

The Lessons of Lent – False Assumptions

The goal of our Midweek Lenten services involves studying the mistakes we identify during our reading of our Lord's Passion and learning from them. This evening we examine *false or unfounded assumptions*, one of which is the very idea of "learning from our mistakes." The false assumption is that we must *make* mistakes before we can *learn* from them. Obviously that's not true. If it were, the warnings and examples of failure in our Bibles would all be pointless. The reality is that our God in his Word has provided examples of the failures of others so that we might learn from *their* mistakes, not our own.

That is therefore the goal of our midweek services this Lenten season – to learn the easy way from what others learned the hard way.

We find our third lesson in the 18th Chapter of John's Gospel:

ESV (John 18:29-30) So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰ They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you."

This is God's Word. We ask God the Holy Spirit to open our minds to understand and our hearts to believe all that he here desires to teach us as we pray, "**Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!**" Amen.

I assume you've all heard someone use (or mostly misuse) the expression, "*That begs the question.*" The misuse of the expression is a perfect example of the problem we address this evening. To "beg the question" means to make a false assumption – to assume to be true what has not been proven. Here's an example: "*Since Bill always lies, what he just said must be a lie.*" You see the obvious problem. The unproven assumption is that "*Bill always lies.*" Assuming that to be true led to the unfounded conclusion that what Bill just said must be a lie. Nor is this a relatively insignificant problem. Consider another example: "*Since all murderers should be put to death, Bill should be put to death.*" Two questions are "begged" in that statement (assumed to be true). First, that all murders should be put to death, and, second, that Bill is a murderer.

Ironically, the misunderstanding and resulting misuse of the phrase today has compounded the problem. Those who have no idea what the expression means nonetheless *assume* that they do. They wrongly assume that "begs the question" means "to raise a question that needs to be asked" – or, in other words, "that what you just said 'begs me' to ask another question." The expression is thereby neutered – immeasurably diminished or demoted from a vital test in determining the truth to a silly reason to prolong a conversation.

This evening we use the expression "begs the question" as it was intended, since it is in understanding that Jesus' enemies *made false and unfounded assumptions* about Jesus that is itself the lesson we are to learn.

When Jesus' enemies brought him to Pilate, Pilate asked them the logical and reasonable question: "**What accusation do you bring against this man?**" Pilate, in his role as judge, is asking for facts – established, factual evidence of wrongdoing. He asks, in other words, exactly what you would expect any competent judge to ask: "*You are bringing this man to me for judgment. Tell me what, exactly, you believe he has done that is wrong.*"

True justice never allows false or unfounded assumptions. It demands proof – verifiable evidence. It can never rely on human conjecture or opinion. Yet note the reply of Jesus'

enemies: ***"If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you."*** They offer no charge. No evidence. No specific example of wrongdoing. They assume guilt and expect the Roman authority to accept it without examination. Their answer is essentially: *"Trust us. He's guilty. The proof is that we are bringing him to you."*

This is God's own divine warning against the spiritual and relational destruction that flows from false or unfounded assumptions. An assumption is a conclusion formed without proof. It is a judgment made without inquiry. Pilate asked for facts and Jesus' accusers offer implication. They do not say, *"He violated this law."* They do not say, *"He committed this crime."* They say, in essence, *"Forget evidence. Trust us."* Assumption bypasses truth-seeking. It avoids careful examination. It relies on bias, emotion, or reputation rather than evidence.

Scripture warns us clearly about this form of injustice. ^{ESV}(**Proverbs 18:13**) ***If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.*** This is just a condensed summary of what God established in Deuteronomy 19:15-19: ***"A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. ¹⁶ If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, ¹⁷ then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. ¹⁸ The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, ¹⁹ then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.***

According to the very law that Jesus' accusers were pretending to follow, they themselves should have been nailed to Roman crosses. Matthew 26:59-60: ***Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward.***

Rather than follow their own law, Jesus' enemies were demanding that Pilate answer before hearing, that he conclude before investigating, and that he judge before understanding. What they were doing was not only shameful, it was worthy of their own crucifixion – the sentence they wanted Pilate to impose on Jesus.

That was them. What about us? This is obviously not a lesson for the dead but for the living. Jesus' enemies have long since died and entered their judgment. This is therefore a lesson for the living, for you and me.

Through the Prophet Jeremiah, God gave us this humbling reminder: ***The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?***^{ESV}(Jeremiah 17:9) Our assumptions often reveal more about *our* hearts than about the person we are judging:

When pride rules the heart, we assume disrespect from others.
When insecurity rules the heart, we assume rejection.
When jealousy rules the heart, we assume competition.
When bitterness rules the heart, we assume offense.

The religious leaders saw Jesus through the lens of envy and fear. They therefore falsely assumed that everything he did was criminal. When anger leads, righteousness retreats. When emotion governs, truth suffers.

Notice something else in this account: this was not just one person assuming guilt. It was a group. The leaders collectively reinforced one another. There is a dangerous comfort in shared assumption. When many voices echo the same suspicion, it feels validated—even if it is false.

We see this throughout Scripture. Ten spies returned from Canaan assuming defeat. Only Joshua and Caleb trusted God. The majority voice shaped the people's fear, and the entire generation suffered because assumption replaced faith.

Groupthink can drown out discernment. A crowd repeating an assumption does not make that assumption true. A crowd brought Jesus to Pilate and a crowd later called for his crucifixion. That crowd was wrong – tragically, catastrophically wrong. That crowd nonetheless carried the day. The lesson for us: never mistake agreement for accuracy.

God obviously used the false assumption of Jesus' enemies for our eternal good. Through their false assumptions and unjust condemnation God brought about our redemption. Because of the condemnation of God's Son, we have been acquitted. Yet that neither justifies their actions nor our own. There are lessons here for those who "have ears to hear" – practical, everyday lessons. In just one seemingly insignificant area of modern life (texting) ask yourself a few questions to gauge the relevance of God's warning against false assumptions:

Have you ever assumed the tone of a text message?

Assumed the intent in a delayed reply?

Assumed criticism in silence?

Instead of asking, did you act on that assumption by withdrawing?

Instead of clarifying, did you accuse internally, or even externally, to others?

While that may seem somewhat petty or minor, not all false assumptions are. The season of Lent, in particular, is a special time *not* to identify sin in others but *in ourselves*. Yet even here many Christians make false, unfounded assumptions that are anything but minor. Groupthink compels them to assume that Lent is not the time to humbly examine how sinful and therefore unworthy I am but to do more to prove myself worthy. I must give up something for Lent. I must fast. I must abstain from meat, give more money, limit television, apply ash, pray more, wear special clothing. The basic *false assumption* is that since I must pay for what I have done wrong, I must do more good. It would be hard to identify a more critical false assumption.

So then this evening Pilate asks his question "***What accusation do you bring?***" not to Jesus' enemies but to each one of us. Our answer: "*Against Jesus we bring no accusation. But against ourselves we bring every accusation. Our sins, our failures, are without number. Not only do we admit all, we have no defense, no justification, and we have no means to pay the debt for our countless sins.*"

And then we look to Jesus and finally understand why he stands silent. He makes no defense because he came to bear our punishment in our place. We do not glorify him by falsely assuming that we can satisfy the demands of divine justice. We glorify him by acknowledging that we cannot, but that he paid the awful penalty in our place, fully and completely, when he offered his perfect, sinless life on Calvary's cross. The greatest, most significant false assumption we could ever make is that we who incurred the debt could ever repay that debt through our actions. The absolute, life-giving reality is that Jesus has already done that for us.

So also we trust only this same Jesus for forgiveness of our countless sins, including our sins of unfounded assumption, and thank him who endured false judgment so that we might stand redeemed, restored, forgiven before him for all eternity. Amen.