

Pilate Before the King

In regards to Pope Pius IX's declaration of papal infallibility, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, Lord Acton penned those now infamous words:

Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

In this world, men love power and what most powerful men love most is more power. The power to control the lives of others, to affect their destiny according to that which pleases us most is intoxicating. How often than not, do we find ourselves shocked by such sins of infidelity, treachery, and murder and yet we merely wink at those men and women who, in their upwardly mobile career, grasp for more and more power?

The kingdoms of this world are built on the lust for more power. Worldwide Wars have been fought, with the loss of life numbering in the millions (of both civilians and soldiers) by men who desired greater power.

Power itself is not evil. God is omnipotent and has infinite power to accomplish all His holy will. But power in the hands of sinful men and women, especially when left unchecked, will almost always tend towards the death and destruction of those within their grasp.

We have two clear examples of Lord Acton's aphorism in our story this morning first in the lives of the Jewish leaders who have a certain degree of power and who are willing to illegally seek the death of an innocent man to keep what power they possess. We will also see a man who toys with capital punishment as a sadistic child might torture a small, innocent animal. What is interesting to watch this morning in our story is when these two power-hungry groups of men clash over the death of Jesus and see how each side seeks to misuse their power against one another, even trying to one-up one another, while the life of an innocent man hangs in the balance.

In the midst of these two nations (Jews and Gentiles) in an uproar we see, in fulfillment of **Psalm 2**, evil men devising a vain thing as the leaders of this world take their stand against the LORD and His Anointed, who cry out, "Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!"

But how will the King of kings and Lord of lords respond to their threats of death? While Jesus has in His possession 12 legions of angels (that's 72,000 angels; cf. **Matt. 26:53**) what will He do when the final hour of His life approaches, being quickened by the hands of evil men?

Well our story begins with the powers-that-be now having Jesus finally in their grasp. All they need to do now is find a reason, any reason will do, to have Him killed and forever out of their way. They have already appealed once to Pilate, the prefect or governor of Judea, who commissioned a whole cohort of Roman soldiers (cf. **18:3**) to assist the Jewish priests in arresting Jesus. But, knowing that the death penalty has been forbidden by their Roman masters, they now have to finish their dastardly deed by coming up with a crime worthy of capital punishment, which Pilate will accept.

At first, they make an appeal before Pilate to have Jesus executed because He has broken the Law of Moses (**vv. 29-31**) but once they see that the theological basis of their appeal simply doesn't impress Pilate, they quickly switch tactics and change their reasons to political sedition and insurrection (**cf. 18:32-33; 19:12, 14-15**). If the accusation of "blasphemy" won't get Jesus killed for them, then "treason" will have to do – either way, the end result will be the same – Jesus will be dead.

We are told by John that when the Jewish leaders finally arrive outside Pilate's headquarters that they refuse to enter in. Why? Well, the text tells us that they remained outside in observance of their Law which forbade them to have any contact with Gentiles and remain ceremonially clean (**v. 28**). This was the festival of Passover, followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which together lasted a week, and if they wanted to participate fully in that night's activities they could not pollute themselves during those early morning hours.

Now, it is interesting to note how meticulous these Jewish leaders were in following the Law of Moses down to the minute detail and at the same time they are conniving and conspiring together, attempting to manipulate the Roman judicial system to secure the death of Him who alone is the true Passover Lamb. Truly as Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees in one of His eight oracles of woe:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. ²⁴ "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (**Matt. 23:23-24**).

The Jewish leaders were meticulous in following the minutest detail of the Law while a blood-lust fills their heart to remove Jesus any way they can from the face of the earth.

This is the heart of the Pharisee inside each of us. How many times do we all play the game of "search and destroy" with all the people in our lives, our neighbors and the multitude of others that come into our crosshairs? It is so easy for us to highlight the sins of others – "look at what that person has done, or how could they have done that, or I would never do that" – while all the time completely missing our own self-righteousness and pride which is constantly seeking to earn brownie-points with a Holy God based upon our own inner goodness.

In the story this morning, you are the Pharisee. You are so careful to follow the commands of God, down to the smallest detail and yet you have completely missed the over-arching commandment of God to love one another as Jesus has loved you. Conceit fills your heart rather than humility. Revenge and a root of bitterness controls you rather than joy, peace, mercy, and compassion. And no matter how hard you struggle to get control of those sinful responses to others you nevertheless find some way justifying your own sinfulness while condemning the sinfulness of others.

The Pharisee inside you even controls you when you are doing everything you can to stomp out Phariseism around you. How many times have you said, "I can't stand it when someone looks down upon others." And then you add, "I'm glad I don't look down upon others like that." At the end of the day, it is simply impossible to kill your inner-Pharisee. It is written into the very fabric of our fallen nature.

Instead you need a cure that is outside of you. No earthly medicine will do. Nothing you possess or could possess can rid you of this disease. Not your own goodness nor the goodness of your neighbor. The only cure for what truly ill you, to the very core of your being, is Calvary's Love. And that is exactly how Jesus responds to His wicked accusers. Throughout these last few hours of Jesus' life, the man who has done nothing worthy of death, who has within His own possession the very power of Heaven itself, quietly lays down His life and is nailed to a tree. Why? LOVE. He loves you this much that He joyfully endures the shame that He might do what you could never do – cleanse you completely and give you His own righteousness before God.

Now the underhanded arguments of the Jewish leaders must have finally worked at convincing Pilate to take a look at Jesus (**vv. 31-33**). John does not directly tell us what accusation finally worked, but it is clear from **v. 33** what the general complaint was – Jesus had been trying to subvert the Roman rule of Judea by teaching the Jews that He was their King.

So Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you really saying that ‘you’ are the King of the Jews?” (**v. 33**). At first, Jesus does not answer Pilate's question directly, that must wait until **v. 37**. Rather, before Jesus gives him His answer, He must first clearly expound the nature of His Kingship (**vv. 34-36**).

What is clear in the story is that Pilate thinks He is interrogating Jesus when in reality Jesus is King and He is in absolute control of the situation. Even while Jesus is shackled in chains at the complete mercy of the Roman governor, Pilate is the one who has been summoned before the King to give an answer for what he is about to do. The prisoner has become the judge! Jesus makes Pilate answer the question: “What will you do with Jesus?”

The probing of Pilate's heart begins in **v. 34**. Jesus wants Pilate to slow down and think about who it is who is standing before him. He asks Pilate if his question (**in v. 33**) originates in his own heart or is he simply mimicking the pitifully groundless accusation of the Sanhedrin.

Pilate becomes indignant. “Am I a Jew?” It is well-known that Pilate despised the Jews and on several occasions he purposefully offended the Jewish sensibilities seeking to provoke and taunt them. So when Jesus asks him this question he strikes at the heart of Pilate's sin – his pride and self-conceit. This would be like calling a deep-rooted Southerner, a “Yankee” or asking a Texas alum if he was rooting for the Sooners this year. Jesus exposes Pilate's heart – his self-righteous prejudices, thinking that Romans are inherently superior to Jews – Jesus touched a nerve!

Pilate becomes impatient with Jesus and demands that Jesus tell him what He has done (**v. 35**). Jesus' answer is the heart of the passage – “My kingdom is not of this world.” What is Jesus saying?

On the one hand, Jesus is clearly distancing Himself from any thought of political insurrection. He assures Pilate that He is no threat to the Roman Empire. But on the other hand, Jesus distances Himself from this world – neither does His Kingdom find its origin in this world nor does His Kingdom operate in the way of this world.

Jesus' Kingdom is not from this world, both created by God (and therefore finite) and fallen under sin and rebellion against God (therefore sinful). Jesus' Kingdom does not belong to this fallen world as if Jesus' reign is merely one other option among the rising and falling kingdoms of this world. Jesus is not an ally of the

kingdoms of this world, which is something we as Americans need to be constantly reminded of. All the kingdoms of this world, including our own, are in rebellion to God and shake their fist in defiance of His rule and authority. That is why Jesus' kingdom could not be "of" this world.

Rather, Jesus' Kingdom must be from another world, the world to come. And His Kingdom is far superior and supersedes all the kingdoms of this world – every last one. That is why He often refers to His Kingdom as the Kingdom of "Heaven." This is shown to Daniel the prophet in a vision where a stone cut without hands crushes the glorious statue (**Dan. 2:34**). The statue represents the kingdoms of this world and the stone (cut without hands – represents that it doesn't belong to this world, made by the hands of man) is the Kingdom of Heaven, which once crushing the kingdoms of this world becomes a great mountain and fills the whole world.

And this is also why Jesus' Kingdom does not operate the same way the kingdoms of this world do. The kings of this world preserve their own self-interests around the globe by force and violence – "peace through strength." The kingdoms of this world maintain their supremacy by keeping all the other nations around them paralyzed by fear.

But Jesus' Kingdom, not being of this world, will not be defended by the means of this world (**v. 36**). Jesus is no threat to Caesar's empire. Jesus' Kingdom has nothing to do with the kingdoms of this world -- "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." The power of the sword has nothing to do with the advancement of the Gospel.

Rather, Jesus shows the radical difference between the way the kingdoms of this world are advanced and the way His Kingdom is built by laying down His life rather than taking up a sword, he willingly bears the shame and accepts the abuse seeking not His own interests but the interests of others, rather than grasping at power He willingly empties Himself, becoming your bond-servant, humbling Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross (**Phil. 2:5-8**).

Now, in the midst of this tragic excuse for justice John includes the bafoonery back-and-forth movement of Pilate in trying to figure out what He must do with Jesus (**vv. 29, 33, 38; 19:1, 4, 9, 13**). John doesn't include this back-and-forth movement of Jesus to just fill out his chronology – no he has a theological purpose for doing so. What is it? Well, to understand what John is doing we must remember the purpose and intent of John's Gospel as an evangelistic treatise to persuade the Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing in Him they might have eternal life. As the Jewish readers watched Pilate go back-and-forth between Jesus and the Jews, the choice is absolutely clear – Jesus or Moses? Will they stay back with Moses or move forward with Jesus? Will they remain under the bondage of the Law or will they rest in the peace of the Gospel?

Once Joshua led the people of God safely into the Land of Promise, he challenged the people:

Joshua 24:14-15 "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ "And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

As the Diaspora Jews of Jesus' day read the Gospel of John they were challenged anew: "Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: Moses or Jesus?"

Pilate made it easy on himself in deciding what to do with Jesus, he put the choice in the hands of the mob -- and what did the Jews choose to do with Jesus that day? Well, their enmity for Jesus comes in ever-intensifying stages -- first they choose Barabbas, a thief, over Jesus (**vv. 38-40**).

So Pilate has Jesus scourged and humiliated in hopes that that will satisfy their thirst for blood (**19:1-3**). He presented Jesus to the mob again, this time beaten, bruised, and bloodied, mocking and showing His contempt for the Jews (**vv. 4-5**). Here you can clearly see the power of the kingdoms of this world and how they brutally deal with challengers to their power -- the Romans took out their hatred for the Jewish people upon their King -- humiliating and shaming Him showing their invincible power over the other nations of this world.

And the choice of the Jews is absolutely clear (**vv. 6-7**). We have Moses, crucify Jesus! And if Moses is not enough, then we have Caesar as Lord (**vv. 12-15**). Either way, Jesus will die! Away with Him!

That same choice has been made by billions and billions of people since that day -- What will you do with Jesus? In whom will you put your trust? God has so loved you that He has given you His Son. Believe in Him that you might not perish but have eternal life.

Amen!

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