Despised and rejected by all

Text: Mark 14:53-15:15

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 53:1-3; Mark 14:53-15:5

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 82, 280, 110, 290, 313

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#50)

**Theme:** Jesus is tried by the Jewish religious authorities and falsely found guilty of blasphemy, then Peter vigorously denies knowing Jesus before He is delivered up to be crucified under the authority of the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate.

**Proposition:** Christian, Jesus was despised and rejected so that you could be loved and accepted by God

**Introduction**

Picture being honoured. Perhaps receiving a medal or prize for an achievement, or an Order of Merit by the NZ government or maybe having a street, a building or even a town named after you. Now picture being dishonoured. Held in contempt, ignored, belittled, publicly humiliated and despised like a politician convicted of a crime. To despise is to distain or hold in contempt, to consider someone or something to be worthless, unworthy of attention is the opposite of honouring. I know some people who have greatly disliked me because of good things I have done. Maybe they even despised me. Perhaps you also know what it is to be disliked or despised when you have done the right things? The prophet Isaiah prophesied that the promised Messiah, the Servant of the Lord would be despised by all people.

Picture being accepted. Welcomed into a group as someone who truly belongs, is appreciated, loved and whose presence there everyone values. Now picture being rejected. Cast out from your family, friends and community, left utterly alone without any relationships with others because they view you as having no value or significance for them. As an adopted person, I have lived my life with feelings of rejection – struggling to below. Perhaps you also know what it is to be rejected? Maybe by friends, family, husband or wife?

The prophet Isaiah prophesied that the promised Messiah, the Servant of the Lord would be rejected by all people. Jesus truly was “*despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not*” (Isaiah 53:3). In our text from Mark’s gospel, it is Thursday night and Jesus, having been arrested, is taken before the Jewish Council in order to justify their verdict that He be condemned as deserving death. Whilst this mockery of a trial was being conducted, Peter, as predicted by Christ, denied Him three times. Then Jesus was then taken to Pontius Pilate who, having given into the will of the crowd, delivered Him to be crucified. We will look at these three interconnected events under these points:

1. The wickedness of the Jewish Council
2. The weakness of the disciple Peter
3. The wiliness of the Roman Governor Pilate
4. **The wickedness of the Jewish Council (v53-65)**

I once knew a man who had a personal conviction that he should only sing psalms and not hymns in congregational worship. The Scriptures affirm liberty of conscience in this (e.g. Romans 14). This man had left his wife with no intention to return to her. He came to a worship service in the church I was attending. I remember watching him remaining silent during the hymns. I couldn’t help but think that here was a man who meticulously observed his conviction about singing, but when it came to his marriage vow, he felt much less constrained to obey God.

How can you tell the difference between true worship and worthless religion? One way is to observe a person’s priorities. The true worship of God ‘majors on the majors’ focussing on willing obedience to the heart and essence of His good commands. Jesus helpfully summarises this for us in these few words: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself*” (Matt 22:37-39).

The false religion of the unbelieving Jewish leaders was characterised by ‘majoring on the minors’, focussing on small details and ignoring the heart and essence of God’s law. Jesus strongly rebuked them with these words: “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others*” (Matt 23:23).

As we come to Mark’s account of the trial of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin, notice the careful attention to proper process.

**Firstly,** ‘*all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together*’ (v53). The trial and verdict was not the work of one, or just a few individuals. They had gathered together in what we would today call a ‘quorum’ in order to collectively hear the case against Jesus and then reach a united verdict. According to the Jewish Mishnah the presence of 23 members constituted a quorum. The elders were primarily wealthy landowners and together with the chief priests, they were the established ruling class. The scribes were lawyers from the middle classes of society, many of whom shared the same religious views as the Pharisees. We do not know if Nicodemus, who was a ‘ruler of the Jews’ (John 3:1) was present at the trial of Jesus. When Mark uses the word ‘all’ in verse 53 this does not necessarily mean every single member of the Sanhedrin was present. Nicodemus had defended Jesus’s right to a fair trial before; when the chief priests and the Pharisees had tried to get the temple police to arrest him (John 7:51).

**Secondly,** the Council called witnesses to testify - in keeping with some of the legal process required by God’s Law (Deut 19:15-21): “*Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established*” (Deut 19:15).

**Thirdly,** they followed the Old Testament pattern of gestures like spitting and striking the guilty person to indicate rejection, loathing and disgrace (e.g. Job 30:10; Num 12:14, Deut 25:9; Isa 50:6).

**Fourthly,** the Council did not try to execute Jesus themselves, because a sentence of death was outside of their jurisdiction under Roman occupation.

So, with this careful following of ‘due process’ was it a fair trial in which a righteous judgement was delivered (ref. Deut 1:16)? It is entirely accurate to say that this was the one of the two most unjust trials of all time (we’ll come to the other one in our third point). Exactly how was this trial unjust?

**Firstly**, the trial did not begin with a clear accusation with a view to fairly determining whether that charge was true or false. Instead it began with a definite desired outcome and then sought evidence to justify a pre-determined sentence. Mark has already recorded at the start of chapter 14 that ‘*the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him*’ (v1). At the trial ‘*the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none*’ (v55).

**Secondly**, those who testified against Jesus ‘*bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree*’ (v56). Yet there is no evidence that these witnesses were condemned according to God’s law (Deut 19:18-19). The Council should have done to them what they intended for Jesus.

**Thirdly**, the charge that the witnesses had heard Jesus say, ‘*I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands*.’ (v58) was a very serious one. Throughout the Greco-Roman world, the destruction or desecration of places of worship was regarded as a capital offence, deserving of death. Remember that when the prophet Jeremiah merely announced the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem he was captured and brought before the royal court as a criminal whose words warranted death (Jer 26:1-19). Whilst Jesus did speak of the coming destruction of the temple and his building of a new one, not made with hands, we know that he was ‘*speaking about the temple of his body*’ (as John reveals in 2:21).

Yet, it was not misunderstanding over the meaning of Christ’s words that might have led to an unjust verdict, but lack of legally sufficient evidence. Mark records that ‘*Yet even about this their testimony did not agree*’ (15:59).

You might be thinking at this point ‘well, couldn’t the Sanhedrin have prepared and primed their false witnesses better; making sure that their testimonies did agree?’ It is helpful to remember that this was not a carefully scheduled, well-planned in advance trial, but a very hasty event taking place hurriedly at a highly unusual time; at night. The Sanhedrin usually met in the marketplace near the Temple, but this trial was held at the high priest’s residence. It’s worth noting that the characteristically brief account of the trial by gospel writer Mark purposefully omits many details. For example, John records a pre-hearing before Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas (John 18:12-14, 19-23).

**Fourthly**, when the supply of witnesses had been exhausted without providing any grounds to convict Jesus of any crime, the High Priest, Caiaphas, stood up and effectively asked Christ what the charge against Him was to be. If this was a comedy play, that would be hilariously funny. It was like “We can’t find any charge that will stick, so can you provide one for us?” Caiaphas asked Jesus “*what is it that these men testify against you?*”. Jesus remained silent, both because there was no just charge to be made against the only truly innocent person who has ever lived and also in fulfilment of the prophesy in Isaiah 53:7 “*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; 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*”.

Now comes the leading question, the one that Mark’s gospel is all about: “*Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?*” (v61). In other words, “*do you claim to be the promised Messiah?*”. As we’ve seen earlier in Mark’s gospel, Jesus had been careful to conceal His true identity because His time had not yet come. Now He says plainly for the whole Council gathered to hear: “*I am, and you will see the Son of Man ‘seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven*’” (v62). Jesus testifies to His own divinity with the words ‘I am’ reflecting the name by which the everlasting, uncreated, Living God revealed Himself to Moses (Ex 3:14). He also draws on the prophesy of both Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13 (cf. Isaiah 52:8) to reveal that He will be coming as the Judge of all at the end of this age. The falsely accused true Messiah is the truly righteous One who will one day judge all those who were wickedly committing the crime of the greatest injustice of all time that night at Caiaphas’s house.

The High Priest understood exactly what Jesus was saying, symbolically showing his judgement by tearing his garments and then saying ‘*what further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?*’ (v63). Mark records their verdict ‘*they all condemned him as deserving death*’ (v64).

None of us were there that night. We did not judge Jesus as they did. Yet sometimes you and me can be guilty of conveniently following the minor details of the patterns and processes of the Christian life, whilst ignoring the heart and essence of God’s good law. For example, we might keep accurate meeting minutes, financial accounts, and maintain a tidy church building. We might faithfully attend worship twice each Lord’s Day and regularly attend a Bible study, giving regularly to the work of the church. These are good things, but they are not the best thing.

If we do all this, but fail to wholeheartedly love God and one another and those outside of the church as ourselves, then we fail in the ‘*weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness*’ (Matt 23:23). Remember that Jesus, the unjustly judged One, is coming to ‘*judge the living and the dead*’ (2 Tim 4:1). Are you ready? Or are you going to be like Peter in the courtyard below the high priest’s house that night, thinking that he was prepared, when in fact, he was not. This leads us to our second point:

1. **The weakness of the disciple Peter (v66-72)**

Whilst Jesus was being put on trial in Caiaphas’s residence, below in a courtyard, Peter, it could be said was also ‘on trial’ – not by the official Jewish leaders, but by a servant girl. There could be no greater contrast in power and authority between the accusers of Christ and the accuser of Peter. At the start of our text, Mark writes that as Jesus was led from the place of his arrest to be tried before the Council, ‘*Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest*’ (v54). It must have been a cold night, because Peter was ‘*warming himself at the fire*’ along with the guards. Mark ‘sandwiches’ the details about Peter around his account of the trial of Jesus to show that these events took place at the same time.

A servant girl (who John records ‘*kept watch at the door*’ – 18:16) and therefore must have let Peter in, brought this charge against him “*You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus*” (v67). Unlike the false witnesses brought against Jesus, this was the truth. Peter had most certainly been with Jesus, until he and all the other disciples ‘*left him and fled*’ (14:50) after Christ was arrested. Yet this man who earlier that night, when Jesus predicted that Peter would deny Him three times, had protested, saying emphatically “*If I must die with you I will not deny you*” (14:31). In his defence before the servant girl, Peter said “*I neither know nor understand what you mean*” (v68).

Why did he lie about his close relationship with Jesus? Although the Scriptures do not explicitly answer that question, it seems clear to deduce that Peter feared for his own safety. He was therefore determined to seek the approval of the guards and others in that courtyard, rather than the approval of Christ Jesus (ref. Mark 8:34-38). Perhaps Peter was hoping that his denial would satisfy the servant girl, but it did not. She started speaking to others in the courtyard saying, ‘*this man is one of them*’ (v69). The problem with telling one lie is that it is often necessary to then tell other lies in the hope that this will stop you being found out. So Peter denied that he was one of Jesus’s disciples (v70).

Now, as the situation escalated, the interrogation was taken up by others in the courtyard, they said “*Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean*” (v70). The people who were born and raised in Galilee had a distinctive accent which identified them; a bit like the accent of those from Southland in New Zealand, but more pronounced. As the pressure mounted for Peter to confess his true identity, so the strength of his lies increased. Mark records that Peter ‘*began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear “I do not know this man of whom you speak”*’ (v71). Notice how Peter carefully avoided using the name of Jesus.

Whilst all this is taking place, Jesus was being tried by the Sanhedrin, confessing His true identity without fear of the consequences, whereas Peter brought repeated false testimony in order to protect himself from being known as an associate of Christ. How could he have been so weak? How could he have been willing to bring such dishonour to His Lord? How could he curse himself rather than tell the truth? It is clear that under pressure he was by no means as strong as he thought that he was. Martin Luther King Jr., the 20th century American Christian Minister and activist once famously said that “*the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy*”.

This principle applies in our lives, just as much as it did in Peter’s. Next time you accidently stub your toe, hit your finger with a hammer, bang your head, or get cut off in traffic when you are in a hurry take note if any expletives come out of your mouth. Next time when things do not go the way you had hoped and expected, observe how you react. Next time sin is revealed in your life through the admonition of others (perhaps your husband, wife, mother, father, child, fellow Christian or non-believing friend or workmate), watch how you respond.

You and I do not really know how we might respond in a situation where confessing Christ could result in imprisonment, torture and/or death. However, the ways in which we publicly profess Christ or else publicly keep our faith private at present may give us some indication for the future. We are more like Peter than we likely care to admit. Many of us are likely spiritually weaker than we think.

Apparently, the nightly cockcrow was a very regular occurrence in Jerusalem. So much so that the third watch of the night (around 3a.m.) was referred to as the ‘cockcrow’. So it was, in complete fulfilment of Christ’s prophesy, that Peter denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed twice. By 3 a.m. Peter had been tried and found guilty of weakness, wickedness and sin. Mark records that when he realised what he had done ‘*he broke down and wept*’ (v72).

When we deny Christ, either by pretending to others that we do not know Him, or by wilfully disobeying His commands whilst professing to know Him, we may later experience sorrow. There are two very different kinds of this grief, although they may at first look the same on the outside. The sorrow that leads to repentance, and the sorrow of consequence. “*For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death*” (2 Cor 7:10). Worldly grief may mean that you feel bad and/or humiliated by what you have done, but it is not a sorrow of heart for having dishonoured Christ.

Peter escaped eternal death, not because He succeeded in this test, but because Christ succeed in His trial. We know that Peter repented and was restored by Jesus (John 21:15-19). He learned from his terrible mistake and was then greatly used by the Lord in the proclamation of the gospel. Whatever you or I may have done wrong, we can gain comfort, courage, clarity of mind, and calmness of soul by following Peter’s pattern when we come to realise our failures: Weep over sin with a godly grief that leads to repentance; Wholly trust in Jesus for forgiveness, restoration, life, hope and ongoing service in His Kingdom. John puts it this way in his first letter “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). The Lord is faithful and just, Pontius Pilate was neither, as we see in our third point:

1. **The wiliness of the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate (1-15)**

Wiliness is the ability to achieve your goals through indirect, subtle or underhanded means. A wily person is a cunning, sly, shrewd and devious character. Pontius Pilate was the wily Roman Governor in Jerusalem. He had a reputation for cruelty and was no friend of the Jews (ref. Luke 13:1). The Jewish Council had convicted Jesus as being guilty of blasphemy. This was not recognised as a crime in Roman law any more than adultery is in New Zealand law. A different offence would need to be presented to Pilate which carried the death penalty.

In his account, Luke records that the Jews who brought Jesus to this Roman trial began to accuse Him saying: “*We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king*.” (Luke 23:2). Mark writes that Pilate, who would have no interest in Jesus identifying as the promised Messiah, asked ‘*Are you the King of the Jews?*’ (15:2). Jesus was not a king over Israel as the Herods were, but He is the Ruler over God’s chosen people. In response to Pilate, Jesus just said ‘*you have said so*’ (15:2), literally in the original language just two words ‘*you say*’. This is ambiguous, an answer given with reservation because the Kingship of Jesus did not correspond to the political worldly rule that Pilate had in mind. Jesus said no more by way of clarification, despite the chief priests accusing him of many things. Pilate, it seems, wanted Jesus to realise that His silence in this law court would be taken as agreement. Yet, in fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophesy Jesus was silent, ‘*like a lamb that is led to the slaughter*’ (53:7).

It is clear from the longer parallel account in Luke’s gospel that Pilate did not believe that Jesus was guilty of any of the charges brought against him (Luke 23:13-14). So why didn’t Pilate simply have Jesus released? It seems that, although he had no love of the Jews, he did not want to risk public opposition to his ruling, so he came up with a cunning plan. He would have Jesus released, not as the innocent man He was, but under an annual prisoner release scheme which occurred during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. By having Jesus set free under this scheme Pilate would be able to avoid making a judgement that disagreed with the Jewish Council and at the same time demonstrate his great benevolence.

So Pilate put before the crowd what we call a ‘duo’ for office-bearer elections in our churches; a choice of two men. Either Barabbas, a man who had committed murder in the insurrection; someone who sought to overthrow the occupying Roman government (Matt 27:16), or ‘*The King of the Jews’* (15:9). It was an ironic duo to choose between. Barabbas a would-be political saviour of national Israel and Jesus of Nazareth, the true Saviour of the New Israel; God’s chosen people from every tribe, tongue and nation.

Mark records that “*But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead*”. And Pilate again said to them, “‘*Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?’ And they cried out again, ‘Crucify him.’ And Pilate said to them, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Crucify him*.’” (15:11-14). Pilate’s cunning plan ‘backfired’ and Jesus paid the ultimate price. The Roman Governor knowingly sentenced a truly innocent man to death because he feared the disapproval of the crowd of Jews. Mark writes at the end of our text: “*So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified*” (15:15).

Jesus was truly ‘*despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows*’ (Isa 53:3a). He was dishonoured before the Jews and the Gentiles, held in contempt in both courts and by Peter, his most vocal disciple. He was belittled and publicly humiliated. He was considered to be someone utterly worthless. He was cast out by everyone and left utterly alone without any relationships with others because they all viewed Him as having no value or significance for them. Christian, He went through all this (and more) because He loves you. He could easily have prevented all His suffering, but He chose not to. Such was the price He was prepared to pay to give life, peace, and hope to many.

At times you and I may experience some degree of contempt and humiliation from other people, we may be rejected by some. This, however great, however painful for you and me, is but the smallest reflection of what Christ willing endured. He truly understands your pain, past, present and future. He truly sympathises with your weakness (Heb 4:15). He is truly able to forgive all your sins, just as He has forgiven the sins of weak Peter.

He became a ‘man of sorrows’ so that you could be a man, woman or child of joy. He was despised by all so that you could be loved by God. He was rejected by all so that you could be accepted by God. Don’t forget to thank Him every day with every breath, every word and every deed.

AMEN.