

# Sermon Notes

The Irony of the Mockery | Mark 15:16–21  
Shaun Marksbury | Grace Bible Church  
Sunday Morning Service | April 7, 2018

---

## I. Introduction

We are entering what is, in some ways, the most difficult section of Scripture. I must confess a part of me that dreads this chapter of Mark because of how our Lord is abused throughout it. Yet, the rejection and crucifixion of our Lord appears in all four gospels because of how important it is to us. There's a certain irony in that.

Irony isn't necessarily what's humorous; rather, it's a rhetorical device in literature that captures the unexpected. You may remember studying this in school; there are three forms of irony — verbal, situational, and dramatic. For instance, a character facing hardship and devastation may surprise us; "This is a good state of affairs," he may declare. Such irony can also be situational, where, for example, that same individual may react to his grim reality with peace and hope. If we as readers have knowledge that some of the characters in the story lack, we anticipate the moment when they realize the irony of their situation.

Some of you may have identified all these elements in Mark 15. Of course, don't mishear me: the crucifixion of Christ is not a work of fiction, having plenty of evidence in history. Still, we must appreciate the irony here: We know that Jesus is in this moment for His good purposes, and we watch aghast as men mock and scorn the Lord.

Indeed, we must read this understanding that He *allows* or permits these events to take place. As such, the soldiers may have believed they were mocking a lunatic, but they were coronating a true king. These lost men may have thought crucifixion would be His end, but it brought them true life. They may have pressed an unwilling participant with the sufferings of Christ, but he would become a true disciple. The irony of this passage is that Jesus remains in perfect control, turning all their evil into good.

## II. The Mock Coronation and the True King (vv. 16–19)

*The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort. They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him; and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him.*

We see the soldiers taking their prisoner to what the NASB translates "the palace." The term means a walled space or courtyard, and Mark uses a loan word from Latin for his Roman readers: *Praetorium*. It's specifically the governor's courtyard, located where Pilate was staying, perhaps inside Fort Antonia.

What did they do with Jesus there? Well, there was an element in our text last time that we didn't discuss: they scourged Jesus (cf. v. 15). As one study Bible notes, the Romans used "a whip (known as a *flagellum*) consisting of a wooden handle to which metal-tipped leather thongs were attached. Being scourged with a *flagellum* was a fearful ordeal, ripping the flesh down to the bone, causing severe bleeding. It was a beating from which prisoners often died."<sup>1</sup> Such brutality was common practice before a crucifixion.

It's a mercy that none of the Gospels describe the detail of Jesus's flogging. Even so, verse 15 says that Jesus was scourged and then crucified, and then we have this text, which seems to be an expansion on the events of

---

<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 1499.

that verse. It seems Pilate planned this as a last-ditch compromise to the people: scourge this innocent Man, and then set Him free (cf. Lk 23:6). It was an attempt to mollify the crowd (Mk 15:15).

In John 19:1–7, Jesus is brought before Pilate *after* the flogging, and the description of some of the events sound like what we’re reading today. It was after His final rejection by the people that Pilate sent Jesus to the cross. John’s telling is likely the course of events, with Mark focusing more on the sufferings of Christ than on chronology.

So, we must presume that the scourging of Jesus is how the soldiers begin their time with the Lord. They love what they’re doing so much that they called together the whole cohort. Again, that’s roughly 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a legion, or 500–600 men, though they may be only calling those who were available, those not currently on duty. They invite their comrades to participate in their abuse, and Mark highlights four elements of it.

**The first step** of their scorn was to clothe Him in a purple garment. The color purple was a sign of rank (Est 1:6; Pv 31:22; Lk 16:19; Rv 17:4) or royalty (2 Chr 2:7, 14; 3:14; Song 3:10), given that purple was difficult color to produce at the time. Matthew 27:28 describes it as a scarlet military cloak. In MacArthur’s commentary, he suggests the cloak was sun-beaten and had faded to a more purplish hue (360). Of course, the soldiers did this out of mockery, and the placing any garment on Jesus’s now torn flesh must have been painful. However, they don’t stop their in their ridicule.

**The second step** to their cruelty was to place a thorny crown upon His brow. They likely wove this false crown woven from a vine with thorns perhaps one or two inches in length. Twisted in this way, it would approximate the laurel wreath Caesar wore.

**The third step** to their ridicule is mock reverence. In v. 18, we see them parallel their greeting to royalty, the “Ave, Caesar!” Not only this, v. 19 says they “kneeling and bowing before Him.” According to Mt 27:29, they obtained a reed and gave it to Him as a pseudo-ruler’s staff. They mock His royal claim with reverence.

**The forth step** to their violence was to strike and spit upon Him. Verse 19 says they were striking Him with a reed — perhaps snatching the same reed back from hand and hitting Him with it. This is after the crown of thorns were placed. They plucked out His beard and beat Him until He no longer looked like a person.

The irony here is that Jesus is the true King. They place kingly garments on His back, head, and in His hand in mockery. For instance, according to one commentary, the laurel diadem was “worn by the emperor as a sign of divinity.”<sup>2</sup> We could look to Revelation 1 and see Him today wearing a true robe of royalty and divinity. In Revelation 19, we read that He has not a crown of thorns, but multiple diadems.

This King will not stay in heaven, either — He’ll return to earth. In Revelation 19, He’s called “King of kings, and Lord of lords.” He has a robe with blood on it again, but it’s not His own blood. He’s coming back in judgment, which is why the Roman soldiers and everyone else needs salvation.

So, He permits this moment. Hundreds of years earlier, He had already decided this was a necessary path. We read in Isaiah 50:5–6, “The Lord God has opened My ear; and I was not disobedient nor did I turn back. I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.”

They unwittingly fulfill not only that prophecy, but also Jesus’s words in Mark 10:34 — “They will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him and kill *Him*, and three days later He will rise again.” The irony of ironies is that He allows all of this to take place. Why was that? The answer to that question is in our next point.

---

<sup>2</sup> Donald English, *The Message of Mark*, 230.

### III. The Crucifixion and the Life it Brings (v. 20)

*After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His own garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.*

The true king allows the people to mock Him, and now He allows them lead Him where He wants. We see this in the interaction with Pilate. Again, as John explains, Jesus was brought back in before Pilate and the crowd, one, final time, and it's at that point that His garments are changed back before the cross (Jn 19:5–16). In that passage, a frustrated Pilate asks Jesus, “You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” — and Jesus replies, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (Jn 19:10–11a).

He was led away to crucify Him, outside the city. The traditionally understood route Jesus was led was the Via Dolorosa, a section of Jerusalem that still stands today. There's one person Mark highlights on the path to the cross who we'll meet in just a moment.

For now, consider the crucifixion, which would have been near the city wall (Jn 19:20). Again, why does Jesus allow this? As Hebrews 13:12 says, “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate.” Calvin notes, “For as God commanded his people to *burn without the camp* the bodies of those animals, the blood of which was carried into the sanctuary to make atonement for sins, (Exod. 29:14; Lev. 16:27); so he says that Christ went out of the gate of the city, that, by taking upon him the curse which pressed us down, he might be regarded as accursed, and might in this manner atone for our sins.”<sup>3</sup>

This is why Jesus allowed all of this. He's the lamb who would take away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29), and He does so through His blood. According to God's Law, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement” (Lv 17:11). As Hebrews explains, without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins (Hb 9:22).

In fact, there's perhaps further irony in that thorny crown upon His brow, as it speaks of Him even bearing the curse of the ground (cf. Gn 3:17–18). He's redeeming everything through the cross, so He's allowing everyone to push Him in that direction. This was the mission He kept communicating to His disciples, though they weren't following His words. Ironically, the best picture of discipleship comes from someone who doesn't even try.

### IV. The Pressed and Willing Discipleship (v. 21)

*They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross.*

The condemned would typically carry the crossbeam, the patibulum of the cross. This means that a sleep-deprived Jesus suffering extreme blood-loss and severe trauma is having to carry a beam that weighed anywhere between 30–100 pounds. Though His Spirit was willing to go all the way to the cross, in His flesh, Jesus was fully human and already too weakened to continue.

Enter a seemingly random passer-by. This verse could be read as part of the next passage, where we will look at the crucifixion. Simon was from Cyrene, in North Africa in modern day Tripoli, Libya. His town contained a large Jewish settlement since the third century BC (cf. Acts 6:9). Since it's Passover, Simon is

---

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 296.

probably in Jerusalem for the festival, having to campout in the country side because he couldn't find a place to stay within the city walls.

So, Simon is in town for the festival, not for Jesus. In fact, the text here seems to indicate that he's not even a spectator to Jesus's march toward the cross — he's just passing through when these Romans suddenly grab him and press him into service. That's the way of life, sometimes. It seems that some random event has befallen us, but we must understand that it's really orchestrated by the Lord. As Matthew Henry says, ““We must not think it strange, if crosses come upon us suddenly, and we be surprised by them.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, consider that Mark names this individual: Simon of Cyrene isn't just a random passerby. Even his sons are named! It's possible that some in Mark's audience knew who these two were, perhaps because they were believers in Rome at the time (cf. Rm 16:13, where Paul greets a Rufus). That there's no further explanation given tells us that this was written in real history.

Simon, then, becomes the image of Christian discipleship (8:34). Undoubtedly, before the end of the day, he inquired of Jesus, if he had never heard of Him before. He and his sons later became *literal* disciples.

## V. Conclusion

Irony here is a feature of God's sovereign control over history. The cross is the destination, but it's just a stop on the greater narrative He's telling us. Despite the ignominy of the moment, God chose to use this path to exalt Christ and give Him the Name above all other names. As we read in Philippians 2:8–11:

Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Glorification comes through suffering, and Paul highlights this for the believer's benefit in Philippians. Life is sometimes filled with pain, and believers know that God grants for Christ's sake, “not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Phili 1:29). By sharing in “the fellowship of His sufferings” (3:10), Paul explains that one can know Christ more. We come to realize the irony of the moment God is creating for our good.

Indeed, we'll find that whatever heartache we experience today is “momentary, light affliction” “producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17).

This starts with the first trial — understanding that we are sinners. Mark writes for a Gentile audience, specially, Roman Christians. As such, he shows them the behavior of their own people. He doesn't do so to shame them or single them out, though — he's spent plenty of the book on his own people's sins. Even so, the hope is that they will recognize their sinfulness and need for the Savior. As we also think back to how we've scoffed at Christ's Word in the past, we can all know that same forgiveness is available to us because of the suffering He faced.

We need only to humble ourselves by repenting and believing.

---

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry, [Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume](#) (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1815.