

Illusion of Choice

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[0 : 00] So, I came across a parenting hack on the internet. Parents, if you want your kids to eat broccoli, don't ask them if they want broccoli.

Ask them if they want two stalks of broccoli or five. Because that way, they think they're making a choice when in fact you've already made the choice for them.

And this trick works in other areas of life as well. In fact, it's how retail products get sold to you and me on spa, checkers, pick and pay shelves. You see these competing products and you think, wow, look at the great choice I have.

But did you know there's probably just a handful of umbrella companies that own all of those products that you think are competing against each other. So, when you choose one over another, the money is going to the same place.

It's a concept called the illusion of choice. And retailers know it well. Parents know it well. And it's a concept that works.

[1 : 01] And psychologists tell us why. Psychologists have done studies on the illusion of choice or the illusion of power. And it works because we tend to think in our lives that we have more control than we actually do over our outcomes.

We want to think that. We want to think we have control over our lives and our outcomes. When in fact, we don't have nearly as much control as we think. We don't have as much choice as we think. We want to think we have choice. When in fact, a lot of the choices we make in life have already been decided for us. And that's what we see here as we turn to the story of the trial of Jesus and those involved, the characters in this trial, especially Pilate, the most powerful man in the region, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor over Judea, Jerusalem area.

And the crowds that he gives a lot of power to in this trial to make a choice. They thought that they were in control. The players in this trial think that they're the ones calling the shots.

But when we slow down and we read closer, what we discover is that their choices have already been decided for them. We discover there are other powers at work and they just have the illusion of choice.

[2 : 23] And as I was reading through this trial this week, it occurred to me that it has something to say to each one of us today. Because we are all in some way or another under the illusion that we have more control over our lives than we think we do.

When in fact, there are other powers at work, which we need to recognize. We need to understand there are other powers at work and we need to realize what those powers are. And that's what I want us to see this morning as we look at this trial.

The first power at play, and a powerful one it is, is the power of sin. The power of sin. And this, you know, you hear about it, you hear preachers talk about it.

Sin's power over us. But it's more powerful than we think. It's more powerful than we want to think. It has more control over us than we like to admit. And it influences more of our choices than we'd like to know.

And we see that at play in the trial of Jesus. This trial, as you read through the story, I wonder if you felt the same way as me when you read through it as you heard it read earlier.

[3 : 26] It's quite chilling. Because as you read it, you realize there's more forces at work than just those that are on the surface, right? There's darker forces at work in this trial.

The clearest example of that, I think, is the crowd's irrational need to have Jesus executed. Did you notice how adamant they were that this Jesus must die?

Look how it starts. Look how it unfolds. So from verse 6. Let's pause there.

Pilate knows something about Jesus. You know what he knows? He knows Jesus is innocent. He already knows it. And you see it in the other Gospels as well. Pilate couldn't find any incriminating evidence against Jesus.

And he's a little bit confused as to why these chief priests are so adamant to have him killed. Anyway, he doesn't want to condemn Jesus.

[4 : 46] But the chief priests have put him in a tricky position. He can't just let him go because he's got to address these rather serious charges. And so he comes up with a plan, you see, to undermine the chief priests.

And they didn't get on. The chief priests and Pilate, the Jewish leadership and the Roman leadership, who were their overlords. They didn't get on. And Pilate saw this opportunity to undermine the chief priests. And so he appeals to the crowds, which is not normally what a Roman governor would do.

But he turns to the Jewish crowds. And the reason is because he knows they like Jesus. He's popular already. We see this. Just turn back to Mark 11, verse 18.

The chief priests and the scribes heard it and started looking for a way to kill Jesus. For they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was astonished by his teaching.

You see what's going on there? The chief priests want to arrest Jesus, but they don't because the crowd like him so much. And they don't want to get on the wrong side of the crowd. We see this again in chapter 12, the next chapter, verse 37.

[5 : 54] At the end, after one of Jesus' teachings, it says, The large crowd was listening to him with delight. The crowd liked him. The crowd of Jerusalem even liked Jesus.

They were delighted in him, we're told. And Pilate knows this. And so what he does is he turns to the crowd and he offers them one thing that they couldn't refuse.

Look at verse 9 of chapter 15. Pilate answered them, Do you want me to release the king of the Jews for you? You see, this is unprecedented.

We need to realize a Roman governor offering a king of their choice to the Jewish people never happened before. Normally the kings they put in place were their choice.

So never were the Romans actually giving the people a choice to choose their king. And he knew this was a guy that the people liked. And so this is a Roman governor offering the Jews a king of their choice, which is something that they had always wanted.

[7 : 03] And he knows they can't refuse this. Kind of like when I offer my kids time on screens. Screen time. I know they're never going to refuse.

When we want some peace and quiet, we love our kids. But when we want some peace and quiet, all we need to do is say you can go on screens for a couple of hours. And we know they'll always take that up. None of them will go. No, I'd rather read my book.

They'll always. And the reason is because they can't choose to do that whenever they want to. And so it's an opportunity. And Pilate knows that about the Jewish crowds. They can't choose their king. And so this is a golden opportunity for them. How could they possibly refuse? And that is why their response is so surprising and so chilling. They say, no thanks.

We want, we want, who's in prison? Barabbas. We want Barabbas instead. Barabbas was unknown. Barabbas was unknown. He was a fairly random character in the story.

[8 : 00] And that's who they chose over Jesus. In fact, they probably would have chosen anyone as long as it wasn't Jesus. Something's going on here. You see? Something unexpected. And you can see Pilate's shock in the story as you read it.

Look from verse 12 of chapter 15. Pilate asked them again. Then what do you want me to do with the one you call the king of the Jews? And again they shouted.

Crucify him. Pilate said to them. But why? What has he done wrong? But they shouted all the more, crucify him. No, no reasoning. No argument. No presenting their case.

Just crucify him. Crucify him. Pilate doesn't know what's going on. And his plan had failed. And the reason we know is because there were other forces at work in the story.

Causing the crowds to make the decision they did. Look at verse 11. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd. So that he would release Barabbas to them instead.

[9 : 05] They didn't go there. Wanting Barabbas to be released. But the chief priests managed to change their mind. And have them want Jesus to be crucified.

They didn't wake up that morning wanting Jesus to be crucified. I don't think. Because it's here that their mind changed. In verse 11. It was the enemies of Christ. There.

In the crowd. Whispering. You don't need this king. In fact. You want him dead, don't you? And the crowd are like.

Well, yeah, yeah, yeah. We want him dead. Crucify him. And it worked. It's very easy to stir up a crowd. If you know the right things to say. If you know the triggers that are going to move this mob. Often people can control a crowd. And that's what the enemies of Christ were doing. But the reason it worked. Is because they didn't really have a choice in the matter.

[10:06] They had the illusion of choice. But now that their Messiah had actually come. Now that their true king had arrived and was in front of them.

They realized, possibly for the first time. They didn't want a king. Now that he was actually here and in the flesh. They realized he's too close. We don't actually want a king.

And that's why when the chief priest whispered. Why don't you call for Barabbas instead. Not this Jesus. They went. Yeah, yeah. Let's crucify him instead.

Because if they actually had the Messiah come and rule in their lives. It would mean that they would need to submit to God's rule. And they actually didn't want that when push came to shove.

And so that's what was going on here. But I think that's where this story connects with us today.

And with our natural tendencies. And why we too so often give in to the voice of sin, don't we?

[11:13] Let's be honest with ourselves. We often give in to the voice of sin more than we expect to. Why? Why when we hear that voice of sin do we so easily go, okay?

And it's not just because we like to sin. I think it's because deep down we also don't want a king. Deep down part of our nature is to want to rule our own lives.

We don't actually, when push comes to shove, we don't want God's rule over us. By nature. The Bible tells us that. And that actually is the root of all the bad choices we make in life.

God knows better. And by definition, because we want to do something that God doesn't want us to do by nature. We don't want him ruling over us. And because he knows better, we will always make bad decisions.

Because the one good decision is the thing he wants us to do. And we don't want to do it because that would mean not being in charge of our lives. The root of the bad choices we make is actually a desire not to be ruled over by a king.

[12:20] God gives them an amazing garden. And we saw it right at the garden, right back at the garden of Eden in Genesis 3, didn't we? You know the story, Adam and Eve? God gives them an amazing garden and this mandate to subdue the earth and to rule it.

And he gives them something that is so alien to us. Everything they needed, they had. God gives them just plenty of food and resources at their disposal.

And he gives them all these trees with, I imagine in an unfallen world, food that we could only imagine. And he says you can have any of them. You can eat from any of these trees except one in the middle.

Just don't eat from that one, okay? And what's the one they go to? Of all of these hundreds or thousands of trees, they go to the one they know they can't eat from. Why? It was a simple rule.

Well, because they couldn't tolerate God telling them what to do.

They couldn't tolerate God's rule over their lives. And that same root is at the sin of this crowd's irrational, chilling call to crucify him and to call for Barabbas instead.

[13:29] Because Barabbas wasn't going to exercise authority over them. Barabbas wasn't going to make demands of their life. Jesus would. And that resistance to the rule of God, and therefore the rule of his son Christ, is something that is deeply ingrained in us.

It's more deeply than we like to know. And that is something we need to realize about ourselves.

That we actually resist the rule of God in our lives far more than we think we do.

Yes. Yes. Every time you choose not to come to church for no good reason other than you just feel like a lion, you are actually resisting the rule of God in your life. Jesus wants you to be on church.

Be at church on a Sunday. that that's clear where does he want you to be on a Sunday at church

that's where Jesus wants you to be and so when you choose not to go to church just because you feel like it you're actually saying I don't need Jesus to decide what's best for me when you make no effort to actually seek fellowship go out of your way to seek fellowship with his people which is what Jesus wants you to do but you've got better things to do in your life it's because you don't want him

to tell you how to spend your time when you come to church on a Sunday and you listen to sermons and you treat them as mere suggestions and you walk out here and nothing's changed it's because you actually still want control you'll you'll take what what works for you but you'll leave what doesn't because you still want a casting vote in how you live your life rather than letting your king tell you what to do non-negotiable you know what that's called in any other kingdom rebellion and yet Christians think it's fine for them to do in their in in Christ's kingdom when you don't invite people to church who you know need to be there and you know Jesus wants there the people that Jesus has put in your life to influence when you don't speak about Christ when there's an opportunity because you fear what people might think of you even though Jesus wants you to represent him in this world well it's because you think your name is more important than Christ's name when you open that porn site and you indulge in lust which you know Jesus doesn't want and that's in the back of your mind while you do it you are saying well I don't care I want this when you husbands don't love your wife sacrificially which is what Jesus wants you to do wives when you don't submit to your husband under God which is what Jesus wants you to do you're basically saying well thanks for the marriage advice buddy but I'm going to do marriage how I think is best but you see this is what it means to live with Jesus as your king which we sing about which we pray about we talk about Jesus as our lord yes my lord Jesus and yet do we live with that as a reality because living with Jesus as your actual king doesn't mean just coming to church and singing songs about him it means doing what he wants rather than what you want every day do you do that none of us do by nature because none of us want a king by nature and that the first thing we we always think about in making choices is what do I want not what does Jesus want you know a few years ago it's probably decades now they had those bangles it was popular amongst christian circus circles to have those bangles uh wwdj remember those what would Jesus do and you look at that and you remember what would Jesus you know what we need a bangle that says wdjw what does Jesus want we need we need a reminder actually in this situation in that situation as I'm going through my day as I'm going through my life Jesus wants certain things here and not first think what do I want what do I want but what does

Jesus want because every time you think what you want first every time you prioritize your own will over Christ you know what you're doing you're calling for Barabbas as well because you're trying to live a life where you don't have to kneel to a king just like the crowds are doing at his trial and you're giving in to that ancient voice that was at Eden that was there at the trial and that is around us every day saying you don't need a king to tell you what to do you are the master of your life you make your own choices the enemy is always at work whispering that to us but it's a trick it's it's an illusion because when we listen to that voice we become a slave to the power of sin just like this crowd were at this trial and if we're honest with ourselves we are not that different we are also listening to those voices we are also very often calling for Barabbas rather than Jesus but thankfully there's another power at work in this story

[18:58] I wonder if you noticed in fact you would only notice if you read slowly and looked at the details look at the details that Mark includes in this trial again chapter 15 verse 1 as soon as it was morning having held a meeting with the elders scribes and the whole Sanhedrin the chief priests tied Jesus up led him away and handed him over to Pilate okay so the chief priests and the scribes are meeting they arrest Jesus they've just condemned him they they say that he needs he needs to die and then they hand him over to Pilate that's what's going on here and then at the end verse 15 wanting to satisfy the crowd Pilate released Barabbas to them and after having Jesus flogged he handed them over to be crucified it's that detail that he includes he had Jesus flogged why?

to tell us the immense pain Jesus went through and yes it does tell us that Jesus went through immense suffering and pain in the lead up to his crucifixion but there's another reason Mark includes that detail and we only find out when we remember what Jesus said five chapters earlier to his disciples on the way to Jerusalem chapter 10 have a look from verse 33 look what Jesus said was going to happen to him way before it did see we are going up to Jerusalem the son of man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes exactly what Mark tells us what happened that happened and they will condemn him to death exactly what happened then they will hand him over to the Gentiles exactly what happened and they will mock him spit on him and flog him and kill him and he will rise after three days who's in charge of what's going on here in Mark 15 Pilate the crowd the chief priests no all that seems to be under the control of Christ's enemies in the story we learn is actually under the control of God it's all part of the plan and Jesus knew to the

detail everything that would happen to him and that's why he makes no effort to defend himself did you notice that in the story and Pilate was amazed verse 5 Jesus still did not answer and so Pilate was astonished why aren't you defending yourself why aren't you trying to get out of this situation Jesus doesn't say anything because he knows the real power at work he knows God is in charge of what's going on even though it's an evil thing done by evil people under the influence of evil powers it's an evil thing that God is directing for his purpose ultimately and he always does that God always wins God always outsmarts evil and he always uses it to achieve his purposes in the end and his purpose in this case was that Jesus would be condemned and would go and die an atoning death for his people and rise again so to free his people from the control and the power of sin in their lives that power that is so prevalent in this trial that power that is so in control seemingly of these people this crowd

Jesus went to the cross he submitted himself to that power so that he could break his people free of it that's what was going on and it was always part of the plan just as Israel was set free from the power of Egypt where they were slaves so Christ's people who trust in him have been set free from the power of sin that used to enslave us that power that used to tell us what to do no longer has to we don't have to listen to it anymore that's what it means to be set free from the power of sin Paul talks about this in Romans I want you to turn to Romans and I want us to have a look at a few verses there especially Romans 5 Paul is talking about Christ's sacrifice and saving his people those who are his people those who trust in him and name him Lord that's what it means to be one of Christ's people not just to believe that he existed but to submit to him as your Lord and Paul is reflecting on Christ's death for his people and he puts it this way

Romans 5 from verse 6 notice this for while we were still helpless while we were still under the slavery to sin while we couldn't do anything while we couldn't help ourselves at the right time Christ died for the ungodly very rarely will someone die for a just person though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die but God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us notice that still helpless we couldn't escape these voices the power of sin over us still sinners and in the next verse verse 10 while we were enemies while we were still enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his son while we were still helpless while we were still sinners while we were still enemies in other words while we were still there in the crowd shouting Barabbas while you in your life were still shouting Barabbas I want to rule my life [24 : 33] Jesus came and died for you to rescue you from that power that slavery that illusion of choice that you thought you had but there's something else Paul says in Romans about our salvation he says this phrase he uses in Romans right at the beginning of his letter and right at the end and I want you to spot it so go to Romans 1 a few pages before and we're also going to go right to the end to Romans 16 I want you to notice this phrase that Paul kind of bookends his letter about this amazing salvation Christ wrought for his people that's what Romans is about but he bookends it with this interesting phrase have a look if you can see it Romans 1 verse 5 he says through him we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the Gentiles and then at the end of Romans look what he says in chapter 16 from verse 26 he's talking about this revelation of the gospel now revealed and made known through the prophetic scriptures according to the command of the eternal God to advance the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles did you spot it?

did you see what phrase he uses there that he he doesn't often use elsewhere? the obedience of faith did you notice that? not just faith he says we are proclaiming this gospel Jesus came and died not just to bring people to faith in him but to bring people to the obedience of faith and that tells us something very important about our salvation it tells us that we have been saved if we are Christ's people not just from death which is the penalty of sin we have actually been saved from disobedience we have been saved from having to disobey we have been saved from slavery to sin we have been saved from the power of sin so that we can now be obedient to our true king and our true ruler and our true lord because the truth brothers and sisters is that we are not the ones in control of our lives we love to think we are we love to think we have the illusion of power the illusion of choice or we don't love to think that we love to actually think we actually have the power but we don't it's an illusion we are not the ones in control of our lives our choices are already determined by other powers you need to realize that you are under the power of another the only question is is that power the power of God or is it the power of sin and with that

I will pray but before I pray I just want to reiterate something Dylan said in the notices to invite people to Good Friday services coming Friday Good Friday Easter Friday everyone here knows someone who needs to be here everyone here knows someone who Jesus wants to be here think of who that is that person won't be here unless you invite them because not only do we enjoy the salvation from the power of sin which is what we should want those in our life to also come and find and experience so that they can be freed from the power of sin but inviting people going to someone this week and saying would you like to come to church with me on Friday our church is having a Good Friday service yes it will be very scary to do but inviting people to taking that step and doing it is a way that you put Christ's name and reputation above your own name so will you do it think of someone you can invite invite them to Good Friday it's one of the easiest opportunities of the year to invite someone to church

Good Friday Christmas are generally the times people will willingly come to church when they don't normally so don't waste this opportunity it's a simple thing but will you do it because it's what Jesus wants you to do let's pray Lord Jesus you came as our king and as we think about your death your humility your service to us it's very easy for us to forget that you are our king and that we owe you our full allegiance and obedience and that you died so that we can come to you and submit to your good rule over our lives help us to do that help us to realize that we are not that different from that crowd that condemned you to death because deep down we all don't want a king to rule over us but help us to realize you came to save us from that you came to save us from that destructive self-will and you came to implement God's rule over our lives our creator's rule over our lives help us to submit to that and help us to learn more and more to do what you want over and above what we want in Jesus name

Amen