

# The Hard Sayings of Jesus: “Los Banditos of the Domination System or God’s Cosmic Rule is a Just Community!”

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By Steve Ramer  
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**Scripture:** John 18: 31-40

Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.) Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

## Sermon

This morning my sermon is really part three,  
in our New Theme for Sunday Worship,  
The “Hard Sayings of Jesus!”

Now Jesus said a number of difficult things,  
things that left his own followers perplexed.  
His listeners were often “amazed” or “astonished” by his words.  
Even his closest disciples were heard to exclaim,  
“This is a hard saying; who can hear it?”  
And so, if you find some of the words of Jesus hard to believe,  
difficult to understand, or maybe too demanding to follow,  
well, then, you're in pretty good company!

Talk about something I wish Jesus hadn't said,  
well this passage contains a really big one for me!  
For most of my life this saying, was likely the hardest for me!

Typically I heard it quoted from the King James Version;  
“My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world,  
then would my servants fight... but now is my kingdom not from hence.”

I guess what bothered me the most about this passage was the way it had been used by many Christians (Mennonites included) to discourage efforts of resisting systematic injustices in our world.

The argument I typically heard, using this passage, goes something like this; that in the end, faced with his death, Jesus is making it clear that his ultimate reason for living had little to do with what happens down here on earth. Acts of kindness and charity are certainly good things for us to do, but the focus for his faithful followers is to be that other realm where Jesus' true Kingdom exists in heaven.

In the least, our efforts in challenging unfair social structures, systems of injustice, and governments, that actually do create poverty and use violence are simply a waste of time. And at worst, these efforts may even get in the way of God's efforts and ultimate purpose.

In fact, some have argued, that we should leave the fighting of wars, the defining of who is the enemy, and the determination of who is worthy of prison or financial subsidy, to those Kings, presidents, the wealthy and the powerful, who actually do know best how to handle such complex issues. In this scenario personal morality trumps corporate or social morality. Good Christians should only worry about the final destination of their own soul, "somewhere over the rainbow, way up high!"

For me the major problem with this interpretation was the fact that it seemed to fly in the face of so much of what Jesus consistently said and did.

So I would like to look at another interpretation, one that has helped me to better understand what Jesus was really telling Pilate, an earthly ruler, regarding the actual location of God's Imperial Rule. Pretty much everything I will say is taken from biblical scholar, Walter Wink and his book, "Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination"

Now the bible often lumps together a complex reality called, “principalities and powers” as some kind of malevolent force, that while still under God’s control, exists beyond our comprehension and control.

As Paul says in Romans 8:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

According to Wink, these Powers, “are both visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly, spiritual and institutional, the Powers possess outer, physical manifestations” such as “buildings, portfolios, personnel, trucks and fax machines” as well as “an inner spirituality, or corporate culture...”

He also points out that,

“There were, in the first century, both Jews and Christians who perceived in the Roman Empire a demonic spirituality that they called Sammael or Satan.” And that this demonic spirit actually confronted God’s people in the “institutional forms of Roman life: legions, governors, crucifixions, payment of tribute, Roman sacred emblems, and ...so forth.”

Wink then develops the term, “Domination System,” to indicate what happens when an entire network of Powers becomes integrated around idolatrous values.

“Satan” then, he explains, becomes, “the world-encompassing spirit of the Domination System.” According to John’s gospel, it was the Domination System, a conglomerate of unseen spiritual forces that animated the visible systems of empire, religion and culture that in the end were able to put Jesus to death. And the New Testament writers, Wink adds, were thoroughly familiar with this concept of a Domination System and that they had also developed specific terms for describing it.

The Greek word kosmos can be translated a number of ways as, world, universe, the creation, humanity, and the planet. But Wink adds, that there was, in the New Testament, another usage that was quite unique in that period of human history. It would have referred to the entirety of human social, political and cultural existence that was operating in opposition to God.

Now the term we translate as “World” does have a somewhat “contradictory range of meanings” and so in a real sense it is understandable that we should be a bit confused when it is used in the Bible.

The kosmos must be correctly understood as simultaneously existing in three forms or realities. First, the kosmos is the good creation of a good Creator, but it also exists as a fallen reality that is estranged from God, and it exists as a reality that is being redeemed by Divine action.

“The world” then that exists estranged from God, is the Domination System and we know that this cosmic reality teaches us to value one thing, power.

Wink points out that,  
“As Rome’s representative, Pilate does not, cannot, understand that there is another order of reality breaking in on the hegemony of violence that, under the temporary guise of Rome, now straddles the world. Jesus answers him. ‘The New Reality (basileia) of which I speak is not of this old System of Domination (kosmos); if it were, my aides would fight, that I not be delivered to the Jewish authorities. But the New Reality of which I speak does not take its rise from the Domination System (kosmos).’

How completely different does that sound from the King James translation,  
“My kingdom is not of this world:  
if my kingdom were of this world, then...”

According to Wink then, the values of the Domination System and those of Jesus are both incompatible and irreconcilable.  
How can violence be used to cure violence?

The “New Reality” of God, being taught by Jesus, eschewed (deliberately and habitually avoided) violence. But this New Reality, does have its own, quite amazing forms of power, but those inured (or who have become accustomed to something unpleasant) to violence cannot comprehend. But Wink I think correctly brings his uncomfortable challenge forward about 2,000 years and lays it at our feet,

“Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. It has been accorded the status of a religion, demanding from its devotees and absolute obedience to death. Its followers are not aware, however, that the devotions they pay to violence is a form of religious piety. ... It and not Christianity, is the real religion of America.”

But as pointed out earlier, kosmos can also refer to a benevolent reality, such as the created universe, or to humanity that are the object of God's love and concern, or even to the current human social order that is still capable of divine redemption.

In John's Gospel, the kosmos as alienating system of oppression was always seen as a negative. But there is also good news, also according to John, and that is, the kosmos as the Domination System can be transformed into the kosmos as the Reality of God.

Wink offers us this additional parting translation and challenge, "I did not come in order to condemn the System, but to heal the System." ...However it comes, then, God's System will replace the Domination System, not by violent confrontation, but as increasing numbers of people find themselves drawn towards its values. The old order begins to lose its intelligibility. ...Only God can bring about a new System in its entirety; a new kind of earthly existence will be given us... And yet, though it cannot be built, it is our task to try to create the conditions that would make that new order possible. Prayer persuasion, and social struggle thus occupy the community that lives 'as if' God's reign has already begun."

I'd like to close with two thoughts that can challenge what is too often is accepted as the "default" perceptions of how true Christians should be treated in our world.

Sometime, around about 107 c.e., one of the great church "fathers," Ignatius of Antioch, was martyred for his faith. During his life he made this observation of true Church, "the greatness of Christianity lies in its being hated by the world (or in our case, hated by the Systems of Domination), not in its being convincing to it!"

Secondly, in another place, John in his gospel likens this powerful transformation of our world to a woman giving birth. Certainly we all know that there is pain and he would add, travail, during childbirth. But he also adds, as we too understand, that that momentary pain will eventually give way to joy once the child is born. As followers of "the truth" we too are all pregnant with possibilities. But we are also called to be the midwives of this fundamental transformation of reality into a new kosmos.

A radical and complete transformation of the kosmos  
from a system that alienates, destroys and dominates  
into a system that loves, heals and welcomes all people  
and indeed all of creation into a new and true community.

With every birth we know that there is pain -  
sometimes excruciating and body numbing pain!  
But this is good news my friends!

It is the good news of cosmic transformation  
that is happening, painful though it may seem at this moment,  
which is simultaneously creating a new world here  
on earth just as God's Reality does exist in heaven!

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