

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: *Basin Theology*

SCRIPTURE: Matt 27:11–26

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We are literally just hours from the crucifixion as we open Matthew 27 this morning. Three weeks ago we examined the religious trial of Jesus at the palaces of Annas and then Caiaphas. Two weeks ago we considered the betrayal of Judas and that man's tragic suicide. This morning we focus our attention on Pilate. His remarkable witness about the character of Jesus is especially valuable since it comes from one who was never one of His followers. One might choose to be skeptical when Jesus' friends proclaim His innocence; but when the man who ordered His execution claims He is innocent, that is indeed a powerful testimony.

Pilate's political problems are critical to the role he plays in Jesus' trial.

Pilate is a man well-known in the pages of secular history, as well as the sacred text of Scripture. The Jewish historian Josephus writes much about him, as does Philo of Alexandria. His name was found in 1961 on stone tablets excavated by archaeologists in Caesarea. It read "*Tiberieum, Pontius Pilatus, Prefect of Judea*".

What we learn about Pilate is that he was a Roman citizen, born in Italy in approximately 1 BC, so he was a young man in his early thirties when the events of Matthew 27 took place—in fact, about the same age as Jesus. We know he was married, a member of the Equestrian class in Rome, and wealthy. His early career is unknown, but he must have held a series of civil and military appointments before being appointed to such a high position as governor of a province. The picture we get is definitely one of an ambitious young politician seeking to climb the ladder of political power and prestige.

Pilate was first appointed governor of Judea in AD 26 by the emperor Tiberius at the young age of 27. His area of jurisdiction was Samaria, Judea (not Galilee), and as far south as Gaza and the Dead Sea. His functions combined military and administrative responsibilities, but the Jews were granted a fair degree of liberty and self-government. The Jewish religious leaders, in the form of the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem, retained various judicial functions over their own people, but death sentences could be carried out only with the permission of the Roman governor.

Because of political and religious unrest that was common, the Romans considered Judea one of their most difficult provinces to govern. On two occasions prior to the trial of Jesus, Pilate experienced major conflicts with the Jews. One occurred on his very first visit to Jerusalem. He was accompanied by a large detachment of soldiers, each company of which carried its own banner or standard. On the top of each standard was a little metal bust of the reigning Emperor, Tiberius. Since the Emperor was regarded as a god by the Romans, the Jews considered that bust to be a graven image. They pleaded with Pilate to remove the images, but he refused, saying he would not pander to their superstitions.

When Pilate returned to his headquarters in Caesarea the Jews followed him and dogged his footsteps for five days, demanding an apology. Finally, he told them to meet him in the amphitheater, where he surrounded them with soldiers and threatened to kill them on the spot if they didn't cease their demands. They called his bluff by baring their necks and bidding the soldiers to strike. Pilate knew he was beaten and acceded to their request. That is how his tenure in Palestine began—not a very auspicious beginning.

A second confrontation occurred not long afterward. The Jerusalem water supply was inadequate and Pilate determined to build a new aqueduct. When the necessary funds for the project could not be found, he raided the temple treasury, arguing that one of the main reasons why more water was needed was to help wash away the blood of 200,000 sacrifices a year. However, the Jews considered this appropriation of temple money to be sacrilegious, and they rioted. Pilate mingled his soldiers with the people in plain clothes, and at a given signal they clubbed and stabbed to death hundreds of Jews. This incident actually became a sermon illustration for Jesus in Luke 13.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:1-3)

But the confrontations just mentioned between Pilate and the Jews were minor compared to his most troubling predicament—the trial of Jesus of Nazareth. Though his palace is on the coast at Caesarea, Pilate is in Jerusalem during Passion Week, no doubt because the population is swollen to over one million people for Passover. Tensions are high and there is always the potential for political unrest among the volatile Jews.

He is awakened in the early hours before dawn on the day before Passover by a mob which demands that he deal with a prisoner of theirs. The urgency is that they need to get His execution over before Passover so they won't "defile themselves." The sheer hypocrisy of such scruples is striking.

By the time Jesus is brought to Pilate's Judgment hall, He has already been subjected to one religious trial of sorts. Arrested about midnight in the Garden of Gethsemane He was taken to the home of Annas, the high priest emeritus, the godfather of the religious establishment. From there He was sent on to Annas' son-in-law, Caiaphas, the ruling high priest. Peter's denial and Judas' betrayal follow, and we pick up the reading in verse 1-2, then 11-26 of Matthew 27:

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. . . . (skip down to verse 11)

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" But

Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered.

"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!"

"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

It is early in the morning when the religious leaders determine that Jesus should die. All they need now is a civil trial so they can execute Him legally. Thus they bring him to the Praetorium, the Roman Governor's residence in Jerusalem, probably located in the Fortress of Antonia just north of the temple. Once again Jewish scruples surface, as they refuse to enter the Gentile's palace for fear of defiling themselves (John 18:28-29). So Pilate comes out to talk to them and asks what their charges are against Jesus. When we analyze all four Gospels we find four charges being leveled against Jesus (Luke 23:2, 5):

1. Subverting the nation
2. Opposing the payment of taxes to Caesar
3. Claiming to be Christ, a King
4. Stirring up the people

Only one of these charges is true, of course—the claim to be the Messiah, a King—but even that one is misconstrued. The Jews portray Him as a political Messiah and a threat to Rome.

Pilate questions Jesus and receives a mixed response. (Matthew 27:11-14)

When asked by the governor, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus acknowledges it, "Yes, it is as you say." But when Pilate asks Him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?", He gives no answer. Pilate is amazed at His silence—probably because He suspects Jesus could easily refute the accusations.

It is here that the Gospel of John records a good deal more conversation between Pilate and Jesus than is mentioned by the other Gospel writers. John includes the well-known soliloquy by Jesus to the effect that “My kingdom is not of this world; if it were, then my servants would fight.” John also records the profound question Pilate asks, “What is truth?” Most importantly, he tells us that Pilate informs the Jewish religious leaders, “I find no basis for a charge against him.” Not only do none of their charges constitute a capital crime under Roman Law, but in addition, Pilate can find no basis *in fact* for any of the charges.

This is the first of at least four declarations of innocence from this man Pilate. You can read the others in Luke 23:14, 15, and 22. Even Pilate’s wife asserts Jesus’ innocence. Pilate was sitting on the Judgment Seat when his wife sent the message. Surely it was not her practice to interrupt her husband as he was officiating at a trial. But her dream caused her to dread the results if the religious leaders were allowed to coerce her husband into changing his mind.

This only highlights the fact that Pilate has no excuse for agreeing to Jesus’ execution. This is not a case in which the evidence is ambiguous. This is a case in which the evidence is watertight—and it all points to the innocence of the defendant.

Pilate tries every conceivable way to extricate himself from responsibility for Jesus’ death. First,

1. He tells the Jewish religious leaders to handle Jesus’ case themselves. (John 18:31) This is not obvious from Matthew’s account, but we see it clearly in John 18:31: “Pilate said, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.’” However, they object, “We have no right to execute anyone.” They want the death penalty and that can only be handed down by Roman authorities.

Pilate, realizing he is dealing with an irrational mob, suddenly sees a glimmer of hope. One of Jesus’ accusers has mentioned Galilee (Luke 23:6), and that causes Pilate to ask if Jesus is a Galilean. The reason this is of such keen interest to him is that Galilee is outside his jurisdiction. Herod Antipas is the ruler over that region, and as luck would have it, Herod is in Jerusalem at this very time.

2. He turns Jesus over to Herod’s jurisdiction. (Luke 23:6-12) As it turns out, Herod is thrilled with the opportunity to meet Jesus because he has been hoping to see a miracle (Luke 23:8). But Jesus refuses to even speak to Herod. After all, what could He say to one who cares nothing about the truth but only wants a demonstration of divine power? Jesus never performed miracles just to titillate the skeptics.

Herod and his soldiers proceed to ridicule and mock Jesus, but Pilate’s hope that Herod will dispense with the case goes unrealized, for Herod just sends him back to Pilate. Luke adds an aside: “That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies.” It’s another case of the old adage, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

3. He suggests a compromise by offering to punish Jesus. (Luke 23:16) “I will punish Him and then release Him,” he says in Luke 23:16. One cannot help but think, “Why punish an innocent man at all?”, but Pilate is caught between a rock and a hard place. Flogging Jesus is better than executing Him. But this too the Jews reject. They will accept nothing but His death.

4. He offers to release Jesus as the “Passover Criminal.” (Matthew 27:15-18) The Jews had a custom of releasing a criminal on the Passover holiday, as a gesture of kindness and celebration. Pilate latches on to this custom as an opportunity to finally escape the dilemma he is facing. He can release Jesus, which he plainly wishes to do; but at the same time he will be technically convicting Him, for only a convicted criminal qualified for the Passover release. And since he won’t actually be acquitting Jesus, the Jews should be appeased.

So he offers them a choice. He will release Jesus or, if they prefer, Barabbas, a notorious criminal, Public Enemy #1. Surely these Jews, no matter how much they hate Jesus, will never opt to have an insurrectionist and murderer released in their midst. But he has underestimated the hatred the religious leaders have for Jesus, as well as their ability to manipulate the gullible crowds. They choose to have Barabbas released and Jesus crucified.

Friends, do you grasp this? This is tantamount to people today clamoring for the release of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, terrorist mastermind of 911, if given a choice between him and, say, Scooter Libby. No, it’s far worse, because Scooter Libby was guilty of something! Jesus was not. So again Pilate is foiled.

5. Again he tries to compromise, ordering Jesus to be flogged and crowned with thorns to stir up sympathy. (Luke 23:22, John 19:1-5) This second offer to punish Jesus is found in Luke 23:22; the actual deed is recorded in John 19:1-5. Pilate parades the suffering Jesus before the crowd, saying, “Here is the man!” (John 19:5). He uses an expression that in classical Greek means “Look at the poor creature!” I am convinced that Pilate’s purpose is to show them how ridiculous it is to think that this pitiful creature in the purple robe with blood streaming down his face could be any threat to them at all. But Pilate’s attempt produces the opposite effect intended, for when the chief priests and officers see Jesus they immediately cry out, “Crucify, crucify.” Failure again!

6. After a troubling conversation with Jesus he tries again to release Him, but the Jews intimidate him by mentioning Caesar. (John 19:8-12) The last words between Pilate and Jesus are to me the most profound. Pilate asks Jesus, according to John 19:8-12, “Where do you come from?” But Jesus refuses to answer. Pilate therefore pleads with Him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” And Jesus answers with those profound words, “You would have *no power* over me if it were not given to you from above.”

These are words that every king, every prime minister, every president, and every dictator should take to heart. All authority is God’s authority and He only delegates it to humans. He can retract it whenever He chooses. These are also words which every persecutor of Christians should take to heart, whether communist, fascist, atheist, or humanist.

These are words which every unbeliever should take to heart. God is still in control and let His detractors never forget it, no matter how great their temporary authority or prosperity. And these are words which every child of God should remember. No matter how great the opposition we face or how severe the trials, all authority has been given to Jesus Christ and we belong to Him. We are on the winning side.

Following this conversation Pilate renews his efforts to set Jesus free, but the Jews finally pull out their trump card: “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.” (John 19:12). Now the wheels start turning in Pilate's head. He knows well that his previous confrontations with the Jews have been reported to Tiberius Caesar. He knows that he is on probation and needs to have a clean slate from here on out. And he knows that Tiberius is a very insecure, jealous tyrant, who takes any report of a possible usurper to his authority seriously.

And so John tells us, “When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement.” This is where sentences were handed down. Pilate has wrestled over his dilemma for many hours. He has sought every means he could imagine to avoid condemning this innocent man, but every step he has taken has been frustrated. Even now he makes one last effort to extricate himself from this responsibility.

7. Once more he tries to use shame and sympathy. (John 19:14-15) With Jesus standing before him at the Judgment Seat, Pilate says to the Jews, “Here is your King!” But they cry out, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” And Pilate asks, “Shall I crucify your king?” And then the chief priests answer with what is surely one of the most incredible statements ever to come from Jewish lips: “We have no king but Caesar!” These are the same people to whom God gave the Ten Commandments, the first of which demands that we have no other gods before us. These are the same people who rioted just a few years earlier and put their lives on the line so as to remove little metal busts of Caesar from even appearing on a military standard. Now they are crying out, “We have no king but Caesar.”

So far in this story our sympathy may be with Pilate because his intentions are right—to release Jesus. But you have heard it said that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Pilate’s intentions may be honorable, but his actions turn out to be despicable.

Pilate condemns an innocent man while futilely declaring his own innocence. (Matt. 27:24-26).

Listen again to Matthew 27:24-26:

“When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man's blood,’ he said. ‘It is your responsibility!’

All the people answered, ‘Let his blood be on us and on our children!’

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.”

The washing of the hands was a religious ritual of great significance to the Jews, according to Deut. 21:6-9. It seems that Pilate borrowed the custom here in an effort to salve his own conscience. But nothing is more worthless than a religious rite which has no reality of faith behind it. People are constantly trying to alleviate their consciences through baptism, church membership, good works, tithing, and countless other religious rites. All of them together don't count for anything with God if their hearts are not right with Him.

One of the common tourist sites in Rome is the Scala Santa, or the Sacred Stairs of the judgment seat of Pilate. It is believed by many that these are the actual marble stairs, brought to Rome from Jerusalem, though there is not much historical support for that. The devout pilgrim who ascends these stairs on his knees believes he receives special merit and grace from God. It was while he was in just such an act of devotion on these very stairs that Martin Luther, a pilgrim visiting Rome almost 500 years ago, remembered the words of the book of Romans which afterward became the watchword of the Reformation—"The just shall live by *faith!*" He came to the important realization that ritual means nothing without faith.

Pilate declares himself innocent, but the fact remains that he acceded to the condemnation of an innocent man. Perhaps his guilt is not as great as that of the Jews who clamored for Jesus' death. In fact, Jesus Himself said they were guilty of the greater sin (John 19:11). But "greater sin" on their part still implies "sin" on his.

Friend, it may be that you too have judged Jesus guiltless. Like Pilate you may have said, "He's a good man. He's a great teacher. He's an amazing example." But if that's all you've done—if you have not bowed your knee to Him and put your faith in Him—you have also agreed to His death.

Epilogue: Pilate desperately wanted to keep his job as governor of Judea and decided that the best way to ensure that was to yield to the demands of the Jews. But secular history tells us that at the age of 36, less than three years after he ordered Jesus to be crucified, he was deposed as governor and ordered to return to Rome for the judgment of the Emperor, due to his rash conduct during still another confrontation with the Jews. Tradition tells us he was banished to Gaul where he committed suicide. He bargained for temporary security instead of eternal security and ended up losing both.

Pilate would never know it, but his would eventually become the most familiar name in all of Roman history. For uncounted millions in future ages who knew little or nothing about Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius or even Nero, would regularly confess, "I believe in Jesus Christ . . . who . . . suffered under Pontius Pilate." A pitiful epitaph for a pitiful man.

Conclusion: In conclusion I return briefly to the other basin. We read about it in John 13:2-5 in the story of the Last Supper:

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up

from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Then after the Supper Jesus said to the disciples,

“Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:12b-15).

Which basin are we going to take up today? Are we going to wash our hands of responsibility for the death of Christ, to declare that we consider Him innocent, a good man, a great teacher, but say that we are not responsible for his death?

Or are we willing to acknowledge that our sin put Him on the cross, receive Him as our personal Savior, and then be obedient disciples in taking up the basin of humble love to wash one another’s feet?

Let’s pray. Father, as we turn our attention this morning to the Lord’s Table, we do so in full awareness of the incredible sacrifice You made when You sent Your one and only Son to die on the Cross. We accept our part as sinners in putting Him there. We acknowledge our sin. We refuse to wash our hands in Pilate’s basin. We are not innocent of this Man’s blood; we are responsible. Thank you that You are willing to forgive us and cleanse us through Jesus’ sacrifice.

Thank you also that you invite guilty sinners to sit with You at supper, to enjoy the bread and the wine which represents the body and blood of Christ. We receive it this morning with gratitude in our hearts for Christ’s death. In Jesus’ name, amen.