

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 36: Jesus Before Pilate

Matthew 27:1-26

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage holds two truths that a teacher must handle with care. The first is the nature of repentance. Judas is a sobering case study, because he did almost everything we might associate with a changed heart: he felt deep remorse, he confessed his sin in clear words, he even gave back the money. Yet he was lost, because his sorrow drove him to despair and self-destruction rather than to God. Paul names the distinction exactly: "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Your students need to see that feeling bad about sin, even intensely, is not the same as the turning-toward-God that Scripture calls repentance. The second truth is the substitution pictured in the release of Barabbas. The guilty man goes free because the innocent man takes his place. This is not a side detail; it is the gospel in miniature, and Matthew sets it before us deliberately.

At the same time, this lesson is aimed squarely at the formation of the student. Pilate and the crowd are mirrors. Pilate shows us the cowardice that knows what is right and does the wrong thing anyway because the pressure is too great and the cost too high. He even performs a little ritual to soothe his conscience, washing his hands as if responsibility could be rinsed off. The crowd shows us the terrifying power of going along, of letting others stir us toward a choice we would never make alone. Every student in your class has stood, in some smaller way, where Pilate and the crowd stood. The aim is not to let them feel superior to these ancient failures but to recognize themselves in them, and then to look up at the silent, innocent Christ who bore it all.

So teach for both. Help your students grasp clearly what repentance truly is and what the cross truly accomplished, so they do not mistake remorse for salvation or miss the substitute dying in their place. And press the passage into their consciences, calling them away from cowardice and crowd-following and toward the courageous, grateful obedience that belongs to people who know their place was taken by Another.

Question 1

Student Question:

When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he "was seized with remorse," returned the silver, and admitted, "I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood" (27:3-4). What does the difference between Judas and a truly repentant person teach us about the nature of real repentance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open by setting Judas beside a truly repentant believer and asking what is missing. On the surface, Judas looks like a model penitent. Matthew says he “was seized with remorse” (27:3), a strong word for inner torment. He took action, hurling the silver back into the temple. He confessed plainly, “I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood” (27:4). If confession of sin and emotional anguish were enough, Judas would be saved. He is not. That is the warning Matthew wants us to feel.

The decisive difference is the direction Judas turned. Repentance, in Scripture, is a turning toward God: a change of mind that bears fruit in a changed life and casts itself on God’s mercy. Judas turned inward and then away, toward despair and finally self-destruction. He never brought his sin to the One who could forgive it. Contrast him with Peter, who also failed grievously that very night, denying Jesus three times, and also wept bitterly, yet Peter turned back and was restored. Same night, same kind of failure, two very different ends.

Paul gives us the categories in 2 Corinthians 7:10: “Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” Worldly grief is sorrow over consequences, over being caught, over the wreckage and the shame. Godly grief is sorrow that drives us back to God. Judas had worldly grief in abundance. He did not have the godly grief that turns and trusts.

Help your class feel both the seriousness and the hope here. The seriousness is that a person can feel awful about sin, even say all the right words, and still be lost if he never turns to God. The hope is that no sin is too great for the mercy of God when we do turn. The same Lord Judas betrayed would have forgiven Judas, just as He forgave Peter, had Judas brought his sin to Him instead of to a rope.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between remorse and biblical repentance, which turns toward God (2 Corinthians 7:10)
- Repentance as a change of mind and direction that bears fruit, not merely an emotion (Acts 26:20)
- The contrast between Judas, who despaired, and Peter, who repented and was restored
- Worldly grief as sorrow over consequences; godly grief as sorrow that returns to God
- The reality that no sin is beyond God’s mercy for the one who genuinely turns to Him

Discussion Prompts

- What is the practical difference between feeling sorry for a sin and actually repenting of it?
- Why do you think Judas despaired instead of bringing his sin to Jesus?
- How does Peter’s restoration that same night give you hope after a serious failure?

Question 2

Student Question:

Judas said the right words, returned the money, and felt genuine anguish, yet despaired instead of turning to God. Where are you tempted to settle for feeling sorry about a sin rather than actually turning from it and bringing it to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question presses the truth of Judas into the student's own heart. The danger Judas embodies is subtle precisely because it looks so much like real repentance from the outside. A person can feel intense guilt, can even confess it to others, and still never make the turn toward God that brings forgiveness and change.

Help students name the places where they tend to stop at feeling bad. Many of us have a habitual sin that we genuinely regret every time, that we feel ashamed of afterward, that we even confess in a general way, and yet we never truly bring it to God in a way that changes us. We mistake the ache of guilt for the work of repentance.

Point them toward what actually turning to God looks like: naming the sin honestly before Him, asking forgiveness through Christ, and taking concrete steps to forsake it, including the humility to seek help and accountability where needed. Repentance is not a feeling we wait to have; it is a turning we choose to make.

Keep the tone hopeful, not crushing. The point of holding up Judas is not to leave students in despair but to spare them his mistake. The good news is that the door Judas refused to walk through stands open to every one of us. We never have to stay stuck in mere remorse.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to substitute guilty feelings for genuine repentance
- Confession and turning to God in Christ as the path to forgiveness (1 John 1:9)
- Repentance bearing concrete fruit in a forsaking of sin (Luke 3:8)
- Accountability and humility as helps in turning from besetting sin (James 5:16)

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a sin you keep regretting but have never truly brought to God? What holds you back?
- What would it look like, concretely, to turn from that sin rather than just feel bad about it?
- Who could you invite to help you walk in repentance with honesty and accountability?

Question 3**Student Question:**

Pilate repeatedly recognized Jesus' innocence, even hearing a warning from his own wife (27:18–19, 23–24), yet handed Him over anyway. What does Pilate reveal about how knowing the right thing is not enough without the courage to do it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Turn now to Pilate, and let your students feel the agony of a man who knows the right thing and lacks the courage to do it. Matthew tells us Pilate understood the leaders had handed Jesus over “out of self-interest” (27:18). His own wife sent word, “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him” (27:19). Pilate himself asked the crowd, “Why? What crime has he committed?” (27:23). Every signal pointed to innocence. Pilate had the authority to release Him. And he handed Him over anyway.

This is one of the clearest portraits in Scripture of the gap between knowledge and obedience. Pilate is not deceived about Jesus; he is afraid of the crowd and of what taking the unpopular stand might cost him with Rome. He knows, and he caves. James warns us that the one who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for that person it is sin (James 4:17). Knowing is not the same as doing.

Help students see that the most dangerous moral failures are often not failures of knowledge but failures of nerve. We frequently know exactly what God wants. The struggle is whether we will pay the price to do it when the room is against us, when our reputation is on the line, when staying silent or going along would be so much easier.

Pilate’s tragedy is that he tried to have it both ways: he wanted to be seen as just while doing the unjust thing the crowd demanded. There is no such middle ground. To know the right thing and refuse to do it is itself a choice, and it was the wrong one.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gap between knowing what is right and having the courage to do it (James 4:17)
- The fear of man as a snare that pressures us toward compromise (Proverbs 29:25)
- Moral failure often as a failure of nerve rather than of knowledge
- The impossibility of a neutral middle ground when justice and truth are at stake
- Christ’s innocence affirmed even by His judge, fulfilling Scripture (Isaiah 53:9)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it often harder to do the right thing than to know what the right thing is?
- What was Pilate really afraid of, and how does that fear show up in our lives?
- Where have you seen knowing the truth fail to produce the courage to act on it?

Question 4

Student Question:

Pilate caved to the crowd because he feared the uproar more than he feared doing wrong. In what setting are you most likely to let the fear of people pressure you into compromising what you know God wants?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes Pilate's fear of the crowd and turns it on the student. Pilate folded because he feared an uproar more than he feared doing wrong (27:24). Every one of us has settings where the pressure of other people bends us away from what we know God wants.

Help students identify their particular arenas. For one it is the workplace, where speaking up about an ethical line could cost a promotion or invite ridicule. For another it is a friend group, where going along with gossip or coarse talk feels easier than standing apart. For another it is family, where an unbelieving relative makes faithfulness awkward. The crowd that pressured Pilate has many modern faces.

Draw out that the fear of man is not always loud. Often it works quietly, as a nudge toward silence, a softening of conviction, a laugh at the joke we should not laugh at. We rarely make a dramatic decision to deny Christ; we just slide, a little at a time, in the direction the room is pulling.

Then point to the better fear. Proverbs says, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe" (Proverbs 29:25). The cure for the fear of people is not gritted teeth but a larger fear and a deeper trust: a reverence for God that makes the crowd's approval grow small.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fear of man versus the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 29:25)
- Compromise as a gradual slide rather than a single dramatic choice
- Trust in God as the antidote to the pressure of the crowd
- Faithful witness even when it is costly or unpopular (Matthew 10:32–33)

Discussion Prompts

- In what setting are you most likely to bend under the pressure of people's opinions?
- How does the fear of man usually show up for you, loudly or quietly?
- What would help you fear God more than you fear the disapproval of the crowd?

Question 5

Student Question:

Given the choice between Barabbas, a notorious prisoner, and Jesus, the crowd cried, "Barabbas!" and demanded Jesus be crucified (27:20–21, 26). What does this exchange show us about both the human heart and the substitution at the center of the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now come to the exchange of Barabbas for Jesus, one of the most pointed pictures of the gospel in all of Scripture. Pilate offers the crowd a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, a notorious prisoner (27:16–17). Mark and Luke tell us Barabbas was an insurrectionist and a murderer. The leaders stir up the crowd, and they choose the murderer. “Barabbas!” And Jesus, the innocent, is delivered to be crucified (27:20–21, 26).

First, let the choice expose the human heart. Given a clear choice between the Author of life and a man who took life, the crowd chooses the killer. This is not merely the failing of one mob on one morning; it is a window into the whole human condition. Left to ourselves, we repeatedly prefer the wrong thing, choosing Barabbas over Jesus in a thousand smaller ways. The crowd is a mirror, not just a villain.

Then let the exchange reveal the gospel. Picture Barabbas in his cell, hearing the crowd, expecting to die that day. Then the door opens and he is told he is free. Why? Because another is taking his place. The cross literally stands where Barabbas should have hung. Here, acted out in history, is the heart of what Jesus came to do: the guilty go free because the innocent takes their punishment. Barabbas is every one of us, the guilty one who walks out alive while the innocent One dies in our stead.

Hold both truths together. The same scene that shows us how dark the human heart is also shows us how far God’s grace will go. We chose Barabbas; Christ took Barabbas’s place. We rejected the innocent One; the innocent One died for the very ones who rejected Him. That is the gospel pressed into a single, unforgettable exchange.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fallen human heart that prefers sin over the Savior when left to itself
- Substitution pictured in Barabbas: the guilty freed, the innocent condemned in his place
- Christ as the innocent One dying for those who rejected Him (Romans 5:8)
- The crowd as a mirror of our own choices rather than merely a distant villain
- The reach of God’s grace, taking the place even of those who cried for His death

Discussion Prompts

- What does the crowd’s choice of Barabbas reveal about the human heart, including our own?
- How does picturing Barabbas walking free help you understand what Jesus did for you?
- In what everyday ways are we still tempted to choose Barabbas over Jesus?

Question 6

Student Question:

It is easy to condemn the crowd for shouting against Jesus while overlooking the times we drift with the crowd ourselves. When has going along with a group led you somewhere you would never have chosen on your own?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question keeps us from the comfortable distance of merely condemning the crowd. It is easy to shake our heads at a mob that shouted for a murderer. It is harder to admit how readily we ourselves drift with whatever group we are in.

Help students recall concrete moments. Most of us can name a time we laughed at something we found cruel, joined a chorus of complaint or criticism, stayed silent while someone was mistreated, or did something foolish or wrong simply because everyone else was. The crowd has a strange power to make wrong feel normal and silence feel safe.

Explore why crowds are so powerful. There is safety in numbers and shared responsibility. When everyone is shouting, no single voice feels accountable. Pilate exploited exactly this when he tried to push the guilt onto the crowd, and the crowd absorbed it, "His blood is on us and on our children!" (27:25). Shared sin feels lighter, even though God still sees each heart.

Lead students toward the kind of rootedness that resists the crowd: knowing who they are in Christ, settling convictions in advance, and being willing to be the one out-of-step voice when the group moves the wrong way. The disciple is called not to be conformed to the pattern of the crowd but transformed by the renewing of the mind (Romans 12:2).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The pull of the crowd toward sin we would not choose alone
- Diffused responsibility as a deception; God still sees each heart (Galatians 6:5)
- The call not to be conformed to the world but transformed (Romans 12:2)
- Settled convictions and identity in Christ as defenses against crowd pressure

Discussion Prompts

- When has going along with a group led you somewhere you would not have chosen alone?
- Why does being part of a crowd make wrong choices feel easier or safer?
- What helps you hold your convictions when the people around you are moving the other way?

Question 7

Student Question:

Pilate washed his hands and declared, "I am innocent of this man's blood," trying to shift responsibility to the crowd (27:24). What does the New Testament teach about whether we can transfer or escape moral responsibility for our own choices?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Return to Pilate and his basin of water for this doctrinal question. Pilate “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!’” (27:24). It is one of the most futile gestures in all of Scripture: a man trying to rinse off a guilt that water cannot touch.

Make the point plainly: responsibility cannot be transferred by ritual, by blame-shifting, or by claiming we were only following orders or only doing what others demanded. Pilate had the power to release Jesus. He chose not to use it. No basin of water changes that. Scripture is clear that each of us will give account for our own choices: “each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (Romans 14:12), and “each one should carry their own load” (Galatians 6:5).

Notice how ancient and how modern Pilate’s move is. We say, “I had no choice,” when we did. We say, “Everyone else was doing it.” We say, “It was not my decision,” when we played a real part. We perform our own little hand-washings, hoping to feel clean while still doing the wrong thing. God is not deceived by the gesture, and neither, in the end, are we.

The mercy in this hard truth is that owning our responsibility is the doorway to forgiveness. As long as we are washing our hands and shifting blame, we cannot repent, because we will not admit we did anything to repent of. The moment we stop pretending and say honestly, “I did this,” the cross of Christ stands ready to do for us what no basin of water ever could.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal moral responsibility that cannot be transferred or rinsed away (Romans 14:12)
- Each person accountable to God for their own choices (Galatians 6:5)
- The futility of blame-shifting and self-justification before God
- Honest ownership of sin as the doorway to forgiveness in Christ (Psalm 51:3–4)
- The contrast between water that cannot cleanse guilt and the blood of Christ that can (Hebrews 9:14)

Discussion Prompts

- What are some of the ways we try to wash our hands of decisions we know are ours?
- Why can we never truly escape responsibility before God by shifting blame?
- How does honestly owning our sin actually open the door to forgiveness?

Question 8

Student Question:

Pilate looked for a way to please everyone and protect himself rather than simply do justice. Where are you currently trying to keep everyone happy instead of doing the one thing you know is right?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes Pilate's people-pleasing and holds it up as a mirror. Pilate's deepest motive was self-protection: he wanted to keep the crowd calm, keep Rome satisfied, and keep his own position secure. Justice was expendable; comfort and approval were not.

Help students see how often we do the same on a smaller scale. We avoid a hard but necessary conversation because we do not want conflict. We say yes when we should say no, because we cannot bear someone's disappointment. We stay vague about our faith or our convictions because clarity might cost us favor. Like Pilate, we try to keep everyone happy rather than do the one clear right thing.

Press gently for specifics. Where is each student currently trying to please everyone? A parent who will not set a needed boundary? An employee who will not raise an honest concern? A believer who will not name sin as sin to a loved one because the relationship feels too fragile? People-pleasing wears many faces, but underneath it is usually the same fear Pilate had.

Then point to a better master. Paul writes, "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). We cannot serve the crowd and Christ at the same time. Freedom comes when we resolve to please One audience above all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- People-pleasing as a form of the fear of man that crowds out obedience
- The impossibility of serving the approval of people and of Christ at once (Galatians 1:10)
- Doing the right thing even when it disappoints or angers others
- Living for an audience of One as the path to freedom and integrity

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you currently trying to keep everyone happy instead of doing what is right?
- Whose approval do you find hardest to risk losing, and why?
- What would change if you truly lived for the approval of God above everyone else?

Question 9

Student Question:

Barabbas, the guilty man, walked free while Jesus, the innocent man, was condemned and led away to die in his place (27:26). How does this scene picture the heart of the gospel, that Christ the innocent substitute took the punishment our sins deserved, and how does the New Testament say we come to share in that exchange?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, so give it the fullest care. Everything in the passage has been pointing here. Barabbas, the guilty man, walks free. Jesus, the innocent man, is condemned and led away to be crucified in his place (27:26). What happened literally to Barabbas that morning is what happens spiritually to every sinner who comes to Christ: the guilty go free because the innocent One takes the punishment they deserved.

Anchor this in the larger witness of Scripture. Isaiah foresaw it: “he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him” (Isaiah 53:5). Peter declares it: Christ “bore our sins in his body on the cross” (1 Peter 2:24). Paul sums it up: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is substitution, the very heart of the atonement. Jesus did not merely die; He died in our place, bearing what our sins deserved.

Marvel at the justice and the mercy held together. God did not simply wave sin away as if it did not matter; sin was judged, the penalty was paid. And God did not crush us under that penalty; He bore it Himself in the person of His Son. At the cross, justice and mercy meet. The innocent One takes the place of the guilty so that the guilty can go free, not by ignoring justice but by satisfying it.

Then turn to how a person comes to share in this exchange, and let Scripture set the pattern. The substitution Christ accomplished becomes ours as we respond to the gospel: hearing the good news, believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, repenting of our sins, confessing Him as Lord, and being baptized into Him for the forgiveness of sins. Paul ties our union with Christ’s death directly to baptism: “all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3). On the day the church began, when convicted hearers asked what they must do, Peter answered, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38).

Be careful to teach this as a living, obedient faith that receives a free gift, never as works that earn it. We could never deserve what Barabbas received. The release was sheer grace; he did nothing to merit it. So with us: we are saved by grace through a faith that obeys, gladly going to Christ on His terms (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16). Keep the tone full of wonder. The innocent One took your place. The only fitting response is a heart that bows in gratitude and follows Him for life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Substitutionary atonement: Christ the innocent One bearing the penalty our sins deserved (Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24)
- The great exchange: our sin laid on Christ, His righteousness given to us (2 Corinthians 5:21)
- Justice and mercy meeting at the cross, sin judged and the sinner spared
- Sharing in Christ’s death and the forgiveness it secures through baptism into Him (Romans 6:3–4; Acts 2:38)

- The plan of salvation: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16)
- Salvation as a free gift of grace received through an obedient faith, never earned by works

Discussion Prompts

- How does the release of Barabbas help you understand what Christ did in your place?
- Why does it matter that the cross satisfies God's justice rather than ignoring our sin?
- How does the New Testament describe the way a person comes to share in Christ's substitution for them?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this whole scene, at Judas, at Pilate, at the crowd, and at the silent, innocent Christ. Name one specific way Jesus is forming your heart through this passage, whether toward true repentance, courageous obedience, or gratitude for the substitute who took your place.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone question to gather the whole scene and press it toward the heart. Matthew has set four figures before us: Judas, whose remorse never became repentance; Pilate, who knew the right thing and lacked the courage to do it; the crowd, which chose a murderer over the Messiah; and Christ, the silent, innocent Substitute who took the place of the guilty. Each one calls for a response.

Encourage students to be specific rather than general. A real answer might sound like, "I have been stuck in remorse over a sin I have never truly brought to God, and this week I will turn to Him and seek help," or "I keep caving to the crowd at work, and I will take one courageous, faithful stand," or simply, "I will stop and marvel that the innocent One took my place, and let that gratitude reshape how I live."

Give people room to let it land. A moment of silence to write one sentence before sharing often produces more honest, lasting fruit than quick answers. The aim is that each person leaves with one clear way they are saying yes to the Christ this passage reveals.

Close with worship, not just resolve. The deepest takeaway from this scene is not chiefly our failures, as real as they are, but His love. He stood silent so that we could go free. Lead your class to wonder at the Substitute, and let obedience flow from gratitude rather than fear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of doctrine and daily transformation
- Genuine repentance, courageous obedience, and gratitude as fitting responses to the cross
- Worship and thankfulness as the proper motive for Christian obedience

- The lifelong process of being formed into the likeness of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Which figure in this scene do you most see yourself in, and what is Jesus saying to you through it?
- What is one specific step you will take this week in response to this passage?
- How can this class pray for you as you take that step?