



The Soldiers Mocked Jesus

Series: *7 Last Steps to the CROSS*

Jesus' Path to the Crucifixion in the Gospel of LUKE

by Joshua YJ Su (Soh Guan Chin) (Rev. Dr.)

(You can follow the audio series at www.thejoshuamission.net/messages/)

Step 3 - Luke 22:63-65 - The Soldiers Mocked Jesus

This is the third of a series of eight articles on the theme, *7 Last Steps to the Cross*. After the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, and the denial of Peter, Jesus met with the mockery of the Roman soldiers. Luke 22:63-65 (ESV) tells us -

⁶³Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him. ⁶⁴They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" ⁶⁵And they said many other things against him, blaspheming him.

The Problem of our Fallen Human Nature

Jesus was betrayed by a close disciple and was denied by His leading disciple. Now He faced the mockery of the Roman soldiers who were holding Him in custody. These soldiers had no idea who He was. All they knew was that He was a man under arrest and was on trial. They treated Him as they would any prisoner under their control. In the culture and custom of that time, as is often the case in many cultures and customs of many different times, it was with mockery and cruelty.

Such mockery and cruelty show the propensity of human nature for evil. It is so easy for us to be cruel and belittle others, especially if they are utterly at our mercy! If there is no danger of retaliation, no danger of punishment, no danger of any bad consequence, we are very liable to just lay it on against the other, as much as we like. Many would enjoy doing so. It may begin in a small way. But as one does so, the more one finds it fun, with no chance of being caught, or being punished, or facing retaliation, the more one is likely to escalate the cruelty. This was the situation of the Roman soldiers. They were under orders. They were dealing with a prisoner entirely under their control. So there is no fear of retaliation, penalty or being caught. They could do it openly. It probably fed their sense of power and ego.

The Problem of the Lower Ranks

This scenario also reflects the nature of human society and organisation. The lower ranks are indoctrinated to be the extension of those who are their superiors. This is typically buttressed by the culture, values and structures of the society and the nation of which they are members. In this case, the soldiers are the expression of Roman authority and power. The military is always formed and organised for the explicit purpose of executing the orders of their superiors. In so doing, they also express the nature of their superiors. If the governing authority is benevolent, the soldiers will express this in their action. If it is cruel and power hungry, they will do the same. It is not pretty, but it is the reality of this life and of society.

In virtually all societies, whether past or present, the lower ranks are inculcated, if not indoctrinated, to defer to, submit to, and obey, their higher ups. They are limited by their social, political, economic status or rank in their range of choices and autonomy. No society, or system of politics, economy, social organisation, or culture can eliminate such disparities. The Roman soldiers reflected this reality in the Roman Empire, and in the trial of Jesus.

The Roman soldiers had limited ability to do other than they were told. If they, as other lower ranked or lower status people in any society, were guided by their own conscience and believed that the prisoner was innocent, they would still be hard pressed to be able to help in anyway.

They will face a dilemma. If they were to reject their orders, they themselves, and their families, would be subject to punishment and penalties. The best they can do, is to find opportunities and means to be kind to, or help, the prisoner, while still carrying out their orders. They can perhaps not heap insults, or inflict unnecessary wounds. If they can, they may lighten the harshness of how they treat the prisoner, or give some drink or food to help, without facing penalisation themselves. But, in the case of these soldiers, they did what most do. They obey without question and added their own insults and cruelty.

How Jesus Suffered at their hands

Jesus certainly knew the situation of the soldiers. He accepted their cruel mockery as a part of the injustice He had to face in order to go to the cross for our sake. This included the sake of these soldiers. If they, and any sinful human being, is to be given the opportunity to be saved, by repenting of their sins and to surrender to Him for who He is, He had to go to the cross to die for us all. Later in Luke's account, in Luke 23:34 (ESV),

³⁴And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

It was prophesied in Psalm 22:18 that the persecutors of the Messiah would cast lots for His clothes. This was fulfilled by these Roman soldiers when Jesus was on the cross. Whether or not they were the same soldiers who mocked Jesus earlier is unimportant. They were in the same shoes as the lower ranked who executed the commands of their commanders and were quite happy to add their own cruelty to exploit the prisoner under their control.

What is most noteworthy for us, is that Jesus forgave these soldiers because they did not know what they were doing. I believe that this showed that Jesus understood the status and situation of the Roman soldiers as the lower ranks of the army and of society, as I explained above. They were bound by their status to execute the commands of their superiors; in this case, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, before whom Jesus was on trial. In my view, many commentators and preachers of this passage overextend the meaning of the forgiveness that Jesus asked for from the Father to include all who sent Him to the cross - including the Jewish Council and Pontius Pilate. This does not fit what the Gospel of Luke, and all the Gospels, tell us. The Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, consisting of priests, Pharisees and Sadducees, which deliberately sent Jesus to Pilate in order to put Him to death cannot possibly not know what they were doing. They wanted Him executed because He admitted to be the Messiah. Pontius Pilate cannot possibly not know what he was doing. He knew that the Council sought Jesus' death out of envy (Matthew 27:18). He pronounced Jesus as innocent and not worthy of the death penalty. Yet he accepted their demand to put Jesus to death (Luke 23:22-24). We will look more fully at the Jewish Council and Pilate later in this series. For now, I just want to highlight that they were not people who did not know what they were doing. They each knew exactly what they were doing. So the forgiveness that Jesus asked for was for the Roman soldiers who mocked Him and cast lots for His clothes. These soldiers did not know what they were doing. This showed Jesus' empathy and compassion for those who are limited by status and situations in life, to be ignorant of the truth and the facts, but were compelled by what is beyond their control, to sin. They are not guiltless. But they can be forgiven.

How it Applies to us

There are 3 areas to look at for our own application today:

In terms of the propensity of our fallen nature to be cruel, we need to look to the Lord for His transformation of our nature so that we live and act according to His love and righteousness, instead of our sin. We need to live the life of repentance. This does not mean a life of regret, always looking at our sins and wallowing in defeat and self-pity. It means that we admit our sins

for what they are, reject them by honest repentance before the Lord, and ask for His cleansing and forgiveness. Thereafter, we leave them in the past, because of His cleansing and forgiveness, and move forward in Christ to live life His way.

In terms of our life status and circumstances, we need to look to the Lord for His leading and enabling, to live by His love and truth, whether we are at the higher or lower rungs of society. If we are in a position to give orders and instructions, know that we bear the greater responsibility before the Lord in our decisions, because it also affects all those who are under our authority, whether for good or for evil. If we are in the lower rungs where the information, authority and choices available to us are limited, take comfort in that the Lord knows our limitations and will not prosecute us for being so. However, this does not excuse us from doing what is right in His eyes. It is still our responsibility to do what is right and good within the scope and range of what we can do in good conscience. We are still guided by His Word, and need to seek His leading and enabling, to act in obedience to the guidance He may give us in every instance. The bottom line for all is that obedience to Him is the highest priority, over all other authorities and principles.

In terms of Jesus asking for forgiveness for those who do not know what they are doing, we need to learn to do likewise. There are many circumstances in life when people behave like the Roman soldiers towards us. We are under their control. They mock us, are hostile to us, but do not know us. They may be instigated by others, take offense because of their own wrong presumptions, or be acting under instruction from their superiors. We are to learn from Jesus to forgive them. They are not right. But they are forgivable. It may help us to empathise with them and be more compassionate towards them if we note that we can be like them in how we treat others whom we do not know.

Further to Jesus' example of forgiving the Roman soldiers, He taught that we are always to forgive those who sin against us because we are, ourselves, forgiven sinners before God (Matthew 6:14-15). The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18:21-35 underlines this truth. Let us leave judgement to God, who alone is the Righteous Judge (Romans 12:19). No matter how wronged we are, we are sinners ourselves, in need of God's forgiveness. Do we even know how frequently or how seriously we have sinned against others, not to say against God?! What if God does not spare us and require us to pay the full penalty of our sins? So let us never become judges of others. Leave that to God. Let Him judge. Let us repent of our own sins and forgive those who sin against us. This will free us from all grudges, unresolved hatred and anger. We would be hurt, sick, or even die, by holding on to such things. Forgiveness set us free from these. By forgiving, we are also committing the offender to God's true justice. Yet, it is even better, if they know to repent of their sins and be saved, as we want to be ourselves. Why not pray for them this way?