

Slander and Silence - the hatred of the cross unleashed

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would turn with me to Matthew chapter 27, to the passage that we read, it would be a great help to me and I trust also to you as we study it together. And it is a striking story, isn't it? A story of slander, and yet also of silence.

St. Matthew's passion, as we've now been studying for several weeks, is a passion story with a purpose.

Matthew is an evangelist and a theologian, not just a historian, and his purpose is to teach us not just the facts, although they are the facts of Jesus' death, but also their meaning.

And in fact, that's been Matthew's purpose right since the very beginning of his gospel. His story begins way back in chapter 1, you remember. He tells us the purpose of Jesus' birth.

You will call his name Jesus, which means the Lord saves, because he will save his people from their sins. That's how Matthew's story begins, and it climaxes as we come to Jesus' death.

[1 : 17] And with the utmost clarity, Matthew has been telling us the goal of Jesus' life and ministry is, above all, one thing. His saving death for sins.

All through the gospel, Jesus himself has been explaining his life and ministry in these terms. Just for example, chapter 20, verse 18. The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, he says, and deliver him to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.

That's where my ministry is taking me, says Jesus, again and again and again. Why? Well, because, he goes on, even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And so, all through the climax of the story of this gospel, the passion story, we can see that being expanded, being explained by Matthew.

That's what he's doing. Last week, in the first part of chapter 27, we saw that even Jesus' trial itself is a graphic display of the redemption, the setting free by the payment of a price that Jesus' death accomplishes.

[2 : 33] You remember, right at the heart of the story in chapter 27, verses 15 to 23, is a story of two men, Jesus and Barabbas. Barabbas is the guilty criminal, the murderous rebel, and yet he walks free.

Jesus is the innocent man, and yet he is delivered in Barabbas' place to be crucified. What is the price of Barabbas' place to be crucified?

His liberation? Well, it's the innocent blood of Jesus Christ, the precious blood of the Passover lamb, the blood of the new covenant Jesus had spoken about.

And yet it's the blood, at the same time, that's scorned and rejected, isn't it? And scorned and rejected by Judas, on the one hand, and then by all the people of Israel and all the chief priests on the other.

And we saw that the blood of Jesus truly does divide the world. Either it is the gate of heaven opened up forever, or on the other hand, if it is scorned and rejected, well, it closes that door forever in rejection.

[3 : 51] Remember those terrible words, not just Judas, but all the people calling down a curse upon themselves. His blood be upon us and upon our children. And as we get nearer and nearer the cross itself, the actual crucifixion of Jesus, we get more and more focused, not, interestingly, on the horrifying and gruesome details of the physical process, no, rather on the meaning and the purpose of the death of Jesus.

I don't know if you noticed that in our reading. Matthew's passion is not like Mel Gibson's passion, is it? I've not seen the film, but I'm told that the whole focus is on the physical brutality of the crucifixion.

But that's not what it is in Matthew, is it? Did you see? The section that's headed in our Bible is the crucifixion, verse 32 onwards. The actual process is described in just one word, isn't it?

Verse 35, and when they had crucified him. That's all we're told. That's not for a minute to downplay the awful brutality.

The thing that is far, far more important, even than that, is the explanation.

[5 : 08] It's the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. His big interest, if you like, is not so much in what the cross was like for Jesus, but what the cross was for.

And what he's doing for us in our passage today is showing us in a way that we simply cannot avoid the contrast between the sickening hatred of the world for God as it rejects him in the person of his Son, and the saving love of God for this world as he reconciles it to himself in the person of his Son.

And that contrast is brought into such sharp relief in this ultimate confrontation that we're seeing between the human race and their creator as we see the hatred of the cross unleashed upon Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Matthew paints it for us as a picture of slander and silence. There's the slander of mockery as Jesus is derided by the whole world in his darkest hour.

And yet that slander is met with the silence of majesty. As in the very midst of the world's most vile and bitter scorn, Jesus is in fact revealed to be both the world's true King and the world's true Saviour.

[6 : 39] And nowhere, nowhere in the whole of Scripture will you find a more graphic description of those words we spoke to the children about in Romans 5 verse 10. While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.

We're getting used to Matthew's use of symmetry by an eye, aren't we? And it's very clear again here. I wonder if you can see it. As usual, it's a little bit obscured by the paragraphs of our English Bible, but right at the centre is the crucifixion, verses 32 to 38.

Speak of that. They're bracketed on either side by the end of verse 31. They led him away to be crucified. And verse 38, two robbers were crucified with him.

So in the middle is the crucifixion and on either side is a story of slanderous mockery. verses 27 to 31 and then verses 39 to 44.

Slanderous mockery on either side. But from Jesus, oh, we hear not a word. Silence. Slander and silence.

[7 : 54] What does it all mean? Let's listen to the slander first, shall we? We see Jesus, the Son of God, facing the wrath of all mankind.

There can be no mistake, can there? Here is unmistakably the picture of a man just like the servant that Isaiah spoke of in his fourth servant song in Isaiah 53.

a man despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. We've already seen Jesus rejected, haven't we, by his friends, the disciples, by Judas, by Peter, by all of the disciples.

We've seen him betrayed and rejected by the religious authorities represented by Caiaphas, the high priest. We've seen him scorned and rejected by the secular state represented by Pilate, the governor.

And now in verse 27, it's the soldiers of the governor, the whole battalion who openly are despising and deriding him with slander. They mocked him. Hail, King of the Jews, they said, before they let him off to be crucified.

[9 : 06] It doesn't stop there on the cross itself. It carries on. Verse 39 tells us that. They let him off to be crucified.

The passers-by join in, deriding him. The chief priests with the elders and the scribes, not the kind who are usually there to public execution, but they turn up too just to add their slander.

He saved others. He can't save himself. And even, verse 44, the robbers, the criminal lowlife, the lowest of the low, the ones who are where they deserve to be, being crucified for their crimes, even they, join in the slander of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, the one that they all knew to be an innocent man, again and again, they've said it, the one who had saved others and who had never done anything, ever, to deserve such contempt and hatred.

And yet, the whole world scorns and slanders and mocks and derides. It's astonishing, isn't it? Absolutely perverse.

[10:24] Yes, it is, but we shouldn't be surprised, should we, if we've read the story of the Gospel of Matthew? If we've read the story of the Bible from the start, that's what the story of all history is about, isn't it? Man shaking his fist at God, spitting at him, slapping him in the face.

From the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis, that's what the story is all about, the very first rebellion against the perfect, righteous innocence of God. We will rebel. We will be gods for ourselves, says mankind.

We've seen it all the way through Matthew's Gospel and the reaction Jesus has provoked from the world and even worse, from the leaders of God's own people, from his church. The fulfillment and the climax of all God's salvation from the beginning is in Jesus Christ, the person of his Son.

That's what Matthew's great theme is through his Gospel. It's the fulfillment of the hope of Israel. And yet, of course, we've also seen that it's the fulfillment of all mankind's enmity and hatred and opposition to God, focused in such a frenzied way, in such a fearful way, in Jesus, who is Emmanuel, who is God himself, in the flesh, on earth.

And he draws out the bitter hatred of mankind. Remember the story of the parable of the tenants in chapter 21?

[11:56] Well, this is it in real life. Finally, the Master sent his own Son to them, saying, surely they will listen to him. What did they say? Come, let us kill him.

And that is the verdict of the world, the whole world, on Jesus Christ. And Matthew makes that point by his use of symmetry because, verses 27 to 31, we see the Gentile world, the pagan world, mocking his kingship, mocking his lordship.

Just what Psalm 2 speaks about, isn't it? The nations coming together against the Lord and his anointed. Let's throw off their bonds. Let's reject their rule.

And that's what the soldiers are doing, isn't it? Dressing Jesus up as a king and mocking him, putting a kingly robe on him, a crown on his head, a reed in his hand as a scepter. Hail, King of the Jews!

They sneer. Not to them, they're Gentile soldiers, they're probably Syrians and Samaritans. Well, he's no king. And yet, paradoxically, of course, they proclaim his true identity to the world in their mockery.

[13:06] And that is why they hate him so irrationally. It's because he is king, because he is lord. And on the cross, they carry on in verse 34, the wine mixed with gall to make it bitter.

It's just a further malicious gesture. Promises relief, but just inflicts more misery. It all just brings out so vividly, doesn't it, the deep perversity of hatred that there is in the human heart for the one who claims to be king, for the one who claims to be the sole lord of the world and therefore of their lives. That's just how it's always been. Matthew's account is full of allusions to the Old Testament scriptures, especially some of the Psalms that express so vividly the hatred of man for God and therefore the hatred for the one who stands for God.

Just look at verses 34 to 35 and listen to the words of the psalmist of David in Psalm 69. I looked for pity, but there was none.

For comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink. Or in Psalm 22, they pierced my hands and my feet, they divide my garments among them, and for my clothes they cast lots.

[14:33] You see, that is the response of the world to the lordship of God made known in the lordship of Jesus Christ. The Christ who claims to be king upon their lives, upon their loyalties, upon their loves, over everything for the people of this world.

And we say, we spit on you. We lash out at you. We mock you. We want to crucify you. Well, that's still the response of the secular pagan world today, isn't it?

To the kingship of Jesus Christ. The world will not have Jesus Christ as a unique king. The world will not have him as lord. The one who crushes their pride and their self-rule demands submission to his yoke, to his way.

And so, on every side today in our society, Jesus Christ is mocked and scorned and ridiculed. He is slandered. Slandered in the summary dismissal he receives all the time in the secular media. The snide interviewers, the scornful columnists, those who meet any expression of faith with sheer derision. You see it in the rank blasphemy and offence of the comedians and the celebrities, the C-list nobodies that these days inhabit the voyeuristic world that's called entertainment on our television screens.

[16:03] Day after day, day in, day out, Jesus Christ is slandered. He's mocked. Not Muhammad, of course. No way.

BBC doesn't dare to put the name of Muhammad on their website now without calling him the Prophet Muhammad or Muhammad, peace be upon him. Did you know that? They dare not scorn his name as the Pope found out this week.

But Jesus and his lordship and his kingship, we spit upon that. We trample it in the dust. Why? That's obvious, isn't it? Because to accept it would mean total revolution. I mean, our own self-rule would have to end. We'd be overcome by the sovereign authority of one who truly is king and lord of the world.

And that we cannot have. We will not have. I did it my way, sang Frank Sinatra. And we say, and we'll keep doing it our way, thank you very much.

[17:11] So Jesus Christ, well, I spit on you. He'll never rule me. Isn't that what people say? I know plenty of people like that.

Sure you do. Maybe you're one of them this morning. Maybe that's what you think. That is secular thinking, but you know, religious thinking is very much the same.

In verses 39 to 44, we see the Jewish religious world mocking Jesus Christ. Mocking particularly his salvation. This is the culmination of everything that we've seen through the whole of Matthew's Gospel.

The entire Jewish world from the whole hierarchy of the elders and the chief priests and the scribes right down to the passers-by and the common criminals. They're all scoffing the very saviour that God had promised them from the beginning.

They're all scoffing the very salvation that their whole history has testified to the world. They turn up their noses. Luke's Gospel, he uses exactly that phrase.

[18:13] They turn up their noses at God's salvation in Jesus. Son of God, Messiah, pa! saviour, saviour self.

They simply could not accept a suffering, a sin-bearing saviour stuck in their craw. It's what Paul said, that the cross is a stumbling block for the Jew, for the religious person.

And friends, the cross is still a stumbling block for the religious person today, whether Jewish or Muslim or even those who profess to be Christian. Why should there be such slander of God's way of salvation in Jesus?

Well, because just as Jesus' lordship deals a death blow to our self-rule, so Jesus' salvation through his cross bears a death blow to our pride, to our sense of self-merit.

Because the cross speaks of sin that must be punished. It speaks of God's anger that separates us from him. It speaks of our helplessness, our total reliance on another, not upon ourselves.

[19:28] And we don't like that. We don't like to be helpless. We don't like to think about being under condemnation and judged as absolutely unrighteous, as totally undeserving in God's sight.

We don't like that. That's the whole point about religion and morality for so many people. We can help ourselves. We can do our duty. We can fulfill the requirements.

We can put God in our debt and God will have to accept us. And all down the years, even those who have possessed the truth of God, like the Old Testament church, like the New Testament church, have managed to pervert the truth so as to foster our own pride and our position with God while silencing any real talk about sin, any real need for repentance, for trust in God's free forgiveness alone because we're utterly helpless.

That was Israel then and Jesus exposed them for what they were. You cherish the heritage of the prophets, he said in chapter 23. You whitewash their tombs and honour them.

But the reality is you're just like your ancestors who murdered them because they spoke for God and told you that you were sinful and must repent and you wouldn't have it.

[20:55] You scoffed and you scorned and you slandered God's salvation then and you do it now. Absolute brazen perversity in rejecting Jesus the Saviour even as he stands before you as the sin

bearer that all your history has pointed to.

It's absolutely staggering isn't it? Staggering. And yet the truth is that so little has changed. The true Jesus, the true meaning of his cross still suffers slander and mockery at the hands of the religious world just as it does at the hands of the secular world.

Dare to threaten secular humanity's self-rule. Dare to threaten religious humanity's self-merit and pride even if you're Jesus.

Even if you are God in the flesh, the Saviour, the King. Dare to do that and you will be met with the wrath of man. The hatred of a faithless world.

We can understand why God's true rule and his true salvation stir up such opposition, such derision, such mockery. And yet still there is something so perverse, so twisted about it.

[22 : 20] There must be some deeper explanation. An ounce of rationality would surely teach us that human creatures cannot possibly oppose God and must surely want to embrace the mercy of Almighty God.

Wouldn't it? What explains such complete perversity that we would reject God's Saviour, his Deliverer, his King? Well, there is something deeper of course, isn't there?

Jesus in the parable explained it by saying an enemy has done this. Paul put it starkly, the God of this world he says to the Corinthians, the devil has blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

And of course we see that enemy behind the mockery and the slander here, not just in the invective, but in the desperate purpose. This is Satan's last desperate opportunity to try and get Jesus to take another way, to take the way of Messiahship without the cross, to take the way of glory without the shame, without the suffering.

All the way through the gospel we've seen that temptation coming to Jesus, haven't we? Right back from the beginning in the wilderness. If you're the Son of God, don't starve. Have satisfaction now, turn these stones into bread.

[23 : 52] Or in chapter 16 when Jesus is confessed as the Messiah by Peter, and Peter immediately says, oh you won't suffer. Jesus says, get behind me Satan.

In the garden of Gethsemane, this cup surely can pass from you. But no, it can't. It's just the same here.

That's the mockery, isn't it? Save yourself. Come down now. Show yourself to be the glorious king now. But no, in the face of the wrath of man, in the face of the temptation of the enemy, the hideous, blasphemous slander, Jesus is silent.

The answer's not a word. Let's just think about that silence. What does it mean? Well, in the slander, Jesus faces the wrath of man against God, doesn't he?

But the silence, the silence speaks of Jesus, the King, the Messiah, facing the wrath of God against man. And again, there can be no mistake, this is the man sung about by Isaiah in his song.

[25 : 06] The man who was like a lamb led to the slaughter, like a sheep before its shearers is silent. He opened not his mouth. Why? Because, Isaiah says, all we, like sheep, have gone astray, and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Remember that in his trial, we read that Jesus was silent, that he gave no answer, not even to a single charge. So it is here. In verse 42, it's because he will save others.

He can't save himself, but he will not save himself. because he chooses to bear their sins in their place. He will not have glory now.

He will only have glory through bearing the sins of his people as Savior. Verse 43, God will not deliver him now from death because Jesus really was made sin for us.

He will only deliver him, he will only vindicate him as he will through death as the glorious Savior King is again Isaiah sung about in his song.

[26 : 24] Out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall my righteous servant make many to be counted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Jesus, in his silence, is facing the wrath of God against human sin. Do you see God's glorious power at work?

The slander, the wrath of the world is poured out on Jesus. It actually proclaims his true identity to the world. Verse 29 is right. He is the king of the Jews.

Verse 40, he is the son of God, the son of God who saves. Remember that psalm that says, even the wrath of man shall praise you. The scorn, the slander, the wrath of man praises Jesus Christ

and shows the world who he truly is.

And the silence of Jesus and the silence of the father himself in not saving Jesus from the cross.

The wrath of God poured out upon Jesus Christ, his son.

[27 : 37] That also proclaims him supremely in heaven and earth. The charge against him in verse 37 is accepted silently by him because it proclaims him as the true king, the king who is king on the cross.

The king who reigns as he saves his people. The silence of majesty in the midst of the slander of mockery.

He is the servant king. He is the savior king. And this, verse 37 says, this man upon the cross bearing the wrath and the slander of man and more bearing the wrath of God against man for the sin of man, this is he, this is Emmanuel.

He will save his people from their sins this way. The slander, the slander that surrounds the cross speaks like nothing else does of the sickening hatred of the world for its God.

But the silence that surrounds the cross, it also speaks like nothing else in all creation of the saving heart of God for his world.

[28 : 59] The world that mocks him, derides him, reviles him, that spits at him, that beats him, that wants him dead. While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son.

And that's Matthew's message as he shows us vividly the hatred of the cross being unleashed upon Jesus Christ, the son of God. God was at work causing the wrath of man to praise him.

In his silent response, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. What does that mean?

What does it mean for us as Matthew's readers? What does Matthew mean for us to see in all of this? Well, three things. first, there is conciliation for the enemies of God.

Conciliation, says the dictionary, noun, the state of manifesting goodwill after being reconciled.

Matthew's been determined that we should see in this awful hatred of the cross the message of the suffering servant, saviour, king, of Isaiah's song in Isaiah 53.

[30 : 29] in the silence, in the submission, in the face of slander and mockery, is our conciliation.

We have peace and goodwill with God, though we were enemies.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, but as Isaiah says, he was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities.

Upon him was the chastisement that brought us his peace. With his stripes we are healed. We've all been enemies of God.

You might have been an enemy of God right up until this very moment, but even your slander is no barrier to the grace of God in Jesus Christ because he met the slander of the world with silence.

To bring you peace. And if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, how much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life?

[31 : 42] There is conciliation for enemies, for slanderers, for mockers, for curses of Christ, and there's a bright future hope.

We're saved by his life. second, there is comfort for disciples of Jesus Christ, comfort for every believer seeking to be faithful to Jesus in following him.

All along through the gospel, Jesus has been teaching us about what it means to be a disciple, to carry your cross with him. Matthew says, if you are finding that you also are slandered and mocked, if you are betrayed and reviled by friends because of Jesus, if you are derided by the secular establishment in this world, by the religious establishment, even by the forces of law and order, by soldiers, even by the lowest of the low, the criminals, the scum of this earth, even if you are mocked and derided and slandered by the whole world, by your employer, by your family, by your friends, by your wife or your husband, then fear not, don't give up.

As Peter wrote later on to his people, for to this you have been called, for Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you might follow in his steps.

Don't you think that was a wonderful comfort to Matthew's first readers? facing persecution from the Romans, being reviled by the Jews for following Jesus? You think that's a comfort for people today throughout the world, facing up to all of these things?

[33 : 30] And for us, and for you, these things are becoming ever more real in our society. Friends, it should be a comfort to you if you're mocked, if you're derided at work or in your family for Jesus' sake.

it's not that you're a failure for Jesus. It's not that he has deserted you. No, says Jesus, if they call the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more those of his household take comfort. Blessed are you, he said in the Sermon on the Mount, when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil on my account. rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven. And so they persecuted the prophets that came before you and the Lord Jesus Christ himself. But remember, it was in his silent acceptance of that slander that his true identity was proclaimed to the world, that he was seen to be the saviour king. And friends, so it is still today. Paul says we are being given over to death daily for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our human flesh. [34 : 47] It's been granted to you, says Paul, not only to believe, but also to suffer for his sake. So that through your life, the saving majesty of the king who is the saviour on the cross shines out like a light to this dark world.

That's how the salvation of Jesus Christ is made known. So take comfort if you're a struggling disciple of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, there is also challenge, isn't there? Challenge to be true disciples. Were you shocked by verse 32?

Where are all the disciples? disciples? Is there not a single disciple following Jesus to be a disciple in his hour of need to carry the cross and follow Jesus?

Apparently not. Just this foreigner, this man, Simon from Cyrene in North Africa. And he was compelled by the Romans to carry the cross for Jesus.

[35 : 59] ironic, isn't it? Nobody there to really prove to be a true disciple when it came to the crunch. What did Jesus say? If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me for whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

That was Jesus' call to real discipleship, to following him. But just as Jesus was tempted many times to come down, to come down to Messiahship without a cross, to glory now, oh, there are so many temptations, aren't there, to come down to discipleship without a cross.

You know that's true, don't you? So do I. You'll find that temptation this week, you'll find it tomorrow. At work, maybe at home, perhaps in your first week of university or college, away from your friends and your family at home, many voices inside you will be saying, in the face of mockery, in the face of slander, they'll be saying, come down now, save yourself now, have glory and honour now in the eyes of this world, not the mockery, not the derision.

friends, remember, it's not about now. What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?

For the son of man is going to come with his angels in the glory of the father and then he will repay each according to what they've done. It's glory then, not now, says Jesus.

[37 : 46] now, now it's the way of the cross. It's the way of slander from the world. Perhaps seeming to you like the whole world around you is against you.

But when the mockery is flying, when the insults are being traded, when the spitting, yes, maybe even physical mistreatment, maybe even legal mistreatment, we were hearing about that earlier this week in the Christian Institute.

That's when the challenge comes. Where are the disciples? Who will carry the cross for Jesus?

That day it was only Simon, this unknown man from Cyrene, and yet Mark tells us his name and his son's name.

It seems that he and his whole family became disciples and served Jesus from that time on. There's a challenge, isn't there? There's always a challenge.

Where are the disciples and the incense start to fly when the danger is in the air? It's hard to carry the cross of Jesus Christ.

[39 : 00] It's hard. But it's also glorious because when you do, it's the cross that proclaims to the world, this is Jesus, the King, the Saviour.

Don't you want that to be the message of your life to the whole world? That's Matthew's challenge. Let's pray. Let's pray. see, we have left everything and followed you.

What then will we have? Jesus said, truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the tribes of Israel.

And everyone who has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

But many who are first will be last, and the last first. gracious, loving, Lord Jesus Christ, you stood in silence before the slander of this world, bearing the wrath of man, and bearing the wrath of God, that we might be forgiven.

[40 : 47] Teach us, we pray, to take our place at the cross of Jesus, to lift it high, glory in your saving death for sinners, and to live crucified lives, that that saving death may be trumpeted to the world through us, we pray.

For Jesus' sake, Amen.