

Releasing the Wrong Son
Read Mark 15:1-15

Pilot paced anxiously on the chilly, gray-tiled floor. His renewed irritation caused his fingers to curl into crab-like fists, fists that slammed into the air. *It was an exhibition of unjustness*, he thought to himself. *It was inexcusably wrong!* Yet Jesus was standing before Pilot--the Roman governor of Judea--*without any evidence of criminality*, he fumed. Although he was recently appointed, he had already heard of the religious leaders' conspiracy to destroy Jesus—a conspiracy that had been instigated by Jesus' healings on their Sabbaths. His spies had reported to him that it had taken three years for this outbreak of injustice to manifest itself. How he craved to foil the leaders of the Jewish Sanhedrin! Their hidden schemes against Rome were constantly simmering and threatening to erupt. And with this trial now brewing against Jesus, he feared the eruption was about to take place.

In an olive grove called Gethsemane on the evening before Jesus appeared before Pilot, Judas, “one of the twelve,” arrived to betray Jesus (Mark 14:43-44). Judas was “accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs, who were from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders”—the religious elite. They “laid hands on Jesus and seized Him,” and brought Him to a council of religious leaders (14:46). The subsequent trial revealed one piece of decisive evidence that provoked the high priest to tear his clothes: Jesus had replied, “I am” (v. 62) when asked by the high priest, “Are You the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” (v. 61). Such “blasphemy” was unacceptable! Their consultation the next morning led to the binding of Jesus and His subsequent delivery to Pilate (Mark 15:1).

As Pilot quizzed Jesus, he grew “amazed” at Jesus' responses (15:5). Because of this, since Pilot “used to **release** for the people any one prisoner whom they requested,” Pilot was determined now that it should be Jesus (v. 6). Pilot was perceptive enough to know that “the chief priests had handed Jesus over because of envy” (v. 10). He inquired of the mob which had gathered for the trial, “Do you want me to **release** for you the King of the Jews?” (v. 9). The chief priests, however, had “stirred up the crowd to ask Pilot to **release** Barabbas for them instead” (v. 11).

All repetition in Biblical narrative is purposeful. The word “release” is purposefully repeated here to draw our attention to the contrast between two renowned prisoners in Pilot's court. One was Barabbas, who “had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection” (Mark 15:7). The other was Jesus. Pilot had claimed that Jesus was without evil (v. 14). The contrast between the two was sharpened when Pilot “**released** Barabbas” (v. 15) after the crowd spurned Jesus and yelled, “Crucify Him!” (v. 14). They were willing to **release** a murdering rebel but not an innocent man.

The contrast between Jesus and Barabbas is further emphasized by Mark through a pun on Barabbas' name. We think of puns as jokes. Biblical writers, however, often used word puns in a serious fashion. We are able to recognize that Mark is using Barabbas' name as a pun because he presents clues in his gospel to decipher the meaning of Barabbas' name. If we read Mark slowly, carefully, and frequently enough, we observe that the Hebrew word “bar” means “son of.” according to Mark 10:46. In this

verse Mark informs the reader that the name of the blind beggar **Bart**imaeus is translated “**son of** Timaeus.” Furthermore, in Gethsemane, when Jesus “fell to the ground and began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by,” He cried to “Abba” (14:35-36). Mark then reveals that “Abba” means “father.” Barabbas, therefore means “a son of a father”.

Pilot and the crowd were willing to release “A son of A father”—Barabbas--but not “THE Son of THE Father”—Jesus. Hence, when Pilot “**released** Barabbas for the crowd” but “handed Jesus over to be crucified” (v. 15), he released the wrong son.