

Theme: Powerful Words – Powerful Passion – “By Our Law He Ought to Die!”

Text: John 18:39-19:7

[Pontius Pilate speaking:] "But you have a custom that I should release someone to you at the Passover. Do you therefore want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"⁴⁰ Then they all cried again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.^{19:1} So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him.² And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe.³ Then they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck Him with their hands.⁴ Pilate then went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him."⁵ Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!"⁶ Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him."⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God."

Throughout history mankind has come up with some pretty strange laws. We might think that we, modern, “enlightened” people would have completely eliminated such laws from our books, but that is definitely not the case! There are some very strange laws still on the books in our country—even in our state. Do an internet search on “Strange California Laws” and you’ll find that there’s a pretty good list of laws that will make you scratch your head or even laugh out loud. For example, did you know:

- Women may not drive in a house coat.
- It is a misdemeanor to shoot at any kind of game from a moving vehicle, unless the target is a whale.
- In Eureka, California men who wear moustaches are forbidden from kissing women.
- In Chico, California bowling on the sidewalk is illegal.
Also, detonating a nuclear device within the city limits results in a \$500 fine.

And finally, a couple of strange laws from San Francisco:

- Did you know that San Francisco “prohibits elephants from strolling down Market Street unless they are on a leash”?
- Or that, “Persons classified as ‘ugly’ may not walk down any street”? (How in the world do they enforce that one?!)

(Source: <http://www.dumblaws.com/laws/united-states/california>)

Well, these laws may be strange, and we may wonder where they came from, or why they are still on the books, but what about the “law” that is spoken of in our text; the **“Powerful Words”** from Jesus’ **“Powerful Passion”** that we are considering today? Words which were spoken against Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders: **“according to our law He ought to die” (v. 7)**. What kind of crazy law is that? How could any law have condemned the innocent Jesus? Where did this strange law come from?

Actually, it came from God's Law in the Old Testament. **Leviticus 24:16** clearly states, **"And whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death."** The leaders of the Jews no longer tried to disguise their reason for wanting Jesus crucified. They don't try to say that it was because He was causing an uproar among the Jewish nation, or because He claimed to be a king. They reveal their true reason for wanting Jesus crucified—**blasphemy!** They shouted to Pilate, **"We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God" (v. 7).**

Blasphemy is the sin of either speaking evil against God or claiming to be God. Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God, thus making Himself equal with God (**cf. Matthew 26:63-65**). The problem was the Jewish leaders didn't believe that Jesus was who He claimed to be. Despite the overwhelming evidence; despite all the miracles and the sinlessness of Jesus they refused to believe that He was the Son of God, the Messiah. In their hatred for Jesus they called for the death penalty that was required by the Old Testament Law of Moses.

Does anyone else see anything incredibly wrong with this situation described in our text? The Jewish religious leaders are crying out for the crucifixion of the innocent Son of God, but just a few verses earlier permitted the release of a known, convicted criminal, Barabbas (**v. 40**), a man who we are told in the Gospel of Luke, **"had been thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder" (Luke 23:19)**. I know our court system here in this country is far from perfect, and that we've had many examples of injustices over the years, but this is ridiculous! A rebellious murderer, Barabbas, is set free, while the innocent man, Jesus, is condemned to death? What kind of upside down legal system do we see in operation here?

Would you believe it was God's? God was the one who wrote the law that commanded the death penalty for blasphemy amongst His Old Testament people, the children of Israel. This harsh law showed God's seriousness in regards to His sacred name; His seriousness in keeping His people faithful to Him so that He could preserve the family line of the coming Savior, Jesus. God is also the one who found Jesus guilty of blasphemy and every other sin. True, Jesus had never committed any of these sins, but in God's eyes He had. Remember those famous words from **Isaiah**? **"But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."** (**Isaiah 53:5-6 NIV**). "He" for "us." His innocence for our sin. His punishment for our peace. His death for our life. We call it the "great exchange," but it was also the greatest injustice of all time from a human legal standpoint. But God's perfect justice was met. The world's sins were paid for. The punishment was served and God's wrath was appeased. God looked at Jesus and said, **"According to My Law He ought to die!"** and He counted that death as valid for all mankind.

But what about this troubling case of Barabbas, the hardened, murderous criminal being set free? Doesn't that seem to be a "bit much?" How could that possibly be part of God's justice? This difficulty becomes a little clearer when we understand a few things about God's unlimited grace. It becomes clearer still if we see ourselves in Barabbas! We are by nature rebellious and even murderous—at least in our thoughts if not in our deeds (the Bible tells us, **"Whoever hates his brother is a murderer" – 1 John 3:15**). The evidence of guilt against us is an unending list of offenses against God's Law. And yet like Barabbas we are set free, and Christ is sent to the cross. God didn't wait for us to be "good enough" to deserve His mercy. He didn't wait until we "changed our ways" and made restitution for our sins against His Law. It was impossible for us to do so. Listen to these words from Romans, **"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 8:6-8 NIV).**

No one in their right mind would allow someone like Barabbas to go free, and absolutely no one would die for such undeserving scum as he. But Jesus did! Jesus died for Barabbas and set Him free. He died for us and set us free when both of us were completely undeserving. However, He did not die for us and set us free from our sins to let us go on living like Barabbas! He forgave us through His shed blood so that we would be *set free* from the sins that imprisoned us so that we would go on living more like Him! The Apostle Paul reminds us, **“He [Jesus] died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Corinthians 5:15).**

God looks at us now and does not see “Barabbas”—rebellious sinners—He sees the very righteousness of His Son, Jesus. His blood now covers us like a spotless robe. It doesn’t matter what kind of filth or stains are contained under that robe, because of Jesus’ sacrifice God sees only that robe. He now looks at us and tells us, **“According to My Law You ought NOT die!”** What could we possibly give in thankfulness for this? The hymn writer, Isaac Watts, put it well in our last hymn:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a tribute far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all!*
(Hymn 175 v. 4 TLH; 425 v. 4 LSB)

So, what are we going to do with our freedom? Let us all pray that God would give us the desire and the ability to give our hearts and souls and lives to Jesus in thankfulness, and may He lead us to share this freedom with others. Amen.