

What Did Jesus Call Wicked?

NORM REED

Psalm 58 is a psalm most Christians have never heard read aloud.

It is not in the lectionary. It is not sung. It ends with the righteous rejoicing at the sight of vengeance and washing their feet in the blood of the wicked, and the standard responses to that ending are well worn: it belongs to an earlier stage of revelation; it is honest about human anger but not normative; it is the Old Testament, and Jesus came to correct it.

Each of those responses assumes we know who the psalm is about.

That assumption is worth examining. If it is wrong, we have not set aside something the gospel improved on. We have set aside a text that says what the gospel says.

This article makes that case in four movements: that Psalm 58 belongs to a known genre with a known target; that Jesus used the word *wicked* in a way that fits it; that Matthew 23 is the same address delivered in person; and that the psalm's violence is the opposite of what it appears to be.

THE TWIN

Psalm 58 is not a solitary outburst. It has a near neighbour, and reading them together changes what kind of text it is.

Psalm 82 opens with God standing in the divine assembly to give judgement among the *elohim*. What follows is an interrogation: *How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?* Then the charge — give justice to the weak and the fatherless, maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. And then the sentence: *you are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, like men you shall die.*

The two psalms are not merely similar. They do the same thing, in the same order. Both address *elohim* who hold judicial power. Both accuse them of using it against the people it was meant to protect. Both end by telling them they will be judged themselves.

Who these *elohim* are has been argued over for a long time — a heavenly council, or human rulers, or human rulers understood as holding delegated divine authority. The argument matters less than what is agreed on all sides: whoever they are, their offence is judicial. They decree, and they decree wrongly.

Which settles what Psalm 58 is doing. It is not a private curse against personal enemies. It belongs to a small, recognisable group of texts in which God turns on those who administer justice and finds them guilty. Read alone, Psalm 58 looks like bloodlust. Read alongside its twin, it looks like a lawsuit.

WHAT JESUS CALLED WICKED

Jesus applies the word to individuals less often than we might expect, and when he does — in the parables — the pattern is narrow enough to be surprising.

The servant given one talent buries it and returns it intact. *You wicked and slothful servant* (Matthew 25:26). He has stolen nothing. He has damaged nothing. He has simply held onto what he was given and passed none of it on.

The servant forgiven a debt he could never have repaid goes out and seizes a fellow servant over a trivial sum. *You wicked servant* (Matthew 18:32). Again, the charge is not the original debt — that was cancelled. It is what he did with the cancellation.

Neither man is a criminal. Both are insiders, trusted, given something. And in both cases the fault is the same: they received, and they did not pass it on.

That is a narrower usage than we expect, and it points away from the categories we reach for. Jesus does not attach the word to the violent, the notorious, or the outcast. He attaches it to people in positions of trust who withheld what had been entrusted to them.

THE SAME ADDRESS, IN PERSON

Jesus knew the tradition Psalm 82 belongs to. He quotes it — *I said, you are gods* (John 10:34) — in an argument with the religious authorities about who has the right to speak for God. He is not citing an obscure text. He is reaching for the psalm that puts God's own judges on trial, and he is reaching for it in front of them.

Matthew 23 is that address delivered in full.

The seven woes are spoken to people who sit on Moses' seat. They bind burdens on others and lift none themselves. They shut the kingdom in people's faces. They devour widows' houses. And in the middle of it, the charge that names what has actually gone wrong: they have neglected *the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness* (23:23).

Mishpat. Hesed. Emunah. The three words the prophets used, spoken against the men who held the seat.

This is the same accusation Psalm 58 makes. Not a similar one. The same: authority given to protect the vulnerable, turned and used against them. What has changed is that the psalmist asked whether the judges were judging rightly, and Jesus answered the question in front of the judges.

Which makes Matthew 23 difficult to read as the gospel's correction of the psalm. It is the psalm, still being prayed.

WHAT THE RIGHTEOUS ACTUALLY DO

The ending remains. Even granting everything so far, Psalm 58 still finishes with the righteous rejoicing at vengeance and washing their feet in blood.

But look at who acts.

Break the teeth in their mouths. Tear out the fangs. Let them vanish like water that runs away. Let them be like the snail that dissolves. Every one of these is a request. Not a single destructive verb in the psalm belongs to the righteous. They ask. God acts.

That distinction is the whole point, and it is easy to miss because the imagery is loud. The psalmist is looking at something intolerable and doing the one thing that is neither acquiescence nor violence: handing it over. Paul makes the same move and grounds it in Deuteronomy — *never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God* (Romans 12:19). The prayer is not a rehearsal for the deed. It is what you do instead of the deed.

And the rejoicing at the end has a stated content. Not the blood. Verse 11 says what the joy is about: *surely there is a God who judges on earth.* The psalm has spent ten verses asking whether anyone judges the judges. The last verse is the answer, and the relief of it.

Which leaves the imprecatory psalms — the ones that call down harm, that ask God to break and scatter and undo — doing something other than what they are usually accused of. They are how a person without power says that what they are looking at is wrong, and refuses to either accept it or take up arms about it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached on this psalm in 1937, after the Nazi state came for Martin Niemöller. He begins by asking whether we may pray this way and answering flatly that we may not. His reason is not squeamishness. It is that the psalm assumes innocence in the one praying it, and we do not have it. Our anger is never clean; we want the teeth broken for reasons of our own. Bonhoeffer's answer is that only one innocent man has ever prayed this psalm, and that we pray it in him or not at all.

That is a harder position than the one I have been setting out, and it comes from a man who knew what a corrupted bench looks like from underneath. It does not undo the reading. It qualifies who may take it up. The psalm is still a prayer against perverted justice — but it is not a licence, and the person praying it is not thereby placed among the righteous.

THE BENCH TODAY

Twenty-five years ago an Australian law professor named Richard Fox wrote an article about mercy in sentencing.¹ He opened it with a case from the Victorian Court of Appeal.

A man had pleaded guilty. His counsel, having set out the circumstances in his favour, asked the judge to exercise the discretion of mercy. The judge's reply was that he was not there to dispense mercy — he was there to dispense justice, and no amount of case law was going to change that.

The Court of Appeal said he was wrong. Mercy, they held, has always run hand in hand with the sentencing discretion, and to say otherwise misleads anyone who hears it.

That exchange is Psalm 58's question, asked in a modern courtroom and answered. And the answer went the right way — which is worth saying, because the psalm is not a claim that every bench is corrupt.

Fox goes back further, to a thirteenth-century English jurist. Bracton distinguishes two mercies. There is the mercy of remission, which reduces a sentence; it is rare, exceptional, and granted to few. And there is the mercy of compassion, which is not an action at all but a disposition — and which, Bracton says, is owed to every person who stands before the bench.

Not granted. Owed.

That is *hesed* in a law book: not a favour the powerful may extend if they feel moved, but a debt they carry toward everyone who comes before them. And a debt can be defaulted on. When it is — when the seat that exists to protect the vulnerable is occupied by someone who has decided in advance what the person in front of them is — the psalm has a word for it.

WHAT IT ASKS

If Psalm 58 is addressed to the bench, then the question it puts is not *are you a good person* but *what has been done in the room where you had power*.

That widens it considerably. Most of us will never sit as magistrates. But the psalm's target is not an office so much as a position — anyone deciding what happens to someone who cannot decide for themselves. Which includes a good deal of ordinary life: the panel, the review, the file, the placement, the meeting where a person is discussed and not present.

And it asks something harder of those who read it as Scripture. If the wicked are not who we assumed, then a habit of reading has been quietly doing work we did not authorise. The word arrives with faces already attached to it, and they are almost never the faces of people like us.

Jesus pronounced the woes and then, within the week, asked forgiveness for the men carrying out the sentence. Both from the same mouth. The naming did not cancel the mercy and the mercy did not soften the naming.

That is the harder thing. Not choosing between them. Doing both.

NOTES

1. Richard G. Fox, “When Justice Sheds a Tear: The Place of Mercy in Sentencing” (1999) 25(1) *Monash University Law Review* 1. Full text at austlii.edu.au. The case discussed is *Miceli* (1997) 94 A Crim R 327; the Bracton material is drawn from Fox's discussion at 27.

These reflections did not begin with artificial intelligence. They began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this manuscript, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.