

The Governor, Pilate

How Not to Respond to Jesus

Scripture: Matthew 27:11-26

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Pilate

I. Introduction

This portion of Scripture is a sad tragedy, for the governor Pilate, not for Jesus. Today's text is primarily about Pilate and secondarily about Jesus. This portion of Scripture is about having Jesus delivered to you, but then delivering him over to his death. It's about meeting Jesus, but missing him. It's about seeing the living Christ, and yet sailing right past him. It's about knowing true facts about Jesus, but failing to know the significance of those true facts.



It's about seeing a man, but seeing *only* a man. It's about standing before a king, but treating him like a criminal. It's about having an opportunity to do the right thing, but lacking the moral conviction to do it. It's about preferring to please the crowd, rather than to please God the Father by rightly responding to his Son. This Scripture is a sad tragedy for *the governor Pilate*.

Matthew takes us one step further into the amazing story of how God accomplished salvation through his only Son, Jesus. Now he shows us the way that even godless governors are unknowing instruments in the hand of God to fulfill his word and carry out his good will. Matthew will now show us this as he focuses our attention on *the governor, Pilate*.

In these fifteen verses, Matthew refers to him 20 times. He refers to him 5 times by the title, 'governor,' 4 times by his name, 'Pilate,' and 11 times by way of masculine pronoun (he/him). Matthew is still recording and following God's fulfillment of his plan of salvation, but now He is doing so by means of a Roman governor of the district of Judea.

Last week (vs.27:1-10) he focused on how God's plan was fulfilled through the changing of hands of the thirty pieces of silver. Now he will focus on fulfillment accomplished through Pilate, the governor. It is early Friday¹ morning, just a few hours before Jesus will be crucified. Matthew has already told us this.

Matthew 27:1-2 (ESV) ¹ When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ² And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

Last week we noted that Jesus had predicted that he would be "*delivered over*" to the Gentiles. He did this while he was journeying toward Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and lay down his own life.² The reason Jesus knew that he would be delivered over to the Gentiles is because the Jews were seeking to kill him, but executing him was not allowed by Roman law. John tells us,

John 18:31 (ESV) 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."

"Only the Roman governor could approve a capital sentence."³ The aim of the Jewish leaders was to execute Jesus. Thus, they needed the help of the governor Pilate if they were to complete their mission. Would he go along with their scheme? Would Pilate even care that a wandering Jewish rabbi had sentenced to death by the Jews for the blasphemous claim to be the Son of God (Mt 26:63-66)?

Scene 1: The Governor and Jesus (vs.11-14)

Matthew now takes us through the second phase of Jesus' trial. He has been tried by the Jewish court and found guilty by the chief priests and the elders who—against Jewish law—met over night and then had arrived at the sentence of death. Now Jesus will be tried a second time, but this time before a Gentile court, before the governor, Pilate. This scene focuses on the governor and Jesus and the discussion—such as it is—that unfolds between them.

Matthew 27:11-14 (ESV) ¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." ¹² But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. ¹³ Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" ¹⁴ But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

¹ Matthew 27:1; John 18:28.

² See Matthew 20:17-19; cf. Psalms 2:1-2.

³ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, vol. 1, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Mt 27:11-14.

Are you the King of the Jews? This, evidently is the charge that the chief priests and elders have laid before Pilate. But this is not the original charge against him. This is not the charge over which the high priest tore his robe (Mt 26:65-66). When Jesus was being tried before the Jews, they charged him with *blasphemy*. However, they know a charge of blasphemy will not carry any weight with Pilate, for he cares nothing about their own internal Jewish laws. However, if a king was rising up among the Jews, than that would be of concern. A Jewish king rising in the land would concern Caesar, and so they change the charge to effect Jesus' death. These are liars and murderous manipulators.

You have said so (v.11). This is like us saying, You said it. It is an oblique way of saying yes, but it is oblique because while it is true that Jesus is king of the Jews, as John tells us, Jesus' kingdom is "*not of this world*" (Jn 18:36). Yes, Jesus is king, but he is no threat to the kingdom Rome. Jesus is a king, but not in the way that Pilate would think of a king.

When he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer (v.12). These murderous manipulators began making up charges. They accused him of "*many things*" (v.13), but Jesus "*gave no answer, not even to a single charge*" (v.14). All of these charges were false and there was no need to give an answer for nothing he could say would change anyone's mind. The silence of the Messiah had been foretold by Isaiah.

Isaiah 53:7 (ESV)

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.

This silence is stunning, but it reveals who Jesus truly is. He is silent who had previously knocked down with a word the entire crowd of soldiers and guards who came to arrest him in the garden (Jn 18:6). He is silent who could command 12,000 angels to immediately come to his rescue (Mt 26:53). He is now silent who could speak a word and open a blind man's eyes. He is now silent who commanded storms to be still, and they obeyed. He is silent who said to a dead girl, "arise," and she rose up (Mk 5:41). He is now silent who spoke a word to a corpse in a tomb, and he lived and walked out of that tomb (Jn 11:43). He who preached to thousands, now speaks to no one. He is simply quite, and allows this injustice and wickedness to play out.

The governor was greatly amazed (v.14). The governor has seen many condemned men before, but he'd seen no one like Jesus. Pilate was paying attention to Jesus and he was amazed. He saw where this was going. If Jesus didn't defend himself and this would lead to his death. The silence said that he was willing to die. Just as the crowds had been amazed who saw his healing miracles, so the governor looks at Jesus before him and is amazed.

Scene 2: The Governor and the Crowd (vs.15-23)

Matthew now takes us out of this private interrogation inside Pilate's palace and into the public gathering space. Matthew moves from the governor's questions of Jesus to the governor's four questions of the crowd.

The Custom and the Criminal (v.15-16)

To set the stage of what happened in this public forum, Matthew must explain one of the governor's customs.

Matthew 27:15-16 (ESV) ¹⁵ Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. ¹⁶ And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.

The governor was accustomed to release... any one prisoner whom they wanted (v.15). To gain favor with the people, Pilate established a custom at Passover of releasing one prisoner. Passover was a particularly troublesome time with so many Jews gathering and so much messianic fervor in the air, that in order to maintain control, Pilate sought to appease the masses by giving a show of grace each year and releasing a prisoner of their choice.

A notorious prisoner called Barabbas (v.16). Barabbas was a well-known convicted criminal. In other words, Barabbas was popular because of his criminal behavior. The other gospels call him a *lēstēs*, which means "robber or an insurrectionist"⁴ (Mk 15:7; Lk 23:19; Jn 18:40). The two men crucified with Jesus was called the same by Matthew (27:38). Robbery was not a capital crime, while insurrection was. It may very well be that all three of these men were co-conspirators in a planned insurrection against the Roman government. Their plot was discovered, they were arrested, and then convicted. "The fact that three crosses were prepared strongly suggests that Pilate had already ordered that preparations be made for the execution of the three rebels."⁵

Question #1: Whom to be Released? (vs.17-19)

Now that the backdrop has been explained, Matthew moves on with the story.

Matthew 27:17-19 (ESV) ¹⁷ So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" ¹⁸ For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. ¹⁹ Besides, while he 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."

⁴ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 569.

⁵ Ibid.

For he knew it was out of envy that they had delivered him up (v.18). Pilate was neither stupid, nor uninformed. His response here is based upon the facts that he knows. He knows who Jesus is and he knows what these chief priests and elders were up to. There is no way that traveling rabbi as well-known as Jesus was unknown to Pilate. He knew what Jesus had been teaching and the miracles he had been working. He knew they *envied* the popularity of Jesus among the people. Therefore, Pilate laid before the people a choice that, I think, he was sure would result in the release of Jesus. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and “he had decided to release him” (Acts 3:13). This is why he offers them a choice between two prisoners.

Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ? (v.17). The structure of the sentence clearly points to the obvious conclusion. This is a no-brainer. The wisest and *most obvious choice is Christ over a criminal*. Certainly the people would choose a miracle-worker over a murderer. The people loved Jesus. Christ had been welcomed into Jerusalem as a king just six days before. *Who in their right mind would choose a convicted criminal on death row over a man who heals people and teaches the wonderful words of God!?*

The governor thinks he will now gain favor with the people—who will certainly chose the Christ over a criminal—and he’ll stick it to these arrogant and envious religious leaders who are trying to get him to do their dirty work. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent, the priests are envious, and so he is aiming to release Jesus.

Having nothing to do with that righteous man (v.19). Everyone can see that Jesus is innocent, even Pilate’s wife. While this trial was going on, the governor’s wife was so troubled by a dream that she had about Jesus, that she was moved to send a note to Pilate. This is so important that she interrupts him while he is at work! She sends word to warn him not get mixed up in this Jewish controversy for this man was *righteous!* How ironic this is. The godless wife of a brutal Roman governor and the governor himself can see that Jesus is innocent and yet the very leaders of Israel themselves are seeking to put this righteous man to death!

Question #2: Which of the Two? (v.20-21)

Perhaps while Pilate was dealing with this note from this wife, the chief priests and elders went to work among the crowds.

Matthew 27:20-21 (ESV) ²⁰ Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. ²¹ The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.”

Persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus (v.20). The chief priests and elders went to work making their way through the crowds and convincing people to ask for Barabbas to be released and Jesus to be destroyed! What a strong and violent word!

Herod had sought to *destroy* Jesus as his birth (Mt 2:13). The Pharisees had long been seeking to *destroy* Jesus (Mt 12:14). Now, here are the chief priests and elders are seeking to *destroy* Jesus and set free a man who is a convicted destroyer!

They said, "Barabbas" (v.21). The governor asks a second time whom they want released and they for the second time as for the release of the criminal Barabbas.

Questions #3-4: What Shall I do with Jesus? (v.22-23)

Now Matthew records the last two questions the governor asks the crowd.

Matthew 27:22-23 (ESV) ²² Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" ²³ And he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ (v.22)? This is THE question every human being must answer. What will you do with Jesus who is called Christ? Yes, what shall I do with Jesus, who is called Christ? Notice that Pilate knows who Jesus is.

Christ, means Messiah. Christ, means Son of God. Christ, means the anointed one. Christ means the ONE! There is only one Christ. Christ is not Jesus' last name. Christ is the office he holds. Christ is the ONE and *only* one whom is chosen by the Father to be the savior of all who put faith in him.

Christ is the only one about whom God the Father himself spoke from heaven on two occasions saying to world, "*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.*"⁶ God said this at Jesus' baptism and at his transfiguration. God the Father has never said such a thing about any other human being. God never said anything like this about any other religious figure from any world religion. Jesus who is called Christ is infinitely more than merely a prophet. Jesus is called Christ. No other prophet, none, not a single one, is called Christ. Jesus is the only Son of God and he is the Son in whom he so delighted that he shouted out from heaven and his cheer was heard on earth!

Let him be crucified! (v.22). The crowds were also shouting, but not in favor of Jesus. Pilate call not believe what he is hearing. This is not going as he had expected.

Why? What evil has he done? (v.23). Pilate knows who Jesus is and he is astonished that the people are calling out for Barabbas to be released and Christ to be crucified. He knows the answer to his question. Jesus has done *no* evil and everyone knows what evil Barabbas has done—he's a convicted criminal. How can they be crying out for Jesus to be crucified?

⁶ Matthew 3:17; 17:5.

But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" (v.23). The crowds are crying out and Pilate is shocked. He knows they know that Jesus is a good and just man, but he does not know why they are now demanding the death of their Christ.

What will he do? What will he decide?

Scene 3: The Governor's Decision (vs.24-26)

Matthew now takes us to the final scene.

Matthew 27:24-26 (ESV) ²⁴ So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." ²⁵ And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" ²⁶ Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

When Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather a riot was beginning (v.24). Notice about whom Pilate was thinking. He was gaining nothing. He saw the crowd getting out of control. How will he keep them under control? He thinks that he must gain the crowd in order to keep control. What will be his decision? What will he do with Jesus? Will he gain the crowd?

Matthew 16:26 (ESV) For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

What will it profit Pilate if he gains the crowd, but loses Christ? Crowds are fearful things. Riotous mobs always do evil and never do what is right. Will Pilate surrender to the crowd and condemn an innocent man? Or will he stand against the crowd and do the right and just thing? Pilate's life is on the line. This is the most important decision of his life.

He took water and washed his hands before the crowd. I wonder if Pilate has in his mind what he has witnessed so many Jews doing, washing their hands before going into the temple to pray. Perhaps he picks up their own ritual and practices it himself. Of course, the washing of hands with water does not effect the removal of sin from the soul. No external physical ritual removes internal guilt and spiritual sin.

I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves (v.24). This is the identical language used by the priests when Judas came confessing that he had betrayed innocent blood of Jesus. They told Judas "see to it yourself" (Mt 27:4), and now Pilate is saying the same thing to them. These words were spoken to Judas in his guilt and now Pilate is speaking these words to the chief priests and crowds in their guilt.

This is another testimony to the innocence of Jesus. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent and he knows that their demand of Jesus' blood is sinful and he wants no part of it. He is trying to get out of being involved in this. But it is impossible to avoid. He is part of this and he cannot escape culpability by simply declaring himself innocent. Pilate is the highest authority present in this moment, therefore he bears the highest responsibility for what happens here. He cannot escape responsibility in this instance.

His blood be on us and our children! (v.25). This is an astonishing statement. They are willing to accept the guilt of Jesus' innocent blood upon themselves. However, Pilate's role in this brings down the guilt of Jesus' innocent blood upon himself as well.

Matthew 27:26 (ESV) Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

Pilate abdicates to the crowd. He gives them what he wants. He surrenders to the will of the crowd. He gains the crowd, but loses his own soul. He hands Jesus over to be brutalized, while a brutal criminal goes free.

Conclusion

The governor's decision here is tragic. He met Jesus, but then completely missed him. He had the innocent Christ delivered to him and yet he delivered an innocent man over to death as if he were a criminal. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and yet he permitted him to be convicted of a capital offense. The governor knew Jesus was sinless and yet he sentenced him to be scourged. A governor cannot abdicate his responsibility and yet be innocent.

Every one of us must make up our minds about Jesus. Every human being must ask themselves the same question that Pilate asked, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?"

We must each judge whether we find him to be a criminal or the Christ.

Consider the words of Pilate, "What evil has he done?" Consider the words of Pilate's wife, "That is a righteous man." If these are true statements about Jesus, then is he not worth surrendering your life?

Do not let Pilate's tragic story be your story. Do not know true fact about Jesus and yet fail to see the significance of those facts.

Christians, we must ready ourselves to die for the name of Jesus. The day may come when we too may stand before a mob because of the name of Christ. Training for that day comes every day when we have little moments at work, home, and in the market place where we have opportunity to demonstrate whether or not we are ashamed of the name of Jesus. Make up

your mind now, today, that you will not fail to acknowledge Jesus at every opportunity you have. If you are faithful to his name in the small ways, then you will be faithful to his name in larger ways. If you are unfaithful before a few, then you will also be unfaithful before many.

Is Jesus not worthy of all our life?

Don't miss Jesus, rather melt before him.

Don't seek to please crowds more than you seek to please God.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you summarize the main point of this portion of Scripture?
2. Why did Jesus need to stand before the governor?
3. Why did the chief priests and elders change the charge against Jesus?
4. Do you think Pilate is or is not guilty of the blood of Jesus? Explain your answer.
5. Why did the people choose Barabbas over Jesus?
6. What does this passage reveal about humanity?
7. What does this passage reveal about God?
8. What does it reveal about Jesus?
9. What did Todd say was the most important question revealed in this passage? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
10. What is one thing you don't want to forget from this passage?