

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 36: Jesus Before Pilate -- Matthew 27:1-26

Morning has come, and the religious leaders are not finished. They have already condemned Jesus in the night, but a verdict from the Sanhedrin is not enough to put a man to death under Roman rule. So they bind Him and lead Him away to Pilate, the governor (27:1-2). Watch the procession move through the gray dawn: the most powerful men in Jerusalem, marching the only innocent man who ever lived toward the only judge who can sign His execution. The machinery of religion and the machinery of empire are about to grind together, and Jesus stands silent in the middle of it.

But before we reach Pilate's court, Matthew turns aside to show us Judas. The betrayer has been watching. When he sees that Jesus is condemned, something breaks in him. He is "seized with remorse" (27:3). He flings the thirty pieces of silver back into the temple. He confesses out loud, "I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood" (27:4). And then he goes out and hangs himself. Here is a man who felt the full weight of his guilt, said the right words, even returned the money, and was still lost. Matthew wants us to look hard at Judas, because remorse is not the same thing as repentance.

Then the scene shifts to the governor's palace, and we meet two more failures of nerve. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent. He says so. His own wife sends a warning. He searches for a way out, offering the crowd a choice between Jesus and a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. But when the crowd roars for Barabbas and screams for Jesus to be crucified, Pilate folds. He calls for a basin, washes his hands in front of everyone, and says, "I am innocent of this man's blood" (27:24). As if water could wash away a coward's decision. As if a man can hand someone over to death and then declare himself uninvolved.

And the crowd, stirred up by their leaders, makes the most fateful choice in human history. Given a murderer and the Messiah, they choose the murderer. "Give us Barabbas!" In that exchange the whole gospel is hidden in plain sight: the guilty man walks free, and the innocent man takes his place. Barabbas does not know it yet, but a substitute is about to die in his stead. Neither do we always see it. Yet that is exactly what is happening here, and it is exactly what Jesus came to do.

Group Discussion: Judas felt terrible about what he had done, returned the money, and confessed his sin out loud, yet he was still lost. Why do you think feeling guilty about sin is not the same thing as truly repenting of it?

Personal Reflection: Pilate tried to wash his hands of a decision he knew was wrong, telling himself he was not really responsible. Where in your own life are you tempted to go along with something you know is wrong while quietly telling yourself it is not your fault?

Read Matthew 27:1–26

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?

7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 2 Corinthians 7:10, the difference between godly grief that leads to repentance and worldly grief that brings death; Acts 1:16–20, Peter's account of Judas and the field bought with the betrayal money; Isaiah 53:7–9, the suffering servant silent before His accusers and numbered with the wicked; 1 Peter 2:21–24, Christ entrusting Himself to God and bearing our sins in His body; Romans 5:6–8, Christ dying for the ungodly while we were still sinners.