

SERIES: Easter
SERMON: Pilate: Portrait of Betrayal
SCRIPTURE: Luke 23
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Many individuals played a role in the world's all-time worst travesty of justice—the crucifixion of Jesus. Among them are Annas, Caiaphas, Herod, Pilate, Barabbas, Judas, Peter, the scribes and the Pharisees, but the one I have chosen to focus upon this morning is Pontius Pilate. His remarkable witness about the character of Jesus is especially valuable, since it comes from one who was never one of His followers. You see, many are skeptical when Jesus' friends claim He was innocent; but when the man who ordered His execution makes the same claim, that has unique value in any court. And that's what Pilate did.

Pilate is riding the fast track to political power.

This is a man whose life is well-known in the pages of secular history, as well as the sacred text of Scripture. The Jewish historian Josephus writes much about him, as does Philo of Alexandria. And his name has been found on stone tablets recently excavated by archaeologists in Caesarea. What we learn is that Pilate was a Roman citizen, born in Italy in approximately 1 BC, so he was a relatively young man in his early thirties when the events of Luke 23 took place. He was married, a member of the Equestrian class in Rome, and wealthy. We know little about his early career, but he probably held a series of civil and military appointments before being appointed governor of a province. The picture we get is definitely one of an ambitious young politician seeking to climb the ladder of political power and prestige.

Pilate was appointed as the fifth governor of Judea in AD 26 by the emperor Tiberius. His area of jurisdiction was Samaria, Judea, and as far south as Gaza and the Dead Sea—more than half of the country we know as Israel. The Jews were granted a fair degree of liberty and self-government, and the Sanhedrin, composed of Jewish religious leaders, retained various judicial functions. However, death sentences could not be carried out without permission of the Roman governor.

Because of political and religious problems, the Romans considered Judea one of their most difficult provinces to govern. On two occasions prior to the trial of Jesus, Pilate experienced major conflict with the Jews. One occurred on his very first visit to Jerusalem. He was accompanied by a large detachment of soldiers, each company of which carried its own banner or standard. On the top of each standard was a little metal bust of Emperor Tiberius. Since the Emperor was regarded as a god by the Romans, the Jews considered that little bust to be a graven image. They pleaded with Pilate to remove the images, but he refused, saying he would not pander to their superstitions.

When Pilate returned from Jerusalem to his headquarters in Caesarea the Jews followed him and dogged his footsteps for five days, demanding an apology. Finally, he told them to meet him in the amphitheater, where he surrounded them with soldiers and threatened to kill them on the spot if they didn't cease their demands. They called his bluff by baring their necks and bidding the soldiers to strike. Pilate knew he was beaten and acceded to their request. That is how Pilate's tenure in Palestine began—not a very auspicious beginning.

A second confrontation occurred not long afterward. The Jerusalem water supply was inadequate

and Pilate determined to build a new aqueduct. When the necessary funds for the project could not be found, he raided the temple treasury, which resembled Fort Knox, reasoning that one of the main reasons why more water was needed was to help wash away the blood of 200,000 sacrifices a year. However, the Jews considered this appropriation of temple money to be sacrilegious, and they rioted. Pilate mingled plain clothes soldiers with the people, and at a given signal they clubbed and stabbed to death hundreds of Jews. This incident is mentioned by Jesus in Luke 13:1-5:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, No! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

But these two confrontations between Pilate and the Jews were minor, at least from an eternal perspective, compared to his most troubling predicament—the trial of Jesus of Nazareth. Pilate happens to be in Jerusalem during Passion Week because, with the population swollen for Passover, tensions are high and there is always the potential for political unrest among the volatile Jews. He is awakened in the early hours before dawn on the day before Passover by a mob which demands that he deal with a prisoner of theirs. The urgency is that they need to get this lynching over before Passover so they won't "defile themselves." The sheer hypocrisy is striking.

Actually by the time Jesus is brought to Pilate's Judgment hall, he has already been through one kangaroo court. He was arrested about midnight in the Garden of Gethsemane and taken to the home of the high priest, probably referring to Annas, the high priest emeritus. (It was in the courtyard of that home that Peter denied Christ). From there He was sent on to Caiaphas, the current high priest, and I want us to pick up the reading at that point in verse 63 of Luke 22:

The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophecy! Who hit you?" And they said many other insulting things to him.

At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. "If you are the Christ," they said, "tell us."

Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God."

They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?"

He replied, "You are right in saying I am."

Then they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips."

Chapter 22 ends with all the religious leaders agreeing that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy. All they need now is a civil trial so they can legally put him to death. So Jesus is brought to the palace of the Roman Governor, Pilate. Let's continue our reading in chapter 23.

Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse

him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king."

So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man."

But they insisted, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here."

The Jews here level four charges against Jesus:

1. Misleading the nation
2. Opposing the payment of taxes to Caesar
3. Claiming to be Christ, a King.
4. Stirring up insurrection among the people.

However, the charges are all trumped up or distorted.

Pilate repeatedly declares Jesus “not guilty” of all charges.

For one thing, none of these charges are capital crimes under Roman Law. But in addition Pilate can find no basis *in fact* for any of these charges. He declares in verse 4, “I find no basis for a charge (any charge) against this man.” This is just the first of a number of declarations of Jesus’ innocence from Pilate. Right here in Luke 23 we have three other declarations—one in verse 14, another in verse 15, and the third in verse 22—and others are recorded in the other Gospels. Even Pilate’s wife asserts His innocence. In Matthew 27:19 we read that “while Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: ‘Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.’”

These declarations of innocence accomplish two purposes—they highlight the character of Jesus and they eliminate any excuse for Pilate or the religious leaders who demanded His execution. This is not a case in which the evidence is ambiguous or circumstantial. This is a case in which the evidence is watertight—and it all points to the innocence of the defendant. Pilate sees this, and ...

He tries every conceivable way to extricate himself from responsibility for Jesus’ death.

1. He simply refuses to approve the death penalty. (23:4) Following Pilate’s first declaration that Jesus is “not guilty,” (in 23:4) he orders the Jews to deal with Jesus themselves. This is not obvious from Luke’s account, but we see it clearly in the parallel passage in John 18:31: “Pilate said, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.’ ‘But we have no right to execute anyone,’ the Jews objected.” They want the death penalty and that can only be handed down by Roman authorities.

Pilate, realizing he is dealing with an irrational mob, suddenly sees a possible escape from his dilemma. It is found in that statement at the end of verse 5 to the effect that Jesus “started in

Galilee and has come all the way here.” Pilate immediately asks if Jesus is a Galilean. The reason this is of such keen interest to him is that Galilee is outside his jurisdiction. Herod Antipas is the ruler over that region, and as luck would have it, Herod is in Jerusalem at this very time. Let him deal with these lunatics!

2. Pilate turns Jesus over to Herod’s jurisdiction. (23:6,7) It is perhaps 6:00 in the morning when Jesus arrives bound at Herod's residence. Though it is an ungodly hour, Herod is excited when he is told that Jesus is in the courtyard (verse 8) because he has been wanting to see Jesus for some time, and he is hoping to see a miracle. But Jesus refuses to even speak to Herod (verse 9). What can he say to this one who only wants a demonstration of divine power? Jesus never refused a sincere seeker, but Herod is not in that class, and Jesus never once performed a miracle just to titillate the skeptics. A song in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* entitled "Try It and See," may not be far off in its portrayal of this blasphemous man, Herod:

*Jesus, I am overjoyed to meet you face to face,
You've been getting quite a name all around the place,
Healing cripples, raising people from the dead,
And now I understand you're God, at least that's what you've said.*

*So you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ.
Prove to me that you've divine—change my water into wine.
That's all you need do and I'll know it's all true
C'mon King of the Jews.*

*Jesus, you just won't believe the hit you've made round here.
You are all we talk about, the wonder of the year.
Oh what a pity if it's all a lie
Still I'm sure that you can rock the cynics if you try.*

*So, you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ.
Prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool
If you do that for me, then I'll let you go free
C'mon, King of the Jews.*

But when Jesus stonewalls Herod, the king and his soldiers ridicule and mock Him, dressing Him in an elegant robe, and send Him back to Pilate.

3. He suggests a compromise by offering to punish Jesus. (23:16) When Jesus is arrives back at Pilate’s court room, Pilate says to the Jews (verse 14),

“You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.”

One cannot help but think, “Why punish a man if he is innocent?” But Pilate is caught between a rock and a hard place. Flogging Jesus is better than executing Him. Besides, he can tell his

soldiers to pull their punches. But this too the Jews reject.

4. He offers to release Jesus as the “Passover Criminal.” (23:18,19) You see, the Jews had an unusual custom of releasing a criminal on the Passover holiday, as a gesture of kindness and celebration. The Apostle John tells us at the end of the 18th chapter of his Gospel that Pilate latches on to this custom as another opportunity to escape the dilemma he is facing. Since he wouldn't actually be acquitting Jesus, the Jews should be appeased.

But the scheme does not work. Even this apparently foolproof plan is totally frustrated when the Jews in their hateful frenzy yell, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" One cannot appreciate the significance of this without realizing that Barabbas is Public Enemy #1. He is an insurrectionist and a murderer, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke. Their request to have him released would be tantamount to people clamoring today for the release of Saddam Hussein if given a choice between him and Billy Graham. Verse 20 indicates that Pilate wants to release Jesus so much that he appeals to them again. But they keep shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

5. Again he tries to compromise, ordering Jesus to be flogged and crowned with thorns to stir up sympathy. (23:22, John 19:1-5) This is barely mentioned in Luke 23:22 but it is described in detail in John 19:1-5. When the Romans scourged a prisoner they tied him to a whipping post in such a way that his back was fully exposed. The lash was a long, leather thong, studded at intervals with pellets of lead and sharpened pieces of bone. It literally tore a man's back into strips. Few remained conscious through the ordeal; some died; many went stark raving mad. And as if being scourged weren't enough, they shove a crown of thorns upon Jesus' head, and hit Him in the face. "Surely," thinks Pilate, "this will satisfy these blood-thirsty mongrels," failing to realize that the taste of blood would only send them into a greater demonic frenzy.

He parades the suffering Jesus before the crowd. When Pilate says to the crowd, "Here is the man!" (John 19:5), he uses an expression that in classical Greek means "Look at the poor creature!" I believe Pilate's purpose is to show them how ridiculous it is to think that this pitiful man in the purple robe with blood streaming down his face could be any threat to them at all. But Pilate's attempt produces the opposite effect intended, for when the chief priests and officers see Jesus, they immediately cry out, "Crucify, crucify." Failure again! The sixth attempt to release Jesus is found in John 19:

6. After a troubling conversation with Jesus he tries again to release Him, but the Jews intimidate him by mentioning Caesar. (John 19:8-12) These are the last words between Pilate and Jesus, and they are to me the most profound. Pilate asks Him, "Where do you come from?" But Jesus refuses to answer. Pilate therefore says to Him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" And Jesus answers with those profound words, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." These are words that every king, every prime minister, every president, and every dictator should take to heart. All authority is God's authority and He only delegates it to men. He can retract it whenever He chooses.

Following this conversation Pilate renews his efforts to set Jesus free, but the Jews pull out their trump card: "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." Fear grips Pilate's heart. He knows full well that his previous confrontations with the Jews have been reported to Tiberius Caesar. He knows that he is on probation and needs to have a clean slate from here on out. And he knows that Tiberius is a very insecure, jealous tyrant, who takes any report of a possible usurper to his authority seriously.

John tells us, "When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement." This is where sentences were handed down. It is now 7 or 8 am and Pilate has wrestled over his dilemma for many hours. He has sought every means he could think of to avoid condemning this innocent man, but every attempt has been frustrated. He desires to make one last effort to extricate himself from this responsibility.

7. Once more he tries to use shame and sympathy. (John 19:14,15) With Jesus standing before him at the Judgment Seat, Pilate says to the Jews, "Here is your King!" But they cry out, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" Pilate asks, "Shall I crucify your king?" And then the chief priests answer with what is surely one of the most incredible statements ever to come from Jewish lips: "We have no king but Caesar!" These are the same people to whom God gave the Ten Commandments, the first of which demands that we have no other gods before us. These are the same people who rioted just a few years earlier and put their lives on the line to remove little metal busts of Caesar from even appearing on a banner. Now they are crying out, "We have no king but Caesar."

So far in this story I suspect our sympathy is all with Pilate and our disgust is all with the religious leaders of Israel. After all, his intentions are honorable and theirs are murderous. But you have heard it said that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." Pilate's intentions may be honorable, but his actions turn out to be despicable.

Pilate condemns an innocent man while futilely declaring his own innocence. (23:24,25, Matt. 27:24,25).

Luke tells us in verse 23:

But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

Matthew tells us there was a little more to it. In 27:24, 25, he writes:

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood" he said. "It is your responsibility!"

Pilate declares himself innocent, but it doesn't make him so. The fact remains that Pilate accedes to the condemnation of an innocent man. Perhaps his guilt is not as great as that of the Jews who

clamored for Jesus' death. In fact, Jesus Himself said they were guilty of the greater sin (John 19:11). But "greater sin" on their part still implies "sin" on his. Friend, it may be that you also have judged Jesus innocent. But if that's *all* you have done—if you have not bowed your knee to Him and placed your faith in Him—you also have acceded to His death and are as guilty as Pilate.

Conclusion: There are many emotions which are conjured up at the mention of the name Pontius Pilate. One can feel anger or contempt or bitterness or scorn. But the emotion that wells up the strongest in my own heart is that of pity. Pilate to me is the most pitiful of all the characters in the NT. He is pitiful, first of all, because ...

1. He pursued political expediency at the expense of truth. The threat of the loss of his position was more serious to him than the shedding of innocent blood.

2. He sought to alleviate his conscience through religious ritual. The washing of the hands was a religious ritual of great significance to the Jews, but nothing is more worthless than a religious rite which has no reality of faith behind it. People are constantly trying to alleviate their consciences through baptism, church membership, good works, tithing, and countless other religious rites, but it doesn't count for anything with God if their hearts are not right with Him.ⁱ

3. He bargained for temporary rather than eternal security and lost both. Secular history tells us that at the age of 36, less than two years after he ordered Jesus to be crucified, Pilate was deposed as governor and ordered to return to Rome for judgment by the Emperor, due to his rash conduct during still another confrontation with the Jews. Only the Emperor's death while Pilate was en route to Rome spared him from certain execution. But strong early church tradition tells us he was banished to Gaul where he committed suicide.

Pilate would never know it, but his would eventually become the most familiar name in all of Roman history. For uncounted millions in future ages, though knowing little about Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius or even Nero, would regularly confess, "I believe in Jesus Christ ...who ...suffered under Pontius Pilate."

What would God have us take away from this pitiful epitaph for a pitiful man today? I think the answer may be found in the words of Jesus: "For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose His own soul?" What shall it profit a man if he gain popularity or job security or power or wealth or knowledge or family or friends, but lose his own soul? The answer is "absolutely nothing." Yet Jesus Christ, of whom Pilate himself said multiple times, "I find no fault in Him," offered His perfect life to pay for our sin, and through faith in Him, *and in Him alone*, you can be saved. Won't you receive Him as your Lord and Savior? You can do that right now where you're sitting. Just be honest with God—acknowledge that you are a sinner and despite all your efforts you know you cannot make yourself right with God. Place your trust in Jesus, who paid for your sin and receive His forgiveness.

i. One of the common tourist sites in Rome is the Scala Santa, or the Sacred Stairs of the judgment seat of Pilate. It is believed by many that these are the actual marble stairs, brought to Rome from Jerusalem, though there is not much historical support for that. The devout pilgrim who ascends these stairs on his knees believes he receives special merit and grace from God. But it was while he was in just such an act of devotion on these very stairs that Martin Luther, a pilgrim visiting Rome nearly 500 years ago, remembered the words of the book of Romans which afterward became the watchword of the Reformation--"The just shall live by *faith!*" He came to the important realization that the ritual means nothing without the faith.