Mark Lesson 50 (2023)

**JESUS BEFORE PILATE**

*(Pilate’s Conflict: “Survival vs. Truth”)*

Mark 15:1-20

Key Verse: 15:15

“Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified.”

Today’s passage is tough. So, I’d like to begin my sermon by sharing a story about two squirrels, Sam and Sally (Pic#1), who lived in a forest and loved collecting acorns to prepare for the winter. One day, they stumbled upon a giant oak tree, adorned with the tastiest acorns they had ever seen. However, to their dismay, only a few acorns were left on the tree. Faced with a significant moral dilemma, they pondered, “*Should we keep all the acorns for ourselves to ensure we have enough food for winter,” or “Should we share the acorns with other animals in the forest, even if it means they might run out before winter arrives?”*  In this moral quandary, Sam and Sally made a profound choice. They generously shared their precious acorns, distributing some to the birds, the rabbits, and even the friendly raccoons. When winter finally arrived, they had just enough acorns for themselves. However, because of their kindness, all the animals in the forest came to their aid, ensuring they had a warm and cozy winter together. This heartwarming tale concludes with a happy ending.

In today’s passage, we find Pilate grappling with a profound moral dilemma centered around the destiny of Jesus, a man unjustly accused of a crime he had not committed. Pilate possessed the authority to set Jesus free, but he hesitated in making this decision. Understandably, no one in his situation could easily navigate such a complex case. Ultimately, this passage sets the stage for the crucifixion of Jesus. Remarkably, despite numerous opportunities to safeguard his own life, Jesus made the selfless choice to offer himself as a sacrificial atonement for the sins of the world.

What would you do if you were in Pilate’s or Jesus’s shoes? As we explore this passage, let us seek wisdom and inspiration in our lives on how to strike a balance between survival and truth.

Look at verse 1. “Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.” The trial Jesus endured before the Sanhedrin, as described in the previous passage, 14:53-72, undoubtedly extended through the night. In this trial, Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy, a crime punishable by death. However, the Jewish Sanhedrin, constrained by Roman legal limitations, had no authority to carry out executions. Consequently, they discussed it among themselves and decided to bring their case to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea.

In the following verses, we notice the change in the charge against Jesus. Rather than pursuing a case of blasphemy, they chose a treason case. This strategic shift was made because the Roman governor held no jurisdiction over religious or spiritual matters; his primary domain was political affairs.

Let’s take a close look at verse 2. “‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ asked Pilate. ‘You have said so,’ Jesus replied.” Pilate’s inquiry indicates that the Jews had accused Jesus of claiming to be a king, and Jesus responded with a simple affirmation, saying, “You have said so.” In his response, Jesus indirectly acknowledged the claim, but it is essential to understand that his kingship was unique and distinct from Pilate’s expectations. He was a spiritual king rather than a political one, a distinction highlighted in John 18:36-37.

Look at verses 3-5. “The chief priests accused him of many things. So again, Pilate asked him, ‘Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.’ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.” In these verses, we find that Mark didn’t mention detailing the specific accusations made by the chief priests against Jesus. Instead, the focus is on Jesus’ deliberate silence, which left Pilate astonished.

But why did Jesus choose not to defend himself? His silence was not just in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, Isaiah 53:7, in which the phrase “he didn’t open his mouth” is repeated twice. Instead, Jesus’ silence was a strategic choice, the most prudent way to proclaim his innocence.

In verses 6-15, we witness Jesus’ second appearance before Pilate. While Mark doesn’t document this, Luke provides an account of Pilate sending Jesus to Herod Antipas after the initial trial. Herod subsequently sent him back to Pilate without any charges. (Lk. 23:6-12) This segment highlights Pilate’s persistent effort to secure Jesus’ release, acknowledging Jesus’ innocence. The potential solution is granting amnesties – a formal pardon for those convicted of political offenses.

Let’s examine verses 6-8. “Now, it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.” The assembled crowd approached Pilate, urging him to honor his customary practice. Pilate, in response, was inclined to release Jesus, believing that the people would also favor his decision. However, his expectations were proven wrong, as the crowd insisted on the release of Barabbas.

Let’s turn to verses 9-11. “‘Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?’ asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.” Who was Barabbas? He had been incarcerated on charges of robbery and murder, likely connected to the killing of Roman guards during an insurrection. In the eyes of Roman authorities, Barabbas was considered a rebel and a criminal, someone who had actively participated in an uprising against Rome, potentially leading a rebellion that endangered the security of the Roman citizens.

From a Jewish perspective, however, Barabbas held a different status. He was seen as a national hero, representing Jewish resistance and patriotism. His popularity among the Jews exceeded that of Jesus, mainly because they believed he could continue to fight for their freedom. While the Jewish religious leaders didn’t necessarily endorse Barabbas, they preferred his release over Jesus because they perceived Jesus as a greater threat to their authority and status quo. Consequently, they manipulated the less-informed crowd to ensure Pilate would release Barabbas.

Now, let’s look at verses 12-14. “‘What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews? Pilate asked them, ‘Crucify him!’ they shouted. ‘Why? What crime has he committed?’ asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’” The people’s choice of Barabbas left Pilate with an enormous dilemma. This was an unexpected moment for Pilate, as the Roman governor. It weighed heavily on him, a situation he preferred to avoid. Nonetheless, he was compelled to reach a decision, and the religious leaders exacerbated the situation by inciting the crowd to demand Jesus’ crucifixion. The mob ignored Pilate’s plea for reasoned reconsideration and continued their chants and shouts. They were gullible and easy to manipulate.

Now, let’s take a closer look at verse 15. “Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified.” Evidently, Pilate had Jesus flogged in front of the crowd, hoping this punishment might satisfy their desire for retribution. It might have been his intention to strike a compromise. However, ultimately, he set Barabbas free and handed Jesus over to be crucified. Although it might not have been his initial intention, this was the decision he made. Regrettably, this choice is one of the worst choices Pilate had ever made. Even though he could preserve his position as governor and maintain a superficial approval from the Jewish authorities, he was left with guilt, regret, shame, and a damaged character because of the choice he made. (Pic#2)

Choosing the path of truth during challenging circumstances is undeniably a tough task. Nevertheless, some individuals have confronted such conflicts and, despite the hardships, demonstrated unwavering courage in their commitment to truth.

Consider, for instance, the inspiring example of Daniel’s three friends. Confronted with the demand to bow before a golden image, they refused to yield, even when faced with the prospect of being cast into a blazing furnace. Their resolute response to King Nebuchadnezzar demonstrated their unwavering faith in God: “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know; Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Dan. 3:16-18)

Another remarkable example is Mahatma Gandhi, a prominent figure in the Indian independence movement against British colonial rule. Gandhi passionately championed the principles of non-violence and truth. He steadfastly committed to truth and justice despite enduring imprisonment and physical violence.

Throughout history, many individuals have chosen the path of truth over self-interest and survival. The foremost example among them is Jesus Christ. His life and ministry were characterized by his teachings of boundless love, forgiveness, and compassion. Yet, he fearlessly confronted the corrupt religious and political authorities of his time, often at considerable personal risk. Jesus willingly endured persecution and, ultimately, offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world, as he articulated to his disciples. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk. 10:45)

Pilate’s decision led to Jesus being handed over for crucifixion. Nonetheless, this act aligned with God’s divine will for the redemption of humanity, as eloquently conveyed in Isaiah 53:10-11, “Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his land. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.”

In verses 16-20, the author describes the Roman soldiers’ cruel mockery of Jesus. Look at verses 16-20. “The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ Again and again, they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.” The soldiers displayed relentless cruelty, subjecting Jesus to physical and verbal abuse.

One might wonder why Jesus, the Son of God, allowed such inhumane and brutal treatment. Christians understand it as an integral part of his obedience to God. This understanding is validated in 1 Peter 2:23-24, which articulates, “When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him, who judges justly. ‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds, you have been healed.’” These words resonate deeply with us, reminding us of the profound significance of Jesus’ suffering and wounds on the cross, offering us healing and restoration.

Today, let’s explore a bit from a different angle. It’s crucial for us to grasp the profound message that Jesus imparts through his example. His purpose extends beyond mere physical or emotional healing. It’s a call for a transformation in our behavior. Jesus, through his powerful example of non-threatening and non-violent responses, demonstrates the incredible potential of non-violence. He encourages us to actively seek peaceful resolutions to conflicts and refrain from responding to hatred or aggression.

His commitment to non-retaliation also underscores the importance of forgiveness. By forgiving those who wronged him, Jesus revealed his divine nature of mercy and exemplified the path to reconciliation. By avoiding revenge, Jesus showcased a profound sense of empathy and grace. His example reminds us to carefully consider how we respond to adversity, mistreatment, and conflicts. “*No threat, no aggression, and non-violence but forgiveness.*” We surely need to strive for a high standard in our behaviors.

Let me close the sermon. In today’s passage, Pilate, the religious leaders, and the crowds all had something in common - they placed their self-interest and personal survival above God’s truth. This compromise inevitably leads to negative consequences, such as feelings of guilt, regret, and tarnished character. Whoever makes such wrong choice will suffer the consequences. The inner conflict of Pilate was not isolated to him alone. All of us must make choices between survival and truth.

**So, how can we find a balance between survival and truth?** We need to follow the truth, then we can not only survive but also enjoy eternal life. Is it even possible? Yes. But it’s not easy. But how? It’s not something new. We must not only believe in Jesus but also follow his footsteps in our daily lives. Jesus Christ, our Lord, is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Just as Jesus, for the joy that awaited him, endured the cross and became the source of everlasting, we should follow his footsteps daily, denying ourselves and taking up our cross and emulating him in every aspect of our lives.

**What’s the reward?** The kingdom of God and the fullness of life in us now and forever. We will be fully satisfied. It reminds us of what Jesus repeatedly told his disciples, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mk. 8:35-36) May we make the conscious choice to embrace truth and God’s will over self-interest and mere survival. Can we be like Sam and Sally who made a profound choice? (Pic#1) This choice is more than attainable when we fix our eyes on Jesus by faith. Faith is the answer.

As we conclude this time of reflection and study, we come before you with hearts filled with gratitude for the wisdom and lessons shared in your Word. We recognize the importance of seeking truth and standing firm in our faith, even when faced with the challenges of self-interest and personal survival.

Lord, we pray for the strength to make the right choices in our lives, just as your Son, Jesus, demonstrated by his unwavering commitment to your truth and will. May we fix our eyes on him, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and find the courage to embrace truth, even when it requires sacrifice.

Help us to remember the profound words of Jesus, that losing our lives for his sake and the Gospel's is the path to true salvation. Grant us the wisdom to prioritize your truth above all else and to let our actions be a testimony to your love, grace, and forgiveness.

We ask for your guidance in our daily lives, that we may make choices that honor you and contribute to the betterment of our world. May our actions reflect our faith, and may we find joy and peace in doing your will.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.