

Pilate's Dilemma

Mark 15:1-15

©Copyright December 31, 2023 by Rev. Bruce Goettsche

This morning we return to the Gospel of Mark after our Christmas series. Admittedly, this seems like an abrupt change from celebrating the birth of Jesus and then immediately jumping to His "trial" before Pilate. However, the only way to see the true value of the manger is to see it in the shadow of the cross. As we look at Pilate's Dilemma we will also see some principles that can help us as we enter a new year.

Let's review. Jesus was arrested in the Garden after the betrayal of Judas. He was taken to the High Priest and the members of the Sanhedrin who were intent on getting Jesus out of the picture. Their so-called trial was a travesty of justice and a violation of Jewish Law. Unfortunately, when people are intent on doing evil, the Law will not get in the way of what they want.

After trying to get false witnesses to testify against Jesus, the High Priest finally asked: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" (Mark 14:61) Jesus answered truthfully,

"I Am. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God's right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven."

In saying these words, Jesus took the name of God, "I Am," and applied it to Himself, and then took the prophecy in Daniel 7:13 and said it was referring to Him. This was enough to cause the group present to condemn Jesus for blasphemy. (As we have noted, claiming to be God is not blasphemy when you actually ARE God.) The Jewish governing body said Jesus was deserving of death.

The Jewish leaders had a problem: they could not execute someone. They also knew Governor Pilate would not be impressed that at a charge of blasphemy. These facts figure into what happens next.

Very early in the morning the leading priests, the elders, and the teachers of religious law—the entire high council—met to discuss their next step. They bound Jesus, led him away, and took him to Pilate, the Roman governor.

The gospel of John adds an interesting statement: "His accusers didn't go inside because it would defile them, and they wouldn't be allowed to celebrate the Passover." If a Jew went into the home of a Gentile, they would be considered "unclean" for seven days which would exclude them from the Passover celebration. Do you see the irony here? They don't want to be disqualified from worship as they connive to kill the Son of God!! This is a reminder that we can be so devoted to our religious practices that they can keep us from the Lord!

The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate did not have a good relationship with the Jewish people. Pilate's home was in Caesarea, but he was likely in Jerusalem to keep the peace during the influx of people during Passover.

One time Pilate had his Roman soldiers march into Jerusalem at night and they erected numerous shields with images of Caesar on them. When the Jews woke up in the morning, they were horrified. These were “graven images” . . . expressly forbidden in the Law of God!

The Jews demanded that Pilate withdraw the images of Caesar. Pilate refused. This protest went on for 7 days! Pilate finally had enough. He had soldiers surround the people, and told them to disperse, “or else.” The Jewish faithful fell to the ground and exposed their necks, saying, “Go ahead and kill us!” Pilate had to give in lest he cause a riot leading to fury in Rome.

In the second incident, Pilate improved the public water system by building a path for water to enter the city of Jerusalem via an aqueduct. That sounds good, but he paid for it by stealing money from the temple funds! This money was devoted to God! Josephus (a Jewish historian) said “many thousands of people” came out to protest forcefully. Pilate sent soldiers in disguise into the crowd with their daggers hidden under their cloaks. When the people refused to give up their protest, Pilate threatened to use force. The people stood their ground. Pilate gave “the sign” and the soldiers attacked more aggressively than he intended, and there was a great massacre with many others wounded.

Because of these conflicts Pilate’s job was hanging in the balance. The Roman Empire wanted peace in the Empire. Peace meant taxes would be paid and soldiers would not have to be dispatched. Pilate had to work hard to keep the peace or he would be called back to Rome. That could result in his death. I suspect the Jewish leaders were aware of Pilate’s tenuous situation.

So Pilate was looking for a way to dispense with this latest request from the Jewish leadership as quickly as possible. It was early in the morning, and Pilate had no idea what a long day it would become.

He did not get any help from Jesus

The charge against Jesus was,

“This man has been leading our people astray by telling them not to pay their taxes to the Roman government and by claiming he is the Messiah, a king.” (Luke 23:2)

The Sanhedrin had convicted Jesus of blasphemy, but that is not the charge they gave to Pilate. They made up the charge of claiming to be a King who was telling people not to pay taxes. This would be seen by Rome as treason. The charge of blasphemy would be seen as nothing to the Romans.

Of course, Jesus never told anyone not to pay taxes. What He did say was, “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s”. These men were so intent on getting rid of Jesus they were willing to twist the truth to get what they wanted.

Pilate took Jesus in to interrogate Him. At first, Jesus simply stood there silently. Pilate was baffled and maybe a little impressed with the silence of Jesus. Pilate had dealt with lots of criminals . . . but none like Jesus. He was charged, but made no defense! Pilate was a little frustrated that this was not going well. He took a break and then returned and asked Jesus a direct question: “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You have said it.” That seems like an odd response. The Gospel of John expanded on this a little more. He writes, “Is this your own question, or did others tell you about me?” Jesus is, in a sense, testing Pilate to see if he really wants to know the answer, or whether he is just parroting what he has heard.

Pilate said, “I’m not a Jew!” It’s your own people who have handed you over to me. What have you done? John tells us, Jesus said,

³⁶ Jesus answered, “My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world.”

³⁷ Pilate said, “So you are a king?”

Jesus responded, “You say I am a king. Actually, I was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true.”

³⁸ “What is truth?” Pilate asked. (John 18:36-38)

This is quite an exchange between the Lord and Pontius Pilate. Jesus says He is a Spiritual King rather than an earthly King and that He came into the world to point people to the truth. Jesus does not say, “I came to testify to “A” truth.” “He came to testify to THE truth.” And Pilate had the same trouble so many today have. . . they have no idea of the concept of “truth.” They are awash in talk about being free to be who they were meant to be. To which we ask the question, “Meant to be? By whom?” There is only One who is true and that is the LORD.

Pilate knew the difference between innocence and guilt. He could see that this was a “religious issue” between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. He wanted no part of this, so he went out and told the leaders he saw no problem with Jesus.

The leaders were not hearing what they wanted to hear. They said,

⁵ Then they became insistent. “But he is causing riots by his teaching wherever he goes— all over Judea, from Galilee to Jerusalem!”

⁶ “Oh, is he a Galilean?” Pilate asked. ⁷ When they said that he was, Pilate sent him to Herod Antipas, because Galilee was under Herod’s jurisdiction, and Herod happened to be in Jerusalem at the time.

⁸ Herod was delighted at the opportunity to see Jesus, because he had heard about him and had been hoping for a long time to see him perform a miracle. ⁹ He asked Jesus question after question, but Jesus refused to answer. ¹⁰ Meanwhile, the leading priests and the teachers of religious law stood there shouting their accusations. ¹¹ Then Herod and his soldiers began mocking and ridiculing Jesus. Finally, they put a royal robe on him and sent him back to Pilate. ¹² (Herod and Pilate, who had been enemies before, became friends that day.)

Herod is No Help to Pilate

As you noticed from the last comment, Herod and Pilate did not care for each other. They were standing in the way of each other's power. Herod was the King over Israel. Pilate represented the Roman Empire in this area. Pilate, I am sure, wanted a little more authority. Herod wanted a little more authority, and he wanted Rome gone!

Herod had heard about Jesus and the purported miracles He did. Herod thought he could persuade Jesus to "perform." The charges were read against Jesus and Jesus said nothing. Herod, was frustrated and sent Jesus back to Pilate. This was like a game of "hot-potato."

Once again, Pilate summoned the leaders and said, "Look, neither Herod nor I see anything wrong with this man. I will have him whipped (even though He had just testified that Jesus did nothing wrong. Pilate was not a good man.) Pilate hoped this would satisfy the Jews and he could get back to watching Football on Fox.

He got no help from the Crowd

The leaders were not satisfied, and football would have to wait! They came at this from another way. The people asked Pilate to release a prisoner like he always did around the Passover. Pilate saw this as another great opportunity to get out of this jam. He picked the worst guy in the prison, a guy by the name of Barabbas and asked if they wanted him to release public enemy #1, Barabbas, or Jesus, the King of the Jews.

I think Pilate thought this was a no-brainer. The people would choose Jesus for sure. Meanwhile, his wife sent him a message (Matthew 27) that said, "I suffered terribly in a dream because of that righteous man (Jesus) so don't have anything to do with Him." God was giving Pilate a chance to do what was right.

The people said they wanted Barabbas released. The shocked Pilate asked, "Then what should I do with Jesus? I am sure He did nothing wrong."

Pilate's Decision

Pilate had Jesus flogged (a whip with shards of metal and stone in it) just for "good measure" and then had Him brought out again (perhaps trying to say, "I taught this man a lesson" so enough of this nonsense). Pilate said he found "no grounds for charging Him." The people yelled for Jesus to be crucified (or hung on a cross). The Gospel of John tells us,

⁸ When Pilate heard this, he was more frightened than ever. ⁹ He took Jesus back into the headquarters again and asked him, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave no answer. ¹⁰ "Why don't you talk to me?" Pilate demanded. "Don't you realize that I have the power to release you or crucify you?"

¹¹ Then Jesus said, “You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above. So the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin.”

Pilate went back outside, and then John records the people responded, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar”. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary notes,

The phrase “a friend of Caesar” was more than a casual allusion to Roman patriotism. It usually denoted a supporter or associate of the emperor, a member of the important inner circle. The cry was a veiled threat: if Pilate exonerated Jesus, the high priest would report to Rome that Pilate had refused to bring a rival pretender to justice and was perhaps plotting to establish a new political alliance of his own. Tiberius, the reigning emperor, was notoriously bitter and suspicious of rivals. If such a report were sent to him, he would instantly end Pilate’s political career and probably his life, too.¹

They went right at Pilate’s vulnerability. Pilate washed his hands and said, “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” and then He gave Jesus over to be crucified. When push came to shove, Pilate gave an innocent man, the very Son of God, over to be crucified even though he knew the man had done nothing wrong.

Lessons from Pilate

The story of Pilate is not pretty but there are things we can learn from Pilate’s story that can be helpful in our walk with Christ.

First, **ultimately, Like Pilate, there will be a time when though we try to dodge conflict, we will either stand with Christ or stand against Him.** It doesn’t matter how many ways we try to straddle the fence; we will eventually make choices that determine where we truly stand; ultimately, we will either water down the faith to be “less offensive” or we will stand on what the Bible says. The more we try to dodge the issue, the more we will be backed into a corner by those who oppose Christ and those who belong to Him.

Let me give you an example. We are now told to use correct “pronouns” for people. In other words, we should ask what gender a person identifies with and then use the proper pronoun. We need to understand that when we do this, we are going against God’s created order of a man and a woman. To give in to the worldly pressures results in taking several steps toward a secular and godless approach to the world. We aren’t sentencing the Son of God to death, but we are denying His truth.

Will there be negative consequences for standing on God’s truth? Very possibly so. Somewhere there must be drawn a line that we cannot cross. The longer we wait to draw the line, the more difficult it will be to hold.

¹ Merrill C. Tenney, “John,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 178.

Second, **there are times when silence is the best answer to critics.** Jesus knew there was no way to appease the hatred of the Jewish leaders. Their mind was made up. Any attempt to defend Himself would only make their anger worse. Jesus did not engage Herod because He knew Herod only wanted Him to entertain him. Jesus saw no point in trying to amuse Herod. Again, it wasn't going to do any good.

Isn't it interesting then that Jesus does engage Pilate a little (as recorded in Scripture). Perhaps Jesus heard an honest question and gave an honest answer. Maybe he knew about the wife's dream and Jesus too gave Pilate the chance to do what was right. In the end, Jesus said little.

Proverbs tells us that it is a waste of time talking to a fool. It's important however, that we are not too quick in pronouncing someone a fool. Listen to their questions, if they seem sincere, respond sincerely. This will either open them up (showing they may be ready for a more significant conversation) or they will become irritated, showing they are more interested in giving speeches than having a conversation. In such a case, save your breath.

Finally, **the choices we make today will impact us long into the future.** Pilate thought he was getting rid of the whole "Jesus mess" by washing his hands of the ordeal. But, he still signed the death warrant. Like it or not, he was neck deep in this situation. Ever since that moment, Pilate was known as the man who executed Jesus.

The decisions you and I make today about our stand on moral issues, or abortion, or the use of personal pronouns will impact our future. Any step away from Jesus erodes some of our security and makes us more vulnerable to the Devil's ploy. One step can lead us to future steps that have much greater consequences. However, a step toward Him will strengthen us for the next test. If we serve Him today, we may see the fruit of that service in the future born out in the lives of others.

Think about it, as we head into a New Year, we will make choices that impact our future. So, let me ask:

1. Are you willing to commit to seeking God every day in prayer and through reading His Word? Here is a good test: Do you spend more time looking in the mirror each day than you do looking into God's Word and seeking His heart?
2. Will you determine to use every opportunity to share your faith in love but without apology? We are not told to be antagonistic, but we must share the truth honestly, because distortions of the truth cannot save anyone.
3. Will you choose to be faithful to the Lord even if it means being unpopular with your friends? Decide now where your ultimate allegiance lay.

These choices will impact whether or not our witness has any effect at all. And, like Pilate, they will ultimately determine how the world will remember you. Will you be remembered as a follower of Jesus or as one who followed the crowd? It is a distinction that may not seem like much now, but it will be the difference between "Well Done!" and "Depart from Me!"