

PASSION PERSONALITIES: PONTIUS PILATE

JOHN 18:28 – 19:16

Pontius Pilate. What do you know about him? Secular Roman historians give us information about Pontius Pilate that goes beyond the biblical accounts. They tell us he was a Spaniard who went to Rome seeking fame and fortune. He married very well – the granddaughter of the Roman Emperor Augustus. He was appointed the governor of the Roman province of Judea about the same time Jesus began his three years of public ministry. Pilate was the governor for ten years – ten very bitter, hostile and contentious years. Historians describe Pilate as a foolish leader. He did little to hide his utter contempt for the Jewish people. He went out of his way to provoke confrontations with them. After his stint as governor of Judea, little reliable history can be found. Some say he committed suicide. Others claim Pilate and his wife became Christians. Be that as it may, historians are virtually unanimous in describing Pontius Pilate as a stubborn, proud, corrupt, violent and cruel man who lacked the character, strength or sensitivity to govern anybody anywhere very well.

We don't have the time to read all the Bible passages that mention Pilate, but let's read at least one this morning. (John 18:28-19:16) For someone who had a reputation for being unjust, Pilate seemed very interested in trying to free Jesus, didn't he? On three occasions in that passage he declared Jesus innocent. He tried to get Jesus released. Elsewhere in the Bible, we read how Pilate sent Jesus to King Herod – the Jewish puppet ruler at that time – hoping that Herod could find a way to free Jesus. That didn't work. Then Pilate offered to release Jesus in keeping with the custom of letting one prisoner go free during the religious festival of Passover. But the crowd wanted someone else released instead: Barabbas. Then, Pilate decided to have Jesus flogged and whipped mercilessly to satisfy the mob's bloodlust. That backfired on him. Finally, Pontius Pilate gave up and gave in. There's that pathetic scene recorded in the Bible. "When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere and that a riot was imminent, he took a basin of water and washed his hands in full sight of the crowd, saying, 'I'm washing my hands of responsibility for this man's death. From now on, it's in your hands. You're judge and jury.'" (Matthew 27:24 MSG)

Why did Pontius Pilate try so hard to set Jesus free? Who was Jesus to him, after all – just a country bumpkin turned preacher? Why not just give the Jewish leaders what they wanted and be done with it? The best suggestion I've heard is based on this verse. "While court was still in session, Pilate's wife sent him a message: 'Don't get mixed up in judging this noble man. I've just been through a long and troubled night because of a dream about him.'" (Matthew 27:19 MSG) The Romans were very superstitious when it came to dreams and were always wanting to find out if their gods thought a particular course of action a good one or not. Pilate was smart enough to know that Jesus was being falsely accused. No doubt he was impressed with how Jesus handled himself. But when his wife brought him this additional warning, I believe it provided the main reason for him to fight for Jesus' release. But it was all for nothing. Pontius Pilate proved to be

a coward at the most crucial moment in his life. The mob prevailed. Jesus was crucified. When I consider Pilate and his story, two lessons stand out to me. First of all, you can learn something about...

WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE TRUTHFULLY.

Jesus and Pilate had a fascinating conversation. "Then Pilate said, 'So, are you a king or not?' Jesus answered, 'You tell me. Because I am King, I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice.' Pilate said, 'What is truth?'" (John 18:37-38 MSG) What was Pilate's tone of voice when he asked that question, "What is truth?" Probably a cynical, sarcastic tone: "So you claim to have a corner on 'truth', do you, Jesus? Just what is truth?"

Pontius Pilate lived in a cynical, despairing age. But I hope you hear the voice of your own culture in Pilate's question, "What is truth?" Where, after all, can you find truth, honesty, certainty and integrity? Washington? Spare me. How about in our great institutions – our universities, our corporations, our financial, legal or medical systems? Not so much. Religious groups or churches? Good luck. Many people conclude that the only place to find truth is in oneself. So, where is truth? What is truth? There's still a great hunger for truth today – for integrity, for certainty – and yet dismay as to where it can be found and what it is.

Jesus' statement underlines three facts about truth. First of all, truth is something that can be known with certainty. Jesus said, "...I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth..." During the last century, many Americans have given up the idea that there's such a thing as absolute truth. Most believe that truth is relative. What is true today may not have been true 20 years ago and may not be true 20 years into the future. What is true for you may not be true for me. What is true for Americans might not be true for Africans. Because many people believe truth is relative, they also assume that truth is selective. If it fits into the way I'd like the world to be, then it must be true. If it violates some personal value, it can be rejected. Inevitably, this leads to deep disillusionment because there's nothing objective upon which to build your life, your values, your morals, your sense of direction or your purpose in life. There's nothing certain to pass on to your kids.

I was fascinated by the journey of a man heavily influenced by New Age thinking and values that has so permeate every nook and cranny of our culture. Someone asked this man, "What caused you to second guess what you were involved in?" He said, "It was the moral anarchy. I became part of a group and we used to sit around and talk about what 'my truth' was. One person would say, 'My truth is doing/saying/ or acting out his form of morality.' And someone would say, 'Oh, that's nice. That's your truth. Well, this is my truth.'" This same man got the idea that his wife of many years was not as beautiful and wonderful as another woman in the group. That woman said her truth was that that they ought

to get married. The man said, “I thought about it more, and after awhile I decided that was my truth, too. So we got our truth together. I divorced my wife. She was very upset, but I told her, ‘Honey, this is my truth.’” One day this man was invited to church and the pastor gave a message about human beings standing before a holy God one day and being held morally accountable for their actions. The Holy Spirit spoke to that man at that moment. He said, “I knew I was playing games. I was just making up the truth. That’s all I was doing: manufacturing the truth I wanted for myself so I could live the way I wanted to live. The next morning I fell on my knees, and I received Christ and forgiveness.”

Jesus proclaims that there is something called “the truth.” Any and all truth is related to that ultimate truth which is found in God alone. This is truth that doesn’t depend on your acceptance of it to make it truth. You can observe it, discuss it, analyze it, test it and decide either to accept it or reject it. You can live truthfully, my friend, when you first realize that there is an ultimate truth that can be known, believed and lived out every day of your life.

Second, Jesus implies that truth exists outside of you. Ultimate truth comes from God. It’s not the product your own human reason or intellect. Truth resides in God, not in you or me. Furthermore, God gives truth to you by something called revelation. It’s primarily found in the Bible itself. Here’s the claim that the Bible makes about itself, “Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17 MSG) That’s why every Jesus follower needs to become a lifelong student of this book. You can’t afford to be ignorant of it. It’s the truth. Don’t limit your exposure to one message preached or one Sunday School class or small group you attend weekly. Learn to read it for yourself. Learn to study it for yourself. Learn to interpret it for yourself. Learn how to meditate in it for yourself. Your ability to live truthfully largely depends on your willingness to absorb the truth God has provided.

Third, Jesus also implies that truth is embodied in a Person. Remember, He “... ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.’” (John 14:6 NLT) said, Now, this is the other side of the coin. Living your life truthfully means more than mastering a bunch of Bible facts and having all your doctrinal “t’s” crossed and “i’s” dotted just so. Ultimately, truth is a Person not a bunch of propositions. I heard that Nikita Khrushchev – the Communist leader of the former Soviet Union way back during the Cuban missile crisis in 1963 – had memorized the four Gospels when he was a boy. Imagine that! He memorized truth but he never came to know the Truth. The Truth is Jesus. When you sincerely enter into a relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior, you enter the realm of truth forever. Now, that doesn’t mean you know everything. Nor does it mean that everything false or wrong in you personally just suddenly disappears. This encounter with the Truth is both an event and a process. It begins when you put your trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord and

then it becomes a process. Gradually, exposure to the Truth – Jesus – changes you. You become more authentic, more real, more genuine.

There's an amazing irony here. Pontius Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" Standing there right before him that day was the Truth. Condemn Pilate if you want. But here's the thing. You and I know far more about this Jesus than Pilate ever could have known. Do you live truthfully? Do you live in the light of God's Word? You say you know Jesus. So how has knowing Jesus as the Truth changed you recently – your attitudes, your behavior, your ambitions? When you consider Pontius Pilate and his story, you can learn, secondly, something about:

WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE COURAGEOUSLY.

For all Pilate's arrogance and bluster, he proved to be all too human. You will never be faced with the monumental events Pontius Pilate had to deal with, but you do face some of the same issues on a smaller scale. So here's the first conclusion. You live courageously when you choose to fear God more than people. That sounds easy enough, but it's not. Pilate made the tragic choice of fearing people more than God. In the passage we read earlier, the Jewish leaders made it only too clear that they would go over Pilate's head if necessary to get Jesus executed. The Bible says, "...Pilate tried his best to pardon him, but the Jews shouted him down: 'If you pardon this man, you're no friend of Caesar's. Anyone setting himself up as 'king' defies Caesar.'" (John 19:12 MSG) Historians tell us that the Emperor Tiberius had already reversed one of Pilate's earlier decisions. Pilate probably feared getting into trouble with the boss once again. He despised the Jewish leaders who wanted to crucify Jesus, but he feared their influence. Pilate was afraid of people. Inevitably, he ended up obeying their shouts, their demands and their will. He refused to do the right thing and ended up condemning the Son of God.

Are you so different? Spring baseball training has begun! I enjoy the story of Marty Springstead's first major league appearance behind home plate as a baseball umpire. It was a memorable one. It was way back in 1966 in Washington, D.C. when Frank Howard, an absolutely enormous man, stepped up to home plate to bat for the then Washington Senators. The first pitch to Howard was a knee-high fast ball. Springstead called it a strike. Howard turned around and thundered at the rookie umpire, "Get something straight, buster! I don't know where you came from or how you got to the major leagues, but they don't call that pitch on me a strike. Understand?" The next pitch was also a knee-high fastball. Springstead yelled, "Two!" "Two what?" Frank Howard roared. "Too low, much too low," said Springstead. Every now and then you will meet someone who wants you to compromise your values. They want you to call balls when they're strikes or call strikes when they're balls. There will come a time in your life – and in the life of every Jesus follower – when you will have to decide who you fear more – God or people. Don't assume it will be an easy decision. There may well come a time when you must choose God instead of the wishes of

a family member, a friend, or an employer. You live courageously when you choose to fear God more than people.

Second, you live courageously when you refuse to be just a victim. I suspect that Pontius Pilate concluded he had little choice but to condemn Jesus. Everything was stacked against him. By washing his hands of the blood of Jesus, he tried to convince himself that it wasn't his fault. I wonder if at some point he said to himself, "Why me? Why do I have to make this decision? What I have done to deserve this?" You can sometimes see yourself as just a helpless victim before life's great challenges and problems. "Why me? What I have done to deserve this?" You can approach life with a kind of endless victim mentality.

But you don't have to live your life that way. We all have limitations and challenges, that's for sure! But, at the end of the day, you choose to become the person you become. You may have grown up in a seriously dysfunctional home and the scars are still there in your soul. You may have suffered the effects of poverty or neglect. You may have been abused in some way. You may have struggled with an addiction to drugs, alcohol, gambling or pornography. You may have suffered through a terrible divorce or you may right now today be enduring an enormous challenge in your marriage. You may have suffered an awful tragedy – perhaps the untimely death of a loved one. You may have been diagnosed with a terminal disease. You may have lost your job or you may be facing enormous financial concerns. Life happens, doesn't it? Just like Pilate, you didn't ask to be put in a tough spot. Just like Pilate, you didn't ask for a huge challenge. Just like Pilate, you didn't deserve the struggle you've been through or that you're facing today. No, just like Pilate, you got up one morning and had to deal with some great, unpleasant circumstance.

Part of life is what happens to you, to be sure. But the other part of life is what you do with what happens to you. At the end of the day, you choose to become the person you become. With God, you can – by the grace of God – always make a better choice. With God, you can refuse to be just a victim your whole life long. With God, you can get up from a defeat or a failure and make a new beginning. With God, you can refuse to let resentment or bitterness about the past rule your life. With God, you can choose to approach each new day with joy, with faith, with love and with hope. With God, you can choose to believe God's Word when it says, "No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us." (Romans 8:37 NLT) Pilate refused to live courageously because he insisted on seeing himself as just a victim of his circumstances. At the end of the day, he chose to make about the worst decision any human being has ever made – condemn the sinless Son of God to death.

Third, you live courageously when you choose to stand with Jesus. If Pontius Pilate's story teaches us anything, it's the fact that it's impossible to be neutral when it comes to Jesus. Pilate wanted to release Jesus and please the people trying to kill Jesus. That didn't work. He couldn't be neutral when it came to

Jesus. At the end of the day, neither can you. You are either for Jesus or against Him. But what does it mean to be “for Jesus”? It means surrender – the surrender of everything to Jesus – and a kind of “re-surrender” when He reveals areas of your life that are not yet under His governance. It means that when you find yourself in the middle of great struggles – not if, but when – you go to Him to find the strength and grace to live in a way that honors God.

One day –without any warning; completely unexpectedly – Jesus walked into the life of Pontius Pilate. On that day, Pilate might have found everything he had missed in his life. Sadly, he didn’t have the courage to take his stand with Jesus. Has Jesus walked into your life? If so, what happened? Did you surrender? Did you put your trust in Him? Or did you resist and turn your back on Him? Jesus has a way of still walking into your life and mine many times over – often without warning or expectation. When He does, what will you do? One thing is certain, when it comes to Jesus, you can’t be neutral. You either accept Him or reject Him. You live courageously when you choose to stand with Jesus.

Can you believe it’s been almost eleven years since the massacre of 12 students and one teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado? April 20, 1999. The first student shot and killed that awful day was Rachel Scott. She was well known and respected at the Orchard Road Christian Center for the kind of life she led. One day, Jesus just walked into the life of young Rachel Scott and she decided to stand with Him. That decision may well have cost Rachel her life. There’s strong evidence that the two shooters were targeting Christians students on their rampage.

The following words were written by Rachel Scott in her journal after she became a follower of Jesus apparently one year before she was murdered. “I lost all of my friends. Now that I have begun to ‘walk the talk’ they make fun of me. I don’t even know what I have done. I don’t really have to say anything, and they turn away.... I know what they’re thinking every time I make a decision to resist temptation and follow God. They talk behind my back and call me ‘the preacher’s church-going girl.’ I used to drink with so and so, but since I’ve stopped she thinks that I am a loser, and that God is just a phase for me. I have no more personal friends at school. But you know what? I am not going to apologize for speaking the name of Jesus.... I am not going to justify my faith to them, and I am not going to hide the light that God has put into me. If I have to sacrifice everything, I will. I will take it. If my friends have to become enemies for me to be with my best friend, Jesus, then that’s fine with me.”

We need to remember people like Rachel Scott – people who choose to stand with Jesus. Eternity belongs to Rachel Scott nonetheless – an eternity in the presence of Jesus. In fact, Rachel is more alive today than whenever she walked this earth. And if you choose to stand with Jesus, no matter how long or short your life on this earth, eternity belongs to you as well. But you must choose to stand with Him!