

## Chapter 110: Appearances are Deceiving

*Matthew 27:1–10*

To an outside observer, the proceedings against Jesus may have seemed strangely urgent, but one could perhaps have rested in the fact that things seemed to proceed, more or less, by the book. All the essential i's seemed to have been dotted, and all the most important t's were crossed. Someone might still have sensed that something was not quite right, but at the very least there was no real appearance of impropriety. Yet, as Matthew is at pains to reveal, all is not as it may have seemed. Rather, *in the crucifixion of the Lord of glory, appearances are deceiving.*

### Deception in the Civil Sphere (Matt. 27:1–2)

Although the Sanhedrin's trial of Jesus has concluded, the high court must take additional steps to secure the death of Jesus: "When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death" (v. 1). This "counsel" that the Sanhedrin took does not suggest new deliberations about Jesus' case; rather, "Matthew is telling us that the Sanhedrin gathered in the morning to ratify the decision made during the night."<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the Sanhedrin "must now formulate a plan to get the Roman prefect, who alone had the power to order his execution, to endorse and implement their verdict."<sup>2</sup> Lenski suggests that the language of "taking counsel" as "to pass a resolution," which emphasizes that, "in all due formality the final vote on the death penalty was taken."<sup>3</sup>

The coordination between the Jewish court and Pilate, the Roman governor, must be seamless if the Sanhedrin wishes to see their their schemes brought to completion. If we have been reading about the "courtroom drama" of Jesus, this is where the legal proceedings against Jesus must take on a *dramatic* flair. This is not so much a bureaucratic paper-pushing exercise, making sure that the right forms are filed in triplicate with the right functionaries. This is an all-out effort to put on a theatrical production for Pilate to ensure that he wouldn't ask too many questions or exercise his legal right of restraint.

After the hasty formalization of the sham trial proceedings, the Sanhedrin then "bound" Jesus as they led him and delivered him over to Pilate (v. 2). It is worth asking why Jesus should need to be bound, since he has at no time offered the least resistance in this process. To some degree, the binding is still a necessary step of due diligence; however, the binding of Jesus seems to be more for the purposes of show than to protect the prisoner from escaping: "a firmly secured prisoner will lend

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 692.

<sup>2</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1035.

<sup>3</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 1077.

credibility to their charge that he is a political danger.”<sup>4</sup> We meet Pilate here, the man who will have his role in finally signing off on the crucifixion of Jesus in the remainder of this chapter. Here in v. 2, Pilate is described as “the governor,” which is “a general title (cf. 10:18; 1Pe 2:14),” since “Pilate was in fact appointed prefect or procurator by Tiberius Caesar in AD 26.... Prefects governed small, troubled areas.”<sup>5</sup> France gives a more complete introduction to this historical figure here:

Pontius Pilatus was prefect of Judea A.D. 26–36, directly appointed from Rome but under the supervision of the legate of the imperial province of Syria. He is better known to us than most minor Roman governors of the period not only from the NT accounts of Jesus’ trial but also because Josephus and Philo record several examples of his insensitive style of government which led to brutal clashes with his Jewish and Samaritan subjects....He was eventually deposed following a complaint against his heavy-handed suppression of a supposed Samaritan insurrection.<sup>6</sup>

As Carson notes, prefects like Pilate “possessed powers [in judicial matters] like those of the far more powerful proconsuls and imperial legates; in short, they held the power of life and death, apart from appeal to Caesar.”<sup>7</sup>

### Deception in the Personal Sphere (Matt. 27:3–5)

Only Matthew tells us the story of how Judas attempted to give back the silver that we find in vv. 3–5. Matthew’s characterization of this scene is intriguing in several ways. First, there is an intriguing emphasis on what Judas “saw.” Judas’s actions are prompted by when he “*saw* that Jesus was condemned” (v. 3a). Then, after telling the chief priests and the elders that he had sinned by betraying innocent blood, they respond by saying, “What is that to us? *See* to it yourself” (lit., “you see”; v. 4b). The idea seems to be, “That’s your problem” (CEB, NLT), but the expression focuses on what Judas must *see*. So much of this story emphasizes outward appearances, and here we have Judas *seeing* what he has done—prompting him to a change of mind—and being told simply to *continue* seeing what he has done—leading him ultimately to a despair-driven suicide. Part of Judas’s torment is his ability to see what an evil, wretched thing it is that he has done.

Yet, Matthew tells us only that Judas “changed his mind” (v. 3b) about his actions. The word for “changed his mind” (μεταμέλομαι; *metamelomai*) is a different different, but similar, word from the one we translate as “repent” (μετάνοια; *metanoia*).<sup>8</sup> Both refer to a change of mind in one sense or another, but “repent” suggests something great—a change of mind, stemming from a change of heart, but flows out to into a change of life. As Calvin writes, “True repentance is displeasure at sin, arising out of fear and reverence for God, and producing, at the same time, a love and desire of

<sup>4</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1035.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 626.

<sup>6</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1036.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 626.

<sup>8</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 407.

righteousness....This is the reason why their grief is useless; for they do not cheerfully turn to God, or even aim at doing better, but, being attached to their wicked desires, they pine away in torment, which they cannot escape.”<sup>9</sup> Judas could not bear to see what he had done, but he did not pursue grace from Jesus, whom he had betrayed.

In this case, Judas returns the thirty pieces of silver, confesses that he has “sinned by betraying innocent blood” (v. 3b–4a), and hanged himself (v. 5). In these actions, however, he does not seek out Jesus for forgiveness—perhaps by pleading with his Lord on his way to the Golgotha. The despair Judas feels only turns him to seek an end to his misery and shame through suicide. In this, the narrative contrasts Judas’s actions with those of Peter, who was similarly distraught after denying Jesus (Matt. 26:75), but who is among the “eleven” to receive the Great Commission from Jesus in Galilee (i.e., all twelve disciples, minus Judas; Matt. 28:16). While Matthew does not have an extended account where Jesus directly forgives Peter (John 21), the juxtaposition of Peter’s remorse with Judas’s reveals key differences between the two.<sup>10</sup> Where Peter finds forgiveness, “woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born” (Matt. 26:24).<sup>11</sup>

### Deception in the Religious Sphere (Matt. 27:6–10)

After Judas casts his thirty pieces of silver, the chief priests debate what to do with the money, observing that, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money” (v. 6). Several commentators understand this idea as hypocritical by observing that they had no such qualms in taking money *out* of the treasury to use as blood money.<sup>12</sup> Nolland is probably right that the real concern lies in purity concerns related to the shedding of blood. In 1 Chronicles 22:8–9, for example, we read that David himself was not permitted to build the temple—not because of his sins (including his sins with Bathsheba and against Uriah), but because of he had shed so much blood in war.<sup>13</sup> God had commanded, empowered, and blessed David’s warfare, so his bloodshed in war was not sinful. Rather, the issue was that the same blood that David had shed in obedience to God’s command also made him ceremonially unclean to build a temple. For the same reason, the chief priests did not see the money that they had used to purchase the blood of Jesus as sinful, but nevertheless unclean for

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:269.

<sup>10</sup> France argues that the story of Judas is not set in a chronological sequence with the rest of the narrative for several reasons, including as a contrast to Peter: “There are perhaps three main purposes in inserting this strange pericope here. (a) It sets the treachery of Judas alongside the failure of Peter, and allows the reader to compare and contrast their faults and their different fates. (b) It narrates the fulfillment of Jesus’ dire prediction about the fate of his betrayer (26:24), just as his prediction of Peter’s failure (26:34) has been precisely fulfilled. (c) It allows Matthew to introduce the most complex and creative of his formula-quotations, to show that even in the betrayal of the Messiah and in the fate of his betrayer Scripture continues to provide the pattern, even to the most incidental details.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1038.)

<sup>11</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 408; contra Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1153.

<sup>12</sup> e.g., Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:271; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 696.

<sup>13</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1154.

the purposes of restoring to the treasury of the temple.

This clarification of the issue at stake does not, however, exonerate the chief priests. Rather, it illustrates the gap in their emphasis on the strict keeping of external, ceremonial issues (here, the uncleanness of bloodshed) over spiritual and moral issues. That they did not acknowledge their actions as immoral, and, further, that they displayed their callousness to Judas’s grief-stricken conscience, is further evidence of their hard hearts.<sup>14</sup> They are oblivious to the heinous crime of putting to death the holy Son of God, even while they are scrupulous about ceremonial details. The Pharisees displayed a similar hardness of heart through the same phrase, “it is lawful,” back in Matthew 12, when they asked whether it was “lawful” to heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:10). By contrast, Jesus said that it was “lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Matt. 26:12), before healing the man, provoking the Pharisees to conspire how to destroy Jesus. Here, to keep up appearances, the chief priests “took counsel” (same language as in v. 1) to buy a “potter’s field as a burial place for strangers” (v. 7). As Blomberg puts it, “Unclean money buys an unclean place for unclean people!”<sup>15</sup>

Intriguingly, Matthew explains that these actions were prophesied by “Jeremiah,” but then he proceeds to quote language that sounds much closer to Zechariah 11:13. In Zechariah 11, the Lord appoints Zechariah as a shepherd of a flock of sheep who are doomed to slaughter. Zechariah, however, is rejected by the other shepherds (symbolic of the priests of Israel), and he seeks to abandon his flock (symbolic of coming judgment because of the covenant breaking of the sheep).<sup>16</sup> Before he leaves, he asks to receive his wages, which are 30 pieces of silver, and the Lord tells him to “‘Throw it to the potter’—the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD, to the potter” (Zech. 11:13). On the surface, it appears that Matthew (or the copyists of his Gospel) has made a mistake.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, several commentators have recognized the way that Matthew seems to have combined elements from Jeremiah with the language of Zechariah.<sup>18</sup> Hendriksen, then, points to the fact that Zechariah does not buy a field with thirty pieces of silver is, and he then notes the ways that the Jeremiah 19 better echoes the details of current passage in Matthew:

Judah and Jerusalem have shed innocent blood (Jer. 19:4; Matt. 27:4). Chief priests and elders are mentioned prominently (Jer. 19:1; Matt. 27:3, 6, 7). A potter is mentioned (Jer. 19:1, 11; Matt. 27:7, 10). Topheth, that is, the valley of Hinnom—the very valley where, according to tradition, the Potter’s Field was located—has its name changed to “the Valley of Slaughter,”

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<sup>14</sup> “Cold, hard as stone are these spiritual leaders of the Jews. A soul in travail means absolutely nothing to them, in fact, not even a soul they themselves have helped to get into this desperate travail. They are busy even now in taking the victim of Judas’s sin to be murdered on the cross.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1079.)

<sup>15</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 408.

<sup>16</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1042–45..

<sup>17</sup> Even Calvin calls the attribution to Jeremiah as having been written “plainly...by mistake” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:272).

<sup>18</sup> “He is including words from Zechariah, but he is pointing his readers to Jeremiah.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 696.)

which is about the same as “the Field of Blood” (Jer. 19:6; Matt. 27:8; cf. Acts 1:19). And this valley becomes a well-known “burial place” (Jer. 19:11; Matt. 27:7).<sup>19</sup>

Further, Nolland considers the hope-filled significance of buying a field in Jeremiah (Jer. 32:6–15), along with the theme of the potter in Jeremiah 18–19:

If the field is allowed to have a connection with Jeremiah [pointing to the hope of renewed spiritual life and, ultimately, of resurrection], then possibly the potter also has such a connection. In Je. 18:1–11 Jeremiah visits a potter’s house and sees imaged in the potter’s work God’s sovereign freedom to change his mind about his purposes for Israel and specifically God’s freedom to destroy the city and the people he had thus far defended. It is suggested that in taking up this insight and pressing it home Jeremiah is directed in 19:1 to buy a *potter’s* earthenware jug (subsequently to be smashed). The earthenware jug of 19:1, called ‘the potter’s vessel’ in v. 11, may be the bridge between Je. 19 and Je. 32, where in v. 142 ‘an earthenware vessel’ is used to store the property deeds to the field that has been bought. For Matthew, the potter’s field is likely to provide a compound image, pointing first to judgment and destruction and then to renewed hope.<sup>20</sup>

Several passages teach about how “the Scriptures” of the Old Testament prophesy the death and resurrection of Christ, without necessarily identifying specific passages (e.g., Luke 24:27, 44–47; 1 Cor. 15:3–4). By attributing to Jeremiah a text written to Zechariah, Matthew seems to be encouraging us to look beneath the surface-level appearance of a single text to discover the witness of the whole Old Testament Scriptures to Jesus Christ.

## Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean that the Sanhedrin “took counsel” against Jesus (v. 1)? Why did they need to maintain a certain level of formality in their proceedings? What role did Pilate have in overseeing the eventual execution of Jesus (v. 2)? Why did the Sanhedrin bind Jesus on his way over to Pilate (v. 2)? How does this contribute to the appearance that Jesus is a dangerous criminal who deserves the worst possible punishment? What does this tell us about putting our faith in the civil sphere?
2. What do you think Judas “saw” that prompted him to go back to the chief priests (v. 3a)? What does it mean that he “changed his mind,” and how is this different from true repentance (v. 3b)? Why does his confession that he has “sinned” fall short of a full confession of sin (v. 4a)? Why do the chief priests tell Judas to “see” (v. 4b)? What does Judas’s suicide tell us about his spiritual state?
3. What would have made it “not lawful” for the chief priests to put the “blood money” into the temple treasury? How does their scrupulous concern for ceremonial issues contrast with their

<sup>19</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 948.

<sup>20</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1155.

abominable violations of God's moral law? How does this concern for appearances illustrate a legalistic approach to religion? In what ways are you tempted to protect your external appearance as clean when you know that you are unclean spiritually, on the inside?

4. How does Matthew combine the prophecy from Zechariah 11:13 with the themes from the book of Jeremiah (vv. 9–10)? Why is the theme of covenant annulment and the rejection of God's shepherd by the other shepherds in Zechariah contrast with the hope of a new covenant in Jeremiah? In what way, then, are the outward appearances of the gospel itself deceiving to those who look upon it? When it comes to the gospel, are you walking by faith, or by sight?