



"The Way of the Cross" Sermon Series: "The Way of Jesus"

Mark 15:1-20

By: Dr. Carol Friesen

July 18, 2010

Mark 15:1-20

(New International Version)

Jesus Before Pilate

¹Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

²"Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate.

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

³The chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of."

⁵But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

⁶Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

⁹"Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, ¹⁰knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

¹²"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them.

¹³"Crucify him!" they shouted.

¹⁴"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

¹⁵Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

¹⁶The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers.

¹⁷They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. ¹⁸And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" ¹⁹Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. ²⁰And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

We are continuing on The Way of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark, and we are now up to Chapter 15. We will look at verses 1-20. (Reads Mark 15:1-20.) This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us Pray.

Loving God, we come today so thankful that you have adopted us into your family. That you have revealed yourself through your Word. That you have sent your Holy Spirit to be our teacher. So, we pray, come Holy Spirit, come and open our hearts and minds to your truth this morning. Help us Lord not simply to be hearers of your Word, but to be doers. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.



Have you ever wondered who the most powerful person in the world is? Yes? No? Apparently some people do because Forbes magazine set out to answer that very question. However, before they could find the answers they had to define power. They chose to define it in four dimensions: 1) They asked does the person have influence over lots of other people; 2) then they assessed the financial resources controlled by that person; 3) they determined if the person was powerful in not just one, but multiple spheres of influence; and 4) they asked whether or not he or she actively uses their power. So, that the 83-year-old entrepreneur behind IKEA, the richest man in Europe, was excluded. He apparently does not exercise the power at his disposal.

Who made the list? Yes, Oprah Winfrey came at #45. But #1, who do you think? #1 was the President of the United States; #2 the President of the People's Republic of China; #3 the Prime Minister of Russia; #4 Chairman of the Federal Reserve; and #5 the founders of Google.

Power is not inherently good or evil. All of us exercise power to some degree every day. But by its nature, power is a dangerous thing. I think most of us have heard that quote, "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Have you heard that? Well actually it was Lord Acton, an English historian, who wrote that quote in a letter to Bishop Creighton back in 1887. He was writing to oppose the doctrine of papal infallibility. In that same letter was another quote, one that is less familiar to us. According to Acton, "***Great men are almost always bad men.***"

Well **today's text presents quite a parade of great men, powerful men - men in positions of authority and influence.** Today we are going to look at the ways that these men used their power and to see what we can learn.

The Sanhedrin was the supreme Jewish authority during the time of Jesus. They had considerable power, exercising not only civil jurisdiction according to Jewish law, but also criminal jurisdiction in some degree. Composed of the chief priests, the elders, the scribes and noble laypersons – the council had administrative authority that extended throughout Judea. Wealthy families dominated that council, with the high priest the most powerful member. In fact, between A.D. 6 and 67 – sixteen out of eighteen of those high priests came from just five of Jerusalem's most prominent families. The council could order arrest by its own officers of justice and they could judge cases, cases that did not involve capital punishment. Capital cases required the confirmation of the Roman government.

We know from the Gospels that **Jesus was charged by the Sanhedrin with blasphemy.** The trial recounted in Matthew, Mark, Luke & John, raises a lot of questions for it appears that the trial proceedings were not in keeping with the Mishnah, the Jewish law. It appears there were some flagrant violations of their own legal system. It appears that they had their own agenda. The chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law had been looking for some time for a way to get rid of Jesus. They were afraid of his popularity. They were envious of Him. When Judas agreed to betray Him for thirty pieces of silver, they were delighted. Later when the same Judas came back, feeling some remorse, wanting to return the money to them, acknowledging that he had betrayed innocent blood, they were callous and cold. "That is your problem, your responsibility," they said. They had made up their minds.

The Sanhedrin represented the Jewish religious establishment – powerful men, religious men, but not necessarily good men. Author Eugene Peterson reminds us in his book, *The Jesus Way*, "being religious does not translate across the board into being good and trust worthy. Religion is one of the best covers for sin of almost all kinds – Pride, anger, lust and greed are vermin that flourish under the floorboards of religion. Those of us who are identified with institutions or vocations in religion can't be too vigilant. The devil does some of his best work behind stained glass."



Certainly Jesus had some harsh words for the teachers of the law and the Pharisees – calling them hypocrites and blind guides, snakes and vipers. Ruled at least in part by fear and envy and in the absence of adequate evidence, the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law conspired to eliminate Jesus. They used their official capacity to accuse Him of blasphemy, of claiming to be the King of the Jews and of violating Mosaic law. At last they were satisfied. Jesus could be presented to Pilate as a rebel king and to the Jewish people as a false prophet leading Israel astray. **Power is a dangerous thing, even in religion. It can destroy or it can create, but too often a taste of power leads to an insatiable appetite for more.**

Richard Foster writes in his book, *Money, Sex and Power*, “think of Adam and Eve in the garden. Given every good pleasure, every delight, everything necessary for a good life. Yet they wanted more. They grasped and grabbed in the headlong rush to be like God, to know good and evil. The sin of the garden was the sin of power. They wanted to be more, to have more, to know more – not content to be creatures, they wanted to be gods. That spirit festers within us.” I may not recognize my own lust for power, but I can become pretty depending, pretty quickly. A regular kind of control freak, wanting to get my own way, my own time, rather than trusting God, I take things into my own hands. This is the way of the world. It is not the way of Jesus.

Our parade of powerful people begins with the Sanhedrin, religious leaders who used their authority to get what they wanted. They handed Jesus over to Pilate. **Pilate was the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judea** and he held that office for ten years – an unusually long period of time. In addition to financial administration, he had supreme power judicially. Apparently the Jews hated him because he was very severe, but also because he showed little consideration for Jewish customs and practices. We don’t know a lot about Pilate, but the writer Philo has written describing him as inflexible, stubborn and of cruel disposition. He appears in all four Gospels and is identified as the one who authorized Jesus’ crucifixion. His name, along with the name of Jesus and Mary, appears in the Apostles’ Creed – a creed that has been recited since the church’s earliest days. Yes, Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate.

Yet all four Gospels stress the fact that Pilate was reluctant to condemn Jesus. We learn in the Gospel of Matthew that Pilate’s wife actually warned him, advising him not to have anything to do with Jesus, because Jesus was innocent and she had been warned in a dream. In Luke we learn that Pilate, when he discovered that Jesus was a Galilean, sent Him to Herod who happened to be in Jerusalem at the same time. After Herod and the soldiers spent some time mocking, toying with Jesus they sent Him back to Pilate. Neither Herod, nor Pilate could find any reason to sentence Jesus to death. In the Gospel of John we also read that Pilate found no basis for a charge against Him.

So, when the crowd came asking Pilate to release a prisoner as was a custom at the feast, Pilate expected them to ask for the King of Jews. He expected to release Jesus. But the chief priests had stirred up the crowd against Jesus and so the crowds came asking for Barabbas, a murderer and an insurrectionist.

Pilate was a weak man and rather than follow his own conscience, he choose to satisfy the crowd. He was ready to do what was politically expedient, rather than pursue justice. Most likely he was motivated less by a desire to please the Jewish authorities and more by a fear of imperial displeasure. You see he wanted to get through the Passover season without any major trouble and he didn’t want to alienate the chief priests.

In John’s Gospel we read that Pilate was fearful and after he consented to releasing Barabbas he went back to Jesus and asked Him, “Where do you come from?” But when Jesus gave no answer, he asked, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Don’t know realize, don’t you know that I have the power to free you or crucify you?” Jesus responded saying, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” From then on



John's Gospel tells us that Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept insisting and insisting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar. In the end Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Political expediency was what matter most to Pilate. He thought that by giving in he could avoid further unrest. How often do our leaders compromise their convictions, rather than take an unpopular stand? How often do we?

There is a third group I want to consider this morning. It was the Roman soldiers who led Jesus away into the Praetorium and then called together the whole company. Called them together to do what? To have some fun with this prisoner calling himself the King of the Jews. So they put a robe on Him and a crown of thorns. They bowed down to Him saying, "Hail, hail King of the Jews." They struck Him on the head and they spit on Him. When they grew tired of their fun, they took off the purple robe, put on His clothes and led Him out to crucify Him.

I find such behavior repugnant and yet I remember reading about an experiment at Stanford back in the early '70s. Twenty-four male undergraduates selected from a pool of seventy-five, deemed to be the most psychologically stable and healthy were selected to play the roles of both guards and prisoners and live in a mock prison for two weeks in the basement of the Stanford Psychology building. Roles were assigned at random, appropriate uniforms were distributed, rules were made clear and the prisoners were given numbers instead of names. According to reports, the experiment quickly grew out of control. You see guards forced the prisoners to count off repeatedly, again and again and again. If they got them wrong, the guard subjected them to fierce exercise. Sanitary conditions declined and some of the prisoners were forced to go nude as a means of degrading them. It appears that the guards became increasingly cruel as the experiment continued with an estimated 1/3 of the guards exhibiting genuine sadistic tendencies. Remember these are Stanford undergraduates deemed to be the most healthy of those who applied. The experiment was discontinued after only six days. It could not continue. Apparently, most of the guards were upset that they stopped, because they wanted to keep playing. Yes, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is the way of the world.

Yet, there is another way. There is one in our parade of powerful people who was tried by the Sanhedrin and condemned by Pilate – the one who was abused by the Roman soldiers. The same one who astonished the crowds with his teaching, who made the blind see and the lame walk. The one who turned water into wine and multiplied the loaves and the fishes. The one who walked on water and raised Lazarus from the dead. This one, this Jesus chose not to use His power to defend Himself, but remained silent. He gave no answer when accused, didn't fight back and so He was convicted, beaten and led away to die on a cross.

Jesus did not make the Forbes list. But undoubtedly He has influenced more people than any other person who has walked the face of the earth. But the Jesus way is not the way of the world. Jesus did not demand control, he did not choose the path of political expedience. He did not abuse the weak and defenseless, instead in humility and utmost vulnerability, Jesus surrendered Himself to the cross, praying, "Not my will, but Thine be done."

The Jesus way is an altogether different way. If you walk that way eventually you discover that "the greatest hindrance to God's blessing in your life is not other people, it is yourself – your self will, your stubborn pride, your personal ambition. You cannot fulfill God's purposes for your life while focusing on your own plans." Rick Warren reminds us, "if God is going to do his deepest work in us it will begin with this. We need to give it all to God." We need to give Him our problems, our ambitions, our hopes and dreams, our habits, our hang-ups, our



hurts-good and bad. We need to take our hands off the steering wheel and let Jesus be the driver. Amazingly doing just that surrendering to God, turns out to be a place of great freedom and great strength. Relinquishing our tight grip on having to have our own way or having to control other people frees us.

The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. It turns out to be the way in which God's power is made perfect in weakness. The way of Jesus is the way to life.

Let us pray.

Loving God we come so thankful that you chose to relinquish your power, that you chose to die on that cross that we might live. Lord you know the challenges that each person faces this morning. You know what they are struggling with, you know what they need to surrender. God we pray that you would continue to teach us to walk the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, that we would not use our power for selfish gain, that we would use it for your kingdom purposes. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Money, Sex and Power: The Challenge of a Disciplined Life by Richard J. Foster
The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way by Eugene H. Peterson
The Purpose Driven® Life: What on Earth Am I Here For? by Rick Warren

