. How much more clear could Matthew be in pointing to what Jesus' death was all about? He was taking our place. He was taking *our* guilt upon himself. He was taking *our* sins upon himself. He was taking *our* evil upon himself and being treated the way we should be treated. He was condemned that we might go free. He died that we might live.

And this is the answer to the question of how you get the power to be agents of social change the way those early Christians were. Because if you look at those early Christians, they didn't just look to Jesus as their *example*. They didn't just say, "Oh, *he* died for others. He loved others. He gave up his power for others. He forgave his enemies. We can do I it too!" No, that wouldn't be enough!

I have to confess something to you. I've stopped reading hero stories in the news. Yay! Good job! Glad for it...but I just want to lay on the couch and watch Netflix. See, good examples just crush me. They just make me feel bad. They don't empower me, and they won't empower you. But when those early Christians saw Jesus Christ substituting himself for *them*...then what could they do? Remember the line from old Dionysius, "And many who cared for the sick and gave strength to others died themselves, having transferred to themselves their death..."

Christians looked at their neighbors and said, "If I take care of my neighbor, my neighbor might survive. My neighbor might live, but I might die because I might get infected. I might die that my neighbor might live. But wait, that's what Jesus did for me! Substitution!" And they willingly did it. You see, at the very center of the Christian understanding of salvation is not a man who raises an army and seizes power and saves us.

That's not what Jesus did! He *lost* his power. He transferred our death to himself, our sickness to himself, our evil to himself. And so when the Christians said, "The only way I can help the poor to become rich is if I become poor. The only way I can help the sick to become well is if I become sick. The only way I can help the *dying* to life is if I die."

And they said, "Okay....Jesus did that for me." Do you understand that substitutionary atonement turns you into a radical agent for social change? It did back then and it can do it again.

It's been that way through history. You know the late 60's and early 70's were very turbulent, even violent, politically divided times. And there was an African-American preacher named Tom Skinner who pastored in Harlem. He was right in the middle of the Black Panther racial unrest. Riots in Chicago and LA. Turbulent times. And in the middle of that, he preached a message at a massive college ministries conference called Urbana.

I've been to Urbana, but not this particular one, because I wasn't born yet – and in 1970 Tom Skinner addressed the social unrest of the times using the analogy of Jesus and Barabbas. And it's so good, that I can't replicate it. Besides, I want you to hear his authenticity in it. So I'm going to close my sermon by playing the closing of another man's sermon. Listen to Tom Skinner talk about Barnabas and Pilate and Jesus...[**Skinner Sermon 4:17**]

But Jesus came to change the system. And so they had to arrest him too. Now, Jesus would not have disagreed with Barabbas' diagnosis of the human system. Barabbas said, "The Roman system stinks, it's militaristic, it's oppressive." And Jesus would have agreed. The difference between Jesus and Barabbas would have been in their solution to it.

And so the Romans have two revolutionaries locked up. It is around festivity time. And Pilate stands out before the Jews with these two prisoners - potential radicals. And Pilate says, "You know, around this time of year, I get very gracious. I want you to know that I love all you dear Jewish people. Some of my best friends are Jews. Now, I'm going to release one of them to you, and I want you to tell me which one you want. Over here I've got Barabbas" and incidentally Barabbas' name was Jesus - Jesus Barabbas. "So you've got two Jesus' on your hands, so it's not a question as to whether there is going to be a revolution. It is which one."

Pilate went on: "Over here you've got Barabbas. Barabbas has been burning the system down, killing people. Do you want him? Or over here I've got Jesus, who claims to be the son of God. I've interrogated him, and I can't find anything wrong with him, other than the fact that some dead people are alive because of him, some blind people have seen, some deaf people are hearing and, by the way, he did feed a few thousand people with a welfare give-away program, but other than that I can't find anything wrong with him. Now which one do you want? Jesus or Barabbas?"

And with one voice they cried out, "Give us Barabbas!" The question is: Why Barabbas and not Jesus? Barabbas is the cat burning the system down, he is killing people. Why him instead of Jesus? Very simple: if you let Barabbas go, you can always stop him. The most Barabbas will do is go out, round up another bunch of guerrillas and start another riot. And you will always stop him by rolling your tanks into his neighborhood, bringing out the National Guard and putting his riot down. Find out where he is keeping his ammunition. Raid his apartment without a search warrant and shoot him while he is still asleep. You can stop Barabbas.

But how do you stop Jesus? They took and nailed him to a cross. But they did not realize that, in nailing Jesus to the cross, they were putting up on that cross the sinful nature of all humanity. I was told that as Christ was nailed to the cross, it was more than just a political radical dying; he was God's answer to the human dilemma. On that cross Christ was bearing in his own body my sin, and he was proclaiming my liberation on that cross. And on that cross he shed his blood to cleanse me of all my sin, to set me free. They took and buried him, rolled a stone over his grave, wiped their hands and said, "That is one radical who will never disturb us again. We have gotten rid of him. We will never hear any more of his words of revolution."

Three days later Jesus Christ pulled off one of the greatest political coups of all time: he got up out of the grave. When he arose from the dead, the Bible now calls him the second man, the new man, the leader of a new creation. A Christ who has come to overthrow the existing order and to establish a new order that is not built on man. Keep in mind, my friend, with all your militancy and radicalism, that all the systems of men are doomed to destruction. All the systems of men will crumble and, finally, only God's kingdom and his righteousness will prevail. You will never be radical until you become part of that new order and then go into a world that's enslaved, a world that's filled with hunger and poverty and racism and all those things of the work of the devil.

Proclaim liberation to the captives, preach sight to the blind, set at liberty them that are bruised, go into the world and tell men who are bound mentally, spiritually and physically, "The liberator has come!"

The liberator has come. *Every* other revolution put new *people* in power, and Jesus says, "I'm going to put a new attitude toward power in power." *Every* other revolution *destroyed* their enemies. This revolution comes into authority through the forgiveness of enemies. And therefore, Jesus' revolution can't be stopped by killing him; all that they did was further it.

Is Jesus Christ a political leader? He is the *most* political leader, and he is the *least* political leader. The answer is yes and no. How can you follow him in the revolution to end all revolutions? This world is desperately waiting for you to find out.

Let's pray...