

Jesus Seals the New Covenant

Summer Quarter: Living in Covenant

Unit 1: A Fulfilled Covenant

Sunday school lesson for the week of June 9, 2019

By Ashley Randall

Lesson Scripture: Mark 15:6-15, 25-26, 33-39

Key Verse: Mark 15:39

Purpose: To recognize how God through Christ restores our relationship with God and others.

“First, do no harm...”

If you have a chronic medical condition, regular visits to the doctor are a part of your routine. Some folks are fortunate to be able to get by with annual checkups, but others may need to be seen once a quarter, or even every month.

The doctor checks your vital signs. It’s likely you have blood drawn. You discuss your symptoms. The doctor wants to know if you are getting better or worse. You tolerate all of this interruption, inconvenience, and interrogation because you expect that your doctor is guided by an ethical standard that is nearly as old as the practice of medicine itself.

Hippocrates is often recognized as the father of medicine. The oath that bears his name is the earliest expression of medical ethics in the Western world, dating from around the 3rd century CE. It establishes several principles of medical ethics which continue to guide the practice of medicine today. One of the primary tenets of the Hippocratic Oath says, “I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrongdoing.”

It would be fair to assume that if our doctors ascribe to this standard of ethical behavior, the other parties involved in our medical care would abide by these standards, as well. Nurses, technicians, therapists, pharmacists, and the companies who manufacture and supply the medications our doctors prescribe. Certainly, no one would try to profit from the misfortune of another person.

In early May of this year, Connecticut and a coalition of more than 40 states filed a 500-page lawsuit accusing 20 of the biggest generic drug makers of a massive, systematic conspiracy to bilk consumers out of billions of dollars. Connecticut Attorney General William Tong and his office found evidence of price fixing by dozens of generic drug industry sales directors, marketers, and CEOs dating back to 2006. The chief investigators in the case want people to understand the generic drug industry touches everybody. 90 percent of all prescriptions filled in this country are filled with generic drugs.

When Tong appeared on *Sixty Minutes* to talk about this lawsuit, he said: “We’re talking about the drugs that America takes every day to live. And they’re profiteering off of that in a highly illegal way. They’re just taking advantage. This conspiracy has caused billions and billions of dollars in damages to the people of Connecticut and states across the country.... We have evidence, hard evidence, in the form of text messages, emails, documents, witnesses that demonstrate clearly that it wasn’t about product shortages. It was about profit. It was about cold, hard greed.”

He continues: “As an attorney general, I look at that and I say, ‘How can they do that?’ And I think what we’ve concluded is they know it’s illegal. And – and it’s not that they’re too big to fail. It’s that they’re just too big to care.”

On *CBS This Morning* he added, “What disturbs me most is that this was undertaken without shame. It feels like it’s just a routine feature of the industry. You know these folks live in New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania; and they go in in the morning and they break the law, and then they go to lunch, and then they go home, and then they watch TV, and then they make dinner, and then they get up in the morning, again, and then they break the law. And it’s the routine everydayness of it that really bothers me.”

I have no idea how many people have little to no regard for others. Some days it seems like most of the people I encounter are focused primarily on themselves. They are interested in getting everything they can from everyone they meet. They resist anyone who questions their sense of entitlement – sometimes forcefully. If a threat to the *status quo* might put them at a disadvantage, there is no limit to the steps they will take to protect their advantage in the current balance of power.

Clearly something is out of whack. And if we are honest, we have to admit that this attitude holds sway in our own lives from time to time and corrupts our relationships with those around us. We need something beyond our own conscience, something beyond governmental agencies, something beyond religious institutions, to restore order to the core of the human community. We need a new covenant written on our hearts – a covenant sealed with the blood of Christ.

What do you want me to do with this man?

Mark 14:43-15:15

As you read the story of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and execution, it is important to remember that Mark has alerted us to the plan to kill Jesus that has been developing since the first weeks of his ministry. When Jesus heals the man with the withered hand on the sabbath, the Pharisees leave the synagogue and immediately begin to conspire with Herod’s followers to devise a plan to kill Jesus (Mark 3:1-6).

Over and over again, Mark makes it clear that Jesus is in conflict with the established seats of authority in his day. The scribes and the Pharisees represent the religious establishment. Herod's followers represent the regional political establishment. Jesus speaks sharply about the economic disparities and rampant injustice that injures those on the margins of society. And as Jesus' ministry grows in prominence, he comes more directly into conflict with the global political power of Rome.

In their book, "The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem," Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan make the case for a more expansive understanding of the passion of Christ:

Jesus was not simply an unfortunate victim of a domination system's brutality. He was also a protagonist filled with passion. His passion, his message, was about the kingdom of God. He spoke to peasants as a voice of peasant religious protest against the central economic and political institutions of his day. He attracted a following and took his movement to Jerusalem at the season of Passover. There he challenged the authorities with public acts and public debates. All of this was his passion, what he was passionate about: God and the kingdom of God, God and God's passion for justice.

Jesus's passion got him killed. Jesus's passion for the kingdom of God led to what is often called his passion, namely his suffering and death. But to restrict Jesus's passion to his suffering and death is to ignore the passion that brought him to Jerusalem. To think of Jesus's passion as simply what happened on Good Friday is to separate his death from the passion that animated his life.

As Jesus moves from the garden to the cross, first "they took Jesus to the high priest's home where the leading priests, the elders, and the teachers of religious law had gathered" (Mark 14:53, NLT). Once the high priest had finished with his questioning and called on his colleagues to condemn Jesus, "they bound Jesus, led him away, and took him to Pilate, the Roman governor" (Mark 15:1b). When the chief priests present Jesus to Pilate, their charge is that Jesus has claimed to be the King of the Jews.

Even as Pilate makes his feeble attempt to deescalate the situation, the chief priests stir up the crowd to call for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus. The complicity of the religious leaders with the political powers is stunningly raw. Even Pilate recognized the jealousy of the chief priests as they sought to rid themselves of the problem that Jesus has become for them. To satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas, had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified (Mark 15:15)

Once For All
Mark 15:16-39

As Mark takes us through the final hours of Jesus' life, he provides us with enough details to help us understand how agonizingly painful, cruel, and humiliating crucifixion was as a method of execution, but he also spares us of some of the more gruesome details. Mel Gibson's 2004 movie, "The Passion of the Christ," provides an unflinching depiction of the brutality that was intentionally incorporated by the Romans into this method of execution. Each of the elements was included to maximize its power to deter political insurgency.

Returning to the reflections of Borg and Crossan, "As Mark tells the story, Jesus was not only executed by the method used to execute violent insurrectionists, he was physically executed between two insurrectionists. Was Jesus guilty of advocating violent revolution against the empire and its local collaborators? No."

So why did Jesus have to die? Borg and Crossan suggest the following:

*According to Mark, Jesus did not die **for** the sins of the world. The language of substitutionary sacrifice for sin is absent from his story. But in an important sense, he was killed **because** of the sin of the world. It was the injustice of domination systems that killed him, injustice so routine that it is part of the normalcy of civilization.*

Richard Rohr builds on this idea in his book, "Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi:"

Franciscan philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus (1266-1308) was not guided by the Temple language of debt, atonement, or blood sacrifice (understandably used in the New Testament written by observant Jews). He was instead inspired by the cosmic hymns in the first chapters of Colossians and Ephesians and the first chapter of John's Gospel. For Duns Scotus, the incarnation of God and the redemption of the world could never be a mere mop-up exercise in response to human sinfulness, but the proactive work of God from the very beginning. We were "chosen in Christ before the world was made" (Ephesians 1:4). Our sin could not possibly be the motive for the divine incarnation; rather, God's motivation was infinite divine love and full self-revelation! For Duns Scotus, God never merely reacts, but always freely acts out of free and unmerited love.

Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity (it did not need changing)! Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God. God's abundance and compassion make any scarcity economy of merit or atonement unhelpful and unnecessary. Jesus undid "once and for all" (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10) all notions of human and animal sacrifice and replaced them with his new infinite economy of grace. Jesus was meant to be a game changer for religion and the human psyche.

This grounds Christianity in love and freedom from the very beginning; it creates a very coherent and utterly attractive religion, which draws people toward lives of inner depth, prayer, reconciliation, healing, and universal "at-one-ment," instead of mere sacrificial atonement.

Nothing “changed” on Calvary but *everything* was revealed – an eternally outpouring love. Jesus switched the engines of history: instead of us needing to spill blood to get to God, we have God spilling blood to get to us!

As Jesus breathed his last and the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, even a Roman centurion is able to perceive the “eternally outpouring love” as it occurs before him: “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

To read more of the details about the generic drug price fixing lawsuit, visit www.cbsnews.com/news/sweeping-lawsuit-accuses-top-generic-drug-companies-executives-of-fixing-prices-60-minutes-2019-05-12/

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem

Adapted from Richard Rohr, Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi

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