

Introduction

Substitutes are generally substitutes for a reason. They are not the first choice or the first string. In sports, the substitute is not the starter. A substitute comes in when the starter gets hurt or tired. You would rather have Aaron Rodgers playing than Tim Boyle. But if something happens to Rodgers, you must have a substitute. When it comes to food, there are also substitutes—tofu for meat and Splenda for sugar. And I don't know about you, but as for me those substitutes just do not cut it. Give me Rodgers. Give me real meat. And give me real sugar!

However, there are a couple cases in which I would rather have the substitute. For one, my wife Melissa is a substitute school teacher. I can't help but believe the children in the classroom are getting the best whenever she walks into the room. And this morning in our text we are going to see the cosmic case in which ONLY the substitute will do. The starters all are messed up. We each need a substitute that is BETTER than we are, and ONLY Jesus qualifies.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main idea that emerges from this text is that the man who deserved to die went free while the faultless one went to the cross. The man who deserved to die went free while the faultless one went to the cross. The Jewish leaders had made their decision long before today that Jesus would have to die in order to put a stop to his popularity and spare their nation and its religion. But everything was now formalized. And the Jewish council delivered Jesus over to Pilate, the governor, for the sentence of death to be administered. And as Jesus stood before Pilate, a turn of events took place which I doubt the Jews had counted on. Pilate offered to spare Jesus in accord with his annual Passover prisoner release program. Can you imagine the angst that must have been going through the hearts and minds of the Jewish leaders? The success of their plan hung in the balance. Quick thinking and mob persuasion kept the plan on track and actually gives a remarkable picture of the biblical truth we call substitutionary atonement. The spotless and blameless lamb of God takes away the sin of the world by being given up as a sacrifice in the place of the ones who are nothing but blameworthy and full of blemishes. Let's observe how this scene unfolding on the morning of Jesus' death depicts this precious reality.

I. The Amazed Governor and the Silent King (11-14)

A. When Jesus was brought to Pilate, he questioned Jesus as to whether he was the king of the Jews. Jesus' answer was an affirmation that he is the Jewish king. "You have said so" equates to "it is as you say," and lest there be any doubt, we turn to John's account. There we are told that Jesus owned that he was a king by speaking of his kingdom. He said, "My kingdom is not of this world." Pilate responded, "So, you are a king?"

When we consider this scene and what is taking place before us, we must bear in mind who it is who is standing trial. The one who has been falsely accused, the one who is under inquisition by the governor Pilate, the one before whom stands the prospect of crucifixion is none other than the King of kings and Lord of lords. He was in the beginning with God and all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made. The ones who threaten him depend on him for their every breath. And he has a kingdom. His kingdom is superior to any and all earthly kingdoms. Before him the nations are like a drop from a bucket. They are counted as dust on the scales. The nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted as less than nothing and

emptiness. He brings princes to nothing and makes rulers of the earth as emptiness. And yet these pompous rulers have called this king to account.

The chief priests were indignant and began hurling accusations at Jesus. And while he conversed with Pilate, Jesus would give no answer to the false charges of the Jews, not even to a single charge.

B. The silence of Jesus mystified Pilate. He was greatly amazed. Here were all these charges being hurled against Jesus, and Pilate knew where they were coming from. He knew the Jews were not interested in justice; rather they were envious of Jesus's popularity. So it amazed Pilate when Jesus remained silent. Most people would not have responded that way, particularly when their life was hanging in the balance.

C. Let's turn for a moment from Jesus to look at ourselves when in circumstances like his. How do you respond when you are falsely charged? I am not necessarily thinking of standing trial but even in the midst of everyday relational interactions. Most all of us rush to defend ourselves. We tend to defend ourselves even when we are in the wrong. But especially when we believe we are being charged unfairly or wrongly, we want to set the record straight. We do not want people thinking badly of us. Pride is usually at the root of our animated self-defense. We long to be applauded by the world not criticized by it. We see here how low Jesus was willing to humble himself. He was not motivated by the pride that seeks to save face before man. He feared God not man. Peter puts it like this. "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return: when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." In this, Christ Jesus is our example. God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. And the humble person in the world entrusts himself and his reputation to God. He is not nearly as concerned what the world thinks of him as he is what God knows to be true.

This is a fitting place to just remind us all of the glorious humility of Christ and urge us each one to walk in that same humility not fearing man but fearing God, not prizing the approval of the world but the glory of God.

II. The Condemned Christ and the Spineless Governor (15-19, 24)

A. The Jews had condemned Christ to death, but they had to bring Jesus to Pilate to carry out the death sentence. Pilate was not fooled by the passion of the Jews nor their feigned concern for the stability of the Roman empire. You see, Luke tells us that among the accusations of the Jews was the assertion that Jesus was forbidding giving tribute to Caesar. Pilate realized that the Jews were just using him for their own ends. He was convinced that Jesus was innocent. He was also warned by his wife not to do anything to Jesus because of a dream she had. So in his heart, Pilate was averse to sentencing Jesus to death.

B. A way to extricate himself from the pressure to crucify an innocent man presented itself to Pilate. There was a now-standing practice to release a Jewish prisoner every Passover. It was a diplomatic effort to appease the Jews and to keep tensions in check between them and the Romans. To Pilate the prisoner release program was an opportunity to appeal to the masses who were known to admire Jesus. So he offered a choice to the crowd now gathered at his headquarters. There was a notorious prisoner by the name of Barabbas. He was well-known to the people. No explanation or introduction was needed. Barabbas was notorious. When people of our day hear the names Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer, not much else needs to be said. And when the Jews heard the name Barabbas, nothing more needed to be explained. He was bad news, probably a thorn in the side of both the Romans and the Jews. We know from Luke and John that Barabbas was a thief, an

insurrectionist, and a murderer. It seems clear what Pilate was doing here. Jesus or Barabbas? Surely the people would take the freedom of Jesus over the freedom of Barabbas—a guy who has not even garnered a parking violation or a guy who is a known villain? This was Pilate's way out!!

C. But, no. The crowd called for the release of Barabbas! They called for the crucifixion of Jesus. And they were about to break out in a riotous demonstration. It will help our understanding of this event to know that Pilate was on the hot seat. Rome had placed Pilate as governor to keep the peace and quell disturbances in the Jewish territory. However, his methods had resulted in stirring up the Jews rather than bringing tranquility to the region. Pilate tended to aggravate the Jews and push them toward revolt rather than soothing the tensions. One of his offenses is mentioned in Luke 13; Pilate had slaughtered some Galileans along with their sacrifices. He was failing in his purpose, and, no doubt, was wary of doing another thing that would anger the Jewish masses. In the end, therefore, he went against what he knew in his heart to be true. He allowed the sentence of crucifixion to be enacted against one he was convinced was not worthy to die.

Pilate made a great demonstration of his position on Jesus's innocence by ceremoniously washing his hands before the multitude and declaring himself innocent of the blood of Jesus. The problem for Pilate is that putting his hands into a pan of water could not remove from him the guilt of condemning a man to crucifixion whom he had the power to spare but refused to spare because of public pressure. He was fearful to hand Jesus over, but he was more fearful of the consequences if he did not. And thus he feared man rather than God. His acquiescence to the crowd did not save his position. A few years after Jesus's crucifixion, Pilate was called back to Rome and stripped of his post.

E. Pilate is a warning to us of the results of the fear of man. Sometimes there will be the threat of repercussions when you do what is right. The world presses against you and urges you to join in living and thinking the way it does and threatens fallout if you do not. Is this not the very kind of pressure that is swelling in our day? Just this week the House of Representatives passed a bill called the Equality Act. Sounds real appealing, does it not? And yet, it would better be called the IN-equality Act. Let me share with you a few consequences of this bill if it is ultimately put into law.

It will . . . Designate schools, churches, and healthcare organizations as "public accommodations." so that they could be forced to accept the government's beliefs and mandates about sexual orientation and gender identity.

It will . . . Legislate that we allow boys in girls' sports, boys in girls' locker rooms, men in women's shelters, and men in women's prisons. It will force teachers and students to publicly pretend that a biological male is a female. Schools will be encouraged or mandated to instruct first, second, and third graders that they can choose to be a boy or a girl, or neither, or both, making biological sex (and science) a relic of the past.

It will . . . Use the force of law across all 50 states to strip Christian and other religious ministries of their right to hire people of shared faith to pursue a shared mission.

It will . . . strip health professionals of their rights of conscience. It will force doctors and medical professionals who long to do no harm to engage in gender transition treatments such as hormone-blocking, cross-sex hormones or surgery.

This is the world in which we are living. There is public pressure to cave on these and a host of other matters. And many are. Many professing Christians and churches are giving in to society's pressure. It is caving to the fear of man and refusing to fear God. This world may inflict consequences for those who refuse to speed downstream into an ocean of ungodliness, but we must

wait patiently on the Lord. We must obey him no matter the earthly consequences. He will ultimately deliver his people, but unlike Pilate, we must have a spine. We must stand fast. We must look ahead to the future assurance of God's promises and be what Paul exhorted the Corinthians: "my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

III. The Fickle Crowd and the Persuasive Power of Popularity (20-25)

There must have been some quick-spreading word around the city so that a crowd had gathered outside the governor's Jerusalem headquarters. A crowd had come together only several days prior to exclaim praises to God and wave palm branches and throw their coats on the road before Jesus to welcome him to Jerusalem as a victorious warrior-king. Now word was that he had been arrested. What had he done? How could this be? Passover was a time when the city swelled in population so there was a sense of being the city that did not sleep and the city where much was going on. So it is easy to imagine that by word of mouth a large number of citizens and visitors would have come together to see just what was going on.

While Pilate was deliberating, the chief priests were busy spreading their lies among the crowd and urging them to ask for Barabbas. And that is just what they did. The power of popularity seems to have taken over. The chief priests were crafty in their plot to win the crowd and they won the day. The crowd's cry grew in intensity, first for Barabbas and then to crucify Jesus. Finally when Pilate washed his hands of the matter, they boldly took ownership of the guilt of the crucifixion saying astonishingly, "his blood be on us and on our children." The crowd succumbed to the propaganda and became reckless, thoughtless, and spineless. The complete reversal from hailing Jesus as "king" on Sunday to calling for his crucifixion on Friday morning and shamelessly owning the guilt of Jesus' crucifixion testifies of the persuasive power of popularity. It is another example of the fear of man. Pilate caved because he literally did fear the consequences of refusing to go along with the crowd. The crowd caved for a different reason, FOMO—the fear of missing out, the fear of not belonging to the crowd.

My grandson Titus was here last week and some of you got to see him. As he has grown older, one thing I appreciate is that Titus has gotten more used to the fact that he has to take a nap once a day. He used to just lose it whenever he had to go to bed, and it was clear that the reason he did not want to go to bed was that he was afraid of missing out on what was going on. Being with the crowd has an appeal to our sinful flesh. The desire to be part of what is popular is a real pressure that exerts itself on each of us daily. And what is popular in our day and culture is mostly not good. Peter wrote, "For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you." Paul exhorts the Roman believers, "do not be conformed to this world." It is a fitting warning for us every single day that we must resist getting caught up in what is popular, that we resist the fear of missing out, and that we surround ourselves with those who are anchored in truth and spur one another on to resist the pressure that popularity exerts upon us and pursue truth, faith, godliness, and purity.

IV. The Notorious Criminal and the Crucified Savior (26)

Verse 26 reads, "Then [Pilate] released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus delivered him to be crucified." Apparently three crosses were ready to go. Perhaps Barabbas was meant for one of them. However, instead of Barabbas receiving his due, Jesus became his substitute and Barabbas went free.

Here we have a picture of the truth of what has happened through the crucifixion of Jesus for all who repent of sin and believe on him. This work of God is illustrated throughout the Bible and is the centerpiece of his salvation for sinful man. Every one of us is a Barabbas, a notorious criminal. We are thieves. We live in bodies designed and made by God, we live off of air and food God provides. Yet by nature we do not give thanks nor serve the purposes for which he has given these things to us. We are murderers. We slay our fellow human beings with our tongues, our judgment, our hate, our attitudes, and our selfish pride. We are insurrectionists. By our sin we have sought to topple the sovereign God of the universe. We have turned against the Lord and have gone astray each one turning to our own way. Our righteousness is filthy rags. Justice demands execution and eternal destruction. Blood must be shed. Death is our just sentence. But God, being rich in mercy, has provided a substitute, the only substitute who could suffice to take away the penalty and corruption of sin—His only son. And God has laid upon him our iniquity. He transferred our guilt to Christ so that he suffered in our place. Isaiah writes, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

The sacrificial system of the OT lived out the portrait of substitution. Every time a sacrificial lamb or bull was offered, the one who brought the offering was seeking atonement for his sins. His sins were transferred to the offering and it was killed and sacrificed before the Lord. This is what our sins deserve—a payment according to God's justice. The animal offerings were a substitute for the sinner. The blood of the innocent animal was shed for the iniquity of the sinner. But all of these sacrifices could not literally take away sin. Only the blood of one truly like us could make a real propitiation. And so the writer of Hebrews says, "He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree."

And Jesus preached this gospel message. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. . . . Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already."

We are all Barabbases. But God is the one who in effect has said, "Give me Barabbas and crucify my Son so that the many Barabbases on whom I have set my affection can go free and be reconciled to me. They will come to dwell with me and my victorious son and we will be together forever."

Conclusion

The one substitute for which there is no substitute is Jesus. If you have truly believed on him, you are free from the sentence you deserve. It is because he took your place! It is because the Lord himself said "Spare Barabbas." But there are some "Barabbases" here this morning who are still in chains. You are still on death row. You are still in your sins. May God give you sight even now to see the gospel of the glory of Christ. He never sinned in the least, but God put on him the sin of the world so that whoever will turn from sin and trust in Christ will be saved. O that you would turn from sin and trust in him even this very moment.

Prayer

The Lord's Supper

The Lord Jesus Christ gave us a ceremony to observe. By this ceremony we proclaim Christ's substitutionary atonement for sinners. When Jesus instituted it, he said of the cup, "this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

As you partake of the elements of the Lord's Supper, you are testifying that your faith for right standing with God rests in the person and the work of Jesus as your substitute.

Grace Community Church welcomes baptized believers in Christ whether you are a member of this church or not to share in this ordinance together. If you are not believing in Christ, we ask you not to take the supper. Partaking is itself a statement of faith. If you are believing make sure that you are not taking the supper in an unworthy manner. Discern in the ceremony the body of the Lord and do not make a mockery of it by taking it while living in unrepentant sin. This is communion. It is about drawing near to the Lord and him drawing near to us.

"As they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples." Lord we ask you to bless this bread and the purpose for which you intend our partaking of it today. Thank you for breaking the body of Jesus in our place. A-men."

And Jesus said, "Take, eat; this is my body." <EAT>

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them
Our Father we thank you for the cup and for the emblem it is for us of the blood of Jesus. We thank you that he shed his blood in our place to set us free that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. A-men.

Jesus said, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

When they had sung a hymn they went out into the mount of Olives. Before parting this morning let us stand together and sing.

Blest Be the Tie that Binds our hearts in Christian love
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above

When we asunder part, it brings us inward pain
But we shall still be joined in heart and hope to meet again.

Benediction

May he whose body was broken and whose blood was shed to be your substitute, be your hope, your joy, and your glory. And may you live for his glory in the fear of God not man.