

“Choose a Friend”

John 19:8–16

⁸Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid; ⁹and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, “Where are You from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰So Pilate said to Him, “You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” ¹¹Jesus answered, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.” ¹²As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, “If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.” ¹³Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. ¹⁴Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, “Behold, your King!” ¹⁵So they cried out, “Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” ¹⁶So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified. [NASB]

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I. Whose friend are you?

Choose your friends well, they say. It's a tricky business. It is often easier to let your friends choose you. But that can be dangerous. When you let your friends choose you, you may find that before long not only are they choosing you, they are also defining you. They begin to determine who you are and who you will become. Once your friends choose you, it becomes difficult to say or do things that might displease or disappoint them.

Once your friends choose you, you begin to become aware of the expectations they have placed upon you if you would remain their friend. What they expect of you begins to shape your thinking, your speaking, your acting. Sometimes it can be quite dangerous *not* to remain their friend. Once your friends choose you, it can be quite dangerous to choose other friends instead. Pilate was becoming more and more aware of all this with every passing minute, in this morning hour leading to the Passover feast.

Pilate has been scuttling back and forth between Jesus and the Jews. One Man silent; many leaders screaming. Pilate had a decision to make. He knew what he *wanted* to do. He even knew what he thought he *ought* to do. If Pilate had to choose a friend among these two parties, Jesus would have won hands down. But Jesus does not work that way. He only chooses friends hands *out*. So Pilate let the others choose him instead. He did this, even though he knew they were not his friends at all.

The Roman governor despised those he governed. He mocked them. He insulted them. He crossed them. Then he caved in to them. Can you blame him? Not as much as them. They, at least, knew what they were doing. They, at least, had the light of two thousand years telling them that God would Himself provide the sacrificial Lamb whose blood would be spilled instead of theirs.

They, at least, had the light of two thousand years telling them that the only way for God's judgment to pass over them instead of crushing them, would be for the blood of a spotless Substitute to be painted upon them. They, at least, had the light of two thousand years telling them that One named The Lord our Righteousness would come to deliver them from their rebellion against the King of all Creation.

Greater was their sin than Pilate's. Pilate didn't really know what he was doing. Poor guy. But his ignorance did not absolve him... because he still had a conscience. He was still in a position with authority... a position into which God Himself had placed Pilate.

Pilate was not a monster, nor was he inhuman. Pilate was like you and me. He liked to have friends. He knew the Jewish leaders were not his friends. He knew they hated him, and would make no bones about reporting to the Emperor any irregular behavior on his part. But there was one who had chosen Pilate as friend and with whom Pilate would choose to remain friends. Namely, Tiberius Caesar, the Roman Emperor. It was not convenient, you see, to lose your friendship with the Emperor, especially an Emperor who made no bones about executing anyone suspected of sedition.

Pilate was still trying to “do the right thing” and release Jesus. Pilate's “right thing” was informed by superstition; his wife had warned Pilate about her frightful dreams. His “right thing” was informed by his intrigue with Jesus; he recognized there was something very majestic about this man who would not crumple under the most gruesome scourging. And his “right thing” was, in some small way, informed by his conscience.

Hey ho... all such informing finds an easy exit when friendship with the Emperor is at stake. ¹²“If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.”

Right! Jesus said He is a king... He said so straight to Pilate. ^{18.37}“You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” Obviously, the Jewish leaders found it convenient in their envy to add a few minor words to Jesus’ claim. They added, “*of the Roman empire.*”

Apparently, Pilate had a short memory. Jesus had told Pilate only a few short hours before, ^{18.36}“My kingdom is *not* of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is *not* of this realm.” Jesus was no threat to Caesar. Jesus had no conflict of interest with Caesar. Jesus claimed no kingship in the Kingdom of Rome. He merely claimed kingship over the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

Poor Pilate... though not poor in spirit. His kingdom—at least at this point—was the kingdom of Caesar, the kingdom of the world, the kingdom of convenience, the kingdom of comfortable position, the kingdom of cynical self-advancement. Choose your friends well, so they say. Pilate knew that he had been chosen by Caesar... to be a friend of Caesar. Nothing was more important to Pilate, than to remain a friend of Caesar. *Nothing.*

II. Two rights don’t make a wrong

¹²“If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.” The Jewish leaders had their victory sewn up and they knew it. Now all they needed to do was to put the seal on it. Pilate was defeated and he knew it. Now all he had to do was to get in another thrust or two with his sword into the bellies of the Jews.

We behold an interesting choreography here. And as they say, two rights don’t make a wrong. Pilate was defeated. I think by this time he had made up his mind. No more trying to find a way out. No more trying to find a way to release Jesus. It was time for Pilate to sit upon the judgment seat. It is the official mark—the defining action—that the debate had come to a close. He sat upon the judgment seat in the court with the mosaic of large stones. The Lithostrotos.

Pilate was seated there in his position of power, a shamed man grasping at the wind to hold on any possible shard of self-esteem and cannot find one. So he descends into the pigsty of cynicism. What better place into which to drag the Jews if you want to insult them! It was the only way Pilate could find to rally up his deflated self—if he can deflate the Jews even more he himself is deflated, then at least he’ll have *some* sense of accomplishment.

¹⁴And he said to the Jews, “Behold, your King!” John was genuine—the Baptist, I mean—when three years before he pointed to Jesus and cried “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” Pilate was still trying when a few minutes before he brought Jesus out, crown of thorns piercing His cranium, purple robe drying to and pulling on the mangled flaps of skin. “Behold, the Man!” he had said.^{v5} Even then, Pilate was looking for a way out without crucifying the one they called Jesus.

But now there is no longer any way out. So Pilate spits out of his mouth both at Jesus and at the Jews, “Behold, your King!” As if to say, you Jews are really a pitiful breed. This is your King... and look how you would treat Him! You are despicable in your disloyalty to your own King. And of course, Pilate at the same time spews scorn upon Christ the King, who certainly

looks nothing like any *real* King in this stricken, smitten, and afflicted estate. What a *humiliating* specimen of a King, insinuates Pilate. Precisely!

Well, it appears Pilate succeeded in insulting the Jewish leaders, for now they cried out, ¹⁵“Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!” Have you ever stopped to think what Jesus felt at this moment? Have you ever felt dismissed? Rejected? Alone? Unacceptable and scorned by everyone around you? Considered worthy of nothing but the trash pile? Somebody has been there before you! He *knows*, then.

Well, I guess Pilate was not through quite yet. Another stab, another twist. “Shall I crucify your King?” Pilate taunts them one last time. He flaunts his own power over all the most powerful Jewish leaders, rubbing it in their faces that he—not they—has the power to crucify... and one more time shows how low the people must be in order to have a King that is so low as this Jesus is. And maybe Pilate is, one last time, venting his frustrated retribution at Jesus, who just moments before this had told Pilate that Pilate was really only a puppet: ¹¹“You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above...”

The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” They did not have to shout this one. Just a little, nonchalant statement. “We have no king but Caesar.” What a lie. Not a one of those Jews felt allegiance to Caesar. They bristled at their subjection to the Emperor, as they would soon prove in their rebellion that would result in the destruction of the Temple.

“We have no king but Caesar.” It was a lie, for they spoke what they did not think or believe. And yet it was true; it was right. Two rights don’t make a wrong. Pilate was right and the people were right. Pilate was right: Jesus *was* their King. And the people were right: Caesar *was* their king. They voluntarily subjected themselves to Caesar and in doing so subjected themselves to their King who is the King of kings: Jesus Christ.

Two rights don’t make a wrong. In the infinite wisdom of God, these two rights lead to a most perfect right.

III. Most Perfect judgment ever made by man

And that brings us to the most perfect judgment ever made by man. ¹⁶“So [Pilate] then handed Him over to them to be crucified.” And this is the most perfect judgment ever made by man: “Not guilty: Crucify Him!”

Pilate has repeatedly declared Jesus “Not guilty,” and now he judges Jesus worthy of crucifixion. “Not guilty: Crucify Him!” It just does not get any more perfect than that. However, there is another judgment that is every bit as perfect as “Not guilty: Crucify Him!” And that judgment must go together with “Not guilty: Crucify Him!” That judgment is: “Guilty: Free him!”

Pilate judges Jesus Not Guilty... and then gives Jesus over to be crucified. It is the most perfect judgment ever made by man. It is, in fact, the judgment closest to that of God: “Not guilty: Crucify Him!” Pilate does not know what he is doing. He is being the mouthpiece of God. “Not guilty: Crucify Him!”

The Law then having declared us guilty; God says, “Free him! Free her!” It is the perfect Judgment made by God. In the case of Barabbas the Jews have already been the mouthpiece of God. “Barabbas is guilty! Free him!” Barabbas is you; Barabbas is me. “Guilty! Free him! Free her!”

Most perfect judgments made by unwitting mouthpieces of God. Perfect judgments made in the silence.

Silence. The words have been spoken. Did you hear? ^{Jn18.37}“For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth.” What truth? “Not guilty: Crucify Him!” “Guilty: Free him!”

Silence. The words will be made clear to remove your fear. Will you hear? ^{Heb10.8}“Previously saying, ‘Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them’ (which are offered according to the law), ⁹then He said, ‘Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.’... “Not guilty: Crucify Him!”... ¹⁰By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” “Guilty: Free him!”

Silence. Have you noticed how silent Jesus is throughout this trial? A few words of reality in v11. A few words of reality describing all that is happening in the silence. What! Did you think God was not near? Pilate is acting only upon authority given from heaven above. Those Jesus came to save have the greater sin. It is all so very perfect. And so very silent.

Angels look on ready to help ready to bear up lest a toe of the Savior should strike a pebble. Yet the angels look on in silence. The Spirit of God rests upon the Silent One. But even the Spirit is silent too. Father in heaven, so well-pleased with His Son, beholds the Lamb He Himself provided. And He is silent.

Sometimes God’s mercy finds you only in His silence.

Great commotion among those who are judging. Why are not they silent too? God has spoken. It is their turn now.

“Not guilty: Crucify Him!” they cry.

“Guilty: Free Us!” they clamor.

Will you join them? It is your turn now.

Or will you remain silent?

Cry for the judgment of Jesus and the liberty of you.

Sometimes God’s mercy finds you only in His silence.

His love for you is known in this silence.

Make your love for Him known in your cry.