

John 18:33-40

Introduction

Last week, we saw Jesus standing “backstage,” as it were, inside Pilate’s residence, while the Jews stand outside so they can avoid defilement and eat the Passover. In the first exchange between Pilate and the Jewish leaders (*outside* of Pilate’s residence), we saw all the maneuvering and the bad blood, and the hypocrisy, and the plotting, and the injustice. And yet we also saw that in the midst of all this evil and wickedness, it’s Jesus—the one in custody, standing backstage—who’s in complete control, because outside Pilate’s residence it’s His word which He spoke that’s being fulfilled. The word that He spoke is that He would die not by stoning, but rather by being “lifted up” (on a cross).

But Jesus has not yet been sentenced by Pilate, and so far Pilate is proving to be very uncooperative with the Jews. First, he insists on trying Jesus himself. Then, when the Jewish leaders imply that such a trial isn’t needed and that he should take their word for things, Pilate tells them they can take Jesus themselves and judge Him according to their own law. The Jews then respond that it’s not lawful for them to put anyone to death. Since they’ll be satisfied with nothing less than a death sentence, and since a Jewish stoning might incite the Passover crowds and reflect badly on them, they now require a Roman crucifixion — just as Jesus said. But Pilate despises the Jews—and particularly the Jewish leadership—just as much as they despise him.

I. John 18:33 — Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?”

This is John’s notice that the Jewish leaders *did* (probably grudgingly) provide Pilate with a formal charge against Jesus. Jesus had been charged with blasphemy in their own court (making Himself equal with God), but they knew this charge wouldn’t hold the same weight in a Roman court. So now they accuse Jesus of being a political threat to the Emperor — to Roman law and order (cf. Lk. 23:1-3). They knew that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah—the Christ—and they knew from Scripture that the Messiah was a royal figure – the Son of David. So if Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah, didn’t this mean He was claiming to be Israel’s king? And if Jesus was claiming to be Israel’s king, didn’t this make Him a revolutionary and a dangerous threat to Roman interests?

The fact is that Jesus had not been organizing any militias or stirring up any violence against Rome. Jesus had not been forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar (as Luke tells us He was accused of doing), but actually said that the Jews were to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Mat. 22:21). We remember what happened after the feeding of the five thousand:

➤ John 6:15 — So Jesus, knowing that they were going to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

The basis for the Jews’ charge against Jesus isn’t rooted in any real “evidence”; it’s all “theological” and hypothetical. The Jewish assumption was that the kingdom promised in the

Old Testament would be *inaugurated* by military and political conquest and that the Messiah promised in the Old Testament would sit on an earthly throne, ruling from their own earthly Jerusalem. The Jewish assumption, therefore (by default), was that the inauguration of Messiah's rule would mean no more taxes paid to Rome.

The first irony is that they were wrong. Their conception of the Messiah's rule was entirely bounded by this-worldly realities. Their idea of the Messiah's kingdom was ultimately materialistic and carnal – appealing to the priorities of the flesh. But what does the Apostle Paul say?

- Romans 14:17 — The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

What are the ways that we make the kingdom of God—the Messiah's kingdom—to be about “eating and drinking” (the satisfaction of temporal and materialistic desires) rather than about righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit? The first irony is that the Jews' assumptions were wrong. But the second, and even worse irony, is that their charge against Jesus amounts to nothing more nor less than that He *claims to be* their Messiah. By their own definition, whoever the true Messiah is, when he does come, he'll be a political and military threat to Rome. Therefore, their charge against Jesus must also be their charge against anyone and everyone who ever claims to be their Messiah.

So now let's put these two “ironies” together. The reason the Jews are willing to charge Jesus with claiming to be their Messiah is because He's not the Messiah they want. And yet the Messiah they want—and that they charge Jesus with claiming to be—is not the Messiah God has promised. Jesus is the Messiah that God has promised. And so their formal charge and accusation against Jesus amounts in the end to this: “This man is our Messiah. This man is our King. Therefore, according to the laws of Rome, He must die.”

- John 1:11 — He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

We begin, then, to see how it is the cross that testifies uniquely and powerfully to the kingship of Jesus. We see how on the cross, Jesus is “lifted up” in the glory of His true kingship.

It's against this backdrop that we see Pilate entering again into the Praetorium (“backstage”), and summoning Jesus and saying to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” That's obviously not a “sincere” question. When Pilate asks Jesus, “Are *You* [probably emphatic in Greek] the King of the Jews?” This is his mocking way of asking, “Do *You* seriously *claim* to be the King of the Jews? But when Jesus answers, He *uses* Pilate's sarcasm as an opportunity to testify to Pilate about the truth.

II. John 18:34 — Jesus answered, “Are you saying this from yourself, or did others tell you about Me?”

Remember the actual wording of Pilate's question: “*Are you* the King of the Jews?” So Jesus responds: Do you really want to know if I am the King of the Jews? “Are you saying this from

yourself?” The obvious implication of these words is that He *is* the King of the Jews and that if Pilate really wants to know the truth, then Jesus will give him that truth.

And yet the context of Pilate’s question, and no doubt the tone of his voice, indicate that he’s mocking: “Do *you* actually *claim* to be the King of the Jews?” So Jesus follows up: “Or did others tell you about Me?” Which is to say: Or are you only asking sarcastically because I’ve been accused of claiming to be a king like Caesar or like any other king in this world? The obvious implication of these words is that whatever Pilate may have heard from others, their words, if not outright false, will need to be “explained.”

And so we see how Pilate’s mocking question has resulted in a very uncomfortable situation for him—and also in an unexpected opportunity. Pilate has asked Jesus not if He *claims* to be the King of the Jews—he’s asked Him if He *is* the King of the Jews. He expected that in response to his demeaning sarcasm Jesus would either deny any such thing or else that He would respond belligerently – as any other accused prisoner would do. But instead, Jesus asks *Pilate* if he *really* and *truly* wants to know the answer to the question he himself has just asked: *Is* Jesus the King of the Jews? And so without ever trying to “one up” Pilate, the roles have been reversed, and now it’s Jesus who’s questioning Pilate.

III. John 18:35 — Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me. What did You do?”

On the one hand, Pilate is contemptuous. “Am *I* a *Jew*?” So why should I have any personal interest in *Jewish* affairs? Why should I have any personal interest in whether or not You are the King of the *Jews*?

On the other hand, Pilate understands that in the question Jesus has just asked him is the beginnings of His answer – that He *is*, in fact, the King of the Jews. But instead of pressing Jesus for a simple “yes” or “no” statement, Pilate himself contradicts Jesus’ implied answer—essentially answering his own question *for Jesus*. “Your *own* nation and the chief priests delivered You to me.” In other words, “I know *You* can’t possibly *be* the King of the Jews because the Jews are the very ones who’ve arrested You and delivered You to me.”

Pilate asks scornfully, “Are *You* the King of the Jews?” Jesus responds with His own question, asking if Pilate truly wants to know and implying that there is truth in what Pilate says. Pilate—the *judge*—then tries to contradict Jesus by answering his own question *for Jesus*. And so we see that the true “Judge,” here, is Jesus. It’s Jesus, the accused prisoner, who has the true authority.

After implying that Jesus *can’t* be the King of the Jews, Pilate—the “*judge*”—then *asks Jesus—the accused*: “What did You do?” Never mind the formal charge that’s been brought against Jesus. Pilate says to Jesus: *You* tell me the reason the Jews are so angry with you. *You* tell me why You’ve been delivered to me! Whatever the tone of Pilate’s voice—whether it’s scornful or careless or both—we see that what he’s just done is ask Jesus to tell him the truth about who He is.

IV. John 18:36 — Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be delivered over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not from here.”

The reason the Jews hate Jesus is because the kingdom He has come to bring—the kind of authority and rule that He has come to exercise—is not the authority or the rule that they want. The Jewish assumption was that Messiah’s kingdom would be inaugurated through military and political conquest and that the Messiah Himself would sit on an earthly throne, ruling from their own earthly Jerusalem. Their conception of the kingdom was defined by this-worldly realities. Their idea of the kingdom was materialistic and carnal—appealing to the flesh. But Jesus, the Messiah, has come to inaugurate the rule of God not by military and political conquest, but rather by raising sinners from death to life; by calling out a people to be His willing subjects and giving them the true *eternal* life (cf. Jn. 17:1-2) — which amounts to “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Remember what Jesus said to the Jews in chapter five:

➤ John 5:25–27 — “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming *and now is*, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and *those who hear will live*. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him *authority* to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man.”

It’s true that the Messiah’s rule will be *consummated* when death is finally abolished and all the wicked who refused to repent are finally destroyed, but this is not how the kingdom is inaugurated (cf. Jn. 5:28-29). And insofar as the Jews don’t want the kingdom that Jesus inaugurates, therefore, they can only be among the wicked who perish when that kingdom is consummated.

Why do the Jews hate Jesus?—Pilate wants to know. *Why* have they delivered Him to Pilate? Jesus answers: “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be delivered over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not from here.” Notice how Jesus qualifies His connection with “the Jews”: “If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be delivered over to the Jews.” Never mind that if Jesus’ kingdom *were* of this world, the Jews might not be seeking His life in the first place. Jesus doesn’t deny that He is, Himself, Jewish. Neither does He deny that He is the King of the Jews. What He does deny is that He is *only* the King of the Jews. Jesus’ kingdom—His rule and authority—is not of this world, and therefore it is not limited to one ethnic group. And what does this mean? It means that even Pilate himself is subject to the rule and the authority of Jesus. It means that even Pilate—the Roman governor of Judea appointed by the Roman emperor of the civilized world—is called to confess Jesus as *his* King – as the one who alone has the authority to raise Pilate from death to life; to that true eternal life of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

V. John 18:37a — Therefore Pilate said to Him, “So *You* are a *king*?”

Jesus distinguished between kingdoms which are “of this world” and His kingdom which is not “of this world.” But Pilate is uncomfortable with this distinction because he understands what it means: It means that he might be, in some ultimate sense, answerable to Jesus. So he seeks to

avoid the issue and blur any distinction by saying simply, “So *You* [emphatic pronoun] are a *king*?” It’s hard to imagine that he says this without more sarcasm and scorn. And yet whatever his manner or tone of voice, he *is*, once again, asking Jesus to say more. Jesus isn’t belligerent or scornful toward Pilate. He’s not disrespectful of Pilate’s lesser “authority.” Jesus, who always submits Himself to His Father’s will, never needs to prove His authority (contrary to Pilate). And this, as much as anything else, has put Pilate off his guard. Underneath his discomfort and his scorn is a perhaps “unexplainable” desire to know who Jesus really is.

“Therefore Pilate said to Him, ‘So *You* are a *king*?’”

VI. John 18:37b — Jesus answered, “You yourself said I am a king. [‘You have spoken the words, and the words are technically correct, as far as they go. Yes, I am a king.] For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

Could anyone have ever imagined that Pilate, the Roman governor, would be listening to these words from an accused prisoner brought before him for judgment? We also see how in all that Jesus says, He says just enough to testify to Pilate in a way that is suited to the situation and to Pilate’s condition (and that is also full of grace), while at the same time never needlessly exposing the deep truths of the Gospel to Pilate’s scorn and contempt. Jesus never gives what is holy to dogs or throws His pearls before swine (Mat. 7:6).

Pilate’s question has not gone far enough. Jesus isn’t just *a* king, He’s *the* King – the King who is above all kings. His rule and authority is the kind to which even Pilate, before whose tribunal Jesus stands, is himself subject. Jesus’ rule and authority is the kind to which even Pilate, before whose tribunal Jesus stands, is himself accountable. The authority of Jesus resides not in any human appointment or office (as did Pilate’s), but rather in the fact that *His* birth was His “coming into” the world. The authority of Jesus resides in that truth to which He alone can testify, because He Himself is that truth (cf. Jn. 14:6). Therefore, Jesus isn’t the King of the Jews *only*. “*Everyone*”—Jesus says to Pilate—“***Everyone*** who is of the truth *hears My voice*.”

Here, then, is Pilate, confronted with the absolute sovereignty and lordship of Jesus. Here is the representative of the Roman Emperor, confronted now with that supreme authority of the King over all kings—who stands now before him as a prisoner awaiting his sentence. And so now the real question is not, “How will Jesus answer, and what will Pilate’s judgment be?” but rather, “How will Pilate answer, and on the last day what will Jesus’ judgment be?”

VII. John 18:38a — Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?”

Pilate asks the one who *is* the truth—and who has even now been telling him the truth—what truth is. He asks dismissively—carelessly—because he’s afraid (cf. 19:8) – because the authority of Jesus is an authority He does not want to confess. Instead of driving him to the truth, his guilty conscience turns him away. And so Pilate, the Roman judge, is judged already by the word that Jesus has spoken, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (Jn. 12:48 & 3:18).

Does our guilty conscience cause us to minimize the truth, or even to trivialize the truth? Or does our guilty conscience drive us *to* the truth for cleansing and forgiveness and pardon? Does the authority of Jesus' kingship, and His absolute right to our obedience stir in us fear, or do we rejoice to know that it's this same authority that has called us out of death, into life—into righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit?

Pilate said to Jesus, "What is truth?"

VIII. John 18:38b–40 — And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release to you the King of the Jews?" So they cried out again, saying, "Not this man, but Barabbas." Now Barabbas was a violent outlaw [*lestes*; cf. TLNT; Louw-Nida; Ezek. 22:9 LXX].

Pilate still refers to Jesus as "the King of *the Jews*." On the one hand, this is his way of mocking the Jews and trying to show them how ridiculous is their charge against Jesus—"do you wish then that I release to you the King of the Jews?" On the other hand, this is Pilate's way of comforting himself – that the claims of Jesus are irrelevant to him, because he isn't a Jew.

"For this I have been born," Jesus said, "and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to *the truth*. *Everyone* who is of the truth hears My voice." Jesus' claims are just as relevant to Pilate as they are to the Jewish chief priests and the Jewish nation. The supreme authority of the King who is over all kings is equally relevant to every person who's ever been born and therefore to every person in this room.

While Pilate tries to trivialize and brush aside the claims of Jesus, he also seeks to soothe his guilty conscience by finding a way to release Jesus, who he's concluded is "not guilty" of the charge brought against Him. What are the ways that we try to soothe our guilty conscience apart from the cleansing that Jesus gives freely through repentance and faith?

The Jews, on the other hand, prove again their hypocrisy and blindness. Barabbas was a violent outlaw – the true threat to Roman interests. Luke tells us that "he had been thrown into prison for an insurrection made in the city and for murder (Lk. 23:19; Mk. 15:7). And yet the Jews ask that Barabbas, the rebel, be released to them and not Jesus — the one they've accused of being the real threat to Rome; the one they've accused of being their own *Messiah* – the *King* of the Jews. Once again, we see how it is the cross that testifies uniquely and powerfully to the kingship of Jesus (in a way that stoning never would have). We see how on the cross, Jesus is "lifted up" in the glory of His true kingship.

On the one hand, both the Jews and Pilate are a lesson and a warning to us. There's the religious hypocrisy and blindness of the Jews. And there's Pilate's minimizing and trivializing of the truth while trying to soothe his guilty conscience. And yet even in the continued unbelief of Pilate and the continued unbelief of the Jews, we still see the overruling and supreme authority of Jesus. The authority of Jesus that confronts Pilate with the truth is the same authority by which He lays down His life in order that He might take it up again—and by which He now calls us out of death, into life; into righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Jn. 10:15-18; 12:32-33).