

## A TALE OF TWO SIMONS

The Holy Week and the Easter narrative contains two Simons.

**Simon Peter** is the one many of us would be familiar with. He is perhaps the most famous of Christ's twelve disciples, and many a sermon has been preached on his three denials before the rooster crowed and his eventual three-fold restoration after the resurrection.

But there's another Simon that's a forgotten figure – **Simon of Cyrene**.

There's not much commentary on him.

It's not due to neglect.

We simply don't get much on him.

Each of the synoptic gospels- Matthew, Mark and Luke- only give us one verse about this man who is pulled from the crowd to help Jesus carry his cross on the way to crucifixion.

**Mark 15:21** gives us the following which contains the most details:

*A passerby named Simon, who was from Cyrene, was coming in from the countryside just then, and the soldiers forced him to carry Jesus' cross.*

*(Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus.)*

The tale of these two Simons through Holy Week– Simon Peter & Simon of Cyrene- is a tale of two bystanders. I want to look at them both, as well as two of Jesus' teachings about bystanders.

The first and easily most famous teaching is in **Luke 10 - The Good Samaritan**.

In Luke 10 an expert of the law asks Jesus what one must do to punch their ticket to Heaven.

Jesus replies with, "what does the law say? How do you read it?"

He replies with Love God with all your heart soul strength and mind and Love your neighbor.

To which Jesus says "you have answered correctly."

Jesus then teaches the Parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate the above.

### **READ LUKE 10:30-37**

*"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'*

*"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

*The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."*

*Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*

We see in the Parable what psychologists would call **passive bystanders & active bystanders**. Passive bystanders remain detached from the situation, while active ones jump to help.

These psychological studies on bystanders increased exponentially after an event in Queens in 1964- when a young woman named **Kitty Genovese** was brutally murdered within sight and earshot of **38** neighbors.

The equivalent of 38 priests and Levites – passive bystanders- who did nothing to help. It shocked the American public so much that it moved psychologists to try to study and understand the difference between a passive bystander vs. an active one.

**Ervin Staub** was a psychologist whose research was sparked by his experience as a young Jewish child in Hungary during WWII. The presence of active bystanders who didn't sit idly by were why he lived, as a house maid didn't hesitate to hide his family. But he also witness so many passively standing to the side as 75% of Hungary's 600,000 Jews were killed by the Nazis. Many of the terms tonight come from his research.

**Simon Peter**: after Jesus' arrest Simon Peter follows before settling in at a distance by a fire with other onlookers in the crowd.

He settled in as a **pseudo bystander**.

He wanted people to think he was detached from the conflict and just another passive bystander sitting by as Jesus suffered. In the process he denies three separate times that he even knows Jesus. Then as the story goes, the rooster crows fulfilling Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial, and Jesus himself looks at Simon Peter from a distance. The veil of being a would-be bystander is stripped away, and Simon Peter is distraught and runs away in tears.

**Simon of Cyrene**, however, was legitimately detached, and quickly pulled in...

There were plenty of reasons for Simon of Cyrene to not want to jump in and help Jesus.

There were many reasons for him to play it passive as Simon Peter did.

Practical

*"was coming in from the countryside"*

He was just coming from where they were going and had to do a 180. (picture of repentance) It's possible he was camping outside the city as many people would have been doing during Passover week when the typical population in Jerusalem of about 30k people was flooded by well over 100k people on pilgrimage.

He had traveled some 900 miles on pilgrimage to come from Cyrene- a region in modern day Libya- to Jerusalem. This likely had taken months to execute as well as a substantial amount of funds. It's entirely possible he's itching to lay eyes on Jerusalem for the first time, already tired from a month of travel, and he runs headfirst into the procession to Golgotha.

Curiosity no doubt stirred in him as the crowd came toward him, finally engulfing him. And then moments later a brutalized man with a crown of thorns fell at his feet.

Practically speaking: **for all he knows, Jesus is guilty.** This wasn't a time where there are trending topics on Twitter or home pages. It's likely Simon- from hundreds of miles away in Africa- wouldn't have heard of Jesus before his visit- and certainly not recognized him. And as one who was just coming in from the country, it's unlikely he had witnessed Jesus' trial or been a part of the mob present at these events.

### **Psychological**

Put yourself in his culture: to touch the bloody cross would have made him **unclean**. He just made the 900 mile trip to celebrate Passover, and he'd no longer be able to do so due to ritual purity laws of worship and his touching blood in this way.

But perhaps the most psychologically troubling: **To carry the cross was a shame**  
It was a punishment for the lowest of criminals and condemned.

In psychological studies, people often remain passive bystanders because of what is called "**Confusion of Responsibility**" - you don't want to be mistaken for the cause of the distress. Simon of Cyrene no doubt would have preferred to stay a passive bystander so he wouldn't be mistaken as a criminal and the cause of the commotion.

But here's the problem that kept Simon from remaining passive:  
*this wasn't a request.* You don't tell a Roman soldier no.  
So it wasn't his will but, he picked up the cross and carried it.  
**"Not my will but..."**

These were the words Jesus had prayed in the garden, knowing this same cross was coming. But Jesus knew why he was sent. God's will. His death. His resurrection. Our salvation.  
**His words? "Not my will, but yours be done"**

Simon, who came into Jerusalem for the sacrifice of Passover, headed back where he came from for the ultimate sacrifice of Easter.

Now ceremonially unclean, chances are Simon of Cyrene never was able to make it into the Temple to make a sacrifice. But did he come to grasp that Jesus, the Lamb that was slain, was the real sacrifice, the all sufficient sacrifice – and all he needed?

For us as believers, in hindsight, understanding what had been set in motion, what a powerful moment! To come alongside our savior in his suffering. To serve the one we love and worship in that way!

When I realize the depths of that moment, I yearn to have the opportunity to come to my Savior's side in such a profound way. To be in that moment, with an opportunity to be an active bystander.

**But there's a third Simon to consider tonight.** (*Not Simon Cowell, not Paul Simon...*)  
**You.**

Here's the difference with you: you don't get a once in a lifetime opportunity. You get the opportunity again and again, often daily, to help Jesus carry the weight he bears.

What on earth am I talking about? When will we ever live through the events of Passion week like Simon Peter and Simon the Cyrene?

Well let's turn to a second teaching Jesus shares on bystanders... in **MATTHEW 25:33-46**  
*“Whatever you did for one of the least of these... you did for me”*

We love to wash our hands of the responsibility like Pontius Pilate.

We love to, as Psychologists would call it, embrace the **DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY**  
*If there are other bystanders, we feel less responsible to act and are prone to passiveness*

This active bystanding isn't about earning our salvation. It's about the overflow in the life of a follower of Christ that will cause them to walk in care and compassion.  
It's about showing grace and mercy. But it's not about earning God's love or grace or mercy.

The beam that Simon of Cyrene was responsible for was what was called the transverse beam.  
**This was the horizontal beam.**

In the paintings we celebrate and movies we watch we often see Jesus carrying the entire cross. But according to Roman practice of crucifixion- a system of execution that they perfected and used at a prolific pace- the vertical beam was already taken care of, permanently in place at Golgotha. Simon's responsibility in that moment was to carry the horizontal beam.

So it is with us.

Jesus takes care of the vertical beam. Vertical reconciliation with God the Father.

**We're responsible for the horizontal beam. We're called to labor horizontally.**

We're called to be co-laborers with Christ, as ministers of reconciliation, working horizontally to reach and impact those around us.

In light of this responsibility we should ask “who is my neighbor” and reflect on Jesus' answer. We should also ask “who is Jesus” and reflect on Matthew 25.

The call to be an active bystander to those in need is a foundational part of following Jesus. Our very call as a follower is to Love God and Love our neighbor.

Paul sums up the laws of Christ in this:

**“Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the laws of Christ.”** - Galatians 6:2

Paul goes on in Galatians 6 to say in verse 10:

**“whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith.”**

Be mindful. Be active. To everyone. But we so often settle in as passive bystanders. But a key verse in all that we are considering tonight that can make us less passive?

***“At that moment the Lord turned and looked at Peter.”***

There's power in **eye contact**. The veil of the bystander is removed with eye contact.

If you're a victim psychologists say you create active bystanders as a victim by selecting a specific person for help. Make eye contact and say "YOU..."

It prevents people from concluding there isn't an emergency, and from thinking somebody else will help. Two of the major problems with passive bystanders.

Jesus looking at Peter stripped him of his façade of being a detached, passive bystander.

In the account of judgment day Jesus says people will ask: "*When did we see you...*"

When did I lay eyes on your eyes? When did we make eye contact?

The assertion is if I'd seen you, I'd certainly have helped you.

How often do we feel disconnected from Jesus because we live disconnected from the flesh and blood around us? We miss Jesus when we miss the flesh and blood around us.

And we have gotten real good at that.

Eye contact is a lost art.

We are more and more skilled at locking eyes with screens.

And we've become more and more blind to the flesh and blood people around us.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan in the modern context would have a pastor like myself missing the victim altogether because I'm swiping and scrolling on my phone.

Our excuse in the moment?

We are ignoring the people we do see but it's too care for those we don't see.

But **1 John 4:20** would give us a warning:

*If we won't love the person we can see, how can we love the God we can't see?*

We should ask how many needs do we miss among the flesh and blood around us?

We should ask how serious is that?

Matthew 25 is in what is called the Olivet Discourse, this sermonette or stream of thought taught by Christ, and it precedes the account of judgment with two other parables:

**The Five Foolish virgins** – where there are five who foolishly don't fill their lamps with oil.

**The Parable of the Talents** – where the servant didn't invest his talent.

In both of those cases, as well as the case of the goats on judgment day – they weren't condemned for an especially heinous sin or extensive list of sins committed.

But each of these three situations?

They were condemned for their failure to do the right thing.

**Sins of omission.**

How serious is it when we're blind to needs around us, or we limit or diffuse responsibility?

Matthew 25 and Jesus' Olivet Discourse would answer: as serious as it gets.

Jesus walked around with next level, supernatural situational awareness and observational skills. Some texts basically say he knew what people were thinking. But so much of Jesus' compassion and interactions came from simple, intentional MINDFULNESS- the simple act of paying attention to what was going on around him.

In a mob of people he saw Zacchaeus off to the side in a tree.

In a mob of people he discerned random bumps from the intentional touch of a woman seeking healing. .

In his moment of arrest and abuse he even saw Peter detached and distant at a fire, locking eyes with him.

When we choose to be a bystander when others suffer,  
we, like Simon Peter, make it clear we don't truly know Jesus.

We rarely have the opportunity to carefully select the crosses we would like to carry. Not selections, they come at intersections with the lives of others. We become bystanders to the weight carried by family members, friends, or even strangers and the least of these, and we meet the opportunity to work under a cross that wasn't originally ours to carry.

We find Jesus there according to Matthew 25.

They find him too.

**Proverbs 3:27**

*Never walk away from someone who deserves help; **your hand is God's hand for that person.***

For Simon the Cyrene, the most important moment of his entire life was helping carry the cross of another. So it will be for many of us.

Some of the truly meaningful moments of our lives are found in coming under a cross with someone else until they are ready to resume the journey and bear the weight.

And the impact can be much much greater than just the person you help in the moment.

Mark mentions Simon of Cyrene's sons as if his readers would know who they are.

He was writing for the Church in Rome.

Paul, writing Romans in the book of Romans, makes mention of Rufus in Romans 16:13

It's widely believed this Rufus and Simon's son could have been one and the same.

Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Christ.

As a result Rufus helped carry forward the kingdom movement sparked by it.

Legacy in our world is often seen in climbing a ladder. Getting to the top.

Legacy in God's eyes isn't climbing a ladder. It's carrying crosses.

It's not getting to the top. It's getting on our knees in the dirt and helping another.

The greatest in the Kingdom is the servant of all, the carrier of crosses, the bearer of another's burdens.

God give us the heart for this, and the eyes to see the work in front of us.