

A Part for the Whole

Sermon Text: Luke 23:13-16

^{ESV}(Luke 23:13-16) Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵ Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. ¹⁶ I will therefore punish and release him."

Whether or not you've heard that exact wording, pretty much everyone is familiar with the concept of "a part for the whole." It's a tactic used by those who realize (or even just imagine) that they have power over the person they are dealing with. The most obvious examples are those "credit card relief" companies that spend a small fortune on advertising. Their whole business model is based on "a part for the whole." They approach credit card companies on behalf of their customers with a "Look, our client can't pay what they owe. If you insist on full payment they will simply declare bankruptcy and you will get nothing. Or, you can agree to reduce the bill to a manageable level and you will at least get something." That's the basic concept behind "a part for the whole."

The same scenario plays out in lesser ways every day. Sometimes the concept works for you, sometimes against. You meet a friend for lunch and agree to split the bill. Your friend's share is \$12, but they only have \$10. Close enough. A part for the whole. Forget it and move on. You reserve a midsize rental car, but when you get to the rental counter you are told they have no midsize available and are going to give you a compact instead. Your immediate response: "Oh no you're not!" Their response: "Well all we have left is a compact, so it's that or nothing." With no other options, you accept a part for the whole. Something is better than nothing.

This is essentially what's happening in our text for this evening. Pilate evidently assumed that he was holding all the cards, that he had all the power, and that the Jews had no choice but to accept whatever he offered them. So he offered a part for the whole. "There's no way I am going to sentence this innocent man to death, so I'll whip him and then release him. Take it or leave it."

Putting the best construction on it, the reasoning employed by those credit card relief companies centers around the exorbitant interest rates credit card companies charge. "Our client will pay you the purchase price for what they bought, but you need to work with them on those ridiculous interest rates." So too Pilate knew that the Jews had brought Jesus to him with patently false charges. There was obviously no doubt about that. In his mind therefore he no doubt believed that his "leverage," his power over them, was the threat that he could just declare Jesus innocent, release him, and they would get nothing. So he offered them a part for the whole – whipping rather than crucifixion. Pilate must have initially imagined there was nothing the Jews could do to overrule his decision, and they would be left with nothing but their unfulfilled demands.

Pilate might even have imagined that the Jews had actually just been negotiating from the start – asking for more than they expected to get so that they might get what they actually wanted. Sort of like listing your used car for \$10,000 when you would be satisfied with \$9,000. In fact it

wouldn't surprise me to hear that Pilate was shocked when the Jews flatly refused his offer, when they refused to budge on their demands.

The reality was that just as Pilate believed he held all the cards, so did the Jewish leaders. The result was that they immediately rejected Pilate's offer. They would accept nothing less than death by crucifixion. Imagine Pilate's surprise and consternation when the Jews played the Caesar card. That was their power. They threatened to tell Caesar that Pilate hadn't taken their report of a traitorous, treasonous king seriously. That threat clearly terrified Pilate, because while he knew that while the Jews could not hurt him, Caesar most certainly could. Caesar could not just take his position of power, he could take his life.

There was another reason the Jews refused to compromise on their demands: pure evil is never satisfied with partial evil. The Jewish leaders desired pure evil—the murder of the innocent Son of God. Once they'd given themselves over to evil like that, they wouldn't – *couldn't* – settle for anything less.

Just here is where we turn from spectators to active participants. Here is where we are to stop thinking only in terms of Pilate and the Jewish leaders and begin to learn the lessons we are supposed to apply to ourselves. We too make a feeble attempt to offer a part for the whole when it comes to dealing with evil and the temptations of the devil. We imagine that if we give in to temptation partially, the temptation will be satisfied and will leave us, at least for a time, alone. We'll be able to soothe our consciences by doing as Pilate probably did when he made his offer to the Jews. Pilate likely convinced himself that while beating Jesus wasn't exactly just or honorable, that it was in fact giving in to the evil of Jesus' enemies, it was only partly so. In fact he may even have reasoned that he was actually accomplishing something good and noble by offering to whip, rather than kill. He would be saving Jesus from the worse fate that the chief priests and rulers intended for him, while also averting an uprising that could harm others. As a sweet little side benefit, he could also preserve his position as governor.

So too we also can convince ourselves that if we give in partially to a temptation, it will probably release just enough pressure to keep us from yielding to some greater sin that would be more damaging – both to ourselves and to others. There are at least two obvious flaws in that type of thinking. First, justifying sin in our lives on the basis of the notion that that will prevent greater sins implies that those are our only two options. The choice to do what is right—100% right—always exists, even when we pretend it doesn't. Second, the thought that the devil will settle for half-measures when it comes to your soul is as foolish as thinking that the leaders of the Jews were going to settle for anything less than the death of Jesus.

Satan's ultimate goal for us isn't sin, it's eternal destruction. The devil will never be content with just a piece of you. He wants all. In fact it's not really you that the devil wants. He has no love or desire for you. He longs for your eternal destruction because it is God himself that he hates, and his desire is therefore to destroy anything and everything that God loves. Whenever we give in to temptation and sin – even a "partial" yielding – we are sending a clear message to Satan: *"I am willing to compromise. I am willing to give a part."* And so the bargaining will begin, and the devil will not rest until he has all.

In fact whenever we are willing to offer the devil a part for the whole, we are not only negotiating with the devil, we're doing the same with God. We're saying to God, *"I know you are looking for complete obedience, but how about 90%? Isn't that better than most and therefore close enough? Really, isn't that about as much as you can realistically expect from me?"*

Think of how insulting that is to God. Would your spouse be satisfied with 90% faithfulness? Would your parents be okay if you promised to lie to them only 10% of the time? Would you still have a job if you told your boss that you would only steal from him on Fridays?

And yet we expect God to accept those terms, as though he is some sort of beggar and we're the ones holding all the cards, all the power. God doesn't tell us to "be holy" as a starting point for negotiations. He doesn't say, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart—or at least with everything that's left over after you make your deal with evil.*" Just as evil is not satisfied with partial evil, God does not expect partial obedience. There is no part for the whole that is satisfactory to God. That's also the case when it comes to paying the debt we owe him because of our sins. God is not a bill collection agency trying to gauge how much obedience he can reasonably expect to extract from us.

Think back to Jesus' parable of the man who owed an impossible debt to his master, one that he could never hope to repay. When the man offered to work in order to pay back at least a portion of it, the master refused the arrangement. He *will never* accept a part for the whole. In the parable he first forgives the man's entire debt, but when it becomes clear that the man has rejected God's offer through unbelief, he demands full payment and throws the man into the eternal prison. (Matthew 18:21-35).

We are fooling ourselves if we ever imagine that we're somehow going to pay our debt by doing things better in the future. Even if we did everything perfectly from this point on, all we would be doing is giving God what we owe him today, not paying anything for yesterday. Like the man in Jesus' parable who made the ridiculous promise that he would pay back all if he just had more time, all we would accomplish would be to increase our debt. We couldn't even pay it down, let alone pay it off.

God doesn't bargain. He cannot be manipulated. You and I have no bargaining power. Come to terms with this immutable truth. Recognize your impossible situation. And then look to Jesus.

Our Savior truly is our only hope. He's the only one who, with perfect consistency, gave 100% obedience 100% of every moment of every single day. He didn't offer to carry 70, or 80, or 90% of our sins to the cross; he carried every single one. At the moment of his death on that cross he didn't say, "*A part is finished*" or "*My part is finished. Now the rest of you need to do your part.*" Jesus paid all, every last bit of punishment God was owed for our sins. God the Father will never come to you for the rest. God received everything when Jesus paid all.

During the season of Lent in particular we take a cold hard look at ourselves and our personal sin and guilt. Yet we do so not to gauge whether or not we are doing our part, paying our fair share, or living lives "worthy of him." We do so to better understand and appreciate the enormity of the sacrifice our Savior made for us. That Savior who did all – a Part for the whole. One perfect part of humanity for the rest of the imperfect whole. Amen.