

FROM CHEERING TO JEERING

Scriptures: Mark 15:1-15, Mark 11:1-10

In the early 1960s Stanley Milgram, a social psychologist at Yale University, conducted a series of experiments to see how far people would go to hurt others if told to do so by an authority figure. Volunteers for the experiment were told they were participating in a study about the effects of punishment on learning. They watched as another person, designated as the learner, was strapped into a chair and had electrodes attached to his or her wrists. Then the volunteers were taken to an adjoining room and seated next to a generator that delivered shocks to the learner in the next room. The generator had 30 levels of shock, ranging from 15 volts to 450 volts. Each time the learner gave a wrong answer, the volunteer was told by the experimenter to administer a shock and to up the voltage by 15 volts after each wrong answer.

In reality the generator was a fake, and the person in the next room was a research assistant who only pretended to receive shocks. But the volunteers giving the shocks did not that. As far as the volunteers were concerned, they were giving real shocks to randomly chosen people, just like themselves. In fact to convince the volunteers they were giving real shocks and to show them what it felt like, each volunteer was given a test shock with the generator set at 45 volts. A 45-volt shock is a very unpleasant experience. If at any time the volunteers administering the shocks hesitated or refused to continue, then the scientist conducting the experiment would say, "Please continue" or "Please go on." If that did not work, he would say, "The experiment requires that you continue." If that did not work, he would say, "You have no other choice, you must go on." If after the fourth prodding the volunteer refused to administer any more shocks, the experiment was stopped.

How far do you think these volunteers would go? Remember, the volunteers had experienced for themselves a very unpleasant shock at 45 volts. How much farther would they go to give shocks to someone else? Stanley Milgram found that 65% of the volunteers went all the way up to 450 volts, a shock ten times more painful than the one they themselves had experienced. To add a little drama to the scene, at 300 volts the research assistants in the next room pretended to be in anguish by pounding on the walls, and at 330 volts they quit responding at all, even to the questions. But the volunteers were told to treat no response as an incorrect answer and to keep raising the voltage, and 65% of them did, right up to 450 volts.

This experiment is described in a book by James Waller, a psychology professor at Whitworth University, called *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*. Waller makes the point that genocide is not carried out just by a few deranged leaders. It is estimated that between 100,000 and 500,000 people participated in the Holocaust in Nazi Germany (p. 16). That is not the number of people killed in the Holocaust; that is the number of people who did the killing. One hundred to five hundred thousand people participated in the killing of six million Jews.

How did that happen? How did so many people get caught up in such an extraordinary evil? The answer is complicated, but one of the answers is because they were told to. People in authority told them to do it, so they did, just like in Stanley Milgram's experiment.

Now with that in mind I want to go back to our scripture reading for today. On an insert in the bulletin I have collected several verses in the Gospel of Mark that describe the crowd. There are 38 references in the Gospel of Mark to the crowd that surrounded Jesus wherever he went. The crowd is almost like a character in the story. On the insert I have listed some samples:

Mark 2:13—“Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them.”

Mark 4:1—“Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.”

Part of the reason for the big crowd was the miraculous healings that Jesus did. But Mark tells us that the crowd was also enamored with Jesus teaching. Look at Mark 11:18—“And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill Jesus; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.” Or Mark 12:37—“And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.”

The crowd flocked to Jesus, like people flocking to a popular preacher. The pinnacle of this was Palm Sunday when people threw their coats on the ground before Jesus and waved tree branches shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” It’s like a rally for a political candidate.

But look what happens in our second scripture lesson. On the insert I have quoted the last 8 verses, starting at verse 8: “So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.” Pilate had a custom of releasing one Jewish prisoner during the Passover as a gesture of goodwill. But this time Pilate has an idea. He suspects that the religious leaders—the chief priests, elders, and scribes—want to kill Jesus because his popularity threatens their power and influence over the people. So in verse 9 Pilate goes over the head of the religious authorities and appeals directly to the crowd. He says, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” Now look at verse 11: “But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.”

All through the gospel of Mark the crowd has been cheering for Jesus, and now suddenly they are against him. Why? Because they have been influenced by people in authority. Social pressure causes them to commit an injustice they would not have imagined themselves doing. It is just like the people in Stanley Milgram’s experiment.

Notice how this works. The chief priests did not stir up the crowd to have Jesus crucified. They only encouraged them to ask for Barabbas instead. One of the striking things about Stanley Milgram’s experiment is how people are influenced to hurt others by asking them to do it gradually. People were not asked to give a 450-volt shock right at the beginning of the experiment. At the beginning it was only a little 15 volt buzz. No big deal. But that small act of hurt became the building block for greater and greater cruelty.

In his book James Waller shows how the same process transforms ordinary people into torturers. Initially they are recruited to be part of an elite unit and sent out with a squad of soldiers to arrest people. At first they are not asked to torture people, only to arrest them. But

when they bring them back they are forced to watch as other guards beat and torture the prisoners. Later they are ordered by superiors and cajoled by the other guards to join in beating the prisoners or humiliating them. At first they participate in this as part of a group, but eventually they become accomplished torturers themselves and in the final stage they will actually boast to the other guards of their proficiency as a torturer.

It is just like Stanley Milgram's experiment. You start by asking people to give a little 15 volt shock, and by small steps you work them up to extraordinary acts of cruelty.

The chief priests stirred up the crowd, not to crucify Jesus but to ask for Barabbas. In verse 12 Pilate says, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" Verse 13: "They shouted back, 'Crucify him!'"

Wow! How did we get to that point? Five days earlier the crowd was cheering Jesus. Now they are jeering him. Five days earlier they were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Now they yell, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

There is another interesting thing that happens during Stanley Milgram's experiment. Many of the people giving the shocks came to despise the people they were shocking, even though they did not know them. The volunteers would say things like, "He is so stupid he deserves to get shocked" (*Becoming Evil*, p. 214).

Psychologists call this "blaming the victim." In a fit of anger a husband batters his wife and then concludes that she is "asking for it," that she is not worthy of any better treatment. Unfortunately, the wife sometimes concludes the same thing. Or a student at school is made fun of by other students, and you as a bystander conclude that the student deserved to be made fun of—that the student was "asking for it." You are blaming the victim.

The crowd in Mark's gospel starts out cheering for Jesus, then they are persuaded to choose Barabbas over Jesus, then they begin making fun of Jesus, and in the final stage they participate in killing him. Do you see how evil works? It captures your heart little by little. The little meanness you do someone at school, the quiet contempt you show for someone at work, the little pornography you watch on a small computer screen, the little lies you tell on a tax form, the demeaning comments you make about people of a different race, nationality, religion, or political party—these seemingly small acts prepare the soil of your heart for later acts that would appall you if you did not come upon them so gradually.

The crowd in Mark's gospel represents us. It is not just Pilate or the Jewish leaders that are responsible for Jesus' death. If you look closely at a picture of the crowd, you will see yourself. You will discover what can happen when you are persuaded by social pressure to demean other people. You will discover what can happen when you accustom yourself to wrongdoing by small incremental steps. In the picture of that crowd you will discover what you are capable of doing if you turn your back on God's grace.

- Ken Onstot
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