“The Nailed to the Cross Reflections

The Nail of Pride
Mark 12:38-40

The Gospel of Mark is the most practical of all the Gospels.

In Chapter 12, Mark attempted to answer some searching questions about the appropriate response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ demonstrated through Christ’s witness in the world by way of his teachings and works.

In verses 38-40, Mark captures Jesus dealing another blow to status quo religion as practised by the Pharisees, who were the accepted authority on religion of the day. The Pharisees were well known for their pomp and pageantry, and Jesus seized every opportunity to highlight this type disposition and to expose it for what it truly is. Yet another time we find our Lord denouncing the Pharisaic posture. Is it not strange that when we read the Bible, and in particular, any text about the Pharisees, how we love to castigate and criticise them? Yet, Jesus would ask of us today, “have you distinguished yourself from those upon who you cast judgement?”

Let’s look briefly at what Jesus has to say about these Pharisees who represent that which is undesirable about religion.
Jesus warned his disciples not to be fooled by Pharisees whose only interest is a display of self-righteousness. Their excessively long and stylish robe was a mark of distinction which they love but it only served to cover up or distract you from their sins. They loved to be greeted in the marketplace and wherever they went they desired to sit in high places – all these acts demonstrating a pathology of vain conceit and aggrandisement (self-elevation).

The psychological profile of persons who love so much to be seen as the Pharisees did is reads thus: acute inferiority complex; delusions of grandeur; and narcissistic (inflamed with love for self and an inordinate fascination with self to the point of self-absorption).

Anyone so in love with self sees none other but self. So Jesus went a step further to suggest that if they were so religious, why do they take advantage of the widows by charging such weak persons excessive fees and taking advantage of their hospitality?

So, Jesus “warns (us as he did his disciples) against three things: the desire for prominence rather than selfless service; the desire for admiration and recognition rather than seeking to promote the good of others through humble service and love; and... attempting to use one’s status for self-gain and self-advancement.” (Don Schwager, 2000)
The religion that God calls us to is one of humble service in holiness and righteousness before God and man that elevates the best interest of God and others over the interests of self in love, honour and reverence. “Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD...” (Prov. 16:5, KJV)

The Nail of Envy
Matthew 20:20-28

Who doesn't want to be first, and to be esteemed and honoured by others? We seem to have an unquenchable thirst for recognition and fame, power and authority to rule our own lives as we please as well as the lives of others. Should we be surprised to see the disciples of Jesus thirsting for power, position, and authority? James and John, the sons of Zebedee, urged their mother to strike a deal with Jesus, their Master and Messiah. They wanted the distinction of being first and most important in position, next to Jesus, of course!

When Jesus called the twelve apostles to be his inner circle of disciples who would teach and exercise spiritual authority on his behalf, he did the unthinkable! Jesus taught contrary to the world’s understanding of power, authority, and position, by reversing the order of master and servant, lord and subject, first and last! Jesus wedded authority with love, position with sacrifice, and service with humility. Authority without love is over-bearing and slavish. Position without respect and concern for the subordinate is demeaning and rude. And service without generosity and sacrifice is cheap and unkind.

Those who wish to serve with the Lord Jesus and to exercise authority in God’s kingdom must be prepared to sacrifice – not just some of their time, money, and resources – but their whole lives and all that they possess! Jesus used stark language to explain what kind of sacrifice he had in mind. His disciples must drink his cup if they expect to reign with him in his kingdom. The cup he had in mind was a bitter one involving crucifixion. What kind of cup does the Lord have in mind for us? For some disciples such a cup entails physical suffering and the painful struggle of martyrdom. But for many, it entails the long routine of the Christian life, with all its daily sacrifices, disappointments, set-backs, struggles, and temptations.

A disciple of Jesus must be ready to lay down his or her life – each and every day in the little and big sacrifices required – and even to the point of shedding one’s blood if necessary for the sake of Christ and his gospel. What makes such sacrifice a joy rather than a burden? It is love – the kind of "love which God has poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). An early church father summed up Jesus’ teaching with the expression: "to serve is to reign with Christ." We share in God’s reign by laying down our lives in humble service and love for one another, just as Jesus did for our sake. Are you ready to lay down your life and to serve others as Jesus has taught and modelled for us?

Jesus very clearly implies that at least one criterion for these special seats, is suffering. “You do not know what you are asking,” He said; “Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” For whom are these special seats prepared? – Perhaps for those whom God has appointed to share most fully in the sufferings
of Christ, according to the mysterious purposes of His own sovereign will. Notice Jesus never says there will only be one seat at His right hand and only one seat at His left hand for a total of only two seats. There’s no reason to think that Jesus was concerned to correct every single faulty assumption. My guess is that there will actually be a multitude of “seats” at Jesus’ right and left hand, and that these special places of glory and honour have been prepared not as rewards for those who have been most faithful, but rather as comfort and vindication for those whom God has appointed to share most fully in the sufferings of Christ. So, in one sense, all will be equal in the kingdom of God because all is of God’s free and sovereign grace (cf. The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard)! But there’s another sense in which we can say that all will not be equal in the kingdom of God, because all is of God’s free and sovereign grace! (cf. Calvin) Will those of us who don’t get a special seat at Christ’s right or left hand feel gypped, or envious, or like we’re somehow second-rate citizens of the kingdom? Far from it! Instead, we will rejoice greatly with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15), and this very rejoicing will, if possible, only add to our own eternal bliss and happiness! We will rejoice greatly with our brothers and sisters who were appointed to so much suffering, and yet whose sufferings are not being so richly, and so fully, and so abundantly compensated.

"Lord Jesus, make me a servant of love for your kingdom that I may seek to serve rather than be served. Inflame my heart with love that I may give generously and serve joyfully for your sake."

The Nail of Betrayal
Matthew 26:47-56

Do you know the pain of rejection? The greatest pain and injury comes not from our enemies but from those closest to us. Psalm 55 foretells the suffering of rejection which God's anointed King and Messiah would endure for our sake: "It is not an enemy who taunts me-- then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me-- then I could hide from him. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to hold sweet converse together; within God's house we walked in fellowship" (Psalm 55:12-14). In the ancient world a kiss was a sign of intimate friendship and trust. Judas' betrayal with a kiss shows the hypocrisy of his love and trust. This is literally a "kiss of death" not only because it leads to Jesus' death but is also a sign of the death of one who lost all hope and abandoned God. In betraying Jesus Judas rejected the one and only hope for freedom from sin and condemnation and the hope of reconciliation and restoration to friendship with God. Jesus met rejection not with bitterness or resentment, but with love and pity. God will never stop loving us no matter how far we stray from him or abandon hope. When you encounter injury and rejection from others, how do you respond? With merciful love and a forgiving heart or with bitterness and revenge?

Jesus met his betrayal and arrest with serenity and with confident trust in his Father. He knew that this was Satan's hour of darkness but God's light and truth would prevail in the end. How did the other apostles meet this trial? They were unprepared even though Jesus has warned them about his betrayal. And they had forgotten God for the moment. Their will was to resist force with force rather than peaceably submit to God's will. Jesus never failed to show mercy and compassion even to his enemies. Luke tells us that Jesus "touched" the severed ear and healed the high priest's slave who had been struck by one of
Jesus' own disciples (Luke 22:51). When adversity strikes how do you respond? With fear and panic or with confident hope and trust in God?

"Lord, only you can save us from the blindness of sin and despair. May your light dispel the darkness of our lives and give us hope and joy. Fill our hearts with mercy and compassion that we may bring hope to those who have no hope and show them the light of Christ."

The Nail of Indecision
Matthew 27:20-24

The indecision of Pilate was threefold:

1. He had a desire justice

According to a parallel examination of the account of Jesus’ trial in the Gospels, seven times Pilate sought to release Jesus:

1. Pilate sent him to Herod Antipas.
2. He gave a verdict of innocence.
3. He offered to substitute a lighter punishment.
4. He proposed a choice between Christ and Barabbas.
5. He insisted on Jesus’ innocence: "Why, what evil hath he done?"
6. He suggested that they take him and mob him.
7. He still sought to release him.

(\textit{James Burton Coffman Commentaries, 1999})

However, in the end the rabble rousing shouts of the crowd and the persistent quest for an execution by the chief priests prevailed on Pilate over his assessment of the truth and prodding of his conscience. Herein lies a politics that rivals that of today where the struggle for power takes on more and more each day uglier and scarier faces. Therefore, we find that mere desire and intent are insufficient responses at the point of indecision.

2. He was conflicted and confused

Here Pilate was confronted with choosing between control and conscience. On the one hand, he found no reason to lay any charge against Jesus. Instead, he had every reason to release Jesus. Herod, Pilate’s sworn enemy before that day found Jesus innocent and sent Jesus back to Pilate, which represented foe Pilate a mark of respect; his own trial of the case returned a not guilty verdict; his wife beseeched him not to have anything to do with innocent blood after having horrible nightmares about Jesus.

Yet, on-the-other hand, Pilate struggled with the thought of losing control of his domain. Though confronted with truth, the lie was more compelling, demonstrating that in the arena of indecision evil stands more likely to triumph over good. You may be asking, ‘why is this?’ The answer is, “such (is) the
cunning of the evil one that (even) the Lord's chosen people shouted their preference for a brutal criminal (over the benevolent Christ). There is a pattern in that perverted choice that extends endlessly through man's spiritual history. Rejection of the truth always results in the acceptance of something else. As Paul said, "They shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Timothy 4:4). Further, we are well acquainted with the saying, “if you don’t stand for something you will fall for anything.” (James Burton Coffman Commentaries, 1999)

3. He had to make a decision

Some may say his hand was forced as it appears he was about to blackmailed by the crowd. Having just gained friendship with his long time sworn enemy, Herod, Pilate was not prepared to relinquish the opportunity of more power. It was not in doubt at this point that control would triumph over conscience. Here we find Satan tightening the noose of what Pilate loved the most around his neck. Surely, the intensity of the crowd’s unrelenting onslaught that was coming from without, coupled with the intensity of the lust of power oozing on his inside, there was no escape of Satan’s chokehold for Pilate. It was just too intense.

Perhaps if there were more witnesses testifying on Jesus' behalf the sentence would have been stayed and per adventure even swayed. Alas, there was none.

Like Pilate, oftentimes when we must make a decision and we end up choosing folly, we are prone to want and may eventually pass the buck to another instead taking responsibility for our decision.

Though many today would have loved for it to be so, however, the decision about “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” as Pilate asked, “cannot be avoided or transferred to another, or endlessly deferred.” (James Burton Coffman Commentaries, 1999)

The Nail of Cruelty
Matthew 26:47-56

Are there any blind-spots in your life that keep you from recognizing God's power and mercy? Faith opens the way for us to see the power of God’s kingdom and to experience his healing presence in our lives. The word mercy literally means "sorrowful at heart". But mercy is something more than compassion, or heartfelt sorrow at another's misfortune. Compassion empathizes with the sufferer. But mercy goes further; it removes suffering. A merciful person shares in another's misfortune and suffering as if it were his own. In Jesus we see the fullness of God's mercy and the power of his kingdom -- power to save from death and destruction, to forgive sins and lift the burden of guilt, and to heal infirmities and release the oppressed. Jesus never refused to bring God's mercy to those who earnestly sought it.
How can we seek and obtain God's mercy? God gives mercy to the lowly in heart -- to those who recognize their need for God and for his forgiveness and healing power. Faith is a gift freely given by God to help us know God personally, to understand his truth, and to live in the power of his love. For faith to be effective it must be linked with trust and obedience -- an active submission to God and a willingness to do whatever he commands. When two blind men approached Jesus, he questioned their earnestness in order to test and strengthen them in faith and trust in his power. Their faith grew as they responded to his word with confident hope. He restored their sight -- both physically and spiritually to the reality of his kingdom. The Lord Jesus wants us to live in the confident expectation that he will fulfil his promises to us and bring us into the fullness of his kingdom -- a kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). Do you know the peace and joy of God's kingdom?

A criminal condemned to death by Roman law was forced to carry his own cross. Soldiers made him carry it to the place of execution usually by the longest route possible. This prolonged the public humiliation and agony of carrying a weight that bowed the head and broke the back into a posture of submission. Jesus fell under the weight of his cross and could go no further. The Roman soldiers compelled another man to carry it for him. Simon had come, a long distance from Cyrene (in North Africa, present-day Libya) to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. The last thing he wanted to do was to participate in the public execution of a criminal. But he had no choice since Roman authority could not be challenged without serious consequences. Mark records that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). Since Mark wrote his gospel for the Christian community at Rome, it is likely that the two sons of Rufus were well-known to the Church there as fellow Christians. Who knows, if Simon had not been compelled to carry Jesus's cross, he may never have been challenged with the message of the cross and the meaning of the Christian faith which his two sons later embraced. Perhaps Simon became a believer and passed on his faith to his family as well. Do you take up your cross willingly to follow Jesus in his way of love and sacrifice?

The Romans reserved crucifixion for their worst offenders. It was designed to be the most humiliating and excruciatingly painful way they knew for execution. The criminal was stripped and nailed to a cross erected in a public place, usually by a roadside or highway near the town where the criminal could be viewed by everybody who passed that way. A healthy man could live for several days on such a cross before he expired from hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and madness. It was a slow agonizing death, usually as a result of asphyxiation. The victim was hung on the cross in such a fashion that his lungs quickly filled with fluids and he could not breathe unless he pulled his chest upward and gasped for breath. Every movement brought nerve-racking pain. Eventual exhaustion led to asphyxiation. If the soldiers wanted to speed the process up, they broke the victim's legs to prevent ease of breathing.

The place where Jesus was crucified was on a hill just outside of Jerusalem known as Golgatha (Aramaic word for skull). The authorities deliberately executed Jesus besides two known criminals. This was designed to publicly humiliate Jesus before the crowds and to rank him with robbers. When Jesus was nailed to the cross he was already more than half-dead. The scourging alone and the crown of thorns beaten into his skull had nearly killed him. In such a state it is all the more remarkable to see Jesus with a clear sound mind and a tranquil heart. When Jesus was offered some wine mixed with myrrh to ease his pain, he refused it. He willingly embraced suffering and death for our sake because he knew and loved us...
all when he offered his life as an atoning sacrifice on the cross (Gal. 2:20, Ephes. 5:2,25). Jesus shows us the depths of God's redeeming love and forgiveness. He loved his own to the end (John 13:1). "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). "For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died." (2 Cor. 5:14).

Pilate publicly heralded Jesus "The King of the Jews" as he died upon the cross, no doubt to irritate and annoy the chief priests and Pharisees. Jesus was crucified for his claim to be King. The Jews understood that the Messiah would come as king to establish God's reign for them. They wanted a king who would free them from tyranny and foreign domination. Many had high hopes that Jesus would be the Messianic king. Little did they understand what kind of kingship Jesus claimed to have. Jesus came to conquer hearts and souls for an imperishable kingdom, rather than to conquer perishable lands and entitlements. As Jesus was dying on the cross, he was mocked for his claim to kingship. Nonetheless, he died not only as King of the Jews, but King of the nations as well. His victory over the power of sin, Satan, and the world was accomplished through his death on the cross and his resurrection. Jesus exchanged a throne of glory for a cross of shame to restore us to glory with God as his adopted sons and daughters. "He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:8-11) In the Book of Revelations Jesus is called King of kings and Lord and lords (Rev. 19:16). Do you recognize Jesus Christ as your King and Lord and do you exalt his name as holy?

"Lord, help me to draw near to you with confidence and trust in your saving power and mercy. Free me from doubt and unbelief that I may approach you confidently and pray boldly with expectant faith. Let your kingdom come and may your will be done in me."

"Lord Jesus, you laid down your life for me that I might walk in the freedom of your love and mercy. Free me from love of the world and from attachment to sin and hurtful desires that I might love whole-heartedly and sincerely what you love and reject whatever is false and contrary to the gospel."

The Nail of Hatred

Jesus is clear declaring and establishing what separates those who belong to him from those who of the world. The apostle Paul states proclaims it in Romans 5:5, "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit." Further in Romans 8:9 Paul declares, "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ."

“What makes Christians different and what makes Christianity distinct from any other religion? It is grace — treating others, not as they deserve, but as God wishes them to be treated — with loving-kindness and (tender) mercy. God is good to the unjust as well as the just. His love embraces saint and sinner alike.
God seeks our highest good and teaches us to seek the greatest good of others, even those who hate and abuse us. Our love for others, even those who are ungrateful and selfish towards us, must be marked by the same kindness and mercy which God has shown to us. It is easier to show kindness and mercy when we can expect to benefit from doing so. How much harder when we can expect nothing in return? Our prayer for those who do us ill both breaks the power of revenge and releases the power of love to do good in the face of evil. How can we possibly love those who cause us harm and ill-will? With God all things are possible. He gives power and grace to those who believe and accept the gift of the Holy Spirit. His love conquers all, even our hurts, fears, prejudices and griefs. Only the cross of Jesus Christ can free us from the tyranny of malice, hatred, revenge, and resentment and gives us the courage to return evil with good. Such love and grace has power to heal and to save from destruction. Do you know the power of Christ's redeeming love and mercy?” (Don Schwager, 2001)

Let us not be confused about loving others. In the Kingdom of God, the low road is not an option.

We are commanded to love by Christ says, “This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you.” (Jn. 15:12, KJV) “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” Jn. 13:35, KJV)

Love is not an option. It is a command. That, even our sworn enemies and those who make it their business to persecute us must receive the extravagance of love of God from us, who spared not even his very Son but sacrificed him as a sin offering for us that we too, though once sworn enemies of God, might benefit from God’s extravagant love so freely lavished on sinner and saint alike.

To this end we are compelled to love lest we “show contempt for the riches of God’s kindness, tolerance, patience and grace.” (Rom. 2:4, NIV)

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” (1 Cor. 13:4-8a, NIV)

“Dear friends, this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” (1 Jn. 3:11; 4:7, NIV)