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#101

The Verdict of Pilate – “Not Guilty”

John 18:28-40

Introduction

The question that sometimes gets debated is, “Who was responsible for the crucifixion of Christ?” And of course if you think carefully about the question you can come up with more than one answer. On the surface we see that the Jews who hated Jesus and plotted his death and arrested him and tried him are guilty. Peter makes the point in one of his earliest sermons:

Acts 3:13-15 *“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. “But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. Here we find the Jews are responsible.*

But, you could also argue that the Gentiles, as represented by Pilate, were guilty. Last week we looked at the first of two trials where the Jews found Jesus guilty of blasphemy. But this week we will examine the formal trial conducted by Pilate. In Acts 4 in a prayer offered by the disciples we find this perspective: *“who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, And the peoples devise futile things? ‘The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the Lord and against His Christ.’ “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You*

anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel. So here, the Gentiles are cast with the responsibility.

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But of course there is another answer to this question. An answer that is much more personal and close to home. Romans 5:6,8 tells us *that while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* So in that sense we are responsible for the death of Christ. Had it not been for our sin, Christ would not have needed to die.

And then finally, we can look even beyond ourselves and understand that it was the Father in Heaven who sent His Son to die for us. As Acts 4:28 makes very clear, all of this was so the purpose and predetermined plan of God might come to pass.

Today we are going to see how God used the instruments of the world to proclaim the innocence of Christ but still accomplished His plan to redeem us by His atoning sacrifice.

[John 18:28-40]

There were four parts to a Roman trial. The Charges; the Examination; the Defense; and the Verdict. Each of these is present in this first meeting between Jesus and Pilate. Let's look at each part.

I. The Charges

The first thing Pilate wanted to know when the Jews arrived with Jesus in hand, was the nature of the charges. It's interesting to note that given the early hour, and the assumption that some behind the scenes arrangements had certainly been made, the

Jews thought they could secure a death sentence for Jesus without any formal charges – simply on the basis of what they had done that night. It seems like Pilate's question, *What accusation do you bring against this Man?* caught them off guard. They seem offended by the question.

But likely their hesitancy was because the judgment they had just rendered against Jesus in the Jewish court had no standing in the Roman court. Jesus had been condemned by the Jews for blasphemy. They found Him guilty of claiming to be God. (As we saw last week, they charged Him rightly. Their failure was in examining the evidence to find out that Jesus not only claimed to be God, but is in fact God.)

But what did the Roman government care about Jewish religious law? They cared nothing for it. And so when Pilate asked what the accusation was they knew they could not charge Him with blasphemy. So Pilate threatened to send the case back to the Jewish courts. Of course, he knew they desired to have Jesus killed, so his threat was merely to torment them.

What we are witnessing here is a little taste of the animosity and gamesmanship that went on between the Jews and the Romans. But behind it all we find the sovereign hand and plan of God. Verse 32 tells us that all of this was *to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.* If the Jews could have executed Jesus, it would have been by stoning, which was the means prescribed in the Old Testament. But the Romans executed their vilest criminals by crucifixion. Jesus had prophesied that He would die by being *lifted up* – by being crucified. Here is an example of how one little exchange in the course of history confirms and upholds the plans of God.

The Jews did eventually bring formal charges. Luke 23:2 records them for us. "And they began to accuse Him, saying, *We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.* Of these three accusations, Pilate settles on the third as the most serious. We'll look at that in a moment. But first we need to notice the hypocrisy of the Jews in bring these charges.

- They were hypocrites because they kept an outward form of righteousness while they were dead inwardly.

Look at verse 28 (read). Why would the Jews not go into the Praetorium? The Praetorium was the hall of judgment. It was there at the residence of Pilate. Certainly there is no law of God that prohibits a Jew from entering the place of a Gentile. This was a *tradition* or teaching of the Jews that had taken on the weight of God's law. But here's the point: they are pretending to be passionate about their own purity when on the inside they are pursuing murderous plans. They didn't want to be undefiled? How easy it is to be religious on the outside while leading an inner life of sin. That of course is the essence of hypocrisy. Pretending to be something we are not.

- Secondly we see the hypocrisy of the Jews in their response to Pilate's decision.

In the next chapter, in maybe the most startling and revealing statement in the whole proceeding, they cry out *We have no king but Caesar.* What is that if it's not a statement of blasphemy itself and an outright rejection of God's promise to be their king? And they knew it. But they were willing to compromise and blasphemy to get what they wanted.

So, in these Jews we see great hypocrisy. But before we condemn them too harshly, I think we would do well to see ourselves in them. Which one of you has not struggled at some point with making yourself out to be something you are not? Which one cannot plead guilty to some spiritual blindness, certainly before conversion, but is it not an ongoing problem? And which one of you has never compromised some aspect of truth or righteousness for the sake of indulging our flesh? Is that not the essence of sin? To each of these we must be honest with ourselves and God. To acknowledge our sin and confess and repent is the only answer for the sins that took Jesus to Calvary. The difference between what we see in them and what we see in us, is not that they sinned and we don't. The difference is that, by God's grace He has opened our eyes to our sin and we have come to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. And that is an eternal difference – the difference between heaven and hell; forgiveness and guilt.

II. The Examination and Defense.

A Word about Pilate. The history books written by Josephus and others are not kind to Pilate. While the account in the gospels reveals a man who at least on some level showed interest and sympathy for Christ, everything else points to a man who was proud, insensitive to the Jewish people, stubborn and cruel. And certainly at the end of this gospel account we find a man who has no principles beyond a desire to promote himself above all else.

But as for the trial, he begins well by insisting on charges, which, as we seen include the most serious one purporting that Jesus claimed to be a king. There were few things more threatening to

Caesar than someone who would dare to rival his throne.

So in the examination Pilate asks two simple questions. First, *Are you the King of the Jews?* And second, *What have you done?* Reasonable questions.

The heart of Jesus' answer is given in verse 36. *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.*

Pilate is looking for a threat to Rome. In Jesus he finds no such threat. While acknowledging that He has a kingdom, Jesus points to the spiritual nature of His Kingdom. It's a marvelous answer from Christ. Like He did through out His earthly ministry, He answered with a wisdom that was deeper and wider than Pilate could grasp.

Consider:

- The kingdom of Christ was not about armies and force, as Jesus indicated by pointing out that He was not fighting. But that didn't mean it wasn't about people. Ultimately a kingdom is about people. So while Pilate's concerns were alleviated by Jesus' answers and he perceived no threat, Jesus was in fact claiming a kingdom that went far beyond the physical realm of Caesar and would in fact swallow it up as Jesus would build His church.
- The Kingdom of Christ was not about land and wealth. It was about truth. But Pilate had no framework to evaluate anything of eternal value. He could only grasp what He could see. The way to the heart is through the truth. Look at verse 37.

Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a

king?” 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.

Pilate can't hear Jesus' voice – that is, He is clueless as to what Jesus is talking about. And he shows this ignorance by asking the question *what is truth?* But Pilate was not searching for truth. It was a sarcastic question. More like the voices we hear in our own culture today – *yeah, right. Truth, sure.* Jesus had once taught that if men knew the truth, the truth would set them free. Loyalty and faith in God through Jesus Christ brings about radical changes in the citizens of any country.

One the one had, Christians make the best citizens because their character is upright, they know and understand authority and are willing to submit. But on the other hand, Christians have a loyalty that is far higher than their country's king or president. And a devoted Christian will follow the commands of God over the laws of the land whenever there is conflict.

But Pilate understood none of that. He only discerned that if Jesus were acquitted of the charges He would not amass an army and march on Rome.

More importantly, Pilate missed the crucial point. Jesus Christ was his judge. We will see this more later, but before him stood the One who had the power to forgive him of his sins and set him free. If only he had waited for Jesus to answer the question, *what is truth?*

III. The Verdict.

The verdict could not have been any more clearly or simply stated. In verse 38 Pilate issues this

judgment – *I find no guilt in Him*. At that moment Jesus should have been let go. But that of course was not the end of it. Pilate looked Jesus square in the eye, pronounced His innocence – and then condemned Him to die.

But that is no different than anyone else who rejects the Son of God. The light of creation proclaims the excellencies of God. The gospel is preached and proclaimed throughout the whole earth and yet men and women, apart from the work of grace, reject Christ and count His death as nothing.

But literally, standing in the middle of all of supposed trial and sentencing is the holy Christ. What we see in Christ is a steadfastness of purpose. He has veiled his power. With a word from his lips he could have silenced Pilate and destroyed his enemies. But there was a far greater enemy than Pilate and the Jews and the Gentiles with which He was battling. So rather than defend himself and fight for an acquittal, he “like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, he did not open his mouth.” Jesus was fulfilling his own promise spoken in John 10, “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. No one has taken it away from Me, (not Pilate, not the Jews, not the crowd) but I lay it down on My own initiative.”

So here He is laying down His life, not because of the sin and hardness of heart of Pilate and the Jews, but laying it down because of His love for you. He die for your sin – for your hypocrisy, your blindness, your compromises, your pride and your stony, dead, hardened heart, if you’ve never been forgiven.

Moments later, Jesus was carrying His cross through the streets of Jerusalem. A few hours more and He was hanging on that same cross giving up His life as a payment to God for your sins. And three days later God raised him back to life. Death was defeated, sin was paid for, life and victory were won. And that's the gospel. If we believe in Him and His work then we are His – forgiven and made new creatures. The hypocrisy, blindness, compromises, pride and hardness of heart are taken away and forgiven at the cross. But if we reject Him, then we are like Pilate and others who will be forever separated from the love God and the fellowship of Christ. What is your relationship with Christ?