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Lord's Day Morning
November 11, 2007
#103

“Behold, Your King!”

John 19:8-16

Introduction

Quite a few years ago our family visited Washington DC. We saw most of the famous sites and really had a great time learning more about the history of our nation. Without a doubt the most disturbing part of our entire visit was the time we spent in the Supreme Court. As we sat in the court room listening to the explanations of the tour guide we were shocked at what we were told about the architecture of the court room. Above the bench of the justices is a frieze (marble carvings) of various historical characters. Among those is a representation of the Ten Commandments. What a great reminder of the foundation of the laws of our land. But the tour guide proceeded to tell us that the image was of someone holding the Bill of Rights. Historically this has always been understood to be the Ten Commandments. But in 1988 the U.S. Supreme Court Handbook was re-written by the Department of the Interior and the official line was changed.

The day we were there, several in the crowd challenged our guide, but she was unrelenting in her insistence that there were no specific references to Judeo-Christian belief or the Law of God in the Supreme Court. This is a great example of man's quest for independence from God. (If you Google Supreme Court frieze, you will find the debate is raging today about the place of Christianity in our nation's capital. You could argue that apart from

God's grace, and no matter what a person might say about God, man's greatest quest is a quest for autonomy. But the message we are going to discover today is that all authority, in heaven and on earth, whether it be individual or institutional – all authority is given by God. In our text today, Pilate calls Jesus a King, but he is unwilling to bow his knee to this King. Instead he opposes Him, casts Him off and seeks to be done with Him. He hands Him over to be crucified.

[John 19:7-16]

Have you ever been afraid? If so, what brings fear into your heart? Sickness, death, danger or threats, the dark, pain, confrontation, insecurity, the unknown? Our passage this morning begins by telling us in verse 8 that Pilate was afraid.

This is fascinating to think about. Jesus is about to be crucified. He is about to suffer unspeakable physical pain. He is about to be separated from His Father in heaven. And yet He is steadfast, unwavering, certain, immovable and willingly and voluntarily laying down His life. Jesus is at peace. He'd come into the world by design to do what He was about to do. He'd poured out all of His fears to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before. So here is Jesus – every reason to be filled with fear – and He's not.

And the other hand, we see Pilate. He was the procurator or governor of Judea. He was a man of great power. He had at his disposal all the resources and influence of the Roman Empire. He could summon the armies of Rome; tap into the wealth of the kingdom; and rule with authority and an iron fist. Here was a man of power and security. And yet his heart was filled with fear.

What was Pilate afraid of? While not explicitly stated the context indicates three things.

1. He feared Jesus.

This is pretty clear from Pilate's response to the statement from the Jews (vs. 7) that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. He immediately took him back into the Praetorium and asked Jesus, *Where are you from?* He didn't want to know what city he was from. He wanted to know if He was from heaven. If Jesus was God – or a god in Pilate's mind – then he was in big trouble. He had just scourged Him. If Jesus was God then Pilate faced accountability and a day of reckoning for his actions. And for moment he was filled with fear. The fear of God is not the same as faith, but it can lead to faith. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. But for Pilate, the fear was a passing emotion. He wanted to release Jesus, but not because he believed in Him.

2. He feared the Jews.

Roman rulers always held a certain amount of fear for those they ruled. Although he hated the Jews, he feared an uprising or a riot that would escalate into regional trouble. It's not hard to read this passage and see that much of Pilate's motivation for what he does comes, not from a love for Jesus, not from a love for the people he ruled, but from his taking the pulse of the crowd. He's greatest concern is protecting himself. He's interacting with the crowd the whole time. And his various decisions seem to be governed by the mood of the Jews, because he fears trouble.

3. He feared Caesar.

This was, in the end, Pilate's greatest fear. In his view, only Caesar had the ultimate power and authority to ruin his life. Caesar had appointed him governor. Caesar could demote him and send him

into exile, which, incidentally, is exactly what he eventually did. The most piercing words Pilate heard that day were the cries from the Jews when they said *you are no friend of Caesar*. Behind those words, Pilate knew, was a threat to report to Caesar that Pilate was not loyal to the Emperor. That scared Pilate.

So what is interesting in this passage is that Pilate was able to cast off his fear of God while being enslaved and governed by his fear of man. And the reason for that is simply that in the end, everyone has to make a determination about who or what is the King of his life. And when all is said and done there are only two options. Either Christ is King or Man is King.

If man is king we will naturally fear others. Pilate tried to scare Jesus. *Do you not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?* Pilate is speaking in his official capacity as governor. He believes Jesus will be cowered by this threat from the government because that's exactly how Pilate responded to Caesar – with great fear.

But Jesus knew the truth and He shared it with Pilate. *You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above.* The implications of this truth are crucial, not just for Pilate, but for us today as well.

1. Pilate did have a real authority. In the same way today, governments have a genuine and real authority over us. It does us no good to deny that authority or to rebel against it. Romans 13:1, 2 says *Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of*

God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

Jesus never denied the authority of Pilate. He never challenged it. Just the opposite. In spite of the unjust sentence and the unlawful flogging, Jesus submitted Himself.

We too need to be men and women who live under the law. Our government is not evil simply because it's a government. Certainly it has adopted some evil practices and positions. But even as Paul commanded Christians to submit to the governing authorities, he could look over his shoulder, as it were, and see the rule of the evil, godless Roman Empire everywhere he went. Don't justify cheating on your taxes or breaking the laws of the land because you are ruled by a less than perfect government. There are a whole lot of folks today who are tempted to live in rebellion against the government, just because they don't like to submit to authority. But God has established authority over us and our first response needs to be to obedience.

2. The authority of governors and rulers is a derived authority. They are not autonomous. That means they have no right to rule apart from Christ. No matter how powerful they may be, they are still subject to a higher authority.

But places like Psalm 2 teach us that a king's natural inclination is to tear away from God and to assert his independence. *The kings of the earth take their stand And the rulers take counsel together Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us tear their fetters apart And cast away their cords from us!"*

The derived authority of a king is point of contention for many a ruler. The Old Testament is rife with illustrations. The temptations of office are enormous. Uzziah, king of Judah clearly illustrates the point. His reign in Jerusalem was one of the

longest of all the kings. He ruled for 52 years. And for much of that he reign he followed the Lord and ruled well. He is even described as one who did right in the sight of the Lord, although with this foreboding statement attached to the summary of his life - *as long as he sought the Lord, God prospered him*. But somewhere along the line something changed. II Chronicles 26:16 describes it this way. *When he became strong, his heart was so proud that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the Lord his God*. Shortly after that the Lord smote him with leprosy and cut him off from the house of the Lord. There is no blessing from God for rulers who cast their eye away from God. There is something about the power of office that leads men to conclude that they are strong because of themselves.

This is why our testimony gives us the following counsel. *The Christian, when such action involves no disloyalty to Christ, ought to be involved in the selection of and to vote for civil rulers who fear God, love truth and justice, hate evil, and are publicly committed to scriptural principles of civil government*.

We're a year away from selecting our next U.S. President. We need to be thinking about this now. Already we can foresee that it may be difficult to vote for any of the mainline contenders if we are going to be loyal to Christ. Will we be able to find a person who fears God and is committed to Scriptural principles of government? We need to pray to that end.

The authority of rulers is real, but it is derived from the throne of God. And so our desire – and our message as a church – needs to be that God would cause us as a nation to follow Him. And that He would raise up leaders who fear God and love His truth.

And with that message, as Christians we also need to understand that God has not simply granted authority to governments and backed away. We will see more of this later on, but after Jesus was raised from the dead, He said to His disciples, *all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth*. Jesus Christ is ruling today. He is accomplishing His will among the nations. And so we may be grieved by sin in our nation, but we are never to despair. Christ sits on His throne and His will is being done.

So, Governments have real authority.

Their authority is derived from God and they are accountable to God.

3. We are always responsible to God first and to our rulers second.

Jesus makes this clear when He says in verse 9 *you would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given to you from above; **for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin***. The Jews would not escape their personal responsibility to God simply because they could manipulate Pilate into granting their request for the death sentence. They knew God. They knew Christ. They knew what was right and wrong – and they chose to reject Christ.

If there is ever a conflict between what our earthly king says and what our heavenly King says, we must always obey God rather than man.

This is the time of year when the church around the world prays for the persecuted Church. We remember those who follow Christ faithfully in lands where they are commanded to deny Him. But instead, these courageous and committed believers gather for worship, they preach the gospel, they live for Christ against the commands of their rulers.

Pilate had no such courage. He knew what was the right thing to do. He had proclaimed Jesus innocent on three occasions. And yet he handed Him over to be crucified. He desired the friendship of the world more than friendship with God. Jesus Christ was standing before Him. The One who could forgive him and give him new life. But instead he worshipped himself and men.

Who is your King today? Not, who do you say is your king – but how is your life ruled? In the tough decisions of life, who do you follow – yourself, your own desires, those of your friends and peers? Or do you follow Jesus? Do you listen to His Word and His commands? Are you driven by His will?

Jesus is the King. Are you bowing your knee to Him?