

## “Pilate’s Dilemma”

John 19:1-16

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor  
Smoke Rise Baptist Church  
Stone Mountain, Georgia  
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I found Mel Gibson’s portrayal of Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, to be quite interesting in the movie, “The Passion of the Christ.” Pilate was not arrogant, as I had expected, but sympathetic and compassionate. He talked to Jesus in private, away from the maddening crowd. He offered Christ something to drink and throughout the movie, each time Pilate touched Jesus it was tender and respectful. In the end, though, self-preservation overruled justice and mercy and Pilate acted cowardly. He handed Jesus over to the religious authorities so they could crucify him.

Pilate did not do so casually, though. Three times he attempted to spare Jesus’ life. He tried reasoning with the religious authorities and when this failed, he gave them a choice of releasing a notorious criminal like Barabbas or Jesus. They chose Barabbas. This left Pilate with one final option. He decided to have Jesus scourged in order to placate the authorities and shift their hatred to pity. This strategy also failed and made a bad situation worse, at least for Jesus.

Was Gibson’s depiction of the beating of Jesus excessive? I guess it depends upon who you talk to about it. I thought it was but who among us really knows. What is important is not how many times Jesus was hit but that he was tortured. He was an innocent man that was emotionally and physically abused, and for this I grieve.

*“Then Pilate took Jesus and had him **flogged**. The soldiers twisted together a **crown of thorns** and put it on his head. They clothed him in a **purple robe** and went up to him again and again, saying, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ And they **struck** him in the face” John 19:1-3.*

What is the worst thing you ever did to an innocent person? Why did you do it? How did you feel?

Was it a child, your mate, a friend or a stranger? Did you lose your temper and strike them or out of jealousy did you humiliate them? Did you lie to or cheat someone?

Beware! Hatred, jealousy, prejudice, selfishness, greed and the lust for power can blind us to reason and cause us to say and do things we never dreamed we would.

As I watched Gibson’s movie, I wondered if innocent people are being tortured and killed today. I thought of James Byrd, Jr. He was a loving husband and father of three daughters. On June 7, 1998, he was walking down a dusty east Texas road outside of the tiny timber town of Jasper when a pickup truck with three men inside stopped to give him a ride. They took him to a remote area of the woods, beat him, chained him to the back of the truck and dragged him for two miles. Body parts were found all along that desolate stretch of road.

Do innocent people still suffer? Certainly. Sometimes we are the victims and other times we are the perpetrators. Both are tragic.

*“Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, ‘Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.’ When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, ‘**Here is the man!**’” John 19:4-5.*

Pilate was still trying, wasn’t he? An immovable object was meeting an irresistible force and neither was giving an inch. Who was going to blink first?

It was as if Pilate was saying, “Here is the man you consider a threat? Surely not. Look at him! He’s harmless. Take pity on this man.” But they would not.

*“As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, ‘Crucify! Crucify!’ But Pilate answered, ‘You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.’ The Jews insisted, ‘We have a law and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.’ When Pilate heard this, he was even **more afraid** and went*

*back inside the palace. 'Where do you come from?' he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave no answer" John 19:6-9.*

I see in this passage one of the best examples of healthy and unhealthy fear. Healthy fear is anything that keeps us from doing wrong. Unhealthy fear is anything that keeps us from doing right.

Pilate was afraid of doing what was right. He was afraid of the repercussions he would suffer, the loss of his job, power, prestige, lifestyle and perhaps life. As a result, he let fear control him and keep him from sparing the life of an innocent man.

Fear is a common emotion and as a counselor I try to tap into it when I listen to people. Often I hear people say, "I know I need to do this but I am afraid." I try to help them discover if they are afraid of the consequences of doing right or wrong. If they are afraid of doing what is right and best, I attempt to help them see that this is an unhealthy fear. They will pay a much higher price down the road for failing to do right. Sometimes I tell them Pilate's story.

It breaks my heart when I see people that let unhealthy fear control them. They must be miserable. I know Pilate was.

*"'Do you refuse to speak to me?' Pilate said. Don't you realize I have the power either to free you or to crucify you?' Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore, the one that handed me over to you is **guilty of a greater sin**'" John 19:10-11.*

I am not sure if Jesus was excusing Pilate as much as he was condemning the religious authorities. The message is clear, though. The religious person that does wrong stands in greater peril. He or she knows better, misrepresents God and confuses people. Those are three grave sins that carry heavy consequences!

*"From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar. When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour. 'Here is your king,' Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, 'Take him away! Crucify him! 'Shall I crucify your king?' Pilate asked. '**We have no king but Caesar,**' the chief priests answered. **Finally,** Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of him" John 19:12-16.*

What is the most astonishing thing you ever said to get your way? It can't be as shocking as what the religious authorities said to manipulate Pilate. Clearly, they denied their heritage and abandoned their principles that fateful day. So intent were they to execute Jesus that they swore all their allegiance to Caesar.

In doing so, they finally wore Pilate down. They had to go to great lengths to do so, but in the end, the religious authorities won. Pilate blinked. He went against his better judgment and sentenced an innocent man to die.

Who is trying to persuade you to do something wrong? Are you weakening? Have they just about worn you down? Before you succumb, you may want to talk to Pilate. I think he would have some good advice for you.

Allow me to conclude this sermon by asking some penetrating questions. Who in this part of the Passion story do you identify with the most? **Is it the soldiers?** Have you mistreated and hurt innocent people? Have you said and done things for which you are ashamed?

**Is it the crowd** that accompanied the religious authorities and shouted along with them, "Crucify Him!?" Have you blindly followed evil people that have led you down the wrong path? Have you thrown truth and logic out the window in order to be a part of a group with whom you wanted to identify?

**Is it the religious authorities?** Have you abused the power entrusted to you that was meant to be used to help people? Have you hurt others in the name of God?

**Is it Pilate?** Have you been pressured by others to do wrong? Have you walked away from an opportunity to oppose evil because you were afraid of what would happen if you stood up for your convictions?

**Is it Christ?** Do you know what it is like to be a victim of hatred, prejudice and jealousy? Do you know what it is like to be abused and abandoned?

**What do you do if you identify with our Lord's accusers?** Must you live forever with guilt and die in shame? Is there any hope for you? I believe there is.

Listen to the words of our Lord while hanging on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" Luke 23:34. These were the words of the one that was treated so harshly by his accusers. These words of compassion and grace were meant for them and us. They are as potent today as they were when they were spoken on the cross.

The good news I have for you this morning is that forgiveness is real and powerful. It is through forgiveness that the destructive process of sin is reversed. Forgiveness restores self-esteem, influence and potential. It revives the desire to live. It redirects the purpose for living. It offers opportunities to heal wounds and make amends. It repairs relationships or builds new ones.

Perhaps this is why we refer to conversion as "being born again." Forgiveness and birth are inextricably woven. Maybe it is time for you to start over. I know someone who can help you do this and I hope you will let him.

I think this is one reason Mel Gibson made this movie. He is a forgiven man that has been given a new life. His old life of drug and alcohol addiction led to the neglect and abuse of others and himself. Radical and permanent change occurred after he fell to his knees and cried, "Help!" That one word opened a door for him through which he found healing and hope. It can do the same for you, too.

**What can you do if you identify with Christ today?** What can you do with your confusion, pain and agony? Let me encourage you to share them with the Lord along with the experiences that caused them. I assure you that he will understand. Pour your heart out to him and ask him to help you focus on the future, not the past. That's what forgiveness is all about. This is where healing begins. This is where the Gospel is most effective, for this truly is "The Passion of the Christ."