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Lent Rotation 2024 – God on Trial  
Luke 23:1-12 – Misconceptions

*Rap, rap, rap...* In this country, that is a sound that is synonymous with judgment. When the gavel raps, a sentence is passed, and that means the judge's decision is final. That *should* mean justice is served – **should**, that's the operative word. But as much as we love the image of blindfolded lady justice upholding her balanced scales with objective impartiality, in reality, that's not how it always goes, is it. *Rap, rap, rap...* That might mean somebody won a court case who had the money to pay for the better legal counsel, rather than the one who was actually in the right. It might mean someone got off on a technicality, no matter how obviously guilty they are to anyone with a working conscience and senses. It might mean the only people benefiting in the end are the lawyers. It might mean, in a word, *misconception* of what true justice should be.

And that was certainly the case here in our lesson from Luke 23. There were misconceptions all around about who Jesus was and what he was here to do. The story opens around dawn on Good Friday morning, with the whole assembly of Jewish religious leaders leading Jesus off to Pontius Pilate for trial. Of course, it was a foregone conclusion what they thought about Jesus and what they wanted to do with him. They wanted to see him crucified, dead, and buried. But for them, the tricky part was putting together the case to support it.

So they came up with the best they could and presented their “findings” to Pilate: “*We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king.*” A lie, a lie, and a deliberate falsehood was the best these holy men of Israel could muster. Jesus was subverting their nation, they said – who, the crowds of people Jesus healed and helped and loved? The multitudes who heard the Gospel from his lips like they never had before? Jesus opposed paying taxes to Caesar, they said – no, Jesus said that we should give to Caesar what is Caesar's. And finally, Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, they said – well yes, he did, but that didn't mean he was a rival to Rome, like the Jews were trying to insinuate. It meant he was a *spiritual* king, a heavenly king, a king who fought and conquered our *spiritual* enemies of sin, death, and the devil by the power of the Gospel. The fact is that if anybody was stirring up the people into an angry, rebellious frenzy that was a threat to Roman rule, it was the Jews who were trying to *oppose* Jesus. They were trying to pass judgment on Jesus – as if they had the right! – yet everything they said was misconceptions. Everything they accused Jesus of, *they* were the ones actually doing it and pushing for it!

And then there was Pilate. He was the one who actually held the gavel, so to speak – he was the man in charge here, the one whose ultimate responsibility was to keep law and order in Judea, the one who should have seen through this charade! But it seems like he couldn't wait

to rid himself of this whole mess. Now to his credit, it seems like he did recognize that Jesus posed no true threat to the empire and was no real rival to his or to Caesar's throne. But that might just make it that much worse, because when the time came for him to put his foot down, to stand up for what was just and right, and to set this obviously innocent man free, did he rap his gavel? No, he treated Jesus like he was an insignificant detail, an inconvenient bother too early in the day, not even worth his time, and he was all too happy to pass the buck along to Herod if it meant that Jesus could be somebody else's problem and he could get back to his breakfast.

And then Herod – well, words like *justice* and *righteousness* just weren't really in his vocabulary. Maybe you remember that he and his family actually had a long history with Jesus. His father, Herod the Great, was the one who tried to kill baby Jesus after the Magi's visit to Bethlehem way back when. This Herod arrested and killed Jesus' relative, friend, and forerunner, John the Baptist, and also threatened to kill Jesus if he didn't leave Galilee. And even though he tried to convince people that he was a faithful Jew, his life of immorality and excess and his famous fascination for carnal entertainment betrayed who he really was inside.

Pilate sent Jesus to Herod to pronounce an official judgment on his case, but rather than rapping his gavel, it seems like Herod would have rather seen Jesus juggle it. Herod treats Jesus like he's just some court jester. Herod was thrilled to finally meet Jesus, it says, but not to listen and learn. He just wanted to know about the miracles: Are the stories true? Are the miracles real? How do you do them? Can you show me? But when Jesus didn't even dignify him with an answer, he responded like the typical self-absorbed bully: with mockery. They dressed him up in a flashy robe and sent him back to Herod with the unmistakable message: this is somebody to laugh at, to toy with, not somebody who should even be taken seriously enough to fear or to punish.

And in a story full of misconceptions, that might be the most dangerous one, because if there is anything those sinful, selfish, arrogant attitudes should bring down on themselves, it is fear and punishment. But the only thing that could be more dangerous than the misconceptions made by the people in our story, is if we make those same misconceptions today. And the truth is, in our own ways, we do. The Jews' misconception was that they stood in judgment over God and that *he* should conform to *their* ideas and desires. Well isn't that what we do when we say that the church really needs to get with the times, or lighten up on some of these hot-button social issues, or give special treatment to *my* family for everything we've done around here, or think “I better get *my* way, otherwise I'm gone”? Or Pilate's misconception was that he didn't want to give Jesus the time of day to take responsibility and do what was right. Isn't that what we're saying when we don't take the time for feeding our souls in worship and service, when we let everything else come first – as if God and his Gospel gifts

are only worth doing as long as we can't find something else to do instead? Or finally, Herod's misconception was that Jesus' purpose in his life was really only about his own personal entertainment. Aren't we falling into that same misconception when we pray to God like he's just some divine vending machine, or when we yearn more than anything for more *charismatic* preaching, more *modern* music, more *relevant* topics, more *fun* in spiritual education because that's how we think *we* can make God's church better... all the while ignoring Christ's own call to deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow him?

Misconceptions abound, don't they – here in our story, and right here in our own sinful hearts. And ours no less than theirs put Jesus first on trial and ultimately onto his cross. That was our judgment, our condemnation, our rap of God's divine gavel! But don't miss this last misconception. The hymn we just sang said, "*To this world's pow'rs the Lord stays dumb. The guilt is ours, no answers come.*" Why didn't Jesus answer these accusations? It wasn't because he didn't know what to say. It wasn't because he had no excuse or they had him dead to rights. And it certainly wasn't because he lacked the intelligence. It was because he was standing in for us, and *we* had no excuse. He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, so like a lamb to the slaughter, the time for words was past; all that mattered now was sacrifice. The only thing that could right our wrongs and correct our misconceptions about our Savior and ourselves was his blood spilled for us, so that's exactly what he did. *That* was the answer to every question he was asked that day – when he willingly hung up there on that cross, the innocent in place of the guilty, his life for yours, for your forgiveness and salvation, to dress *you* in elegant robes of his heavenly royalty and righteousness forever.

You know, I'm told that the gavel actually derives its name from land or tribute payments in Medieval England called *gavel*-payments that needed to be made with currency other than cash. The rap of a mallet – what came to be known as a "gavel" – was the sign that that non-monetary payment was accepted by a land-owning lord to satisfy a debt. Well, what could be a more appropriate picture for us to remember the payment Jesus made on our behalf and that our Lord God accepted to satisfy the debt of our sins – a payment made not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death? Friends, when the gavel raps in God's heavenly courtroom, for us, it doesn't mean impending judgment. It doesn't mean conviction or condemnation. It doesn't mean a mockery of justice, like it too often does in our world. That *rap, rap, rap* is the echo of the nails driving into Jesus' cross as your sins are hammered into dust and the Father's final verdict is given: he was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Let there be no misconception about this: for Jesus' sake, the judgment has been pronounced, justice has been served, and you have been declared once and for all "not guilty." Your verdict is *life* – not in prison, but in heaven with our God, with our Savior, with all our brothers and sisters in faith both now and forevermore. Court adjourned! Amen.