

Pilate's Choice  
John 18:28 – 19:16

*Jesus said, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Pilate said, "What is truth?" and walked away.*

Turn to John chapter 18. Our Scripture tells the story of Pilate the Roman governor deciding what to do with Jesus. The Jewish leaders arrested Jesus late Thursday evening, and during the night they had decided that Jesus deserved to die.

But the Jews were under Roman rule, and although they had many freedoms, they did not have the right to execute criminals. Only the Romans courts could do that. So they brought Jesus to Pilate the Roman governor because they wanted Pilate to execute him.

John's Gospel tells how Pilate listened to the Jews, and listened to Jesus, and tried to figure out what he should do. John's Gospel sets this story up in a peculiar way, because John's Gospel makes a particular point about this trial.

Pilate's trial of Jesus has seven scenes. Pilate goes out to talk to the Jewish leaders, and then he goes in to talk to Jesus, and then he comes out again. Back and forth, seven scenes in all. Pilate is the only person in each scene. Pilate is the main character.

This story of Pilate judging Jesus is sometimes seen as noble Pilate wanting to set Jesus free, but being bullied by the Jewish leaders into crucifying Jesus. That is a part of this story, but not the center. The *main* point of the story is: who will Pilate listen to?

Will he listen to Jesus, or will he listen to the Jewish leaders? Pilate going back and forth between inside and outside is a picture of Pilate's choice. He must choose who he will believe. Here's what it came down to: *Jesus said, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Pilate said, "What is truth?" and walked away.* That was Pilate's choice.

This is actually a discipleship sermon. That's not what you came expecting, and I'm sorry about that. But the Good Friday stories in the Gospels have several important discipleship stories, like Peter's denials, or Jesus praying about the Father's will. So I want you permission to preach Pilate that way, because that's what John does.

Scene 1: Pilate comes out to hear the charges 18:28

*Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas (the Jewish leader) to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.<sup>29</sup> So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?"<sup>30</sup> "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."*

That's called avoiding the question. Let's read that again. *So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."* They don't have a charge, only: "trust us, he's a criminal."

*Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die. Jesus had said he would be lifted up.*

The Jews were not allowed to execute anyone, but sometimes they got angry and just did it, like they did to Stephen; but their method was to kill someone by stoning them. Jesus had predicted his crucifixion, and that was how Romans executed criminals.

### Scene 2: Pilate goes in to Jesus (18:33)

***Pilate then went back inside** the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"*

Jesus wants to know about *Pilate*. He's saying, "Do you care who I am, Pilate? Do you have an opinion about this? Do you care who I am?" He got personal. Jesus looks us in the eye. "Do you care who I am? Do you yourself want to know who I am?"

*"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. Pilate won't take the bait. "Am I a Jew?" That's his question, and he means, "I am not a Jew, so whether or not you're the king of the Jews, and who you are, makes no difference to me."*

*"What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."*

Three times in that verse Jesus said "my kingdom." (Some translations have only two, but three in Greek..) He agrees that he's a king. *If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders.*

For Pilate this is important. Pilate will know by now that this is true, that Jesus' servants did not fight to protect him. Above all, the Romans punished rebellion and revolt. Jesus means, "Rome has no argument with me. I'm doing nothing to make Caesar nervous." And Pilate knows that Jesus' servants did not fight. No crime against Rome here.

*"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. That's true, Jesus did agree. But Pilate again walked past the bait. The kingdom of Jesus is not from this world, it is from another place. Jesus wants to get Pilate onto the real story. There's more going on here. Pilate should have asked, "Where is your kingdom? Where are you a king?" But he leaves that alone.*

*Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." 38 "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there.*

Jesus three times said "my kingdom," so Jesus agreed that he was a king. But when Pilate said "you *are* a king," Jesus did not think that was the best way to understand him.

So Jesus offered Pilate a better way to understand him. Jesus said his real job was not to be king, but to *announce the truth*. Jesus came to tell the truth. If Pilate wants to figure Jesus out, that's more important. Twice already Jesus tried to interest Pilate in who he really is. First, "do you care if I'm a king?" and then "my kingdom is not from this world, but another place." Pilate won't respond like a truth seeker. Jesus tried a third time.

Let's read it again. *"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. (Here is a better way to understand me.) The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there.*

People like Pilate's question: *what is truth?* It sounds like a noble seeker of truth, always searching. And that is true, it is an honourable question. But here it is the wrong question, because of *when Pilate asked it*.

End of v38 - *Everyone on the side of truth listens to me*. Wow! Our first question should be, "did Jesus mean that? Is that actually true?" Think about that line. Everyone that really wants the truth listens to Jesus. That's what Jesus said.

This is a challenge to Pilate, and it is a third invitation. "Listen to me, Pilate, follow me. Do you want the truth? Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." *"What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again.* "What is truth" means "I don't believe you."

As far as John's Gospel is concerned, which is the only place we hear Pilate's question, Pilate says this to reject what Jesus says about himself.

Scene 3: Pilate goes outside and tells the Jewish leaders that Jesus is innocent 18:38f

*With this **he went out again** and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.*

"I find no basis for a charge against him." Pilate will say that to the Jewish leaders two more times. Jesus had used some good logic: "my servants did not fight to prevent my arrest, Rome has no quarrel with me, I have broken no Roman law."

Pilate paid attention to that, he knew it was true. From that and from his conversation with Jesus he was persuaded that Jesus was innocent.

Pilate offered to release Jesus. Did he think that would work? But who does he end up releasing? Barabbas, who had taken part in an uprising. Barabbas had done exactly what the Romans intended to punish by crucifying. Jesus had not. Pilate freed Barabbas.

Scene 4: Pilate has Jesus flogged, and the soldiers mock Jesus 19:1

*Then **Pilate took Jesus** and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they slapped him in the face.*

In the Gospels, the briar crown is not to cause pain, the point is mockery not cruelty. It means the same thing as the purple robe. In Matthew, they also put a stick in Jesus' hand, to mock a royal sceptre. These are all intended to humiliate, to scorn him.

Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. Don't miss the progression. There is a powerful sequence of events here. Pilate rejected Jesus as the truth. Pilate still wants to do the right thing, he still wants to do justice. But he does not do justice.

First, he rejected Jesus, said “what is truth” and walked outside. Second, he said Jesus was innocent, “I find no basis for a charge against him.” Third, he tried to release Jesus (he's trying to do the right thing, trying to do justice). Fourth, he frees Barabbas, a guilty man. Fifth, he takes Jesus, the innocent man, and has him flogged.

As the story reads, he was being **pressured** to free Barabbas and punish Jesus, but he was **not being forced**. Pilate is still the governor. In our day, many people want to do the right thing, they have ideals, they want justice. But they will not put their faith in Jesus, they do not listen to Jesus as the voice of truth.

Pilate in this story is much like that. What he wants to do is good. He wants to free Jesus. Under pressure, though, he is weak. Other things are more important than justice. When the pressure is on, other things are more important than doing the right thing.

Scene 5: Pilate takes Jesus outside to show him to the Jewish Leaders 19:4

***Once more Pilate came out** and said to the Jews gathered there, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.”*

That's the second time Pilate said that, 1<sup>st</sup> in v38. *When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!” But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.”* [That's the third time Pilate said that – he knows that Jesus is an innocent man] *The Jewish leaders insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.” When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid.*

*He claimed to be the Son of God. When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid. He was already afraid, and this made it worse. What was Pilate already afraid of?*

Back in scene 2 Jesus said, two times, “*my kingdom is not of this world,*” and Jesus also said “*everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*”

Pilate said “what is truth” and walked away, but he became afraid that Jesus was a lot more than an innocent man. Now Pilate suspected that Jesus was some kind of divine person, someone far greater than Pilate. Pilate does not want to believe, but some voice in him is saying, “this is a very important man, a god-man of some kind, a divine man.”

And Pilate can feel that he keeps getting closer and closer to crucifying this man. Pilate is not scared to crucify an innocent man. But Pilate is afraid to crucify a divine man, a king from another world.

And now he finds out that this Jesus, who Pilate already suspects is connected to God in a special way, claims to be “Son of God.” Pilate’s fear shoots through the roof. And according to Matthew, somewhere in here Pilate gets a note from his wife: “Have nothing to do with this righteous man, for I have suffered much in a dream about him.”

#### Scene 6: Pilate goes inside and questions Jesus again 19:9

*He went back inside the palace. “Where are you from?” he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer.*

In John’s Gospel especially, *Where are you from* is the right question to ask Jesus. He came from the Father, that’s important in John. Pilate asked the right question. But Jesus gave no answer, and that is curious. Why not answer that important question?

Do you remember what happened the last time these two spoke to each other? This goes back to scene 2. The last thing Jesus said was, ‘*everyone on the side of truth listens to me*’. And the last thing Pilate said was ‘*what is truth*’ and he turned and walked outside.

Pilate had already decided not to believe in Jesus. Three times already, Pilate has pushed Jesus away. Maybe Jesus just wants to figure out if Pilate is actually interested.

*“Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”* This is sad, because Pilate chose to talk about himself. In effect he says, “you don’t answer me? Don’t you know who I am?” This conversation needs to be about who Jesus is. He should have asked again, “where are you from?”

*Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”* Pilate said, “don’t you realize I have power?” Jesus: “Actually, Pilate, you don’t have much power here.”

*From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."*

Did you catch the irony there? *Pilate said, "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" From then on Pilate tried to set Jesus free. But he failed, because he actually does not have power.*

Pilate would *like* to do the right thing; he would *like* to set Jesus free. But he *will not* put his trust in Jesus, and so under pressure he does *not* have the ability to do the right thing.

*The Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." When Pilate heard this, it was over.*

If the Jews tell Caesar that Pilate freed a man who claimed to be king, and the Jews were entirely capable of telling this to Caesar, then Pilate's career is over, and he's shamed.

If Pilate had put his trust in Jesus, he would have told the Jewish leaders, "You can tell Caesar whatever you want. I will not crucify the Son of God. Jesus is innocent. Set him free." It would have been a difficult choice, but that's what he would have done.

Pilate had no easy choice. He will crucify the Son of God, or he will offend the emperor.

#### Scene 7: Pilate brings Jesus out and hands him over to be crucified 19:13

*"If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." When Pilate heard this, **he brought Jesus out** and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon. "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus.*

"When Pilate heard this." When Pilate heard the Jews say that that freeing this man would make him an enemy of Jesus, when Pilate heard that, it was over. Doing the right thing does not matter any more, Pilate chooses to take care of himself. Pilate chooses to take care of his name and his kingdom.

This is not just a story about rejecting Jesus, it is also a story about how life goes after that. Jesus had a long conversation like this with the Samaritan woman, too. She took the bait, she was skeptical, not easily convinced, but she gave Jesus the option of being who he said, and eventually she came to faith. And she brought joy to her people.

*Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.* That was Jesus' challenge to Pilate. Pilate acted like he wanted the truth. It turns out Pilate did not really want the truth. But it is the line of Jesus I leave with you. *Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*

This Pilate story shows us someone wrestling with that line and walking away. Pilate chose not to trust in Jesus, and he also chose to do the right thing, but he didn't.

Pilate's choice showed what he did with that line, and our lives will show it also. The good news is that we who believe have someone in our lives who always tells us the truth, and along with believing, God gives us grace to change our lives. Amen.

PRAYER: God our Father, this is not a happy story. But it is how things work in this world, and you want us to know about that. Lord Jesus, thank you for pursuing us. How hard did you work on us, to get each of us to hear your voice and realize it was the truth? We do not know. But we are so grateful that you gave us eyes to see, and opened our hearts to receive the message. You stood in our path to be found by us. We praise you for your kindness.

And Lord, you were calling Pilate in the middle of your terrible ordeal. Even then, you had compassion and wanted to bring him in. We love you for that, too. Jesus, our Lord and our God, our lives are in your hands, and we put them there with joy. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.