

Demanding That He Should Be Crucified
Luke 22:63–23:25
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Read Luke 22:63–23:25

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4b)

Introduction

In 2012, a man named Jack McCullough was given a life sentence for the murder of a seven-year-old girl outside of Chicago many years earlier. As he served his prison sentence, though, a newly appointed State Attorney conducted a six-month review of the case. He saw much more evidence for McCullough’s innocence, including records of a collect call made 40 miles away at the time of the girl’s disappearance, so he pushed for a retrial. Four years later, McCullough was exonerated and released, and actually sued the arresting officers for misconduct and was granted a \$300,000 settlement.¹ As we know, not every person wrongfully convicted is so fortunate. And a report in the *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* by Bruce Spencer of Northwestern University claims that in a study of 271 cases, juries gave wrong verdicts in at least one out of eight cases. His article asked, “As a society can we be satisfied if 10 percent of convictions are incorrect? Can we be satisfied knowing that innocent people go to jail for many years for wrongful convictions?”²

This morning’s Scripture passage is perhaps the most famous trial that resulted in a guilty conviction of an innocent person. It was not a jury trial, but a judgment from one man, Pontius Pilate, who would go down in history as the man who crucified Jesus unjustly. Left to his own legal opinion, Pilate would have done the right thing and freed Jesus. But the pressure of the people, as well as the sovereign will of God, compelled him to send Jesus to His death. The worst trial, the wrong verdict, and the most unjust legal decision in history, but one that was used by God for great good. Our passage consists of four sections, with Jesus standing before three different courts.

I. Abused and Accused Before the Jewish Council (22:63-71)

⁶³ Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him. ⁶⁴ They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?” ⁶⁵ And they said many other things against him, blaspheming him. ⁶⁶ When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. And they led him away to their council, and they said, ⁶⁷ “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 shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” ⁷⁰ So they all said, “Are you the Son of God, then?” And he said to them, “You say that I am.” ⁷¹ Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.”

In today’s justice system, there are often pretrial hearings meant to determine whether there is enough of a case to have an actual trial. This is essentially what happened to Jesus here – He was taken before the religious authorities for a pretrial hearing before He was taken to the Roman court. As He was waiting in custody, we see the abuse that Jesus had to endure from His own people. He had told the disciples He would be mocked and shamefully treated back in Luke 18, and that was certainly true as the guards blindfolded Him and hit Him. Luke actually calls it “blasphemy” in verse

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jack-mccullough-man-wrongly-convicted-in-ill-girls-1957-murder-is-released/>

² <https://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2007/06/juries.html>

65, which is speaking wrongly of God. Jesus will be accused of blasphemy during these trials, but Luke subtly shows us who is actually guilty of that charge.

William Barclay tells us that the Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court of the Jews, but instead of nine members like we have, there were seventy members, with representatives from the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, rabbis, priests, and elders. It could not meet during the hours of darkness, that's why verse 66 says they waited until day came.³ They asked Jesus if He was the Christ. Now, what's the difference between the Christ and the Messiah? Nothing, they both mean "anointed one," it's just that Messiah is the Hebrew word and Christ is the Greek word.⁴ (In case you thought that Christ was Jesus' last name, it's not, it's a title.) You notice throughout the Gospels that Jesus mostly avoided those terms, probably because they were so loaded with political expectations and baggage. Here He answered only vaguely because He knew they had already decided His fate. They were not asking honest questions, only looking for ways to sink Him further. Jesus spoke instead about the term He used much more often for Himself - Son of Man, which has its roots in Daniel chapter 7 where the Lord gives the Son of Man glory and a kingdom and everlasting dominion. The astute theologians on the council made the connection: "OK, if you're the Son of Man, then are you also saying that You're the Son of God?" And again, a vague confirmation - "*You say that I am.*". But that was all the evidence that this Jewish court needed to condemn Him and pass Him on to the Roman court. They felt like He had given them all the rope they needed to hang Him with.

They would have loved to have the power to actually hang Him or stone Him, but because Rome occupied the land, the Jews did not have the legal authority to condemn someone to death. So they turned to the reigning governor.

II. Innocent Before Pilate (23:1-7)

¹ Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. ² And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king." ³ And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." ⁴ Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man." ⁵ But they were urgent, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place." ⁶ When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷ And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.

The Jewish leaders brought Jesus before Pilate with three charges that had replaced the original charge of blasphemy. They knew that Pilate wouldn't really care about a religious crime, that wasn't a threat to Rome. So they accused him of political crimes - of stirring up rebellion, encouraging tax evasion, and being a threat to Caesar's throne - they needed to make Him sound as dangerous to Rome as they could. Pilate seemed to only care about the last one, asking Jesus directly if He considered Himself the King of the Jews. Jesus' answer seems to be a nonchalant version of "Your words, not mine." John 18:33-37a records a longer dialogue, so we know that Jesus did give a clearer explanation:

³³ So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), pp. 275-76.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 790.

over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”³⁷ Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.”

Pilate had no problem with a religious man saying that He’s got a kingdom that is not of this world. “That’s fine, have your kingdom in space, as long as you’re not planning to overthrow my government.” So he delivered his verdict: “*I find no guilt in this man.*” Case closed, judgment rendered, can we move on to something else? But no, the chief priests and the crowds were insistent that He was a threat. They mentioned Galilee in passing, and as soon as Pilate found out that Jesus was from Galilee, he jumped on that and said that He was under Herod’s jurisdiction.

Pilate passed the buck to the regional ruler,

III. Harmless Before Herod (23:8-12)

⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. ⁹ So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. ¹² And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

Remember that this is the same Herod who imprisoned John the Baptist, but then enjoyed listening to him, not wanting to kill him until his hand was forced by a pledge to his stepdaughter, who requested John’s beheading. When Herod first heard about Jesus, he thought that He must be John risen from the dead; then Luke told us in chapter 13 that he wanted to kill Jesus. Here, he clearly did not feel threatened by a Jesus in chains, he was excited and wanted to see a miracle. But Jesus was not going to perform for Herod, He would not even dignify his questions with answers. Even with the Jewish leaders standing there foaming at the mouth with accusations. Even with Herod and the soldiers mocking Him. Eventually Herod got tired of someone who was no fun to harass, so he dressed Him up in fancy clothes as further mockery and sent Him back to Pilate.

It’s always puzzled me that this turn of events made Herod and Pilate become friends. Was it Herod dressing up Jesus in fancy clothes that amused Pilate and helped thaw their previously icy relationship? If I was Pilate, I’d have been annoyed that Herod hadn’t made some decision that took the burden off of him. But it’s likely that Pilate was simply looking for advice, not for Herod to take action. We’ll see that Pilate appreciated that Herod came to the same conclusion that he did: that Jesus was innocent of any of the charges. But we’ll see how things progressed towards Jesus being

IV. Condemned in Place of Barabbas (23:13-25)

¹³ Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵ Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. ¹⁶ I will therefore punish and release him.” ¹⁸ But they all cried out together, “Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas”— ¹⁹ a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. ²⁰ Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, ²¹ but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” ²² A third time he said to them, “Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.” ²³ But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

It's very clear that Pilate did not want to condemn Jesus to death. He has looked for every way out that he could. But Pilate was not able to just make his pronouncement of innocence and have his way, most likely because of his fear that the Jews would start rioting and make more trouble for him. So first he offered to have Jesus flogged before releasing Him, but that was not good enough. The Jewish leaders and the crowd pressed for a death sentence. Before Jesus was arrested, the crowds loved Him; that's why the leaders had to have Him arrested in secret. But they've turned quickly to a bloodthirsty mob screaming for Jesus' death. So they brought up the idea of releasing Barabbas instead of Jesus. The other Gospels tell us that there was a custom of the governor releasing a prisoner during the Passover feast; the crowd could choose who that would be. The choice of whom to punish with death and whom to release from custody is between a man who was in prison for trying to overthrow the government and committing murder and a man who taught His followers to love their neighbors and their enemies and went around healing people. Pilate thinks that's an easy choice – release the non-violent offender who just doesn't line up with the exact doctrine of these inflexible Jewish leaders. But the crowd thinks otherwise.

I want us to notice two things about Barabbas:

1) First is his name – *Bar* means “son,” *Abba* means “father.” His name meant “Son of the Father.” So the question was: which Son of the Father should we kill? And the crowd cried out for Pilate to release the son of a human father but to condemn the son of the Heavenly Father.

2) What we see is that Barabbas' quick story is a visual of what is about to happen in the narrative for us: a man who was guilty through and through, already condemned to death and absolutely deserving of his punishment, would suddenly be released because an innocent Man would die in his place. Barabbas represents the position we all can be in: rescued from the penalty of sin and given our freedom because Jesus, the One in whom no one can find fault, suffered the death we deserve for our rebellion. Barabbas and Jesus changed places, just as He takes our place and we receive the rewards of righteousness and obedience. His condemnation is our pardon.

Pilate relented against his better judgment and granted their demand. He felt the pressure of this huge crowd gathered on a feast day. And it's not that Pilate was a particularly sensitive or people-pleasing kind of man. He had greatly angered the Jews on several different occasions and wasn't particularly remorseful about it. But ultimately, the mob's voices prevailed, and Pilate did what he thought he had to do to avoid a riot. How would you have done in Pilate's place? Would you have held your ground no matter what the mob screamed at you? Would you have delivered justice no matter who it upset? We'd probably all like to think that we would have acted differently, but it's easy to see ourselves in Pilate, making practical choices that take us on the path of least resistance. May God grant us the courage to stand alone in truth when we have to.

Conclusion

You will probably remember the name Johnnie Cochran, who famously defended OJ Simpson and other celebrities. He was once asked whom he would have liked to defend in court. His reply was, “Jesus is the person I would like to have defended. I would have relished the opportunity to defend someone who was completely innocent of all charges and a victim of religious persecution. However, because of his mission here, he would have undoubtedly declined.”⁵ What an interesting statement: an innocent person would have declined a defense lawyer who might have gotten Him cleared of His charges. As we've been discussing in recent sermons, it was not just the will of the Jews or the judgment of the Romans that sent Jesus to the cross: it was divine plan of God the Father, and the active acceptance and laying down of His life by Jesus. Acts 2:23 – “*This Jesus,*

⁵ <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/jesus-on-trial-scott-maze-sermon-on-good-friday-257166>

delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Everyone who had a part in unjustly sending Jesus to the cross was guilty of great sin, but God redeemed and used the sinful actions of men to accomplish His divine rescue of His people.

Michael Card concludes this section by saying, "In the two separate hearings before Pilate... and in a single appearance before Herod, the lips of two of the most irreligious, deceitful and bloodthirsty despots in the New Testament declare the truth that Jesus is, in fact, innocent."⁶ And He wasn't just innocent of the crimes for which they executed Him; He was innocent of all crimes, of all sins, of having ever done anything to hurt anyone else or to violate God's law. We can't speak of any other human being as completely innocent; we are all guilty of countless sin. As Gary Millar said, "*Place this man beside any of us and he stands out in blazing purity. The sweetest baby is exposed as a ball of snarling selfishness. The greatest humanitarian suddenly appears as a bundle of self-interest. Our grasping, self-serving, shameful black-heartedness serves only to illuminate his perfect innocence.*"⁷ He is the only truly innocent One. Pilate said so, the thief on the cross next to Him will say it, the centurion at the foot of the cross will say it. But the crowds would cry, "Guilty," and actually God the Father would say "guilty." Not because of anything that Jesus did, but because of what we did; the sin that was laid on Him when He died sacrificially in our place.

Human beings in every age have put Jesus on trial in their minds: Was Jesus who He said He was or was He a misguided delusional false Messiah? But be careful because Jesus is not the One on trial anymore. I am, You are, and every human being who has ever lived is in the defendant's chair. What Jesus said in verse 69 is now the reality: "*The Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.*" One day we will all appear before God for judgment. Unless we are perfectly innocent and righteous, we will be judged and punished for our sins. Every one of us is full of sin and selfishness; we have not kept God's law in any sense and have earned the worst sentence of eternal punishment. But praise God that Jesus provides our innocence for us; we who are believers are clothed in Jesus' righteousness. God declares us innocent when He sees Jesus in our place; His innocence is imputed to us/counted for us because our guilt was imputed and reckoned for Him. That offer is extended to all people. Do not leave today without considering the free offer of the Gospel: eternal life through Jesus; your guilt and allegiance in exchange for His innocence and love. It's the best offer you'll ever receive if you're humble enough to accept it.

One of my best friends, Tom, wrote a devotional and put some really wise thoughts into words:
"I can remember being a non-Christian. And though I never would have said it in these terms, I was quite happy being the once and future king of my own life. I had a custom-built throne, complete with gems of my own perceived righteousness. I was the master and commander of my own fate, my own destiny... Whenever people would try to witness to me, the real problem I had with it all, though I didn't admit it to myself until after I had abdicated my throne, was that I didn't want any other king but "His Royal Highness, Thomas Gardner." The Jesus that people were telling me about wanted to be King in my stead. And who was this Jesus - He was just the son of a carpenter from Nazareth and even I knew that nothing good could come from there. And so, I held on tenaciously to my cardboard crown, thinking it was made of gold, until the time was right, and in the travails of life, which eventually brought me to my knees, the Spirit... blew it from my head and I was laid bare, bowing before the one true Sovereign of my life.

⁶ Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), p. 250.

⁷ Gary Millar's chapter "Jesus Betrayed and Crucified" from *His Mission: Jesus in the Gospel of Luke* Carson & Nielson, ed (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 107.

Jesus was always the king, I had just been serving another, who like John, was not worthy to untie the laces of His sandals. I had been serving... a false claimant to the crown. I had been serving myself... The hardest thing for anyone to do is step away from the throne.”

Jesus said, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me”* (John 14:6). *“What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.”* These are the words of eternal life, come to Him, acknowledge Him as King and Lord of your life, and you will be saved. Amen.

Benediction

Ephesians 3:17b-19 - *“You, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”*