



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 23:1-25

To understand more about Pontius Pilate and Herod, and their role in the crucifixion.

Putting the Pressure On

After Jesus is arrested, beaten, and interrogated by the chief priests and scribes (Lk. 22:63-71), the demonically inspired religious leaders begin to apply pressure to the local governing authorities to carry out their plan to murder the Messiah. Beginning with Pilate, the procurator of Judea, and Herod, the tetrarch and son of Herod the Great, before finally returning back to Pilate along with Herod, Jesus is finally sentenced to death after giving the people a choice between releasing Him or a convicted murderer named Barabbas to be released. Pilate, not finding reason to put Him to death suggests punishment and release, but the crowds “were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified” (Lk. 23:23).

Pilate

In verses 1 through 5, Jesus is brought to Pilate by the chief priests in hopes that they can get him to issue an immediate sentence. They accuse him of “misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king” (Lk. 23:2). Interestingly (and unsurprisingly), these are not true accusations. None of what transpired in the previous verses suggests any of what they are saying is true. However, this is an intentional accusation that they know will immediately peek the interest of Pilate. Known as *maiestas*, this was a crime that diminished the sovereign power or grandeur of the state, emperor, or people in Rome. Garland writes, “Jesus’ answer, “So you say” (σὺ λέγεις) may be equivalent to a sarcastic,

“Whatever,” or “What does it look like to you?” Ancient readers in the Greco-Roman world would likely view Jesus’ refusal to answer as a sign of his brave resistance.”¹

Pilate was not convinced: “Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.” (Lk. 23:4). While the crime of *maiestas* was a serious threat, Pilate also understood the political complexity of Roman rule over a Jewish province, and the ways in which the chief priests might manipulate Roman law in order to get what they wanted. He was apparently unmoved by their frivolity. However, they did not relent: “But they were urgent, saying, ‘He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place’” (Lk. 23:5).

Herod

Pilate was not only unwilling to budge, but unwilling to continue dealing with their problem: “When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time” (Lk. 23:6-7). It isn’t that Pilate wasn’t able to charge a criminal for a crime and prescribe the appropriate punishment to a Galilean, but that he simply doesn’t want to mess with the a charge that he doesn’t think is viable.

This transfer to Herod indicates the level of reputation Jesus had gained during his three years of ministry: “When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him” (Lk. 23:8). Even a ruler to Herod’s degree knew of Jesus and the wild stories of miracles performed by Him. This recognition of the Lord should not, however, be understood as genuine curiosity to His message; Herod treated Jesus was with contempt when He refused to answer his questions: “And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate” (Lk. 23:11). Luke’s eye-witness accounts provide some historical context for his contemporary readers concerning an apparently well-known relationship between Pilate and Herod: “And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other” (Lk. 23:12). While not remarkable for us today, this likely helped explain how Herod and Pilate came to be friends to the contemporary readers of Luke.

Verses 13 through 16 reveal Pilate’s feelings concerning this ploy to crucify Jesus. Both he and Herod could not find any real reason to crucify Him. The mob was not pleased: “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” (Lk. 23:18-19). There is obvious irony in this exchange on multiple levels. They accused Jesus of insurrection (Lk. 23:2) and yet chose a known insurrectionist to be spared in place of Jesus. This action laid bare the nefarious plot of the religious leaders. They did not care about peace and justice as they proclaimed; they simply wanted to silence Jesus because He was a threat to their power. Beyond this, there is another level of irony at work. Barabbas is Jewish name that is made up of two Hebrew words: “Bar,” meaning “son,” and “Abba,” meaning “father.” Barabbas is “son of Abba,” or “son of a father.” It is ironic that the guilty “son of a father” is being chosen over the perfect Son of the Father in Heaven.

The threat of the mob grew stronger and stronger, finally Pilate relented: “So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for

¹ David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 903.

whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will” (Lk. 23:24-25). This leads to the final stages of punishment that will culminate in crucifixion.

Two Additional Notes

THE SIN OF SILENCE

It’s easy to almost sympathize with Pilate while reading a passage like this. He is presented in Luke’s Gospel as a man who knows that Jesus should not be put death, and yet because of the threat of the mob, chooses to do their will anyways. The Scripture speaks of staying silent in the face of what one knows to be wrong and has a name for it: “sin.” Leviticus 5:1 says, “If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity.” In other words, the person who knows that someone is being punished for something they didn’t do bears the responsibility for it as much as those who carry out the punishment. The New Testament says it this way: “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (Ja. 4:17). Pilate cannot be let off the hook. He knew that Jesus was not deserving of the punishment being demanded by the chief priests, scribes, and mob, and yet he delivered Jesus to be crucified anyway. According to Scripture, he is guilty just as much as they are.

VERSE 17

Unless you are reading the King James Version of the Bible, you’ll notice that verse 17 is likely omitted from your Bibles: “{For of necessity he must release one unto them at the feast}.” The reason for this is that the KJV is based on the Greek *Textus Receptus*, a collection of manuscripts that do not date as early as the manuscripts included in the *Greek New Testament* (5th ed., 2014) by United Bible Societies and *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed., 2012) by Nestle and Aland. The more modern translations (ESV, NIV, NASB, and CSV) are built off of these older manuscripts and these older manuscripts do *not* include verse 17, meaning it was likely added sometime later. It isn’t that newer translations of the Bible have removed verses of God’s Word, it’s that older translations have included verses that likely were never there.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the importance of doing what is right even when it will cost you. Pilate exemplifies the opposite of this. He chooses to condemn Jesus in order to avoid the pressure of the people. Another takeaway is submission to that which will cost you. Jesus submitted perfectly to the will of the Father knowing that it would lead Him to bear the weight of sin and judgment for His people.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 23:1-3. Who was Jesus brought before? Of what did the chief priests and scribes accuse Jesus? How did Jesus respond to Pilate’s question? How would it have been understood?

2. Read Luke 23:4-5. What was Pilate’s initial verdict to the chief priests and scribes? What did they urgently say to him in response?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 23:6-7. What detail made Pilate send Jesus away? To where did Pilate send Jesus?

2. Read Luke 23:8-12. Why was Herod “glad” to see Jesus? How did the interrogation go with Herod? What did Herod and his soldiers do to Jesus before sending Him back to Pilate? Why is verse 12 included?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 23:13-16. What is Pilate’s second verdict after Jesus is returned by Herod?

2. Read Luke 23:18-19. Who did the crowds demand to be released instead of Jesus? For what was he known?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 23:20-22. What was Pilate’s third verdict to the mob?

2. Read Luke 23:23-25. How did the mob respond? What did Pilate do in light of this?

Week 83 Discussion: Silence is Easy

In this week’s study, we’ve seen Pilate take the easy way out by avoiding pressure from the mobs and condemning Jesus though he knew He was innocent. Talk as a group about the ways in which silence can be the easy way out, and why we as Christians should avoid silence when it comes to sin.

1. Icebreaker: Is remaining silent when you know sin is happening really a problem? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever known about a sin and remained silent to avoid confrontation?
3. Has someone ever spoken up on your behalf when you were wrongfully accused of something?
4. Have you ever spoken up on behalf of someone else when they were wrongfully accused?
5. Why is silence tempting in high pressure situations?
6. How can the church better discourage “sinful silence?”

Takeaways:

1. Jesus is interrogated by Pilate and Herod and neither of them find fault worthy of death.
2. Jesus is handed over to be crucified by Pilate anyway.