

An Understandably Confused Pilate (27:11-26)

Good morning everybody. My name is Colton LeBoeuf, and I am the Director of Groups & Member Care here at City Church. We just came up on one year of me serving on staff here and I just want to say thanks for putting up with me you guys. It's been an honor to serve you all and encourage you on your journey pursuing Jesus.

Today is my wife's birthday. Give it up for her! She turned 25 again today so I thought we could all sing her happy birthday. Just kidding! Please don't. She's got a very specific expression on her face that is aimed at me and I need it to stop. Rather than embarrass her this morning I thought I'd embarrass myself instead. Let me share with you a little pattern Mary Cate and I find ourselves in often. Working for City Church means that I don't have the traditional weekend like most 9-5 jobs. Sundays require a bit of work for me, as you can see (gesture to podium). So my days off are Friday and Saturday. And while Mary Cate is at work on Friday, she often gives me a list of things to do on my day off. Now before you do what I do and complain that that's not fair and say something like "how could she be so cruel to you to ask you to WORK ON YOUR DAY OFF?", understandable objection, I'll give you that. But honestly you should know this: Mary Cate is gracious and compassionate, and she will only give me one thing on the list. Just one thing. Do whatever you want all day, but please make sure you do one thing to help our family. Sometimes it's mow the yard, unload the dishwasher, or schedule my dentist appointment. It's always something I can handle, and usually doesn't take all that much time, and she doesn't really care how it gets done. I could cut the grass with scissors for all she cares. Yet **sometimes**, more often than I care to admit, I still manage to forget to do the one thing she asked me to do. Or I just put it off for so long that I don't have time to finish before she gets home, so why bother starting? And what's the first thing I know she's going to ask me about when she gets home? You see, far too often she comes home and says. "Dude you had one job, seriously? I just expected you to do ONE THING and you had all day to do it..." Then she quickly forgives me and I don't make the same mistake until next Friday. In today's passage we are taking a look at a Roman governor named Pilate who also in a way has just ONE job. More on Pilate in just a minute. I just want to point out my incredibly smooth transition into today's teaching. Feel free to jot down in your notes something like "wow what a smooth transition".

We are in Matthew 27 this morning, starting in verse 11. While you're getting there I'm going to catch you up a little bit on where we are in the story. Two weeks ago, Eric took us through the absurd, rigged trial that Jesus went through. The way His trial went down wouldn't even fly in the show Suits, much less any legitimate court today. Jesus was arrested by an armed mob in the middle of the night and put through a complete sham of

a trial. He was found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to death by the Jewish leaders. They had rules to protect the integrity of their trials and yet they seem to have broken every one of them during Jesus's trial. To me what's even more bizarre about the whole trial is that they actually weren't able to carry out their verdict. They condemned Jesus to death but Verse 1 of chapter 27 says that they had to then make plans as to how to actually have Jesus executed.

In order to have Jesus executed, they end up sending Him to a Roman Governor named Pilate. Now, Pilate, like I mentioned earlier, really had only one job. For Pilate he's got only one directive that Rome expects of Him. His ONE JOB is this: don't let the Jewish people start a riot. You see, his position was basically just to make sure they didn't forget that Rome was in charge. At this time the Romans were in control of most of the discovered world and they appointed people all across their territory to keep their conquered populations civil and to squash any attempts to free themselves from Roman rule. That's it. Do whatever it takes to make sure that there isn't an uprising. Pilate had the authority even to hold public executions to discourage said riots. Just do whatever you need to do to make sure no riots or uprisings take place.

Verses 3-10 take a quick detour to take a look at how two of Jesus's disciples responded to the verdict, which Kent unpacked for us last week. We pick the story back up just after Jesus's sham trial as he is brought before Pilate, verse 11.

11 Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"You have said so," Jesus replied.

Jesus had the same response in the sham trial we mentioned a few weeks ago. He was asked by the Chief Priests if he was the Messiah; He responded with the same words, "you have said so". He was basically saying "it is like you say", and He then went on to double down on the statement with a very inflammatory description of himself seated at the right hand of God. **Here**, however, He uses the same words, but things are a little different. This time He seems to be saying yes and no. Let me explain.

Throughout the book of Matthew, Jesus talks constantly about the Kingdom of God, and He explains over and over and over again how His kingdom is *different* from all the kingdoms we have known. He is an altogether *different kind of king* from every king we have known, and therefore a different kind of king than we know to expect. Historically, kings conquered through force, through battles, and through wars. Pilate, well aware of his ONE job, asks not "are you the messiah (savior)?" as the chief priests did but "are

you the KING of the Jews”. What he’s really getting at here is more like, “are you the kind of leader who will cause trouble for ME?” Or more explicitly “are you coming after Rome?” Jesus’s answer here says both “yes, I am a king as you say” but also “no, I’m not a king in the way you are expecting.” It’s pretty clear to Pilate that He doesn’t need to worry about Jesus leading a physical army against Rome. I mean come on, Jesus seems to have no one in his corner at the moment, much less an army. Pilate still doesn’t know why Jesus is all the sudden his problem. If he could clearly tell that Jesus intended to start a militaristic revolution against Rome, his judgment of Jesus would be incredibly concise and straightforward. Instead, verse 12,

12 When he [Jesus] was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” 14 But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

Pilate doesn’t understand. He is thoroughly confused. He says here “well, if you aren’t really a threat to Rome, what about your leaders’ accusations? You haven’t sufficiently explained yourself to me, and didn’t explain yourself to them. Care to let me in on what’s really going on here?”

In Luke’s gospel account, Pilate at this point tried to pawn off this whole mess to another court, and sent him over to Herod. Herod questions him, becomes equally confused, and sends Jesus right back to Pilate. They are both perplexed by this guy. Neither one of them sees a solid reason to have Jesus killed. It’s like, “Come on, help me help you, Jesus. Why aren’t you saying anything? Why aren’t you defending yourself?” Jesus could make this whole thing much easier if He just said out loud what He **could** say. But Jesus is silent, just Scripture said He would be in Isaiah 53:7:

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

See, I said earlier that Pilate’s ONE job was to not let the Jews start a riot. What I didn’t say is that he was walking on pretty thin ice. Before this we know that Pilate had already had two serious on-the-job blunders¹ that almost started riots, and he was already in the hot seat with Rome. He’s on strike three and can’t make another mistake, or he’s not only losing his job - he will likely lose his life too. And here in front of him is Jesus, and things aren’t quite adding up. Pilate doesn’t get how Jesus was found guilty in his previous trial and he really doesn’t understand how he is expected to find Jesus guilty

¹ The New Testament In Its World (Pg 100), *NT Wright*

himself. Jesus was known to be called the messiah or savior of the Jews; however, He has already said that he's NOT the kind of king anyone expects and he certainly doesn't look to Pilate like the guy who'd start an uprising. And I think it's this thought that gives Pilate a way out. Well, he thinks it will be his way out anyway. Verse 15:

15 Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. 16 At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. 17 So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" 18 For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

Pilate already has a custom in place to placate the crowds. Every year at this time, he sets free one of their own. It's typically nothing more than a gesture to appease the crowd. But, this time Pilate sees it as a way out. He thinks Jesus is innocent, and he offers the people a choice. Jesus Barabbas has already been convicted undeniably as a traitor, murderer, and leader of a Jewish uprising. He isn't just guilty, the guy is on death row and everyone knows it!

Pilate sees this as his way out. What person in their right mind would choose to set free Barabbas instead of Jesus? This one seems pretty cut and dry: **Option 1:** Free Jesus Barabbas - convicted felon on death row. Guilty before Rome, but we'll overlook that. No big deal. **Or Option 2:** Jesus Christ, we all know he is innocent, and in case you forgot you guys kind of call him your savior. Surely they will see how silly they're being and let him go...

19 While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

The plot thickens. As if things couldn't get more tense for Pilate, he gets a text from his wife reaffirming what he already suspects, which is that Jesus is innocent. Once again in the book of Matthew we see this theme of reversal come up: The people *who should get it* (God's people, the ones who cried hosanna a few days ago) **don't get it** - the people *who shouldn't get it* (Roman governor's wife) **do**. Theologian **Matthew Henry** puts it this way in his commentary²:

When his friends were afraid to appear in defence of him, God made even those that were strangers and enemies, to speak in his favour; when Peter denied him, Judas

² Matthew Henry https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Mat/Mat_027.cfm

confessed him; when the chief priests pronounced him guilty of death, Pilate declared he found no fault in him; when the women that loved him stood afar off, Pilate's wife, who knew little of him, showed a concern for him. Note, God will not leave himself without witnesses to the truth and equity of his cause, even when it seems to be most spitefully run down by its enemies, and most shamefully deserted by its friends.

Short side note here that I don't want us to miss: God speaks to people, and evidently even to people who don't even believe in Him, through dreams. We see this in scripture all over the place. God spoke to King Solomon in a dream³, He spoke to Joseph in dreams⁴, In Acts 2 we see Peter at pentecost reciting an old testament prophecy saying point blank that God will pour out His Spirit on all people and that we will prophesy, see visions, and dream dreams⁵.

I know this might seem weird to some of us, but this absolutely does still happen today. Countless friends of mine have had these experiences and If you are curious and want to know more I'd love to tell you about some of them.

Let's go back to Matthew 27, Pilate puts before the crowd Jesus Barabbas, convicted insurrectionist, and says surely you guys want to see this guy crucified... not Jesus... right?" Verse 20,

20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

The amount of times these guys double down on their sin is just incredible. Now, we don't know exactly what they said or how they said it, but one way or another, the Chief priests and elders convinced the crowd to choose Barabbas. This is just me speculating, but It could be that they threatened and manipulated the crowd with their power and status. Or they may have convinced the crowds to realize that Jesus was not the kind of King who would overthrow Rome, but that Barabbas actually **could** fit that mold. Verse 21,

21 "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

³ 1 Kings 3:5

⁴ Matthew 1:20

⁵ Acts 2:14-21

22 “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” [you know... the one you call your savior] Pilate asked.

Pilate here is double, triple, and quadruple checking here. He is giving them every possible chance to change their minds—because it seems like that’s what they *should* do.

They all answered, “Crucify him!”

23 “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

Now Pilate is begging them. PLEASE... Give me ONE good reason

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

24 When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar (i.e. a riot) was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!”

Pilate gives up... There is a riot starting, and if you remember from earlier Pilate literally has only one job: DON'T LET A RIOT START. He is about to lose his job. This crowd is not budging, not only that but they are getting loud. Have you ever heard a crowd yelling? I mean it's LOUD. You know at Neyland stadium when the crowd meter starts shaking and your ears are on the verge of ringing? The crowd has made their decision, and doubled down on it again and again. So he makes this gesture of washing his hands as an attempt to remain innocent. He’s saying “I don’t agree at all with your premise for wanting this guy dead.” He’s not going to say that Jesus is guilty, but he will put Jesus to death if it means he gets to walk away.

Now, this next verse here is my least favorite verse in all of Matthew. Look how they respond:

25 All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

This to me is absolutely heartbreaking. The people of God, the ones who God himself is about to be crushed and crucified for, are so sure of themselves that they demand Jesus be crucified. Not only that but they insist that they go on record condemning Jesus. His blood is on us and on our children: “we’re so certain this guy deserves to die that we’ll put ourselves and our families on the line. Execute him.” Verse 26,

26 Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

And so it begins... Next week.

So I don't know about you, but for me every time I read through the bible, I try to place myself in the story. And the longer I follow Jesus, the less sure I am that I do a good job at casting myself for the part. Let me explain. As much as I'd like to, I won't cast myself as Jesus because I don't want to be prideful. That one seems to me like the clearest answer throughout the book of Matthew. Jesus says or does something and my first thought is usually, "Welp, that's not how I would have handled that". And if I'm being really honest, In this story I have often seen myself the way that Pilate sees himself in this story.

Some ridiculous situation is brought before me, I do the best I can to figure it out, and when I can't figure it out I'll pretty much just wash my hands of the matter and let the chips fall where they may. I don't cause big problems and I don't really do anything wrong. Ever. I just do the best I can. I'm an innocent person walking through this minefield that is life, doing the best I can to survive. That sin stuff really isn't a sin because I had no other choice. I would argue that that sin was the right thing to do. So Pilate, man I get it, I feel your pain.

Now, those who know me well are probably laughing at me here because they see clearly that is not what is happening. And if we are really honest with ourselves and take a good look at our hearts, we aren't Pilate in this story, at least not how he sees himself. And if we aren't Pilate and we aren't Jesus then where do we really fit in the story? Great question I'm so glad you asked.

Before I get there let's answer one more question, Why is the crowd so irrational? Why do they choose the obviously wrong thing when the innocent Jesus stands right in front of them? **The crowd is irrational because SIN is irrational.** I know that sin does not satisfy. I know that last time I ran to this sin it wasn't good for me. It didn't fix me, it didn't make the situation better, and yet I have this little thought that just won't go away: maybe this time will be different? Maybe this time when I gossip and trash this person's reputation I'll really get over my need to compare myself to them. Maybe this time when I run to pornography I won't feel so alone. Maybe this time when I overeat it will really make me happy.

Sin does not make sense yet it's just as the proverb goes: like a dog returns to its vomit so fools repeat their folly⁶.

Paul puts this really well in **Romans 7**. Let's start in verse 21,

So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?

Do you hear what Paul is saying here? He knows what the right thing is. He even delights in it! Yet in the same breath acknowledges that there is a war in his mind and he does the things he does not want to do. Sin at its very nature is irrational.

This crowd, just a few days earlier, was shouting for joy as Jesus rode into town. And now they are shouting "Crucify Him!" at the top of their lungs.

So back to my question from earlier, who are we in this story? Welp, here's the bad news:

WE ARE THE CROWD

You're offended. I get that. After all, I did just compare you with a crowd of people who willfully condemn Jesus. What they do here in the story is incomprehensible. It is irrational. It doesn't make sense and they do it on purpose. But let me ask you something. Do you ever find yourself praising God easily and passionately when everything is going your way, and the moment things are hard and painful and confusing you dismiss Jesus altogether? Are you happy to talk about Jesus in this building and to worship with your hands lifted, but at work you tell your coworkers you kinda like Jesus but you also kinda don't...

We'll shout hosanna to Jesus when it feels good in the moment, but when the moment ceases to serve our express purposes we turn and shout "crucify him".

And while you probably aren't running around town, screaming "crucify him" pitchfork in hand, let me ask you something. Do you ever do the wrong thing on purpose? Do you ever decide that you know better than Jesus and you're just going to do what you're

⁶ Proverbs 26:11

going to do? Do you ever say, “be quiet Jesus. That’s not my problem. That’s not my fault. You deal with it. If you’re upset or if other people get hurt or offended by this, that’s not my fault. Honestly, it’s your fault for not taking care of my problems”? **As uncomfortable as it is to realize. We make the same kinds of irrational decisions as the crowd all the time.**

Like when we are tempted by that familiar sin. Whether it’s an addiction to drugs or alcohol or pornography or gossip or overspending or overeating, our internal dialogue can go like this, “I know this isn’t right. I know this won’t satisfy me. I know Jesus has more for me. But this just is what it is right now. I have to do this”. And I don’t know about you, but somehow I find a way to make it God’s fault. If God hadn’t put me in this situation I wouldn’t have sinned. If God were paying attention to me then I wouldn’t be tempted. If God really knew what MY situation was like He wouldn’t ask me not to do this.

We know that the crowd and Pilate are both guilty. It’s pretty hard to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord AND that it was the right thing to put him to death for telling the truth. If you have a workaround for that statement I’d love to grab coffee and pick our brain a bit.

So that’s the bad news: we are the crowd. **But for those of us who can see ourselves as Pilate and as the crowd here, in other words those of us who know we are guilty, I have some very good news: not only are we the crowd,**

WE ARE BARABBAS⁷

See, Barabbas is the last person I tend to see myself as in the story, but stay with me here for a minute. When we realize that we actually are the crowd we realize that we are guilty. And in this story the only person that everyone agrees is guilty is Barabbas, so let’s put ourselves in his shoes for a minute.

Imagine this with me, if you want you can close your eyes: You have been found guilty by a judge and jury. Not only that but you have plead guilty, you have been convicted, and now you sit on death row. The only thing you can do now is wait to be executed. There is no final appeal, there is no last ditch effort, ~~there is no Harvey Specter swooping in at the last minute to have the case dropped.~~ There. is. no. hope.

The doors open, blinded by the sun you are brought out before everyone. You hear a mob shouting “Crucify him! Crucify him!” over and over and over. Shouting *your* name. In

⁷ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/we-are-barabbas/>

the distance you see your cross where it all ends. The chains come off, you close your eyes and breathe what you imagine will be your last unlabored breath...

Just then, the noise begins to fade. You feel a tingle in your spine and when you open your eyes you see another man in your chains, someone else being marched to your cross. The shouts aren't for you, they are for Jesus. Jesus Christ is led away with your guilt, your shame, and your punishment. He takes your cross, you get His innocence. The most unfair trade in the history of the world, that you didn't even know to ask for. Your guilt, for Jesus's innocence. And as [2 Corinthians 5:21](#) says,

[God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.](#)

[This is the good news for us Church: God himself took our punishment, our guilt and decided that we are free, that we are innocent. In this story today we are the crowd, we are the ones who shout hosanna and the ones who shout crucify him. We are the ones who shout his blood is on us and on our children. And in this story we are Barabbas, the guilty one who is found innocent.](#) And on us the blood of Jesus is given. The innocent and righteous blood of Jesus is poured out over us and over our children. Jesus is able to redeem even humanity's most egregious and conscious failure.

In just a moment we are going to go to the tables and take communion together. When we take of this bread and drink from this cup we are remembering Jesus's sacrifice for us. We are acknowledging that God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

We are also going to have our prayer team up front and up in the balcony for anyone who is in need of God's grace. They are up here for anyone who is hurting, lost, or afraid. And maybe for you in this room they are here to introduce you to Jesus for the first time. Whatever it is for you this morning, don't leave this place without responding to the gospel.

Jesus is unlike anyone else. Earlier this morning, I read you a verse from [Isaiah 53:7](#) prophesying Jesus's silence during his trials. I wanted to wrap up this morning by declaring the truth of the gospel over you by reading these verses over you starting at [verse 3](#),

[He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces](#)

he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

In the moment of humanity's greatest disgrace, God performs the greatest miracle on our behalf: The Lord has laid on him, on Jesus, the iniquity of us all.

Let me pray for us as you begin to respond to Jesus.