

# PILATE, THE COWARDLY POLITICIAN

## John 18:38-40

Politicians in our culture don't have a very good reputation. Just look at the events of the last few weeks regarding the governor of Illinois. Or, consider some of the past governors of Illinois, or even some of the U.S. Senators over the last several years. Their behaviors leave a great deal to be desired.

The biblical passages that we will study today will show us that integrity issues with politicians go back pretty far.

As we conclude our study in John chapter eighteen, we would like to go back and summarize the highlights of this chapter to better enable us to understand the final three verses. Let us begin in John 18:4.

### John 18:4-5 NAS:

<sup>4</sup> *So Jesus, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth and said to them, "Whom do you seek?"*

<sup>5</sup> *They answered Him, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "**I am He.**"*

As the Roman soldiers came forward to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, He knew that His time had come to die for the sins of mankind. He, therefore, stepped forward identifying Himself as the one they were seeking.

### John 18:12-13 NAS:

<sup>12</sup> *So the Roman cohort and the commander and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him,*

<sup>13</sup> *and led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.*

Jesus was now in the hands of the Jewish leaders and knew that they would do whatever they had to do to insure that Jesus would receive the death penalty.

### John 18:25 NAS:

<sup>25</sup> *Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You are not also one of His disciples, are you?" He denied it, and said, "I am not."*

Some wonder how Peter could have denied Jesus after he had so firmly promised that he would stand with Jesus under any circumstances. We need to remember that at this time Peter did not have the Holy Spirit living within him. It was only at Pentecost, soon after Jesus' ascension, that the Holy Spirit came to indwell believers. Without the Holy Spirit the only thing that we can rely on is our own human strength, and in situations that produce great fear we may fail to do what is right because we are afraid of what will happen to us.

The Bible promises a number of times that a true believer will never deny Christ under any circumstances because the Holy Spirit will take over in such circumstances to overcome our fear and provide us with the right things to say (Matthew 10:17-20; Luke 12:11-12; 21:12-15).

**John 18:28-29, 33, 36-37 NAS:**

<sup>28</sup> *Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium.*

<sup>29</sup> *Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?"*

<sup>33</sup> *Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?"*

<sup>36</sup> *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world."*

<sup>37</sup> *Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."*

Jesus had been teaching the truth to the people and the Jewish leaders for three years. Many rejected His teaching simply because they had no interest in the truth. They were only interested in how much gusto they could get out of this life and they did not particularly care what they had to do to get it. Had they wanted a relationship with their God more than anything else they would have understood the truth.

There is a story about an American Indian that illustrates what can happen to a sinner when they truly want relief from their sin and they are willing to look to God for the answer.

“This Indian chief was the most powerful chief of all the tribes in North America, and reveled in cunning midnight attacks, and all that goes to make savage warfare. But the *Gospel Herald* once carried the following story of his conversion under the early Methodist missionaries:

“One evening **Maskepetoon** was deeply moved by the missionary's address on our Lord's dying prayer, “*Father, forgive them.*” The next day a band of Indians was approaching in which was the man who had murdered Maskepetoon's only

son. His son, sent into a secluded valley, had never returned; and the son's companion said that he had fallen over a precipice, though in fact he had murdered him. Unknown to the murderer, the tragedy had been witnessed by some Indians who later reported it to the bereaved chief.

“When the two bands were within a few hundred yards of each other, the eagle eye of the old chief detected the murderer, and drawing his tomahawk from his belt, he rode up till he was face to face with the man who had murdered his son.

“Maskepetoon, with a voice tremulous with suppressed feeling, yet with an admirable command over himself looking the man full in the eyes said: *‘You deserve to die. I sent my son with you as his trusted companion. You betrayed my trust and cruelly killed my only son! You have done me and my tribe the greatest injury that is possible. You deserve to die, and if it wasn't for what I heard from the missionary at the campfire last night, I would already have buried this tomahawk in your brains! The missionary told us that, if we expected the Great Spirit to forgive us, we must also forgive the one who has committed the greatest wrong against us.’*

“With deep emotion he continued, *‘You have been my worst enemy, and deserve to die!’ But as I hope the Great Spirit will forgive me, I forgive you.’* Then, hastily pulling his war bonnet over his face, Maskepetoon bowed down over his horse's neck and gave way to an agony of tears.

“For years Maskepetoon lived a devoted Christian life. He preached to others, influencing many of his own tribe to turn from killing their enemies, the Blackfeet. He taught them to use no other weapon but the *‘Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.’*

“But a bloodthirsty chief of the blackfeet, remembering some of their fierce conflicts of other days, and, perhaps having lost some of his relatives in those conflicts, seized his gun, and in defiance of all rules of humanity, shot down the converted chieftain.

“Who can say that forgiveness is not a costly thing? Maskepetoon suffered a broken heart to forgive the murderer of his son. Then it cost him his life to forgive his enemies, to go to them unarmed and preach to them forgiveness of sin.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers*. Garland TX: Bible Communications, 1996,

Jesus was now about to suffer a most painful and agonizing death so that the bloodthirsty crowd that wanted to kill Him could be saved from the very sin they were about to commit against Him. He who had no sin was about to suffer for the sinners who would be the source of His pain. He would substitute Himself in order to go through what they would have had to suffer if He had not willingly put Himself in their place. It was a sacrifice of monumental proportions.

John 18:38-40 NLT:

<sup>38</sup> **“What is truth?”** Pilate asked. Then he went out again to the people and told them, *“He is not guilty of any crime.”*

<sup>39</sup> *But you have a custom of asking me to release one prisoner each year at Passover. Would you like me to release this ‘King of the Jews’?”*

<sup>40</sup> *But they shouted back, “No! Not this man. We want Barabbas!”*  
(Barabbas was a revolutionary.)

What is truth? Too often today, people answer that question by saying there is no truth, no absolute truth. They feel that everything is relative. What a rude awakening they will have when one day they are confronted by the One who is Truth (John 14:6).

What is truth? Since Pilate was a cynical Roman soldier and governor of a province where lying was often a way of life and necessary to gain status and power, we can imagine his reaction to such a claim as Jesus had made in verse 37, where He said that **everyone who is a friend of the truth would recognize that His words are true.**

Pilate must have recognized something in the appearance of Jesus because, after all, the answer to his question was standing right in front of him. So immediately Pilate stepped out of the hall to the street, where the priests were waiting, and declared, *“He is not guilty of any crime.”* Pilate must have recognized that there was something very special about this man or he would not have declared Jesus *“not guilty”* in the face of these angry Jews who would not hesitate to tell Rome that he had allowed a dangerous revolutionary to go free. We pick up more detail on the story in Luke 23:4-16 NLT:

<sup>4</sup> *Pilate turned to the leading priests and to the crowd and said, “I find nothing wrong with this man!”*

<sup>5</sup> *Then they became insistent. “But he is causing riots by his teaching wherever he goes—all over Judea, from Galilee to Jerusalem!”*

<sup>6</sup> *“Oh, is he a Galilean?” Pilate asked.*

<sup>7</sup> *When they said that he was, Pilate sent him to **Herod Antipas**, because Galilee was under Herod’s jurisdiction, and Herod happened to be in Jerusalem at the time.*

<sup>8</sup> *Herod was delighted at the opportunity to see Jesus, because he had heard about him and had been hoping for a long time to see him perform a miracle.*

<sup>9</sup> *He asked Jesus question after question, but Jesus refused to answer.*

<sup>10</sup> *Meanwhile, the leading priests and the teachers of religious law stood there shouting their accusations.*

<sup>11</sup> *Then Herod and his soldiers began mocking and ridiculing Jesus. Finally, they put a royal robe on him and sent him back to Pilate.*

<sup>12</sup> *(Herod and Pilate, who had been enemies before, became friends that day.)*

<sup>13</sup> *Then Pilate called together the leading priests and other religious leaders, along with the people,*

<sup>14</sup> *and he announced his verdict. “You brought this man to me, accusing him of leading a revolt. I have examined him thoroughly on this point in your presence and find him innocent.”*

<sup>15</sup> *Herod came to the same conclusion and sent him back to us. Nothing this man has done calls for the death penalty.*

<sup>16</sup> *So I will have him flogged, and then I will release him.”*

Before Pilate attempted to release Jesus according to the custom of the Passover feast, he sent Jesus to Herod, very likely hoping that he could avoid responsibility for this decision. But Herod sent Him back. Pilate might then have described his position as being between a rock and a hard place. Jesus had been accused of treason against the Roman emperor. Pilate declared that Jesus was not guilty. The priests then accused Pilate of not being a friend of Caesar and that they intended to advise Caesar of that fact. If Caesar learned that Pilate had been accused of letting a man go who claimed to be the King of the Jewish province of Judea, Pilate’s days, both as governor and perhaps even on this earth, would have been numbered. Yet Pilate had no stomach for being the one who ordered Jesus’ execution. So Pilate reminded the Jews of the custom which had developed over the years whereby the Roman governors always released one prisoner who had offended the Roman authority. There were only two such prisoners at this time who qualified for such a pardon. One was **Barabbas**, a man who had been in rebellion against the Roman government in Jerusalem as the leader of a band of robbers. He was also accused of other violations of the law, including murder. The other man of course was **Jesus**. Pilate suggested that Jesus be released but the crowd, having been stirred up by the Jewish leaders, called for Jesus to be executed and Barabbas to be freed.<sup>2</sup>

Luke 23:18-25 NLT:

<sup>18</sup> *Then a mighty roar rose from the crowd, and with one voice they shouted, “Kill him, and release Barabbas to us!”*

<sup>2</sup> Barrett W. Johnson, *The New Testament Commentary: Vol III. — John*, (St. Louis, MO: Christian Publishing Company, 1886), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 274-276.

<sup>19</sup> *(Barabbas was in prison for taking part in an insurrection in Jerusalem against the government, and for murder.)*

<sup>20</sup> *Pilate argued with them, because he wanted to release Jesus.*

At this point in the events, Matthew tells us that Pilate asked, “*What shall I do with Jesus?*” (Matthew 27:22). Now, returning to Luke:

Luke 23:21-25 NLT:

<sup>21</sup> *But they kept shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”*

<sup>22</sup> *For the third time he demanded, “Why? What crime has he committed? I have found no reason to sentence him to death. So I will have him flogged, and then I will release him.”*

<sup>23</sup> *But the mob shouted louder and louder, demanding that Jesus be crucified, and their voices prevailed.*

<sup>24</sup> *So Pilate sentenced Jesus to die as they demanded.*

<sup>25</sup> *As they had requested, he released Barabbas, the man in prison for insurrection and murder. But he turned Jesus over to them to do as they wished.*

There is a question raised here that each one of us will face at one time or another in our lives, and Pilate had to answer that question: “*What shall I do with Jesus?*”<sup>3</sup> (Matthew 27:22)

Every person that has ever been born must do something with Jesus. They must accept or reject Him. Some try to avoid this decision by refusing to decide, which in effect is deciding against Him. Some postpone the decision, which is a risky move. Others substitute what they consider to be good works in the place of believing in Christ; or they lay the blame on others, on circumstances, or on temptations. But it is all in vain. To reject Jesus is to reject the sum total of all goodness. Rejecting Christ is the greatest sin in the world. The time will come when those who reject Christ will have to ask, “*May I have another chance?*”<sup>4</sup> The answer to that question depends on whether it is before or after their death. Before you die, God offers everyone the opportunity no matter what they have done. After one dies it is too late and their decision is sealed for eternity.

“*What shall I do with Jesus?*” is still the most important decision a person can make. There are still a lot of Barabbases running around in this country who would rob us of the religion that made this country great and free. There are desires and lusts that rob our hearts of peace, our homes of joy, and our souls of the crown of life. Behold! Jesus knocks at the door of your heart. Will you receive and honor Him? Or will you, with the majority of others say, “*Away with Him and release Barabbas?*” We are either for Him or

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

against Him; there is no middle ground. It is the old question still, "*What shall I do with Jesus?*"<sup>5</sup>

Are you a believer in Christ because you have asked Him to be your Savior from sin? Then you are a member of Christ's kingdom and you cannot chase after the things of this world. We are told, "*Be not conformed to this world*" (Romans 12:2) and that, "*The friendship of the world is enmity with God*" (James 4:4).<sup>6</sup>

Do you love the truth? Do you recognize the words of Jesus? Anyone who hears or reads the words of Jesus and turns away has no interest in the truth. They will eventually learn that they have done the wrong thing with Jesus and will spend eternity paying for their denial.<sup>7</sup> Do you want to spend eternity in Paradise or the Lake of Fire? Your destiny will depend on what you do with Jesus. Remember that forever is a long, long time.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.