

John 18:28-40, “The King of Truth”

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28 Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters.^[1] It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. 29 So Pilate went outside to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” 30 They answered him, “If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.” 31 Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.” 32 This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

33 So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” 34 Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” 35 Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” 36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” 37 Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” 38 Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him. 39 But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” 40 They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.

Introduction: Priceless Truth in a World of Lies

In John Bunyan’s classic, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian and Faithful enter the town of Vanity which holds a fair year-round, called Vanity Fair –

***Then I saw in my dream,** that when they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is "Vanity"; and at the town there is a fair kept, called "Vanity Fair"; it is kept all the year long. It bears the name of Vanity Fair, because the town where 'tis kept is lighter than vanity; and also because all that is there sold, or that comes thither is vanity. As is the saying of the wise, "All that comes is vanity."*

This fair is no new erected business; but a thing of ancient standing. I will show you the origin of it:

Almost five thousand years ago, there were pilgrims walking to the Celestial City, as these two honest persons are; and BEELZEBUB, APOLLYON, and LEGION, with their companions, perceiving by the path that the pilgrims made, that their way to the City lay through this town of Vanity, they contrived here to set up a fair; a fair wherein should be sold of all sorts of vanity, and that it should last all the year long. Therefore at this fair are all such merchandise sold: as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments,

titles, countries, kingdoms; lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts – as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not.

And moreover, at this fair there is at all times to be deceivers, cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rogues and that of every kind.

Here are to be seen, too – and that for nothing – thefts, murders, adulteries, false-swearers, and that of a blood red colour.

You can buy almost anything you want at Vanity Fair, except for one thing: truth. In fact, when Christians and Faithful walk through Vanity Fair without buying anything, the exasperated merchants ask them what they will buy. They reply, “We buy the truth.” (This is in keeping with Proverbs 23:23: “Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding.”) Knowing this is the one thing not available in Vanity Fair, the merchants are outraged at this response and proceed to have Christian and Faithful arrested and put in trial, which leads to Faithful’s execution.

John Bunyan created Vanity Fair as a warning to Christians who hope to find a comfortable home in a compromise with this fallen world. Today, we sell Vanity Fair as a glossy magazine, where you can read about celebrities and fashion and all sorts of things, except, as always, the truth!

Truth is priceless in a world of lies and the wise person seeks the truth and prizes it above all the flashy distractions full of empty promises that this world offers. In today’s passage, we see Jewish religious leaders, a Roman governor, and an assembled crowd, all devoid of and disinterested in the truth. Instead, they all seem concerned with what this fallen world values: power, specifically, the power to be able to do what you want.

I. False Accusation

We hear first from the Jewish religious leaders, who are cynically continuing to unfold their devious plot against Jesus:

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate went outside to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” ³⁰ They answered him, “If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.” ³¹ Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.” ³² This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

John doesn’t tell us about the trial at Caiaphas’ house before the whole Jewish Sanhedrin, or ruling council. He also doesn’t tell us about Pilate’s decision to send Jesus to Herod. John knows these things are already described in the other Gospels, so he chooses instead to focus in more depth on Jesus’ interview with Pilate. Perhaps John knew someone who worked in Pilate’s household, in his security detail, who witnesses these conversations reported in John 18-19. We certainly get more details here about what Jesus and Pilate said to each other than we have in Matthew, Mark or Luke.

The Jewish leaders and their Temple guard arrive at Pontius Pilate’s headquarters. They did not enter because entering a Gentile’s home would have defiled them and made them ceremonially unclean, unable to eat the Passover meal. The main Passover meal had already been eaten the previous evening, but this main Passover meal was the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which continued for

seven days, and these Jewish leaders would have responsibilities in leading Temple worship and in eating ceremonial meals every day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Do you see the hypocrisy and the irony in the fact these spiritual leaders of God's people were concerned about remaining ritually pure, even while they were setting up and innocent man to be executed?

A. Evasive Answers

Pilate condescends to their need for ritual purity and he comes outside to greet them with a question: *"What accusation do you bring against this man?"* He may have signed the arrest warrant with Jesus' name on it, but now he wants to know what the exact charge is going to be.

The Jewish leaders don't answer Pilate's question. They are evasive: *"If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you."* That's not an answer to the question, which was pretty clear and straightforward. When we know we're guilty and doing wrong, we tend to get evasive and to resist straightforward questions and answers.

B. A Devious Agenda

Pilate is irritated by their evasive answers and he tells them, *"Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."* He has already been required to come outside to meet with his subjects, but he has no patience for their evasiveness. If they want to punish Jesus for something they think He has done wrong, they can take Him and punish Him themselves. He's giving them permission to carry out their punishment and stop wasting his time.

But the Jewish leaders have a problem: *"It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death."* Here the cause for their earlier evasiveness becomes clear: They are not pursuing justice against a criminal. No, they are seeking a devious agenda: to kill Jesus. They want Him gone and they cannot legitimately execute Him themselves.

II. False Interrogation

Once Pilate has cut through the fog of their evasiveness and he can see clearly that they're after, he takes Jesus into his headquarters to question Him himself:

³³ So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." ³⁷ Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” ⁴⁰ They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.

A. A Confused Interrogator

Pilate wants clarity, and so he talks to Jesus Himself. He has heard what the Jewish leaders are saying about this man, but now he wants to hear from Jesus Himself: “Are you the king of the Jews”? The last man who called himself the King of the Jews was Herod the Great, who had been king when Jesus was born, some 33 years earlier. But Herod had died, his kingdom was divided among his sons, and Pontius Pilate was installed as a Roman governor to keep the peace and administer Roman rule over this rebellious, tumultuous land. If another “King of the Jews” was going to arise, it would mean a direct challenge to Roman rule, and that was something Pilate could not allow.

At first, Jesus seems to be as elusive as the Jewish leaders had been. He doesn’t give Pilate a direct yes or no answer to Pilate’s yes or no question. But Jesus has a good reason for doing this: He knows Pilate has no categories of thought that would equip him to understand who Jesus was, what kind of king He was and what kind of kingdom He ruled.

Jesus tells Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.*” Pilate clearly doesn’t understand. He’s confused. Sadly, many Christians over the years have not understood either, and they have remained confused over the nature of Jesus’ kingship and kingdom. Next week, we’re going to take a close look at 36 and consider what Jesus means and what His proclamation means for us.

For now, we can see what it should have meant to Pilate: “I’m no real threat to you or to Rome. I’m not interested in your throne or their kingdom.”

But Pilate misses the significance. All he hears is what seems to him to be a yes answer from Jesus. Jesus does, in fact, see Himself as a king. So, Pilate clarifies, “*So you are a king?*” It’s almost comical how confused Pilate is. He has no idea who he’s talking to, why he’s talking to Him, what he should really be asking Him, or what he should do with Him. He is one confused interrogator.

Yet Jesus remains clear-minded and level-headed as He continues to explain to Pilate who He is. “*You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.*”

B. A Cynical Response

Pilate has no patience for this kind of talk and he simply responds cynically, “*What is truth?*” Some people have wondered if Pilate’s response really was cynical and dismissive, or if he perhaps was sincerely asking Jesus, “*What is truth?*” But his actions explain his words. He doesn’t wait to hear any answer. He doesn’t think there is any answer, because he doesn’t think there is any such thing as truth. No such commodity exists in Vanity Fair, after all. And in Pilate’s world, if you can’t buy it or sell it, it must not be real.

Cynicism is perhaps to be expected from a hardened Roman governor, but we see it also in this scene from the Jewish people: They don’t care about the truth of Jesus’ guilt or innocence. They just want what they want. They’d rather have Barabbas, a robber and an insurrectionist, if that will get rid of Jesus. The response of the Jewish people will only get worse in the next chapter.

II. True Testimony

Meanwhile, Jesus has made His testimony true and clear to Pilate. He told Pilate who He was and why He had come.

A. Jesus’ Identity

Jesus did not deny being a king, but He wanted to clarify what kind of king He had come to be – not a king craving earthly political power (as we’ll see next week) but a king of truth, one who comes to reveal the truth from God in Himself.

Remember what John had already said about the identity of Jesus in his prologue in chapter 1:

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

And then remember what Jesus had said about Himself just the night before to His disciples: “*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*”

Now Jesus says, “*For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.*”

B. Jesus’ Mission

So Jesus is the king of truth, that’s His identity. His mission is to bear witness to the truth. Another way to say this is that Jesus is the light of the world and He has come into the world to shine the light of truth into the world. This is what John 3:19-21 says, “*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.*”

Here, Jesus expresses much the same truth as John 3 by saying, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to me.” In other words, those who belong to God know and listen to the voice of Jesus. This should have helped Pilate find the way out of his cynical fog. Truth is personal and relational. Truth is a person, Jesus Himself, who calls us by the voice of truth into a relationship with Him.

Do you know Jesus? Do you know God's truth made flesh in the person of the Savior, the King of Truth? If you want to come into the light and hear the voice of truth, come to Him. This is why He came into the world, to testify to the truth and call people to the truth of God found in Himself. So, come to Jesus.

Conclusion: Standing for the Truth Under Pressure

If we do know Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, the word made flesh, full of the glory of grace and truth, what do we do? How do we follow Jesus here?

Well, in 1 Timothy 6, Paul charges Timothy with words based on what Jesus does here in today's passage:

But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³ I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, ¹⁴ to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

We should see Jesus here as our Lord standing strongly and speaking the truth clearly, even in the face of great pressure. He made the good confession. He said clearly who He was and why He came into the world. Will we make the good confession, speaking the truth in love to those who need to hear, without compromise and without fear? May God give us the grace to do so, in honor of the One who truly is the “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”