

## Politics of the Passion: **Mar 25: The Governor without a Guide** (John 18:28-40)

Intro: Pontius Pilate (PIC), prefect of Judea from A.D. 26-36, is known to us through the Gospel accounts, the writings of Josephus, and an inscription in limestone discovered in the theatre at Caesarea Maritima which provides physical evidence of the NT accounts. According to Eusebius, the 3<sup>rd</sup> century bishop of Caesarea Maritima, Pilate killed himself during the reign of Caligula.

Pilate is the only person other than the Virgin Mary mentioned by name in the ancient Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, stating that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate."

Religion and government work together to execute Jesus of Nazareth. The radical religious leaders of the day will kill even fellow believers to protect their power and the purity of their particular approach to religion. They disown Jesus before Pilate and, swallowing hard, declare that Caesar is their king.

Governor Pilate represents the power of Rome in Jerusalem. Executing Jesus as an insurrectionist, despite his evident innocence, is the expedient thing to do. He is the governor without a guide because he does not believe in truth. Combine a corrupt government and radical religious leaders, and you get the execution of a man that everyone present knows is innocent of the charges.

I don't like Pilate very much. He practices here the lowest form of politics, both unjust and uncaring. Don't follow Judas in his betrayal, and don't follow Pilate in his corruption.

Pilate makes some errors here that we don't need to make:

### **Error #1: Subjugating Truth to Politics:** *"What is truth?"* (John 18:38)

A. Cynicism about truth itself in history, philosophy, or religion. Pilate does not believe in the concept of truth, apparently. Jesus said, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Truth is not something you generate inside your own head or heart. It is outside of you. You can get on its side. It stands independent of you and what you think. Truth is not subject to your manipulation.

B. Governance by Personality instead of Law: What we see here is not the rule of law but the rule of men. Guilt or innocence is obviously not that important (John 18:38): *"I find no basis for a charge against him."* What is important is WHO wants him dead.

C. Jesus said, "I am the truth" because he was God. Ultimately, God is all truth and power in this universe.

### **Error #2: Punishing Religious Conviction** (favoring Rebellion to Heresy): John 18:40: *Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion*

A. "Am I leading a rebellion," Jesus asked the people who came to arrest him with swords and clubs. The obvious answer is no. But "Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion" (John 18:40). "Rebellion" translates the same word, sometimes rendered "thief."

1. Jesus of Nazareth is a religious figure. He is not leading a rebellion. He has some strange opinions about God and religion. Pilate's first impulse to let him go is the right one.

2. Barabbas is an insurrectionist and murderer. He is justly incarcerated according to law.

3. The mob wants Barabbas freed. He is a popular hero. They want Jesus killed because he is a HERETIC.

4. Pilate has no expertise in the Jewish religion. He is not competent to judge heresy. Yet on this night he will kill the heretic because "the orthodox" want Jesus dead, and spare the criminal.

B. Pacifying loud religion with the sword is always a bad idea. John 18:31: *"But we have no right to execute anyone."* They come to Pilate only because Roman law rightly prohibits these religious leaders from executing anyone—a very good law, by the way.

C. Unfortunately, followers of Jesus in later years will achieve political power and make it illegal to be anything but a Christian. So they will slaughter the pagans and the infidels. Then the supposed followers of Jesus, the Lamb of God, will turn on each other as the Jews do here. Catholics will kill Protestants. Protestants will kill Catholics. Protestants will kill Baptists and Quakers. Anglicans will kill Puritans, etc. All of this killing is done in the name of the Lord, and much of it is done by the government which is harnessed to do the bidding of the clergy in power at the time.

D. Jesus Christ does not need you to kill for the faith. You may kill to protect yourself, your family, and your country. But you do not need to kill to advance faith in Jesus Christ. Your gun is not nearly powerful enough to accomplish the goal of the Kingdom of God. We cannot coerce true faith.

E. All we do when we seek to use government to advance faith is this: we pollute the faith we seek to advance. We corrupt the politician we pressure into doing our bidding.

**Error #3: Overestimating Your Power:** *“You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above”* (Jn 19:11).

A. Pilate is not the main player here. He thinks he is--that Jesus needs to talk to him because he has authority of life or death.

B. Jesus sets him straight. Pilate is in this position because God put him there for a reason. That is what Jesus tells him. Jesus knows that Pilate is a weak man caught in a difficult dilemma. Pilate is going to let the mob rule on this night despite his inclination to the contrary.

C. When Pilate sees himself in a broader context, as Jesus leads him to do, he is frightened. He tries to set Jesus free. But the disturbing sense of injustice is not as powerful in him as the charge that he is no friend of Caesar if he lets Jesus go free.

D. Good people give up on the Gospel. They try evangelism and discipleship, but they do not see a difference in their community or country. Things appear to them to be slipping away. So they go to Baton Rouge and Washington. Giving up on the power of the gospel, they try the power of politics to advance the Kingdom.

E. We need good people in government who are called by God into the public fray. They do very important work. But politics is no substitute for the gospel. The church of Jesus Christ is involved in the proclamation of the good news about Jesus which has the power to transform an individual from the inside out.

F. Astute sheriffs and wardens will tell you that what prisoners and guards need is not more politics but more gospel.

**Error #4: Discounting the Kingdom of God** (John 18:36): *“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”*

A. Jesus told Pilate that he was a king, “the king of the Jews” (Luke 23:3). Pilate heard him say this, and then he went to the religious leaders and told them, “I find no basis for a charge against this man” (Luke 23:4). So Pilate heard that he was a king, but he dismissed it as no threat to him or to Rome. For Pilate the Kingdom as described and ruled by Jesus was of no consequence.

B. Jesus was not pushing for an earthly kingdom. He was announcing the presence of the kingdom of God in the world. And he was ushering in a new age of the presence of God’s Spirit.

C. Jesus believed that the RULE OF GOD IN THE HEARTS OF PEOPLE would change the world. He taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

**Error #5: Avoiding Responsibility:** *“Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law”* (John 18:31).

A. Pilate tries to avoid responsibility for Jesus repeatedly throughout the night and the trial. He tells the Jews to take him and judge him by their own laws. He sends him to Herod when he learns that Jesus was a Galilean. He declares the innocence of Jesus. He offers to release him to the mob.

B. In a dramatic gesture recorded in Matthew 27:24, Pilate washed his hands in front of the crowd. *“I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility.”* Was he really innocent of the blood of Jesus? Pilate alone stood between Jesus and the cross upon which he would die. Pilate was the single person in Jerusalem that day that could have spared an innocent man. He could not wash the blood of Jesus from his hands. Peter preached to the Jews at Pentecost, “You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23). Pilate was key among those “wicked men” who helped crucify Jesus.

C. We avoid responsibility in many ways:

1. Our genetics: we can’t help ourselves. It’s the way we are.

2. Our environment: we have been around the wrong people, bad people, and we have taken up their ways--our parentsetc.

D. When we accept responsibility for our actions, we realize that we are sinners. Our sin is not accidental or incidental. It reveals the condition of our hearts. We are people who suffer from greed, lust, pride, and envy. And these conditions of heart show themselves in sinful actions toward others.

**Conclusion:** No one can avoid the responsibility of making a decision about Jesus—his identity and his role in your life. Pilate’s question belongs to every person: “What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?” (Matthew 27:22). Peter preached, *“You disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this”* (Acts 3:13-15).