

Matthew 27:1–26 | “The Innocent Substitute”  
*Preached on July 28, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown*

Open up your Bibles this morning to Matthew 27, verse 1. *[pause]*

We are working through the road that leads to the cross of Calvary in Jesus’ life. *[pause]*

Last week, we saw the many hard things that Jesus went through like: denial, desertion, disloyalty, and disparagement.

And now today, we will see the trial and condemnation of Jesus. *[pauseeee]*

In February of 2023, Maurice Hastings was declared innocent.<sup>1</sup> *[pause]*

Now at first that doesn’t sound that interesting, but it is for a very significant reason...

Maurice Hastings spent 38 years behind bars before the court finally found that he was innocent of murder. *[pause]*

What happened was that they ran the DNA evidence from the crime scene and discovered that the DNA was from someone else.

They had convicted the wrong guy. *[pause]*

Hastings was innocent of the crime that they pinned on him. *[pause]*

Can you imagine being sent to jail for 38 years for a crime that you didn’t commit? It’s hard to fathom.

As the district attorney at the time said of Hasting’s: “[he] survived a nightmare.” *[pauseeee]*

There’s nothing more frustrating than being innocent, but declared guilty by others. *[pause]*

When you know deep down that you didn’t do what someone is saying that you did, you feel some strong emotions.

The injustice of it all is just so hard to bear. *[pause]*

We become passionate, and we say the common thing that children often declare when all eyes are on them—“I didn’t do it!” *[pause]*

We start to turn into our own defense attorney, laying down our case with all the evidence to go along with it. *[pause]*

Our passion turns to pleading when we start to see that the person isn’t going to believe us.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/l-man-wrongly-imprisoned-decades-declared-innocent-dna-evidence-points-rcna72843>.

And then our pleading turns to frustration, for we think, “How can they *not* see that I’m innocent?” *[pausee]*

Then the time comes when the other person makes their judgment. *[pause]*

Though you have layed out your defense, in what you thought was a crystal clear, close-and-shut case, the other person still doesn’t believe you. *[pause]*

To them, you are guilty, but you know the truth—you are innocent.

And what are some of your emotions then? Your frustration turns to anger. *[pause]*

The injustice causes seething anger to boil up.

You can’t stop thinking, “This is so wrong!” *[pause]*

And eventually, if that anger is let go, it transforms into bitterness that takes root, which is not easily removed. *[pauseeee]*

I’m sure each of us has faced being innocent of something that someone else has claimed that we did.

And we have probably felt at least a mini-version of the thoughts and emotions that I just talked about. *[pauseee]*

Being declared guilty when you are innocent is hard to take.

Everything within us wants to speak in our defense, and do everything that we can to avoid the injustice of it all. *[pauseeee]*

Now for us, the things that we are unjustly convicted of are usually smaller things, for it’s not like we have been in jail for 38 years on a wrongful charge.

But I want you to imagine that you were innocent of something, and the result was that you were condemned to die. *[pause]*

Can you even get close to plumbing the depths of the feelings that you would feel then?

Death over something you didn’t do—now that would be hard to take. *[pause]*

And to think that that’s what Jesus went through, as the Son of God—sinlessly perfect, full of grace and truth,<sup>2</sup> humbly coming to earth for sinful mankind—now that’s something. *[pauseee]*

What we will see this morning is that the Messiah, the promised One, the Son of God, was convicted and condemned for things that He didn’t do.

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to John 1:14.

And amazingly, through it all, He didn't fight back.

He didn't even passionately lay out his case.

And He certainly didn't become bitter, but voluntarily and silently went to the Cross for us.  
[pause]

Let's READ the passage. [READ]

In each of these individual stories, there is a theme that shines forth and it's Jesus' innocence,  
*And what we find first is that...*

### **I. Though innocent, Jesus was condemned as guilty.**

Scripture makes it clear that Jesus did not deserve to be condemned to die. [pause]

The charges were false. He was truly innocent.

And what we see in these verses is that Jesus' innocence was known by those very people that sent Him to the cross. [pauseeee]

Judas, the chief priests, and Pilate all played a role in delivering Jesus over to be crucified, and each one knew that He was innocent. [pause]

So Christ was not a victim of *accidental* injustice like that guy who was in jail for 38 years, but Jesus was a victim of *intentional* injustice.

The perpetrators of His murder knew that He was innocent. [pause]

Don't believe me just yet? Let me show you in the passage in front of us. [pauseeee]

Let's begin with the Judas story... [pause]

Reality kicks in for Judas, who sees that Jesus is condemned. [pause]

It's like those moments where earlier something sounded so good to do, but when the time actually came, regret filled your soul, as you realized that it was, oh, so wrong of a choice.  
[pauseeee]

Thoughts started flooding Judas' mind, Jesus' innocence couldn't be denied, and guilt weighed him down like a 30 ton weight. [pause]

He goes to the chief priests and declares, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." [pauseeee]

It would take a lot just to admit that.

For Judas to admit that he did something so horrific and against God's Law shows the unbearable burden of his guilty conscience. [pause]

When the chief priests refuse to do anything, he throws the money down and leaves.

He's willing to give up what he gained, if only to somehow relieve the never-ceasing pangs that he feels. *[pause]*

He even goes so far as to hang himself because of what he's done. *[pauseeee]*

Judas, without a shadow of a doubt, *knew* that Jesus was innocent. *[pause]*

No person would go to the lengths that Judas took for someone they knew was guilty, or even had inklings that the person was guilty.

Instead, Judas is willing to admit Jesus' innocence, give back all that he gained, and even to take his own life, due to the knowledge that Jesus was innocent. *[pauseeeee]*

The tragedy of Judas' life was certainly his betrayal, but it was also the way he ended. *[pause]*

His life could have been so different! *[pause]*

He followed Jesus around for years.

He got to be so close to Christ, see His miracles, hear His teaching, experience His grace first-hand with his own two eyes.

Yet he not only betrayed Jesus, but he also hung himself in remorse. *[pauseee]*

He could have been faithful to the end like the other disciples.

He could have been used mightily by God in the early church like Peter, yet he squandered it all away. *[pause]*

Judas *could have* genuinely repented to God and experienced forgiveness, but he didn't. *[pause]*

Remember that Peter denied Jesus 3 times, and yet was restored later.

Couldn't Judas have been restored?

If he had truly repented, then yes. *[pause]*

If David's murder and adultery, and if Peter's denials could be forgiven, then we know that no sin genuinely repented of is outside of the gracious forgiveness of God. *[pauseeeee]*

You may say, "Look, Judas obviously regretted what he did, felt guilt and sorrow, and even tried to make things right!"

And I would agree to a point, but here's the thing: did Judas take all of that to God? *[pause]*

No, Judas had sorrow, regret, and guilt, but it wasn't *godly* sorrow, regret, and guilt. *[pause]*

What we see in Judas is what Paul calls “worldly grief”. *[pause]*

In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that “godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”<sup>3</sup> *[pauseeee]*

So godly grief causes someone to be sorrowful, regretful, and feel guilty—yes—but then it leads someone to repent. *[pause]*

On the other hand, worldly grief just leads only to sorrow, self-pity, and despair—there is no repentance involved. *[pause]*

**This is why there are many times that an unbeliever can feel bad for doing something wrong...**

...But it’s only worldly sorrow, if they never take that guilt to God to find the freedom of forgiveness and the peace of eternal life. *[pauseeeee]*

**This is a good reminder that how we respond to our sin is important.** *[pause]*

Do you try to just sweep your sin under the rug? *[pause]*

Do you try to make light of it, and act like it’s not a big deal? *[pause]*

Do you try to ignore it and just push down the guilty feelings? *[pause]*

**It’s good to admit that you did wrong to others.**

It’s good to try to make things right, but have you taken it to God?

**Have you laid it at the foot of the cross, and let Christ’s blood wash it away?** *[pause]*

Take your sin, your guilt, your regret, your remorse to God, and know that He will forgive, if you repent. *[paueese]*

Christ went to the cross to provide forgiveness for our sins, so why wouldn’t we live under the cross, knowing that forgiveness runs down to sinners like us? *[pause]*

Feel the relief of the forgiveness of God through what Jesus has done.

**Remind yourselves that Jesus paid it all.**

Rest in the blood-bought forgiveness of Jesus. *[pauseeee]*

**Judas clearly knew that Jesus was innocent, but so did the chief priests.** *[pause]*

Now Judas was willing to admit that Jesus was innocent, but the chief priests knew it, but never admitted it. *[pause]*

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 7:10.

The chief priests tried to push down and cover up the knowledge that Jesus was innocent by all means possible.

You would never hear *them* say that Jesus was innocent. *[pause]*

They are like politicians who can never say even one good thing about the other party, though deep down they know that they did something good. *[pauseeee]*

Back in the last chapter, we are told that “the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death.”<sup>4</sup>

And now the chief priests hear from the betrayer himself that Jesus was innocent. *[pause]*

Do they reconsider what they are doing? *[pause]*

Do they rethink this, even “just in case” they are wrong?

Nope, rather in their hard-hearted obstinance they refuse to change the decision that they made against Him.

They heartlessly and wickedly ignore Judas’ statement and respond by saying, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” *[pauseeee]*

“What is that to us?”

Isn’t that *everything*?! *[pause]*

Doesn’t that change the whole situation?

Isn’t it the linchpin, that when taken out, the judgment against Jesus falls apart? *[pause]*

Shouldn’t *you*, chief priests, do something with that knowledge?

Yet even hearing this from Judas, they do nothing with the information and try to put it back on Judas’ shoulders. *[pauseeee]*

The chief priests knew Jesus was innocent, yet it just goes to show that as sinners we sometimes ignore the truth when it’s inconvenient. *[pause]*

We do this sometimes, don’t we?

You know that what you are about to do or say is going to hurt another person, but you still go ahead with it because you want to get them back. *[pause]*

You know that lying is wrong, but you do it because in the moment, you want something else. *[pauseeee]*

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 26:59.

We ignore the truth when it's inconvenient, and then we adhere to the truth when it's convenient.  
[pauseeee]

Did you see that with the chief priests when it came to the “blood money”? [pause]

They could ignore Jesus' innocence and seek to kill him contrary to God's Law, yet not long after, they are saying, “It's not lawful to put [the blood money] in the treasury.” [pause]

Really?!

They are willing to shed innocent blood, but they didn't dare put the blood money that betrayed that man into the treasury. [pauseeee]

They were more concerned with religious technicalities, while at the same time seeking to kill a man.

Not to mention that *they* were involved in giving the blood money, and now they feel like they can't put it into the treasury? [pauseee]

Sin makes a big hypocrites, doesn't it?

We don't bat an eye at the bigger sins in our lives, but we sure avoid those smaller things with Pharisaical rigidity. [pauseeee]

Even the wicked chief priests knew that Jesus was innocent, but there's another person in this passage who knows the truth: Pilate. [pause]

Jesus goes before Pilate, who is the Roman governor.

And so Pilate has his own trial conducted with his own questions to see what the truth is regarding Christ.

But after asking Jesus some questions, Pilate can't see anything wrong with Him. [pause]

In verse 23, Pilate even says to the crowd, “What evil has he done?”

Additionally, Pilate's wife dreams about Jesus, and tells him to have nothing to do with Him, who she calls a “righteous man”. [pause]

You find Pilate seeking to get out condemning Jesus by appealing to the custom of freeing a prisoner for the Jews, but to no avail. [pauseee]

From beginning to end, you can tell that Pilate doesn't see anything wrong with Him.

And in a final act of admitting that he thinks that Jesus is innocent, he washes his hands, and declares himself innocent of Jesus' blood. [pause]

But here's the thing: Pilate tried to get out of being responsible for the death of Jesus, but he was still responsible.

He still sent Jesus to be crucified, and even let his men scourge Him. *[pause]*

He had the power to stop it all, and refuse to let Jesus be killed, but He gave into the crowd out of fear.

So no matter how much he tried to push away his guilt, he was guilty. *[pauseeee]*

I want to talk about that some more because what's fascinating is that Judas, the chief priests, and Pilate all tried to push away their guilt. *[pause]*

Judas tried to feel better about himself by returning the money, seeking to get the responsibility off of his shoulders. *[pause]*

The chief priests tried to absolve themselves by placing it back on Judas' shoulders, and by simply ignoring the truth. *[pause]*

And Pilate tried to shake the guilt off by putting it back on the Jewish crowd. *[pause]*

This just goes to show what sinful mankind does with its guilt—it tries to push it away by various means. *[pause]*

Every person knows inherently that they are guilty before God,<sup>5</sup> but those who don't turn to the Lord try to remove it by all means *except* the one way that can truly remove it: repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. *[pauseeee]*

The world tries to push away their guilt by simply having worldly sorrow like Judas.

They think that if they just feel bad enough for it, or if they just try to make things right horizontally with others, then the guilt will go away.

But it doesn't truly go away, for they never took to the Lord.

They never bowed at the foot of the cross, and felt the burden roll off, so it's still there. *[pause]*

Just feeling bad enough, or doing some good deeds doesn't remove guilt, only the cross of Christ has that power. *[pauseeee]*

Others blame shift in order to free themselves from the feelings of guilt.

This is what Adam and Eve did in the garden when they were caught.

They tried to blame someone else, instead of owning up to their sin. *[pause]*

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<sup>5</sup> See Romans 1:32.



Both the chief priests and Pilate did this...

They tried to shift the blame to others—the chief priests tried to put it back on Judas, Pilate tried to put it solely on the crowd.

And you see this in how both the chief priests and Pilate say, “See to it yourself,” instead of seeing to it *themselves*. [pauseeee]

Another way that sinful humanity tries to rid itself of guilt is by simply trying to declare it to be so. [pause]

That’s what Pilate did.

He tried to declare himself innocent, while at the same time, sending Jesus to death. [pause]

Positive affirmations of innocence and guiltlessness will not take away your guilt, no matter how many times you pronounce them over yourself...

Guilt is only expunged by the blood of Jesus. [pause]

If you keep trying to declare that you are not guilty before God without turning to Christ, it’s all vain words, and you will still feel the guilt.

You are only guiltless in God’s sight when *HE* declares you guiltless.

And the amazing thing is that He says to those who believe in Christ, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”<sup>6</sup> [pauseeee]

There *is* a way to not feel the guilt you feel before God, and it’s only through faith in Jesus, who took your place and your sin on the cross and paid for it.

You can be reconciled to God, blameless before Him, and feel the blessed relief of no more guilt or shame before Him. [pauseeeee]

We saw here that Jesus was innocent, for even those who sent Him to death knew it, and yet He was still condemned.

*But we also see that...*

## **II. Though innocent, Jesus was substituted for the guilty.**

“During the 17th century, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, sentenced a soldier to be shot for his crimes. [pause]

The execution was to take place at the ringing of the evening curfew bell. However, the bell did not sound. [pause]

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:1.

The soldier's fiancé had climbed into the belfry and clung to the great clapper of the bell to prevent it from striking. *[pause]*

When she was summoned by Cromwell to account for her actions, she wept as she showed him her bruised and bleeding hands.

Cromwell's heart was touched and he said, 'Your lover shall live because of your sacrifice. Curfew shall not ring tonight!'"<sup>7</sup> *[pauseeee]*

There's something within us that admires the self-giving sacrifice of another to put themselves in harm's way in order for another person to go free. *[pause]*

We find it in our books, movies, or news articles.

This is because self-sacrifice for another is a magnificent display that bursts forth and beams with so much love that it touches our hearts. *[pauseeee]*

A truth found in Scripture is the substitutionary atonement of Christ. *[pause]*

This truth is the truth that Jesus died for our sins, taking our place as a substitute—the guiltless died for the guilty. *[pause]*

Well the story of Jesus being swapped out for Barabbas is a stunning illustration of what Jesus did on the cross. *[pauseeee]*

Pilate tries to give the people an “easy way out” by offering an option to release either Jesus or Barabbas. *[pause]*

This should have been an easy choice.

Jesus was innocent and sinless, while Barabbas, we are told elsewhere, was an insurrectionist, who committed murder.<sup>8</sup> *[pause]*

I think of those “Capital One” TV commercials, where the guy says that banking with Capital One is the “easiest decision in the history of decisions”.

But I'd say that this one was easier. *[pause]*

And yet what happens?

The crowd chooses to let Barabbas walk free, while sending Jesus to His death! *[pause]*

The sinner was released when Jesus was delivered over to be crucified. *[pauseeee]*

How could that not make us think of what Jesus did for us? *[pause]*

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<sup>7</sup> *Our Daily Bread*. <https://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/substitution.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> See Mark 15:7.

We are Barabbas!

We were guilty, condemned, and rightly deserved to die, yet in the greatest swap of history, the innocent died for the guilty.

We were swapped out for Christ, for Christ “suffered...for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”<sup>9</sup> *[pauseeee]*

Now we don’t know what happened with Barabbas after he was released, but just imagine if he heard and eventually believed the truth of who Jesus was. *[pause]*

Imagine him knowing that he was guilty, condemned, and on his way to death, but the innocent Son of God took his spot and died instead of him. *[pause]*

Well guess what?

We don’t have to actually be Barabbas to know what that feels like, for it happened to us! *[pause]*

We are all sinners, who rightly deserved to die and face God’s wrath.

We were justly condemned, for we were guilty before God, yet what did God do?

He put forward Jesus, the sinless, innocent Son of God, who took on flesh, to be “pierced for our transgressions...[and] crushed for our iniquities.”<sup>10</sup> *[pause]*

As Paul says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”<sup>11</sup> *[pauseeee]*

Though innocent, Jesus humbly took our place, so that we could be free and forgiven.

Like Barabbas, who wasn’t actually innocent, but declared innocent because Christ took his spot, so we are declared righteous in God’s sight through Christ taking our place. *[pauseeee]*

What else can we do but leap for joy, rejoice in His great act of love, and marvel at His grace?

We live because the Son of God died.

Jesus was substituted for the guilty—us. *[pauseeee]*

You see, this passage is seeping with the innocence of Christ, for even those who sent Him to die, knew it was true.

*And yet...*

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 3:18.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 53:5.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21.

## Though innocent, Jesus was delivered over to die for us!

You know, it's one thing to be innocent of a crime, but it's wholly another one to be completely innocent of all sin.

And that's what Jesus was and is. *[pause]*

He was completely sinless, and innocent of what they condemned Him for, yet He went to the cross for us. *[pause]*

He could have asked the Father for more than twelve legions of angels.<sup>12</sup>

He could have looked for and walked through an 'easy way out'. *[pause]*

He's the Word made flesh,<sup>13</sup> who could have destroyed all of His prosecutors and judges' arguments with just the words from His mouth.

And yet, if you notice in these verses, He kept mostly silent. *[pause]*

Why?!

If He's truly the King, as Pilate questioned Him about, then why go through with allowing this to happen? *[pause]*

Because He is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>14</sup>

He is the spotless, sinless, innocent Lamb of God, who Isaiah prophesied would be "oppressed, and...afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth..."

...Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."<sup>15</sup> *[pauseeee]*

Though innocent, Jesus humbly submitted to being like a lamb in order to take away our sins.

But unlike a lamb, who doesn't understand what's going on, Jesus knew exactly what was going on, and still went. *[pauseeee]*

How else can we respond to all of this, but like Pilate, who was "greatly amazed"?

But unlike Pilate, we don't simply wash our hands and say, "See to it yourselves," pushing away the responsibility of a decision.

But we bow the knee in repentance, faith, worship, and service to the King, who died for us so that we could go free.

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<sup>12</sup> A reference to Matthew 26:53.

<sup>13</sup> A reference to John 1:14.

<sup>14</sup> John 1:29.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 53:7.