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Criminal or King

John 18:28-38

Intro: As we discussed previously, the trial of Jesus that ultimately led to His crucifixion was really 2 separate trials: a Jewish trial and a Roman trial. Each trial was completely distinct from the other as concerns jurisdiction, charges and judges. The only common threads in both are the accusers and the accused. The reason there needed to be 2 trials is because the Jewish authorities had lost the power to administer the death penalty after Rome took control of the region. Thus, they were required to secure a verdict from the legal Roman authority that reflected their own verdict.

This makes for a rather unique situation! It means that in this 1 instance a man was tried by a “heavenly” court that sought to apply the revealed law of God (Mosaic) and by a court of man seeking to apply what is generally thought to be the most highly developed form of law known to man. Last time we discussed how that Jewish law was probably the most humane legal system ever devised. Jewish respect for human life was so great, it was nearly impossible to acquire a guilty verdict under the jurisdiction of a Hebrew court. Roman law, on the other hand, was considered to be an excellent legal system considering its coverage, statutes, court procedures and penalties. Yet, there’s no other instance recorded in human history of a trial conducted before the courts of both heaven and earth; the court of God and the court of man; under the law of Israel and the law of Rome and their respective legal representatives.

One characteristic of Roman law was its careful attention to procedure. In light of this one might assume that the trial before Pilate would be much easier to understand than the trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin. But, this isn’t the case. Although the Jewish trial has its puzzling elements, the result was understandable. Jesus was rejected by the Jewish authorities because they hated Him; they hated Him because He had revealed their sin. None of this would apply in the trial before Pilate because Pilate didn’t hate Jesus. It appears that he actually respected Jesus. In fact, he even acquits Jesus, declaring Him to be innocent 3 different times. But yet, he still turns Jesus over to be crucified.

Who was Pontus Pilate? Secular history tells us that he was not a noble man. He only landed a spot in the Roman government because he married Emperor Augustus' grand-daughter. As Procurator of Judea he was the worst of the lot, constantly going out of his way to offend the Jews in the area of their religion and the attacking them when they complain. Even Roman historians paint him in an unflattering light. The historical record provides a consistent image of Pilate as one who lacked the strength of character to rule well. He was stubborn, proud, corrupt, violent, and cruel.

The odd thing about all this is when we look at the Gospel accounts, they provide a portrait *not* of one who is cruel and insensitive but of one who seems to be sensitive to the cause of justice which is visible in his desire to have Jesus acquitted. The Gospel writers had no cause to enhance Pilate's character. He's the one who crucified their Master after all. Thus, we can assume that their accounts of Pilate are accurate. But this doesn't agree with what secular history says of Pilate. The historical Pilate is arrogant, overbearing, and unyielding. This Pilate in Scripture is attempting every strategy and compromise he can come up with to try to have Jesus acquitted.

Why this odd change of character in Pilate? Why is this known scoundrel actively trying to release Jesus? Some think Pilate was more noble than history gives him credit for but that's hardly the case. The secular writers had no reason to slander him and the Gospel writers had no reason to show him in a positive light. Some say he was greatly impressed with Jesus. There may be some truth to it but there's nothing in the biblical narrative that suggests this as his motivation. The Bible does provide a reason for this obvious change in character for Pilate ([Mt 27:19](#)). Romans were particularly superstitious about dreams and rarely began any major projects without inquiring for guidance from the gods or fate. His wife's warning would have been taken very seriously by Pilate and may well have caused him to try to extricate himself from consenting to Jesus' death.

While this may address the first mystery of the Roman trial – why Pilate acted out of character in his obvious attempt to have Jesus acquitted. But, this only adds a second mystery – despite his great desire to release Jesus and the power to carry out his own will, in the end Pilate still consents to Jesus' execution. What can we learn from this?

1 thing we learn is that it's impossible to be neutral where Jesus is concerned. Pilate wanted to release Jesus, not because he was a follower of Christ, he just wanted to be innocent of His condemnation. He failed miserably because he couldn't be neutral with Jesus and neither can anyone else. You must be either for Jesus Christ or you are against Him. If you are for Him, He will; strengthen you and enable you to live for Him even in the midst of great trials. If you're against Him, then your character and outlook is not much different than Pilate's was.

This truth doesn't simply apply to salvation. Christians must also regularly analyze their lives to ensure they are wholly committed to Christ because there's real danger in not following closely in His footsteps (1 Kg 3:1-3). Solomon had an exception in his life. He loved the Lord and walked in the statues of David "except" in this one area. His public ministry to Israel (king) was amazingly successful. This was merely a private (personal) exception. The only problem is that this exception eventually came to define his public ministry and ruin his biblical legacy (1 Kg 11:1-6).

28-32 – John actually gives quite a bit of attention to the Roman proceedings but in the build up to it, he provides a bit of irony in the actions of the Jewish authorities. He exposes the utter hypocrisy in their staunch refusal to violate a relatively minor command regarding ceremonial defilement while willingly breaking a great command in rejecting God's Messiah and condemning an innocent Man to death. What's it say about human nature? Being so scrupulous about a defilement but so unconcerned about taking part in an act of judicial murder. This is the direct embodiment of the blind legalism Jesus attributes to them when He declared them to be "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Mt 23:24). Another example of this human tendency: Pilate condemns an innocent man to death.

Pilates' question to the Jewish authorities seems to have caught them by surprise. It's hardly possible that they could have arrested Jesus with Roman troops and tried Him before Annas and Caiaphas without Pilates' knowledge and/or approval. Clearly, they expected Pilate to concur with and endorse the verdict they had arrived at in their own court. Pilate surprised them by opening the case again and demanding charges be announced, this signaled his intent to conduct a formal hearing. Instead of answering with a formal indictment, which they should have been prepared to do, they

replied with an evasion (30). Pilate said if they were unwilling to make a formal accusation, they didn't need him. They could prosecute the case with their own laws and inflict whatever penalties they could legally impose.

Pilate's uncooperative attitude forces the true intention of the Jews out into the open (31b). Without yet answering Pilate's demand for a specific accusation, the religious leaders reveal that they want Jesus executed and Rome didn't allow them to execute the guilty under their own law. There were rare times when the religious leaders risked the disapproval of the Roman authorities and executed those they considered guilty without permission but when they did put someone to death in this unauthorized way, it was generally by stoning (Stephen). Their insistence that Jesus die a Roman death of crucifixion was a fulfillment of Jesus' own words. Stoning would not have fulfilled His prophecy!

The Jews didn't want to make Pilate a judge. They just wanted him to execute the verdict they had already passed. His stubbornness caught the Jews off guard but they rallied quickly and produced a spur of the moment accusation (Lk 23:2). Of course, this isn't the crime Jesus was convicted of in their own court! They had found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, but before Pilate, He's now accused of high treason! Why? Blasphemy wasn't a crime against Roman law and no Roman judge would entertain such a charge. Of the 3 accusations made by the Jews, Pilate was only interested in discovering the details of the third.

33-38 – Not content to rely on the accusations of the Jews, Pilate sets about to determine for himself if the charges against Jesus are true. Each Gospel writer records the question with which Pilate opens his interrogation of Jesus. But, his question is not answered; it is met with another question (34). Jesus is not being evasive or difficult; He's forcing Pilate to clarify the matter for Pilate's own sake. After all, it's not Jesus who is on trial here; it's actually Pilate!

In what sense is this question being put to Him? If it's asked from a Roman perspective, one answer would be given (No); Jesus wasn't a king in the Roman sense of the word. But, if it's being asked from a Jewish perspective, a completely different answer would be given (Yes); Jesus was the Jews' Messiah.

Pilate's response is also to the point: "I'm no Jew!" He had no interest in

religious questions. He only wanted to know if Jesus had done anything that would affect the sovereignty of Caesar. "What have You done?" Jesus could have given some wonderful answers to that question! He could have honestly said that He had lived His life without sinning, never doing any wrong against God or any man. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, calmed the storm, walked on water, fed the multitudes, cast out demons and raised the dead. He taught the truth so clearly that it astonished His listeners. He poured His life into a few men who were called to turn the world upside down. Jesus could have said any of these things but He didn't. Pilate wanted to know if He was a king so Jesus told him the truth.

Jesus confirms that He is a King but He's saying He is guilty as charged but with extenuating circumstances. He admits to the charge of claiming to be a king but describes His kingdom in such a way that it couldn't be seen as a threat to the legitimate claims of Caesar. Jesus' defense has 2 parts: a negative and a positive. Jesus first offers a negative definition of His kingdom: It is "not of this world" meaning that His kingdom (reign) does not come through the authority of the world but by a higher authority. The evidence of this is seen in the fact that His disciples didn't fight to prevent His arrest by the Jewish authorities.

The second description of His kingdom is positive (37); it is of "the truth." This means it is a kingdom that rules over people's minds and ambitions. His kingdom is spiritual; it exists in the hearts of those who follow Him. He does not depend on worldly or fleshly means to advance His kingdom. His was not a physical empire but a realm of truth. His kingdom differed widely from Caesar's. Caesar's empire was over the bodies of men; His is over their souls. The strength of Caesar's kingdom was in elaborate fortifications, unstoppable armies and effective navies. The strength of Jesus' kingdom is and will always be in the principles, ideas and saving power of His divine word.

Notice that Jesus never said He didn't have a kingdom in this world or that He would never rule on the earth. He does have a kingdom on this earth wherever there are people who have trusted Him and yielded to His sovereignty.

One day He will return and establish a righteous kingdom on the earth but for now, His is a spiritual kingdom of truth and He wins people to His cause, not by force or coercion, but through conviction and persuasion. He spoke

the truth of God's Word and all who were His responded to His call in faith. Rome's weapon was the sword but Jesus' weapon was the truth of God, the sword of the Spirit.

Pilate failed to fully appreciate Jesus' response. "What is truth?" Pilate asks a critically important question but sadly, he doesn't stick around to hear the answer. He merely turns away, finally convinced that whatever Jesus' peculiar ideas might happen to be, He was certainly no worse than any other religious fanatic and was, at least from Rome's point of view, perfectly innocent of any capital offenses. What was the verdict? Innocent! By itself, Pilate's verdict signaled the close of the trial and identified it as being an official Roman court proceeding.

Pilate has now tried and acquitted Jesus. Why didn't he release him then or at least place him in protective custody? This question has confounded humanity for nearly 2000 years. Pilate was guilty of nothing at all up to this point. In fact, he had conducted the trial with precision, wisdom, and appropriate speed. He had reached the right verdict. But now, despite his official responsibility as a Roman governor and judge to uphold Roman law and the power of the Roman legions at his command, he failed to do the right thing by immediately setting Jesus free. What caused this change of heart? Was it the mood of the crowd or the spurious accusations of the Jews? Maybe both! Regardless of the motivation, Pilate now settles down into a series of irregular and illegal proceedings that eventually ended in the execution of an innocent Man. What it comes down to is: Pilate was a coward. That's the only proper analysis of his character and the only real explanation for why he failed to do the right thing in this situation.

What does this all mean? It means that in the true, eternal issues of the case it's Pilate who was judged by Jesus and found wanting. This isn't just "Jesus before Pilate," it's also (far more importantly) "Pilate before Jesus." In the 1st instance, Jesus was tried and found innocent and rightly so. In the 2nd, Pilate was tried and found guilty.

So it is with all who will stand before Jesus. He's the only perfect person who ever lived. His standard is perfection. We all fall short, each one. "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside, they have together become unprofitable (worthless); there is none who does good, no,

not one" (Rom 3:10-12). We all already stand condemned. But it's exactly for such condemned ones that Jesus died. He died to bear the punishment for our sin and free us from God's righteous judgment and curse.

Has He done that for you? He has if you are a subject of His kingdom, which you enter by a believing response to His truth and person. That response entails the belief that Jesus is who he says he is (the Son of God) and did what he said he would do (die for your sin), coupled with a personal commitment to follow him as your Savior and Lord.

"What is truth?" We only learn what God's truth is by looking at the cross and the empty tomb. 😊