

Part 48: Convicted

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In 1661 the preacher and author John Bunyan was arrested in England for preaching the gospel without being a licensed minister. As a Baptist and a free-churchman, the Anglican Church in England refused to license him as a minister. But as a Christian, Bunyan had a compulsion and a gifting to proclaim the gospel to whoever would listen. He was convicted and sentenced to three months in prison and that conviction would change his life forever.

Three months extended to twelve years. During which time his wife Elizabeth not only had to raise their children as a single parent, but spent much of her time petitioning the authorities for his release. It was also due to this conviction that he would write a little book called, "Pilgrims Progress." A story which has been treasured by Christians and non-Christians alike since its publication in 1678.

Bunyan's conviction changed his life, the life of his family, and the imagination of the church for centuries to come.

We know the transformative power a conviction, or the lack of one, can have. Think of the personal and cultural influence of cases like O.J. Simpson or Ted Bundy. Or ones that seem suspect to reasonable doubt like Adnan Syed or Stephen Avery.

I would imagine that even though most of us in here might be familiar with a drama or true crime show which describes legal convictions, most of you have never been convicted of a crime. But we all know what conviction feels like don't we? While we have never been externally convicted by a court, we are familiar with the internal conviction of our hearts.

It sneaks up on us like the criminal it makes us feel like, spoils our mood and sullies our conscience. And now more than ever we live in a culture where moral outrage is the identity badge of belonging. So not only do we feel conviction personally, but we are convicted that we are not convicted about the things of which we ought to be convicted.

Some of these feelings are true feelings, for we have done wrong. Yet some of these feelings are artificially imposed by those around us. I read an article the other week that tried to convince me that since I always ask my Alexa dot to do things for me, that I am really an oppressor of females because Alexa is a female.

But what's interesting on a cultural level is that cries for conviction always carry with it commands of absolution. If you are convicted about your carbon footprint, change your mode of transportation. If you are convicted about your care for people, start wholesale affirmations of those around you without questions. If you are convicted about justice, start a social media campaign, donate to my cause, petition at your local courthouse.

Often we listen to these because we want the relief from conviction. The question is what do you do with the conviction you experience in your life? What are the influencers in your world telling you to do with those feelings of guilt?

These are important questions to ask because today we are going to look at the first trial of Jesus in the closing chapters of Matthew. In this passage, just like John Bunyan, we are going to see a man wrongly convicted for the gospel. And that conviction will forever shape the church in ways Bunyan's never could.

You have just heard our text today read for us, and as we circle back around to look in more detail we are going to see that in this Jewish trial of Jesus it is not just Jesus who is convicted. Everyone is convicted. While Jesus is the only one to be externally convicted, everyone else is internally convicted of something. So what we are going to do is examine each conviction and we are going to see how the wrongful conviction of Jesus shapes the true conviction of our hearts.

What we are going to see today in the conviction of Jesus is **Jesus' Divine Identity**, in the conviction of Peter, **The weight of grace**, the conviction of Judas shows **The sorrow of self-righteousness** and the Conviction of the High Priests **The Blindness of Legalism**.

Let's begin by looking at the one conviction which influences everything else in this text, and that is the conviction of Jesus: **Jesus' Divine Identity**. If you remember last time we were in Matthew, Jesus was just arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, and the story continues in **Matthew 26:57-68**.

Now this might seem like an odd sort of court proceeding. In this passage we read about prosecutors finding and vetting false witnesses trying to find ones who would agree. We hear of heated and emotional outbursts and raw physical abuse.

And this is due in part that this is not really an official trial. You see the religious leaders at this time knew that they had to check off two boxes before Jesus could be killed. They had to assemble what is called "The Sanhedrin." This was the highest religious court of the Jews. And the Sanhedrin would have to affirm the charges against Jesus in a formal way, and then the Sanhedrin would have to appeal those charges to the Roman courts, where Jesus would then be tried in a Roman trial for it was only Rome who had the authority to put anyone to death.

The problem was that the law dictated that the Sanhedrin cannot meet at night. So what we are reading is a mock trial, an establishing of witness, and a devious dress rehearsal for the formal trial which would happen in the morning. This is corruption at its fullest.

We see the extent these men have to go through to condemn a man who has done no wrong. The tense of the language here implies that the search for witnesses was a long drawn out process. They knowingly brought forward all sorts of false witnesses to knowingly entrap Jesus, but even their false witnesses couldn't make anything stick!

If only that were true of us right! If only we were so immune from conviction! But we all know that if those who oppose us, those who even love us and live with us, came forward with charges they would come with staying power. But this was not so for Jesus.

But finally two false witnesses come forward and they each misquote one of Jesus' statements, but because they misquote it together, they finally have agreeing testimonies. And so the high priest stands up and demands that Jesus answer and he is silent. Jesus' won't incriminate or clear himself. So they priest cuts to the chase: **Matthew 26:63-64**.

In Jesus' answer to the high priest, he begins to quote from Daniel chapter 7 which describes God sending forth a Son of Man, who will be given all glory and all dominion over all the nations. And it is this allusion that helps us understand why the assembly is so offended and quick to convict Jesus of blasphemy.

In a fake court case with false witnesses, a human priest demands to know if Jesus is the messiah of God. To which Jesus answers, "More than that, I am the one true authority, I have dominion over this proceeding and everything else. And further, I am the one who will share the throne of God himself, the one seated at the right hand of Power."

In essence Jesus says, I am not just the messiah of the Jews, I am God's chosen servant who has been given all things including joint authority and power with God almighty. Look at the response of the assembly: **Matthew 26:65-68**.

Make no mistake, Jesus is being condemned to death because these men refuse to believe that he is God. Jesus' crime was being the second person of the Trinity sent to save humanity from their sins. And if this is the claim of Jesus, it is a natural point of decision. You must decide who Jesus is and there is no middle ground. He either is to be believed and treated as this Lord, or he is to be rejected.

In Jesus' conviction we see his divine identity: Jesus came as God to die on a cross for the sins of those who would hope in him. In light of that you must answer the same question: "What is your judgement?" What do you make of a King like this? And when you boil it down there are really only two answers. You may say with the crowd here: "He deserves death." Or you may say in faith "He deserves my life."

As we transition to look at the other stories in this text, you must first make up your mind on Jesus. Who is he to you and what response do you have towards that identity?

In our text today it is only Jesus who is wrongfully convicted, everyone has a right conviction. They really are in the wrong. Which means as we transition to look at the remaining three stories, they are drastically different, yet critically informed by the one we just read. We are not going to compare these following convictions to the conviction of Jesus, we are actually going to compare them to each other.

And this comparison process begins as we look at The Conviction of Peter. And it is in this story that we see first-hand **the weight of grace**. Let's read this story together, **Matthew 26:69-75**.

Peter was convicted and wept of his failure to his Lord. Matthew's writing is really stunning with the parallels he is drawing for us in each of these stories. Remember what we read a few weeks ago in the beginning of this chapter: **Matthew 26:3-4**. And now look at where Peter finds himself in this text **Matthew 26:58,69a**. It was in the courtyard of the high priest that Jesus' enemies plotted against him, and it was in the courtyard of the high priest that Jesus' closest disciple denied him. Even more than that Matthew tracks the movement of Peter. In verse 58, Peter goes into the courtyard, as close as he can be to his Lord, but after each confrontation he moves further away, from the courtyard, to the entrance of the courtyard, to leaving it all together. It is as if with every word, and every foot step the relational and spiritual gap between Jesus and Peter grows and there is a point where Peter realizes the crushing distance.

Thanks to Matthew we can feel the irony of this text, but we cannot imagine the pain. When the words of Jesus come into Peter's mind he can do nothing but go out and weep bitterly. Knowing what we know about Peter, this is all the more sorrowful.

Peter was always the brash disciple of action. At the transfiguration Peter sees a glorified Jesus and his response is, "I'm going to build you a house up here." When Jesus predicted his disciples abandoning him, it was Peter who hours ago said, "I'll never leave you Lord, everyone else will leave you, but I won't. I will die for you Jesus." It was Peter who couldn't stay awake to pray for Jesus in the garden despite Jesus' repeated appeals. It was Peter who upon seeing Jesus' enemies arrest him took out a sword and struck one of the crowd. It was Peter who followed Jesus to his trial and sat down between the guards.

If there was anyone who would attempt to reconcile a moral failure with rash decision making it would have been Peter. If there were anyone willing to rush into the court proceedings and risk his life for Jesus it would have been Peter. If there were anyone who would have lit the building on fire in hopes that Jesus could escape it would have been Peter. If there were anyone who by any effort of his own would try to make up for what had just happened, it would have been Peter.

But it seems for the first time in the book of Matthew, Peter comes crashing into the full realization of his humanity. He had failed Jesus, and he knew he couldn't fix what was just done. And we do not hear of Peter again in the book of Matthew. But in Mark's account of the gospel Peter's name comes up again.

In Mark's account two women run to the tomb of Jesus to find it empty and behold an angel is there waiting for them. And notice what the angel says to the women: **Mark 16:7**. Now it would have been sufficient for the angel to say, "And tell the disciples" for Peter was one of them. But the angel specifically told them to tell Peter. Why? Because the news of Jesus' resurrection was hope for this broken sinner.

You see the resurrection of Jesus reminds us that there really can be life after death. There really can be success after failure. There really can be forgiveness after atonement. There can be grace abounding even for the hardest sins. The resurrection of Jesus shows Peter that his story doesn't have to end in sin.

Because Jesus was convicted despite being sinless, there was hope for Peter who was convicted of his true sin.

This broken and weeping Peter would go on to be a pillar of the church not because he was able to reconcile his heart on his own, but because the grace of Jesus Christ covered his sins. Brothers and sisters when we feel the conviction of sins, do you know as Peter would come to know three days later, that Jesus has dealt with your sins in full? This is the good news of what Jesus has done for us. This is the happy ending that can be yours as well.

To show this truth by contrast, Matthew provides an anti-Peter in this text. To help us understand what grace looks like, we see its absence in the conviction of Judas. In this story we see **the sorrow of self-righteousness**.

Read with me **Matthew 27:1-5**. When Peter heard the crow he was convicted of his denial, and when Judas saw that Jesus was condemned he was convicted of his betrayal.

The word in Greek translated here as "changed his mind" carries with it charged emotions. He was remorseful and deeply saddened. Judas even rightly identifies his actions as sinful. If you have a King James Bible it says that Judas "repented of himself." And while it's true in the sense that he changed his mind, the word used is not the word the biblical writers use for repentance. It is close. In fact the two words in Greek even sound like each other. But they are not the same.

But that's the point isn't it. Judas is broken over his sin, and everything he is experiencing is like repentance, but it is not repentance. And the same is true in our life, there is no substitute for true repentance. Peter and Judas are both broken over their sin, but only one has a happy ending. And Judas' tragic story shows us what it looks like to miss repentance in both action and in experience.

In action Judas turns to his own ability to make right what he has wronged. He takes his coins and he goes to return them. In his mind he is able to undo what he has done wrong by beginning a pattern of right action.

This is what we call self-righteousness. It is thinking that in and of yourself you are able to do enough on your own to lift the internal conviction in your own heart. And I would imagine this is a very common thought for us. We sin. We feel bad that we sinned. We rightly identify sin as sin. And then we begin to work our way out of it.

Why do we do this so much? I think it's because we are quick to identify the weight of sin but not the depth of it. We are quick to see the power of sin, but we wrestle to see the power of Jesus.

We think our sin is superficial enough that we really can change it. If we sinned against someone we can make it right, but our sin is deeper than that. We have sinned against God and unless you have a ladder to heaven that's a distance we can't span. We cannot get to God. But that's why we must see the power of Jesus. It was only Jesus who could make it right because that's what the messiah, the Son of Man came to do.

That's what repentance is. It is not turning to our own efforts, but turning to the efforts of Jesus. Self-righteousness seeks to relieve conviction by pointing to ourselves. Repentance relieves conviction by pointing ourselves to Jesus. Look at what Paul says about this in **2 Corinthians 7:10**.

This might seem like a small difference, but remember the experience of Judas. Imagine being Judas. Being so deeply grieved over the weight in your heart. So much so that you are willing to part with whatever treasure you have, you are willing to make right what you have wronged. And you go to the one person who you think can help you, and you throw yourself at him and they look at your grief and sorrow, they gauge your actions and they say: "What does this have to do with us? You're on your own."

You see the sorrow of self-righteousness is this: there comes a point when you realize that you really are on your own and there's nothing you're not strong enough to get rid of that conviction. What a terrible place to be. To know you are sinful, but to have no ability in yourself to fix it, and no worldly individual to help you with it.

The beauty of this text is that none of you in here are Judas. Which means that while you might have the same experience of entrapment that Judas had. You can turn to a better leader than Jesus turned to. If you go to Jesus with your sin he will not turn you away. He will not say: "What is that to me? See to it yourself."

Are you broken in your sin? Are you turning to yourself or to other man-powered efforts only to hear more crushing commands? Then perhaps you need to hear the words of the true high priest: **Matthew 11:28-30**.

If you are a person burdened by the conviction of your self-righteousness take the only command that can relieve your burden: run to Jesus. Confess your sins to him! He is faithful to forgive them. He is in the business of cleansing you from them. The world wants you to be convicted because it wants you to listen to their cure. But it is only Jesus who can actually do something with that burden.

The truth is that if this is you, there is great hope for you. Because there is one final conviction in this story which is a far greater risk. Let's read in closing the conviction of the high priests. In this short passage we see **the blindness of legalism. Matthew 27:6-10**.

So Judas throws his coins into the temple and this poses a problem for the high priests. All of a sudden they are convicted because these coins in the temple violate the law. In Deuteronomy 23 the law prohibits any money gained through impure means to be given to the temple.

All of a sudden there is this urgent need for these men to uphold the law. The temple has been desecrated. And here we see Matthew's beautiful writing again. In verse seven it says, "they took counsel" to determine what to do with the money. Do you remember the last time these same men took counsel? **Matthew 27:1**.

At this point they have convened a clandestine and generally prohibited trial, they have called forward and entertained knowingly false witnesses, they have paid a bounty for the betrayal of a man, and they have knowingly condemned an innocent man to death for crimes they knew were false. But here they are concerned about the legality of money being admitted into the temple treasury.

We may at times be Peter, and we may at times be Judas, but the more dangerous place to be is with the conviction of these men. For they are convicted, but entirely unbroken. They are so concerned about their own law-keeping that they are completely unaware of the ways in which their life is cosmically out of line. They are numb to the deception which is in their heart.

Living a good clean life is not what makes you a Christian. It is not what removes debt from your head. It is being reconciled to God through Jesus which absolves that burden and you cannot receive that grace by mere morality.

If you are one who takes hope and finds present absolution in your own actions and not in the actions of Jesus pray that God would open your eyes to your folly.

The great irony of the religious leaders in this text is this: when Jesus was convicted they began to hit him and asked for him to prophecy by telling them who hit him. And Jesus was silent. But Jesus was anything but silent in this text wasn't he.

With Peter, Jesus' prophecy of Peter's denial was fulfilled. In Judas, Jesus prophecy that his betrayer would wish himself to not be born came true. And even in the buying of a potter's field, a prophecy concerning Jesus was fulfilled.

The only relief from the conviction of your heart is the conviction that Jesus is Lord. And if you are convinced of that, and if you repent and turn to him, even for those who like Peter feel so far off, who like Judas feel so lost, there has been made a resting place for strangers.

The conviction of Jesus and his subsequent death and resurrection has purchased for us acceptance and belonging which the world and its demands could never fulfill.

I'm reminded of a quote from John Bunyan's wife that is more true and of more hope when applied to our savior: "Because he is a tinker and a poor man, therefore he is despised and cannot have justice. Nevertheless, God hath owned him and done much good by him."

Has the conviction of Jesus done much good for you?