

Communion

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Date: 11 January 2015

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[0 : 00] mentioned in passing as we prayed, this week has been dominated by the brutal killings in Paris of, among others, staff and cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo. Even as we gather here, there's a huge gathering in the center of Paris in solidarity with and in recognition of what has happened in these past days. It doesn't really come to the point that I want to deal with this morning, but it is somewhat striking and sobering how we have heard and seen so much about what has happened in Paris, and rightly so, and yet how little we've heard of massacres on a much greater and horrendous scale in Nigeria that we mentioned briefly in prayer, really quite horrendous events in that particular nation.

But as we think particularly of what perhaps has more occupied our attention, the events in Paris, the events have raised and do raise a number of issues that are difficult to carefully consider and to come to a view on in the immediate aftermath of such a tragedy. It's always wise to take care in coming to conclusions if you haven't given careful thought to how you have come to those conclusions. But recognizing that that is something we need to be careful about, one of the issues that arises in the light of what has happened in Paris is the matter of what we might call the right to mock.

Is there such a thing as a right to mock? Do we have a right to mock others, to mock the faith of others, to mock anything about others? Do we have a right to mock? Now, we may have, we can debate that, we may even wish to defend the legal right to mock. But what about the moral right to mock?

I have to say I struggle to see how some of the cartoons that grace the cover of Charlie Hebdo stand up to the call that is directed to us as believers. The words of Paul as he wrote to the Christians in Philippi, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think.

We could add and write and draw about such things. But you know, leaving aside that legitimate question or debate about the right to mock, really for us as Christians, the more pressing concern is not our or others' debatable right to mock, but rather how we respond to being mocked. That really is a much more pressing and practical concern for us. How do we respond to being mocked, to our faith being mocked, to our God being mocked? How ought we to respond? I think Jesus can help us in this matter.

[3 : 34] He can help us by His example, and He can help us by His teaching, of which there is a great deal in the pages of the New Testament on this very specific matter. This morning, we want to consider something of His example as the one who was mocked, and as we consider how He responded to the mockery that He endured. And then, God willing, this evening, we will spend a little time thinking about something of His teaching on this same matter, as we find it in the Sermon on the Mount.

So, this morning, then, the example of Jesus as the mocked one, mocked in His darkest hour as the nails held Him to His accursed cross. And I want to order what I have to say under two main headings.

First of all, the mocking that He endured, and then the response that He gave to that mocking. Today, we'll spend a little bit more time on the first of these two, not because it is of greater importance, but just because the material perhaps merits a little bit more time being given to it.

So, these two main areas that we want to think of, the mocking that He endured and the response that He gave. And in doing this, in considering these matters, my objective is twofold. In the first place, that it would help us stand in grateful awe as we consider one aspect of Christ's suffering in our place. And what better place to be than in the place of grateful awe as we gather around His table in a few moments' time. So, at that level, I hope that it serves to help us, but also that it would allow us to learn from Jesus as we too, in some measure, we recognize, of course, in a much lesser measure, but as we too face being mocked for what we believe and for the one we serve. First of all, then, the mocking endured. And in order to consider the mocking endured, what we'll do is pose and try and answer three questions. First of all, who are the mockers? Then, how do they mock Him? And then, finally, what was the impact on Jesus of being so mocked? Who are His mockers? We're going to be focusing our attention particularly on the second passage in Luke's Gospel, but we will, on occasion, make reference to the first passage that we read in Matthew's Gospel that adds some material not found in Luke. So, who are His mockers? Well, I think we can distinguish three groups. I'm sure if you wish, you could make the divisions in other ways, but I want to distinguish three groups who make up together those who mocked Him. You have, first of all, the religious authorities. Then, you have others who are described as the passers-by. And then, you have a third group who are what I'm calling His fellow sufferers. And I'm thinking there of the two thieves who were crucified, one on His left and one on His right. And I think we can distinguish between them, though no doubt there's a significant amount of overlap as well between them. And at the risk of oversimplifying, I think these three groups represent mockers in every age. And it's important for us, when mocked, to have a handle on who our mockers are and where they are coming from. And I think as we look at these three groups who mock Jesus, we can draw some insight in this regard. So, three groups. The first, the hard core haters. The Jewish religious authorities very much fall into that category. We have them described in Matthew chapter 27 and verse 41, who they were in the same way, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders mocked him.

They are men who represented the religious establishment. We're certainly not saying that all in the religious establishment shared their view, but nonetheless, these men represented the religious authorities. Hard core haters. They hated Jesus. They hated Jesus with a passion. Their hatred was deep, deep-seated, and also we could say in many ways irrational. Hatred often is marked by irrationality.

[8 : 31] Not always, but often it has that characteristic. And it has always been so, and it remains so. When we think of our own day, there are those who hate the Christian gospel. They hate the message of the Bible. They are what we're calling hard core haters. Rebels often do hate the one they are rebelling against, even if they refuse to acknowledge the one they are rebelling against. Now, I do recognize that many people, perhaps most people, are more, we might say, mildly indifferent to God and the gospel. But there are those who hate God with a passion. They hate the very God they vehemently proclaim. It does not exist.

Just this week in the, I don't know, one day of this week, I was reading through a thread of a comment that had been posted on Facebook. And one of those who contributed to the thread said the following.

He said, if God did exist, I would hate him. Now, how do you reason with that kind of attitude? If God did exist, I would hate him. Hard core haters. Well, among those who mocked Jesus, there were those we could so describe, and very particularly the religious authorities. But there were also those who we might describe as the go with the flow, mockers. You see, at the cross we find those who passed by, in Matthew chapter 27 and verse 39, those who passed by. Now, I think in fairness, we shouldn't think of them as casual passers-by. I think it unlikely that many people just happen to be passing by Golgotha. If you were there, it's because you intended to be there. But nonetheless, they're certainly not in the same category as the religious authorities. They were passing by. And Luke, we're told of those who watched what was happening. They stood watching. They did not instigate any opposition to Jesus. They didn't take any initiative that would have led to Jesus being where He was. No, they wouldn't have dreamed of doing any such thing. These are people who did not sit down and consciously ponder on why Jesus was deserving of such treatment, of such insults and sneering. They just went with the flow.

They went with the flow. We know of the crowds at His trial. They just go with the flow. Everybody, seemingly, was insulting Jesus. So, why not join in with the crowd? If everybody's doing it, it must be right.

They were the go with the flow mockers. And that is certainly a very contemporary picture. It has ever been so. There are many such folk today who carelessly and unthinkingly mock and belittle and pour scorn on God's Word, on God's law, on God's name, on God's people. And they're just going with the flow, the crowd mentality, peer pressure, all of these things we're familiar with. Indeed, if we're honest, we'd have to say that we sometimes succumb to. Well, there were such at the cross, those who passed by, those who watched, and yet who joined in in mocking Jesus. But then there are those I'm describing as the suffering protesters. And I think we can describe the thieves, the criminals, whatever it was that their crime was, and there is much debate on that front. But whatever it was, I think we can describe them as suffering, protesters, in particular the thief whose mocking words are recorded for us in Luke chapter 23.

[12 : 28] There in verse 39, what do we read? One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him, aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us. I don't think this man really fits into the group of hardcore haters. He's certainly not a simple passerby. He seems to be clenching his fist not only at Jesus, but at God. Of course, he didn't identify Jesus as being God. He looked beyond the one who was there hanging beside him and clenches his fist at God himself for his miserable predicament.

Now, as I've just commented a moment ago, we're not altogether sure what his crime had been. He's described as a thief. The word that is used, particularly the word used by Matthew, is also used in other contexts to describe a revolutionary or a freedom fighter, a political rebel. It's possible that that is what he was rather than simply a common criminal. And if that is so, you can imagine that this was a man with his own ideals. Maybe not ideals that many would share, but his own ideals nonetheless. Perhaps even his own religious convictions. But as he hangs on his own cross, he wonders, where is God in the midst of my suffering? Where is God in the midst of my people's suffering, of the suffering of Israel? This man is suffering a painful death and points his accusing finger at an indifferent God who fails to lift his finger to hell. Certainly, that's how he perceives matters. And you may come across people like that, people who suffer, people who have been dealt a bad hand, maybe a succession of bad hands, and they point the finger of accusation, sometimes aggressively, sometimes tentatively, at a distant and indifferent God. Often that they don't do so glibly, they don't do so hatefully, but rather their protest is born of their pain and confusion and impotence. So, there are many who mock Jesus and coming from different places to explain their involvement in this mockery. But let's think about how they mock him. Having identified in some way who they are, how do they mock him? And I'm thinking here of the nature of the mocking endured by Jesus on the cross. And I want to suggest five features or characteristics of the mocking that Jesus endured at Calvary, just very fleetingly. First of all, we can describe it as vitriolic and violent. This was not idle banter that maybe just crossed the line. It was brutal. It was vitriolic, and it was violent. It was verbally violent, and it was, of course, accompanied by brutal physical violence. Even in the matter of the mockery, we think of what had occurred before the cross when the soldiers combined mockery with physical violence as they flogged him and as they fashioned a crown of thorns. The mockery that Jesus endured is vitriolic and violent, but also as we see him there at Calvary on the cross, we find mockery that was grounded in falsehood in Matthew chapter 27. And in verse 39, notice one of the taunts that Jesus has to endure. Those who pass by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, you who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days? Now, of course, in mocking him in this way, those who did so were picking up on one of the accusations that had been made against Jesus at his trial. As it's recorded earlier in that same chapter, and certainly in the previous chapter, the accusation was that Jesus had claimed that he would destroy the temple and build it in three days. But of course, this challenge, this accusation that became a jibe, was itself at best, and even this is being overly generous, a half-truth. Jesus had used very similar language, but of course, he was speaking of his own self as the temple of God. If you destroy this temple,

then in three days it will be raised again. But the words of Jesus were taken and twisted to fit a given agenda or prejudice. And of course, that kind of treatment of the truth is one that we find so often. There's nothing new under the sun. This is the staple diet of so many contemporary mockers of the faith, to grab a verse from here or some aspect of Christian truth that they see it, to twist it and to throw it back at us as a grand accusation. And that is something that we simply have to get used to.

That is so often the nature of the mockery that is to be endured. Certainly that was true for Jesus. But then another feature of the mockery that he endured is this, that it was, or I would suggest that it was, and I think there's reason for so suggesting, it was satanic in origin.

Now, even to use that language is something that's increasingly rare. It would seem many are reluctant to acknowledge the presence and activity of Satan, period. But particularly in this matter, he is, without doubt, the principal instigator and cheerleader of all mocking of the faith.

[18 : 35] And in terms of that being so at Calvary, notice the language used by those who mocked Jesus. In Matthew chapter 27 and in verse 40, the end of the verse, come down from the cross if you are the Son of God. Notice especially that taunting question, if you are the Son of God. And I ask you to focus on that question, because I would now ask you to, if that sounds familiar at all, that question, those words, if you are the Son of God. Do these very words not carry a sinister echo of Satan's questioning words at Christ's temptation? If you are the Son of God, then cast yourself from this mountain. If you are the Son of God, then cast yourself from this mountain. And this, of course, reminds us that the mocking endured by Jesus at the cross was not only a painful trial, but it was also a real and severe temptation as the devil himself, through those who mocked, sought to sow that seed of doubt in the mind even of the Messiah. Am I the Son of God? And yet here I am. It was satanic in origin, but it was also blind and perverse. I'm thinking especially of the taunt that we read, he saved others, but he can't save himself. And I call that blind and perverse because the taunt reveals a curious reality. His mockers knew of and were witnesses to Jesus saving others, as they themselves declare. Many of them, certainly the religious authorities and many of the passers-by knew all about Lazarus, the one who had been raised from the dead, and they knew of many others who

Jesus had saved. And yet, though they know that to be so, though they declare it to be so, even as they mock him, they reject the one they know had saved others. This mockery that they indulge in is blind and perverse. Of course, and this is not our concern this morning, but these words, unknowingly to them, also contain the great truth. He can't save himself. If he was to save us, then indeed he couldn't save himself. But then finally, as we describe the nature of this mockery, we can describe it also as cruel and callous. Of course, it's all cruel and callous, but I draw your attention particularly to the taunt, he trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him or if he desires him. And I say cruel as the intention is to cast a devilish doubt on the very desire and love of the Father for his Son.

His mockers say, yes, you trust in God. We see that you trust in God because you trust in God that you are where you are. But where is God now? Where is the one you call your Father now? You trust in him, but how does he respond to your trust? How does he reward you for your trust?

Where is he now? If he desires him, let him rescue him now. Even that word now is a very intriguing one, one that makes us probe a little deeper as we think of our own circumstances sometimes.

How challenging to faith can be a focus, an unhelpful focus on the word now. Let God rescue him now. You see, we know that the Father would rescue Jesus from death, but he would not do so now.

[22 : 41] He would do so not from the cross, but even more gloriously from the grave itself. But not now. Now was not the time in which the Father would rescue the Son. And though it seems almost inappropriate to draw parallels with ourselves, can we not in a measure do so and remind ourselves how crucial it is for us never to demand of God that he act now or to question God because he doesn't act now in the here and now. In the here and now, is it not true for us that sometimes he appears to be so distant and silent? But the reality, of course, is that our God is a rescuing God and he will rescue you, but perhaps not now. Cruel and callous was the mockery that Jesus endured. What was the impact on Jesus of this mockery that he endured? Well, we're not explicitly at all, but there can be no doubt that the insults and the jeers and the taunts were profoundly painful. Arrows from the very pit that pierced his heart and soul as surely as the nails pierced his hands and feet. We just listen to what the reformer John Calvin says concerning the mockery that Jesus endured. This certainly was more cruel than all the other tortures that they upbraided and reviled and tormented him as one that had been cast off and forsaken by God. In this, Jesus endured and suffered beyond anything that we will ever be called to endure, for Jesus was, in a very real sense, cast off and forsaken by God. We never will be. All this pain, all this torment, all this torture, for you and for me in our place and in our stead. And this is what we remember and gratefully acknowledge as we gather at the Lord's table. The mockery endured, but more briefly, the response given by the one who was so mocked. What does Jesus say and what does he do in response to being mocked? Well, first of all, what does he say? Well, it won't take long to answer that question, for he says nothing. He says nothing. He maintains a powerful and dignified silence. He does not respond in kind or lash out with bitter words, rather as it was prophesied that he would do.

By the prophet Isaiah, he was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

What does he say? He says nothing. But what does he do? You see, to acknowledge that Jesus says nothing and directs no words to his mockers is not to say that he does nothing. Far from it. He is not passive in the face of mockery. What does he do? Well, as we were sharing just very briefly with the children, one thing that we can acknowledge that he does, because we're told that that's what he does, is that he prays for his mockers. In Luke chapter 23 and in verse 34, we read, Now, chronologically, as we try and identify the order of events in the death of Jesus, this prayer would seem was uttered before much of the mocking that we've been making reference to, that he endured on the cross, but certainly not before much mocking that he did endure, both recorded and unrecorded, as he approached the cross. Jesus is praying for those who mock and taunt and jeer and crucify. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And in his prayer, there's revealed a deep love and spiritual discernment, his deep love for his mockers, as he prays for their forgiveness and spiritual discernment, as he acknowledges their ignorance, in what they do. As we think of ourselves, we are called by Paul to forgive as Christ forgave us.

We are surely also called to pray for the forgiveness of those who mock and taunt, just as Jesus prayed for those who mocked him. What does Jesus do in the face of mockery? Well, he prays for those who mock him, but he also trusts in God. In the face of the mockery and the taunting and the cruel questioning of his father's love, Jesus retains his faith and trust in God. Even in the darkest hour, even in the darkest moment, when he cries the darkest words, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He introduces the words with my God, my God. Even in that darkest moment, he's able to retain and does retain his faith in God. He prays for his mockers. He trusts in God. And then finally, in terms of what he does in response, he sticks to his course. He had handed himself over to death, and he remained steadfastly true to his calling and mission. He had come to die, and that is what he would do.

And the mocking and the taunting don't blur his focus or alter his course. And thank God that that is so. As we and our faith are mocked and ridiculed, we can learn from the example of Jesus. We too must pray for those who mock us. We must cling tenaciously to our trust in God. And we must stick to the course, serving and witnessing to our Savior. The mocking that he endured and the response that he gave. But as we close, let me just note very fleetingly one final matter, and that is the impact of Jesus' response on those who were witnesses to it. Of course, there were many witnesses to it and were given information concerning the response of some of them. But for this morning, all I want to do is to draw your attention to one of those witnesses and the impact of Jesus' response to being mocked on this one witness. And I'm thinking of the penitent thief, as he has sometimes described.

[29 : 47] This man began with his companion and all the rest, mocking and jeering and taunting. Matthew is clear in this regard. In Matthew 27 and in verse 44, we read, In the same way, the robbers who were crucified with him also heap insults on him. That is where he begins.

Certainly the story or the chapter of his life as he hanged on that cross. That is where he begins. But he ends in a very different place. Luke records for us where he ends. In chapter 23 of Luke's gospel, and from verse 40, let's just remind ourselves of what is very familiar, I'm sure. But the other criminal rebuked him, the one who continued to jeer and to mock. Don't you fear God, he said, Since you are under the same sentence, we are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.

But this man has done nothing wrong. He ends in a very different place. Confessing his own guilt, we are receiving what we deserve. Believing in Jesus as the righteous one who has done nothing wrong, but also putting his trust in Jesus, commending his life and eternity to the one who is hanging on a cross next to him. Why the turnaround? How are we to explain such a change in such a short period of time? Well, this is the work of God. It's the work of the Holy Spirit of God. But what means does the Spirit employ? Well, this man, we might say, heard the silence of Jesus, that he said nothing to his taunters. But he heard the prayer of Jesus, how he prayed that those who so abused him might know forgiveness. He saw the faith of Jesus as he maintained his trust in his Father, even in these circumstances. And he believed. Now, so much more could be said, but my purpose in drawing attention to this is a simple one, to encourage you, as you would in some measure have to endure mockery and taunting, that you would do so in the manner that Jesus did, praying and trusting and sticking to your course.

You see, it's not only the right thing to do. It's not only that which is pleasing to God, though it is. It could be the means of humbling and drawing even your mockers to the Savior, as was true of this man, who we are told of in the gospel account. Well, if we return to where we began, or at least one question that we opposed as we began, do we have a right to mock? Well, I'm not sure if we do have a right to mock, but of one thing I am sure. We have the blessing of being mocked. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. But in the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Son. We thank you for all that you endured for us, and we are conscious that our capacity to understand and to begin to measure all that you endured is so limited. We but scratch the surface in our understanding.

[33 : 32] And yet we thank you for the measure in which we can have some insight of all that Jesus endured for us. And we pray that that would be to the fore in our thinking and in our thankfulness as we gather around the Lord's table this morning. All this Jesus endured for us. All this pain, all this torture, and yes, even death itself, out of His deep love that He bore for us and demonstrated by dying in our place. Be with us now then as we continue before you this morning. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.