

Part 83: The Trial of Eternity

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February 25, 2024

A perfect date night for my Sarah and I is some sort of true crime podcast or documentary. Stories like these often reveal the implications of what it means to be made in the image of God. Most often they revolve around two assumed realities: the sanctity of life, and a deep desire for justice to be done.

Our passage in Luke today is a true crime episode which includes real people and real demands for justice. John Stott once famously quipped, "Why did Jesus die?" to which he answered, "He didn't, he was killed."

Jesus' death was not an accident, it was an intentional act. But an act of who? Pilate? The Priests? The Crowds? Who killed Jesus? As we watch true crime, it's very rare that the outcome of the investigation has any impact on our lives. But your life is already shaped, and will continue to be shaped by your answer to the question, "Who killed Jesus?"

You'll notice that our passage includes two clear statements of guilt, and yet it is not Jesus who is declared guilty. Instead he is declared innocent three times in this text. It is therefore not the condemnation of the creator we see in this passage, but the wholesale condemnation of the creation who put him to death. Yet even in this darkness, we find hope.

Our big picture is this: **The gospel is the story of Jesus' perfection, our perversion and God's provision.** We will look at this in three parts, first we will **The Innocence of Jesus**, the **Irrationality of Sin** and finally the **Inevitability of a Better Will**.

Jesus seems to be on trial for a fourth time this morning, and it's the decision of this trial which finally puts Jesus on the cross. However, as powerful as this court was, it was not a real court at all. The official proceedings happened last week before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. This, this is the court of public opinion.

If the Scopes Monkey Trial was billed as the "Trial of the Century" in 1925, then despite its informal nature, what we have today is "trial of all eternity." In fact we find prophetic fulfillment here stemming all the way back to Psalm 2 where David says, "Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed."

Luke identified these very parties present in our text today, **Luke 23:13**, "Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people."

Some of you I'm sure remember gathering around your TV or radio to hear the OJ Verdict in the 90s. More of you might better remember LeBron's televised "Decision" in 2010 where nearly 13 million people tuned in to hear his final choice for which team he would play for. And as Pilate gathered these people together the anticipation for his decision was equally as culturally charged and exciting.

Having concluded his investigation, Pilate was going to give the formal opinion of the court in the same way the Supreme Court would today. It was “can’t miss” TV.

His opening statement represents the legal nature making known the charges, his mode of investigation, his conclusion and his final judgement. **Luke 23:14-17**, "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. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him."

This went over just about as well as if LeBron told us he was taking his talents to H&R Block. It's not what they wanted to hear. This is our first point today: **The Innocence of Jesus**.

His conclusion was: "This man has done nothing wrong." If you remember back to the first trial Pilate investigated, his conclusion was the same: **Luke 23:4**, "Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no guilt in this man.'"

Later on in our passage today Luke tells us, **Luke 23:22** "A third time [Pilate] said to them, 'Why, What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death.'" This three-fold vindication of Jesus by the Roman court was meant to communicate absolute guiltlessness.

This is particularly relevant for us because Pilate had one job and that was to make sure uprisings like the one Jesus was accused of didn't happen. As we see with Barabbas, such political tantrums were common which is why the seat Pilate held in Judea was so important. It was regarded as the greatest training ground for Roman political elites. If they could keep peace in Jerusalem, they would prove themselves worthy of more responsibility.

Pilate's examination of Jesus was thorough, and he makes it clear that Herod's lower court also cleared Jesus. Let's remember Herod was king of the Jews, so if anyone were to care about Jesus' claims having any truth—it would have been him.

Why is this important? Because two men who would have much to gain in seeking truth—sought truth and communicated it. Pilate made it clear by saying not only that Jesus didn't deserve to die, but that he had done no evil.

This is because Jesus is God. Even in the incarnation, the perfect, holy and spotless nature of the Son was unaffected. As the author of Hebrews says, he was like us in every regard and yet, "without sin."

Perhaps you've heard someone described as having "impeccable taste." We use that phrase to describe someone incapable of choosing something of lower quality. Theologians have long spoken of Jesus' impeccability. He was unable to sin. In his character he could not choose anything but what was good, holy and right.

As fallen humans, we can't wrap our minds around what it would be like for a human, like Jesus to be totally free of guilt and evil. You might be the sweetest person in the world, but if the whole world got access to the hard drive of your heart—would they declare you innocent of guilt or evil? Wholly perfect and good?

But the more Jesus was examined, the more beautiful he became even by the declaration of pagan rulers. A.W. Pink once said the trials of Jesus were like a crushing of a rose—the more he was pressed

the more fragrant his aroma became. When we are pressed, we stink. When Jesus was pressed, he became more lovely, and his purity was even more on display.

But it's also important to notice when Pilate declared Jesus perfect he simultaneously declared the crowds as imperfect.

The ESV translates Pilate's judgement as "not guilty," but other translations say, "no grounds" or "no basis." And that's because the object of his declaration is not actually Jesus—it's the charges of the crowd. The crowd and the prosecution failed the trial.

In America, there's a legal charge called, "malicious prosecution." Pilate's decision in practice turned the court revealing the evil intent of their charges. "You," he says, "have brought baseless charges against an innocent man. You are the ones misleading the court and the nation."

None of us will ever stand before Pilate. But all of us will stand one day before the decision of God himself. And in that court, what you think of Jesus, what you have claimed about Jesus, and how you have treated Jesus will be examined—and apart from divine grace it will be said that your actions are "baseless and without warrant."

You might accuse Jesus of many things, all of which seem to justify your belief or unbelief in Jesus. Our modern world and our functional atheism has no lack of these claims. We could charge him for false teaching, choosing instead to disbelieve his word. We could charge him as being harsh and vindictive. We could refuse to believe him because he is anti-women, bigoted, authoritarian, or even abusive.

But to accuse the very Son of God of such things is to file a losing claim. In all his perfections, he is without blemish. Just like in Pilate's court—it is us who will be seen as unjust, imperfect, and biased. We are the insurrectionists.

True justice doesn't find its origin in Greek thought or modern democracy. It's wrapped into the taste buds of our heart because we are made in the image of a just God. Innocent till proven guilty isn't a worldly concept, it's a divine one. These very religious lawyers who brought these knowingly false charges would have known passages like this within God's own law: **Exodus 23:2**, "You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice."

But siding with the many, and perverting justice is exactly what these men did. And despite Pilate's protestations, it's what he ends up doing as well. We live in a justice hungry world, but there is no greater miscarriage of justice than what these parties chose to do to the only sinless, spotless human, Jesus Christ.

This is what leads us to our second point this morning: **The Irrationality of Sin.**

By the end of this passage the injustice is abundantly clear. But what we also see is how irresistible the sinful ideas and affections of our unredeemed hearts are.

Pay attention to what both parties seem to want in this text. At face value it appears that Pilate and the Jews want two different things, but in the end they all want the same thing.

What does Pilate want? Luke gives us a unique insight into Pilate's motives here. **Luke 23:18-21**, "But they all cried out together, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas"--a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!'"

It's impressive how Luke paints Pilate in this passage. He is seen as the one who is trying to stop this whole thing. He's trying to stop it because of a desire in his own heart. He is genuinely interested and involved in this cause.

In fact, when we look at all four gospels, Pilate attempted to release Jesus and distance himself from these trials in five different ways. First, he declared Jesus innocent. Second, he sent him to Herod. Third, he offered to teach Jesus a lesson, beating him and releasing him. Fourth, he offered a prisoner exchange. And finally, Matthew tells us he washes his hands having given Jesus over to the crowds.

Now, it's easy to look at the event surrounding Pilate and feel sorry for him. He's trying to do a good thing. He didn't want Jesus to die. But let's bear in mind what we know about Pilate. First, he was the only one who held the ability to condemn Jesus to death. Second, he had the authority of Rome behind him. Third, he had already showed an eagerness to flex his might through violent acts. In Luke 13 we already learned of Pilate killing a bunch of revolutionaries in Galilee. Fourth, historical witness emphasizes Pilate's penchant for making and doing hard things, often with great brutality. One contemporary called him, "a man of very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate."

Why is this important? Because if Pilate desired to release Jesus, he had the power, the position, and the authority to do it. But at the end of the day, he desired something else. He was not disinterested in Jesus' own freedom, but when push came to shove, he was more concerned with his own desires.

Maybe you've heard the phrase, "vote with your feet"? Well, Pilate here voted with his feet. And we ought to be humble enough to see where we do this as well. It's all too easy to show a heart which seems interested in Jesus, or even to believe some of who Jesus claims to be, or to believe you want what Jesus wants. But what happens when wanting good things of Jesus clashes with wanting good things for yourself.

Pilate desired to release Jesus, but he also desired the path of least resistance. Though he wanted it, he didn't want it enough. At the end of the day, if we believe who Jesus is, then we cannot subject him to our wants—we subject ourselves to his. Someone or something is always sovereign over you, and despite what he thought he wanted, his desire for self-preservation and comfort made him do what he didn't want to do. Though he seemed to have more window dressing, at the end he wanted the same things as the crowd.

The crowds were just more honest about it. They don't change their mind, they become increasingly aggressive about it. First they demand simply for Jesus to be taken away, but ultimately they will be satisfied with nothing less than the crucifixion of Jesus.

Left unchecked, sin always escalates. We saw that with Peter, and we see that here as well.

Luke only gives a little bit of time to the release of Barabbas, but what time he does spend he stresses the irony and contradiction of it all. It was customary at the time of the Passover, as a sign of goodwill, for Rome to release a prisoner.

The other gospels tell us that Pilate, in an attempt to free Jesus, recommends Barabbas. Why Barabbas? Well it's probably because he's the worst they've got right now. If the Jews are so seemingly concerned about the health of their nation, maybe they'll be more content with Jesus than with this guy.

Luke tells us Barabbas was a convicted insurrectionist and murderer. Matthew adds he had a notorious reputation and Mark tells us he was also a rebel and a robber. This guy isn't winning any citizenship awards.

Now the contrasts and irony between the Jesus and Barabbas are incredible. It starts with the fact that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, and Barabbas' name means "Son of the Father." Jesus was declared innocent by a court. Barabbas was condemned by a court. Jesus had done no evil, Barabbas was notoriously evil. Jesus told the Jews to pay their taxes to Rome, Barabbas was a rebel to Rome. Furthermore, Jesus had spent his ministry among the people healing the sick and raising the dead, whereas Barabbas spent his time robbing the vulnerable and making people dead. Finally, Jesus was accused of starting an insurrection, but Barabbas actually led a bloody insurrection.

Here's the irony of their options. For the Jews to choose Barabbas was to choose the one most likely to do them harm. To release Barabbas, Pilate was to release the one most likely to get him fired. Any normal person would see the danger and foolishness of this decision but look at what happens: **Luke 23:23-25**, "But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demands should be granted. 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."

They wanted what was dangerous and delusional.

In the book of Jeremiah, God is calling out to sinners to return to him. He says, in **Jeremiah 6:16-17**, "Come and find the ancient path, find the good way and find rest for your souls...but they said, 'We will not walk in it.' He then says, be warned and pay attention to the warning trumpet, and they say, 'We will not pay attention.'"

Our hearts are free to choose at any point in time a multitude of options but as long as we are in sin, we will always choose poorly. Sin always chooses what's dangerous. It exchanges the benefactor for a barbarian, a savior for something sinister, and eternity for immediacy.

It will always cause us death. And it will do that chiefly because your sin, caused Jesus' death.

This is the full purpose of Jesus' trials. These many trials of Jesus show that he wasn't just condemned by the religious, or the Romans, but also by the rest of us. Jews, Judges and average Joes are all guilty. All demanded the death of God. Your sin, my sin, our sin at its core wants Jesus dead.

The puritan pastor, Stephen Charnock says it this way, **"Every sin is...an aim at the destruction of the being of God...[thought not the known] intention of every sinner but [it is] the nature of every sin...A**

man in every sin aims to set up his own will as his rule and his own glory as the end of his actions against the will and glory of God; and could a sinner attain his end, God would be destroyed."

As soon as I had kids I realized something really quickly. Despite how cute and lovely they are, kids only want what kills them. They are convinced that licking that light socket and eating that battery is the surest way to the good life. Sinners always want what satisfies them. That's the problem. What satisfies sinners at our core is one thing: the death of God.

We often try in half-hearted ways to this end, and this is why we have yet to find a sin that satisfied us. If you want satisfaction and peace finally as a sinner—you must finish Adam's rebellion. You must kill God. That is the want of all of our souls. Paul tells us that all of our stories begin, "while we were enemies." That is what we want.

Notice how Luke's conclusion dramatically draws out the wills of everyone: **Luke 23:24-25**, "So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted 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 wills."

Nietzsche didn't declare God dead. Modernism didn't declare God dead. Sinners, all sinners, declared God dead. The triumph of human will is not a cure for cancer or affordable healthcare. The triumph of our will, our eternal Babel is the condemnation of our own creator.

We stand condemned.

But the beauty of this passage is that despite the will of broken sinners, there's another will at play. This is our final point this morning: **The Inevitability of a Better Will**.

We want God dead, and we get the reward of our wants. But the cross was not only what we wanted, it was, against our want what we needed. It was to put it another way, what God wanted. It was the will of God to crush God (Is. 53).

Jesus himself had already said, in **Luke 22:22**, "For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined." Peter standing before many of the same Jews a few weeks after this decision said this: **Acts 2:23**, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

Men killed Jesus, you killed Jesus. But it was God's will, Triune will, Jesus' will to die. So that those who wanted him dead might see that they need him dead. Jesus died for sinners to condemn them, but Jesus died so that sinners who turn in faith might see him punished in their place.

To those who feel trapped in the consequences and inevitability of your sin, there is a God who seeks your good when you cannot. And the very moment of your crowning guilt can be by grace the very moment of your crowning favor.

Paul says this in **Romans 5:6, 8-10**, "For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly...God showed his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled we shall be saved by his life."

As one 19th Century pastor said, "Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear, not the Jews for envy; but the Father, for love."

Darkness, death, perversions of justice, desecration of life, slavery to passions, those are all that our hands have wrought. But for those who see that, those same acts are our deliverance as Jesus the innocent dies in the place of us, the guilty.

You see people often point out that we are Barabbas, the guilty exchanged for the innocent. But before we are Barabbas, we need to realize that we are first Pilate. We killed Jesus. We are not neutral.

I'm fascinated by Pilate because I've been him too many times. What's interesting is that despite his best attempts, and despite the Bible placing the majority of the weight of Jesus death on the Jews, the church has long confessed that "We believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried."

For some reason, Pilate has been placed as the token head of sinful rebellion. I always like to do a little thought experiment. What if Pilate got saved? We know he was torn. We know he was conflicted. But what if he heard of the events which took place three days later? What if he said as the Roman guard, "Certainly that man was the Son of God"?

And what if for the last 2,000 years he has heard his name pinned to the death of Jesus?

My guess is, he wouldn't change a thing. He'd say, "Yes, I did it. I crucified Jesus, yet it was he who was crucified for me. I condemned the innocent. And now this guilty soul is free."

As another theologian once said, "Only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross may claim his share in its grace."

We lost the trial. But Jesus won our salvation. So let those who shouted according to the unredeemed wants of our souls, now repent and shout with redeemed affections. With redeemed eyes, let us praise the crucified Lord not with eyes of fury, but with eyes of faith. Not with calls for his condemnation, but with the sober reality of our own.