

No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 17 - PILATE

TEXT: JOHN 18:28-19:1 (ESV)

Early Friday

For the next two weeks we will focus in on Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate early on Good Friday. What do you think of Pilate? He was the Governor of Judea who sent Jesus to the cross. He was also one of Jesus' most vocal defendants—trying to secure His release on at least four different occasions. It wasn't that he liked Jesus. He certainly didn't believe in Him. But he clearly didn't believe the charges against Jesus were substantial enough to warrant the death penalty. Still, Pilate was a politician and as it is to this day, what a politician thinks and what a politician does often look very different.

Rev. Russ Ramsey
February 22, 2009

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

We live in a political world, and there are those who, for a host of reasons, jump into the fray to lead, represent and even contend for what they believe is best. Many are corrupt, but not all. We should be thankful for the men and women serving in politics who are people of integrity. They play a vital role in securing unprecedented freedoms Americans enjoy. I hope as we study Pilate, it will move us to pray for those who govern us.

When we read Bible stories, it can be hard not to turn them into cartoons. You've got Noah waving from his boat or wee little Zaccheus in his tree with the long haired, fair-skinned Jesus beneath, beaming an unnaturally happy smile up at him. Pontius Pilate, in the cartoon version, might be the consummate bad guy with a thin mustache sneering through the wispy trails of smoke rising from the "Cruella De Vil" cigarette in his hand.

Pilate was a part of the Roman empire. Rome could be brutal. But their legal system was also one of the most advanced of that time. We see evidence of this later throughout the Apostle Paul's journeys. When he is imprisoned, he appeals time and again to his Roman citizenship. Roman law protected her citizens, guaranteeing due process and legitimate hearings.

When I look at Pilate, I do not see a prototypical "bad guy." I see an irreligious person who believes power and money make the man. And he's navigating those waters for the purpose of gaining more of each. I don't want to take away from his cowardly, wicked conduct in this story. Nor do I wish to foster sympathy for him. On the other hand, I don't want us to miss that we, as sinners, are more like Pilate than we are like Jesus in this story. Pilate wasn't "extra sinful." He was just Godless.

Try and imagine this moment from his perspective. Pontius Pilate was a middle-management Governor. He hoped, as any mid-level politician would, that his stock was rising. Judea was a stop along the way to the power, stature and respect he hoped to one day possess. But Pilate had some things working against him. He had done severe damage to his relationship with the Jews he governed. One specific example from Luke tells of how Pilate mixed the blood of certain Galileans with that of their religious sacrifices. (Lk.13:1) This was a desecration, and the Jews never forgave it. On other occasions, Pilate introduced pagan rituals, images and even funds into Jewish religious practices.

It never looks good to your superiors when the people you govern detest you. That doesn't make for peace long term. The happier the Jews were, the sooner Pilate could rise out of his professional purgatory in Judea. As it happened, Herod, who held a higher rank than he, was in town when Jesus was brought to him. Pilate was being asked preside as judge over what was, to him, a religious matter between the Chief Priests and Jesus. Still, this was an opportunity for Pilate to show wisdom and leadership. But it was also an opportunity to reveal weakness. Either way, Herod would hear about how Pilate handled Jesus.

Everything got complicated when the Chief Priests charged that Jesus was "misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king." (Lk 23:2) If Pilate didn't condemn a Jew claiming to be a King, "he was no friend of Caesar." (Jn 19:2) There was only one king—Caesar. Pilate's job was to enforce that rule. The suggestion of disloyalty to Caesar, together with Pilate's history of trouble with the Jews, could cost him every ounce of favor he might have built in the eyes of his king—maybe even his life. He can't ignore Jesus with these charges hanging on him. Jesus' trial would be a small price to pay to keep his own loyalty from being called into question. What would you have done? John tells us what Pilate did.

John 18:28-19:1

²⁸They led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you." ³¹Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." ³²This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

³³So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" ³⁵Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." ³⁷Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

After he said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him. ³⁹But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber. ^{19:1}Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.

Inquisition and Substitution

The Chief Priests need Pilate but they don't like Pilate. Although only he holds the power to legally call for a crucifixion, Pilate is nothing more to them than an unclean gentile. They won't even enter his headquarters, lest they defile themselves by going into a Gentile's home. Pilate has to come out to them just to hear their complaint. But he uses their superior attitude to his advantage, bringing Jesus into his headquarters to question Him in order that Jesus might have an opportunity to respond.

When Pilate asks if He is King of the Jews, Jesus highlights the absurdity of the moment: *"Did someone tell you this?"* Jesus is there for no other reason than that the people outside claimed He was an insurrectionist. But there was no evidence of this. He was handed over by His own people without one single follower at His side. His "crimes" are hearsay, and completely indemonstrable. Pilate, arresting any notion that Jesus might be his peer in this conversation, rebukes Him: *"It was your own people who handed you over. What did you do?"* Jesus goes on to say, *"My Kingdom is not of this world. If I were leading a band of rebels, wouldn't they be fighting for me now?"*

One thing Pilate must do is determine if Jesus is a rebel aspiring to become King? Is Jesus a threat to Rome's national security? If you look at Jesus' interaction with the Romans, what do you see? Luke 7 recounts how Jesus brought back to life the servant of a centurion. In Matthew 22, Jesus tells the Jews it is right for them to pay their taxes to Caesar, even as they goad Him to grant permission not to. In Luke 22, the most recent example, when Jesus is arrested, Peter cuts off one of the soldier's ears, and Jesus rebukes Peter and heals the man right there. Jesus' conduct toward the Romans has been redemptive and gracious.

But His reply to Pilate is complex. He denies there's a rebellion coming. On the other hand, He declares He is a King over a Kingdom not of this world. To clarify Pilate says, *"So you are a King?"* Here, Jesus has an opportunity to perhaps explain that He is a religious leader and His accusers misunderstand His intentions. But no. Jesus' reply, like so many other places in this story, affirms what He said before His arrest—No one would take His life from Him, but He would lay it down. He said, *"For this purpose I was born and have come into this world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."*

Understand this. Jesus is telling Pilate He is a King and His Kingdom is higher than the one to which Pilate belongs—the implication being Jesus is a greater king than Caesar. Jesus goes on to say He was born to rule a Kingdom that will outlast the Roman world, suggesting whatever happens to Him at the hands of Rome or the mob outside have no bearing on His authority as King over His Kingdom. He was born to be King, and His reign is one of truth—the absence of which has led to this very conversation. Jesus came into this world to testify of the truth and everyone on the side of truth listens to Him.

Do you see what Jesus is doing to Pilate here? This inquisition began with Pilate taking Jesus inside for a more private exchange. Pilate would conduct this interview on his terms. But by the time we come to this point in their meeting, Jesus is not only upholding the title of King, and not only is He asserting that His Kingdom is greater and will last longer than Rome, Jesus is now testing Pilate, saying everyone who is on the side of the truth listens to Him. Will Pilate listen? Will Pilate care about truth? Even if Pilate doesn't accept Jesus as the truth, Jesus is still calling Pilate to admit this trial is not about truth for him any more than it is for the mob outside.

Pilate doesn't want to convict, let alone crucify Jesus. He wants Jesus to say the magic words that will show this for the miscarriage of justice that it is. Pilate wants Jesus to help him save political face. But this isn't Pilate's show. Jesus isn't in Pilate's headquarters because the mob wants Him there, or even because Pilate wants Him there. He endures all of this because His Father wants Him there. So with a chance to soften Pilate, all Jesus does is harden him even more by calling into question Pilate's commitment to the truth in this matter.

Pilate responds with a question that still plagues many—*What is truth?* But notice, Pilate doesn't wait for an answer. Rather, he storms out to address the mob, as if truth cannot be known. Beloved, *eternity* is in that question. Salvation is in that question. The purpose of life is in that question. What level of despair must we live in when our starting point is that there is no knowable truth? Picture Pontius Pilate, there in a face to face meeting with the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, asking the question, *"What is truth?"* and he leaves without caring to hear the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life respond.

The truth, for Pilate, is that he has to play his political cards well. He has a supposed rebel with no followers going on about ruling over a kingdom not of this world. Jesus is no threat to Rome, so Pilate says to the crowd, *"I find no basis for the charge against Him."* So he proposes options. In Luke 23, he said, *"I will punish Him and then release Him."* He would flog Jesus and turn Him out in disgrace to live the remainder of His days marked by the whip of the Romans and the memory of the crowds.

But the crowds, stirred up by the Chief Priests, wanted more. So Pilate calls on a custom of releasing a prisoner during Passover, offering them a choice—Jesus or Barabbas. Barabbas was a murderer and a thief. Jesus was known for was healing the sick and raising the dead. Barabbas' guilt was proven and heinous and Jesus' was far from either. Pilate selected Barabbas hoping if this was the people's choice, they'd opt to have the non-murderer released, and Pilate would be done with his part in this mess. He was wrong. The people chose Barabbas, even though their own law said, *"Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the Lord detests them both."* (Prov 17:15) They chose Barabbas and in so doing acquitted the guilty and condemned the innocent. This is a mess, and it's only going to get worse.

Application—The Truth

What do we take home from a story like this? First, consider what Jesus teaches about truth. The world then had never seen anything like the mighty Roman Empire. But where is Rome? The Kingdom of Christ lives on, but Caesar is dead. Pilate thought truth lay in political standing, but this proved to be a moving target. Where are you looking for truth? Truth, as Jesus presents it, is objective, like a spike in the side of a mountain. It holds. You can't change it. It doesn't originate with you or any one else. It doesn't come from political power or the economy or any other circumstance of life. Truth comes from God, the Creator and Sustainer of all that was, is and ever shall be.

Second, Pilate thinks he knows the truth, but he's wrong. Learn from Pilate how easily blind to the truth we can be and pray for humility. The truth is not a situation. It is a person—Christ the Lord. He did not turn away from the horror awaiting Him, but followed through with a death that, for those whose faith is in Him, was in their place—not because it was the Chief Priest's will, let alone Pilate's will. He endured the cross because it was His Father's will that you might be saved. May He open our eyes that we might not be blind, but see the Truth and listen to Him.