



Speaker:
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The Great Substitution

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 52 of 52

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And straightway in the morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council, and bound Jesus, and carried him away, and delivered him to Pilate.

And Pilate asked him, “Art thou the King of the Jews?” And he answering said unto him, “Thou sayest it.” And the chief priests accused him of many things, but he answered nothing.

And Pilate asked him again saying, “Answerest thou nothing? Behold how many things they witness against thee.” But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled.

Now at that feast he released unto them one prisoner, whomsoever they desired. And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection. And the multitude crying aloud began to desire him to do as he had ever done unto them. But Pilate answered them saying, “Will ye that I release unto you the King of the Jews?” For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy. But the chief priests moved the people that he should rather release Barabbas unto them. And Pilate answered and said again unto them, “What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews?” And they cried out again, “Crucify him.” Then Pilate said unto them, “Why? What evil hath he done?” And they cried out the more exceedingly, “Crucify him.”

And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified.

The matter of Jesus and Barabbas is our focus today. I aim to show you this as a powerful picture of how the Lord Jesus Christ would die in the place of sinners so that they could go free.

We saw last week how Jesus was arrested and subjected to a hearing in front of the ruling Jewish class, the Sanhedrin.

Now, we see him tied up¹. Maybe they think it’ll make him look more like a criminal! It certainly isn’t based on any expectation he’ll lash out or try to run away.

The Jewish leaders take him to Pilate. He was the fifth Roman governor of Judea after the deposition of Archelaus (cf. Matt 2:22) in AD6. He held the office from AD 26–36. His proper title was *legate*.

They accuse him of many things, hoping to get him found guilty under Roman law. They mention him opposing taxes and saying he was a king.

Pilate quite naturally expects a forceful defence by the accused man. He’s stunned⁴ by Jesus’s lack of concern for the possible sentence should he be found guilty.

Even this man can see which of the two should be released. He can see their motives for bringing a prosecution were faulty. They're motivated by envy; that is, they're envious of the power and wisdom Jesus has, even though it's those very qualities which should be leading them to conclude he is who he says he is!

What's he done? Pilate asks. They can't give an answer to Pilate's question¹⁴. Instead, they use their combined voice to force Pilate's hand—mob rule, in other words. But it's the very unwillingness of the crowd to answer Pilate's question that's important because it stands as further evidence of Jesus's innocence.

What was Pilate's duty before God? **To do the right thing**, even if it meant insurrection, war, and his own deposing—or even his own execution!

The symbolic event of the freeing of Barabbas is told by all four gospel writers, so the Holy Spirit must have wanted us to pay it proper attention. We don't know a great deal about this man, but we do know he was a robber, a trouble causer and a murderer.

A custom had come into being, whereby every year, at the time of the Passover feast, the Roman authorities would release a prisoner of the people's choosing.

This concession to the Jews would, in the minds of the Romans at least, help them to keep the Jews happy and less likely to rebel. And to the Jews themselves? Well, the setting free of a prisoner would be quite symbolic at their Passover celebrations, as they remembered being set free from the jailhouse of Egypt.

It *seems* Pilate didn't want to put Jesus to death. He couldn't have presented a clearer choice than Jesus and Barabbas: one did no more than saying things the Jews didn't like; the other was a vile criminal.

However, Pilate's like anyone else: he's a complex creature, with feelings and motives which fluctuate. We might guess he, in some way, liked Jesus. We might say he wanted Jesus freed to annoy the Jews, who he despised. Or perhaps he saw Jesus as a potential rival and wanted him dead all along, his attempts to have him freed a mere show. We don't know.

To the surprise of Pilate, the people wanted the murderer to be loosed from prison,¹¹ thereby sending the Son of God to his death. And generations following, who perhaps underestimate the sinfulness of man, are likewise amazed.

Please keep this in mind: **this annual practice of freeing a prisoner, though an invention of man, was in place at this exact time in history, by the providence of God, so that this picture of substitution could be established.** The just man receives the punishment, while the guilty goes free.

In the Old Testament, the ritual for the cleansing of a leper involved two birds. One of them was killed over running water. The other was dipped in the dead bird's blood, then released. So off it would fly, its plumage still covered in blood. This, again, is a picture of substitution.

What does this have to do with us?

1. Every man or woman ever born, or who will be born, is by nature like Barabbas: a sinner, and rebel against God.
2. God is holy and just and cannot let sin go unpunished. The sentence for sin is death—not just the death of the body, but after that a state of dying that will never end.
3. God has provided a substitute in his precious son, who would die in the sinner's place. And in doing this, God could be both just and the justifier of all those who believe. To put it another way, God is righteous, and in salvation he makes *people* righteous too.

In order that you might get some idea today of the importance of this principle, I'd like to bring to your notice several points.

Barabbas was guilty of many crimes

We read that Barabbas was in prison for being a revolutionary and a murderer⁷. John's gospel account tells us he was also a robber. His guilt had already been established. All that remained was his execution.

Like Barabbas, *we* are by nature rebels. During our lives, we rebel against parents, teachers, employers...and even if we *are* God's children, we nevertheless have a rotten nature within us which is still in rebellion. The worst thing is, **we rebel against God himself**.

To you who are believers: I believe the apostle Paul's cries of desperation we read in Romans chapter 7 describe the experience of every true child of God. He says that the good things he wants to do, he doesn't do them; but the things he wants to avoid, those are the things he commits!

Rebels.

And, like Barabbas, *we're all robbers*. Most of us have robbed our fellow man through dishonesty; or we've robbed God of his authority and glory by our lack of thankfulness and refusal to worship him. (And we who claim to worship him, you **know** our worship is often lukewarm.)

And, again, like Barabbas, *we're all murderers*. Most of you will remember Jesus shocking his hearers by telling them that if they've ever hated anyone, they're murderers. And, of course, deep within the heart of the natural man is a longing to see God dethroned or dead. Listen to some of the things our hearts produce:

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.

Matthew 15:19

We're all, by nature, children of wrath, the same as everyone else. This book of the law gives its verdict on us all—our offences make us **guilty**. Guilty.

So Barabbas was guilty. And this brings us to my next point:

Barabbas was under the sentence of the law

He was in prison, in chains. He was on death row. And his state is a reflection of ours. The fifth Psalm tells us that God hates all the workers of iniquity. And John 3:36 says:

He that believeth on him is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten son of God.

John 3:36

And it hangs over his head, awaiting the hour of vengeance. Many people have tried to keep the standards God's set. Some have imagined they've kept the Ten Commandments. I'm not only talking about the old Pharisees. There are those in our present day who pride themselves on being "morally upright". They'll tell you they've never killed anyone, committed adultery or stolen.

Others claim to have kept the Sabbath. What—properly, like Jesus kept it? You can't.

The apostle James tells law-keepers that if they break one of God's laws, they've broken them all. And the result?

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT CONTINUE IN ALL THINGS WHICH ARE WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO DO THEM.

Galatians 3:10

You Christians: you are surrounded, in every walk of life, by people in bondage. Christ says, "whosoever commits sin is the *servant* of sin". Bondage!

Their bondage is certain. They have no hope of ever getting themselves out of this dungeon.

- They are in the bondage of *their own nature*. Sons of Adam, all inheriting the family illness of death by sin.
- They are in the bondage of *the flesh*. The desires of men enslave them in all manner of corrupt habits.
- They are in the bondage of *Satan*. He is the god of this world, and if God chooses not to deliver them, they're under Satan's power.
- Many are in the bondage to *religion*. Men idolise their own way. "There is a way", said wise Solomon, "which seems right to man, but the end is the ways of death."

Churches are full of people who glory in their religious observance. They love to tell you they love God so much they go to church! Every week!

At an open-air witness in Chester a few years back now, we were interrupted by a man who claimed to be a Christian. He objected to us preaching about repentance. And he had real authority to challenge us. Do you know, he preached in all kinds of churches in Chester? Do you know, he was on the board of several different Christian charities? And he'd read the Bible all the way through...three times! He reeled off his Christian credentials.

Yet the basic duty of God's people to tell others about those Holy Spirit concerns of sin, righteousness and judgement was alien to him. He complained we didn't smile enough and tell everyone Jesus loves them.

God save us from the influence of those types of religious people! Those in bondage to false religion—including deviant Christianity—are amongst the bitterest enemies of Christ's cause.

The only one who is able to set the prisoner free from bondage is Christ Jesus, the sinner's substitute. And the way to him is through repentant prayer to God Almighty.

Having shown Barabbas's crimes, and their consequences, I'll move onto my next point.

A substitute was found

A man called Jesus entered the arena of Barabbas's life just at the right moment. Imagine it: the cell door opens, the chains are removed, AND THIS MAN IS TOLD THAT THE OTHER MAN IS TO GO THE ROMAN CROSS. **HE IS TO BE FREED.** The death sentence is lifted from Barabbas but placed on another who was innocent.

And so the picture unfolds for us. Christ is shown to be the one who would die in his people's stead.

And who else but the god-man could do it? None other than God could bear the penalty that sin demanded; and none other than man could be a true substitute *for* man. **The substitute had to be God manifest in the flesh.** This holy Lamb of God was the only substitute acceptable to God.

Back in old eternity, before the universe existed, an agreement was made amongst the persons of the Godhead. A race was to be created which would fall into sin. And God elected a people who would be delivered from the consequences of that fall, and the Son of God would be the one to stand in the place of condemnation where the sinners of Israel should rightly have been.

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

Galatians 4:4-5

And he was also sent for people not under the Law of Moses. People all over the world!

You who are Christians, rejoice in this: that God's own darling son left the glory of heaven for you. He made himself a man of no reputation—poor, despised, rejected; subject to the hatred of men and the fury of his own Father—for you! And so was the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled: "...he was wounded for our transgressions..."

But there's more to this transaction than having sins forgiven. Jesus Christ didn't simply exist in a state of perfection—he actively kept the law of God all the days of his life. And get this: *his perfect righteousness was given to you.* His people. Paul writing to the Corinthian church says:

But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

1 Corinthians 1:30

It is being “in Christ” that your sins are forgiven, and it is “in Christ” that his righteousness becomes yours.

A substitute was found, and there can only be one outcome to this, which brings me to my final point:

Barabbas was set free

The Romans freed the murderous rebel¹⁵ and killed the sinless one. Everyone coming into this world does so as a future mutineer against the heavenly Captain. But some are changed. And these are set free, like that Levitical bird, to fly away from the pollutions of this world, their souls covered as it were in the blood of the Lamb of God.

If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

John 8:36

And the whole picture of substitution tells us this important truth: EVERY ONE FOR WHOM CHRIST BECAME A SUBSTITUTE MUST GO FREE. **Must** go free. It is against God’s perfect justice to send Christ to be a substitute for someone and then require the penalty to be paid a second time in eternal fire.

It’s interesting to note Barabbas’s name means “son of the father”. **And he represents those elected to be sons and daughters of God the Father being freed while the one who was the Son of God by his very nature was executed.**

When the Lord God slew his own beloved son, there was complete satisfaction:

- It satisfied FOREVER the justice of the Father
- It satisfied FOREVER the demands of God’s law
- It satisfied FOREVER the desires of Christ’s own soul, in laying down his life for his friends
- And it satisfied FOREVER the needs of the souls *of* those friends.

What does God do to us who are “the called, according to his purpose”?

- He raises us from the dead
- He gives us a new heart
- He forgives our sins
- He makes us righteous in Christ
- He causes the Holy Spirit to dwell in us
- He gives us all spiritual blessings
- He gives us eternal life

If you're a believer watching today, remember the great cost of your redemption. Live like those who've been set free. Be joyful in the Lord!

I don't mean for you to adopt a silly grin, or to whip yourself into a state of religious excitement. I'm talking of real joy—*lasting* joy. Keep Christ at the centre of your thoughts, your Bible reading and your worship. And be always thankful.

If you're an unbeliever, whether openly or disguised as a believer, remember this story. Even though the crowd had been manipulated, they were still held accountable for killing the Messiah. And no matter what the reason you've not repented and approached God for mercy, you'll still be held accountable for it. No one's forced you to live independently of God. That was you.

You need Christ as your substitute—your surety. He commands repentance. Yet it's always the case that, for man, even repentance is impossible. But with God, **all** things are possible.

He can give life to the sinner who's dead in their sins. It's he who puts the *very desire* to repent in the hearts of all those who will eventually come to him.

May he be pleased to have mercy on you today. May you, like we did, come to know Christ—not only as the sinner's substitute, but as *your* substitute.

Amen.