

Luke 23:1-25
September 27, 2020

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: When you think about today's judicial system, and especially if you've served as a juror, what do you most appreciate about our judicial system? [Let people engage]

Transition: Some of you have had the experience, as I have, of sitting on a jury for a meth case. You probably didn't volunteer for the job, but you couldn't get out of it, and so you fulfilled your civic duty. I appreciate our system because the judge gives very strict guidelines on what we are to look for. The law is clearly stated, and then we are instructed to listen for the evidence by the prosecuting attorney on elements "a,b,c and d," and then render our decision accordingly. The guardrails are set very firmly. In our case, the process went smoothly. Sounds pretty clear cut, right? But once 12 jurors get together, things can still go wrong.

One case regarding a drunk driving charge against a young woman went wrong. Since her blood alcohol level was .2 and the legal limit in California at that time was .1, the case should have taken just a few minutes to convict her. But that didn't happen.

The jurors gathered in their room after arguments were presented, and one man, ignoring the law and the careful instructions of the judge, said, "I can drink that much booze and drive safely. I think she's innocent." Others chimed in the same sentiments. ***It took two jurors three hours to get across the simple point: The law is .1; she was at .2; she is guilty of breaking the law.*** But, still, there was one woman who would not vote to convict because she played the card that "Judge not, lest we, too, be judged!"

Sometimes we are forced to make a verdict on someone when we would rather not. But to make no verdict is to make a verdict. To be neutral is to take sides. Maybe, like jury duty, we didn't ask to be involved. It was thrust upon us. And now we are faced with a decision that we'd rather not make.

That was the situation that Pilate found himself in when Jesus was brought before him. The only difference is that the Roman judicial system didn't have a jury of 12. It was up to him to render a decision. Let's read the text and see where it takes us.

BOOK:

23 Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. ² And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king."

³ So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

⁴ Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man."

⁵ But they insisted, “He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.”

⁶ On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. ⁷ When he learned that Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. ⁹ He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. ¹² That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies.

¹³ Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. ¹⁵ Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶ Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.”

¹⁸ With one voice they cried out, “Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!” ¹⁹ (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)

²⁰ Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. ²¹ But they kept shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

²² For the third time he spoke to them: “Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore, I will have him punished and then release him.”

²³ But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate decided to grant their demand. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

You have had an encounter with Jesus Christ. Perhaps, like Pilate, you didn’t even plan on it. You just thought it would be nice to go to church. But Jesus stands before you and confronts you with your need to repent of your sins. It is not enough to pronounce Jesus “not guilty” and get on with your life, as Pilate wanted to do. You must come to grips with who He is, the way, the truth, and the life, the only way to heaven ([John 14:6](#)).

What is your verdict on Jesus? There is only correct verdict on Jesus: “I trust You as my Savior. I turn from all my sin. I follow You as my Lord.”

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 272-274). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

The trial and death of Jesus Christ revealed both the wicked heart of man and the gracious heart of God. When men were doing their worst, God was giving His best. “But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20). Jesus was not crucified because evil men decided to get Him out of the way. His crucifixion was “by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23), an appointment made from eternity (1 Peter 1:20; Rev. 13:8).

As you study this chapter, notice the six encounters our Lord experienced during those critical hours.

Jesus and Pilate (Luke 23:1–25)

Pontius Pilate served as governor of Judea from A.D.26 to A.D.36, at which time he was recalled to Rome and then passed out of official Roman history. He was hated by the orthodox Jews and never really understood them. Once he aroused their fury by putting up pagan Roman banners in the Jewish temple, and he was not beneath sending armed spies into the temple to silence Jewish protesters (Luke 13:1–3).

In his handling of the trial of Jesus, the governor proved to be indecisive. The Gospel of John records seven different moves that Pilate made as he went *out* to meet the people and then went *in* to question Jesus (John 18:29, 33, 38; 19:1, 4, 9, 13). He kept looking for a loophole, but he found none. Pilate has gone down in history as the man who tried Jesus Christ, three times declared Him not guilty, and yet crucified Him just the same.

Pilate affirming (vv. 1–5). Roman officials were usually up early and at their duties, but Pilate was probably surprised that morning to learn that he had a capital case on his hands, and on Passover at that. The Jewish leaders knew that their religious laws meant nothing to a Roman official, so they emphasized the political aspects of their indictment against Jesus. There were three charges: He perverted the nation, opposed paying the poll tax to Caesar, and claimed to be a king.

Pilate privately interrogated Jesus about His kingship because that was the crucial issue, and he concluded that He was guilty of no crime. Three times during the trial, Pilate clearly affirmed the innocence of Jesus (Luke 23:4, 14, 22). Dr. Luke reported three other witnesses besides Pilate who also said, “Not guilty!”: King Herod (Luke 23:15), one of the malefactors (Luke 23:40–43), and a Roman centurion (Luke 23:47).

Pilate deferring (vv. 6–12). The Jews rejected his verdict and began to accuse Jesus all the more. When they mentioned Galilee, Pilate, astute politician that he was, immediately saw an opportunity to get Jesus off his hands. He sent Him to Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, the man who had murdered John the Baptist, who was anxious to see Jesus (Luke 9:7–9). Perhaps the wily king could find some way to please the Jews.

Herod must have been shocked and perhaps nervous when the guards brought Jesus in, but the more he questioned Him, the bolder he became. Perhaps Jesus might even entertain the king with a miracle! In spite of the king's persistent interrogation and the Jews' vehement accusations, Jesus said nothing. *Herod had silenced the voice of God.* It was not Herod who was judging Jesus; it was Jesus who was judging Herod.

The king finally became so bold as to mock Jesus and permit his soldiers to dress Him in “an elegant robe,” the kind that was worn by Roman candidates for office. Herod did not issue an official verdict about Jesus (Luke 23:15), but it was clear that he did not find Him guilty of any crime worthy of death (Luke 23:15).

The only thing accomplished by this maneuver was the mending of a broken friendship. Herod was grateful to Pilate for helping him to see Jesus and for honoring him by seeking his counsel. The fact that Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate without issuing a verdict could be interpreted as, “Since we are not in Galilee, Pilate, you have the authority to act, and I will not interfere. Jesus is *your* prisoner, not mine. I know you will do the right thing.” Finally, the fact that the two men met over a common threat (or enemy) helped them to put aside their differences and become friends again.

Pilate bargaining (vv. 13–23). He met the Jewish leaders and announced for the second time that he did not find Jesus guilty of the charges they had made against Him. The fact that Herod backed Pilate's decision would not have impressed the Jews very much, because they despised Herod almost as much as they despised the Romans.

Since it was customary at Passover for the governor to release a prisoner, Pilate offered the Jews a compromise: he would chastise Jesus and let Him go. He had another prisoner on hand, Barabbas, but Pilate was sure the Jews would not want him to be released. After all, Barabbas was a robber (John 18:40), a murderer, and an insurrectionist (Luke 23:19). He may have been a leader of the Jewish Zealots who at that time was working for the overthrow of Rome.

We must not think that the general populace of the city was gathered before Pilate and crying out for the blood of Jesus, though a curious crowd no doubt gathered. It was primarily the official religious leaders of the nation, the chief priests in particular (Luke 23:23), who shouted Pilate down and told him to crucify Jesus. To say that the people who cried “Hosanna!” on Palm Sunday ended up crying “Crucify Him!” on Good Friday is not completely accurate.

Pilate yielding (vv. 24–25). Pilate realized that his mishandling of the situation had almost caused a riot, and a Jewish uprising was the last thing he wanted during Passover. So, he called for water and washed his hands before the crowd, affirming his innocence (Matt. 27:24–25). He was a compromiser who was “willing to content the people” (Mark 15:15). Barabbas was released and Jesus was condemned to die on a Roman cross.

Pilate was a complex character. He openly said that Jesus was innocent, yet he permitted Him to be beaten and condemned Him to die. He carefully questioned Jesus and even trembled at His answers, but the truth of the Word did not make a difference in his decisions. He wanted to be popular and not right; he was more concerned about reputation than he was character. If Herod had silenced the voice of God, then Pilate smothered the voice of God. He had his opportunity and wasted it.

Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 262)

c. *Before Pilate (23:1–7) (Matt. 27:1–2, 11–14; Mark 15:1–5; John 18:28–38).*

23:1–7. The council agreed to take Jesus to the Roman authorities. On arriving before **Pilate**, governor of Judea (3:1; cf. 13:1), the Jewish authorities charged Him falsely. They said He opposed paying **taxes to Caesar**, but Jesus had said the opposite (20:25). And the blasphemy charge—He **claims to be Christ, a king**—was worded to sound as if Jesus was an insurrectionist (23:2). Pilate stated clearly that Jesus was innocent (v. 4). However, because the Jewish leaders kept insisting that Jesus was guilty, Pilate **sent Him to Herod**, “tetrarch of Galilee” (3:1), **who was also in Jerusalem at that time**.

d. *Before Herod (23:8–12).*

23:8–12. **Jesus** had told Pilate who He is (v. 3), but He repeatedly refused to answer **Herod** who merely wanted **to see Him perform some miracle**. Herod showed his true feelings toward Jesus by joining in the mockery, dressing Him up as a false king. Herod then **sent Jesus back to Pilate**, without passing any judgment on the case.

e. *Before Pilate for sentencing (23:13–25) (Matt. 27:15–26; Mark 15:6–15; John 18:39–19:16).*

23:13–17. **Pilate** told **the people** there was really nothing he could do but **punish Jesus and release Him** because he **found no basis for the charges against Him**. Jesus had **done nothing to deserve death**. (V. 17, missing from many is not in the NIV.)

23:18–25. In spite of the fact that **Jesus** had been proved by the Roman authorities to have done nothing deserving of death, the Jews yelled out that a known insurrectionist, **Barabbas**, should be **released** in place of Jesus. Amazingly the people were willing to have an insurrectionist and a murderer in their midst rather than the Messiah. They would rather be with a well-known sinner than with the One who could forgive their sins. **Pilate** desired **to release Jesus**, affirming His innocence for a **third time**, but he finally gave in to **their demand ... and surrendered Jesus to their will**.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (pp. 1559–1560). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

23:3 Jesus admitted here that He was the Messiah, but His evasive answer qualified His admission. In effect He said, “I am who you say, but not in the way you think.” That is, Jesus was not the political revolutionary that Pilate’s question implied.

23:7–12 The historicity of the hearing before Antipas is questioned by many, but it is not clear why Luke would invent the story. (The theory that he wanted to produce the “fulfillment” of Ps 2 found in Acts 4:25–28 does not seem sufficient, especially since both Pilate and Herod found Jesus innocent.) The historical plausibility of a Roman governor seeking the assistance of a

Herod in determining questions of Judaism is confirmed by Acts 25:13–26:32. Though the mocking Jesus received in Herod’s court was similar to that rendered by Pilate’s soldiers in Mk 15:16–20, the version in Lk is different enough to conclude he did not construct the former event from the latter. That is, Luke had a source for this material, perhaps Manaen, foster brother of Antipas (Acts 13:1).

23:12 Sometime early in his career as governor of Judea, Pilate had been opposed before the Emperor Tiberius by a letter from a delegation of Jews that included Herod Antipas. They objected to Pilate’s placing of honorific shields in Jerusalem, and Tiberius angrily commanded Pilate to remove them. Pilate’s fortunes with the emperor were further damaged when his patron, the anti-Semite Sejanus, was deposed by Tiberius in A.D. 31. Pilate’s action in including Antipas in the trial of Jesus may have been intended as an olive branch. But this requires a date of A.D. 33 for the crucifixion, not nearly as likely as A.D. 30.

Butler, T. C. (2000). Luke (Vol. 3, pp. 388–391). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

A. Sentenced by Pilate’s Fearful Ambition (23:1–25)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *The Roman representative sentenced the innocent Jesus to death because of his fear of political reprisals.*

23:1–2. The Sanhedrin aroused mass hysteria, leading Jesus from their meeting place to Pilate’s court. Jewish religious leaders needed to rid their world of one who threatened their leadership, their popularity with the people, and their religious system. But religious charges would not do in Pilate’s court. They had to have political charges. Jesus, the self-proclaimed enemy of ambitious, self-serving religion, had to be portrayed as the enemy of Roman rule in Palestine. Thus, the Jewish leaders painted him as a subversive, one leading the Jewish nation away from Rome. Such charges were not hard to believe. Jewish religious radicals frequently led revolts against Rome in the name of religion. The Jews tried to place two concrete examples of such subversion before Pilate. First came the tax issue, then the king issue. In 20:20–26 the Jewish leaders had failed to trap Jesus into opposing Roman taxation policies. Rather, they gave him opportunity to set up the principle of loyalty to government in the realm of government but loyalty to God in everything.

Then they used his title, Christ or Messiah, to charge him with political rebellion, claiming he was a king opposed to Caesar. Jesus had radically proclaimed a new kingdom, the kingdom of God. He had implied in various ways that he was the new king. He portrayed himself in messianic colors, raising expectations among the Jewish people that he would fulfill their hopes based on Old Testament prophecy. They wanted him to be the new king who would overthrow Rome. Jesus did nothing to encourage military action. He did nothing to advocate governmental change. His was a kingdom above and beyond this world. His was a glory to be realized only in heaven in the Father’s hands. He had to go away on a long journey before returning to earth as king (19:11–27).

23:3. Pilate bluntly asked Jesus to answer his accusers. Would he confess to being king of the Jews as charged? Jesus’ answer only created uncertainty as he said, “It is as you say.” Some interpreters even see a return question on Jesus’ lips: Do you say so? More likely, Jesus was suggesting a positive answer to Pilate but doing so in such a way that Pilate was construed as

making the statement, not Jesus. Neither the Jews nor Pilate could take the answer as clear evidence of guilt to the charge of being a king in opposition to Rome.

23:4. Pilate gave a clear verdict: Innocent of all charges. He directed his answer both to those making the charge—the chief priests—and to the emotionally charged crowd. The priests must know their wish had been denied. The crowds must be prevented from any attempt to make Jesus king and force his hand against the Roman government. Jesus was not an enemy of Rome, no matter how much an enemy of the Jewish religious system he might be.

23:5. The priests refused to take no for an answer. They repeated their charges with vehemence. They sought to do what they charged Jesus with doing: stirring up the crowds. The priests gave witness to Jesus' far-ranging ministry in both northern Galilee and southern Judea. They recognized him as a northern boy from Galilee who came south to preach and teach.

23:6–7. Their chance reference to Galilee might give Pilate an out. He could turn the decision over to the administrator in charge of Galilee. After all, Herod just happened to be in town for the Jewish Passover celebration. So Pilate made sure he had heard correctly. Yes, Jesus was not from Judea. He was from Galilee. Let Herod hear the case. This was Herod Antipas (see 3:1, 19; 9:7–9; 13:31). He had inherited rule over Galilee and Perea from Herod the Great, his father. He had married Herodias, his brother's wife. This led to John the Baptist's rebuke that resulted in Herod beheading John (Luke 9:7–9).

23:8–9. Herod knew about Jesus and his wonder-working reputation. Now Herod wanted to instigate a sideshow with Jesus as the star. Herod used provoking questions to try to force Jesus' hand so he could see a miracle. Having survived Pilate's court, Jesus wanted no part of Herod's trial. So he gave him no answer.

23:10. Jewish religious leaders used every trick they knew to get Jesus to incriminate himself. As Herod questioned him, they accused Jesus of every crime imaginable.

23:11. Unable to provoke a miracle, Herod turned to mockery. He turned the charge of kingship against Jesus and treated him as a mock king, putting royal clothes on him. Seeking to humiliate him, Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate dressed as a king.

23:12. Pilate had interfered in Galilean affairs (13:1). Philo, the Jewish historian, tells of an incident when Pilate placed shields in Herod's palace, angering Herod and the Jews. Tiberias, the Roman ruler, made Pilate relent, relegating the shields to a pagan temple. Also about this time, Tiberias' chief advisor—Sejanus—lost his power. He was ruthless, and he hated the Jews. How all this affected Pilate's relationship with Herod, we do not know. We only know Luke's report that their relationships had not been friendly. Getting involved in Jesus' trial apparently made Herod forget any past grievances and renew his friendship with Pilate. The two men joined in injustice. Their silence and refusal to act led Jesus to the cross.

23:13–16. Pilate called a high-level conference of Jewish leaders. Chief priests represented the religious leadership. The word *rulers*, used here for the first time by Luke, included all the social and political leaders, among whom were the elders and scribes.

Thus, the people joined religious, social, and political leaders in hearing Pilate's verdict. Jesus was innocent of all charges brought against him. Pilate could call on his new friend Herod for support. Jesus did not deserve death. Pilate made that clear. In an attempt to pacify the leaders, Pilate proposed a compromise action. He would submit Jesus to a Roman scourging and then release him.

23:17. This verse is absent in the most reliable manuscripts of Luke. It was apparently introduced by a scribe who missed this information in Luke since it did appear in Matthew 27:15

and Mark 15:6. The custom of the Roman ruler releasing a prisoner during the Passover festival is assumed by Luke if not explicitly written.

23:18–19. The identity of those who cried out for Christ's crucifixion is not clear. At least the rulers of Israel are meant. Most likely the crowd is included, though not explicitly (cf. Acts 3:14–15). Only here does Luke mention Barabbas by name, identifying him as a murderer and instigator of rebellion against Rome. He was guilty of the most serious crime of which Jesus was accused.

23:20–21. Pilate was a pitiful character, a man of absolute power but fearful of disappointing the people he ruled. The people felt no compulsion in overruling the ruler. They shouted him down. They were determined to get rid of Jesus. They must protect the tradition of the people.

23:22. Pilate was reduced to arguing with the people rather than making his decision stick. He invited them to offer further evidence against Jesus, to name a crime of which he was actually guilty. Pilate knew Jesus did not deserve the death penalty. He also knew the Jewish leaders would settle for nothing less. Still, Pilate tried to find ground for a compromise. He again suggested scourging Jesus and then releasing him (see v. 16).

23:23–25. The Jews knew when they had the advantage, and they pressed it hard. Crucify. Crucify. Crucify. The clamor increased. Finally, Pilate gave in. Public pressure defeated absolute government power, so injustice could prevail. Pilate let mob rule determine justice. He gave in to the crowd so they would not report him to Rome. He pardoned a murderer, who led rebellions against Rome. He let an innocent man suffer the death penalty to protect his political power and position. Jewish religious ambition had joined Pilate's Roman political ambition to sentence the innocent Jesus to death.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Lk 23:1-25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.