

Slander and Silence - the hatred of the Cross unleashed

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[0 : 00] And we turn again now to God's Word and to Matthew's Gospel. Willie is continuing his series in the Passion of the Lord Jesus in these weeks leading up to Easter.

And we're in Matthew chapter 27. You'll find that on page 834. Matthew 27 and reading from verse 27. Matthew 27 verse 27.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters. And they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him.

And twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head. And put a reed in his right hand.

And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews.

And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

[1 : 20] As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross.

And when they came to a place called Gogotha, which means place of a skull, they offered him wine to drink mixed with gall. But when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. Then they sat down and kept watch over him there.

And over his head, they put the charge against him, which read, This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.

[2 : 26] So also, the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him, saying, He saved others, he cannot save himself. He's the King of Israel, let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.

He trusts in God, let God deliver him now if he desires him. For he said, I am the Son of God. And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him.

In the same way. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. And may he bless it to us this morning. Well, turn with me, if you would, to Matthew 27.

And the passage you read together, beginning at verse 27. Hopefully now, by now, it should be very clear that Matthew's gospel teaches us, not just the facts about the cross of Jesus, but its meaning. And, of course, its purpose. The whole story begins way back in chapter 1, where the miraculous child who is going to be born is said by the angel to be called Jesus, meaning the Lord saves, because, he says, he will save his people from their sins.

[3 : 52] And as we've been seeing in recent weeks, the whole story climaxes with Jesus' death, because it is through that death that he does save his people from their sins.

He dies for their sins. And Jesus explains that repeatedly, all the way through his teaching ministry. Back in chapter 20, he said, The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked, notice, and flogged and crucified.

That is where my mission is taking me, Jesus is quite clear. For, he says, the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many.

And we saw last week how Jesus' trial itself displayed so graphically that redemption, that setting free by the payment of the ransom price, the price in Christ's blood, a price paid for all who will

receive that gracious redemption and not reject the precious blood of Jesus.

And now as we get nearer and nearer the actual crucifixion of Jesus, Matthew's account focuses more and more, not on the horrifying and the gruesome details of the physical process, but rather on the meaning and the purpose of the death of Christ, the death of the Messiah King of the Jews.

[5 : 30] I wonder if you notice that in our reading, Matthew's passion is not like Mel Gibson's passion. You've seen that film or many of the other movies.

They focus, don't they, on the physical brutality of it all. But if you look here at the section beginning verse 32, it's headed the crucifixion. Do you see the actual process is described in verse 35 in just five words?

When they had crucified him. That's all. Now, of course, that does not for a second downplay the horrific brutality of a Roman crucifixion, but it does make very clear that for Matthew, what is far more important is not the process, but the purpose of Christ's death.

His great interest is not on what it was like to be crucified, but on what it was for. In our passage today, Matthew is showing us just how extraordinary is the grace and mercy of our Savior, who saved even those who hated him to death.

Because what we see here in such sharp relief is the sickening hatred of the world for God as it rejects him utterly in the person of his Son.

[6 : 50] But also the saving heart of God for this world as he reconciles it to himself in the person of his Son. Here's the ultimate confrontation between the human race and its creator.

In these verses, we're seeing right in front of us the hatred of the cross unleashed. And Matthew shows it to us starkly as a story 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 midst of the vile and bitter scorn, Jesus is in fact revealed to be the world's true King and the world's only Savior.

And I want to say that nowhere, I think, in the Scriptures will you find a more graphic and vivid illustration of the Apostle Paul's extraordinary words in Romans chapter 5. While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.

[8 : 01] I think we've got used to Matthew's love for symmetry now. And again, it's very clear here. Although, as usual, it's a little bit obscured by the paragraphs in our English Bibles.

But look, in the very center, verses 32 to 38, we have the crucifixion. And it's bracketed on either sides very clearly. Look at the end of verse 31.

They led him away to crucify him. And then verse 38. Two robbers were crucified with him. And in that center is all about the crucifixion.

And on either side of that central section, verses 27 to 31, and then verses 39 to 44, on either side we have accounts, don't we, of slanderous mockery.

But from Jesus, there's not a word. Complete silence. Slander and silence. So what does it all mean?

[8 : 56] Well, let's look first at the slander. Slander that reveals the sickening hatred of the world for God. What we see here is Jesus, the Son of God, facing the wrath of all mankind against God.

And you can't possibly mistake Matthew's allusions here. What we're seeing is everything that the prophet Isaiah had spoken of in his great final servant song in Isaiah 53.

A man who is despised, rejected of men. A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. We've already seen, haven't we, how Jesus is in the end despised and rejected by his friends, his own disciples, every one of whom left him and fled.

And then he's been betrayed and rejected by the religious authorities, represented by Caiaphas, the high priest, but also by the secular state, the secular authorities, represented by Pilate, the governor.

And now here, verse 27, the soldiers of the governor, the whole battalion, openly deride him with slander. Verse 29, they mocked him, saying, hail, king of the Jews, before they led him to his death.

[10 : 10] And then it didn't stop there. It continues on the cross itself. Look down to verse 39. The passers-by join in, deriding him with taunts. And verse 41, the priests, the scribes, the elders mocked him.

Not the kind of people usually to be out sully themselves, dirtying themselves in a place of public execution. But here, they are determined to join in the mockery. He saved others.

He can't save himself. And verse 44, do you see, even the robbers, even the criminal lowlife, who were where they deserved to be and knew they were deserving it, even they join in this vicious, gratuitous slander of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.

The one he knew, all of them, to be an innocent man. The one who had loved and saved many others. The one who had done nothing ever to deserve such scorn, such content, such sheer hatred.

It's a picture of utter perversity, isn't it? Shameful. But that is just the story of human history, isn't it? Man has been shaking his fist at God, spitting at God, slapping God, right from the very beginning. [11:22] The whole story of the Bible is the story of one great rebellion against the goodness, the perfection, the righteous innocence of God, our Creator.

From Adam's very first rebellion, grasping at deity. We will be God. Read on in Genesis to the story of the tyrants that grew up, that built their cities, built their towers in defiance of God, challenging even God in heaven, all through the history of human civilization.

That's what man has been doing. And that defiance towards God is seen all the way through the gospel accounts and the reaction that's provoked against Jesus, against God in the flesh.

And worst of all, sometimes, by those who are actually the leaders of God's own chosen people.

The whole theme tune, the melody of Matthew's gospel, is focused on fulfillment.

He's showing us that the climax of all God's story, the climax of all his promise of salvation from the beginning, is coming in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

[12:32] But he's also showing us the climactic expression of man's hatred, man's enmity, man's opposition to God, which is focused in such a frenzied and fearful way in Jesus, the one who is Emmanuel, the man who is God with us on earth.

And what we're seeing then in these verses in front of us today, it's the parable of the tenants that Jesus had told in Matthew 21, but it's actually now happening in real history. Do you see? Finally, do you remember the story?

The master of the vineyard sent his son to them, and he said, surely they will receive and respect him. But they said, let's kill him.

And that's the verdict of the world, the whole world, on the Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew makes that so plain to us here by his use of symmetry. Do you see? In verses 27 to 31, he's showing us how the secular world hates the one true God, the pagan soldiers, who are mocking his kingship, they're mocking his lordship, they're mocking his rule.

It's what Psalm 2 shows to us, isn't it? The whole world conspiring together against the Lord and his anointed. They're saying, let's break off their bonds. We reject the rule of God.

[13:53] That's what the soldiers are doing here. They're setting up, dressing up Jesus as a king in verse 28, with a purple robe, with a crown, but of thorns, giving him a scepter, saying, hail, king of the Jews.

They're sneering at him. And to them, to Gentile soldiers, he's no king. And yet, paradoxically, it is they who are actually proclaiming his true identity to the world.

And in fact, their irrational hatred of him is because he is, in fact, their true king and lord, although they don't know it. And at the cross, they carry on in verse 34.

Do you see, they offer him wine, mixed with gall to make it bitter. It's a malicious gesture.

Something that promises relief, a drink, but actually, it just inflicts more misery on him.

And it all just brings out so vividly the depravity, the perverse hatred that is deep in the human heart for the one who claims to be the king and the lord of our world.

[15:01] That's the way it's always been. Matthew's account here is absolutely full of allusions to scripture, especially to the Psalms. The Psalms so often express, don't they, so vividly the hatred of man for God.

God has represented in his son, his anointed king on earth, the king of Israel, David. Look at verses 34 and 35. Look at those verses.

And just listen to the Psalmist David in Psalm 69. He cries out, I looked for pity and 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 Psalm 22. They've pierced my hands and feet. They divide my garments among them. And for my clothing, they cast lots.

See, that is the response of the secular world to the lordship of God's Christ, to his claim of kingship, of rule over the lives and the loyalties of human beings.

[16:00] The world says, we spit on you, we laugh at you, we mock you. We want to crucify you, bury you. And that was then, but it's not so different today, is it?

Our world, our society, still refuses point blank to have Jesus Christ as a unique king and lord. On every side today, it's exactly the same in our secular society.

Jesus Christ is mocked and scorned and ridiculed. Our Lord Jesus is slandered relentlessly in our culture today.

Daily, he still suffers the wrath of a hostile world. Isn't that right? From the summary dismissal in the secular media with all its snide interviewers, the scornful columnists, amid any sort of expression of Christian faith with utter derision and mockery, to the rank blasphemy, the offense of the so-called comedians, the B-list celebrities who inhabit the world of popular entertainment today.

Day after day, day in, day out, Jesus Christ is slandered on every side. Not Muhammad, of course.

[17:13] No chance. The British Brainwashing Corporation will never name him without respect, will they? The prophet Muhammad. Or on the website, Muhammad, peace be upon him.

Nobody dares slander the name of Muhammad. Well, we all know why that is, don't we? A far too scared and frightened. But not so with Jesus Christ. His kingship, his lordship is utterly scorned, utterly derided, constantly.

Because, well, it's obvious, isn't it? To accept Christ's lordship would mean revolution. our own autonomy, our own self-rule would have to end, wouldn't it?

We would have to bow the whole world to the one who is the lord and the ruler of the lives of human beings. And that is what people will not have. And so instead, Jesus is mocked and derided and scorned.

That's secular thinking about Jesus. It will not submit to his rule. It will not submit to having him say what is right and what is wrong. But having him tell people how it is you must live and how you must not live.

[18:27] People often say, don't they, well, I've no axe to grind. I have nothing really against God. But the truth is, you see, if you reject the rule, the kingship of Jesus Christ over your life, you are reviling God.

You are hating God. You are spitting in the face of almighty God. But that's secular thinking then as it is today.

But what Matthew shows us here also is that in fact religious thinking is no different at heart. Look at verses 39 to 44. Here we see, don't we, how the religious world hates the one true God.

Just the same. And we see the religious world mocking his salvation. Notice. Mocking his sacrifice. All through the gospels it's staggering just how vitriolic the opposition is to Jesus from the religious establishment, from the churchmen of Israel.

And here it reaches its absolute nadir. Verse 41. The chief priests, the scribes, the elders mocked him. And notice verse 42. They are mocking specifically his saving death for sins.

[19:41] Do you see? He can't save. His death can't save. You've got to come down off that cross if we're going to believe in you. That's the cry of the bishops, the moderators, the theological teachers of the church of Israel right then.

The cross is the great stumbling block for the religious person. They simply cannot accept a suffering, a sin-bearing savior.

And that too is no different today. Whether that religious devotion is Jewish or Muslim or even apparently Christian. why is that?

Well you see, it's because just as the kingship of Jesus brings a death blow to our self-rule, so Jesus as a ransom, Jesus as a sin-bearer, Jesus as a substitute for our punishment by God, that is the ultimate death blow to our pride and to our self-righteousness.

Because you see, 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 to help ourselves in any way.

[20:55] And we hate that. We don't want to be thought to be helpless. We don't want to be judged as being utterly undeserving, utterly unworthy in God's sight.

The whole religious instinct in our heart tells us, doesn't it, that we can help ourselves. We must be able to do our duty. We must do things that will mean God must accept us. And you see, the true gospel of the true Jesus Christ utterly shatters that delusion.

And so, alas, many are therefore enemies of the real Jesus and his gospel. Even though they might use his name, they might profess his religion, they might think that actually they're speaking for

God. And all down the ages, even those who have possessed the truth of God in the Old Testament church and in the New Testament church, they've managed to so pervert the truth to foster their own pride, their own position with God while silencing any real talk about personal sin, about the need for real repentance and real trust in God's free forgiveness alone that can bring salvation. that was Israel then. But Jesus, you see, exposed them for what they really were. Yes, you like to cherish the heritage of the prophets decorating their tombs, but in reality, you're just like your ancestors who murdered those prophets, said Jesus, because they spoke for God. They told you to repent and be saved. You wouldn't have that. just as now, you're scorning, you're slandering his salvation, even as God himself stands before you as the sin bearer to be your savior. [22 : 45] You see, we read it and we find it staggering, don't we? But so little has changed. You just wait. In Easter week this year, I guarantee you, in the newspapers, on the television, there'll be well-known public figures, Christian figures in the religious establishment in our country today, and they'll be speaking words that are full of mockery and scorn and derision about any idea that the cross of Jesus is about a sacrifice for sin, about an atonement in his blood for the sins of human beings.

No, no, no, these churchmen will be saying, you must come down from that cross. If we're going to accept him, remove all of that idea of the cross as an atonement for sins, as a real turning away of the anger of God, we can't possibly have that Jesus come down away from all of that.

That's the Jesus that we want to speak about. See, the world hasn't changed at all. It still shows a sickening hatred for God, the true savior, who is made known in Jesus Christ and him crucified for sins.

And just as at Calvary, we see the ugly horror of a slanderous mockery for the dying Jesus. They deride him as sovereign because they will not have his rule.

And they despise his sacrifice because they will not have his rescue from sins that way. don't underestimate the reality of the pressure that there was here on Jesus, the sheer weight of temptation to answer their taunts with a display of awesome power that would have utterly silenced them and could have brought them to their knees in abject terror before him.

[24 : 39] He could have silenced them. but then he could not have saved men and women. But to save others, he silenced himself.

You notice that stark contrast all through this passage. There's loud, perverse shouting, mockery from all around Jesus and yet from him there is not a single word in reply.

But you see, in the silent acceptance of Jesus in the face of these slanderous accusations against him, Matthew is showing us God's answer to the sickening hatred of the world for God.

In Jesus' silent majesty we see revealed the saving heart of God for this world. Let's think about that silence. Silence that reveals the saving heart of God for the world.

What does it mean? Well, see, in the slander of the cross Jesus is facing the wrath of man against God. But in the silence of the cross Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God he is facing himself the wrath of God against man as sin bearer, as the Savior, as the great reconciler of sinful men to God.

[26 : 06] And again, there's no mistaking of the fulfillment of Isaiah's great servant song. Led like a lamb to the slaughter and like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

Why? Well, because Isaiah says, we all like sheep have gone astray and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.

he is bearing his people's sins. Remember, we saw last time at the trial he was silent. Verse 14, he gave them no answer, not even to a single charge.

And it's just the same here. It's not that he cannot come down from the cross as they taunt him in verse 42, it's that he will not come down. He chooses to bear their sins in their place.

He will not take glory for himself now, but only through bearing their sins as their savior.

[27 : 11] And so, verse 43, God will not deliver him now from death. He will only deliver him, he will vindicate him as he will through his death as the glorious savior king, just as Isaiah's prophetic song had said.

Out of the anguish of his soul shall he see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be counted righteous, for he shall bear their iniquities.

You see how God's extraordinary sovereign power is at work in the cross. The very slander, the wrath of the world poured out on Jesus is in fact the very thing that proclaims his identity as the prophets have spoken.

Look at verse 29, he is the king of the Jews. Now it's repeated twice, verse 37 and again in verse 42, three times he is declared on the cross to be the king.

In verse 40, he is the son of God, the one who can save, the one who does save. Again in verse 43, he is the son of God.

[28 : 30] And you see the silence of Jesus and indeed the silence of the father himself in not saving Jesus from the cross and from the wrath that is poured out on him in the cross, the wrath of God against the sin of man.

That silence proclaims him supremely to heaven and earth. You can see verse 37 the charge that's against him, accepted silently by him above his head on the cross proclaims him to be the true king of the world.

He's the king who is the king on the cross who reigns as he saves his people. the silence of majesty reigning amid the slander of mockery because he is the servant king because he is the savior king. And this verse 37 this man upon the cross bearing the wrath the slander of man and far more bearing the sin of man and bearing the wrath of God this is he this is Emmanuel this is God himself with us to save his people from their sins.

This way this terrible way the slander the slander that surrounds the cross speaks like nothing else does of the sickening hatred of this world for God but the silence the silence that surrounds the cross it speaks like nothing else in all creation of the saving heart of God for this world a world that mocks him derides him reviles him a world that spits at him that beats him and that wants him dead it was indeed you see while we were enemies that we were reconciled to God by the death of his son and that's what Matthew is showing us here you can see the hatred of the cross unleashed and the Lord Jesus Christ God was at work even here indeed supremely here turning the wrath of man to praise him because it was in that majestic silence surrounded by the mocking slander that God was in

[31 : 02] Christ reconciling the world to himself what does it all mean for us what does Matthew the evangelist mean us to see in all of this well friends three things first there is conciliation conciliation for the enemies of God my dictionary says conciliation is the state of manifesting goodwill after having been reconciled and Matthew has been determined that we should see in this awful hatred of the cross in the message of the suffering servant of God that we should see the savior king of Isaiah 53 fulfilled at last and that it's in his submission in his silence in the face of all that slander all that that mockery that we find conciliation that at last we have peace and good will with God we who were his enemies that we should see that he was despised and rejected by men a man of sorrows acquainted with grief but that he was wounded for our transgressions that he was crushed for our iniquities that upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace that with his stripes we really are healed every one of us here has been an enemy of God by nature maybe you have been an enemy of God right up until this very moment but Matthew is showing us even your worst slander and mockery and hatred is no barrier to the extraordinary grace of God our Savior because he met that slander with silence to bring you peace for if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his son says the apostle how much more now that we are reconciled shall we be saved in his life that is conciliation for enemies peace and goodwill life with

God forever even for mockers and slanderers and those who have cursed the Lord Jesus Christ so there is bright hope for the future maybe some of us need that great reassurance even this morning there is conciliation for enemies and second there is comfort for disciples of Jesus Christ comfort for every believer seeking to be faithful in following the Savior because all along Jesus has taught hasn't he what it means to really follow him in our lives here on earth and so says Matthew when you find that you also are slandered and mocked maybe betrayed by friends who desert you because of Jesus or derided by the secular establishment or even the religious establishment even by the forces of law and order or by the criminal world indeed even by the whole world when you're derided and mocked by your employer perhaps or even by your family even by a spouse fear fear not says

Matthew don't give up it was Peter wasn't it who wrote later to the church for to this you have been called for Christ also suffered for you leaving you an example that you might follow in his footsteps don't you think Matthew's message was a great comfort to his first readers persecuted reviled believers in the first century cast out of society cast out of the synagogue cast out of families for the sake of Jesus Christ don't you think that's a comfort for so many believers in parts of the world who face real daily threats real persecution for the sake of Christ and friends it should be a comfort to all

of us if you are mocked if you are derided at school at work or in your family wherever for Jesus sake that does not mean that you're a failure for Jesus Christ not at all it's not that Jesus has deserted you never it's simply that it is your calling to be his and to walk with him blessed are you he said when others revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you on my account rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you and so they persecuted and mocked and slandered our 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 was what made him known as the savior king and so it is still that is how the Lord Jesus will be made known to the world through us Paul says we are always being given over to death for Jesus sake so that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our mortal flesh not in our violent return but in our silence it's been granted to you says Paul to the whole church not only to believe in him but also to suffer for his sake that's the way that the majesty of our savior king will shine forth like the sun in this dark world so Matthew's message is a great comfort isn't it to struggling disciples but thirdly there is also a challenge isn't there a challenge to be true disciples weren't you shocked by verse 32 extraordinary isn't it where were all the disciples there's not a single one is there following Jesus to be a true disciple in his hour of need they've all gone there's no one to carry his cross only this man Simon from Cyrene from far away North Africa a complete foreigner and we're told he was compelled to carry the cross for Jesus isn't it ironic not a one to really prove to be a disciple of Jesus when it came to the crunch what did he said if any of you would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me that was Jesus called to real discipleship wasn't it you see just as as Jesus was sorely tempted to come down from the cross to be a messiah without the cross there's so so many temptations aren't there for disciples then and today to be disciples without that horror of the cross you know it and I know it you'll face it this week you'll face it tomorrow morning at work at home with your friends in your life there'll be so many voices inside you saying save yourself from this derision from this mockery from this pain come down now and they'll stop opposing you they'll they'll accept you they'll praise you and you'll have that acceptance that glory indeed in the eyes of your peers in the eyes of the world

[38 : 39] Matthew's saying remember it's not just about now what did Jesus say what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world now and forfeits his life for the son of man is going to come with his angels in the glory of the father and then then he will repay to each according to what he's done it's glory then not now said Jesus with me for those who are truly mine now it is always going to be the way of the cross it is the way of slander from the world perhaps it does feel to you sometimes like the world all around the whole world is full of scorn and mockery for you because of your faith in Jesus Christ but when the mockery is flying when the insults come even the spitting and even perhaps physical mistreatment legal mistreatment injustice for Jesus sake that's a challenge isn't it where are the true disciples then who will there be to carry the cross for Jesus that day it was only this man

Simon an unknown man from Cyrene but it seems that the challenge that day really did change his life forever him and his sons Alexander and Rufus Mark names them for us they became disciples and entered that kingdom service forever Paul greets Rufus and his mother in his letter at the end of the letter to the Romans it's rather wonderful isn't it but there's a challenge to us all the time where are the disciples of Jesus when the insults start flying and there's danger in the air it's hard to carry the cross with Jesus sometimes very very hard but it's also glorious because when you do that it's the cross it's the cross that proclaims to the world this is Jesus the king this is the son of God come to save even enemies and that's the message isn't it that we want our lives to convey to the world well may

God help us to do so let's pray Lord it was our sin despite our mocking voices our derision it was our sin that held you there on the cross refusing to come down until all was accomplished for us and so we pray keep us as true disciples so that in following you truly and bearing the cross our lives may indeed proclaim to the world your saving love for lost sinners and in doing so bring great glory to you Lord Jesus Christ our king forever and ever amen