

At the time of the Festival the governor had a custom to release to the crowd any one prisoner they wanted. ¹⁶ At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when they were assembled, Pilate said to them, “Which one do you want me to release to you? Barabbas—or Jesus, who is called Christ?” ¹⁸ For Pilate knew that they had handed Jesus over to him because of envy.

¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judgment seat, Pilate’s wife sent him a message. “Have nothing to do with that righteous man,” she said, “since I have suffered many things today in a dream because of him.” ²⁰ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus put to death. ²¹ The governor asked them, “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?”

“Barabbas!” they said.

²² Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?”

They all said to him, “Crucify him!”

²³ But the governor said, “Why? What has he done wrong?”

But they kept shouting even louder: “Crucify him!”

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing and that instead it was turning into a riot, he took water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, “I am innocent of this righteous man’s blood. It is your responsibility.”

²⁵ And all the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”

²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them, but he had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified. (EHV)

Theme: Hands of Self-Preservation—Pilate

When bad things happen our natural instinct is to protect ourselves and our own self-interests. When you were younger and you and your sibling got in trouble, what did you do? You threw your sibling under the bus! We never really stop doing such things even as we get older. If you run into some issues at work, you look for a fall-guy to pin the blame on, even if it is your fault. How many times don’t those in charge do such a thing! That’s what Pilate did—he did what he knew was wrong—condemning an innocent man to death, to preserve his own self-interests.

As the Romans Governor in charge of Judea, Pilate alone had the power to put someone to death. The Jews condemned Jesus as worthy of death because of blasphemy, that is, ridiculing or disrespecting God. According to the Old Testament, the penalty for blasphemy was death by stoning. But the Jews didn’t have the jurisdiction to sentence someone to death; only Pilate did. But that charge wouldn’t stick with Pilate—it may have been against Jewish law but not Roman law. Pilate wasn’t a Jew, he didn’t care about the Old Testament. So, when the Jews brought Jesus to Pilate they didn’t bring up blasphemy, instead they charged Jesus with treason—Luke records the Jewish leaders saying, **We found this fellow misleading our nation, forbidding the payment of taxes to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.**

So Pilate examined Jesus about this claim that Jesus was a king. Jesus, of course, did not intend to set-up an earthly kingdom that would be any threat to Caesar, but a spiritual one. Pilate knew that Jesus wasn’t a threat to the state, he wasn’t going to start up an insurrection against the Roman government. If anything, in the mind of Pilate, Jesus was only guilty of being a religious kook. But he certainly was not guilty of anything deserving of death.

And he said so. He said that Jesus was innocent time and time again. By comparing Luke's and John's account it seems that Pilate announced the innocence of Jesus five separate times to the Jews.

Pilate's wife knew the same thing. She had a dream, probably given to him by the Lord, that caused her much trouble. So, she sent word to Pilate, **Have nothing to do with that righteous man.**

Herod also came to the same conclusion as Pilate, and as his wife had warned him. Pilate knew without a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was innocent. And so he tried to get Jesus released in multiple ways. There was a tradition at the time of the Passover for the Roman governor to release to the Jews a prisoner whom they requested. Pilate had an idea, he would give them a choice: Jesus, who was innocent who some called Christ, or the Promised Messiah; or Barabbas—an infamous criminal who had started an insurrection and committed murder during it. Certainly, they wouldn't want such a horrible person back on the streets; it was a sure-fire way of getting Jesus released. But the plan backfired. The Jewish leaders persuaded the people to ask for Barabbas to be released and Jesus to be crucified.

Then, Pilate thought that he could appease the Jew's bloodlust by severely punishing Jesus. He had Jesus flogged. His soldiers took Jesus and beat him, crowned him with thorns and so on—as Pastor Gartner talked about last week. And then he brought Jesus out in front of the people—all bruised, bloody, and humiliated, and said, **Behold, the man.** Pilate hoped that this was enough to satisfy the Jewish leaders, but they shouted even more for Jesus' death.

In these two ways, plus telling the people time and time again that Jesus was innocent, Pilate tried to release Jesus. Plus, John flat-out tells us, after everything with Barabbas and the flogging took place, **from then on Pilate tried to release Jesus.**

But Pilate didn't release Jesus. What changed his mind? Pilate fought the Jews, he told them Jesus was innocent, and yet he still sentenced Jesus to death. Why? The Bible indicates two separate reasons.

One was the crowd. The Jewish leaders had incited the crowd so much that they had whipped them into a frenzy. They kept on shouting, **Crucify him, Crucify him.** Matthew writes, **When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing and that instead it was turning into a riot, he handed Jesus over to be crucified.** Pilate weighed his options, and he figured that Jesus wasn't worth saving—keeping peace in Jerusalem was more important than an innocent man's life; and to avoid the headache for himself, he had Jesus crucified.

The other reason was the threat of the Jewish leaders. John tells us that when Pilate tried to let Jesus go the Jewish leaders responded, **If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar! Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar!** If Jesus would start a rebellion and try to reign in place of Caesar, and it was found out that Pilate had Jesus in custody and refused to do anything, he would be held accountable. Or, even if the Jews got word to the Roman officials that Pilate was not acting in the best interest of Caesar or the Roman Government, then it would hinder Pilate's career. So, in order to keep his political aspirations on track, he handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Pilate was the one man who could have freed Jesus—and he knew that he was innocent. But Pilate figured that his life and his life's ambitions were more important than Jesus' life. So he protected himself and his own self-interests instead of doing what was right. He even went so far as to wash his hands in front of the crowd as a symbolic gesture and claim that he couldn't be blamed for Jesus' death, **I am innocent of this righteous man's blood.**

He could wash his hands all he wanted, but it doesn't matter. He could claim he was innocent, but he was far from it. He is just as guilty of Jesus' death as the Jewish leaders and the crowd of people. And for centuries we have remembered Pilate as the spineless Roman governor who failed to do what is right and sentenced our innocent Savior to death.

We look down upon Pilate, but at times, we may do something similar. How many times have we chosen to protect ourselves and our own self interests instead of doing what is right? Or how many times have we failed to stand up to those who were doing wrong? And why do we do such things—because we are busy looking out for ourselves. Maybe it's to save face in front of others, to keep our career aspirations going, or to further our friendships with others. And we know better; but we try to convince ourselves otherwise, and we make excuses for ourselves, trying to justify our own actions.

You know what happened to Pilate, Church history tells us a few years after this, his political aspirations fizzled and he died poor and in shame as he killed himself. That's what happens when we try to save ourselves, when we look out for ourselves first—it never ends well.

Thank the Lord for Jesus! He is the only one who has never chosen himself and his own self-interests instead of others. Jesus certainly could have acted in his own self-interest. As we talked about earlier this Lenten season: even when he proved that he had divine power at his disposal, he allowed himself to be arrested. He didn't need to go through everything that he did at the hands of the Roman soldiers, as we talked about last week. He didn't have to be crucified—he could have come down from the cross.

And when Pilate questioned him, he didn't say a word. The gospel writers record that on four separate occasions when the Jews accused Jesus and when Pilate questioned him, Jesus remained silent. He didn't defend himself at all. The only times when Jesus spoke up was to declare who he is—Christ and the Son of God, and to talk about his spiritual kingdom.

Why didn't Jesus speak up, why didn't he defend himself? Because he had to be crucified. He wanted to go to the cross. He wasn't concerned about himself; but us—he wasn't interested in preserving his life, but to saving us for eternal life. So he sacrificed himself and suffered through the hell that we deserve so that our sins would be covered and our guilt removed. Pilate didn't think Jesus was worth saving so he protected himself—praise the Lord that Jesus saw us as worth saving so he didn't protect himself!

We like to praise Jesus for everything he has done to save us, but it is also good and right to praise Jesus for everything he didn't do to save us. He was the one person—even more than Pilate, who had the power to put a stop to all of it. But he didn't! Because he cared more about us than his life, because he wasn't concerned about self-preservation but preserving us for eternity, he refused to save himself and let it all happen to him so that he could pay for our sins and rise for our salvation!

Because of what Christ has done for us—we strive to live our lives not for ourselves but for him who saved us. And when we fail—as we often do by being self-serving, we turn to the Lord for forgiveness. And we know that because he didn't serve himself, but us by giving himself up as our sacrifice, we are forgiven now and forever. Amen.