

Matthew 27:27-31

Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole cohort of soldiers around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. ²⁹ They twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand, knelt in front of him, and mocked him by saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ³⁰ They spit on him, took the staff, and hit him repeatedly on his head.

Dear dearly loved by God,

The terrible act of bullying people has seemed to be growing in our world today. Whether it is because more attention has been shined on this problem or more people are actually bullying other people, bullying has become such a widespread and real problem that our government has set up a website to address this issue, www.stopbullying.gov. It happens in our classrooms. It happens between spouses in our homes and in the workplace. The website describes bullying as a pattern of behavior that is used to leverage power or control over another. It identifies three types of bullying.

- **Verbal bullying** involves name calling and threats of violence.
- **Social bullying** happens when a person is deliberately excluded or ostracized from a group, or others are encouraged not to befriend someone.
- **Physical bullying** occurs when property is damaged as a threat of further violence, or when you actually lay your hands on someone else by pushing, kicking, tripping, or using your fists to fight.

If you accept the website’s description as accurate, then we’d have to admit that Jesus was the victim of all three types of bullying during his time on earth. His enemies, primarily religious enemies like the Pharisees and Sadducees, routinely engaged in patterns of verbal bullying. Their regular attempts to catch Jesus with a “gotcha” question is just one example. There was also the social bullying. Jewish leaders discouraged people from following Jesus, spread rumors about him, and tried to embarrass him publicly. After reading Matthew’s words, Jesus’ physical bullying is unmistakable. What happened at the Praetorium goes way beyond bullying to utter contempt and outright assault.

It’s one thing for a bigger and older kid at school to steal an underclassman’s lunch money, or bully the teacher’s pet. It is entirely another thing to wrongly put a man nearly to death for the “horrible” crime of preaching forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Throughout his ministry Jesus was bullied verbally and socially. Beginning late Holy Thursday evening the physical violence escalated. Today, we see Jesus suffer the soldiers’ . . .

Sermon Theme: Hands Of Brutality – The Soldiers!

What Matthew records for us is actually the second instance of the hands of brutality in the Passion History. Jesus was now in the custody of the Roman governor, but in the early darkness of Friday morning, the Jewish leaders had conducted their own kangaroo court where they abused him similarly. At their illegal meeting, the Jews were trying to manufacture evidence to sentence Jesus to death but couldn't make anything stick. In their zealous hatred of Jesus, they stopped trying to pin blame on him and just mocked him mercilessly. These church leaders blindfolded Jesus, slapped him across the face, and demanded he identify the man who hit him. They blasphemed against him, spit in his face, and sent him on to Pontius Pilate.

Pilate interviewed Jesus and was determined to set him free. But Pilate was a politician first and a humanitarian second. The angry mob of Jews screaming that Jesus be crucified pressured Pilate into taking this action. Perhaps if Jesus were brutalized the Roman way, the Jews' blind rage would be appeased and Pilate could release an innocent man. So he handed him over to his **“whole cohort of soldiers”**—an estimated 600 men—to do their worst.

The first thing the soldiers did was to whip Jesus' naked back. This lead-tipped whip was called a flagrum, and it was designed to break open the skin, cause massive bleeding and internal injury, and weaken the person so he couldn't resist any further punishment. This scourging was violent and cruel. A cruel piece of irony was that this treatment was so tortuous that many considered it to be an act of mercy because you were so weakened by the beatings that you'd die more quickly when crucified.

For a Roman soldier, being stationed in Judea was like being sent to the end of the world. There was nothing to do. Putting up with the Jews was not fun. Their constant religious infighting was enough to make a soldier quit. They had to get their entertainment somehow, and Jesus served that purpose. After his brutal whipping, the soldiers turned to ridicule. The Jews' whole case against Jesus revolved around his claim to be a king. Playing to an approving Jewish crowd, the Romans threw a scarlet robe on him—probably a soldier's coat. They twisted together some thorns and pressed it into his skull as though it were a crown. They placed a stick of some kind into his weakened hands, and **“they knelt down in front of him, and mocked him by saying, ‘Hail, king of the Jews’” (v. 29)**. The company of soldiers took turns spitting on him and beating him over the head again and again. And with every blow of the flagrum, with every spray of spit, with every taunt and jeer Jesus fulfilled God's Word. **“I submitted my back to those who beat me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from disgrace and from spit.” (Isa 50:6)**.

There are a lot of aggressive fathers—and more than a few mothers too—who argue that the way to handle a bully is to fight back. Punch the bully in the mouth! Jesus did no such thing. The same man who taught his followers to turn the other cheek, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you is now the man under the microscope. Would he practice what he preached? He did more than that; he fulfilled Scripture. **“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb he was led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent in front of its shearers, he did not open his mouth.” (Isa 53:7)**.

Jesus let himself be brutalized. He offered his back. He didn't object to his oppressors, because he was the King of the Jews. He was the King of the Gentiles! He's King of kings and Lord of lords, his name is above every name and to him every knee will bow. Why would our almighty King let himself be

brutalized? Why doesn't he stand up and punch those bullies in the mouth? He did it for you. Jesus let himself be treated that way for you. Jesus knew it ahead of time; this was the cup of suffering Jesus asked God to take away! But God wouldn't take it away; he made Jesus drink every last drop. **“Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and to allow him to suffer.” (Isa 53:10).** Jesus was brutalized for you as your perfect substitute. If Jesus hadn't endured this shame, if he had avoided the indignity, if he had retreated from the cross or refused to drink even a drop of suffering, then there is no forgiveness of sins and God's wrath on you is still in play. And you better believe that God will do to you much worse than any Roman soldier could.

As we think of how much Christ sacrificed for you, it makes us cringe a little, doesn't it? But it was needed to pay for our sins. Look how thoroughly he was brutalized. That's how thoroughly you are forgiven! Sins have consequences and the consequences were punishment – the punishment that Jesus suffered on our behalf.

A bully tries to leverage power and control over you. When you're the victim of bullying, you feel alone and powerless, as though you have to obey the bully. Sin is also a bully, when it tries to coerce us into crimes against the commandments. The devil is a bully, when he beats us into bad behavior. Our brother Jesus was bullied in our place and was brutalized, for all so that we would be forgiven. Now our spiritual bullies can't hold sour sin and its guilt over us as Paul writes, **“sin will not continue to control you, because you are not under law but under grace.” (Rom. 6:14).** Since the forgiving love of Christ lives in our hearts, we happily submit to his gracious rule rather than to the empty threats of any evil bully. **“So, submit yourselves to God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you.” (James 4:7).** Freedom from sin and Satan is reason enough to rejoice! But as we join Jesus in his gracious rule, we really begin to see what liberty looks like. **“Therefore, because Christ suffered in flesh, arm yourselves with the same mindset, because the one who has suffered in flesh is done with sin. Do this so that you no longer live the rest of your time in the flesh for human desires but for God's will.” (1 Peter 4:1-2).** Taking on Jesus' attitude enables us to turn the other cheek, pray for our enemies and persecutors, and do unto others as we'd have them do to us. Because Jesus made peace with us through the brutal suffering in his body, in him we are able to live peaceably with all people.

It's no wonder why the world is so unhappy. So many people are still living without Christ. They're being bullied by sin and Satan. They feel alone and powerless as these bullies dictate their lives. How much better is it to have God as your Father? Our brother, Jesus, suffered under the soldiers' hands of brutality, and as a result we will never have to suffer God's wrath. And, as a part of God's family through faith, we delight to bring God's peace to people who are still being bullied by the devil and their sin. Amen.