PLAYING TO THE GALLERY

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Scripture: Mark 15: 1-15

Mark 15: 1-15

15 Early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes and the whole Council, immediately held a consultation; and binding Jesus, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate. **2** Pilate questioned Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And He answered him, "*It is as* you say." **3** The chief priests *began* to accuse Him harshly. **4** Then Pilate questioned Him again, saying, "Do You not answer? See how many charges they bring against You!" **5** But Jesus made no further answer; so Pilate was amazed.

6 Now at *the* feast he used to release for them *any* one prisoner whom they requested. **7** The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. **8** The crowd went up and began asking him *to do* as he had been accustomed to do for them. **9** Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" **10** For he was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. **11** But the chief priests stirred up the crowd *to ask* him to release Barabbas for them instead. **12** Answering again, Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" **13** They shouted back, "Crucify Him!" **14** But Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!" **15** Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

I'm sure you've heard the expression 'playing to the gallery.' It's a performer trying to win the audience's applause. And the concern for that performer is no longer to do what is right or to give the best performance as dictated by the play or the script that he or she is in. But now it has moved to getting the audience on their side. And while that's not necessarily a bad thing, because we all enjoy being appreciated, we all like people to approve of us, the problem begins when getting people's approval becomes more important than doing what we know is right.

When we change our position because people might disagree with us, or when we remain silent because speaking up might cost us something, when we make a decision not because it's fair or right, but because it will make other people happy. That is what we call playing to the gallery.

In Mark 15, we meet a man who does precisely that. Let's look at what happens. Jesus has been brought before Pilate. The chief priests have accused Him, and Pilate questions Him about being the king of the Jews. Mark tells us in v.10 that Pilate was aware the chief priests had handed Jesus over because of envy. He could see something lay behind those accusations. The religious leaders were threatened by Jesus, by His influence, and by the attention that He was receiving.

Then Pilate remembers the custom of releasing a prisoner during the feast. He offers the crowd a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, a man who was imprisoned with other insurgents who had committed murder during the insurrection. Surely Pilate might have thought they would choose Jesus, but the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead.

Pilate asks, “What shall I do with Him whom you call the king of the Jews?” And the answer comes back, “Crucify Him!” And Pilate asks, “Why? What evil has He done?” And they shout even more, “Crucify Him!”

Then we come to v.15, and I think it’s one of the saddest statements in this entire account. It reads like this, “Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them. And after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.”

Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate’s decision was not governed by what was right. He had authority. He had reason to question the accusations. Yet, when the moment came to act, he chose to satisfy the crowd. He knew what the crowd wanted. But knowing what people want and knowing what is right are not the same thing. When the approval of people becomes more important to us than truth, we’re already in dangerous territory.

Why do we play to the gallery?
Why do we sometimes know what is the right thing to do, and yet do something else? I think there are several reasons.

1. We’re afraid of losing people’s approval. We want to be liked. We want to belong. There’s nothing inherently wrong with that. But when our need for approval becomes stronger than our commitment to truth, then we begin to compromise. We laugh at a joke we know is cruel because we don’t want to spoil the atmosphere. We stay silent when someone is treated unfairly because we don’t want to become unpopular. We agree with a bad decision because everyone else seems to agree with it.

   And we tell ourselves, it’s not worth making an issue of it. But sometimes, that sentence is just an excuse for avoiding the cost of doing what is right. And that cost can show up in small, ordinary moments as easily as large ones.

2. We fear what obedience might cost us. Think about Saul in 1 Samuel 15. God instructed Saul concerning the Amalekites. He was to carry out God’s judgment fully, sparing neither their king Agag, nor their livestock. But Saul did not obey fully. He spared Agag, and kept the best of the sheep and cattle for himself. When Samuel confronted him, Saul tried to justify it. he said the animals had been spared to offer as sacrifices to the Lord. He had taken God’s instruction and modified it to suit his own purposes.

   Then in v.24, Saul finally admitted. He said, “I feared the people and listened to their voice.” Saul’s confession exposes more than just a desire to be liked, because he knew what God had commanded. But he feared the cost of resisting the people and let their voice overrule God’s instruction. This is what makes the story so searching.

   Saul was no ordinary person without responsibility. He was the king. He had been entrusted with authority and that authority carried responsibility. Yet, when the moment came to stand by what God had commanded, he gave in to the people. Samuel tells him in v.22 – such penetrating words. “It is better to obey than it is to sacrifice.” You cannot compensate for disobedience by offering God something else that looks religious.

You cannot say, I know what God asked me to do, but I thought this would be better. You cannot excuse disobedience by saying, this is what the people wanted. Perhaps you know you need to speak the truth, but you're afraid of losing a friendship. Perhaps you know you should take a stand, but you fear the repercussions at work. Doing the right thing is not always popular. And doing the popular thing is not always right.

3. We want to avoid the discomfort of a difficult decision. Difficult decisions make us move into our non-comfortable zones. Sometimes, we play to the gallery simply because it's easier. A difficult conversation gets postponed. An unpopular decision gets avoided. Responsibility quietly gets shifted to somebody else.

   And this can look very undramatic, nothing as visible as Pilate's crowd or Saul's army. It can look like a leader who keeps rescheduling a performance conversation they know that they need to have. A friend who lets a hurtful pattern continue because naming it would make things awkward. Or a parent who lets a boundary slide because enforcing it means an unpleasant evening.

   Avoiding the discomfort of a decision does not remove the responsibility. It only determines how we will exercise it. Pilate could not avoid responsibility simply because the crowd demanded something else. He was entrusted with the authority to decide, and he remained accountable for what he chose. Pilate's desire to satisfy the crowd had consequences for another's life, not just himself.

   And that is something that we need to understand about playing to the gallery. When you and I have been entrusted with responsibility, giving in to pressure can become a betrayal of that responsibility. A parent may know a decision is necessary for a child's well-being but avoids it because the child might get upset. A manager may know an employee has acted dishonestly but refused to address it because the employee is popular with his or her team. A leader may know that something is wrong but stays silent because speaking up might upset influential people.

In each case, the question is not, will people be happy with me? The question is, what is the responsibility that I have been entrusted with? What is the right thing to do? Am I doing it? that's the question. Leadership is not simply about keeping people happy. It's about serving people faithfully, even when faithfulness requires a difficult decision.

But responsibility doesn't have to be misused. Let me show you what it looks like when someone carries it the way that Pilate didn't. In 1982, seven people in the Chicago died after taking Tylenol capsules that had been contaminated with cyanide. Tylenol was one of J&J's most successful products. And the company suddenly faced a crisis threatening its reputation and its business. James Burke was the chairman at that time, and he had a decision to make. Either withdraw only the affected batches or recall every bottle of Tylenol capsules across the country.

The FBI and the FDA initially advised against a full recall. They worried that it could spark greater panic and invite copycat crimes. A national recall would also be enormously expensive. The company would take a huge loss, but Burke pushed for it anyway. And they recalled every single bottle of Tylenol across the whole of the United States, damaged or not. And ultimately 31 million bottles were withdrawn. And it cost the company 100 million dollars.

That's the decision that he took because the responsibility was on the company and that he felt was the responsible thing to do. In fact, they brought back Tylenol bottles and were the first company to bring in childproof covers, and their stocks grew after that.

What strikes me about the story isn't that it just turned out to be good business for them. it's that Burke faced genuine pressure to avoid a costly and difficult course of action and instead chose to ask what his responsibility to the public actually required him to do. what is my responsibility, not only as chairman of this company, but my responsibility to the public who believe in Tylenol and J&J.

Compare that with Pilate. Pilate had a responsibility to administer justice. But when the pressure mounted, he chose to satisfy the crowd instead. The situations, I know, aren't identical, but the contrast is worth sitting with. When the pressure comes, will we let convenience or cost determine our decision or will we ask what our responsibility requires and have the courage then to act on it? The test of our character is not what we do when everyone agrees with us. it's what we do when doing the right thing might cost us their approval. That's when it matters.

And it's not just about Pilate. Pilate's failure was not unique. In fact, as we look at scripture, we see repeatedly how the fear of people weakened conviction, distorted responsibility, and sometimes, pulled people down with it.

Aaron, for example, gave unto the people. In Exodus, when the people demanded a golden calf, Aaron yielded rather than holding them to the covenant with God. The result was idolatry and a serious breach of faithfulness.

Or take Herod. Herod gave unto his guests. In Mark 6:26, he was distressed at being asked to execute John the Baptist but did it anyway because of his oath and the people that were dining with him. He didn't want to refuse his daughter in front of them. his concern for his standing before his guests helped lead him into this terrible decision.

Remember Peter. Peter's compromise affected others as well. In Galatians 2, Peter had been eating with Gentile believers. That was significant because at that time, the early church was wrestling with whether Gentile Christians had to also adopt Jewish customs and patterns. But when certain people from Jerusalem came, Peter, who had till then been eating with the Gentiles, stopped eating with them out of fear of those who insisted on circumcision. It may sound small. He simply changed where he ate and with whom he ate, but the action communicated something much bigger. It told people that Gentile believers were somehow less than Jewish believers. Other Jewish believers even followed his example.

Paul tells us even Barnabas was carried away by the hypocrisy. Peter's compromise didn't just stay private. His influence led others to follow him. And it took Paul confronting him and telling him that he was wrong for him to correct it.

So, when we play to the gallery, we may not only compromise our own convictions, but we may lead others astray as well.

But not everyone gives in. let's reinstate Peter a little bit here. Years later, the same Peter, the one who once backed down from a crowd's disapproval, actually stood before the Sanhedrin with John, having been ordered to stop preaching about Jesus. This time, he didn't yield. He said, "We must obey God rather than men." The man who once withdrew from Gentile believers out of fear of what certain people

would think, later stood before the very council that could have had him flogged or killed, and refused to back down.

And that's worth noticing because playing to the gallery isn't a life sentence that once you've done it, you're done. That's how you will be. the same person can fail in one season but then regroup and stand firm the next time something like this comes along. Hence, the question for each one of us isn't what has my pattern been until now, but what will I choose the next time the pressure comes? What will I choose? How will I act the next time I'm under the gun?

How do we stop playing to the gallery?
What should we do? Does it mean that we never listen to people, never consider their opinions, never change our minds? No! Of course not. There are times when other people see something that we've missed. Wisdom means listening, being teachable, and being willing to correct ourselves. the problem isn't listening to people. The problem is letting their approval matter more than truth and faithfulness to God.

So, how do we navigate this?

1. We need to settle whose approval matters most. Paul asks a very pertinent question in Galatians 1:10. He says, does this sound as if I'm trying to win human approval? Am I trying to be popular with people? If I were still trying to do so, I would not be God's servant. I would not be a servant of Christ.

   And that's worth asking ourselves. if pleasing people becomes my highest priority, I will eventually make decisions that compromise my convictions. But when my desire is to please God, then I have a foundation that doesn't depend on whether everybody agrees with me or not. That becomes my foundation.

   It doesn't mean becoming harsh or self-righteous. We're still called to speak the truth in love, because love doesn't require pretending that what's wrong is right. That's not love. However, as we speak in love, then we stand for truth.

   And when we stand for truth, it is never an opportunity to humiliate people. It is never an opportunity to enjoy proving people wrong. There's a difference between courage and aggression. There's a difference between conviction and arrogance. The goal isn't to win the crowd's applause or to provoke its anger. It's to remain faithful to God while treating people with the dignity that they deserve.

2. We need to develop the courage to accept that not everybody will agree with us. We need to accept that. We sometimes behave as though disagreement is a disaster. It isn't. people may misunderstand you. They may be disappointed with you. But you can listen, consider whether they have a legitimate point and then respond with humility. But you cannot always make people happy. That's given. There are occasions when faithfulness requires accepting the discomfort of being unpopular.

3. Remember that we are accountable for the authority that has been entrusted to us. Pilate could not escape by blaming the crowd, and neither can we. We cannot say everybody else was doing it. we cannot say that's what the people wanted. We cannot say I had no choice, when in reality,

we chose the easier path because the alternative was costly. We may face genuine constraints, and sometimes we need real wisdom to discern the right response. But pressure is not an excuse to avoid the responsibility of choosing faithfulness.

So, before making a difficult decision, I think there are three questions that need to be asked.

a) Am I doing this because I believe it is right or because I'm afraid of what people will think? In other words, am I being guided by my convictions or by my fear of criticism?

b) Am I listening to people wisely or am I simply trying to keep them happy? There's a difference between listening carefully to others and feeling that we must please everyone, even when we know what needs to be done.

c) If I make this decision, who might pay the price because I want to avoid disapproval? Sometimes, our desire to protect our reputation can cause others to suffer the consequences of our silence or inaction. I remember a bumper sticker that I saw about 30 or 40 years ago, which said, "Silence isn't always golden; sometimes it's just plain yellow." Harsh, isn't it? But true.

These questions help us examine motives that we might otherwise overlook. They are especially important for leaders who must choose between protecting their reputation and fulfilling their responsibility to others. That was the challenge for Burke, and it was the challenge for Pilate.

Conclusion:

Let's return to Pilate once more. He had heard the accusations. He recognized that the chief priest's motivation was envy. He asked what evil Jesus had done. And yet, when the pressure mounted, he gave in wishing to satisfy the crowd. The tragedy wasn't that Pilate failed to see what was happening. The tragedy was that he let pressure decide for him.

So, where might that be happening in our own lives? Maybe you're a parent who knows a difficult conversation is necessary. Maybe you're a leader who needs to address an injustice. Maybe you're part of a group where everybody is saying something you know is wrong and you're deciding whether or not to speak up.

Or maybe you're simply tempted to say what people want to hear rather than what you know to be true. beloved, doing what's right takes courage. It takes a spine. There'll be times when standing for what's right costs you something – a friendship, a sense of belonging, being misunderstood or even maligned. Yes, that can hurt. And we shouldn't pretend otherwise.

Maybe this morning, you're listening to this and saying, "I know all this to be true, but I've found that in the past, I've been unable to stand by what I believe." Beloved, here's the good news. Here's where being a child of God makes all the difference.

God doesn't simply tell us to do what we need to do and leave us to struggle through it. Listen to scripture.
Philippians 2:13 says, "It is God who works in us, giving us both the desire and the ability to do what pleases him."

2 Timothy 1:7 reminds us that God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. Power to stand when we'd rather give in, love to speak the truth without becoming harsh, and discipline to think carefully and respond in a way that honors Him.
Hebrews 4:16 tells us that we can approach the throne of grace to find help in our time of need.

So, when you find yourself in that difficult moment, you can pray: Lord, I'm afraid. It's okay to admit that. I don't want to lose these people. I don't want to be misunderstood, but I want to please you more than I want to please them. give me the courage to do what is right.

And then take the next step. Even if your voice trembles, even if you still feel the fear, courage doesn't mean feeling no fear. Sometimes courage simply means doing what's right while you're still afraid. The cost of doing what's right doesn't disappear just because we are children of God. But you don't have to face that cost in your own strength. What does he say? His grace is available. His spirit is at work in you. And His presence doesn't depend on whether the crowd approves of you.

We never have to earn salvation. We're saved by grace, nothing that we have done except acknowledging that we need a Savior and accepting the finished work of Calvary on our behalf. But the grace we've received calls us to live faithfully before the God who has redeemed us. not because our standing with Him is at stake. No. But because we belong to Him and want our lives to reflect that when people look at us, they see us as reflections of Jesus because of the way we live and the decisions we make for righteousness.

What does it profit me if I manage to keep everybody happy? But in so doing, compromise what I know God requires of me. What does it profit me if I preserve my reputation but abandon my responsibility? What does it profit me if I get the approval of the crowd but lose my integrity before God?

Our final concern is not the crowd's changing verdict, but the judgment of the God before whom we live. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. So the question becomes, what governs my decisions – the temporary approval of people or the approval of God before whom I will one day stand? That's the question.

This doesn't mean becoming careless about relationships or seeking out conflict. We listen, we stay humble, we remain open to correction. But when we've prayerfully considered the matter and become convinced of what is right, we must have the courage to do it even if it costs us. because the inconvenience, the humiliation, the loneliness, even the pain of losing relationships must never become more important to us than remaining faithful to God.

So, when the moment comes, may we have the courage to say, I may not have everyone's approval. I may not be the most popular person in the room. I may have to stand alone. but I will not compromise the truth simply to keep people happy. I will speak the truth in love I will take my responsibility seriously and with God's help I will do what is right because one day I will stand before my maker and I want to know that I was faithful to Him. So, we need to go out from here saying I will not play to the gallery. I will not play for the approval of people. I'm going to live faithfully before my God. That is our prayer.

Amen.

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