

THE IRONIES OF THE CROSS

Expositional Study Matthew 27

Matthew 27:1-26

Written By

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Irony. You cannot live in D.C. and not readily see it . . . almost on a daily basis. Politicians use it, whether they know it or not, constantly. For instance, on the one hand they will say they support the Constitution, and then on the other hand they will evidence through their words and/or actions clearly demonstrate they do not support all of facets of the Constitution, choosing to subvert or oppose those parts they find objectionable or antiquated.

Scientists say ironic things too. Sir Francis Crick, who held advanced degrees in molecular biology, biophysics, and neurological science, and who was no friend of the believe in God, once quipped regarding the specified and highly complex nature of the cosmos, “The origin of life seems almost to be a miracle, so many are the conditions which would have had to have been satisfied to get it going.”¹ Life is a miracle which only a master designer, God, could pull off. After all, since the odds of producing the thousands of proteins which are the building blocks of life is $10^{40,000}$ to one, logic suggests you need a divine designer to pull off this intricate, highly specified creation.

Irony, as you can see, sometimes reveals a glaring hypocrisy a person probably needs to address. At other times, irony is a rhetorical device used to teach and educate. E. W. Bullinger offers the best definition of this word in his monumental work *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*,

¹ Francis Crick, *Life Itself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 88.

The figure is so called when the speaker intends to convey a sense contrary to the strict signification of the words employed: not with the intention of concealing his real meaning, but for the purpose of adding greater force to it.²

Matthew, the author of the first gospel, understood the power of irony and he employed it, especially when recording the events of the Passion week.

Thinking about the very first Palm Sunday, how can we not see the ironies of the day?

- Jesus rode into town on a donkey instead of the war horse of a conquering king (Rev. 19).
- The people threw palm branches down in front of Him, thereby stating the seventh feast, the messianic feast of Tabernacles, had now (supposedly) arrived as prophesied (Zech. 14), when, in fact, the Messiah still had to fulfill the other six feasts (Passover, Unleavened Bread, First fruits, Pentecost . . . the Feast of Weeks, Trumpets, and the Day of Atonement).
- Those who, at the beginning of the week, chanted “Hosanna” toward Jesus when they thought He was the Messiah (Matt. 21:9), did not blink when they chanted “Crucify him” at the end of the week (John 19:6).

How ironic, yet what a powerful rhetorical tool. What is it designed to accomplish in Matthew’s divinely inspired hand?

Irony Is Designed To Spiritually Educate And Motivate Unbelievers To Turn To The Messiah (Matt. 27)

Over the next two Passion weeks, or over the next two years, we will sink our interpretive spades into the rich soil of Matthew 27. Our purpose is clear: to understand how Matthew employed irony in order to wake up those who are spiritually asleep and need a faith relationship with the Savior. If you do not have the relationship of which I speak, I pray God will get your attention as we study. For those who know the Christ, our pedagogical endeavor will remind us of who we used to be prior to knowing Christ, and it will also give us words to share with those who do not know the wonder and power of His cross.

With these thoughts in mind, we grab our shovels and get to work. As we move through these verses we will methodically point out the main ironies Matthew develops as they relate to the person and work of our Lord. In this analysis, we shall consider two.

They Who Judge Unjustly Will Be Judged Justly (Matt. 27:1-10)

Everything about the arrest and “trial” of Jesus by the Sadducees and Pharisees smacks of injustice from the very people who should have lived for justice. Because of their burning hatred toward Him for daring to challenge their teaching and traditions (Matt. 5-7), for having the gall to cleanse the Temple two times of the money-changers . . . this certainly cut into their profit margin (John 2:14-15; Matt. 21:12), for doing work on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1-9; 14:1-5), for calling *them*, of all people, sinners (Matt. 23), and for equating Himself with God (John 8:58), they felt compelled to terminate Him at all costs and by whatever means necessary. The first ten verses from Matthew

² E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 806.

27 readily demonstrate the unjust activity of those who should have exuded and upheld true justice . . . no matter what:

¹ Now when morning had come, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put Him to death; ² and they bound Him, and led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate the governor.

The illegal trial held in the middle of the night is now airbrushed to appear legal, as the religious/political leaders assembled in the temple to consider the so-called capital evidence against Jesus. Such is how power hungry people behave. Behind the scenes they will twist, distort, and defy the Law, while in public they will attempt to make it appear they are staunch supporters of the Law.

We know from Christ's trumped up trail before the High Priest, Caiaphas (Matt. 26:57ff), they *purposefully* used false witnesses to accuse Him of intimating that He would dare to attack the physical temple in Jerusalem (Matt. 26:61). That, of course, was not the whole story. These false witnesses merely relayed half of what Jesus had originally said. He spoke not of the physical temple, but of His body (John 2:19). Nobody, on that one occasion, bothered to ask Him for clarification regarding which temple He spoke about. Hence, they slanted His speech like good propagandists in order to paint Him as a criminal and threat to the country so they could silence Him, forever.

Frustrated that Christ would not answer this "false" charge, Caiaphas exploded in self-righteous, judicial anger:

⁶² And the high priest stood up and said to Him, "Do You make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?" ⁶³ But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God."

Jesus minced no words and told the High Priest exactly who He was:

⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, "You have said it *yourself*; nevertheless, I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

The statement sent the self-righteous, false High Priest into a fit of rage:

⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his robes, saying, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; (Matt. 26).

Ah, now they had Him. From His own mouth He stated He was, in fact, God. The admission deserved death if true (Matt. 26:66). Once more, their blind hatred of Christ, wedded to their envy of His teaching and following among the people, did not move them, the judicial/spiritual leaders of Israel, to consider the evidence from Christ's life which proved He was, in fact, God. How ironic. *They who should have shown justice lived for injustice, and they did all of this before the One who is the just Judge, Jesus.* We will come back to that thought in a moment.

On another day, these judicial/spiritual leaders had an encounter with Jesus on the temple mount. At that time, they frustratingly said, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" (John 10:24). He had told them but they willfully chose to disregard the evidence. Once again, Jesus clearly told them He was God:

²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these bear witness of Me. ²⁶ But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep" (John 10).

Tough but true words. Ironic, too. They who thought they were God's sheep, were not because they rejected the Shepherd, Jesus.

Note, carefully, what else Jesus said here. The works, or miracles, He performed were incontrovertible evidence of His divine status for only God could pull these off. He said this much in verse 25, and, then, He re-stated it again in verses 37-38:

³⁷ "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; ³⁸ but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father" (John 10).

It does not get any clearer than this. Are you listening? Those bent on unjustly convicting Christ never listen to the facts, but they should because eternity hangs in the proverbial balance. Those who see the leakage of their unjust claims against Jesus are those who are starting to see their need of the Savior. Which are you?

Isaiah prophesied some eight hundred years before Christ that the Messiah would be divine (Isa. 7:14; 9:6). He also said you would be able to recognize the divine Messiah by means of His divine miracles:

³ Then the eyes of those who see will not be blinded, and the ears of those who hear will listen. ⁴ And the mind of the hasty will discern the truth, and the tongue of the stammerers will hasten to speak clearly. (Isa. 32).

Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come *with* vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you." ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. ⁶ Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy (Isa. 35).

Jesus *was* the divine Messiah because He performed all of these miracles, plus many more (healing of two blind men, Matt. 9:27, healing a deaf and dumb man, Mark 7:31; bringing a widow's son back to life, Luke 7:11; healing a man with dropsy, Luke 14:1; healing ten lepers, Luke 17:11; healing a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, John 5:1; . . . to name just a few). His words to the political/spiritual leaders on the day where, therefore, correct: If you do not believe my words, at least believe I am God in the flesh because of the miraculous works I perform. We know how they responded to that challenge. Their love of darkness drove them to reject the light of the evidence.

Hence, the declaration of Caiaphas dripped with injustice because he, along with the rest of the leaders, possessed all the hard evidence they needed to demonstrate Christ was, in fact, God in the flesh. However, their love of sin, power, prestige, tradition, money and so forth moved these

judges to judge Jesus unjustly. They did not *really* care about the facts, but only making sure He was not around to challenge their godless thinking and materialistic, power-hungry lifestyles.

And to think they sought to get rid of Him, the true Judge, by wrapping justice around the cancer of injustice. If a false charge would do, they would go with that all the way to the bank. If a bribe of a former follower would do the trick, they would embrace that too. It is shocking the lengths these political/spiritual/judicial leaders went to in order to silence Christ. They, who repeatedly accused Him of breaking the Law . . . when He did not . . ., wasted no time defying the Law by paying a bribe to Judas in order to set Him up for a trumped up arrest. The Law was forthright about bribes:

²⁵ 'Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen' (Deuteronomy 27).

Being unjust men, they played fast and loose with the Law in order to get what they wanted. Judas took the money, but, as we read here in Matthew 27, he eventually threw it back at these godless men because his guilt got the best of him:

³ Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴ saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See *to that* yourself!" ⁵ And he threw the pieces of silver into the sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself (Matt. 27).

Had they been truly just judges they would have listened to Judas, but they were not. Their actions which followed tell us this much:

⁶ And the chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood." ⁷ And they counseled together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers. ⁸ For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

Now, all of sudden they, the hypocritical, unjust judges want to appear just. What prompted this desire? The answer? Deuteronomy 23:18:

¹⁸ You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God (Deut. 23).

In other words, Moses taught, by way of divine inspiration, that money which is acquired through illegal means should not be used in the temple of God. What judicial charlatans these men of the Law were! On the one hand, they used false witnesses, false charges, and a bribe to get to Jesus, and then on the other hand they moved to project a piety they really knew nothing about. They might have deceived themselves and the fickle populace, they might have temporarily silenced their consciences about their dastardly, evil actions, but they did not fool the just Judge, Jesus, who stood before them. Is this not all so ironic?

Long before His arrest, Jesus taught on several occasions that He would be the just Judge on Judgment Day.

²² “For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. ²⁵ “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶ “For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; ²⁷ and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is *the* Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, ²⁹ and will come forth; those who did the good *deeds* to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil *deeds* to a resurrection of judgment (John 5).

I do not want to get into the eschatological timing of Christ’s judgments at this limited juncture. Suffice it to say Jesus could not have been clearer: all judgment is His in the future.

- He will not pay bribes to get someone he does not like convicted on false charges.
- He will not disregard facts but will embrace hard evidence about a person’s life.
- He will not do things in secret but in the open for all to see and hear.
- He will not be a respecter of persons: “For there is no respect of persons with God” (Rom. 2:11).
- He will abide by the Law and not play fast and loose with it to serve nefarious purposes.
- He will bring all hidden things men have said and done out into the open: As He warned:

³ Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops. (Lk. 12).

The religious/spiritual/political leaders should have listened to this wise counsel, coming from the One who was, and is, and will be the just Judge. For all stated reasons, however, they, the unjust judges, judged the true Judge, Jesus, in order to silence Him so they could go on with their godless, carnal lives. The irony could not be more pronounced, could it? Their injustice in the due course of time would eventually run head long into His just judgment.

What about you? Are you guilty of smugly and self-righteously judging Jesus unjustly so you can drive Him from your life? Why, you might even feel your reasons for rejecting Him as the Savior of the world are logically and academically airtight. Or you might, like these misguided ancient spiritual leaders, believe your religious thinking rightfully puts you in opposition to Jesus. I have heard the arguments many times before. Is one of these evidence of your so-called just judgment?

- How could a loving God create a place of eternal bliss and one of eternal torment? That sounds so unjust.
- How could Jesus of Christianity be the only Savior when the world is full of so

many well-meaning, nice, caring people who embrace religious thinking which rejects the person and work of Jesus?

- Surely my commitment to my religious traditions handed down to me through my family line, coupled with my faith in Jesus, will be enough to win His favor.
- Christians are just bunch of hypocrites and that is why I will never give any serious consideration to the person and work of Jesus. Let me ask you, if a few police officers do not follow the rules of policing, is it logical to say they must all be wrong and not worthy of listening to? I do not think so. Better yet, is your life really devoid of all hypocrisy? I bet it is not.
- Religious belief is just that belief, or faith oriented, and nothing more. It is, therefore, not to be believed because it is not founded upon evidence. Responding to Richard Dawkins' thinking that faith is merely blind, John Lennox, a world renowned mathematician and professor at Oxford, cogently observes: "Indeed, faith is a response to evidence, not a rejoicing in the absence of evidence. The Christian apostle John writes in his biography of Jesus: 'These things are written that you might believe . . .' That is, he understands that what he is writing is to be regarded as part of the evidence on which faith is based. The apostle Paul says what many pioneers of modern science believed, namely, that nature itself is part of the evidence for the existence of God: 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.' It is no part of the biblical view that things should be believed where there is no evidence Just as in science, faith, reason and evidence belong together."³ Lennox then spends the rest of his excellent book titled *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* giving thinking people all the evidence they need to make a just judgment about whether there is a God or not. To disregard the evidence is to embrace an untenable belief system, and to place yourself as an unjust judge before the One who is the just Judge. Are you really ready to stand in His courtroom?

Here are a few people who have judged Jesus justly and are now more prepared than ever to stand before Him holy and acceptable.

- Melvin Calvin, Nobel Prize-winner in biochemistry writes about His judgment of God, "As I try to discern the origin of that conviction (the existence of God), I seem to find it in a basic notion discovered 2,000 to 3,000 years ago, and enunciated first in the Western world by the ancient Hebrews: namely that the universe is governed by a single God, and is not the product of the whims of many gods, each governing his own province according to his own laws. This monotheistic view seems to be the historical foundation for modern science."⁴
- Professor Sir Ghillelan Prance, a world-class professor in botany, and former Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England, once made this amazing statement, "For many years I have believed that God is the great

³ John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009), 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

designer behind all nature . . . All my studies in science since then have confirmed my faith. I regard the Bible as my principle source of authority.”⁵

Do not tell me faith and reason are not inter-related. Here are two educated men who think likewise and who find the revelation of God, as disclosed in the Bible, *is highly trustworthy*. This just judgment will echo in their lives for eternity in a spectacular, amazing, and jaw-dropping fashion. How will your judgment of God, who is Jesus, play out in eternity? Is this not the question this Palm Sunday? No doubt.

The Triumphal Entry and arrest of Jesus is chock-full of ironies, but they are ironies relayed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for one reason: to awaken the spiritual sleeper to the tenuous nature of his thinking about Jesus so he can judge Him justly and be saved by his faith in the Savior.

The arms of Jesus are outstretched to you right now. How will you judge Him? Will you judge Him as the true Savior, or will you misjudge Him and move on?

During the Methodist evangelistic camp meetings in the mid-1800s, William Kirkpatrick helped with worship by selecting the musicians for each service. After several meetings he noticed that one of the soloists left immediately after his performance, thus, missing every sermon.

One evening, as William prayed, God gave him some moving, powerful, soul-stirring words,

I've wandered far away from God,
Now I'm coming home;
The paths of sin too long I've trod,
Lord, I'm coming home.

Refrain

Coming home, coming home,
Nevermore to roam,
Open wide Thine arms of love,
Lord, I'm coming home.

I've wasted many precious years,
Now I'm coming home;
I now repent with bitter tears,
Lord, I'm coming home.

Refrain

I'm tired of sin and straying, Lord,
Now I'm coming home;
I'll trust Thy love, believe Thy Word,
Lord, I'm coming home.

Refrain

⁵ Ibid., 21.

My soul is sick, my heart is sore,
Now I'm coming home;
My strength renew, my hope restore,
Lord, I'm coming home.

Refrain

My only hope, my only plea,
Now I'm coming home;
That Jesus died, and died for me.
Lord, I'm coming home.

Refrain

I need His cleansing blood, I know,
Now I'm coming home;
O wash me whiter than the snow,
Lord, I'm coming home.

That evening, after he had put the lyrics to a tune, William had the young man sing the song. That night the young man did not leave the service because he, who had wrongly judged Christ, was judged for his sin by the Spirit of God. At the close of the service when the preacher called sinners to come home to the Savior, he who had walked away from God on more than one occasion walked away from Him no longer.

I'm sure there's room at the foot of Christ's cross for one more person who needs to come home. May that person be you.