

*Jesus and Pilate: Mark 15:1-15*  
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In our study of the Gospel of Mark, we're at the end of Passion Week now. We're in the final events leading to the cross. It's now the morning of Good Friday.

These are powerful verses. These are powerful events. They are also extremely painful. If we read these passages attentively and with any amount of imagination in order to envision the things that are happening, then it will affect us deeply. We will feel moral outrage at the injustices done to Jesus. We will be disgusted by the ways in which He was mocked and abused. And we will be appalled at the gruesome torture He endured.

As these various emotions grip us, here's how we should respond. First of all, we should be reminded of our depravity, that Jesus had to endure this (all of this) in order to atone for our sin. Then secondly, we should be reminded of Jesus' great love for sinners, that He would subject Himself to such scorn and pain. What we are beholding in these paragraphs is the innocent Son of God laying down His life for guilty sinners like me and you.

I pray that this will have a profound impact on all of us, that it will deepen our love for Jesus, strengthen our trust in Him, and increase our joy in the Gospel.

Jesus has been up all through the night. He ate the Passover meal with the disciples. He prayed at Gethsemane. He was arrested. He was put on trial before the Sanhedrin and condemned to die. Peter denied Him three times. Now it's early in the morning and the chief priests and elders and scribes have bound Jesus and delivered him over to Pilate. What we have in our passage this morning is the trial before Pilate. There are two very intriguing characters in this trial, and it will be insightful to contrast each of them with Jesus. First, there's Pilate. Jesus is on trial before Pilate, at least from man's perspective. Looking at it from a different perspective, we would have to say that Pilate is on trial before Jesus. Pilate may be the governor of Judea, but Jesus is the King of the Jews, indeed, King of kings and Lord of lords. As Pilate stands before Jesus it reveals the sad condition of Pilate's soul.

The other character who captures our attention in these verses is the man Barabbas, the guilty one who goes free, while the innocent One is condemned. So we'll make our way through these verses, first by contrasting Jesus and Pilate, and then secondly by contrasting Jesus and Barabbas.

## **The Governor of Judea**

Pilate was the governor of Judea from AD 26 – 37. He lived in Caesarea for most of the year, but he came and resided in Jerusalem during the time of Passover in order to keep a close eye on things. It would be bad for him if things got out of hand in Jerusalem, and there was always the fear of that especially when massive crowds of Jews were flooding the city during that time of year.

Pilate, himself, was not a Jew, and he cared little about what the Jews believed or what they did, as long as they didn't cause trouble. Pilate's desire in this situation was that the Jews take care of it themselves. He didn't want to get involved. He didn't see why he needed to get entangled in this mess. It seemed to him like an intramural conflict that they should resolve on their own. In John 18:31 Pilate says to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." Pilate was ready to wash his hands of this from the very start. At the end of it, he will literally wash his hands of it. But we see right from the beginning that he is very reluctant to get involved.

The Jews' response to Pilate explains the situation. Still in John 18:31, the Jews reply, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." That's the issue. The Jews don't want merely to scold Jesus. They don't want to give Him a mere slap on the wrist. Not even a scourging will suffice. They don't want to do anything less than kill Him. But their only means of doing that is through the Roman authorities, because Rome did not allow anyone else to exercise capital punishment. They didn't outsource that authority. So here are the Jewish religious leaders, hoping to manipulate Pilate to do their will.

At the trial that the Council held with Jesus during the night, they were appalled that Jesus answered in the affirmative to the question, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." That was all they needed to conclude that Jesus must die. But they, themselves, could not carry out the execution.

So now they need to make a compelling case to Pilate, but they know that the things that have outraged them are not the same things that will carry any weight with Pilate. So they have to put a little spin on it. They have to present this in a way that will force Pilate's hand. Listen to the manipulative language they used in John 19:12, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." This is how they presented the case to Pilate. They knew Pilate wouldn't care about the religious significance of Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.

But they knew that Pilate must care about the political ramifications of such a claim.

If you've read the Gospels you know that Jesus' ministry was anything but political. He did not come by force to bring about a political revolution. He made no threats of overthrowing the government. Certainly others desired that for Him, but He had an entirely different program. He came as the Suffering Servant. He came peacefully. He came in love. He came to sacrifice Himself for the sake of others. That's why it seems so odd that a large group of armed guards arrested Jesus in the garden, and that they now bind Jesus and bring Him to Pilate. Jesus was not about to bring any physical harm to anyone. When Peter cut off Malchus' ear, Jesus healed it. But still, they are terribly afraid of Jesus, and they are fiercely determined to have Him killed.

So they bring Him to Pilate, bound like a criminal, hoping to give the appearance that this is a really bad guy. And then they play on this messianic claim in order to present Jesus as someone who is challenging the authority of Rome. The Jews had accused Jesus of blasphemy. That's what mattered to them. But now, before Pilate, they accuse Jesus of treason. Pilate doesn't care about blasphemy, but it's his job to care about any potential treason.

Therefore Pilate is forced to listen. This seems ridiculous to him. It's annoying to him. It makes him nervous because he knows it's a volatile situation. He wishes he could just avoid it altogether, but he's about to find himself right in the middle of it.

He asks Jesus in verse 2, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus responds in this enigmatic way, "You have said so." That's kind of mysterious and perplexing. Is that a yes or a no? Well, it's a yes, but it's a yes that has resigned itself to silence. It's a yes that is not going to make a defense. John 18 records some of the things Jesus said to Pilate, but what Mark's concise account highlights is the fact that Jesus did not try to escape the charges that were being brought against Him. Jesus had submitted Himself to the Father's will (that was clear in His prayer in Gethsemane). He was determined to go to the cross, even though it was well within His power to avoid it. He could have gotten out of this. He could have argued His way out of it with Pilate. Pilate was desperate for a good reason to let Jesus go, but Jesus would not defend Himself.

This was mind-boggling to Pilate. He was amazed by it, as verse 5 says. All these accusations were brought against Jesus, but Jesus would not make an answer. This is how it was at the previous trial as well. Jesus remained silent before the chief priest, and He remains silent again in the face of false accusations. And this fulfills the description found in Isaiah 53:7, "He was

oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” We continue to see Jesus’ innocence in all of this. He has His face set like flint toward the cross, even though He is the last person on earth who deserves the cross. He is the only person who does not deserve the cross. But He refuses to do anything or say anything that would keep Him from the cross.

Now let’s look at how Pilate handles this situation. The Jews complicate things for Pilate even further by asking him to do as he normally does during the feast and release a prisoner. Pilate wondered if this might be his solution, because maybe the crowd would request Jesus to be released. Pilate could see what was going on. He could tell, as it says in verse 10, “that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered [Jesus] up.” So Pilate thought, maybe this tradition of releasing a prisoner will be my solution. Maybe the crowds will request Jesus, and then the chief priests will be thwarted, and my conscience will be clear.

You have to remember how agonizing this was for Pilate. This was scary for him. Matthew 27 records the additional detail that Pilate’s wife was very troubled by the situation. It says that “while [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.’” (Matthew 27:19)

The message is coming through loud and clear, to Pilate, and to the readers of this Gospel, that Jesus is entirely innocent. He is the righteous One. He does not deserve to die. The accusers are doing this out of envy. They are lying and manipulating. They are unjust. And Pilate is caught in the middle. What will he do? Will he stand up for the truth? Will he do what is right? Will he uphold justice?

The Gospel of John, again, captures a poignant exchange between Jesus and Pilate when 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.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” (John 18:37-38)

That really summarizes Pilate’s response to Jesus. And it summarizes how so many people respond to Jesus. Pilate could tell that Jesus was not a criminal. He could find no guilt in the man. He even asks the crowd, “what evil has he done?” But Pilate doesn’t care too much about the truth. In his life, there are many things more important than truth. And so Pilate finds himself standing before the very embodiment of Truth, but Pilate remains blind. He is blinded by the fear of man and the lust for power. That’s all he really cares about.

Is that you? Are you intrigued by Jesus, kind of like Pilate was? But when it really comes down to whether you're going to lay it all on the line for Jesus, or whether you're going to reject Him, you just say, "What is truth, really?" Maybe you'd like to hold the position where you say that Jesus is a cool guy and an inspiring example, but you're never going to take a stand for Him as *the Way* and *the Truth* and *the Life* (because that can be divisive). Are you like Pilate, trying to please the crowd and therefore indifferent to the truth? Are you wandering through life, worried about how you can make everyone think well of you and worried about how you can also fulfill your selfish desires. And those things are so consuming that you don't even care about the things that really matter, like God and Truth and eternity. If that's you, you're on a very dangerous path, a reckless path, and a path that will end very badly for you.

I saw an interesting illustration of this yesterday (a humorous illustration). We were driving home from Milaina's soccer game, and we were on Pioneer Avenue in Brookline, and all of a sudden the traffic stopped ahead of us. A car coming the other direction stopped, and the car in front of us stopped, and then I saw why they were stopped. A very large groundhog was crossing the street, and it looked like it was carrying something in its mouth—a jar of some kind. As I got closer I realized that the jar was actually stuck over the groundhog's head, and so the groundhog apparently couldn't really see where it was going (and it was probably running out of air). It continued to wander aimlessly back and forth in the middle of the street as the traffic continued to backup. A teenage girl got out of her car and wanted to help, but couldn't bring herself to get close to the groundhog. So I hopped out of our minivan and ran over and took hold of the jar (it turned out it was a large peanut butter jar), and I started to pull. But this thing was lodged pretty securely on the groundhog's head. So I put my other hand on its back and finally was able to pull the jar off. And the groundhog quickly scurried away. Then I wasn't sure what to do with the peanut butter jar, and I was about to get back into the van with it when Stacy said, "Do you have to bring that in the van." So you can turn me in for littering. I left the jar on the side of the road.

Isn't that a disgusting picture of how self-focused and consumed we can be with pleasing ourselves? We are so determined to get what we want, whether that's the praise of man or power or pleasure or comfort . . . we are like that groundhog who wanted that peanut butter so bad (and it looked like he had been eating pretty well). He was enjoying that delicious peanut butter until he realized he was stuck. He could hardly see, he could hardly breathe, and he just about walked himself to his own

death. If it wasn't for some considerate drivers, he would have been road kill.

That's a picture of Pilate. That's a picture of so many who are bringing about their own destruction because they won't face the Truth. They won't let go of their precious idols and therefore they can't see anything else.

Verse 15 of our passage tells us where Pilate landed. He caved to the will of the people. He wished to satisfy the crowd, and so he released Barabbas and sent Jesus to be crucified. What a tragic moment for Pilate. He was on trial before Jesus, and he condemned himself. With his actions he said that the praise of man and having a position of power is more important than knowing the Truth, Jesus Christ.

As we meditate on this passage of Scripture, we're on trial too. We're in the same place Pilate was in. Are we going to be a pawn to the crowds? Are we going to waffle under pressure? Are we going to be self-serving? Are we going to be controlled by the fear of man? Are we going to be indifferent to the truth? If these things are true of us, then the opinions of people are very big and Christ is very small in our lives. And that's a recipe for disaster: first of all, because it's a lie, and secondly, because it will make you miserable.

The opinions of people are not big. They are not what really matters. These things are very small in light of the big picture of God's creation and His plan of redemption. Christ is big. Christ is true. Christ is everything! So we need to read and meditate on God's Word to be reminded day after day of what really matters and what we should build our lives around.

Don't be like Pilate, the governor of Judea, with his limited power, fickle, a pawn of the crowd, no conviction (or at least not enough to make a difference), self-serving, fearing man, indifferent to the truth, unjust, looking to the popularity polls, striving for personal gain. Don't waste your life like that. Don't stand before Jesus and say like a fool, "What is truth?" Stand before Jesus and say, I believe you are the Way and the Truth and the Life, and I know that there's no way to the Father except through You. Lay aside all the idols of self, and fear of man, and worldly success, and put your hope in the One who endured all of this torture and scorn for sinners like us.

### **The King of the Jews**

In contrast to Pilate's very limited power as the governor of Judea, Jesus is the King of the Jews, as He is called here. Even though the term is used in a condescending way, in a mocking way, it is a fitting title for Him. He *is* King of the Jews. He is King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16). Pilate had

limited authority in a small region of the world. Jesus reigns with absolute authority over the entire universe.

Pilate is fickle in trying to determine how to handle this troubling scenario. Jesus is resolute in submitting to the Father and going to the cross. Pilate is selfish. Jesus is selfless. Pilate asks, "What is truth?" Jesus is the embodiment of truth. Pilate is controlled by fear of man. Jesus is completely free of the fear of man. He obeys the Father, no matter what man may do to Him.

We've seen, then, the contrast between Jesus and Pilate. Let's now examine another very interesting character in this passage.

### **The Guilty One Goes Free**

Barabbas is the guilty one who goes free. That's the stunning Gospel picture that appears before us in these events. We don't know much about this man, Barabbas. We don't know anything about this particular insurrection, which Mark refers to in verse 7. But Mark gives us the pertinent details that we need to know. Barabbas was a rebel. He had been part of an uprising against the government. He had even committed murder. And therefore he's now in prison. This is a serious criminal. He's not getting a slap on the wrist for stealing from the candy store. He's behind bars because he's a murderer and an enemy of Rome.

That's why this is all so surprising. It's surprising that the crowd would request his release, and it's surprising that Pilate would allow it. It's hard to know who exactly made up this crowd, but it's obvious that the chief priests had a commanding influence over them. It's a fickle, unthinking crowd, as most crowds are. And so they call for Barabbas to be set free instead of Jesus. It was Pilate's idea that the crowd might ask for Jesus to be released, but they asked for Barabbas instead.

Pilate is desperate at this point and asks them again in verse 12, "Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify him." And Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him." They don't give a reason. They just repeat their irrational plea. They want the guilty man to go free, and they want the innocent man to die.

It was wicked of the chief priests to pursue this course of action. It was wicked of the crowd to go along with their plan. It was wicked of Pilate to give in. But even so, it was all part of God's glorious plan of redemption. As Peter preached in Acts 2, he told the Jews, "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Did the Jews do this? Yes. Did the crowd do this? Yes. Did Pilate do this? Yes. Did God do this? Yes.

This all happened according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

Also in Acts 4, as the believers are praising God, they say, "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27-28). This shows us the sovereignty of God in all of these events. Yes, these various individuals are guilty of these wicked actions. But at the same time, God is completely in control. This all happened according to plan. And so we have this beautiful picture of the Gospel, in that Barabbas (the guilty one) goes free, and Jesus (the innocent One) goes to His death.

It's interesting that the name Barabbas means "son of the father." Bar – abba. Another interesting detail is that it's likely that Barabbas's full name was Jesus Barabbas. There are manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew in which his name is recorded as Jesus Barabbas. This provides quite a comparison of the two men: Jesus and Jesus. The insurrectionist and murderer who is known as Jesus, son of the father. And the peaceful, but powerful, teacher, who is Jesus, the true Son of the Father, the second Person of the Trinity.

### **The Innocent One Is Condemned**

Against the backdrop of Barabbas, Jesus' innocence and purity shines more brightly. No real charge can even be brought against Jesus. Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent. The crowds cannot give a reason why He should be crucified. He has done no evil. But He takes the place of Barabbas.

For those who repent and believe, we are like Barabbas—justly deserving death because of our sin, but Jesus steps in and dies in our place. This is the substitutionary nature of Jesus' atonement for our sin. He takes our place.

Romans 5:8 says that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." And Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:18, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God." This is the wonder of the Gospel. This is the Good News for you and me.

I was talking to a friend of mine this week (he and I have been meeting regularly and reading through the Gospel of Mark together), and at one point in the conversation he said that his view of religion is more focused on God and less on Jesus. He said that he gets concerned to see people talking so much about Jesus that everything becomes centered on Jesus.

So I read to him from Hebrews 1 where it says, "but in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he



appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” And I talked about John 1 which speaks of Jesus as the Word—“and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” You shouldn’t ever worry about focusing on Jesus too much, because when your attention is on Jesus, your attention is on God.

And my hunch is that my friend shies away from focusing too closely on Jesus because he doesn’t want to feel accountable to follow Jesus’ commands. My friend would rather follow some vague notion of God that he can construct in his own mind and in his own likeness, and then he’s really only accountable to himself. That reminds me a lot of Pilate. “What is truth?” I’ll determine my own truth by what I choose to do in the moment. Whatever seems expedient, whatever seems right, whatever seems like it will bring me the most success and pleasure, that’s what’s true for me.

Please don’t go down that path, friends. Please don’t cave to the peer pressures around you. Don’t cave to the fickle desires inside of you. But turn from your sins and cling to this amazing Savior who endured such agony on our behalf.

At the end of our passage it mentions that Pilate ordered for Jesus to be scourged, and he then delivered Jesus to be crucified. Mark does not describe this scourging in any detail, but it would have been well-known to his readers. This was a horrific form of torture. The whips that were used were no ordinary whips. There were pieces of metal tied on the ends so that the blows would leave the flesh shredded even down to the bone. It was not uncommon for men to die from this, before they even went to the cross. And thus Jesus’ torture begins.

As we turn our attention to the Lord’s supper, let’s meditate on the things I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. Consider the excruciating pain that Jesus endured. Consider the ridicule, the shame, the physical and emotional agony of the whole ordeal. And let this be a time of repentance for us, because this is a picture of what our sin deserves. And let this also be a time of rejoicing in the Gospel, because Jesus stood in our place and took this punishment for us, so that we can go free. The innocent One dies, and the guilty go free.