

John 18:28-38
Outline from Jesus Before Pilate: Robert L. (Bob) Deffinbaugh
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This is not the first time I have preached **through the Gospel of John**. . . . **John's Gospel always makes me take a second look at the way I view our Lord's death. Obviously, the Jews wanted Jesus dead. They had tried repeatedly to accomplish this – yet without success.**

Even though the Jews did not get exactly what they wanted when Jesus died on that Roman cross, they were jubilant. There was a measure of rejoicing on the part of those who appeared to prevail over Jesus at the cross

(see John 16:20 verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. but we must also take Luke's words into account when he informs us that, seeing **what had happened at the cross, the multitudes went away "beating their breasts" (Luke 23:48)**. Those who crucified Jesus did not get everything they wanted.

- The Jews wanted to stone Jesus, but they had to settle for crucifixion.
- The Jews wanted to kill Jesus themselves, and yet they had to involve Rome.
- Annas the high Priest wanted to compel Jesus to incriminate Himself, and instead, Jesus indicted the high priest for wrong-doing.
- Pilate wanted to find a way to make the "Jesus crisis" go away, but he did not succeed.

Strange as it may seem, at the cross of Calvary, it was only our Lord who got His way.

This morning I intend to focus on **2 of the 4 main statements** made by the participants in John's recounting of our Lord's trial before Pilate.

1. The **first** is a statement **by the Jews** in verse **31**: **"We cannot legally put anyone to death."**
2. The **second** is the **question raised by Pilate** in verse **38**: **"What is truth?"**

Cover 2 points 7/17/16 – 2 more 7/24/16

3. The **third** is the **declaration of our Lord** in verse **37**: **"You [rightly or correctly] say that I am a King."**
4. The **final statement** is made by **John** in verse **32**: **"This happened to fulfill the word Jesus spoke, indicating what kind of death he was going to die."**

The Jews: "We Cannot Legally Put Anyone to Death." (18:31)

The **Jewish religious leaders appear to have incorrectly assessed the situation**. They may have assumed that since **Pilate had provided Roman soldiers** to assist in the arrest of Jesus, he was giving them a "blank check" to deal with Jesus as they saw fit. Their appearance before Pilate early on this morning does not look like a humble petition being made by the religious

leaders of a subject nation. The Jewish leaders boldly arrive at Pilate's home in the early hours of the morning, with Jesus in their custody (verse 28). It may have been at the very first signs of light. Their arrival at this early hour could almost be characterized as "cruel and unusual." They further insult Pilate by refusing to enter his residence. In their minds, to do so would be to defile themselves by entering the house of a Gentile. Consequently, they virtually force Pilate to come outside to speak with them. Such actions would not be unusual, if it were Pilate demanding such things of the Jews, but for the Jews to act this way toward Pilate is nothing less than insulting.

Pilate's response to their demands caught the religious leaders off guard. They seem to have expected Pilate to "**rubber stamp**" their indictment of Jesus and to quickly authorize His execution. Instead, **Pilate required them to declare formal charges against Jesus, charges that they had not been able to establish, even though they worked at this all night long** (see [Matthew 26:59-60](#); [Mark 14:57-59](#) - [False Witnesses](#)). Before the Jews, Jesus had confessed that He was "**guilty**" of being the **Son of God**. They reasoned that this "confession" **made Him guilty of blasphemy, and that because of this, Jesus must be put to death** ([Matthew 26:62-65](#), [Mark 14:64](#)). However, they were **not able to substantiate any charges that would make Jesus worthy of death under Roman law**. As they stand before Pilate, they find themselves in a real bind. They believe Jesus is guilty of blasphemy, and deserving of death, but they do not have any solid evidence that Jesus is guilty of any capital offense under Roman law; thus, they are hard pressed to convince Pilate that Jesus really should be put to death.

It wasn't as though the Jews never put anyone to death without Rome's consent. We know from the account of the **stoning of Stephen** in [Acts 7](#) that the Jews were more than willing to put someone to death, without permission from Rome. **Stephen's death was different, however. It did not occur during the feast**

The words of the Jews in our text mean something like this:

"We really want to kill Jesus ourselves, by stoning, but we can't get away with that at the moment—not now anyway, during the feast, while all of your Roman soldiers are 'on alert' and watching us like a hawk." If they could kill Jesus without Rome's help, and even without Rome's permission, they would gladly do so. **But they are powerless to do so now, and they know it.** Their words convey a feigned submission to Roman authority, but this is all hypocrisy, as [Acts 7](#) underscores, and as Pilate surely knows.

This is not just a matter of obtaining Rome's permission. The Jewish religious leaders are **unwittingly revealing their inability to accomplish what they have attempted on many occasions**. They do not seem to realize that they are (to use God's words to Saul), "**kicking against the goads**" ([Acts 9:5](#), KJV). **I have not attempted to count all of the times that attempts to kill Jesus are recorded in the Gospels, but they are numerous.** One of the first attempts came in our Lord's hometown of Nazareth ([Luke 4:28-29](#)).

. . . Many failed attempts to stone Jesus may have led them to conclude that they must go about this legally, so that the power of Rome could be enlisted in their efforts to be rid of Jesus. It never seems to occur to these Jews that their words to Pilate were a confession of failure on their part and also an admission that our Lord was really in control.

Pilate: "What Is Truth?" (18:38)

It might be helpful to remind ourselves of the political situation at this point in time. **Rome** had succeeded in gaining dominance as a **world power**, and had divided its subject territories into provinces for administration. **Syria** was one of these **Roman provinces**, of which **Palestine** was a part. **Herod the Great** once ruled over all five areas of Palestine, but when he died, his

territory was divided among his three sons. Due to misrule, Archelaus (who governed Judea and Samaria) was removed and replaced by one known as “**the Governor of Judea.**”

Pontius Pilate was the “**Governor of Judea**” at the time of our Lord’s crucifixion. **At the same time, Herod Antipas¹⁴⁶ ruled over Galilee and Perea.** We know from [Luke 23:12](#) that Herod and Pilate had been adversaries until the trials of our Lord.

Until 1961, there was no archaeological proof of the existence of Pontius Pilate.¹⁴⁷ In the summer of 1961, Italian archaeologists were excavating an ancient theater at Caesarea, the Mediterranean port which served as the Roman capital of Palestine.¹⁴⁸ They unearthed a stone that bore a partial inscription, bearing the name of Pontius Pilate. It refers to the presentation of “the Tiberieum” to the Caesareans. The “Tiberieum” was apparently some kind of public structure named after the Roman emperor Tiberius.

Pilate normally governed Judea and Samaria from his Palace in **Ceserea by the sea.** That Palace was cooled by the Mediterranean breezes, unlike his current living quarters. But his superiors required him to come to Jerusalem for Jewish feast days and any other occasions that might breed turmoil. While the Jews had been ruled by the Romans for decades they were still a constant source of trouble. (from, [The Body](#), Charles Colson, p. 149 or so.)

Readers of the New Testament are familiar with Pilate, who is not portrayed in a very favorable light.

- Luke’s Gospel informs us that Pilate was governor when John the Baptist commenced his ministry ([Luke 3:1-2](#)).
- Later in Luke, we read of his abusive and blasphemous treatment of the Galileans: “Now there were some present on that occasion who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices” ([Luke 13:1](#)).¹⁴⁹

What we know of Pilate from history is not very flattering either.

Normally, when Roman governors arrived in Jerusalem, they removed their standards (a pole with a Roman eagle or an image of the emperor mounted on the top) because of the Jews’ disdain for such images.¹⁵¹ In spite of his awareness of these Jewish scruples and past Roman practice, Pilate’s troops marched into Jerusalem carrying medallions with the emperor’s image or bust among their standards. This precipitated a protest demonstration by the Jews lasting five days, and eventually, Pilate was forced to give in to public pressure by removing the standards.

A year so earlier Pilate’s disdain slipped out of control when some of the Jews protested his use of funds from the temple treasury to finance the construction of an **aqueduct.** Their accusations were an affront to Rome. After all as procurator of Judea he controlled the temple and its funds and the aqueduct brought water to the city in which they lived. But in their usual zealous fervor they had **accused him of sacrilege.** Thousands of Jews trooped in from all over the province for one of their strange festivals and demonstrated outside the palace. So he decided to teach them a lesson. . (from, [The Body](#), Charles Colson, p. 149 or so.)

Following his orders a Detachment of City troops moved in to quell the rioters. **Many Jews were killed in the process including the Galileans who led the Revolt.** His soldiers had even managed to dispatch some of those pilgrims filling the temple with their endless sacrifices: **they had severed the jugular veins of a number of Jews who had offered their lambs for sacrifice.** Pilate had relished the grim justice of **the bodies of men and lambs he piled**

together, their blood mingling on the holy altar. . (from, The Body, Charles Colson, p. 149 or so.)

All of this is to say that Pilate was none too popular with the Jews at this point in time. I doubt very much that he cared either, because his actions toward the Jews seem to indicate that he held a great disdain for them.

The **little Massacre** became the talk of Judea. Pilate even heard about it from **Sejanus his old friend and Mentor**.

Good work, Sejanus said. : **Those Jews need to know who is really in control.**”

Until recently **Pilate envied Sejanus as much as he admired him**. The Tribune had risen through the ranks of Roman privilege and power like a meteor and Pilate had clung to the tails of this toga.

Last year when the emperor **Tiberius** left Rome for a rest at his residence in Campania and Capri, he had placed most of the government Affairs in the hands of **Sejanus** naming him a **“partner in the work”** . life at the Pinnacle of the Empire's politics had exhausted the 70 year old emperor.

Sejanus Along with his supporters including Pilate had been inducted into an **elite group** known as **“friends of Caesar”**. The semi-official title connoted **power, privilege, and Prestige** and Pilate thrilled every time someone called him **Cesar's friend**.

If this title linked Pilate and Sejanus, **a stronger bond was forged in thier hatred for the Jews**. And that ironically enough, was what led to Sejanus downfall.

Sejanus Had actually declared it his goal to exterminate the nation of Jews and he had expelled all Jews from Italy. With **loyal men like Pontius Pilate** in place **he hoped to flush the race from the Eastern provinces as well as Palestine**. In the process he would consolidate his power among the military, which also had no great affection for the Jews. His **overriding objective however was to push the elderly Tiberius aside and become emperor himself**.

But all had not gone well for Sejanus . the **Roman legion** of Syria had refused to honor his leadership and loyal forces **alerted Tiberius**. The elderly Emperor returned to Rome where **Sejanus and his key supporters in the city were tried and executed by order of the Tribunal**. from, The Body, Charles Colson, p. 149 or so

You can imagine, then, how Pilate must have responded to the knock on his palace door early that morning.

“He who blesses his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, It will be counted a curse to him” (Proverbs 27:14) .NKJV

The Jews are in a hurry, and they need to dispense with the legal formalities as quickly as possible if they are to have this whole horrible thing finished by sunset (so that they can “worship God” at this Passover). . . . Now, they demand to see Pilate, but they also refuse to **“defile themselves”** by entering into the dwelling of this Gentile pagan (18:28).

And then, when Pilate asks them to indicate what formal charges they wish to press against Jesus, **they are unable to articulate any charges which would make Him worthy of the death penalty.** Instead, they come up with a pious sounding version of “trust me”: “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you” (verse 30).

Pilate is already impatient with them. If this is the way they want to go about this matter, then let them deal with Jesus according to **their own law.** Pilate does not yet seem to grasp that they will be content with nothing less than the death penalty. They now reveal this to him: “**We cannot legally put anyone to death**” (verse 31). Pilate is (as we would say in Texas) “caught between a rock and a hard place.” He is undoubtedly angry with these Jews for disturbing and insulting him, as they have done, and yet he does not wish to get into trouble with the Jews again, since he appears to be on “thin ice” with Rome at the moment. **He hopes to be able to resolve this crisis in a way that does not anger the Jews, and yet does not give them what they demand.**

Pilate takes Jesus aside privately—into his quarters—where the Jews will not enter, lest they defile themselves. **He asks Jesus this question: “Are you the King of the Jews?” (verse 33).** *(the Jews thought that all gentiles aborted babies and buried them under their floors, thus, the Jew who entered could be defiled by contact with a dead body. This “gentile house=defilement” was not part of the Law as given by God – but rather an extension of the law.)*

We know from Luke’s Gospel that this charge was made against Jesus ([Luke 23:3](#)).

Pilate is virtually forced to explore this charge further, and so he asks Jesus directly whether or not He is the “**King of the Jews.**” Jesus does not keep quiet, as He does before the Jews and Herod. Neither does Jesus deny the charge. Jesus is not seeking to defend Himself, but rather to probe the heart of Pilate. Does Pilate ask this for his own benefit, or is he simply doing so because he is forced to follow up on the charge of the Jews that He is a revolutionary, claiming to be the “**King of the Jews**”?

Pilate’s response to Jesus’ question is negative: “**I am not a Jew, am I? Your own people and your chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?**” (verse 35). Pilate assumes that the real issues are Jewish, and thus that they do not really involve him. Jesus is a Jew. If He claims to be the “**King of the Jews**” that has nothing to do with Pilate, unless, of course, Jesus is actively seeking to overthrow Roman rule—otherwise, this a really a matter between Jesus and His Jewish countrymen. You will recall that this same approach **was later employed by Gallio:**

12 Now while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews attacked Paul together and brought him before the judgment seat, 13 saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God in a way contrary to the law.” 14 But just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, “**If it were a matter of some crime or serious piece of villainy, I would have been justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; 15 but since it concerns points of disagreement about words and names and your own law, settle it yourselves.** I will not be a judge of these things.” 16 Then he had them forced away from the judgment seat ([Acts 18:12-16](#)).

This approach just does not work for Pilate. He seems to suspect that whatever Jesus did, it was not as serious as the Jews represented it to be. On the other hand, the intensity of their accusations would incline one to suppose that Jesus had done something pretty awful to get these folks so worked up. And so Pilate asks Jesus, in effect, “**What have you done wrong to**

make these folks so angry?" In Pilate's mind, there had to be some wrong-doing on Jesus' part. How else could one explain the hostility of the Jews?

As the case drags on, Pilate begins to see things for what they are. Those who so vehemently oppose Jesus are **jealous of Him** ([Matthew 27:18](#); [Mark 15:10](#)).

Jesus does not deny that He is the "**King of the Jews**," but He does explain to Pilate that this is no threat whatsoever to him, or to Roman rule. Jesus' kingdom is "**not from this world**." If it were, then His servants would fight to resist His arrest (as Peter had attempted to do, momentarily, before being stopped short by Jesus). **His kingdom is not from earth**. Pilate had nothing to worry about.

Pilate was listening carefully to what Jesus said. He drew the correct inference: "So then, you really *are* a King!" Jesus replies in a way that clearly indicates this is true: "**You say that I am a King ...**" In more **contemporary terminology**, we would say, "**You said it!**" The Lord's meaning is therefore something like this: "**You are absolutely right that I am a King!**"

- His "kingdom" is **centered around revelation, not revolution**;
- **around truth, not treason**.
- **Jesus was a teacher, not a traitor**.

This was the purpose for His incarnation; this was His mission in life—to testify to the truth. And everyone who embraces Him as the promised Messiah (who "**belongs to the truth**") listens to His voice.

Here is the challenge to Pilate—to accept Jesus' teaching as the truth. Pilate's response is tragic. It is phrased as a question, but it is really an admission of **complete cynicism**.

He does not ask, "**What is the truth?**"

Such a question would indicate that Pilate believes in truth but does not know what the truth is.

The question, "**What *is* truth?**", is a completely different matter. **It is as though Pilate had said, "Truth? You don't mean to tell me that you believe there is such a thing as truth, do you? Truth is whatever you want it to be."** I am sure Pilate had heard many who claimed to know the truth, and who were willing to reveal it to him (for a price of some kind). But here, it is as though Pilate has finally come to the point of giving up so far as ever knowing anything to be absolutely true.

Josh McDowell, speaking on the radio one day, pointed out the same attitude on the part of many college students today. He said that he has spoken on hundreds of college campuses over the years. In the past, students would argue with him as to whether or not the teachings of the Bible were true. They believed there was such a thing as truth; they just weren't sure what the truth was. Today, McDowell said, when he goes onto a college campus, there is cynicism as to whether anyone can ever know anything to be absolutely true.

There is a very important principle to be learned from our text, one that is just as relevant for today as it was for Pilate 2,000 years ago: "**WHENEVER ONE LOSES FAITH IN THE FACT THAT THERE IS ABSOLUTE TRUTH, THERE IS ONLY ONE STANDARD BY WHICH THAT**

PERSON'S ACTIONS CAN BE MEASURED: POLITICAL CORRECTNESS. or, *THE PARTY LINE* as the USSR called it.

Jesus claims to be the source of truth. Pilate has come to doubt that there is such a thing as absolute truth. And so Pilate's actions are guided by the principle of political correctness. He does not do what is right. He has already come to the realization that Jesus is **innocent**. And if this is not enough, **Pilate's wife** will send him the message that Jesus is much more than innocent, He is righteous: "While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him *a message*, saying, 'Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.' " ([Matthew 27:19](#)).¹⁵³

And so it is that Pilate opts to do what is "**politically correct,**" even though it is **morally wrong**. Pilate decides to act out of **expedience**, handing Jesus over to those who are crying for His blood. Today, we are watching the very same thing happen before our very eyes. No longer are **our leaders acting out of principle; all too many are acting out of pure pragmatism.**

Jesus: "You Are Right in Saying I Am a King" (18:37)

The Jewish religious leaders took issue with Jesus in slightly different terms:¹⁵⁴

LK. 22:66 When day came, the council of the elders of the people gathered together, both the chief priests and the experts in the law. Then they led Jesus away to their council **67** and said, "If you are the Christ, tell us." But he said to them, "If I tell you, you will not believe; **68** and if I ask you, you will not answer. **69** But from now on *the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.*" **70** So they all said, "Are you the Son of God, then?" He answered them, "You say that I am." **71** Then they said, "Why do we need further testimony? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!" ([Luke 22:66-71](#))

They were interested in **His claim to be the Son of God**, or as John expresses it in his Gospel, **His claim to be equal with God (5:18; 10:33, 36)**. I don't think Pilate really cared about such matters. His concern was much more pragmatic: Was Jesus claiming to be Israel's king? **Our Lord's answer to the Jews and to Pilate was a very clear, "Yes, I am!"**

And they all said, "Are You the Son of God, then?" And He said to them, "Yes, I am" ([Luke 22:70](#), NAB).

They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You are right in saying I am" (NIV).

Then they all said, "Are You then the Son of God?" So He said to them, "You *rightly* say that I am" (NKJV).

Literally, Jesus responded, "**You say that I am,**" but that was the equivalent to His saying, "**Yes, I am.**" And so we see the translations cited above indicate this affirmation on the part of our Lord.

It was not the safest thing for Jesus to say. To tell Pilate that He was the King of the Jews was to risk being condemned for high treason (which, of course, He was). To admit to the Jews that He was the Son of God was to convince them that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy (for which they excused their initiative in putting Jesus to death). In both cases, the penalty for such

offenses (if proven guilty) was death. The fact is that Jesus is not only “**the way**” and “**the life**,” He is also “**the truth**.” Jesus cannot lie about anything, and especially not about His identity. This is why I view our Lord’s statement to Pilate as the “great confession” in the Gospel of John. Peter’s “great confession,” recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20), is not found in John. It is Jesus Himself who is the true witness in John. “You say that I am a King. I have been born and have come into the world for this reason—**to testify to the truth**. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (**John 18:37**).

PASCHL’s Wager - seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal concluded that “It is rational to seek a relationship with God and live a deeply Christian life, because there is very much to gain and relatively little to lose” . . .

Pascal’s wager compares two possible states of reality:

- that the Christian God exists
- or that there is no God and no life beyond the grave.

Given these possible states, **a person can either commit to the Christian God or not** (where committing involves choosing to pursue a relationship with God). If one chooses to commit to God and Christianity is true, they not only maximize their chance of eternal life with God, but they increase their chance of living a successful life now.

. . .based on recent psychological and social data, **- religious people are healthier, happier, more satisfied with life, have more stable marriages and families, volunteer and give more, and even live longer (!)**. But if one commits to God and Christianity is false, they face lost opportunity because of time spent committing to God, a sense of loss of control over their life, and a possible disruption in their personal relationships due to serious religious commitment.

1. God is, or God is not. Reason cannot decide between the two alternatives.
2. A Game is being played... where heads or tails will turn up.
3. You must wager (it is **not optional**).
4. Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. **If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing.**
5. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is. (...) There is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. And so our proposition is of infinite force, when there is the finite to stake in a game where there are equal risks of gain and of loss, and the infinite to gain.
6. But some cannot believe. They should then 'at least learn your inability to believe...' and 'Endeavour then to convince' themselves.

There are those who seek to convince us that Jesus never claimed to be God, that He never said He was the promised Messiah. Such people seem not to have read the Gospels, or at least to have read them very carefully.

At the time when such a confession would likely lead to His death, Jesus testified that He was the Son of God and the King of the Jews. Jesus claims to be God and acknowledges that He is the One whom God has appointed to rule over the whole earth.

