

The Gospel of John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 24: Jesus Before Pilate

John 18:28–19:16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

John 18:28–19:16 brings Jesus before Pilate and centers on two themes: the kingship of Jesus and the failure of Pilate. Doctrinally, Jesus declares that His kingdom is “not of this world,” teaching the spiritual nature of His reign, and He identifies His mission as bearing witness to the truth. The teacher should note that Christ’s kingdom is a present, spiritual reign, established at His exaltation and advancing now, not a future earthly political regime; this guards against premillennial expectations. Jesus also affirms God’s sovereignty even over Pilate’s authority. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, with significant weight at Questions 1 and 5.

At the same time, the passage is a searching study of moral failure. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent, declares it repeatedly, yet hands Him over to protect his own position when threatened. He represents everyone who knows the truth but lacks the courage to act on it, who chooses comfort and security over doing right. The crowd’s cry, “We have no king but Caesar,” exposes the choice of the world’s kings over the true King. The teacher should let the passage expose the fear of man, the evasion of truth, and the cost of belonging to the truth.

So aim at both: a clear grasp of Christ’s present, spiritual reign and His witness to the truth, and a heart that belongs to the truth, follows the true King, and acts on what is right even at a cost. The disciple we are forming will not be a Pilate, knowing the truth yet betraying it for comfort.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (18:36). What does this teach about the nature of Christ’s kingdom, and how is it different from every earthly kingdom built on power and force?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

To Pilate’s question about kingship, Jesus answers, “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... But my kingdom is not from the world” (18:36). He is a King, but His kingdom is of a different order.

Draw out the nature of His kingdom. Christ’s kingdom does not originate from the world and does not operate by the world’s methods. It is not defended by armies or established by force or

political revolution. This is why Peter's sword was wrong (18:11) and why Jesus did not resist. His kingdom advances not by coercion but by truth taking hold of hearts.

Contrast it with earthly kingdoms. Every earthly kingdom rests ultimately on power and force. Christ's kingdom rests on truth and the willing allegiance of those who hear His voice. It is a present, spiritual reign in the hearts of His people and over His church, not a worldly political regime. The teacher can note that this guards against expecting Christ to set up an earthly political kingdom; His reign is already exercised from the Father's right hand (compare Daniel 7:14; Colossians 1:13).

Apply it. Help students grasp that we belong to a kingdom that does not run on worldly power, and that we therefore do not advance it by worldly means. It also frees us from tying our hope to political power or earthly outcomes. Ask students how understanding Christ's kingdom as a present, spiritual reign shapes the way they live and where they place their hope.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's kingdom not of this world, not advanced by force (John 18:36).
- The kingdom advancing by truth and willing allegiance, not coercion.
- Christ's reign as present and spiritual, exercised now (Daniel 7:14; Colossians 1:13).
- A guard against expecting an earthly political kingdom.

Discussion Prompts

- What does "My kingdom is not of this world" teach about Christ's reign?
- How is His kingdom different from earthly kingdoms?
- How does His present, spiritual reign shape where you place your hope?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus said He came "to bear witness to the truth," and "everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (18:37). How responsive are you to the truth when it confronts you, and where do you sense the truth calling for a response right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus tells Pilate, "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" (18:37). Christ's mission is bound up with the truth, and belonging to the truth shows itself in listening to Him.

Draw out the test Jesus names. "Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

Responsiveness to Christ's voice is the mark of those who belong to the truth. Those who love truth recognize and respond to Him; those who do not, like Pilate, turn away. The issue is whether we are "of the truth."

Apply it to the student's responsiveness. The question is not merely whether we agree that truth exists, but whether we actually listen to and obey the truth when it confronts us. It is possible to affirm truth in the abstract while evading it in practice, as Pilate did.

Press for specifics. Ask each student how responsive they are when the truth confronts them, and where they sense the truth calling for a response right now, a conviction to obey, a change to make, a word from Christ to heed. The aim is to be those who, hearing Christ's voice, actually listen. Ask what listening to His voice would mean in a specific area this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's mission to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37).
- Listening to Christ's voice as the mark of those who belong to the truth.
- The difference between affirming truth and obeying it.
- Responsiveness to the truth as a test of the heart.

Discussion Prompts

- How responsive are you when the truth confronts you?
- Where do you sense the truth calling for a response right now?
- What would listening to Christ's voice mean this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Pilate asked, "What is truth?" and walked away (18:38). What does Pilate's question reveal about the human tendency to evade truth, and how does our culture echo his evasion?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Pilate's response is one of the most famous evasions in history: "What is truth?" (18:38). And without waiting for an answer, he turns and walks away from the Truth standing before him. His question may be cynical, weary, or dismissive, but it functions as an escape from confronting Christ.

Draw out the human tendency to evade truth. Pilate's "What is truth?" is the move of someone who does not want to be cornered by the truth, because facing it would require a response he is unwilling to make. Treating truth as uncertain or unknowable becomes a way to avoid its claims. It is easier to muse about whether truth exists than to obey the Truth in front of us.

Connect it to our culture. Pilate's question echoes loudly today. Our age often treats truth as relative, personal, or unknowable, "that may be true for you." While this can sound humble or open-minded, it frequently functions as Pilate's did, a way to avoid the binding claims of truth, especially the claims of Christ.

Apply it. Help students see the difference between honest inquiry and evasive relativism. The danger is using uncertainty as an excuse to dodge a truth we would rather not face. Ask students where they are tempted to treat truth as negotiable when facing it squarely would be costly, and to resist the Pilate-like reflex of asking “What is truth?” to avoid responding to the Truth Himself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pilate’s “What is truth?” as an evasion of Christ’s claims (John 18:38).
- Treating truth as uncertain to avoid its binding claims.
- Cultural relativism echoing Pilate’s evasion.
- The difference between honest inquiry and evasive relativism.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Pilate’s question reveal about evading truth?
- How does our culture echo his evasion?
- Where are you tempted to treat truth as negotiable to avoid its cost?

Question 4

Student Question:

Pilate repeatedly said, “I find no guilt in him” (18:38; 19:4, 6), yet did not act on it. Where do you know what is right but hesitate to act, and what does Pilate’s example warn you about that gap?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the gap between Pilate’s knowledge and his action. He declares three times, “I find no guilt in him” (18:38; 19:4, 6), yet he does not release Jesus. He knows what is right and fails to do it.

Draw out the tragedy of the gap. Pilate’s failure was not ignorance; he knew Jesus was innocent. His failure was the gap between knowing and doing, between conviction and courage. He knew the right thing and lacked the will to act on it when it became costly. This is one of the most common and dangerous forms of moral failure.

Apply it broadly. We all face this gap. We know we should forgive, speak up, confess, change, obey, and yet we hesitate when action is costly or uncomfortable. Knowing the right thing is not the same as doing it. James warns that to know the good and not do it is sin (James 4:17).

Press for honest reflection. Ask each student where they know what is right but hesitate to act, a relationship to mend, a sin to confess, a stand to take, an obedience to begin. Pilate’s example warns that knowledge without courage leads to betrayal of the truth. The aim is to close the gap, to act on what we know is right. Ask what one known-but-delayed obedience they will act on this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gap between knowing what is right and doing it (John 18:38; 19:6).
- Moral failure as a lack of courage, not knowledge.
- Knowing the good and not doing it as sin (James 4:17).
- Closing the gap between conviction and action.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you know what is right but hesitate to act?
- What does Pilate's example warn you about that gap?
- What known-but-delayed obedience will you act on this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

When Pilate boasted of his authority, Jesus said, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above" (19:11). What does this teach about God's sovereignty even over the powers that condemned Jesus?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When Pilate boasts, "Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?", Jesus answers, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above" (19:10–11). Even Pilate's power is derived and limited.

Draw out God's sovereignty. Pilate imagined himself in control, holding Jesus' fate in his hands. Jesus calmly corrects him: whatever authority Pilate has was given from above. God is sovereign even over the powers that condemned His Son. The cross was not a case of God losing control but of God's purpose being accomplished even through the free, sinful choices of those involved (compare Acts 2:23; 4:27–28).

Stress the balance of sovereignty and responsibility. God's sovereignty over Pilate's authority does not excuse Pilate; Jesus adds that "he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin" (19:11). God's overruling sovereignty and human moral responsibility stand together. God works His purposes even through human sin, yet the sinners remain responsible.

Apply it to our confidence. The same sovereignty that governed Pilate governs the powers and circumstances that press on us. No authority over us, no government, no boss, no enemy, no circumstance, holds power that was not allowed from above, and God can work His purposes through it all. Ask students how the truth that God is sovereign even over hostile powers steadies them when they feel at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- All authority derived and limited, given from above (John 19:11).
- God's sovereignty even over the powers that condemned Jesus (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28).
- Sovereignty and human responsibility held together ("the greater sin").
- Confidence that no power over us is outside God's sovereign allowance.

Discussion Prompts

- What does verse 11 teach about God's sovereignty over earthly powers?
- How do God's sovereignty and human responsibility fit together here?
- How does this steady you when you feel at the mercy of forces beyond you?

Question 6

Student Question:

Pilate tried to satisfy the crowd, release a guilty man, and avoid responsibility, all to protect himself (18:39–19:6). Where are you tempted to please people or protect yourself at the expense of doing right, and how do you resist it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Pilate's people-pleasing and self-protection. He tries every maneuver, offering to release Jesus, having Him flogged, appealing to the crowd's pity, all to escape responsibility and keep the peace, and finally yields when his standing with Caesar is threatened (18:39–19:6, 12).

Draw out the driving motive. Pilate's choices were governed by self-protection and the fear of man. He cared more about his position, the crowd's reaction, and Caesar's favor than about justice. "The fear of man lays a snare" (Proverbs 29:25), and it snared Pilate into condemning an innocent man.

Apply it to the students. We face the same pressure, daily and subtly. We are tempted to please people, avoid conflict, and protect our standing, even when doing right would cost us approval or comfort. The fear of others' opinions and the desire for security can lead us, like Pilate, to act against our convictions.

Press for specifics and resistance. Ask each student where they are tempted to please people or protect themselves at the expense of doing right, and how they resist it. The cure for the fear of man is the fear of God, valuing His approval above all (Galatians 1:10). Ask what it would look like to fear God more than people in a specific situation they face.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- People-pleasing and self-protection as the engine of Pilate's failure (John 19:12).
- The fear of man as a snare (Proverbs 29:25).
- The fear of God as the cure for the fear of man (Galatians 1:10).

- Doing right even at the cost of approval or comfort.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to please people or protect yourself over doing right?
- How does the fear of man snare us into compromise?
- What would fearing God more than people look like in your situation?

Question 7

Student Question:

The crowd cried, “We have no king but Caesar” (19:15), rejecting their true King for the world’s power. In what subtle ways do people, even religious people, choose the world’s kings, comfort, security, status, over the true King?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chief priests make a chilling declaration: “We have no king but Caesar” (19:15). To reject Jesus, the religious leaders embraced the very pagan power they claimed to despise. They chose the world’s king over their true King.

Draw out the irony and the tragedy. Israel’s leaders, who longed for the Messiah and chafed under Rome, now declare loyalty to Caesar to be rid of the true King standing before them. In rejecting Christ, they ended up enthroning the world. This exposes the heart’s tendency to choose any king but the true one.

Apply it to subtle modern idolatries. People, even religious people, still choose the world’s kings over Christ. We can enthrone comfort, security, status, money, success, or approval as the true rulers of our lives, while keeping up the appearance of devotion to God. “We have no king but Caesar” is spoken every time we let something other than Christ truly rule us.

Press for honest reflection. Ask students in what subtle ways they, or people in general, choose the world’s kings, and what it would mean to crown Christ alone as King. The aim is to expose the rival kings we serve and to give Christ His rightful throne in our hearts. Ask what “Caesar” they are most tempted to serve, and how they might dethrone it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The leaders choosing Caesar over their true King (John 19:15).
- Rejecting Christ resulting in enthroning the world.
- Subtle idolatries that crown comfort, status, or security as king.
- Giving Christ alone His rightful throne in our hearts.

Discussion Prompts

- In what subtle ways do people choose the world's kings over Christ?
- What "Caesar" are you most tempted to serve?
- What would it mean to crown Christ alone as King?

Question 8

Student Question:

Through the mockery, the crown of thorns, and the purple robe, Jesus remained silent and steady (19:1-5). What does Jesus' bearing under suffering and injustice teach you about how to carry yourself in your own trials?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Jesus' bearing under suffering. He is flogged, crowned with thorns, dressed in a purple robe, struck, and mocked (19:1-3), and through it all He remains silent and steady, not retaliating, not collapsing, not cursing His tormentors. Pilate presents Him: "Behold the man!" (19:5).

Draw out His bearing. Jesus endures appalling injustice and cruelty with a dignity and self-possession that even Pilate cannot ignore. He does not lash out or beg. He bears the suffering with a quiet strength rooted in His trust in the Father and His resolve to accomplish our salvation (compare Isaiah 53:7; 1 Peter 2:23).

Apply it to our trials. We will face suffering and injustice, though rarely on this scale. Our instinct is to retaliate, to grow bitter, to collapse in self-pity, or to curse our circumstances. Jesus models another way: bearing suffering with dignity, without retaliation, entrusting ourselves to the Father, and keeping our eyes on the purpose beyond the pain.

Press for application. Ask each student what Jesus' bearing under suffering teaches them about carrying themselves in their own trials, and where they need that example right now. The aim is to learn from Christ how to suffer well, with trust, dignity, and without bitterness. Ask what it would look like to bear a current trial more like Jesus.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus' steady, dignified bearing under suffering and injustice (John 19:1-5; Isaiah 53:7).
- Suffering borne without retaliation or collapse.
- Trust in the Father as the root of His steadiness (1 Peter 2:23).
- Learning from Christ how to suffer well.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Jesus' bearing under suffering teach you?
- Where do you need that example in your own trials right now?
- What would it look like to bear a current trial more like Jesus?

Question 9

Student Question:

This passage centers on the kingship of Jesus and the failure of Pilate. Jesus is the King whose kingdom is not of this world and who came to bear witness to the truth, while Pilate represents everyone who knows the truth but will not stand in it. What does this teach about the nature of Christ's reign (which He exercises now, not merely in some future earthly kingdom), about the cost of truly belonging to the truth, and about the danger of knowing what is right yet refusing to follow it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, gathering its two great themes: the kingship of Jesus and the failure of Pilate. The passage teaches about the nature of Christ's reign, the cost of belonging to the truth, and the danger of knowing what is right yet refusing to follow it.

First, draw out the nature of Christ's reign. Jesus is a King, but His kingdom is "not of this world" (18:36). Help students understand this as a present, spiritual reign, not a future earthly political regime. Christ reigns now, from the right hand of the Father, over His church and in the hearts of His people, and His kingdom advances by truth, not force. The kingdom of God arrived with His ministry and was established when His church began (Mark 1:15; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13), and Christ is reigning at present (Acts 2:36). This guards students against the error of expecting a future earthly thousand-year political kingdom; the King already reigns, though His reign is not of this world's kind. His apparent weakness before Pilate masks His true sovereignty, which Jesus asserts even there (19:11).

Second, draw out the cost of belonging to the truth. Jesus came to bear witness to the truth, and those who are "of the truth" listen to His voice (18:37). But belonging to the truth is costly. Jesus Himself was condemned for it. To follow the King of truth means being willing to stand in the truth when it is unpopular or dangerous, as Jesus did and Pilate would not. The truth cost Jesus His life; it will sometimes cost His followers their comfort, reputation, or standing.

Third, draw out the danger Pilate embodies: knowing what is right yet refusing to follow it. Pilate is the tragic figure of one who saw the truth, declared Jesus innocent, even sensed something of who Jesus was, and still handed Him over to protect himself. He is a warning that the most dangerous response to Christ is not ignorance but knowing the truth and lacking the courage to act on it. The fear of man and the love of self-protection can lead even those who know better to betray the King.

Bring it to honest self-examination. Help students see themselves in the contrast. We are called to be like Christ, belonging to the truth and bearing witness to it whatever the cost, and warned not to be like Pilate, knowing the right and betraying it for comfort and security. The King who reigns from apparent weakness calls us to follow Him in the costly path of truth. Ask students

where they are more like Pilate than they would like to admit, and what it would mean to truly belong to the truth and follow the true King, whatever it costs.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's reign as present and spiritual, not a future earthly political regime (John 18:36; Mark 1:15; Acts 2:36; Colossians 1:13).
- A guard against premillennial expectations of an earthly thousand-year kingdom.
- Christ's true sovereignty masked by His apparent weakness before Pilate (John 19:11).
- The cost of belonging to and standing in the truth (John 18:37).
- Pilate as a warning: knowing the truth yet betraying it for self-protection.
- The call to follow the King of truth whatever the cost.

Discussion Prompts

- What does this passage teach about the nature of Christ's reign?
- What is the cost of truly belonging to the truth?
- Where are you more like Pilate, knowing the right yet hesitating to follow it?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this account of the King on trial. What is one specific way Jesus is forming you to belong to the truth, to follow the true King, and to act on what you know is right even when it costs you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the lesson into a personal aim: to belong to the truth, to follow the true King, and to act on what is right even when it costs. The contrast between Christ and Pilate shapes this formation.

Help students choose their model. The passage presents two ways: the way of Christ, who belonged to and bore witness to the truth at the cost of His life, and the way of Pilate, who knew the truth and betrayed it for comfort. Every disciple must decide which way they will walk, especially when truth is costly.

Make it concrete. Ask each student to name one specific way Jesus is forming them to belong to the truth (responding to His voice), to follow the true King (giving Him His rightful throne over a rival "Caesar"), and to act on what is right even when it costs (closing a known gap between conviction and action).

Close with the King on trial. The scene ends with Jesus handed over to be crucified, yet He is the true King throughout, reigning even in apparent weakness, walking willingly toward the cross to save the very people condemning Him. Let students leave resolved to follow this King in the

costly path of truth, not to be a Pilate who knew the truth and turned away. The true King is worth following, whatever it costs.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Choosing the way of Christ over the way of Pilate.
- Belonging to the truth, following the true King, and acting on the right.
- Costly discipleship in the path of truth.
- Concrete, specific formation as the goal of the lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- How is Jesus forming you to belong to the truth?
- What rival “king” do you most need to dethrone for the true King?
- Where will you act on what is right this week, even if it costs you?