

Pilate

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, so we're going to be looking at John chapter 18 and chapter 19 tonight.

And as you know, we're going through this series, Encounters with Jesus. And we've looked at Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, the two daughters, Legion, and last time we looked at Lazarus, and there's a common thread in all of those stories, which is that there's a happy ending. And so it's almost like every encounter with Jesus that we've had before, the story is look how good, look what good things can come when people come face to face with Jesus. And unfortunately that common thread ends tonight because this is the story of Jesus's interaction with Pilate.

And as you know, that interaction does not end well and Pilate is maybe the last lengthy conversation that Jesus has with someone and it ends with Pilate sending Jesus to the cross to be crucified. And so we're going to look at this interaction of Pilate and Jesus and we're going to look at it in the Gospel of John because that's the longest account that we have, so you get the most texture for what happens between Jesus and Pilate. And I'm going to read this passage. This is from chapter 18 verses 33 and we're going to read all the way to chapter 19 verse 16. And there's two different moments where Jesus talks with Pilate here and then there's kind of an interlude where other really significant things happen. And I'm going to read the whole thing for context, but just know that as we come to this passage what has just happened is Jesus has been arrested. The Jews have taken him to Pilate and just before this passage they have asked Pilate to put Jesus to death and then this is where we pick up the story. So chapter 18 verse 33. So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, are you the king of the Jews? Jesus answered, do you say this of your own accord or did others say it to you about me? And Pilate answered, am I a Jew, your own nation, and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done? 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 over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world. 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. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Pilate said to him, what is truth? After he had said this he went back outside to the Jews and told them I find no guilt in him, but you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews? They cried out again, not this man but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber. Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him and the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him saying, hail king of the Jews and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, see I am bringing him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in him. So Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe and Pilate said to them, behold the man. When the chief priests and the officers saw him they cried out, crucify him, crucify him. Pilate said to them, take him yourselves and crucify him for I find no guilt in him. The Jews answered him, we have a law and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God. When

Pilate heard this statement he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, where are you from? But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, you will not speak to me. Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you? Jesus answered him, you would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin. From then on Pilate sought to release him but the Jews cried out, if you release this man you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar. So when Pilate heard these words he brought Jesus out, sat down on the judgment seat at a place called the stone pavement and in Aramaic, Gabbatha. Now it was the day of preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, behold your king. They cried out away with him, away with him, crucify him.

[5 : 14] Pilate said to them, shall I crucify your king? The chief priests answered, we have no king but Caesar. So they delivered him over to them to be crucified.

This is God's word. So that's Pilate's interaction with Jesus and we've spent 20 centuries trying to figure out who Pilate was. Was he a coward or a thief or a monster? And really the only thing that we can truly agree on, and even whether you're a Christian or not, is that what Pilate did in this scene was wrong because three times in this scene Pilate looks at the crowds and says, I find no guilt in this man. And even so he still decides to send Jesus to the cross.

So he knows he's doing wrong and he does it anyway. And when we read this story and when you read it in the context of the whole crucifixion, this is a tragedy, right? And more than anything, this is a tragedy about our Lord Jesus. You know, we look at this and we lament because we say they crucified our Lord. But there's another tragedy here as well, which is that this is a tragedy for Pilate.

Pilate is a man whose world in its own way falls apart in this scene. And that's what I want to talk about tonight because this is about Jesus's interaction with Pilate. And I want to look at why Pilate's story is a tragedy and I want to offer two reasons tonight. First, that he couldn't see the truth and second, that he didn't know the truth's power. So just let me just review the facts of the early case because this is a trial after all, right? And it's helpful to know what exactly is going on and it's easy to get lost in this. But when the Jews bring Jesus to Pilate, their accusation against him and the reason that Pilate puts him on trial is this question, is he really a king? Because if Jesus really says that he is a king, then that means that he's a threat to the Roman Empire. And that is why Pilate would have caused to crucify him. That would be a legitimate case against Jesus. And so what happens is right when Pilate gets Jesus, that's his first question, is are you a king? Are you the king of the

Jews? And Jesus' answer is, he says, do you say this of your own accord? But then he goes on to say, Jesus goes on to say, my kingdom is not of this world. If it were of this world, my servants would have been fighting. And this is a really interesting answer because on the one hand, if Jesus is affirming the fact that he's a king, because he has a kingdom. But he's also telling Pilate, you have no reason to fear me in the sense of I'm not starting a, not a resurrection, but a revolution. Yeah. So he's saying, yes, I'm a king, but I'm not guilty in the sense that you would accuse me, which is I'm not trying to overthrow Caesar. So he says yes and no. And then he goes on to explain, he says, you say that I'm a king.

[8 : 32] For this purpose, I was born him. For this purpose, I've come into the world to bear witness to the truth. And then he says, everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. And then Pilate gives one of his famous sayings, and he has so many famous sayings. Doesn't he? I wash my hands of this. But here he says, what is truth? And most people agree that the fact that he immediately goes somewhere else shows that he's not waiting around to find out what Jesus has answered to that question is. And that what Pilate is doing here is he's being sarcastic, or he's being disdainful, because Jesus has just said, if, what did he say? Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. So he's, it's almost like Pilate is saying, he feels offended. Like, I'm not of the truth because I don't listen to your voice. And I found this quote by an old Anglican minister named JC Ryle that I thought was really powerful. And he talks about what it means, what is Pilate saying when he says what is truth? And this is the way that JC Ryle described it. He says, these words, these sarcastic and cynical words sound like the language of one who has heard from his earliest youth so many barren speculations about truth, quote unquote, among Roman and Greek philosophers that now he doubts its very existence. So even though Pilate is being sarcastic and maybe disdainful, most people agree that underneath that, what you see is this man who, he's not a relativist, he's not saying all truth is good and so we should pursue all truth. He's a man who's saying, we can't know the truth. He's given up on the search for truth. He's a cynic. And what he's making here is not a philosophical point. He's saying, why would you come to me speaking about truth? Who can even know what truth is anymore? And you might call him a pragmatist. And he certainly tries to be pragmatic throughout the rest of the story, but what he's not definitively is a seeker. And I think when we asked that, when I said here at the beginning, the tragedy of Pilate is that he couldn't see the truth. I think one reason why Pilate couldn't see the truth is that he was not looking for the truth. So here's a man who had given up, not just about Christianity, but who had given up on the possibility of finding a true truth in this world. And that's a tragedy when you get to a point in your life and you say, you know, you've heard so many people claiming truth in this world and you finally get so cynical about it all that you say, I'm not even gonna look anymore. And one of the takeaways that I find from this passage is what we hope as we talk about sharing the gospel with our neighbors, what we hope is that our neighbors will be seeking the truth. And so that one thing that we can pray for the people that we know and love who don't know the gospel is that even if they don't know the gospel, that they would come to a place in their lives where they want to know truth and they're seeking for answers to the reason life is the way that it is. And if they get to that place, then we can welcome them and we can say, if you're looking for the truth, we have a few suggestions. But as it is, Pilate is in a tragic state where he's not even looking for truth anymore. And because of that, he can't see the truth that's standing right in front of him. And you know, there's that famous line and we say it here quite a bit, Matthew 11, 28 to 30. Jesus says, come to me, all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. And what we have is this confidence that we can tell people, if you're looking for the truth, Jesus is there ready to meet you to tell you what that truth is and offer it to you. So what we

have is hope. So that's what truth is for Pilate, is that which cannot be known and that which I will not search for. But it also raises another question which I think is really interesting about this passage, which is, what is Jesus' view of truth here? And when you read the Gospel of John, what you find is John is if I can use the word, he's obsessed with truth. Like the word truth or true happens in the New Testament around 160 times and more than half of those times is in the Gospel of John. So it's really significant what's happening in this passage because John has been talking in his whole gospel about what is truth.

And what you find is that John, when John talks about truth and when John describes Jesus talking about truth, truth has two different meanings that overlap. Truth can mean on the one hand that which accords with facts. So I could say, you know, myrtle is wearing a blue sweater and what I have said is truth. So I have truth in one sense. But John oftentimes talks about a different kind of truth that contains that, but it's even so much more because when John talks about truth, what he means is the ultimate divine reality. So to put it another way, whenever Jesus talks about truth in the Gospel of John, he's not just talking about what is factual. He's saying there is a reality out there that we have to understand to understand the Gospel. And that's why in verse 18, chapter 18 verse 37, Jesus can say here, you say that I'm a king for this purpose I was born and for this purpose I've come into the world to bear witness to the truth. And then he says, everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. If the truth there was just a set of factual statements, that wouldn't make a lot of sense. Like everyone who is of a set of factual statements listens to my voice.

What Jesus is saying is truth is the divine reality. And it's almost the same this when Jesus was talking to Nicodemus and he was talking about the need to be born again to see the kingdom. Being of the truth is almost synonymous with being born in the kingdom. You have access where you can see a reality that you didn't know existed before, but that is the truest reality that there is. And there's all kinds of actual facts that are involved with that. Like there is a God that he has sent his son to teach us about himself, that his son is the king of the kingdom and that it is the truest divine reality. And let me just make this a little practical. I don't want to lose you here. The question about truth here is do you see it? And it's a question that's not just for a pilot and we're not just standing here to mock Pontius Pilate, but I think most of us here are committed to saying that we have found truth in Jesus Christ. And that means it's not just a question of do we accept the facts of the gospel. It's do we see that in our reality? There was a minister named Francis Schaefer who is a famous apologist and he told a story one time where he was flying over the

Atlantic in a propeller plane with two propellers on the right, two on the left, and he was sitting next to the window on the right wing and both of the propellers just stopped and the plane started to go down and they were bracing for impact. And I guess it was happening slow enough that they were reporting it on the national news in America as the plane was going down. And what Francis Schaefer did in that moment was he just started to pray and he said, God please help us through this. And he later found out that his family was praying as well.

[16 : 40] And he says that he could see the water. That's how close they got to the water. And then the propellers started to spin and they got lift again. And when the plane landed he said he went and talked to the pilot and the pilot said, you know, it's anomalous that those things stopped, but it's impossible that they started spinning again. And Francis Schaefer looked at him and he said, I think I know what happened. You know, he said I was praying to God that those propellers would start spinning again, that we would be saved, and the propeller started spinning again. And he said that the pilot looked at him like he was a fool and just, you know, had just had a blank stare and just walked away that it just made no sense to him whatsoever. But what Francis was saying was that's the difference between someone who can only see the material world and someone who appreciates that there is something more to this life than what we can see with our eyes. And so one of the questions we have to ask ourselves is, do I live like all there is, is a material world? Or for one example, you know, when I bow my head and pray, do I believe that can actually affect the world around us? And pilot could not imagine a world like that, but Jesus could. And that's what we have in

Jesus is the truth, not just a set of facts, but a new way of understanding our reality. Okay, so part of pilot's problem is he couldn't see the truth, even when it was standing right in front of him. And the second problem is this, and I'll be brief, that he didn't know truth's power. And to understand this theme in the scene, you have to understand a little bit of some of the ways that John describes truth. And I want to read one verse that I'll read it and you'll know the verse. But there's a there's a time when Jesus looks at the Jews who began to follow him. And he says this about truth. He said this is in John 8:31. So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, if you abide my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth. And what the truth will set you free. So what Jesus is saying is once you come to grasp the truth, what you have is not just a set of facts, but something that can actually free you from a slavery that we all live in, which the which he goes on to describe in that passage as slavery to sin. And this is a really interesting way of thinking about this scene with pilot, because what Jesus is saying is if you have the truth, you have found freedom. And if you don't have the truth, you are living as a slave to sin. And yet what is happening in this passage is Jesus here is a prisoner and pilot is the free man judging Jesus. And yet as the passage moves on, the roles reverse. And what it looks more like is Jesus is the one who's actually in control here, even though he's going to the cross. And pilot is the one who looks desperate and who makes decisions that probably at the beginning of this night he could not have imagined. And there's a few ways that pilot situation dissolves here. One is in verse seven where pilot says Jesus is innocent. I don't want to crucify him or he doesn't deserve to be crucified. And the Jews say, and this is not all Jews, but the Jews who are there to accuse him, the Jews say we have a law.

And according to that law, he ought to die because he's made himself the Son of God. And that's an interesting thing that they said there because that's not the accusation they came in with. But when he finds him innocent of the first accusation, he said they say, well, you know, he also calls himself the Son of God. And pilot's response is it says when pilot heard this, he was even more afraid. And most commentators say the reason he was afraid is because he realized the Jews were not going to let this one go. And that even if he found him innocent of one crime, they wanted that man dead that day. So pilot becomes afraid because he realizes this situation is not in his control. And he goes back to Jesus. And then from pilot's perspective, things get even worse because the prisoner is not responding to his questions. And he says to Jesus, where are you from? And Jesus doesn't answer. And most commentators think the reason he doesn't answer is because pilot has stepped into a territory that is not his domain. You know, it was fair for him to ask, are you a king? Are you a threat to the Roman Empire? But now he's asking questions that he has, Jesus has no obligation to answer. And then Jesus says this. So pilot says, in frustration, I assume, pilot says, you will not speak to me. Do you not know that I have the authority to release you and the authority to crucify you? So he turns to the fear tactic. And Jesus says, you would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above. And the way that one commentator describes that moment of what Jesus says there is, in this moment, Jesus lays bare the actual situation of the moment, which is to say

Jesus is saying to Pilate, you think you're in complete control, but you're not. And the irony is the man in the scene who is in chains is the one who actually understands what's going on here. And Pilate is the one that's afraid. And so what you have here is this portrait of two different men. One is afraid and he knows that he's losing his grasp. The other one, Jesus, has just been tortured by the Romans and he knows that he's facing a cross. And yet even so, you might be able to say he's afraid of facing the wrath of God in one sense, but he is not afraid of Pontius Pilate. And the reason is, which he explains in this passage, he is aware that there's more going on here than what you can see with your eyes. And Jesus walks throughout his whole ministry knowing that even in the worst of circumstances, his Heavenly Father is with him. And I don't know if you remember two weeks ago when we looked at the story of Lazarus, there's that beautiful line where Jesus looks up at heaven and he prays to God. And you remember what he says? He says, Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me. So Jesus is never afraid of the man that's in front of him, partly because he always walks in this freedom of knowing that his Heavenly

Father is always with him. And yet Pilate is terrified and insecure and out of fear he's driven to do something that he hates. And you see this in the last section. It says Pilate sought to release him in verse 12 from the very end, from then on Pilate sought to release him. And the Jews, what did they say? If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. So they're threatening Pilate like we will, this is blackmail. If you don't send this man to the cross, we're gonna report you to Caesar for being unfaithful to the crown. And because of that Pilate sends, knowingly sends an innocent man to the cross, something that he, it says he did not want to do. So in order to keep some level of security in his own life, Pilate becomes the very things that he hates. So to take that back to what that verse that I quoted at the beginning where Jesus says, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. In this passage, Jesus had, I mean I don't want to,

[24 : 43] I don't want to be flippant because this was an excruciating moment for him. But he had this anchor in his soul that saw what truth was and that God was there and that this was all a part of God's sovereign plan. And that kept him from being afraid of someone like Pilate. Pilate had none of that. And because of that he was a slave to the situation. And we have to remember that what we have in the truth here is not just knowledge. We don't put a sign outside of St. Columbus saying come here because we have all the answers. We have, we have the right textbook. What we believe as Christians is that when you come face to face with what truth actually is, it changes you and that you can find freedom and that you don't have to live your life. Even when we face trials, we still can find freedom from being chained to the sin of this world. So the tragedy of Pilate was that because he could not see the truth, he missed out on the power of truth. And in this short scene he becomes the very thing that he hates. And I'll just close with this. Jesus in this passage speaks about bearing witness to the truth. But of course, John, Jesus gets way more audacious than that. And in

John 14 he says, I am the way, I am the truth, and I am the life. And this is a sad passage and it doesn't end well, at least in this moment. But we can look at Pilate and we can say to ourselves and to the world, it doesn't have to end this way for us because what Jesus offers us is hope. And Jesus says in this passage, I came to bear witness to the truth. And that means that the truth is not something hidden and far away and inaccessible, but it is something that if we cry out to God for, he will give us because he's not stingy. And if we can find that truth, and if our neighbors can find that truth, the promise that we have is that we will be set free. So let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the hope that we find in Jesus. And we pray that the people that we know and love in this city would not turn away from Jesus. And we pray that you would give our neighbors and you would give us hearts that want to seek for the truth. And that those that we love, even if they don't know the truth, that they would find you as they seek for the answers to the reasons that life is the way it is. And we pray that you would even help us to ask the right questions to our friends and our neighbors so that we would challenge them and that we would help them to see that they don't have to give up on the search for truth, but that we can find it in you. And we ask all this in your son's name.

Amen.