

March 17, 2013

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Behold Your King

John 18:28 – 19:15

This morning you'll notice we find ourselves back in the gospel of John after a couple of months of preaching through what a gospel-centered, Holy Spirit-empowered community looks like. And you might have thought we were through with John – but not quite yet. Two years ago we began looking into this gospel and by the middle of December last year we had covered the first eighteen chapters. And I know some of you might be thinking that's a long time to talk about a book that only has twenty-one chapters. But let me put that in perspective for you. My father, under whose ministry I spent nearly twenty years, once took seven years to cover all thirteen chapters of Hebrews. So in reality we are moving at light speed. However, I want to assure those of you who are anxious about finishing that we won't spend another two years on the last three chapters. My intention is to finish up in about three weeks on the Gospel of John and then move into the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

So this morning, just to put things in context, I want to reach back into chapter eighteen and look at the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate as a whole story; and that begins with a little review. One of the things this passage in John highlights is that **there is truth that is revealed in Jesus Christ, and everyone will be judged on the basis of how they have handled that truth.** John deliberately sets truth against the lie as he relates this story, showing us the ugly irony of truth being crucified by the lie. Everything about the arrest, conviction, torture and murder of Jesus was based on a lie. Look at the contrast: He was from God – they concluded He was from Satan. The friend of sinners was shackled by the hate of sinners. The judge of all the earth was arraigned before a fallen son of Adam. The Lord of glory was treated like a vile criminal. The Holy One was condemned as a blasphemer. Liars gave false witness against the living truth. And He who was the resurrection and the life was killed at the hands of men.

After the all night interrogation of Jesus, He is taken by His captors to the Roman governor for a formal sentence of death. *Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.* John 18:28 The Praetorium was the official residence of the Roman governor, and as a Gentile residence, it was considered unclean to the ultra-religious Jews, as was any Gentile home. The Passover was at hand, and if they did something to defile themselves, they had a seven-day cleansing ritual ahead of them which effectively put them out of running for the Passover celebration. **And we see the irony of the truth being murdered by the lie.** These people were going to celebrate the Passover – which itself pointed to the coming Messiah who would save them from their sins – and they were worried about not being able to participate because they might be defiled by simply being in a Gentile's home. But the fact that they were planning murder didn't seem to bother them at all.

So they bring Jesus to Pilate, and Pilate naturally wanted to know what the charge was: *Therefore Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?"* John 18:29 And Pilate no doubt was expecting some sort of criminal charge. But the problem was that these guys really didn't have a charge that would interest Roman justice. They wanted to kill Him on any pretext they could, and the one they thought up was the charge of blasphemy – but they knew Pilate would never recognize that so they sidestepped the question: *They answered and said to him, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you."* John 18:30 They simply called Him an evil doer, or malefactor – which means one who does bad things. And Pilate probably saw through their subterfuge because he tells them to take care of it for themselves: *So Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law."* John 18:31a

But the Jews were forced to admit that what they really wanted was blood: *The Jews said to him, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death," to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.* John 18:31b-32 The interesting thing here is that up until around a year prior to this, which would be about AD 29, the Jews of this Roman province had the right to execute people who transgressed their religious laws. But just a short time before Jesus was arrested, Rome had taken away this privilege of **jus gladiarii** or **right of the sword** and entrusted it to the Roman authority in the province.

Just as God moved masses of people in Palestine 33 ½ years earlier to bring a certain carpenter and his pregnant wife to Bethlehem for the birth of their first born son, God intervened in the jurisprudence of the Roman Empire to ensure that Jesus would die on a criminal's cross. You see, if the Jews still had the right to execute people under their own laws, Jesus would have been stoned to death, as the Torah commanded. But instead He was hung on a tree to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy that the Christ would be lifted up to die, bearing our curse. And the apostle Paul quoted the words of Deuteronomy when he referred to Jesus' death on the cross: '*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.*' And John is highlighting what he expands on in chapter nineteen, namely that **God is sovereign – even over the wicked plans of evil men.**

So Pilate goes back into his residence and calls Jesus in to have a private interview. I'm sure he didn't trust these religious Jews to give him the straight scoop. *Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?"* John 18:33 He wasn't interested in any religious squabbles – what Pilate wanted to ascertain was whether or not this guy constituted a threat to his government. If Jesus had some political ambitions, his task would be much easier. Rome always came down hard on people who tried to stir up political trouble. But Jesus puts it right back on Pilate: *Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?"* John 18:34 In other words, Jesus was saying that if indeed He was claiming to be the King of the Jews and plotting against Rome, Pilate would have heard some inkling of the news before this time. But the fact that he only just now heard of it implied that Jesus' accusers were not being quite honest with him.

And Pilate's answer seems to indicate this: *Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?"* John 18:35 In other words, 'I don't have any information that would link You to some sort of insurrection or political plot – so tell me, what is really going on?' And Jesus replies: *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."* 18:36 Jesus was telling Pilate that this was not about political power. He was a King, but He wasn't a King like Pilate thought. Jesus was saying the same thing He told Peter in the garden when Peter whipped out his sword to start fighting. His kingdom was not about gaining political power. If it were, He would have brought out His army and started conquering.

And Jesus is telling us that **His kingdom doesn't advance through political power.** No one should ever wage war in His name. No one should ever presume to establish some sort of Christian political entity where you are making everyone tow the Christian line because you are governing in Jesus' name. That has actually been done – and it has been incredibly destructive to the testimony of Jesus. Jesus was saying, 'My kingdom does not come through political power – I'm not establishing a Christian nation – that's not how it works'. ***His kingdom was not established by a strong person who took power but a weak person who gave it up.***

And Pilate, who really doesn't get it – because after all he's a Roman and all they know is taking power by the sword – says: *Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?"* John 18:37a And Jesus gets to the point of this interview: *Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."* John 18:37b In other words, Jesus says, 'I'm not a king in the sense you know it Pilate – but I am a King – a King who is bringing Truth into the world. I'm here to change the way people actually live in the world. On the one hand, I'm not here to establish My rule by the sword, but on the other, My rule will be established – through the Truth – and everyone who is of the Truth agrees with Me'.

And Pilate, in a very post-modern moment, dismisses the idea with scorn: ***"What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him.*** 18:38 In Pilate's reply we hear the echoes of our own day and age – What is truth? Truth is what you think it is. Everyone has their own truth. I won't push my truth on you and you shouldn't push yours on me. Truth is relative. It depends. I choose what truth is. This is the heartbeat of our culture today. The Supreme Court even enshrined this philosophy into law in a decision in 1992 saying that: ***"That the heart of liberty [is to] define one's own concept of existence, of the meaning of the universe."*** (Keller, Reason for God p. 36)

And what Jesus was doing was pressing the issue with Pilate. First, that **everyone must come face to face with the question of who Jesus is** - Pilate asks Jesus, '*Are you the King of the Jews?*' And Jesus responds: *Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?* That is, do you really hear the voice of Truth and do you really want to know?

And second, that **there is a truth that calls men to account** for their choices – *For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth.* What is clear is that there is a cosmic struggle for truth – a great battle between truth and lies. Truth was on trial before Pilate and Jesus said: *Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.* And that implies that there are sides in this conflict – those on the side of truth and those opposed to truth. Those who love the truth and those who hate it and reject it. Jesus says that **you are either on the side of truth or you are on the side of untruth.** Which side are you on?

And when we are confronted, as Pilate was, with the Truth, we have choice. **We can turn away from the truth and embrace imagination** – 2 Timothy 4:3-4; **We can suppress the truth:** Romans 1:18; **We can distort the truth** – Acts 20:30; **We can reject the truth** – Romans 2:8; **we can exchange the truth for a lie** – Romans 1:25 – or we can **surrender and embrace the truth.** Pilate chose poorly, and exchanged the truth for a lie. He came back to the crowd with a proposition: *"But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?" So they cried out again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas." Now Barabbas was a robber.* John 18:39-40 Luke tells us that Barabbas was not just a robber, but a rebel and a murderer. Pilate exchanged the submitted Son of God for an insurrectionist rebel; the perfectly innocent man for the bloody murderer. That is what the lie does – it seduces you into thinking right is wrong and wrong is right and you end up trading the Son of God for the devil.

And then John records that: *Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.* John 19:1 I think deep down, Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and the religious Jews were using Pilate as a means to get rid of a troublesome preacher, so he orders the soldiers to flog Him, hoping that might satisfy the bloodlust of the crowd. Flogging was a brutal punishment that really stopped just short of being a death sentence. The Romans first stripped the victim and tied his hands to a post above his head. The whip (flagellum) was made of several pieces of leather with pieces of bone and lead embedded near the ends. Two men, one on each side of the victim, usually did the flogging. The Jews mercifully limited flogging to a maximum of forty stripes – and they used wooden rods; the Romans had no such limitation.

When a man was flogged, the heavy whip was brought down with full force again and again across the victims shoulders, back, and legs. At first the heavy thongs cut through the skin only. Then, as the blows continue, they cut deeper in the subcutaneous tissues, producing first and oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins of the skin, and finally spurting arterial bleeding from vessels in the underlying muscles. Finally the skin of the back is hanging in long ribbons and the entire area is an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue. If you watched Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* – what you saw was very accurate, and it brings to mind the words of Isaiah: *But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed.* Isaiah 53:5

And then John records the full scope of the humiliation of the Son of God by sinful men: *And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head and arrayed Him in a purple robe. They came up to Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck Him with their hands.* John 19:2-3 And then Pilate brings Jesus out again to the crowd – in all His bloody splendor – perhaps hoping that the sight of such cruelty would cause them to change their minds and he wouldn't be forced to crucify an innocent man. *Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing Him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!" When the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him."* John 19:4-6

Pilate was perhaps thinking, 'Maybe they'll see this guy isn't a threat to anyone. 'Behold the Man' – bruised and bloody, beaten within an inch of His life, His flesh hanging in ribbons off His back, blood flowing down His face from the crown of thorns. But the sight of this physical wreck only intensified their bloodlust – 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!' And in desperation Pilate says, 'You crucify Him'. But *The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law He ought to die because He has made Himself the Son of God."* *When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid.* John 19:7-8 And the law they were referring to was the Law of the Old Testament that said, 'You shall have no other gods besides Me'. And twice Pilate himself had flouted that law; once by allowing the standards of the Roman legion he commanded to be carried into Jerusalem – which had the image of the emperor on them; and once by hanging the shields with the same image in Herod's palace. And both times he had nearly caused a revolt of the Jews and had been warned by Caesar not to incite the Jews anymore this way. So Rome was watching Pilate, and the Jews were watching Pilate and here Pilate feels some fear that the same issue is going to blow up in his face.

There was also the fact that as a Roman he was very superstitious where gods and goddesses were concerned. Romans of his day did not consider it an outlandish idea that from time to time the gods came down to earth in human form to mingle with humans. Put that together with the fact that his wife just that morning had a supernatural experience in a dream about this guy and told Pilate not to have anything to do with Him – and Romans were big into dreams and visions and omens from the gods. So he's probably fearful on two counts – either Caesar was going to get him on the political side, or the gods were going to get him on the religious side. And so Pilate tries to get an answer out of Jesus on the issue: *He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.* John 19:9

Pilate was not asking for His street address in Nazareth – he wanted some sign that this guy was either a god, or demi-god come down to earth, or simply a man with a lot of enemies. But following the plan of God and the prophecy of Scripture – *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.* Isaiah 53:8 His silence must have amazed and frustrated Pilate because he then made a very silly statement: *So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release You and authority to crucify You?"* John 19:10 Pilate may have technically had the authority to do both – but he didn't have the guts to do either. He didn't want to send an innocent man to the cross – but he couldn't let Him go because of the crowd.

And then, breaking His silence, Jesus gives Pilate an amazing answer: *Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over Me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered Me over to you has the greater sin."* John 19:11 And here Jesus lays out the divine paradox of **the sovereignty of God** – and **the responsibility of man**. The Bible teaches both – it is not an either/or as in 'Either God is sovereign – or I am responsible'. First of all Scripture teaches that **God orders and controls all things, including human actions, in accordance with His own eternal purpose**. Secondly, it teaches that **God holds every man responsible for the choices he makes and the courses of action that he pursues**. This is exactly what Jesus is telling Pilate. In other words Jesus was telling Pilate 'Your very office and authority originate with God and He is the One controlling this whole thing – you think you are in charge but you're not'. Furthermore, you will be held responsible for what you do here today – the ones who should have known better will be found more guilty than you – but you will be found guilty too'.

Listen, truth is revealed in Jesus Christ, and everyone will be judged on the basis of how they have handled that truth. Truth about who we are, about who God is, why we're here, what we are supposed to be doing, what we are supposed to believe, truth about where we're going. Everyone has to deal with Jesus. Pilate tried to make the problem go away. In fact John goes on to say that after this pronouncement, Pilate tried even harder. *From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."* John 19:12 He tried, but the crowd wouldn't let him. The threat was 'If you don't crucify this guy – we'll tell Caesar Tiberius you failed to punish a revolutionary'. And then it wouldn't be Jesus on a cross but Pontius Pilate.

And the prospect of losing his own life moved Pilate to finally act. *So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha.* John 19:13 And John adds the comment: *Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour.* John wants us to understand that this was not just random happenchance. It did not just happen that these events occurred during Passover. It was no coincidence that Jew and Gentile came together to offer the Passover Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. Yes it was the will of God who determined this course of events, but it was also the will of sinful man that carried it out. What John wanted his readers to understand, and what Scriptures affirm is that it was our sin that crucified the Lord – not just the anger and hatred of these first century Jews and Romans.

And so Pilate gives Jesus over to the crowd: *He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!"* John 19:14 Pilate had no clue as to the prophetic nature of that statement – 'Behold your King! Israel – here is your long-awaited King – the Messiah of whom your Scriptures foretold, the Messiah of whom your prophets prophesied, the One your ancestors longed to see – here He is!' And their response was: *They cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."* John 19:15 I believe they were lying through their teeth. The Jews really didn't recognize Caesar as king over them. They had to acknowledge the power and authority of the Roman Empire simply because they couldn't resist its imperial might. But that never stopped them from trying. Their whole history under Caesar was one of revolt after revolt.

No I believe what they were saying is what many say today: We have no king and we want no king. **We will be king.** But here is the thing: the King of the Universe layed aside His glory and majesty and came to earth to bear the punishment we, His hostile, rebellious subjects so richly deserved – **Bearing shame and scoffing rude – in my place condemned He stood, sealed my pardon with His blood – Hallelujah, what a Savior!** Will you submit to His rule today? Or will you stand, shaking your fist with the crowd and say, 'I have no king but Caesar?' One day, the Bible tells us, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father. Some will confess to everlasting joy – others to everlasting shame and regret. Whether you know it or not, whether you like it or not, you are in the crowd today – crying either, 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Or crying, 'My Lord and My King!

Our gracious Father God,

Your main plan and the end of Your will is to make Christ glorious and beloved and worshiped in heaven above and on earth below. You sent Your Son into this world to bring the light of truth and expose the lie, to let Truth reign where the lie now holds sway. Father grant that we would surrender to the truth that is Jesus, that we would have no other refuge, wash in no other fountain, build on no other foundation, receive from no other fulness and rest in no other relief, trust in no other help, submit to no other King. Holy Spirit of Truth come and fill us with the Truth, defeat every rebellious thought and rebel lust and reign supreme, leading us into all truth and filling us with all understanding. May we not stand face to face with You Jesus, Lord of truth, as Pilate once did and exchange the truth for a lie and die, but instead embrace the Lord of life who is the truth and live. Let that truth birth in us a passion for Your glory that causes our hearts to delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.